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A Theory of Veteran Identity

Travis L. Martin

University of Kentucky, tlm@travismartin.com

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Travis L. Martin, Student

Dr. Virginia Blum, Major Professor

Dr. Jill Rappoport, Director of Graduate Studies
A THEORY OF VETERAN IDENTITY

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Travis L. Martin

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Virginia L. Blum, Professor of English

Lexington Kentucky

2017

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

A THEORY OF VETERAN IDENTITY

More than 2.6 million troops have deployed in support of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, surveys reveal that more than half feel “disconnected” from their civilian counterparts, and this feeling persists despite ongoing efforts, in the academy and elsewhere, to help returning veterans overcome physical and mental wounds, seek an education, and find meaningful ways to contribute to society after taking off the uniform. This dissertation argues that Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans struggle with reassimilation because they lack healthy, complete models of veteran identity to draw upon in their postwar lives, a problem they’re working through collectively in literature and artwork.

The war veteran—returning home transformed by the harsh realities of military training and service, having seen humanity at its extremes, and interacting with a society apathetic toward his or her experiences—should engage in the act of storytelling. This act of sharing experiences and crafting-self subverts stereotypes. Storytelling, whether in a book read by millions, or in a single conversation with a close family member, should instruct civilians on the topic of human resiliency; it should instruct veterans on the topic of homecoming. But typically, veterans do not tell stories. Civilians create barriers to storytelling in the form of hollow platitudes—“thank you for your service” or “I can never understand what you’ve been through”—disconnected from the meaning of wartime service itself. The dissonance between veteran and civilian only becomes more complicated when one considers the implicit demands and expectations attached to patriotism. These often well-intentioned gestures and government programs fail to convey a message of appreciation because they refuse to convey a message of acceptance; the exceptional treatment of veterans by larger society implies also that they are insufficient, broken, or incomplete. So, many veterans chose conformity and silence, adopting one of two identities available to them: the forever pitied “Wounded Warrior” or the superficially praised “Hero.” These identities are not complete. They’re not even identities as much as they are collections of rumors, misrepresentations, and expectations of conformity. Once an individual veteran begins unconsciously performing the “Wounded Warrior” or “Hero” character, the number of potential outcomes available in
that individual’s life is severely diminished. Society reinforces a feeling among veterans that they are “different.” This shared experience has resulted in commiseration, camaraderie, and also the proliferation of veterans’ creative communities. As storytellers, the members of these communities are restoring meaning to veteran-civilian discourse by privileging the nuanced experiences of the individual over stereotypes and emotionless rhetoric. They are instructing on the topics of war and homecoming, producing fictional and nonfictional representations of the veteran capable of competing with stereotypes, capable of reassimilation.

The Introduction establishes the existence of veteran culture, deconstructs notions of there being a single or binary set of veteran identities, and critiques the social and cultural rhetoric used to maintain symbolic boundaries between veterans and civilians. It begins by establishing an approach rooted in interdisciplinary literary theory, taking veteran identity as its topic of consideration and the American unconscious as the text it seeks to examine, asking readers to suspend belief in patriotic rhetoric long enough to critically examine veteran identity as an apparatus used to sell war to each generation of new recruits. Patriotism, beyond the well-meaning gestures and entitlements afforded to veterans, also results in feelings of “difference,” in the veteran feeling apart from larger society. The inescapability of veteran “difference” is a trait which sets it apart from other cultures, and it is one bolstered by inaccurate and, at times, offensive portrayals of veterans in mass media and Hollywood films such as The Manchurian Candidate (1962), First Blood (1982), or Taxi Driver (1976). To understand this inescapability the chapter engages with theories of race, discussing the Korean War veteran in Home (2012) and other works by Toni Morrison to directly and indirectly explore descriptions of “difference” by African Americans and “others” not in positions of power. From there, the chapter traces veteran identity back to the Italian renaissance, arguing that modern notions of veteran identity are founded upon fears of returning veterans causing chaos and disorder. At the same time, writers such as Sebastian Junger, who are intimately familiar with veteran culture, repeatedly emphasize the camaraderie and “tribal” bonds found among members of the military, and instead of creating symbolic categories in which veterans might exist exceptionally as “Heroes,” or pitied as “Wounded Warriors,” the chapter argues that the altruistic nature which leads recruits to war, their capabilities as leaders and educators, and the need of larger society for examples of human resiliency are more appropriate starting points for establishing veteran identity.

The Introduction is followed by an independent “Example” section, a brief examination of a student veteran named “Bingo,” one who demonstrates an ability to challenge, even employ veteran stereotypes to maintain his right to self-definition. Bingo’s story, as told in a “spotlight” article meant to attract student veterans to a college campus, portrays the veteran as a “Wounded Warrior” who overcomes mental illness and the scars of war through education, emerging as an exceptional example—a “Hero”—that other student veterans can model by enrolling at the school. Bingo’s story sets the stage for close examinations of the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior” in the first and second chapters.
Chapter One deconstructs notions of heroism, primarily the belief that all veterans are “Heroes.” The chapter examines military training and indoctrination, Medal of Honor award citations, and film examples such as All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), Heroes for Sale (1933), Sergeant York (1941), and Top Gun (1986) to distinguish between actual feats of heroism and “Heroes” as they are presented in patriotic rhetoric. The chapter provides the Medal of Honor citations attached to awards presented to Donald Cook, Dakota Meyer, and Kyle Carpenter, examining the postwar lives of Meyer and Carpenter, identifying attempts by media and government officials to appropriate heroism—to steal the right to self-definition possessed by these men. Among these Medal of Honor recipients one finds two types of heroism: Sacrificing Heroes give something of themselves to protect others; Attacking Heroes make a difference during battle offensively. Enduring Heroes, the third type of heroism discussed in the chapter, are a new construct. Colloquially, and for all intents and purposes, an Enduring Hero is simply a veteran who enjoys praise and few questions. Importantly, veterans enjoy the “Hero Treatment” in exchange for silence and conforming to larger narratives which obfuscate past wars and pave the way for new ones. This chapter engages with theorists of gender—such as Jack Judith Halberstam, whose Female Masculinities (1998) anticipates the agency increasingly available to women through military service; like Leo Braudy, whose From Chivalry to Terrorism (2003) traces the historical relationship between war and gender before commenting on the evolution of military masculinity—to discuss the relationship between heroism and agency, begging a question: What do veterans have to lose from the perpetuation of stereotypes? This question frames a detailed examination of William A. Wellman’s film, Heroes for Sale (1933), in the chapter’s final section. This story of stolen valor and the Great Depression depicts the homecoming of a WWI veteran separated from his heroism. The example, when combined with a deeper understanding of the intersection between veteran identity and gender, illustrates not only the impact of stolen valor in the life of a legitimate hero, but it also comments on the destructive nature of appropriation, revealing the ways in which a veteran stereotypes rob service men and women of the right to draw upon memories of military service which complete with those stereotypes. The military “Hero” occupies a moral high ground, but most conceptions of military “Heroes” are socially constructed advertisements for war. Real heroes are much rarer. And, as the Medal of Honor recipients discussed in the chapter reveal, they, too, struggle with lifelong disabilities as well as constant attempts by society to appropriate their narratives.

Chapter Two traces the evolution of the modern “Wounded Warrior” from depictions of cowardice in Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage (1895), to the denigration of World War I veterans afflicted with Shell Shock, to Kevin Powers’s Iraq War novel, The Yellow Birds (2012). As with “Heroes,” “Wounded Warriors” perform a stereotype in place of an authentic, individualized identity, and the chapter uses Walt Kowalski, the protagonist of Clint Eastwood’s film, Gran Torino (2008), as its major example. The chapter discusses “therapeutic culture,” Judith Butler’s work on identity-formation, and Eva Illouz’s examination of a culture obsessed with trauma to comment on veteran performances of victimhood. Butler’s attempts to conceive of new identities absent the influence of systems of definition rooted in the state, in particular, reveal power in the opposite of silence, begging another question: What do civilians have to
gain from the perpetuation of veteran stereotypes? Largely, the chapter finds, the “Wounded Warrior” persists in the minds of civilians who fear the veteran’s capacity for violence. A broken, damaged veteran is less of a threat. The story of the “Wounded Warrior” is not one of sacrifice. The “Wounded Warrior” exists after sacrifice, beyond any measure of “honor” achieved in uniform. “Wounded Warriors” are not expected to find a cure because the wound itself is an apparatus of the state that is commodified and injected into the currency of emotional capitalism. This chapter argues that military service and a damaged psyche need not always occur together.

Following the second chapter, a close examination of “The Bear That Stands,” a short story by Suzanne S. Rancourt which confronts the author’s sexual assault while serving in the Marines, offers an alternative to both the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes. Rancourt, a veteran “Storyteller,” gives testimony of that crime, intervening in social conceptions of veteran identity to include a female perspective. As with the example of Bingo, the author demonstrates an innate ability to recognize and challenge the stereotypes discussed in the first and second chapters. This “Example” sets the stage for a more detailed examination of “Veteran Storytellers” and their communities in the final chapter.

Chapter Three looks for examples of veteran “difference,” patriotism, the “Wounded Warrior,” and the “Hero” in nonfiction, fiction, and artwork emerging from the creative arts community, Military Experience and the Arts, an organization which provides workshops, writing consultation, and publishing venues to veterans and their families. The chapter examines veteran “difference” in a short story by Bradley Johnson, “My Life as a Soldier in the ‘War on Terror.’” In “Cold Day in Bridgewater,” a work of short fiction by Jerad W. Alexander, a veteran must confront the inescapability of that difference as well as expectations of conformity from his bigoted, civilian bartender. The final section analyzes artwork by Tif Holmes and Giuseppe Pellicano, which deal with the problems of military sexual assault and the effects of war on the family, respectively. Together, Johnson, Alexander, Holmes, and Pellicano demonstrate skills in recognizing stereotypes, crafting postwar identities, and producing alternative representations of veteran identity which other veterans can then draw upon in their own homecomings.

Presently, no unified theory of veteran identity exists. This dissertation begins that discussion, treating individual performances of veteran identity, existing historical, sociological, and psychological scholarship about veterans, and cultural representations of the wars they fight as equal parts of a single text. Further, it invites future considerations of veteran identity which build upon, challenge, or refute its claims. Conversations about veteran identity are the opposite of silence; they force awareness of war’s uncomfortable truths and homecoming’s eventual triumphs. Complicating veteran identity subverts conformity; it provides a steady stream of traits, qualities, and motivations that veterans use to craft postwar selves. The serious considerations of war and homecoming presented in this text will be useful for Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans attempting to piece together postwar identities; they will be useful to scholars hoping to facilitate homecoming for future generations of war veterans. Finally, the Afterword to the dissertation proposes a program for reassimilation capable of harnessing
the veteran’s symbolic and moral authority in such a way that self-definition and homecoming might become two parts of a single act.

KEYWORDS: Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, Military Veterans, Identity, Trauma, Homecoming, Creative Communities
A THEORY OF VETERAN IDENTITY

By

Travis L. Martin

Virginia L. Blum,
Director of Dissertation

Jill Rappoport,
Director of Graduate Studies

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Obviously, I would not have gotten to this point had it not been for those members of my family who believed in me, supported me, and forgave me for all the time I spent buried under books. I especially want to thank my brother for allowing me to write about his journey in the United States Navy. I also want to thank another family, the brothers and sisters I served with in the United States Army. Turley Barracks, our home in Germany, no longer exists, and we’ve sense been scattered across the globe, but there’s no doubt in my mind that the bonds we forged will stand the test of time. Of course, I need to thank all those veterans and volunteers who came together under the banner of Military Experience & the Arts. I’m proud to have played a part in growing an organization which allowed you to showcase your best selves in writing and artwork, because your work inspired me to be my best self in return.

Lastly, I need to thank my pack, including my four-legged friends, Buddy, Katie, and Scout, but mostly, Dr. Lisa Day, my partner and best friend, for giving me confidence when I doubted myself, believing in my ideas, and loving me unconditionally.
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INTRODUCTION
A Theory of Veteran Identity

I received an Honorable Discharge from the United States Army in November 2006, ending nearly four years of service overseas, two of which were in Iraq. Since returning to the “civilian sector,” I’ve been a student for ten years, a college instructor for five, the leader of a non-profit organization for four, an editor, an art therapy workshop leader, and I’ve held an array of other positions, all of which could serve as the foundation for a post-war identity. Still, I consider myself a “veteran” above all else. Don’t think that I’m alone. Count the number of veterans’ license plates during your next trip to the supermarket. See how many WWII, Korean War, or Vietnam War ball caps you can spot at an outdoor event. Or, as subtler evidence, look for those inconspicuous individuals who salute rather than place their hands over their hearts during the playing of the national anthem. Just a few years of service in the military renders an individual a “veteran” for the rest of his or her life. Aside from recognition of accomplishment and sacrifice, and beyond the “support the troops” rhetoric woven into the fabric of our national defense policy, does anyone know who decided that veterans should have an identity of their own? Does anyone know why?
I hope to advance a theory of veteran identity useful to those who want to articulate the needs of returning Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans. It is not my intention to create a more complete historical narrative of the veterans’ return home experience. Such teleology is best left to those in the field of history. The sociological contributions and strains placed upon society by veterans are relevant to my theory, but they will ultimately supplement rather than determine what I have to say. Nor is it my aim to diagnose the psychological ailments of a few veterans and create a mold that fits them all; I especially want to avoid that sort of stereotyping because it has been used, generation after generation, to vilify or glorify veterans according to the politics of time and place. Historical commentary about returning veterans is common. Sociological research is conflicting. And psychological theories change almost as quickly as they’re developed. My goal is to establish an interdisciplinary framework for discussing veteran identity that could best be described as a combination of social and literary theory.¹ That is, I will treat individual performances of veteran identity, existing historical, sociological, and

¹ Terry Eagleton’s preface to the “Anniversary Edition” of Literary Theory: An Introduction (2008) defines “literary theory” as “a kind of meta-discourse. Rather than figuring as one way of speaking about literature among others, it adopts a critical stance to other forms of critical analysis. In particular, it tends to suspect that much of what they say is question-begging. Critics may ask whether a particular narrative twist is effective, but narratologists want to know what this strange animal called narrative is in the first place, and are reluctant to be fobbed off with our intuitive sense that everyone can recognize a story when they see one … All reading involves interpretation; but hermeneutics inquires into what goes on when we interpret. A critic might speak of a literary character’s unconscious; a theorist is more likely to ask what a ‘character’ is in the first place, and whether the text can have an unconscious too” (viii). Again, it is not my intent to produce a more comprehensive historical, social, or psychological narrative of the veteran’s return home experience. Rather, this dissertation seeks to undermine war as an institution and reveal systems of thought which marginalize veterans as social group. A literary theorist’s examination of veteran identity examines both conscious and unconscious systems of thought symbolically, thoughts unavailable to those researchers who approach the problem with a single disciplinary approach.
psychological scholarship about veterans, and cultural representations of the wars they fight dialogically, as equal parts of a single text.

I will look critically at practices which impede veterans’ attempts to rejoin society, namely patriotism and mythmaking, but especially the performance of veteran identity itself. There is no patriotic handbook, no “best practices” for weaving veterans into larger myths of national identity. Nor can I point to some elite group and say, “There, those are the ones making war and ruining veterans’ lives.” My argument is ethical, deeply rooted in personal experience, and the sources I draw from offer competing, often conflicting histories of veterans’ lives. The topic of this dissertation is veteran identity as it presents itself in literature, film, and criticism. My subject, or the broad text I intend to examine, is the American unconscious. Of course, in dealing with an unconscious, whether in an individual or in a culture, problems of language emerge. How should I discuss a thing which, by its nature, eschews description? Dennis Sobolev’s *The Concepts Used to Analyze Culture: A Critique of Twentieth-century Ways of Thinking* (2010), a study which also looks empirically at the discursive practices constituting an unconscious culture, expresses a similar problem:

[M]ost of the mechanisms I aimed to analyze were either completely unconscious, or contained an essential unconscious aspect. But what did it mean that these mechanisms were ‘unconscious,’ what kind of analytical vocabulary could be used for their analysis? ... Are these mechanisms related to the instincts, drives and traumatic experiences of the past? To repressed desires or the death instinct? Or perhaps to the mythic primordial ‘archetypes’ of the human race? Do they exemplify Lacan’s ‘unmeant knowledge’ or semiotic dissemination? Or, perhaps, Althusser’s imaginary ‘centering’ of the subject by means of the categories of ideology? … The existence of these unconscious mechanisms is not an exception from the general structure and functioning of culture; on the contrary, in many important senses, it is the very essence of culture—the essence of that invisible collective cosmos which forms the existential and experiential world of the empirical subject. Furthermore, pondering over
different theoretical approaches and cultural studies, I came to the conclusion that I was not the only one who had come across this problem. On the contrary, decade after decade, generation after generation, different scholars of culture had continually arrived at the unconscious substratum, silently struggling with the multidimensionality and complexity of the problem, as well as the complete absence of a language with which to speak about it. (1-2)

Sobolev’s topic, twentieth-century culture, is much less focused than my own. I deal with one element of the American unconscious: veteran identity. I will isolate veterans within a larger system of belief, discuss the symbolic roles veterans play within that system, and use my findings to critique both perceptions and performances of veteran identity. If I repeat certain arguments, or alter them slightly as this document progresses, it is for the benefit of my reader. I will employ a process of divergent thinking, examining perceptions, stereotypes, expectations, and performances of veteran identity which lack

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2 M. Rajamanickam’s *Experimental Psychology with Advanced Experiments* (2005) differentiates between “convergent” and “divergent” thinking: “The production type of thinking may be also stated as convergent thinking. This convergent thinking is leading to a single correct answer. It is a process of thinking in which a common attribute is abstracted from many different ideas. In convergent thinking everybody may be thinking alike, but there is only one correct response. All others are wrong … The other aspect of production type thinking ability is divergent. Since this is an offshoot of thinking ability it is also called divergent thinking. It is a process of thinking in which many different ideas or solutions are generated from a single idea or problem. This may take a number of directions and also it consists of generation of multiple responses. Anyone or more than one of which may lead to [a] correct answer. In divergent thinking there is no single correct response, the value of responses depends upon its suitability, usefulness and meaningfulness” (378). So, I will begin with the single topic or problem: “veteran identity.” By treating the American unconscious as a literary text, I will be able to isolate veteran identity within a larger undercurrent of mythmaking and rhetoric. From there, I will conceive of new ways of thinking about veteran identity, ways which *diverge* from the perceptions and treatment of military veteran in both the real and symbolic realms. Ultimately, I hope that the observations and approaches within this text provoke dialogue—*further divergence*—within communities of veterans and those interested in their reassimilation.
physical referents, which are often viewed as unrelated, but which pertain directly to the veteran’s lived experience.

To read this dissertation, some readers will find that they must suspend belief in patriotic rhetoric. Patriotism works. Belief in national superiority is a great way to keep the populace invested in American democracy. But can patriotism work better? Can the practice of patriotism change to better accommodate veterans and their perspectives? How does patriotic rhetoric intersect with military experience to define the individual veteran’s existence? For example, to declare a veteran a “Hero” places that individual in a new symbolic position, one with discernible privileges, but also one which carries responsibilities. A “Hero” has the power to inspire others, to represent communities, to denounce war or justify it. In Basic Combat Training, for example, the new recruit is told that the last name worn on his or her chest is evidence they’re representing family honor while abroad. Such rhetoric inspires recruits even as it surveils their behavior. In the first chapter, I argue that society protects the symbolic position of the “Hero” more than any individual who carries the title. In the second chapter, I discuss how certain patriotic

3 This “literary theorist’s” approach to war recognizes the value of interdisciplinary research, and in viewing the problem of war through various critical perspectives, it becomes quite clear that many problems concerning veteran identity are rooted in language. In cultivating a voice through which to wage my arguments, “semiotics,” or the science of signs and how they function, emerges as a tool capable of separating symbols from the meanings they convey. Put another way, this dissertation will isolate veterans from the symbolic functions of “Hero” or “Wounded Warrior” they have been assigned. Arthur Asa Berger describes semiotics “as a form of applied linguistics,” and argues that “human beings [are] sign-making and sign-interpreting animals” (355). Berger draws upon Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1916) which helped establish “semiology” as a discipline concerned with language as a “social institution,” or a “system of signs that express ideas” (15-16). I will maintain that veterans function as symbols, a “subcategory of a sign” (Berger 355). As symbols, I argue, veteran identity conveys a wealth of information about war, military service, and veterans themselves; but seldom do they signify consciously.
gestures are stigmatizing, even damaging to veterans casually referred to as “Wounded Warriors.” The symbolic positions occupied by “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors” are not easily vacated, forcing some veterans to hide their wounds and perspectives out of shame, or out of fear that they can’t live up to others’ expectations. I ask my readers to suspend belief in patriotic rhetoric long enough to examine “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors” critically, as stereotypes that are sometimes earned, sometimes given, but always performed.

This part of my argument is ethical. It is not founded in my research, but rather it is concerned with the symbolic roles I believe veterans should play within the American unconscious. In short, I believe veterans should be storytellers. I think veteran testimony needs no motivations, the horrors of war speak for themselves, and taxpayer dollars should be invested in projects which disseminate veteran literature and artwork to the masses. I have struggled with how to write ethically about this topic, and I have concluded that such work is impossible without implicating the societies which produce veterans. As a veteran, I am perplexed at how the perspectives of service men and women are whitewashed out of history books, mass media, and the academy. As a scholar, I can’t understand why all veterans do not have the authority granted to me as the author of a doctoral dissertation. I studied for ten years so that I would have the right to launch these thoughts into the ephemeral plane of serious discourse. How many years does a member of the military have to spend in combat before he or she is deserving of the same privilege? Where do veterans go when they want to be taken seriously?

My complaint is this: there are platforms, institutions, and government dollars invested in distributing works of scholarship such as this one. However, no such parallels
exist for members of military communities. There are arts and therapy-based programs working incongruently to solve the problem. But American culture has no public institution or mandate dedicated to educating the public about war’s impact upon the individual. The results of providing veterans with the skills and opportunities needed to share their stories in such a manner would be myriad: serious consideration of the wars we fight; increased awareness about the wounds veterans endure; empathy toward those “Others” war decimates; and perhaps a decreased appetite for hyperviolent media, which could in turn reduce violence in other settings. Again, much of this is already happening, and I am writing from the vantage of someone who started a non-profit organization dedicated to the same mission. What I envision is something much more prominent, a center of power devoted to the sharing of veteran ideals, an entity or a place so great that the words issued from within carry weight in both the physical and the symbolic realms. For veterans, conveying the experiences, emotions, and lessons of war should be as normal as standing for the national anthem, wearing a uniform, or carrying a rifle. I imagine self-definition as an explicit part of the return home process. I don’t know what

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4 I founded Military Experience and the Arts (MEA) in 2012 and served as its President and Editor-in-Chief until 2015. During this time, MEA helped veterans and their families publish more than 500 works of fiction, non-fiction, artwork, poetry, and research in eight edited collections. MEA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, volunteer-run organization whose primary mission is to work with veterans and their families to publish creative prose, poetry, and artwork. MEA’s volunteers are located all over the world, including college professors, professional authors, veterans’ advocates, and clinicians. As such, most of MEA’s services are provided through email and in online writing workshops. All editing, consultations, and workshops are free of charge to those accepted for publication. Veterans and their families pay nothing for MEA’s services, and they never will. In addition to its primary publishing mission, MEA hosts online and in-person writing workshops and orchestrated national symposia in 2012 and 2015. MEA’s in-person events are free or low-cost opportunities for veterans and their spouses to build skills in the creative and therapeutic arts (“Who We Are”).
veterans will say if they’re given such an opportunity. But it will most certainly result in the creation of new forms of veteran identity.

Wars are fought by the poor, the young, and the disenfranchised. “War,” in the words of Smedley D. Butler, “is a racket.” Similarly, William Tecumseh Sherman asserts: “I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell” (“William T. Sherman” 6). No one disputes these facts. War, as well as the culture which produces it, is accepted as a necessary evil. The topic of this dissertation is not war, however; it is veteran identity. I am interested in what comes after war, but also the moment in which an individual becomes a “veteran,” in both the real and symbolic meanings attached to that title. I am distinguishing between the physical and the symbolic existence of the veteran because no other approach has solved the challenges of veteran reassimilation.6

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5 Smedley D. Butler, a retired Marine Corps General and two-time Medal of Honor recipient, wrote a speech and short book in 1935 entitled, War is a Racket. It is recommended reading for those curious about the individual conflicts of interest which arise when war is waged to safeguard commercial interests. I cite it here because Butler is an example of a veteran who is aware of the symbolic authority granted to him by his military service. Coincidentally, War is a Racket has enjoyed renewed popularity in the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars.

6 Berger elaborates on the topic of symbols and signification in Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts (1995) explaining that “semiotics comes from the Greek root semeion, or sign, and is used to describe a systematic attempt to understand what signs are and how they function. Semiotics is probably the more commonly used term, but some students of signs use the term semiology, literally ‘words’ (togas) ‘about signs’ Semiotics is associated with the work of the American philosopher, C. S. Peirce (although its roots are in medieval philosophy) and semiology with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Atkin). Both are concerned with how meaning is generated and communicated” (355). My concerns, perhaps, will go a step further, exploring the consequences of signification in the lives of military veterans.
Symbolically, veterans carry the guilt of perpetrating war and the stigmas attached to the changes war creates within them. Many veterans are proud to perform this role, and they find solace in knowing that they are carrying wounds for the sake of others. It is a beautiful sentiment. When veterans decide upon the significance related to war wounds, those wounds transcend their categorical meanings, signifying something greater and always contrary to the intent of the person or persons who inflicted them. Veterans possess this transformative power inherently. It is a power stored physically, as gunshot or shrapnel wounds, or mentally, as Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or as a multitude of subtle changes in the veteran’s personality, demeanor, or mannerisms. Each veteran existing in the physical world has access to this transformative, symbolic power, and treating the body as a site of memory has many precedents. Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead, for example, recognize that “most contemporary accounts of memory begin with the premise that it is not located in the mind of a human being or animal but is rather an aspect of the brain’s behavior which necessarily is both mental and physical at the same time” (2). Veterans exist in the physical world as individuals. But they also exist symbolically within the American unconscious as signifiers of meaning. This dissertation explores the overlap between the physical and the symbolic, in how representations of veterans and performances of veteran identity impact veteran quality of life in the real world.7

7 In “Identity Adjustment among Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans with Reintegration Difficulty,” Orazem, Frazier, Schnurr et. al. analyze the thematic elements of writings produced by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The participants, “100 randomly selected veterans,” conveyed “feeling like one does not belong in civilian society” and “having difficulty finding meaning in the civilian world.” The authors conclude, “Identity adjustment is a critical yet understudied aspect of veteran reintegration into community life following combat deployment.” Research on the topic of veteran identity transcends
For now, I wish to more clearly define the terms I will use in probing the American unconscious, and to paint a clearer picture of the symbolic and liminal role veterans occupy in the present. Currently, veterans serve as repositories for memories of war. This function describes the nature of their existence, and it is one I will spend the entirety of this dissertation trying to deconstruct. Veterans signify heroism, woundedness, or individuality based on how they express themselves. But mostly, the veteran’s signifying abilities are rooted in perception, in how civilians interpret wounds, knowledge, scars, and skills brought home from war. Veterans are civilians. Both groups are human beings, citizens, bystanders, or perpetrators in varying degrees. War is humanity’s burden. But symbolically, due to their increasing isolation from their civilian counterparts, phenomena rooted in the socioeconomic disparity between those who fight wars and those who do not, veterans shoulder both the guilt of perpetrating war and the stigmas attached to it. They do not tell stories. They contain stories. Much work takes place within the American unconscious to make these things possible, to prevent an equal sharing of war’s consequences. I want to shed light on this work.

Some readers will view my complaints as a form of entitlement. Others view service men and women as “losers” unable to hack it in the arenas of higher education or the civilian workforce. Yes, I volunteered for military service. But this dissertation suggests that I didn’t have all of the facts. Economists scouted my region. Politicians disciplinary boundaries between the sciences and the humanities and has the potential to transform both individual and societal understandings of war.

Ted Rall, in “Poor and Uneducated, Like We Thought,” challenges the often cited “Who Bears the Burden?” break down of military recruitment trends produced by the conservative think-tank, The Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation claims that, “the current makeup of the all-voluntary military looks like America. Where they are different, the data show that the average soldier is slightly better educated and comes
drew up the contracts. 9 In my case, a high school guidance counselor forced me to meet with a recruiter to avoid expulsion. 10 But mostly, it was a larger undercurrent of myths and mythmaking which lured me into military service. Certain people go to war. Maybe it’s because they make a choice. Maybe it’s because they never had one. Many of the scholars I quote in this dissertation have made careers writing about war. All members of this privileged society benefit from a strong military, but especially from the fact that wars are fought elsewhere, in foreign lands and in the homes of those we simply choose from a slightly wealthier, more rural area” (52). Oppositely, Rall argues, “A closer look shows that the socioeconomic distance between America at home and American troops abroad is a gaping chasm. Young men and women from affluent neighborhoods—those with average household incomes of $100,000 or more—are three to four times less likely as those from poor and lower middle class areas (under $50,000) to serve in the military” (8). This difference in opinion centers on what constitutes “rich,” and what constitutes “poor,” with conservative data skewing results to make it appear as though military recruits start with higher levels of wealth and education than their non-military peers. In my experience, few enlisted troops held degrees that were not from for-profit degree mills, those who came from wealthy, affluent areas were typically officers, and a much higher proportion of African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities were represented among the enlisted ranks than among commissioned officers.

9 In 2014, Vice reported on the U.S Military’s data collection agreements with public schools: “More than 30 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 25 have details about their lives stored in a Pentagon registry called the ‘Joint Advertising Market Research Studies’ (JAMRS) database, their names, phone numbers, email addresses, ethnicities, and other identifying information available to recruiters 24 hours a day. Since 2001, any school that receives federal funding is required under the No Child Left Behind Act to provide the Pentagon such data on all students in 11th and 12th grades, as well as grant recruiters access to their campus” (Davis 5).

10 In “Should We End Military Recruiting in High Schools as a Matter of Child Protection and Public Health,” published in 2011 in the American Journal of Public Health, Amy Hagopian and Kathy Barker compare military recruiting practices in U.S. high schools to “predatory grooming,” or “the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser” (30), concluding with the following recommendation: “We suggest public health advocates in the United States monitor and, where necessary, rein in the behaviors of military recruiters in our schools as a matter of protecting child health and welfare and as a step toward bringing the United States into the family of nations that has ratified the treaty on the Rights of the Child. As a first step, the No Child Left Behind Act should remove the mandate that public high schools admit military recruiters” (42).
not to consider. My underlying assumption is that war is evil, and in using this word “evil” I know that I have crossed into the territory of morality, of subjective reasoning. I recognize the problems inherent with subjective analysis, including the risk of extending my own narrative to account for the philosophies, predicaments, and motives of others, especially those I presume to share a like mind. I also recognize that words such as “evil” are not always acceptable in scholarly circles, and that because of the moral stances I am prepared to take, many will dismiss what I have to say outright.

Still, war is evil. The needs of returning veterans are not being met, and personal ethics prevent me from writing in a way which suggests otherwise. My argument can be made succinctly, but by no means should it be read as simple: war recreates itself with each generation, first by luring disadvantaged youths into military service with myths of heroism, later by appropriating the symbolic authority granted to them as “veterans.” Despite centuries of literary and artistic depictions of the horrors of war, contemporary representations of war and homecoming provide veterans with only two forms of identity.

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11 This claim about “socioeconomically disadvantaged youths” is germane to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also veterans of wars fought by so-called “all-volunteer” armies. Historically, wars have always been fought by disadvantaged populations: slaves, conscripts, draftees, and poor people with varying degrees of agency (or no agency at all), and these populations are always under the control of officers, a wealthy and more powerful social group. Books about war are written by and about those in power. Arnold Krammer’s *Prisoners of War* (2008) asks, “Why did soldiers over the centuries put themselves at such risk? There are as many reasons as conflicts. Some soldiers fought because it was their profession; others joined an army to make extra money after the harvest. In naval countries military service was often involuntary. Sailors were shanghaied while drunk—pressed into service by groups of thugs. More often, however, men who went to war did so as true believers in a cause, ideological, religious, or political” (11). Of course, it is possible to “believe” in a cause while simultaneously being subjected to the classist rhetoric which makes it believable. And, in any society governed by “true believers,” going against cultural norms results in ostracizing, belittlement, and further marginalization. In dealing with veterans as they are perceived in the American unconscious, I am attempting to circumnavigate rhetoric, politics, and cultural representations of veterans which only tell one side of the story.
to model: the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior.” These identities fail to account for the unique obstacles faced in each veteran’s attempt to rejoin society. They do not provide veterans with outlets for the altruism and desire to grow into leaders instilled in military service. They are symbolic positions created to sustain war, not the veteran. Stereotyping and placating veterans—the “thank you for your service” urge of the twenty-first century—robs them of the moral authority to comment on the wars they fight, but also the right to self-definition, the agency which leads young men and women to war in the first place.

**Patriotism**

Patriotism comes in both positive and negative forms. But it uniformly maintains the inescapability of veteran identity. I would like to draw upon W. E. B. DuBois here, not because the struggles of freed slaves reflect the difficulties of returning veterans, but because what comes after struggle in any form is an immediate search for peace. DuBois, like many of the veterans featured in this text, also felt “different from the others” (2). In *The Souls of Black Folk* he grapples with liminal African American identity, wondering if it is “possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American” (3). After the Vietnam War, and largely due to the fact that veterans were blamed for it, 37% of veterans surveyed expressed a desire to live in a country other than the United States (Severo and Milford 358). This theme of alienation is present in representations of war throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I will discuss many of them in this dissertation. The language and practice of patriotism varies slightly from war to war, from generation to generation. Today, patriotism suggests that veterans are the very embodiment of
American identity, a social group which draws upon multiculturalism to accomplish its missions, one capable of overcoming great adversity because of its diversity. This rhetoric is a departure from the ways Vietnam Veterans were treated, but it still assumes that veterans return to an idealized society. Patriotism, as a practice, consumes diversity, redefines adversity to suit its needs, and replaces genuine dialogue between veterans and civilians with hollow gestures and platitudes. Like DuBois I’ve discovered in myself a sort of “double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (2). I don’t like what I see. Through the eyes of others veterans see themselves only as they were in the past. Worse, the passage of time demands that the veteran’s past be rewritten to accommodate more savory narratives of war. Such demands separate the pain of war from any real context. The pain becomes an abstraction, an intangible wound doomed to forever bleed. Not surprisingly, the future is impossible when in the shackles of such conformity.

It was April 2005. I’d had two hours of sleep when I woke up to my platoon sergeant standing over my cot. He asked me to go with him outside of the tent where we could talk in private. Initially, I thought I was in trouble, that I’d left some sensitive item in the humvee following the previous night’s mission. But that wasn’t the case. As we exited the tent, entering into the sunlight beaming down on that patch of desert just north of Najaf, Iraq, I recognized our platoon leader standing next to a stranger.

“Specialist Martin of Somerset, Kentucky?” asked the man that I did not know.

“Yes, sir.”

“When was the last time you talked to your family?”

“I don’t know, a month or so ago, sir.”
My platoon sergeant asked, “Do you have a brother?”

“Yes.”

I looked up at the stranger to see a cross on his lapel. He was a chaplain. I knew immediately that something was wrong back home. I didn’t have time to guess what it could be. “Your brother is dead, son.” It took three helicopter rides and an airplane to get me out of Iraq. In twenty-four hours I would set foot on three continents and still miss the funeral. And that’s what it is like to get a Red Cross message while at war.

I tell this story because it put me in a rare position. I was yanked out of war and sent home with no preparation. I was neither wounded nor had I completed my four years of “honorable service.” And when I changed out of my uniform, soiled with the sand and sweat from weeks in the field—or, more accurately, the desert—I looked and sounded like everyone else. Still, I was different. And it was at this point in my life, based on the way I was treated, that I first recognized that difference.

Everywhere I went, war was all anyone wanted to talk about. They’d bring up stories heard on the news, and I would respond with either clarification or affirmation, but I soon found they preferred the latter. “Do you think it is worth it?” friends would ask. Acquaintances would inquire if I knew so-and-so, as though everyone in the military is on a first-name basis. “Have you ever killed anyone?” asked a distant relative, making me so angry that I couldn’t speak; I could only excuse myself and mutter obscenities in the driveway. It became the first instance of the same question repeated by those who watched movies like Full Metal Jacket (1987) for their understanding of war. I was more forgiving when kids would ask the question. But adults? I thought it plainly offensive.
Perhaps strangest of all, amid the grief inflicted upon me and my family by my brother’s death, I received displays of patriotism in place of the type of sympathy commonly shown to those who’ve lost immediate family members. After sorting through my brother’s belongings because my parents were unable, I’d hear “thank you for your service.” Even at my brother’s memorial service, people went out of their way to tell me how proud they were of me. I didn’t want to be the center of attention. I wanted to be left alone to grieve. I didn’t want to spend my leave walking on eggshells, afraid to break with others’ conceptions of veterans. Then, after two surreal weeks of performance, I returned to Iraq, where no one wanted to talk about war or the military.

My feeling of difference continued in the years immediately following my discharge. I’d spent four years overseas, learning to spot threats and to maintain an aggressive demeanor. I learned to associate dead animals on the side of the road with bombs. Angry looks or aggressive posturing predicted an ambush. We drove with guns pointed out of our windows and mounted to the tops of our trucks. On the back of each vehicle was a sign: “Stay Clear 50m. Deadly force authorized.” Even among friends, because of the hyper-masculine nature of the military, I learned to expect daily fistfights. In my 2003 deployment, “beat downs,” in which one endures an onslaught of fists and boots from 10-15 platoon mates, served as sanctioned rites of passage for the newly promoted, birthday gifts, or off the record punishments. In 2005, when we returned to Iraq, we arrived with a new game: Someone would lay a dollar bill on the ground. Everybody would stand in a circle, talking as though they didn’t see it. Then, someone new would join the circle and see the dollar. When that person went to pick it up,
everyone would jump on them and start throwing punches. It was called “The Dollar Game.” I *endured* this behavior. I also *participated* in it.

From what I can tell, feeling threatened both inside and outside the wire is common among those deployed to warzones. Veterans return having spent years on edge, honing the hypervigilance attributed to PTSD as a means of survival. They come home and find dad wants to arm wrestle. Co-workers code-switch, speaking what they think is a military dialect by raising their voices and puffing up their muscles. Teachers tiptoe around the topic of war in the classroom, ever deferring to the token veteran’s opinion, as though every GI Bill-toting private is an expert strategist or General. The religious tell them that they need to “pray harder” when they find it difficult to sit in the church pews of their youth. Violent thoughts begin to feel like sins. Still, they find it impossible to accommodate strangers who want to pat them on the shoulder. Even handshakes are threatening because of the code switch to a more masculine posture, the very one I watched out for as a machine gunner in Iraq. Veterans try to explain to their loved ones the pains of being different. They confess their dirty, violent thoughts and attribute them to the past. But the only advice they’re given is to “forget about all that and start living in the present.” So, they try. And they soon find that people won’t let them forget, that they’ll forever be reminded of a past which indicates their difference. Within the text I am examining, the American unconscious, there is a script to which veterans must adhere. Furthermore, veterans are prevented from straying from the script by a confluence of unspoken beliefs and expectations.

Mary C. Sengstock, a sociologist interested in matters of culture and race, views the “persistence” of difference as a line which separates cultural and racial identities:
“[M]ulti-cultural individuals usually have a major advantage that multi-racial persons do not” (68). This advantage, Sengstock claims, is in the multi-cultural individual’s ability to “hide” difference, to avoid being reminded that they are “not part of us” (69). Those of mixed race, Sengstock claims, cannot hide; they are marked by physical difference. Veterans share a common set of disabilities, but these are not as pronounced as the physical differences of race. Perhaps, if veterans had uniforms like their active duty counterparts, they could claim physical difference, but they do not. Nevertheless, it is difficult for veterans to “hide” who they are on the inside, so much that it might as well be on the outside. In these ways the shared experience of homecoming transcends the types of shared experience found in other communities. Put simply, veterans must exist publicly.

The capacity for violence possessed by veterans—their tacit knowledge of death—is real. Every recruit, from the Navy yeoman to the Army grunt, is taught, in some manner or another, how to inflict violence upon others. At the same time, civilians exaggerate the threat this fact presents to them, pretending as though they are incapable of such violence, reinforcing the separateness of a veteran culture. Hyper-violent, almost pornographic representations of war produced by Hollywood are the greatest sources of this exaggeration. In these films, year-long deployments of killing and being killed get distilled into a few hours of orgasmic pleasure for civilian audiences, making it appear as though survivors of war are something other than human. The only veterans I’ve known to enjoy such films are those who experience memories of war trauma on repeat in their minds. They seek out external stimuli which correspond with inner turmoil. Civilians appear to have little more than a morbid curiosity. This curiosity results in the permeation
of war violence throughout mainstream media. Many veterans find this violence to be a painful reminder of war from which they’ll never be able to “hide.”

Eric J. Leed, a historian of World War I, articulates the experience of war as “an arena of instinctual liberation” (No Man’s Land, 196). He argues that civilians have come to believe that “[t]he figure educated in this arena was necessarily someone who had been primitivized, barbarized, and infantilized, demoted on the scales that measure and define civilized adulthood. The veteran, with his dangerous powers and his penchant for violence, was a threat to the society of his origins. He was someone who had to be reintegrated, reaculturated, reeducated” (No Man’s Land, 196). Leed’s reading of WWI holds true of the contemporary veteran’s return home experience: “primitivized, barbarized, and infantilized” are ways some members of society define the word “veteran,” but such pejoratives also shape veterans’ conceptions of themselves.

Veterans who question the identities ascribed to them, who wonder why such violent memories merit such extreme praise, are reminded of the many other veterans who endured combat before them; if they dare express symptoms of post-traumatic stress as something other than victimhood they are told to “get over it.” Then, if they begin harboring resentment toward the institution of war, they’re considered unpatriotic, even traitors. It’s not often that films glorifying the enslavement of African people, the genocide of Native American people, or the murder of countless “others” gets produced. But war pornography is as abundant today as it was after WWI. The inability to “hide” from such inaccurate, offensive representations of war inflicts actual harm upon veterans.

Surveillance is another practice reminding veterans of their difference. Those recently discharged veterans who want to “hide” find quickly that they’re being tracked:
all enlistees must complete years of inactive service beyond their initial obligations. Later in this chapter, I will explain how, in 2009, returning veterans were added to a terrorist watch list by the Department of Homeland Security. Even veterans’ license plates and government health care services populate registries accounting for their whereabouts. Veterans cannot collect education benefits in anonymity. Student veterans must report to staff members at the universities responsible for administering them. In fact, when I worked as a graduate assistant for a university veteran resource center, much effort was put into placing the letter “V” alongside the name of each veteran enrolled at the school. These efforts are conscious and unconscious. And most are benevolent. But they still reinforce difference.

Veteran difference “persists” and its continual reiteration sets the stage for a one-sided conversation between veterans and civilians. Veterans watch as Hollywood dramatizes them as merciless killers or helpless victims, listen as friends and family ask insensitive questions, and remain silent as parades march around them, memorials rise above them, and strangers salute them as members of a culture, but never as individuals.

The “persistence” of the veteran’s difference is caused by the insistence of civilians desiring that veterans exist publicly and according to a one-dimensional cultural script. Sengstock argues that such reminders are damaging in a racial context: “They were present forever and could reassert themselves at any time. Even people who had long since become comfortable with their multi-racial background and identity could be reminded months—or years—later that they really did not belong. This was largely due … [to] the fact that so many people in the community as a whole felt free to question their identity and comment upon it” (Sengstock 69). Much of what Sengstock claims
holds true for veterans. It’s not personal. The damage of constantly being reminded of
one’s difference is a product of the emotional investment of society in its patriotic myths.
Importantly, racial difference is created and maintained through emphasis upon
superficial characteristics such as skin color which exist in the physical realm. Racism
extends beyond the physical realm to include stereotypical representations of these
superficial characteristics, but these representations always refer back to physical
difference. Contrariwise, veteran difference emerges from the symbolic realm, from
within the American unconscious, and it is created and maintained within patriotic myths,
in stereotypes which both describe and alter the individual veteran’s performance of
identity. Both racial difference and veteran difference shape performances of identity.

Generally, but not as a rule, I decline the offer to stand and receive applause when
musicians or speakers try to recognize veterans at events. Unintentionally, I’ve
discovered such refusals are taken as political statements to those aware of my veteran
identity. The best way to describe the look I’ve grown accustomed to receiving is to liken
it to the one a person might get after spitting on the American flag. To some, by refusing
to stand I am refusing the patriotic gesture offered and claiming that it is insufficient.
Personally, I refuse to stand for several reasons, some more reasonable than others.
Firstly, I don’t care for praise when a speaker attempts to levy it upon me for the sake of
others. Is patriotism a chore? Admittedly, and this harkens back to my experiences in
Iraq, I refuse to stand because I do not want to become the target of physical violence.
Mostly, however, I despise the three to five seconds of being gawked at and analyzed by
those sitting in my vicinity. I’ve watched as their eyes go up and down and side to side,
not in judgment but in genuine attempts to discern exactly what a “veteran” looks like.
After standing as the recipient of some cheap applause, I’ve found that the discomfort persists throughout the remainder of the event. And it shouldn’t come as a surprise: the ritual results in no longer being a part of the crowd. To be recognized as exceptional is still to be recognized as different.

In its more insidious form, patriotism is scripted by social architects. Take, for example, the “half-time tributes” common at NFL football games: “Between 2011 and 2014, the Department of Defense paid 14 NFL teams a total of $5.4 million and the National Guard paid $5.3 million to 11 teams to ‘honor America’s heroes’ before games and during halftime shows” (“Paid Patriotism” 8). I doubt such deceptions were what George Washington had in mind when he said, “The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation.” The difference between the public’s attitude toward war during Washington’s time and today is that veterans are not permitted to consider war’s justifications, at least not openly. If civilians follow one patriotic script, veterans follow another, which prohibits them from questioning the source of their identity. After all, civilians run the government and veterans’ hospitals, and they control the other sources of agency earned during service; it would be unwise for veterans to bite the hand that feeds them. This pressure to conform to a patriotic script represents the inescapability of veteran identity, and it explains the resulting silence displayed by veterans who “choose not to talk about war.” Again, this pressure to remain silent is inescapable; it is something from which veterans cannot “hide.”
Patriotism is a subjective experience, not a universal one. For those harmed by its effects there are others who benefit. But it is not as simple as gain or loss. Accepting patriotic gratitude carries implicit expectations: conforming to those narratives of war endorsed by the state, condoning all actions of the military—past and present, privileging one’s veteran identity over all others. These expectations are the price veterans pay for the reverence they receive. Patriotism, then, can be viewed as an exchange. Sometimes, it is an attempt to make reparations. But reverence bought is no reverence at all. Wilfred Owen, one of the “Great War Poets” of WWI, referred to this exchange as “the old Lie” in his famous poem, “Dulce et Decorum Est”:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (Owen 17-28)

The last lines translate as, “It is sweet and proper to die for one's country.” In other words, Owen challenges the notion that the action of dying for one’s country because it is sweet and proper imbues the act with meaning. Instead, death perpetuates war, and the reason for war becomes war itself. Owen’s famous maxim, “My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity” (qtd. in Hollinghurst 82), reflects the author’s larger efforts to destabilize the myth of war’s glory by associating it with “pity.” Many war authors have tried and failed to wage written arguments against war. Tim O’Brien,
for example, perhaps the most famous author to emerge from the Vietnam War, flatly refused to accept others’ definitions of “war” and the “war story” in *The Things They Carried* (1990): “A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior” (68). Patriotism fails to account for the reality of veterans’ lives because of the absurdity written into its script: “They have been afflicted by war, our chronically human illness. The sufferings they experience tell us about contemporary strains of our disease, about the ways histories are violently made and unmade in a process of forgetting and remembering” (Leed, “Fateful Memories” 80).

Veterans are essentially told that it’s okay for a country to selectively recruit disadvantaged youths and send them off to factories of death and dismemberment. It is okay for a nation to eat its young so long as there’s a paycheck and the appropriate amount of applause gets distributed. And in this conversation which juxtaposes veterans alongside the politics of race and culture, I can’t help but wonder how we—civilians as well as veterans—have come to denounce slavery as an evil but not war. Patriotism, as an exchange, is little more than commerce, than human trafficking.

Recruits are no doubt aware of the *positive* aspects of patriotism. It is written into their enlistment contracts as entitlements, performed in their schools by marching bands and members of the JROTC, bought like advertisements on national television, and it elevates all veterans to the status of “Heroes,” regardless of their individual service records. Patriotic rhetoric requires heroic examples in order to function. By contrast, visibly wounded or disillusioned veterans undermine patriotism. As such, those who championed the original GI Bill meant to restore “veterans to a place in society not lower than they were likely to have attained had they not served in the military” (Altschuler and
Despite their differences, all agreed something must be done to help Veterans assimilate into civilian life.

Much of the urgency stemmed from a desire to avoid the missteps following World War I, when discharged Veterans got little more than a $60 allowance and a train ticket home.

During the Great Depression, some Veterans found it difficult to make a living. Congress tried to intervene by passing the World War Adjusted Act of 1924, commonly known as the Bonus Act. The law provided a bonus based on the number of days served. But there was a catch: most Veterans wouldn’t see a dime for 20 years.

A group of Veterans marched on Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1932 to demand full payment of their bonuses. When they didn’t get it, most went home. But some decided to stick around until they got paid. They were later kicked out of town following a bitter standoff with U.S. troops. The incident marked one of the greatest periods of unrest our nation’s capital had ever known.

The return of millions of Veterans from World War II gave Congress a chance at redemption. But the GI Bill had far greater implications. It was seen as a genuine attempt to thwart a looming social and economic crisis. Some saw inaction as an invitation to another depression.

Harry W. Colmery, a former national commander of the American Legion and former Republican National Chairman, is credited with drawing up the first draft of the GI Bill. It was introduced in the House on Jan. 10, 1944, and in the Senate the following day. Both chambers approved their own versions of the bill.

But the struggle was just heating up. The bill almost died when Senate and House members came together to debate their versions. Both groups agreed on the education and home loan benefits, but were deadlocked on the unemployment provision.

Ultimately, Rep. John Gibson of Georgia was rushed in to cast the tie-breaking vote. The Senate approved the final form of the bill on June 12, and the House followed on June 13. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed it into law on June 22, 1944.
The Veterans Administration (VA) was responsible for carrying out the law’s key provisions: education and training, loan guaranty for homes, farms or businesses, and unemployment pay.

Before the war, college and homeownership were, for the most part, unreachable dreams for the average American. Thanks to the GI Bill, millions who would have flooded the job market instead opted for education. In the peak year of 1947, Veterans accounted for 49 percent of college admissions. By the time the original GI Bill ended on July 25, 1956, 7.8 million of 16 million World War II Veterans had participated in an education or training program.

Millions also took advantage of the GI Bill’s home loan guaranty. From 1944 to 1952, VA backed nearly 2.4 million home loans for World War II Veterans.

While Veterans embraced the education and home loan benefits, few collected on one of the bill’s most controversial provisions—the unemployment pay. Less than 20 percent of funds set aside for this were used.

In 1984, former Mississippi Congressman Gillespie V. "Sonny" Montgomery revamped the GI Bill, which has been known as the "Montgomery GI Bill" ever since, assuring that the legacy of the original GI Bill lives on, as VA home loan guaranty and education programs continue to work for our newest generation of combat Veterans.

In 2008, the GI Bill was updated once again. The new law gives Veterans with active duty service on, or after, Sept. 11 2001, enhanced educational benefits that cover more educational expenses, provide a living allowance, money for books and the ability to transfer unused educational benefits to spouses or children. (“Education and Training” 4-17)

The history of the GI Bill is more than a story about political legislation. It is a story about veterans recognizing war as a predatory institution, demanding compensation, and rightly so. However, written between the lines, there’s also a story about civilians consciously trying to figure out ways to help veterans to rejoin society. There was no consensus about what role veterans should perform collectively, so access to higher education in general gave veterans a way to redefine themselves, to reenter the civilian
workforce, but also a way to place their experiences within larger historical and sociological contexts through a liberal education. Over time, military service became synonymous with higher education. Disadvantaged youths from impoverished regions began to see military service as upward mobility.

Civilians are not some nefarious villains, holding secret meetings, deciding who lives and who dies in arbitrary wars. And not every recruit enlists in order to get an education. Patriotic gestures are almost always well-intentioned. It’s not a crime to show national pride or to praise veterans for their sacrifices. Rather, my argument suggests that there are unintended consequences, that patriotism, as a practice, should be revised to better account for the reality veterans experience when they return home from war. The GI Bill no longer guarantees upward mobility. The concept of a “liberal education,” which teaches veterans to contextualize their memories and emotional experiences, has been whittled away by austerity and “teaching to the job.” Nonetheless, military service bestows upon veterans a measure of symbolic authority, and changes to the ways veterans are compensated for their service should include teaching them how to exercise that authority, how to become leaders within the society they take oaths to protect. Veteran storytellers have the power to disrupt the prevailing patriotic narratives shaping their lives. But the communities which emerge from these acts of narration must include both veterans and civilians. The private works to become a sergeant. The lieutenant works to become a captain. Eventually, enlisted leaders and officers gain power and respect by taking on subordinates, younger soldiers with their own ambitions, and these leaders advance in rank based upon how well they lead and educate younger troops. In the civilian workforce, there are leaders, managers, and educators. In the military, an
individual occupies all of these positions at once. And the attitudes, ethics, and ambitions of members of the military do not simply vanish once they become “veterans.” Veterans want to educate, to continue growing as leaders in the communities they enter into after war. But they cannot do these things in a vacuum.

**Tribalism in Veteran Culture**

In basic training, during the initial weeks when our cohort of mostly 18-25 year old recruits were learning to speak across the racial, gendered, and socioeconomic divides we brought with us as civilians, a drill sergeant said to us, “In the United States Army there’s only one color: *green.*” I heard that axiom repeated no less than a dozen times during my four-year enlistment. And during that period in my life I took comfort in knowing that I’d entered into an allegiance with the individuals standing to my left and to my right. I took comfort in knowing that they’d protect me, that we’d somehow transcended the petty squabbles of our former lives. Now, I wonder if that drill sergeant was telling a story or if it is possible for an institution to fundamentally alter the identities of its recruits? Did taking an oath of enlistment somehow transform me into a member of a new culture, one less defined by skin color or socioeconomic background than by the habituations common to those who’ve endured military service? Were we all, in fact, *green?* And if I *was* green, what am I *now?*

The problems with reassimilation and homecoming are nebulous, derived from any number of sources and complicated by the intersectionality of veteran identity. In the previous sections, I argued that veterans function symbolically within the American unconscious as repositories for memories of war. Put another way, veterans themselves
become the tools used to repress war; the stereotypes which describe and alter veteran identity force veterans into silence, and this silence takes the place of dialogue about war. I do not mean that war is never mentioned. Rather, war is only understood superficially by larger society. Certain memories—horrors, war crimes, lifelong disabilities, defeat, being on the wrong side of history—cannot coexist with patriotic myths. Further, the practice of patriotism reinforces the veteran’s alienation, pressuring service men and women to remain silent about what they remember, to perform identity in a way which reinforces difference. However, this description of veterans as repositories for memories of war is limited, answering only what symbolic function veterans serve within society, not the more important questions, “How?” or “Why?” It helps to begin with an understanding of the societies which produce veterans, the cultures found in the military, and how societal and cultural experiences merge within an individual’s performance of veteran identity.

Veteran identity is intrinsically bound to altruism and the need to educate. That is, veterans are trained from the lowest ranks to think of themselves as future leaders, and military leaders are responsible for the education of less experienced soldiers. However, when veterans return home, they find few outlets in which to express these traits, resulting both in unharnessed potential and a civilian population uneducated about the effects of war upon individuals and societies. Veterans, like the awards worn on their dress uniforms, occupy a space which is simultaneously physical and symbolic. The Purple Heart, for example, is awarded to service men and women who are wounded in
combat. Unlike the Medal of Honor, which is awarded for valor, the Purple Heart is awarded to individuals for surviving violent actions perpetrated by others. The Medal of Honor signifies prowess in battle; the Purple Heart signifies luck, resilience, or perhaps victimhood. In military communities, both awards grant their owners a measure of authority on the topic of war. Usually, this authority comes in the form of “promotion points” used to advance within a single military occupational specialty. Less formally, it would be assumed in military communities that a Purple Heart recipient possesses knowledge about survival. A Medal of Honor recipient would possess knowledge about the same, but also expertise in waging war. Each military branch has its own hierarchy of awards indicative of different types of heroism or meritorious service. Service men and women who earn awards in combat get promoted faster, which leads to their

12 Military communities have debated these qualifications fiercely in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Conversations about how to account for “the invisible wounds of war”—PTSD and TBI—emerged as a result of changes in warfare, namely the Improvised Explosive Devices used by insurgents and the technologies used by American service men and women to survive them. At present, the Purple Heart can be awarded for TBI, but not PTSD. Additionally, political powers refusing to acknowledge terrorist attacks on American soil have fought to preclude service members from receiving the Purple Heart. For example, those individuals injured or killed in the 2015 mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas reveal much about the award’s ability to signify meaning. In 2009, a gunman inspired by the rhetoric of foreign terrorist organizations opened fire on the military base: “Thirteen people were killed and more than 30 were wounded in the attack by Army Maj. Nidal Hasan, who was convicted in August 2013, of 13 counts of premeditated murder and 32 counts of attempted murder” (U.S. Department of Defense). Army Secretary John M. McHugh, under competing pressures from those who felt that awarding survivors Purple Hearts validated terrorists’ claims of reach into the homeland on one hand, and that awarding the Purple Heart undercut the sacrifices made by service men and women in foreign engagements on the other, eventually ceded authority to Congress: “The Purple Heart's strict eligibility criteria had prevented us from awarding it to victims of the horrific attack at Fort Hood … Now that Congress has changed the criteria, we believe there is sufficient reason to allow these men and women to be awarded and recognized with either the Purple Heart or, in the case of civilians, the Defense of Freedom Medal. It's an appropriate recognition of their service and sacrifice.” I cite the criteria and debates surrounding the Purple Heart Award as evidence that symbolic meanings attached to war wounds change according to politics and time.
commanding troops, a position which allows them to provide knowledge and skills to the next generation of warfighters. Nearly every member of the military learns to be an educator *en route* to becoming a leader. This tenet is a central aspect of military service, and it informs the culture service men and women enter into when they become “veterans.”

Veterans have developed and now live in a culture all their own. So, one way to explore veteran identity is to focus upon the experience of war and how that experience results in hierarchical relationships in the military. Veterans might be better understood by considering the *absence* of these relationships after military service. Sebastian Junger, the author-director responsible for *War* (2010) and *Restrepo* (2010), claims, “[V]eterans need to feel that they’re just as necessary and productive back in society as they were on the battlefield” (102). However, because the battlefield is no longer “an extension of society,” veterans’ experiences, when spoken aloud, appear crude, their skills obsolete. They’re trained and conditioned to educate, but homecoming introduces veterans to a civilian population uninterested in what they have to teach.

I helped to create the nation’s first Minor in Veterans Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. I designed the curriculum to focus on the cultural, institutional, and psychosocial experiences of military service. Much attention was paid to the rituals, dialects, and traditions of the different branches of the military. I got around my lack of all-encompassing knowledge about other branches of service by inviting guest speakers, usually student veterans and faculty from campus. These guests would share their stories, but often with an emphasis on professionalization, as though they were training younger enlisted soldiers. Again, and as Junger states, veterans want to feel “useful” in the civilian
world, and when given expressive opportunities, I found that veterans, as storytellers, are motivated by altruism, teambuilding, and camaraderie. In their guest lectures, they discovered new roles as educators, performing veteran identity in a way representative of the distinct intersectionality of military men and women.

At the same time, there was shock value to many of their presentations. Some veterans chose to talk about combat in its most violent forms. I recognized the difficulties faced by students who had to confront these realities, but ultimately I felt it was better to expose them to the truth instead of overly-simplified, patriotic constructions of veterans’ experiences. Sometimes, the students would say, “Thank You for Your Service” after a presentation, and in that particular context, I felt they meant it. Patriotism was just the starting point. It is the reason many non-military students enroll in Veterans Studies courses: to understand family members who have served; to prepare themselves for work within veterans’ communities; or to interrogate the narratives of war taught in other classes.

Veterans Studies, as it existed at EKU before my departure in 2013, coupled original courses like my own with those from other departments (e.g., Behavioral Psychology, Security Studies, or War Literature courses). So, in addition to the first-hand perspectives of veterans, non-veteran educators descended upon my students, further educating them about the significance of what they’d heard from veteran guest lecturers. In many ways, the courses wielded irony, juxtaposing a larger picture of a vast, American war machine alongside the localized stories of veterans, revealing war as a circumstance beyond any individual’s control.
Paul Fussell, a literary critic and historian of the First World War, argues that veterans tend to recall war’s industrialized aspects over its horrors. Fussell describes “irony assisted recall” as a tool used by veterans to articulate an experience with extreme personal implications, one which does not hold the same symbolic weight when explained as the collective experience of a larger social group:

In reading memoirs of war, one notices the same phenomenon over and over. By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream. (34)

Importantly, irony-assisted recall leads veterans to repeatedly question the circumstances of war. I know that the stories veterans shared in my classes mattered to them. That fact was obvious. Less obvious is the fact that veterans’ audiences should find some personal stake in what they hear. My goal, as an educator, was to help rescue “events” and “moments” from that “undifferentiated stream” of disinterest, or more accurately, *repression disguised as disinterest*. Positioning veterans as educators in my courses undermined the symbolic function of the veteran, making memories of war public, employing irony-assisted recall to explain those memories emotionally and scientifically, transforming the veterans themselves from *repositories* of memories of war into *purveyors* of knowledge beneficial to all of humanity. As repositories for memories of war, veterans keep those memories a secret so not to undermine the illusion of peace and harmony at home. As purveyors of knowledge, these same veterans draw upon painful and inspirational memories alike, extracting lessons and modeling growth for the benefit of humanity.
Most importantly, the courses resulted in stronger bonds between veterans and civilians on campus. Veterans leave behind close-knit communities when they exit military service, reentering into an increasingly divided civilian society. After years of sharing emotional and physical burdens, the lack of these communities results in the veteran’s alienation. By contrast, past generations of Native Americans returning from war experienced a much different sort of homecoming:

Anthropologists like Kohrt, Hoffman, and Abramowitz have identified three factors that seem to crucially affect a combatant’s transition back into civilian life. The United States seems to rank low on all three. First, cohesive and egalitarian tribal societies do a very good job at mitigating the effects of trauma, but by their very nature, many modern societies are exactly the opposite: hierarchical and alienating. America’s great wealth, although a blessing in many ways, has allowed for the growth of an individualistic society that suffers high rates of depression and anxiety. Both are correlated with chronic PTSD. (Junger 101)

Junger argues that both veterans and civilians are dealing with record levels of mental illness, suggesting that society as a whole lacks the resilience needed to overcome these plights. Veterans’ stories contain lessons in resilience, and dialogue between veterans and civilians shares such examples. Veterans, as educators, have the power to serve as models of healthy identity, to dispel veteran stereotypes, and to bridge the gap between military and civilian cultures. Combat and different forms of military trauma plant the seeds of illness and disillusionment, but it is the alienation veterans feel in relation to larger which creates the conditions in which those seeds can germinate.

In their attempts to rewrite the cultural script of veteran identity, veterans are naturally drawn to groups and activities which recreate the altruistic and tribal aspects of military service. For example, more than 1,000 veterans travelled to Standing Rock, ND, to aid Native Americans threatened by the installment of an oil pipeline near precious
water resources in 2016 and 2017. Opponents on social media argued that veterans co-opted the protests, placing their own distrust or disdain for the government above the stated intents of the Native Americans threatened. However, when interviewed by The Guardian, veterans told a different story: “We are prepared to put our bodies between Native elders and a privatized military force … We’ve stood in the face of fire before. We feel a responsibility to use the skills we have,” said Elizabeth Williams, an Air Force veteran (Levin 4). Jake Pogue, a Marine Corps veteran, claimed, “We’re not coming as fighters, but as protectors … Our role in that situation would be to simply form a barrier between water protectors and the police force and try to take some of that abuse for them” (Levin 11). In these brief interviews, veterans attempt to justify their actions, and they reveal much about how they see themselves perceived. Williams, for example, seems to think it important to emphasize veterans’ skills. Pogue underscores the fact that the veterans are perceived as sources of potential violence.

Sam Levin, the author of the Guardian article, draws parallels between the veterans’ mental health problems and reports of trauma emerging among tribal protestors psychologically and physically injured by police and government officials: “At Standing Rock, indigenous activists say the mass arrests and police violence have led many of them to develop PTSD, suffering symptoms that many veterans understand well” (19). The stated intent of many veterans interviewed in the article indicates altruism, specifically, a willingness to experience violence for the sake of others: “I don’t want to see a twentysomething, thirtysomething untrained person killed by the United States government,” claimed Vietnam Veteran Dan Luker. To travel to Standing Rock, these veterans had to battle the perceptions of others. There was no clear-cut way for them to
contribute without first dealing with veteran stereotypes. In the end, it seems that the only thing these veterans want to co-opt is the experience of being victimized by the government, something they have already experienced, one of their *skills*.

The perceptions of non-veterans exist between the lines in Levin’s interviews, and these perceptions impede rather than enhance the veteran’s ability to engage in altruistic action. Veterans begin as civilians, entering into the military where they become soldiers, sailors, airmen, or Marines. After service, these disparate groups of individuals merge into a single subjectivity, the “veteran,” and this subjectivity is defined by civilians, previous generations of veterans, and representations of veterans in artwork, literature, and mass media. To be a “veteran” necessarily entails *not* having the authority to define that title’s physical or symbolic values. The word “veteran” lumps branches of service, military occupational specialties, generations of service, as well as peacetime and combat duties together ontologically as a single entity. Former members of the military, simply because of the word “veteran,” must give up any superlative or unique aspect of their service in order to be acknowledged *generally*. Civilian culture and patriotic rhetoric subsume military culture(s), leaving but one “veteran” culture. From this position, the only symbolic authority granted to veterans who have survived war is the authority to passively accept veteran identity as it is defined by others. So, when 1,000 veterans travel to North Dakota to use their skills in a way which runs contrary to the stated intent of the government they once served, they’re branded as co-opters, mentally ill, or in some way which indicates they are among the minority of veterans in the United States.

To escape generalization veterans find they must confront others’ expectations *en masse*. Cultural representations of veterans and the wars they fight produce images of
emotionally unavailable, easily triggered, disgruntled former warfighters who are unable to communicate memories of war. I will call this stereotype the “Wounded Warrior” in Chapter Two. Presumably, veterans depicted in this manner are unable to communicate their experiences because the act is too uncomfortable, the result of PTSD, survivor’s guilt, or apathy. At the same time, and practically speaking, memories of war are difficult to communicate; such conversations do trigger traumatic memories or an uphill battle against preconceived notions of veterans. The result is predictable: veterans often choose not to discuss war; their stories are told by others, in literature and in cinema, and these representations alter veterans’ perceptions of themselves. How do veterans consciously and unconsciously perform veteran identity to accommodate perception instead of the reality of their experiences?

The relationship between veterans and civilians can best be described thematically as an experience of alienation. Junger believes the alienation experienced by returning veterans can be attributed to what is missing from today’s society. Specifically, the author argues that returning veterans long for the types of roles given to Native American

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13 In an article entitled “Combat in the Classroom” I discuss my experiences working with student veterans at Eastern Kentucky University. In 2012, I designed and taught an “Introduction to College” course for veterans labeled academically “at risk.” The course centered on personal writing as an exploratory tool. However, I structured it in such a way that their personal writings were devoted to present circumstances: articulating the skills they gained in uniform, recognizing others’ preconceived notions of veterans, relating past experiences competently and in narratives invested in their future success. I concluded that veterans are more than willing to share their stories when given the chance, when taught the skills needed to express themselves, and when they are not subtly coerced into producing narratives reflecting the emotional or political agendas of others. Veterans are prone to embrace personal writing, in particular, as a way of communicating memories, perspectives, and beliefs which are more difficult to relate on an interpersonal level. The student veterans’ works were published in The Journal of Military Experience, Vols. 1 & 2. For more about the pedagogical methods and results of the course read my article in Writing on the Edge, Vol. 22.1 (2012).
warfighters who returned from war; modern society, because it emphasizes “extrinsic values over intrinsic ones” (22), eliminates the veteran’s sense of usefulness. One clear way to improve veterans’ lives is to restore this sense of usefulness. Society does not need to bring war to the homeland in order for this restoration to occur. In fact, the threat of veteran violence is another tool used to suppress veteran testimony that I will discuss in the next section. Instead, veteran knowledge needs to be acknowledged through the creation of outlets which allow them to continue as educators and leaders. Aubree Peckham, a member of the Mescalero Apache tribe who continues to protest at Standing Rock, ND, at the time of this writing, claims, “We don’t know how to protect ourselves against the tactical weapons they are using … [The veterans] are getting us better prepared … We are able to talk about PTSD. And they finally feel like they are understood” (Levin 22-23). Veterans must be trained to do this work (see the Afterword). And civilians must take a greater interest in the lives of real veterans, not the fictional veteran characters they see on television. At Standing Rock, all of these things happened.

**Camaraderie**

I have argued that veterans are trained and conditioned to think of themselves as purveyors of knowledge. However, veterans do not control the production of war images or the perceptions of their civilian counterparts. They cannot grant themselves the authority needed to comment on war or, more generally, violence. This reality runs contrary to the values espoused by many veterans, a desire, beyond surviving war, to help other veterans do the same. In its purest iteration, this desire transcends social, economic, gendered, and racial divides. In the Army, for example, I learned that soldiers were all
“green.” The divisions of larger society melted away so that we might become better warriors, so that we might survive the violence awaiting us. I still witnessed racial strife while on Active Duty. But our common identity as soldiers helped us overcome these obstacles to complete our missions. After war, our egalitarian sentiments and knowledge about survival remained. But society’s divisions returned.

The military trains its members to see through socially constructed divisions. As such, members of the military get an education in the humanities; war instructs on the topic of human resiliency. And former members of the military possess a desire to share that knowledge, to remain “useful” after war ends. Junger highlights a “fundamental egalitarianism” among Native American tribes prior to western colonization that corresponds with military service:

Personal property was usually limited to whatever could be transported by horse or on foot, so gross inequalities of wealth were difficult to accumulate … Social status came through hunting and war, which all men had access to, and women had far more autonomy and sexual freedom—and bore fewer children—than women in white society…Because of these basic freedoms, tribal members tended to be exceedingly loyal … But cowardice was punished by death, as was murder within the tribe or any kind of communication with the enemy. It was a simple ethos that promoted loyalty and courage over all other virtues and considered the preservation of the tribe an almost sacred task. (14-15)

It’s not a direct comparison: modern military service does not equate to life as a member of a Native American tribe. But Junger’s analysis does show a type of community found nowhere else in contemporary society but in the military. The word often used to describe the communities veterans share is “camaraderie,” an intimate form of friendship in which the participants openly assist one another with shouldering the emotional and physical demands of their professions or social statuses. Camaraderie is rooted in shared
experiences, overcoming obstacles and learning about them. Pain and rewards are shared in equal measure, and in such a way that all members of the collective carry some important piece of information after hostilities have ended. Veterans learn how to experience and play a part in fostering shared notions of camaraderie. However, when they return home, they find that the experience of war is not shared by all members of society, and this lack of shared experience creates distrust, misunderstanding, and even resentment between those who serve in war and those who do not. The alienation veterans describe in relation to civilian society is the opposite of camaraderie.

Junger provides a wealth of anecdotal examples of veterans saying as much, juxtaposing his far-reaching interactions with veterans alongside historical examples of white American pilgrims *defecting* to Native American tribes:

> Given the profound alienation of modern society, when combat vets say they miss war, they might be having an entirely healthy response to life back home. Iroquois warriors did not have to struggle with this sort alienation because warfare and society existed in such close proximity that there was effectively no transition from one to the other. In addition, defeat meant that a catastrophic violence might be visited upon everyone they loved, and in that context, fighting to the death made complete sense from both an evolutionary and an emotional point of view. Certainly, some Iroquois warriors must have been traumatized by the warfare they were engaged in—much of it was conducted at close quarters with clubs and hatchets—but they didn’t have to contain that trauma within themselves. The entire society was undergoing wartime trauma, so it was a collective experience—and therefore an easier one. (79).

This analysis of Iroquois warfare runs counter to the notion that military service, in the minds of those who serve, is the product of a feeling of patriotic duty. Instead, Junger suggests, tribal warriors fight for one another. The tribe *includes* those members not present during war. Iroquois warriors did not return to a society untouched by war, and as
a result, they found that their knowledge, their collective desire to share lessons, memories, and the spirit of camaraderie helped society rebuild itself.\textsuperscript{14}

By contrast, modern wars fought by the United States take place on other continents. Stories about the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars dominated the news in 2001 and 2003. However, as these wars waned in popularity, the news shrank to a growing body count which scrolled casually across the bottom of television screens. Many veterans watched this body count grow—as coverage of their actions dissipated—even as they completed multiple deployments, spending years in hostile environments. In time, not even the body count remained, and millions of veterans returned from war to find that their sacrifices had not been considered. It wasn’t that veteran knowledge was \textit{inapplicable} to the problems faced by larger society. The alienation experienced by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars is that military experience never enters into actual conversations between nonveterans.

Junger describes veterans as a population particularly prone to feelings of alienation because contemporary society expects veterans to shoulder the emotional burdens of war alone. Today’s divide between veterans and civilians is not just symbolic; it is quite literal. It is hard to treat veterans and civilians as equal members of society.

\textsuperscript{14} Junger states this argument succinctly in an interview: “Basically, soldiers in combat experience something that's a pretty close reproduction of our evolutionary past. We evolved to live in groups of 30, 40, 50 people functioning very closely. Sleeping together, eating together, doing everything together. Our survival depended on the group … That's our evolutionary past. It's also life in combat. It's even life in a platoon at a rear base. Most of the military does not fire their weapons at the enemy, do not get shot, but they do function in these close, tight-knit groups, and those emotional bonds become incredibly important. That's what we're wired for” (qtd. in Illing). In military and veteran communities a brand of loyalty exists which rivals that of the family. Veteran culture remains a blend of homosocial bonding, meritocracy, and rigid codes dictating morality. Veterans take their culture seriously, because at some point, their lives depended on it.
when war is an evil imposed upon some but not all of its members. This imposition includes the burdens of living with war’s aftermath. Further, “Thank You for Your Service” and monetary rewards are perplexing substitutes for intangible qualities like honor, integrity, and sacrifice. Veterans, because of the military culture informing their performances of veteran identity, expect to share their knowledge, their emotions, and their perspectives, not just out of vanity or to document their respective places in history, but because they truly believe what they have to share will benefit the “tribe.” I’ve never heard this term—“tribe”—used by veterans themselves. Politically, the term is often used to describe social divisions, not unity. However, the world the veteran returns to after war is made of many tribes, each with its own agenda, values, and perceptions of those who serve in the military. Veterans begin their lives as members of these disparate tribes. They share commonality with the civilian collectives of which they were once parts; they bring knowledge, skills, and insights into humanity to those tribes when they return from war. What if veteran testimony has the ability to bring these tribes together?

Consumer culture emphasizes the many benefits available to returning veterans, legislating disability compensation, paying for them to go to college, pressuring each returning veteran to enroll in therapy. This emphasis on “extrinsic” rewards and wellbeing is the cause of much isolation. In particular, and with relation to the argument presented throughout this dissertation, veterans are no longer public “storytellers”; testimony regarding war takes place today in therapy sessions and seminar papers, behind closed doors. In these contexts, writing about war serves the needs of civilians: doctors seeking to diagnose illness, college instructors seeking to writing proficiency. The very tools created to serve veterans often reinforce their isolation. Denying war veterans the
capacity to return to what Junger describes as “tribal” living results in their estrangement, and that estrangement is the mechanism society, in turn, uses to insulate itself from war.

**The Veteran’s Symbolic Existence**

So far, I have questioned the source of veteran identity, proposing a literary theorist’s approach to the topic in order to better assess its place in the American unconscious. I have explicitly stated my biases: patriotic rhetoric can be damaging; war is evil. Veterans seek ways to individualize language, to avoid rhetoric, and to prove useful outside of war. I have attempted to illustrate veterans’ conceptions of themselves, arguing that the nature of military service results in an ability to see through larger society’s divisions. In addition, veterans possess qualities specific to their culture: an overriding desire to share their experiences; a predilection for what Sebastian Junger refers to as “tribal” existence; and a sense of camaraderie which rivals the bonds found in families. Ideally, veteran reassimilation would include practices which allow former service members to remain “useful” in their postwar lives. However, when veterans return home, they are confronted with old divisions and a new one. Veteran identity is its own division, a constructed difference designed to relegate veteran experience and knowledge to the margins of society.

The transformation from civilian to combatant to veteran begins in childhood. As media and influential adults gradually inspire curiosity about the military, society gains a future locus in which to store memories of future wars. Combatants become “veterans” as they experience the altering of law and morality which previously framed their realities. In military service, these young men and women are galvanized—joined together in a
new community that could be described as *tribal*. Then, those baptized in the fires of war return home, unified through accomplishment as much as suffering, with shared interests, habits, or other characteristics of “culture.” “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors” discover that the symbolic roles given to them do not involve “picking up where they left off,” or “joining the workforce”; rather, they must exist in the past, never more than the sum of the word “veteran,” alternately praised and pitied in superficial ways that reinforce passivity and silence. The superficially praised “Hero” and the peculiarly pitied “Wounded Warrior” represent binary forms of identity. In reality, these forms of identity are stereotypes. No veteran can exist in such a simplistic dichotomy.

As repositories for memories of war, veteran silence keeps the reality of war out of public view so that the illusion of peace might continue unabated. The third form of veteran identity I intend to examine, and the focus of this dissertation’s third chapter, the veteran storyteller, exposes the imperfections of the military, the horrors of war, and the improbability of a harmonious future through authentic, uncensored renderings of military experience. In other words, the influence of the veteran storyteller stretches beyond satisfying a desire for camaraderie. It accomplishes more than helping the individual veteran feel “useful.” Veteran storytellers implicitly *reject* the symbolic function assigned to them. The act of storytelling, when achieved by a veteran, forces memories and emotions pertaining to war into the public, which in turn forces those willing to listen to revise their definitions of the word “veteran.” Veteran storytellers undermine their own estrangement, and by extension, they undermine the means by which larger society represses its culpability for war.
Veteran storytellers need not relay their messages through prose; they need not instruct on the topic of resiliency through photography or artwork. When I refer to veteran “storytellers,” I am referring to any veteran who exercises the power of his or her symbolic authority, any individual who steps beyond the limitations of the word “veteran.” This act can take place in formal literature and artwork. It is present among those 1,000 veterans who travelled to Standing Rock. But it can also take place in gestures, mannerisms, and refusals to conform to narratives larger than the storyteller. Judith McNeely, a scholar of war fiction who has worked one-on-one with veteran writers, argues that “[f]iction can be used to resist the master narrative created by cultural iconography … The story-telling process crafts a society of readers by resisting the master narrative of the iconic war experience and the iconic soldier image, treating the challenges trauma poses to identity, particularly how identity affects relationships” (274-75). In other words, the act of storytelling creates a new community, perhaps one more suited to the tribal sensibilities of veteran storytellers. Importantly, this community includes both veterans and civilians. It expands the tribe.

McNeely and I worked together in Military Experience and the Arts, the non-profit organization I founded in 2011. In her work with veteran writers and artists, McNeely brought superior writing and analytical skills to the table, something many of the veterans we worked with would gain later as students. The combined result of pairing experienced writers and educators with veterans possessing powerful stories on the topics of war and human resiliency was genuine dialogue. As I often said, “Our goal is to help the veteran writers put their best foot forward.” We tried to maintain a balance between writing proficiency and maintaining the veteran’s creative intent. The attention paid to
maintaining the veteran’s original intent resulted in increased trust because many veterans feel as though their uncensored stories have value. And they’re right. McNeely recognizes the act of storytelling as a transformative force, one which “allows the reader to participate in a resistant war narrative and simultaneously frees the veteran from the master narrative’s imposed judgments and the reader from the hazards of witnessing” (275-76). McNeely’s focus on fictional narratives of war only underscores the power of the storytelling act. Veterans need not recount their experiences in ways that place them in a larger historical or social context. Nor do their stories need to answer the question of whether or not a war is just. The most important aspect of storytelling is its power to restore the veteran’s right to self-definition. Once this restoration is achieved, it is in the veteran’s nature to expand the tribe, to create a sense of camaraderie, and to educate.

When I worked with McNeely at Military Experience and the Arts, we met many veterans, veteran family members, and non-veterans interested in helping those returning from war. We found in each person a common desire to contribute to the larger cause of helping veterans find meaning. And we felt writing and artwork were one way to accomplish this goal. Together, as a community invested in helping veterans, we told our own story, and it was a story inclusive of both veteran and nonveteran perspectives. Junger claims that people in his stories “have been in my mind my entire life and have often served as crucial moral guides to my own behavior” (xi). The author is referring to both veterans and civilians, not two distinct groups of people. This fact is important: he recognizes how the lessons he learned from his interactions with members of the military might also pertain to situations which occur outside of it. Veteran testimony is a constituent part of Junger’s worldview, not a side attraction or an anomaly. Such guides
are precisely what veteran storytellers become when they articulate alternative forms of veteran identity. Junger writes from a unique position. As an embedded journalist, he has experienced war violence first-hand, more than many veterans. Yet, he takes great care in his documentaries and writings to preserve veterans’ perspectives. It’s good journalism, but perhaps Junger, too, recognizes the symbolic authority contained in veteran identity. At the very least, Junger’s work argues that the emotional burdens veterans carry should be shared by all of society.

**Fears of Veteran Violence**

I wish now to return to the larger subject of this analysis: the American unconscious. As previously argued, veteran identity is produced and maintained within a larger system of conscious and unconscious belief. There’s no single narrative of American nationalism or veteran identity. And an “unconscious,” by definition of the word, remains undefinable—out of view. In *Americans and the Unconscious* (1986) Robert C. Fuller explains, “Inasmuch as ‘facts’ about the unconscious cannot be ascertained empirically, theories which purport to explain men’s and women’s hidden depths have almost entirely been shaped by philosophical and cultural factors” (5). An unconscious, whether in an individual or in a culture, cannot be observed. However, its effects can be observed. I can only circle what I perceive to be the American unconscious, using conscious descriptions of veterans’ experiences to better approximate their place within it.

In the previous section, McNeely’s analysis emphasizes how storytelling restores veterans’ collective rights to self-definition, creating a *new community* in which
prevailing narratives of war might be challenged. Junger’s work reveals veteran culture as distinct from civilian culture, and Junger, because he exists in a liminal state between “civilian” and “veteran,” displays the ability to both receive and disseminate veteran testimony. Junger describes the tribal aspects of military culture, and instead of describing tribalism as a source of division, veterans such as those protestors at Standing Rock seek to expand the military sense of camaraderie to include those victimized by the U.S. government. In many ways, McNeely and Junger are extreme examples of the sort of veteran-civilian dialogue I advocate for throughout this dissertation: civilians interacting with veterans and members of the military to conceive of worldviews inclusive of veteran skills, values, and beliefs. I have described veteran culture from the veteran’s perspective, discussed the value of veteran testimony, and sought to reveal the veteran’s symbolic function as a repository for memories of war. My goal is to peel back the layers of patriotism and mythmaking far enough to distinguish veteran identity from its symbolic function. In this section, I deal with how veterans are perceived by looking deeper at the word “veteran.”

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, war has become an omnipresent force in cinema and mass media. Jay Winter, who writes about the cultural impact of the First World War, views depictions of veterans in early cinema as a working through, a way for civilian audiences to engage with traumatic memory:

[A]n underground river of recollection, present in the aftermath of the First World War, but the subject of increasing attention in the 1980s and 1990s, when post-traumatic stress disorder became the umbrella term for those (as it were) stuck in the past. The ‘memory boom’ of the later twentieth century arrived in part because of our belated but real acceptance that among us, within our families, there are men and women overwhelmed by traumatic recollection. (43)
Winter interprets public curiosity about the psychological effects of war as a driving force behind civilian consumption of war narratives and veteran characters. Cinematographers during and after the WWI era tried to normalize veterans and their wounds by including them in their stories: “It was only late in the war that shellshock made an appearance in films. Most commonly, it was a dramatic device in stories unrelated to war topics. As early as 1918, the amnesiac, shell-shocked soldier was a sympathetic hero for tales of separated lovers, uncharacteristic behavior, and mistaken identity” (Cox 295). However, veterans existing as background or side characters in larger stories about civilians did little to answer the many questions surrounding veteran identity.

Grafted onto the word “veteran” and altering its “linguistic being” is PTSD. Examples of veterans in film, such as those discussed in the next paragraph, have only ensured that every veteran is perceived as traumatized. Eric Leed, in “Fateful Memories: Industrialized War and Traumatic Neuroses,” argues that mental illnesses “generated by industrialized war and life repay study by showing how past events act as causes in human history. They show us how our wars mark our minds, how an unforgettable past becomes determinative even though the past has no existence outside human imagination and memory” (79). However, explorations of veteran identity in film work oppositely: Civilians start with an assumption of trauma and work backwards in an attempt to discern its origin. Usually, this thought process is the product of civilians fearing what veterans might do, not genuine concern for the veteran’s wellbeing. And it is so pervasive that it hard to separate veteran identity from war trauma.
In films, veterans tend to be protagonists, usually antiheroes pitted against the state. This formula was recreated in the wake of each major conflict in U.S. history. *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), for example, portrays a Korean War veteran as a ticking time bomb, suggesting that former Prisoners of War (POWs) are lying in wait to do violence on behalf of America’s communist foes. *First Blood* (1982) features Sylvester Stallone’s character, John Rambo, a Special Forces veteran of the Vietnam War so afflicted with PTSD that he turns his military skills against a local sheriff, ending the film surrounded by police, in tears, and with now-famous dialogue:

> Nothing is over! Nothing! You just don’t turn it off! It wasn't my war. You asked me. I didn't ask you. I did everything to win, but someone didn't let us win. Then I come back to the world, and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me. Spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me?

More lighthearted movies, such as *Tank* (1984), a comedy set outside of war in America’s Deep South, also features a veteran turning against corrupt local law enforcement. James Garner’s character easily rolls over police cars and barricades in his personally-owned, WWII-era tank. Likewise, *Taxi Driver* (1976) features the mentally-ill Vietnam Veteran, Travis Bickle. Bickle, a stalker and pornography addict, ends the film as a hero after shooting and killing a pimp to save a twelve-year-old girl from prostitution. Much of the film features the veteran protagonist plotting to kill a U.S. Senator. These are only a few examples, and I will return to this topic later when I examine films in the first chapter, but they are enough to establish at least a few perceptions of veterans: they are violent; they are unstable; it is just a matter of time before they turn their military skills against the country they once served. However, these perceptions rarely match reality.
Patriotic Conceptions of Veteran Identity

Why do veterans have an identity of their own? This question was one I proposed at the beginning of this dissertation and one I have not fully answered. It’s not because of box-office budgets. The simple answer is that veterans exist distinctly from civilians to demarcate boundaries between war and peace. Leed, in his attempt to reconsider war neuroses as products of cultural repression, asserts that forgetting is necessary in order to properly remember, that “forgetting … liberates us from the immediately preceding event, allows us to escape from the lock-step of the chronological series, from the one-way, one-damned-thing-after-another-ness of time” (“Fateful Memories” 87-88). Words like reassimilation imply that veterans must somehow forget the suffering inflicted upon them by the state and its enemies. “Industrial societies,” Leed shows, “define war as an abnormal state of emergency and presume that war and peace are distinct and separate realms of existence, those who adapt to these contexts are presumed to have changed identities, and are required to forget, again and again, or they end up in psychiatric ward” (“Fateful Memories” 88). There is an unspoken fear inherent in every communication between veterans and civilians: a code of silence, a collective repression of war, and an appropriation of veteran identity to recreate war perpetually. Mental illness is but one tool used to suppress the truth veterans know in their hearts, that all of the illusions holding society together are predicated on death and suffering conveniently kept out of public view.

This function is symbolic, but it can be easily recognized as a cultural trope in films featuring veterans who become violent after returning home from war. On one
hand, these films alter veteran identity to emphasize its violent underpinnings, suggesting that the memories veterans carry are a threat to the rest of society. Characters such as John Rambo or Travis Bickle are created to stoke civilian angst, ever creeping toward a climax in which their violent natures will be unleashed. On the other hand, in the real world and in patriotic rhetoric, veterans are referred to as “Heroes” and public attitudes emphasize the veteran’s commitment to the state. In fact, the irony of the film *Taxi Driver* is that Travis Bickle becomes a hero while planning to use his skills to assassinate a Senator. The combined result of violent imagery and patriotic rhetoric in the American unconscious is an image of an indecisive veteran, one caught between the roles of “perpetrator” and “savior,” one modeled by real veterans.

Perceptions of veterans inform performances of veteran identity which, in turn, function symbolically to protect civilians from war’s inconvenient truths. In addition to cinema and mass media, social architects have consciously manipulated veteran identity using patriotism. I discuss the historical treatment of veterans at some length in Chapter Two. In my reading, patriotic rhetoric’s intent is to counteract fears of veteran violence. Yves Winter’s examination of Machiavelli’s writings, for example, describes war as “carefully orchestrating, coordinating, and representing bodies and movements, a practice, in short, that relies more on public performances and the production appearance than on brute force” (166). Such orchestration takes place in veterans’ lives after military service, too. Leaders recognize that “the distinction between war and peace and thus between civil and military life is established and guaranteed by the proper conduct of soldiers” (Winter, Yves 177). One way to guarantee the proper conduct of soldiers is to depict them as exceptional examples, and “the example,” according to Italian philosopher

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Giorgio Agamben, “is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type … however, [it] stands for each of them and serves them all” (n.p.). Veterans exist as “the example” in patriotic constructions of veteran identity: in phrases such as “Our Nation’s Heroes”; in low-angle shots of gruff warfighters in recruitment posters; in the special rites performed at their funerals; in prayers which elevate veterans based on the dangers they face; in medical and educational benefits unavailable to non-veterans. In patriotic constructions of veteran identity, the veteran’s very existence lends the state credibility. Put another way, the accomplishments of men and women in uniform become the accomplishments of an entire nation through appropriation. But this act of appropriation has implications which extend beyond the symbolic realm. To live as a veteran requires careful orchestration and adherence to all of these narratives, a task which is nearly impossible when dealing with illnesses and misconceptions which have no place in reality.

In patriotism, instruction regarding the topic of veteran identity is provided by the very government which transforms teenagers into veterans of foreign wars. As a propaganda tool, this process is not entirely effective, however. In an age of an “all-volunteer” military, wartime service, in particular, has different connotations than in the past. In 1988, sometime after the Vietnam War and the tumultuous return home experienced by its veterans, President Ronald Reagan gave a televised address on the topic of National Defense. In it, Reagan directly addresses the negative stereotypes surrounding veterans and military service:

When I took office in January 1981, I was appalled by what I found: American planes that couldn't fly and American ships that couldn't sail for lack of spare parts and trained personnel and insufficient fuel and ammunition for essential training. The inevitable result of all this was poor
morale in our Armed Forces, difficulty in recruiting the brightest young Americans to wear the uniform, and difficulty in convincing our most experienced military personnel to stay on.

Thanks to your strong support, and bipartisan support from the Congress, we began to turn things around. Already, we're seeing some very encouraging results. Quality recruitment and retention are up dramatically - more high school graduates are choosing military careers, and more experienced career personnel are choosing to stay.

Our men and women in uniform at last are getting the tools and training they need to do their jobs. Ask around today, especially among our young people, and I think you will find a whole new attitude toward serving their country. This reflects more than just better pay, equipment, and leadership. You the American people have sent a signal to these young people that it is once again an honor to wear the uniform. That's not something you measure in a budget, but it's a very real part of our nation's strength.

Reagan describes a situation in which members of the military are too poorly equipped to carry out their missions. He describes low morale, and “a whole new attitude toward serving.” These descriptions indicate that such attitudes were not prevalent prior to his speech, or his presidency at the very least, and they reveal the economic disparities experienced by service men and women who choose the military as a life-long career. Importantly, in 1988, many of the children watching Reagan’s address would be fighting age at about the same time of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. They chose to serve despite rumors of soldiers being poorly equipped and despite the views of many members of society who felt that military service was somehow evidence of inferiority. Another perception of veterans, then, is that they are willing to support the state even when the state does not respond in kind. Reagan refers consciously to a new generation of veterans willing to serve, but in the American unconscious his speech describes another group of veterans: those serving already, in unsatisfactory conditions, in unpopular wars, and for a country which allowed the military to deteriorate.
I am attempting to describe a binary form of veteran identity which requires veterans to exist between opposites, between violent and unwavering patriotic stereotypes. Machiavelli, who reimagined the Roman “citizen-soldier” to replace the conscripted warfighters and mercenaries found in Renaissance Italy, felt that a constructed, “civic-minded” veteran had the capacity to quell populism. He recognized the veteran’s symbolic value. War controls the movements of many bodies, resulting in a single, destructive energy. After war, veterans possess the same potential, causing some members of society to perceive them as a threat. Patriotic rhetoric interrupts and contains this threat. Machiavelli recognized war as an extension of politics and “the military as the site of potential political upheaval and popular revolt” (Winter, Yves 164-65). In other words, the military, because of its violent potential, has the ability to disrupt, even overthrow society. Veterans are those individuals who are no longer members of the military. However, because they have been trained and indoctrinated, and because many veterans have experience waging war, they, too, represent a threat to society.

At the same time, violence is not always perceived as limiting. If anything, the threat of violence contained within veteran identity could be read as a form of power. Further, military service can be packaged and sold as a way of accessing this power. For example, Machiavelli argues that a respectable army reflects a respectable state: “If military discipline and training are seen to reinforce civic-mindedness and if good soldiers turn out to be good citizens, then perhaps all citizens should be soldiers” (Winter, Yves 178). This line of reasoning is shared by proponents of drafts and conscription. It suggests that the ideal citizen is the veteran. To take this position is to accept war as a necessary evil while also recognizing that the costs of war are not shared equally by
society. Veterans within this logic are exceptional examples, superior citizens, or self-actualized civilians. However, the veteran is credited for civic-mindedness, for “discipline.” The veteran conceived in this manner is inherently non-violent, a credit to the state, an entity which promotes stability and order by design. Machiavelli argues, in other words, that veterans, with all of their violent potential, become models for the rest of society in each moment they do not use violence. Veteran identity, when passive, reinforces “civic-mindedness.” What is this “civic-mindedness”? Is it merely another way of describing patriotism? Or, could it be something more?

I interpret “civic-mindedness” as a state of being, one which, in this theoretical framework, attributes moral authority to those who have served in the military. Long after Machiavelli, and after Reagan, in 2009, a Department of Homeland Security report entitled, “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” describes veterans as a potential source of political upheaval:

[The Department of Homeland Security] assesses that rightwing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training and combat. These skills and knowledge have the potential to boost the capabilities of extremists—including lone wolves or small terrorist cells—to carry out violence. The willingness of a small percentage of military personnel to join extremist groups during the 1990s because they were disgruntled, disillusioned, or suffering from the psychological effects of war is being replicated today. (7)

The report suggests that extremists with right-leaning political views could recruit veterans to their cause. But this conclusion yields further insights into how veterans are perceived by others. Timothy McVeigh, the Gulf War veteran who detonated a truck bomb at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, is cited as one example by
defenders of the report. One veteran among millions had the power to alter societal conceptions of veteran identity. As a result, in 2009, one of the greatest threats to national security imaginable was the violent, unstable, and politically motivated veteran. Over time, this amalgamation emerged from the interaction of both fictional and non-fictional conceptions of veterans in the American unconscious. Machiavelli reasons that veterans reinforce “civic-mindedness” among citizens. I argue that this function is predicated upon the veteran’s passivity: to be a nonviolent veteran is to be “civic-minded.” So what happens when McVeigh does the opposite? Veteran identity, however briefly, represented a threat in the minds of non-veterans and to those in positions of power.

Here are the three perceptions of veterans outlined in this section: First, in films and mass media, veterans are depicted as violent and unstable; they are portrayed as ticking time bombs, just one bad day away from bringing war violence to the homefront. Second, in patriotic rhetoric, veterans are passive members of the state, accepting praise for past accomplishments in uniform, but rarely in a way which suggests veteran status conveys political power. Exceptions to this rule, such as Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), remain focused on veterans’ benefits, funding for active duty members of the military or historical projects. These organizations rarely step into larger political debates. Of course, there are many veterans who are also politicians or who possess other forms of power. However, it’s not hard to find correlations between pedigree and types of military service, between military rank and positions of opulence in the civilian world. I am mostly referring to former enlisted men and women who begin military careers early in their lives or those recruits with few other choices. These veterans, in particular, are subject to stereotypes and rhetoric, and they are subjected to these forces because they are
perceived as sources of potential political upheaval. The third perception of veterans discussed in this section reveals that they are exceptional examples: brave, selfless, and innately “civic-minded.” This last perception can be read as either a threat or a credit to the state.

Veterans cease existing as individuals, and they begin existing as symbols the moment they allow military experiences, sacrifices, and scars to be appropriated in support of a narrative other than their own. It does not matter if the resulting stereotype is of a violent, unstable terrorist or of a Christ-figure willing to sacrifice him or herself on the altar of freedom. Existing symbolically as evidence of some past glory, war crime, or news-media body count prevents veterans from existing individually in the present. The symbolic existence of the veteran reflects the symbolic function of the veteran. As a repository for memories of war, the veteran safeguards his or her knowledge about war from public consumption by adhering to the identity described by stereotypes. The adherence causes the silence. It’s not that veterans are safeguarding government secrets. Instead, veteran identity safeguards symbols and concepts which reinforce the power of the state. Often, to discuss war’s horrors is to go against the governments which cause them. To express violence is to give into stereotypes and damn other veterans to further marginalization. Reassimilation, however, requires that veterans become more than the sum of past experiences and more than the perceptions held by others. But is reassimilation even possible?
Expectations of Veterans and Reassimilation

What does it mean to *reassimilate*? The word implies that veterans should end a period of *dis*-assimilation and rejoin the collectives they were parts of before the military. In that case, to reassimilate is to regress. And regression implies undoing any growth that came about *because* of military service. Should those who joined to escape poverty return to a state of poverty? Should the educated forget what they have learned? Should soldiers march straight back into the racial and socioeconomic enclaves they sought to escape?

This section examines the *expectations* civilians have of veterans. Specifically, I deal with how civilians *imagine* veteran reassimilation. These imaginings take place in what I have called the American unconscious. So far, I have attempted to isolate veteran identity within this larger system of belief. Perception combines with military experience to shape the way veterans perform their identities. Veteran performances of identity are a combination of conditioning and conforming to expectations. Historically, media representations of veterans depict them as violent, unstable, and prepared to visit war violence upon the homeland. These depictions run counter to the intrinsic values instilled in veterans through military service. Veterans are trained and conditioned to perceive of themselves as educators and future leaders, roles inherent in military communities described by Junger as “tribal.” However, social architects from Machiavelli to the Department of Homeland Security view veterans’ communities as potential sources of political upheaval, a threat they use patriotic rhetoric to quell. Earlier, I included the work of Judith McNeely to emphasize the community-building and restorative nature of veteran testimony. The individual veteran attempts to conceive of a self after war that is rooted in perception, experience, and the demands of larger society. Veteran identity, in
its most predominant form, does not serve the veteran. It is not geared toward reassimilation, but rather, it is invested in maintaining misconceived notions of veteran identity.

Civilians are aware of the divisions in society. They are aware of the veteran’s imperfections. Therefore, civilians must believe that veterans return from war to a different world which operates on a different set of principles, that what came before war in their lives as civilians no longer applies, that all war wounds have a cure. I call the myth which contains this imaginary world “the myth of national unity.” It could be likened to the Christian belief in a Second Coming: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away” (King James Bible, Revelation 21:4). Or, it could be compared to the efforts of social progressives to invent technologies and systems of government capable of curing society’s ills. Ultimately, the “myth of national unity” refers to unfounded optimism, to a citizen’s belief in humanity’s eventual triumph over adversity in all of its forms. And because veterans serve as exceptional examples in the minds of many, they are held to the standards of this imaginary world.

The myth of national unity is a parenthetical story about the good of society, and it contains idealized versions of veterans and the homes to which they return. In “Traumatized Masculinity and American National Identity in Hollywood’s Gulf War,” Mark Straw defines American exceptionalism as a “doctrine” which defines America’s
special place in human history.\textsuperscript{15} Straw treats American exceptionalism the same way that I treat the myth of national unity, recognizing it as a belief in superiority which ebbs and flows parallel to the popularity of a given generation’s wars:

Although this notion came under scrutiny in the wake of the Vietnam War, it is a concept which has undergone successive revisions in order to secure the pre-eminence of US foreign policy in the field of international relations. Most recently, and commencing with George W. Bush’s speech to Congress after the September 11 attacks which included the observation that the perpetrators ‘hate our freedoms,’ we have a clear invocation of American exceptionalism rewritten through the ideologies embodied in the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which espouses the necessity of a strong and dynamic foreign policy. PNAC is a neo-conservative organization that implicitly believes that to secure US imperial and economic goals, a belligerent foreign policy must be evoked in the name of ‘freedom.’ (130)

I am less concerned with in Straw’s neo-liberal/neo-conservative arguments than I am with examining the effects of such rhetoric on individual veterans. Straw asks, “So why is it that despite the hypermasculine basis of globalization, the belligerent basis of US foreign policy and the ideological power bestowed on concepts of masculinity in

\textsuperscript{15} The concept of “American exceptionalism” dates back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s nineteenth-century work, \textit{Democracy in America} (1835). Seymour Martin Lipset’s \textit{American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword} (1996) explains that “Tocqueville is the first to refer to the United States as exceptional—that is, qualitatively different from all other countries. He is therefore, the initiator of the writings on American exceptionalism … When Tocqueville or other ‘foreign traveler’ writers or social scientists have used the term ‘exceptional’ to describe the United States, they have not meant, as some critics of the concept assume, that America is better than other countries or has a superior culture. Rather, they have simply been suggesting that it is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier. Exceptionalism is a double-edged concept” (18). Lipset argues that “American Exceptionalism,” at least when used as a concept by thinkers outside of the United States, has never meant that the United States is “superior.” Rather, it means that America is “different.” Throughout this dissertation I argue that the veteran who performs the “Hero” stereotype is actually assuming the role of “exceptional example.” In Chapter Three, I will use the word “difference” conceptually, to describe the veteran’s feeling of apartness from the rest of society. It’s curious that veterans functioning as “exceptional examples” repeatedly describe feeling “different,” especially when “different” is how the United States is perceived from the outside.
contemporary US culture, ideas of victimhood, crisis and trauma still permeate American masculinity and constructions of normative national identity?” (Straw 130). Veteran identity, as stated earlier, is often perceived as an exceptional example of citizenry. Veterans are portrayed as traumatized and victimized in all of the film examples in Chapter One of this dissertation. In fact, all of Straw’s descriptors seem to apply to the stereotypical examples of veterans examined in this dissertation. Veteran identity grants individuals access to these descriptors as character traits—parts of a veteran culture—that can be performed. It’s as though former service members enter into a new form of service after their discharges. Their collective mission: to disseminate “constructions of normative national identity to the masses.”

Obviously, the myth of national unity is not shared by all members of society. And seldom is it thought of consciously. I see it as one form of civilian privilege, a story which transforms reassimilation into an abstraction. It could best be described as “American Exceptionalism,” only interpreted through the lens of veteran disillusionment. Just as the stereotypes informing veteran identity are tools used in a larger cultural repression of war, the myth of national unity is a tool used to repress unacceptable conditions at home. The myth of national unity is a construct existing in the American unconscious. In this land of make-believe veterans exist in a state that is simultaneously outside of the military, because they no longer fight or wear a uniform, and inside the military, because it contains the harmonious clarity of military structure while still permitting service men and women free will. Not even the most vicious wounds of war can prevent the veteran from succeeding in this utopia. Further, the sins perpetrated during war must be absolved or forgotten before the veteran can reside there. Practically,
this absolution or amnesia is achieved through the veteran’s silence. The myth of national unity is an aspiration, a state of social concord yet to be achieved. It is where those who choose not to consider veterans imagine that they exist. As such, it is an incomplete world and one that is sparsely populated. Those who reside there are carefully selected, molded, and compensated to serve as the screen upon which those living in this fallen world project their hopes for the future. It is the land where veterans go to reassimilate when reassimilation isn’t possible in the present. And it doesn’t exist.

Meanwhile, real veterans return to the real world. There, they face all of the problems civilians face and the added weight of being veterans. And twenty commit suicide every day. The government continues to fund veterans’ programs, throwing money at a veteran problem that won’t go away. In the private sector, the 2013 “Sea of Goodwill” report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff listed “more than 400,000 resource organizations operating to bridge the gaps and improve the outcomes of soldiers … transitioning to civilian lives” (Copeland and Sutherland 1). Roughly 2.5 million individuals have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. That amounts to a “resource organization” for every six Iraq and Afghanistan veterans! The media streams reports of veterans overcoming their wounds and society seems more invested in the reassimilation of veterans than ever. Despite these programs and benefits, however, veterans continue to struggle. I believe these struggles have much to do with the symbolic function of veterans

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Current research about veteran suicides states: “The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has undertaken the most comprehensive analysis of Veteran suicide rates in the U.S., examining over 55 million Veteran records from 1979 to 2014 from every state in the nation. The effort extends VA’s knowledge from the previous report issued from 2012, which examined three million Veteran records from 20 states were available. Based on the 2012 data, VA estimated the number of Veteran deaths by suicide averaged 22 per day. The current analysis indicates that in 2014, an average of 20 Veterans a day died from suicide” (“VA Conducts” 1).
within larger culture. Reassimilation may be possible, but not until veterans are permitted
to exist outside of “ticking time bomb” / “Christ-figure” binary described in the previous
sections.

Imperfect veterans are not exceptional examples, and to exist in a state of
imperfection—to have visible wounds, or to discuss invisible ones—threatens the larger
myth of national unity. Examples of such imperfection are easy to find: veteran suicides,
mental illness, and homelessness are all products of veteran alienation. Superficial
interactions between veterans and civilians maintain the lies which lead recruits to war,
protecting veterans from discovering those lies, and perhaps protecting those politicians,
clergy, and other leaders that allowed peace’s opposites to gestate while they were away.
This last feature was the fear of Machiavelli in Renaissance Italy, and it was the fear of
the Department of Homeland Security in 2009. It also underwrites the assumption that
veterans have nothing to offer in situations beyond being traumatized in war. If veterans
are truly perceived as violent, unstable, and politically motivated, then patriotic rhetoric
is not gratitude. It is a way to placate a social group perceived as a threat. However,
veterans do not view themselves as threats. Veterans want to rejoin society, to contribute
and heal. They want to continue growing, as educators and leaders, but stereotypical
perceptions of veterans require them to remain passive. Patriotic rhetoric paints veterans
as exceptional examples and, unable to live up to this perceived exceptionalism, many
remain silent, never realizing that their silence is socially constructed to benefit others.
**Veteran Identity and Morrison’s Amalgamated “Not Me”**

In the previous sections, I discussed the ways in which military service reinforces altruistic drives in veterans, creating a sense of being an educator *en route* to becoming a leader. I have looked at the perceptions *others* have of veterans. In patriotic rhetoric, veterans are depicted as exceptional examples of citizenry. In films and mass media, however, veterans are portrayed as violent, unstable, and as future terrorists waiting to visit violence on the homeland. The third perception of veterans has different connotations. Veterans, because they serve in dangerous and inhospitable conditions, gain a certain symbolic authority, an appearance of “civic-mindedness” that, when perceived by others, implies the veteran’s willingness to serve is not dependent upon how he or she is treated by the state. The willingness of service men and women to put their lives on the line for national interests grants them this symbolic power, and it puts veterans into competition with those who possess other forms of power, namely wealth and political clout. One way to read patriotism is as an attempt to keep the veteran’s symbolic authority in check. In this section, I turn to Toni Morrison’s novel *Home* (2012) as an *extreme* example of wartime service and discuss how such an example might fit into larger perceptions of veterans in the American unconscious.

Junger describes veteran culture as *tribal*. But because of its inescapability, a trait I attribute to the veteran’s inability to forget war (especially among veterans with PTSD, individuals whose symptoms are *provoked* by representations of war), social programs requiring self-identification, and war’s promotion in schools and other public institutions, veteran identity *also* shares traits with racial identity. As such, critical race theory provides insights into the ways artificial divisions empower civilians, as one social group,
over veterans, another. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992) Morrison argues that “creative possibilities”—tragic, but sometimes beautiful new meanings—emerge when a society subjects some, but not all, of its inhabitants to barbarisms such as slavery. Military service is not slavery. But the *shared experience* of military service instills in recruits a new sense of cultural identity, one from which they cannot hide, and one so relied upon in surviving war that it later becomes inextricable from that recruit’s core sense of self. Arguably, veteran identity is shaped by the “creative possibilities” provided by subjecting some, but not all members of society to the barbarism that is war.17

Morrison’s *Home* features Frank Money, a 24-year-old African American veteran of the Korean War. For the year following his return stateside, Frank avoids going back to his childhood home in Lotus, Georgia, a place where he would have to confront not only his own traumatic history of growing up as a poor African American in a racist society, but also the implacable racism and segregation of the Deep South. Nevertheless, he feels compelled to return when he receives a letter warning him that his sister’s life is in danger. Over the course of the novel, the reader learns about the multiple episodes of

17 In *Playing in the Dark* (1992) Morrison illustrates how white Americans came to understand freedom by subjecting an entire race of people to its opposite. In early American literature, Morrison claims, “whiteness, alone, is mute” and “meaningless” (59). At the same time, it exists alongside “representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control” (Morrison 33). White Americans in the nineteenth century, then, understood freedom and whiteness because in “blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not me” (38). Veterans signify physical identity in other ways. Without members of the military losing arms and legs to improvised explosive devices, living forever with the blood of war stained upon their hands, or dealing with the survivor’s guilt which ensues after losing friends to senseless acts of violence, civilians would struggle to understand the value of their peace. Again, veterans occupy a space which is simultaneously physical and symbolic. Symbolically, former service members find veteran identity inescapable because the violence to which they are subjected results in a culture; it codifies veterans as an amalgamated “not me.”
trauma (including both childhood and wartime experiences) that have shaped Frank’s worldview.

In addition to his war trauma and an unspeakable crime he commits in Korea, Frank must confront the racism and poverty of America:

Lotus, Georgia, is the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. At least on the field there is a goal, excitement, daring, and some chance of winning along with many chances of losing. Death is a sure thing but life is just as certain. Problem is you can’t know in advance … In Lotus you did know in advance since there was no future, just long stretches of killing time. There was no goal other than breathing, nothing to win and, save for somebody else’s quiet death, nothing to survive or worth surviving for. (86)

Frank originally joined the military in order to lay claim to an ideal of hypermasculine American manhood, one which can empower him in the present, and one which allows him to retroactively revise his self-image as a poor Black man growing up in mid-century America. With his newfound training and experience, Frank’s expectation is that he can de-racialize his identity by adopting a seemingly generic military masculinity. In war, at least, Frank finds “excitement,” “daring,” and “some chance of winning.” But in his hometown, Frank finds the opposite: “no future,” “nothing to win,” and “nothing to survive or worth surviving for.” As the novel progresses, Frank’s interactions with other characters display the altruistic drives I have attributed to veterans, but also the transformative power of veteran testimony.

Basic training and military service do not erase the racial identities of recruits. But these experiences so drastically alter the recruit’s cultural identity that many prior service members exist openly (and primarily) as veterans. Frank’s ambivalence toward military service, despite the horrors described throughout the novel, undermines the myth
of national unity by revealing the socioeconomic and racial disparities informing Frank’s decision to enlist. Of course, these disparities also influence his reassimilation. Frank exists between two identities: African American and veteran. One identity is inescapable because of the color of his skin; the other is inescapable because of his mental state. Veteran identity does not begin at the date of enlistment. It begins in childhood, when a young boy like Frank Money recognizes military service as a form of agency, a means of escape, or as a way to contribute to the larger community. None of these options were available to Frank prior to his enlistment.

Frank’s racial identity intersects with his veteran identity. He has access to two communities, to two forms of the “amalgamated not me” described by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*. White Americans in the nineteenth century, according to Morrison, understood freedom and whiteness because in “blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not me” (38). The enslavement of disparate groups of men and women from African cultures resulted in a new community, African Americans, a racial group whose subjugation provided a basis for understanding the true scope of freedom available to Whites. Of course, that is not to say that slavery is excusable because it provides a deeper appreciation of freedom, just that the new meaning affixed to freedom as a result of familiarity with its opposite resulted in an unexpected, “creative possibility.”

Again, and as explained by McNeely earlier in this chapter, veteran testimony is transformative; it creates new communities around the act of storytelling which are inclusive of both veterans and civilians. Veterans experience war, and by extension, civilians learn about peace. Frank is a fictional character in Morrison’s novel, but
McNeely’s premise about the transformative nature of veteran testimony holds true. By experiencing war, he is able to instruct on the topic of peace. In his conversation with a young boy curious about war, Thomas, Frank actively works to undermine patriotic constructions of veteran identity and war:

“Were you at war?”
“I was.”
“Did you kill anybody?”
“Had to.”
“How did it feel?”
“Bad. Real bad.”
“That’s good. That it made you feel bad. I’m glad.”
“How come?”
“It means you’re not a liar.”
“You are deep, Thomas.” Frank smiled. “What you want to be when you grow up?”

Thomas turned the knob with his left hand and opened the door. “A man,” he said and left. (32-33)

Here, Frank embraces the symbolic authority granted to him as a veteran and uses it to challenge conventional perceptions of war. Specifically, he challenges the notion that killing, within the context of war, is an experience to be sought after. Thomas is “deep”; he already has some knowledge about war, presumably from other veterans. 18

18 Critical race theory, because it recognizes the inescapable and socially constructed nature of racial identity, also gives examples of individuals able to see through the fictions that grant one social group power over another. In particular, there are correlations between veteran storytellers and the two trickster figures that Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims emerged from the African diaspora: “Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, in whose myths are registered certain principles of both formal language use and its interpretations. These two separate but related trickster figures serve in their respective traditions as points of conscious articulation of language traditions aware of themselves as traditions, complete with a history, patterns of development and revision, and internal principles of patterning and organization. Theirs is a meta-discourse, a discourse about itself” (xx-xxi). Gates describes Esu as a mediator, as a trickster or god of figurative language use. Gates specifically addresses a meta-discourse of Black writers, yet Esu is similar to western society’s literary critic. For example, in Home, the young boy who questions the merits of war, Thomas, is a good example of Esu. War is
Thomas assumes that veterans who brag about killing are “liars.” And Frank agrees, offering his own guilt as evidence, transforming the meaning of that guilt by refusing to remain silent or conform to stereotypes. Yet, Frank’s delusions are not solely the products of wartime experience. Rather, they are products of the life Frank experiences before, during, and after war.19

I wrote an article for *War, Literature, and the Arts* in 2012 entitled “Reality and Anti-Reality in WWI and WWII Memoirs.” In the article, I tried to explain the irony of wartime experience as it presents itself in memoirs by Robert Graves, Hervey Allen, and Paul Fussell. I coined the term “Anti-Reality” to describe the suspension of law and what Thomas interprets. Frank is the subject, the boy’s “text.” And, in *Home*, Thomas doesn’t question Frank, but rather his notions of veteran identity. Veterans who choose to represent their experiences through writing and art interact with past generations of veterans, their contemporaries in the present, history textbooks’ sweeping coverage, and, perhaps most importantly, a society more insulated from war than ever. I described the nature of this scholarship as *literary theory* due to the direct influence of Gates. As both a veteran and a literary critic, it is my hope use critical reflection to step outside of the trope-like identities such as the “Hero” or the “Wounded Warrior” and to create a theory of veteran identity capable of unraveling the fictitious web binding together a veteran culture, a web also responsible for perpetually delaying our successful reassimilation.19

In *Home*, many of the males in Lotus, Georgina are war veterans: “[T]he men there were veterans. The two oldest fought in the First World War, the rest battled in the Second. They knew about Korea but not understanding what it was about didn’t give it the respect—the seriousness—Frank thought it deserved. The veterans ranked battles and wars according to loss numbers: three thousand at this place, sixty thousand in the trenches, twelve thousand at another. The more killed, the braver the warriors, not the stupider the commanders” (136). Reassimilation is far from idealized in Morrison’s telling. Further, veteran culture plays a part in the alienation of the novel’s protagonist. Frank returns home to a racially segregated, impoverished region that, at an earlier point in his life, he was willing to die in order to escape. The fact that he was willing to die is made clear by other veterans in the story, individuals who posit death as the most honorable outcome available to those who serve in the military. Frank, like Thomas, likely listened to these accounts, found them unreliable, or perhaps viewed them as performances, as attempts to conform to narratives of war without bearing on his own attempt to become a “man.” As a child, Thomas realizes that death and killing are not paths to manhood. Frank has to travel these paths himself in order to learn the same lesson.
morality which takes place in war. In short, combatants do things and behave in ways
during war which, in other contexts, would be considered criminal. Shooting people earns
awards, not prison sentences. Being wounded results in VA benefits, not just disability.
Kicking in doors and ransacking people’s property is an example of bravery, not breaking
and entering or burglary. Frank recognizes war’s horrors, but these horrors are not
“opposite” to the traumatic reality of his childhood. For example, in Home’s first chapter,
Frank and Cee witness a murder:

I grabbed her arm and put a finger to my lips. Never lifting our heads, just
peeping through the grass, we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow
and throw it into a hole already waiting. One foot stuck up over the edge
and quivered, as though it could get out, as though with a little effort it
could break through the dirt being shoveled in. We could not see the faces
of the men doing the burying, only their trousers; but we saw the edge of a
spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When she saw
that black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked
into the grave, her whole body began to shake. I hugged her shoulders
tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a
brother four years older, I thought I could handle it. The men were long
gone and the moon was a cantaloupe by the time we felt safe enough to
disturb even one blade of grass and move on our stomachs, searching for
the scooped-out part under the fence. When we got home we expected to
be whipped or at least scolded for staying out so late, but the grown-ups
did not notice us. Some disturbance had their attention. (4-5, emphasis in
original)

A mere four years older than his sister, Frank felt that he “could handle it,” that he could
comfort his sister even as he experiences the trauma himself. Thus, the reader learns that
Frank imagines himself as invulnerable to trauma, and in that sense exceptional. It is
precisely such a conviction that makes him susceptible to recruitment tactics which draw
upon patriotic representations of the soldier. Frank left home because he felt he was
unable to protect his sister. As an African American, racism prevented him from having
the same privileges available to White men. So, he goes to war, hoping to escape racism, to become a “man” and gain the skills and courage needed to protect his sister:

Maybe his life had been preserved for Cee, which was only fair since she had been his original caring-for, a selflessness without gain or emotional profit. Even before she could walk he’d taken care of her. The first word she spoke was “Fwank.” Two of her baby teeth were hidden in the kitchen match-box along with his lucky marbles and the broken watch they had found on the riverbank. Cee suffered no bruise or cut he had not tended. The only thing he could not do for her was wipe the sorrow, or was it panic, from her eyes when he enlisted. He tried to tell her the army was the only solution. Lotus was suffocating, killing him and his two best friends. They all agreed. Frank assured himself Cee would be okay…She wasn’t. (34-35)

Thematically, Frank’s childhood, wartime service, and homecoming are all defined by a lack of concern for human life. Despite these evils, Frank is compelled to move forward by his beliefs, by his feelings of altruism and confidence in his ability to overcome inhumanity. However, Frank returns home to learn that he is not viewed as exceptional; on the contrary, he remains subject to the same brand of racist hostility and indifference.

Reverend Locke, whom Frank encounters after escaping from the mental hospital, gives some advice: “An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better … Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don’t believe it and don’t count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (18-19). At the same time, Frank believes that his veteran identity lends him the symbolic power needed to challenge such injustice.

Reverend Locke, with his own perceptions of veterans and how they are treated, worries that Frank is naïve concerning the value of his veteran identity. So, he reminds Frank of his racial identity and warns him that even outside of war, he is still in danger.

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Frank attributes his survival to a higher purpose: rescuing Cee. As stated earlier, the veteran’s symbolic authority stems from a willingness to serve despite the way members of the military are treated. And this brand of “selflessness” is present in Frank’s memory of himself as a child, as a young boy who would help his sister without need for “gain or emotional profit.” Maybe, some people go to war because they make a choice. Maybe, it’s because they never had one. Frank claims, “the army was the only solution,” and the guilt of abandoning Cee informs both the nature of his wartime service as well as his efforts to return to his sister.

In the second chapter, the reader learns about Frank’s discharge through an exchange he has with Reverend Locke:

Frank stared at him, but didn’t say anything. The army hadn’t treated him so bad. It wasn’t their fault he went ape every now and then. As a matter of a fact, the discharge doctors had been thoughtful and kind, telling him the craziness would leave in time. They knew all about it, but assured him it would pass. Just stay away from alcohol, they said. Which he didn’t. Couldn’t. (18)

Morrison expertly hones in on the importance of class, race, and their intersection with veteran identity. While, in many ways, Frank’s journey home is that of the violent, unstable veteran stereotype, he doesn’t blame the Army for his plight. If anything, the Army helps him escape a dreadful childhood. Wartime service in Korea, according to Frank, is a better form of existence than that of African Americans in the Deep South.20

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20 Leah Hager Cohen explains the relationship between Frank and Cee in a review of Home for The New York Times, “At age 4, Frank was forced on foot out of his first home in Bandera County, Tex., an exodus made with 14 other families under threat by men ‘both hooded and not’ to leave within 24 hours or die. The Moneys wound up in Lotus, ‘the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield,’ according to Frank, to whom it appears, like its Greek counterpart, devoid of aspiration, cramped by suffocating indifference. There his parents worked 16-hour days picking cotton and planting crops, leaving Frank to protect Cee as best he could while subsisting on a daily brew of their
When I use the word “identity” I am not referring to a pre-packaged or complete set of character traits. I hold “identity” to be a lifelong project—the “totality of subjective experience” (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically* xiv). Identity formation is not just a phenomenon located in the lives of veterans. John Paul Eakin, a scholar of autobiographical identity formation, examines the work of “crafting self” in children to better understand memoirists’ attempts at self-representation. As children, Eakin argues, “we learn to tell stories about ourselves, and this training proves to be crucial to the success of our lives as adults, for our recognition by others as normal individuals depends on our ability to perform the work of self-narration” (*Living Autobiographically* 152).

Eakin describes the performance of identity, how that performance changes to accommodate new lessons and new perspectives, and how *telling the story of oneself* is intertwined in the act of *being oneself*.

Frank’s “totality of subjective experience,” or his identity, is defined by childhood trauma, his struggles against racial prejudice, and repressed war traumas that the reader only learns about late in the novel. But his identity is also rooted in his love for his sister. At times, Frank represents himself as an African American, while at other times he’s a veteran. But mostly, *Home* is about Frank trying to *tell the story of himself* as both a

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grandparents’ cruelty and neglect. There his parents died young, one of lung disease, the other of a stroke. And there, it emerges, is where Frank must return, must deliver his ailing sister, “his original caring-for,” in hopes not only of saving her, but of saving himself: ‘Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself — a strong good me’ (5). Cohen does not believe that Frank’s desire to save his sister is entirely selfless, but that it is influenced by an underlying desire to save himself. However, I do not interpret Frank’s attempt at self-preservation as a negative character trait. He could have abandoned his family, moved some place far away from the racism, poverty, and apathy found in Lotus, Georgia. But Frank decides to go back. He attempts to save himself, but because he is willing to subject himself to inhumanity, his attempts should also be read as prioritizing his sister’s life above his own.
veteran and an African American. Morrison’s novel is a treatise in the intersectionality of identity. Frank is subject to the perceptions, stereotypes, and expectations surrounding one form of identity: African American; and this identity causes him to become the victim of injustice. Later, as a veteran, Frank gains access to the “creative possibilities” made available to him through his access to another form of identity: veteran. To the non-veteran, “veteran identity” refers to an abstraction, a performance by some “Other.” To veterans, the phrase “veteran identity” refers to an ongoing attempt to represent oneself (in conversations or mannerisms as much as in stories or works of art) after war. Frank Money engages in this work of self-narration throughout *Home*, battling guilt and mental illness, trying to conceive his own “totality of subjective experience” which will allow him to accomplish the mission of saving his sister.

Like Eakin, I explore identity in relation to narrative: “[The] narrative’s role in self-representation extends well beyond the literary; it is not merely one form among many in which to express identity, but rather an integral part of a primary mode of identity experience, that of the extended self, the self in time” (*How Our Lives Become Stories* 137). Veterans struggle with reassimilation, in part, because they are unable to conceive of this “self in time.” The pressures placed upon veterans to conform to preexisting, yet ultimately incomplete and damaged stereotypes result in an inability to continue the work of self-definition. In other words, the conditions which exist prior to and after war equally influence the veteran’s performance of identity. For example, where do war crimes fit within the myth of national unity or patriotic rhetoric? How does it feel to be called a “Hero” or to be treated as an exceptional example when one’s experience tells a different story?
Frank Money is far from an exceptional example. In *Home*, the reader learns about Frank murdering a young girl:

*She smiles, reaches for the soldier’s crotch, touches it. It surprises him. Yum-yum? As soon as I look away from her hand to her face, see the two missing teeth, the fall of the black hair above eager eyes, he blows her away. Only the hand remains in the trash, clutching its treasure, a spotted, rotting orange*” (95, emphasis in original).

The story is first told in the ninth chapter, and in that iteration the villain is another guard, not Frank. However, in Chapter 14, Frank retells the story:

*I shot the Korean girl in the face.  
I am the one she touched.  
I am the one who saw her smile.  
I am the one she said “Yum-yum” to.  
I am the one she aroused.  
A Child. A wee little girl.  
I didn’t think. I didn’t have to.  
Better she should die.* (133-34, emphasis in original)

Frank took the life of a young Korean girl because of the guilt he felt upon being sexually aroused by her. The structure of their conversation implies that other soldiers would or had already taken advantage of her. But the extent of the girl’s abuse is not clear. What is clear: Frank murdered her because of some delusion or defect in his logic—this girl and Cee seem to be psychically intertwined for Frank. Whereas there is no sane explanation for his decision, and certainly no moral justification, the murder does make sense when viewed as part of Frank’s “totality of subjective experience.” Frank felt that he was saving the girl from a worse fate; he believed it “[b]etter she should die” because the pain inflicted upon Cee during his absence grows in proportion to time as well as the extent of Frank’s imaginative abilities. Such delusions can be traced back to Lotus, Georgia, to a violent upbringing; they’re not solely the products of wartime experience.
Structurally, the kind of work which takes place in the American unconscious in order for racism to occur, work such as devaluing human life, stereotyping, and cultural appropriation, also occurs in maintaining collective notions of veteran identity. Morrison illustrates the social construction of identity in African American Southerners, but as I’ve shown, veteran identity intersects with racial identity to further complicate the patriotic script followed by veterans and civilians. Frank’s tale certainly does not correspond with patriotic constructions of veteran identity, and the dissonance created by rhetoric which assumes all veterans are exceptional examples could be the subject of Frank’s direct address to the author: “You keep on writing, but I think you ought to know what’s true” (134). In this line, the character implies that the telling of his story is beyond his control. It’s as though the truth of the crime he commits in Korea wants to come out, but a confluence of rhetoric and expectation prevents it. Morrison, the author Frank addresses, is aware of the problems of race and class. She knows many crimes against African Americans go unpunished. Warzones and the communities described by Morrison share these common injustices. Novels such as *Beloved* (1987), which features a mother who kills her children to free them from slavery, and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which extensively documents intra-familial sexual violence, tell stories that more closely approximate the experiences of African Americans from the Deep South. If war is an extension of politics, however, then the murder Frank commits in Korea must, in some part, reflect his victimization as an African American, not just as a veteran. What’s more, Frank’s altruistic drive, which I attribute to all those willing to enlist in the military, can be found in his promise to protect his sister long before he enlisted, and this drive finds a way to reemerge after war due to the symbolic authority available to veterans.
EXAMPLE

Bingo: Between “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior”

Colton Binghamton’s story is easy to tell. The only problem is that this ease comes with consequences. For instance, and because of my need to advance a conversation about veteran identity, I am compelled to write about a bright, charismatic man who used humor to mask an inner sadness, one who, in a veteran-cohort college course I taught in 2013, scrawled the words “death” and “end it” in black contrast to the inside of a white, art-store theatre mask. Underneath these words, in blood red, and repeated no less than three dozen times, were simple variations on the word for laughter: “Ha! Ha. HA.” These black and red words were Binghamton’s—or “Bingo,” as his classmates called him—attempts at half of a mask-making assignment, at making conscious a self-perception otherwise hidden. The outside of the mask was to represent the world’s view of that same person, and Bingo decorated his with a smiling mouth, the word “war,” and the typical camouflage of a proud Marine Corps veteran. Now, some years removed, I want to write about Bingo’s discovering a degree of agency through this mask-making exercise, about his realizing how perceptions of self, both hidden and public, can be defined as much by others as they can be defined by the trauma of two deployments to Iraq.
I want to tell that story of self-discovery. It’s true, in a complicated way, feels good, and, quite frankly, makes me look like an innovative teacher. But it’s also reductive. It simplifies Bingo’s story by shaping it into a linear narrative, one in which I am the purveyor of some healing knowledge and steps forward, with no pauses or steps back. In fact, I can only function as “the purveyor” in this narrative because it is linear. My mask-making exercise wouldn’t seem quite as effective if I included evidence of Bingo’s suicidal ideation after the fact.

I would have to omit the stories Bingo told me of his struggles after creating that mask. Indeed, after deciding upon Bingo as the example in my discussion of veteran identity, my first instinct is to appropriate his story, to launch a stream of carefully organized words and memories into a larger river of self-serving rhetoric. However, Bingo’s story did not begin and end when I handed him a mask. His past is more than pain, and his pain is more than a plot device or prop in my story. His destiny remains his own, not mine to define once and for all. And this, at last, is the problem I hope to address in this section: appropriating war veterans’ stories in a way that restricts veterans themselves to predefined roles within society. I am interested in specific instances of this appropriation, in how it occurs consciously, unconsciously, and cumulatively over time.

What are the consequences of forcing individuals like Bingo into symbolic roles, or identities confined to two sides of a single mask? And how do we read stories by and about veterans so as to recognize shifts toward and away from appropriation? If society, like Bingo, were to paint the inside of a mask, it might express an inner sadness. And that same society, on the outside of its mask, might create an artificial veneer, a camouflage to hide that sadness. Veteran culture, as explained in the previous section, is the product of
subjecting some, but not all members of society to war. Further, individual veterans’ sacrifices during and after war shape the nation’s understanding of itself in relation to war. By confining veterans to only two symbolic roles—“Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors”—society finds that it can determine how and when its sadness—its culpability in perpetrating war, its dissatisfaction with the present, its inability to compensate veterans for open-ended wounds—is expressed. Society asks the war veteran to conform to a set of predefined narratives, to sacrifice individuality and individual stories for the sake of maintaining a more comprehensive, but ultimately false narrative about national identity.

Bingo was always exceptional in that he took it upon himself to share what he learned to help his peers. On the day of the mask-making exercise he explained the dark words on the inside of his mask: “We would laugh as loud as we could to drown out the gunfire—to drown out the sounds of killing them” (paraphrased). He went on to express guilt and to describe how that same laughter continued to echo in his mind years later. I got the impression that day was the first in which he’d discussed the events or their consequences outside of a therapist’s office. “Death,” “end it,” and laughter filled the inside of his mask. But not a speck of pain could be found on the outside. War, as Bingo felt civilians understood the act, was clean and unmarred. On the inside of his mask, however, in the space where Bingo expressed the reality of war in his day to day life, war appeared profane, violent, and ongoing. Bingo didn’t leave war in Iraq. He brought it home, but his depictions remained extreme, even to me after helping dozens of veterans write war stories. It was as though Bingo, either inadvertently or by design, depicted the
pressure to conform to a “Hero” identity on the outside of his mask and the pressure to conform to the “Wounded Warrior” on the inside.

“Heroes,” I believe, accept pomp and circumstance in exchange for silence. Bingo broke this silence by creating and talking about the inside of his mask. The dark laughter and suicidal ideation he expressed in red and black paint could not accompany the “Hero” narrative represented by the outside. These dark elements are linked to mental illness, to woundedness, so they came together as parts of a “Wounded Warrior” identity previously inaccessible to their author. Earlier, had I appropriated Bingo’s story and omitted these dark elements for the sake of advancing my narrative, I might have succeeded in erasing Bingo’s war trauma from this conversation, forcing my readers to picture him whole, silent, heroic. Instead, I’ve emphasized Bingo’s inner sadness and must be careful not to restrict him to the role of “Wounded Warrior.” My method for avoiding that restriction will be to remain focused upon the act of mask-making, to avoid an ending to Bingo’s story. However, I am not the only author to take Bingo as his subject.

Bingo and his classmates were grouped together because they were deemed “at risk” academically for reasons such as age and the need for developmental courses, but also because they were veterans. They represented a larger program of initiatives meant to recruit veterans and to help them succeed at Eastern Kentucky University. Bingo later became the poster-boy for those efforts. In a spotlight article on their website, the university reminds its audience that “[s]tudents derive many benefits from attending Eastern Kentucky University… It’s the academic preparation toward a dream job. It’s the mentoring by faculty and staff. It’s the social opportunities. It’s the support services.” These benefits appeal to any reader interested in obtaining a college degree, but the
article has a dual purpose: to recruit student veterans while depicting EKU as a place where those same veterans can heal. The article continues, “[f]or Colton Binghamton, it’s all that and much more. ‘It’s therapy.’” Immediately the work of appropriation unfolds as his college experience shifts from the story of a student learning to the story of a veteran healing. The audience includes potential students, supporters of the campus community, and civilians interested in seeing the future of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans take shape. To accommodate the latter portion of this audience, or more accurately, to not alienate them by telling a war story, Bingo must be made to conform to the vagary of the “Hero” or “Wounded Warrior” identities before the article ends.

First, the author reduces Bingo’s military service to a single sentence: “Like many of his some 1,300 fellow military veterans enrolled at Eastern, the former Marine (2004-10) suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) stemming from two eight-month deployments in Iraq with the 3/8 India Co., often in close-quarters combat.” The first mention of PTSD reveals a problem for the university. To sell themselves as panacea they need a student veteran capable of moving from a “Wounded Warrior” to a “Hero” through education. The article’s readers are looking for signs of the coming utopia—the myth of national unity explained earlier in the Introduction, a place where the “wounded” will no longer exist. So, the article begins by emphasizing those portions of Bingo’s return-home journey in which his options are limited: “Upon returning to Kentucky, though, the Lexington native found himself ‘essentially homeless, couch-surfing,’ relying on the generosity of friends for food and shelter for a couple of years.” As I mentioned earlier, “Heroes” accept praise for silence, and though his choice is an unconscious one, Bingo is no exception. He is complicit in writing the article, describing his experience as
“therapy,” a step up from a “real low, low place.” Not only is college “therapy” to Bingo, it’s an adjunct to traditional treatments. He describes overcoming self-doubt through “conversations and therapy sessions with VA counselors.” After hitting bottom in his “Wounded Warrior” role, Bingo asks himself, “What was there to lose?” and enrolls in college to escape homelessness, aimlessness, and a “Wounded Warrior” identity he never chose. Of course, positioning Bingo as the “Wounded Warrior” in this microcosm of an article is all by design.

The article presents EKU as Bingo’s savior. Still, narrating him as a “Wounded Warrior” is the first step in stripping him of his individuality. Bingo ceases to be an individual and becomes a plot device. The endgame, then, is to use that plot device so as to paint a picture of the ideal college campus for military veterans. It is an article about what Bingo’s reassimilation would look like if EKU were the panacea it claims to be. The author describes the monetary benefits available to veterans and explores Bingo’s choice of Wildlife Management as a major, highlighting the ways in which he found community as an officer in the school’s student veteran organization. Miraculously, his mental illness experiences amelioration, improving from near-total debilitation at the beginning of the article to a point where Bingo struggles only “occasionally with PTSD.” Certainly, this amelioration is possible on a college campus. But this was not the picture Bingo painted on his mask. The author continues, transforming that occasional suffering into strength: “[H]e freely shares his inspirational story in an effort to help others, including a recent presentation at a Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC) conference in Lexington.” Any lingering doubts about the efficacy of college as a new treatment for PTSD are dealt with: “Several years and thousands of miles removed now from the battlefield, are there
still bad days? Sure. ‘But I’m going to school with 1,300 other vets,’ Binghamton noted, ‘and if I’m having a bad day, these guys always have my back.’” The story “feels good” because it allows the reader to dismiss Bingo’s suffering in the present. The piece offers up a veteran who has found community, purpose, and healing through higher education. “Dark elements,” such as those I shared from my own interactions with Bingo, are left out, of course. Bingo cannot become the poster boy for EKU’s student veteran initiatives as a “Wounded Warrior.” In fact, the real Bingo cannot serve as a poster boy at all. EKU only needs a plot device, and the concocted “Wounded Warrior” in the article is a lot easier to transform into a “Hero.” Meanwhile, veterans with severe PTSD read the article and wonder if a few friends and some college credits will cure them.

Mentions of suicidal ideation and slaughters in Iraq would be too ugly; they might raise doubts about the permanence of Bingo’s cure. They might raise doubts about the society which allowed them to happen. David Jones, the British WWI veteran and author of the Modernist work In Parenthesis (1937), said of his writing, “I have written it in a kind of space between—I don’t know between quite what—but as you turn aside to do something … [T]he war itself was a parenthesis—how glad we were to step outside its brackets at the end of ’18—and also because our curious existence here is altogether in parenthesis” (xv). I find Jones’s parenthetical, compartmentalized look at military service useful because it illustrates the liminality of military veterans, the space they occupy between war and peace. It illustrates war’s effect upon the individual, the way that the experience of war results in the continual re-experiencing of war, the blending of the past, the present, and the future through post-traumatic symptoms. Veterans cannot reassimilate because it is an action which takes place in the future. Reassimilation
assumes that veterans are healed. They cannot fully exist in the present because they are not permitted to discuss their past. Veterans and civilians claim to be the same. But they refuse to be anything but different. What a curious existence indeed.

If my reading of their spotlight article is correct, EKU has done two things of concern: used Bingo’s war trauma to recruit students and limited his postwar narrative to a single outcome, one in which Bingo’s path to healing must travel through the university. At the same time, who’s to say Bingo’s college experience wasn’t healing? His words are represented in the article. I doubt the author had any intent of harming him. And I doubt EKU holds any personal grudge against the man. Perhaps Bingo possesses an awareness, conscious or otherwise, which allows him to skirt the boundaries of the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” identities to suit his needs. If that’s the case, the only accusation I can level upon the creator of this “Hero” narrative is the charge of carelessness.

It’s careless to write about an individual veteran in a way which precludes the possibility of continued suffering. In appropriating just one veteran’s story to perpetuate an idealized notion of reassimilation the article creates a narrative mold for other veterans to fit into. Their path to healing travels through EKU. It is irresponsible to discount the countless others, the 1,300 other veterans collectively mentioned in the EKU article, who will not or cannot fit that mold. The article brushes aside significant obstacles to reassimilation, obstacles Bingo himself likely hasn’t conquered at this point in his life, if ever. The article renders Bingo a “Hero,” but it also renders him silent while ironically claiming to enable his voice. He is no longer free to suffer publicly, to experience and share the pain he shared in my class because his story has already been written. The
student veteran in the spotlight article is not Bingo because that student veteran’s story has an end. But Bingo’s story is still unfolding.

Coincidentally, a student named Frank sat two rows over from Bingo. He was a bright student who also used humor to mask an inner sadness. Injured while serving in Iraq, he told me several times that he was ashamed that he couldn’t complete his term of service in the Marine Corps. Still, he tried his best to fit into the mold EKU provided for him. He tried VA therapy and the onslaught of drugs that goes along with it. I taught him in two classes. He was the type of student who would add to his teacher’s reading list. He was incredibly smart, and he tried his best to find a community, serving, like Bingo, in the student veteran organization, even auditing my classes when they dealt with military culture or history. Frank became my “unofficial” teaching assistant for the next crop of “at risk” student veterans. When they arrived their freshman year, he showed up early each Tuesday and Thursday morning, not for pay or course credit, just to give them advice about the road that lay ahead. Frank never lost sight of the altruism which led him to serve in the Marine Corps. He tried so hard to find himself after war. He tried so hard to “come home.” Frank committed suicide in 2015. I hear EKU is going to name a park bench in his honor. They’re certainly not going to turn his story into a promotional article to recruit students.
CHAPTER ONE

The Hero

Welsh had never been in combat. But he had lived for a long time with a lot of men who had. And he had pretty well lost his belief in, as well as his awe of, the mystique of human combat. Old vets from the First World War, younger men who had been with the Fifteenth Infantry in China, for years he had sat around getting drunk with them and listening to their drunken stories of melancholy bravery. He had watched the stories grow with the years and the drinking sprees, and he had been able to form only one conclusion and that was that every old vet was a hero. How so many heroes survived and so many non-heroes got knocked off, Welsh could not answer. But every old vet was a hero. If you did not believe it, you had only to ask them, or better yet, get drunk and not ask them. There just wasn’t any other kind.


Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) argues that individuals play a variety of roles in their social lives. The author uses the language of theater and stage directing to discuss basic human social interactions. Veterans do not differ from their civilian counterparts in these interactions except in the extremity of the experiences informing their characters. Veterans, too, must interact: with loved ones, with employers, with educators. The difference for veterans comes in the form of the unspoken demands of patriotism. Veterans’ social interactions require a great deal of what Goffman calls “impression management,” or subtle variations in a person’s
demeanor—or, his or her method of storytelling—meant to fill in blanks for others concerning identity:

Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence … The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending on such factors as the amount of information they already possess about him, but no amount of such past evidence can entirely obviate the necessity of acting on the basis of inferences. (2-3)

Throughout this text I refer to veteran-civilian interactions, the unspoken expectations placed upon returning veterans, or the symbolic roles of veterans in their postwar lives. I am referring, in each instance, and with varying degrees of scale, to the description of social interaction provided by Goffman above. Veterans returning from war find themselves in a moment of transformation. They must find a new role for themselves other than that of the warfighter. Unfortunately, existing perpetually as a warfighter is easier than convincing loved ones, employers, and educators that the veteran’s new identity will be superior to the one they already know and trust. “Impression management,” for veterans, is not a simple matter of standing up straight or disguising an accent; for veterans, the unspoken demands of patriotism require them to alter the meaning of their sacrifices, to accommodate mundane and trivial interactions with civilians by sacrificing their right to give testimony. To exist symbolically as a veteran requires that veteran to be “on” all the time as a veteran. Goffman believes the condition of being “on” all the time is a human experience, not just one found among veterans. However, every veteran plays a role in how veteran identity is conceived in the American
unconscious. The “creative possibilities” which emerge as a result of subjecting some, but not all members of society to the barbarism of war, is less a possibility than a responsibility to represent veteran culture as a whole.

“Bingo,” the student presented as an example of veterans caught between “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes just prior to this chapter, struggled with reassimilation even as his university wrote articles depicting him as a “Hero.” No doubt, Bingo had to engage in “impression management” when dealing with the article’s author. The narrative present in the spotlight article precludes the possibility of Bingo’s continued suffering. It tells the story of Bingo’s mental illness, presents the school as one possible cure, and seeks to recruit additional student veterans based on the belief that they, too, can find healing and camaraderie. These things might all be true, but not in all cases, and so I charge the author with carelessness. Alternative readings might claim that the article is altruistic: an attempt to recruit students to a place the author knows to benefit veterans. Or, the article could be read as malicious: a false portrayal of the campus environment which preys on mentally ill veterans. I claimed the article was careless because such articles are common; Bingo clearly consented, and there’s no evidence the author intended harm. However, such articles appropriate veterans’ narratives, and by extension, their rights to self-definition. As the introduction showed, veterans praised or elevated through patriotic discourse implicitly agree to certain levels of conformity. They must follow a script, hiding such things as mental illness, disillusionment, or physical scars which depart from the story, even when those wounds are real parts of their day-to-day lives. These types of stories suggest any veteran can be
the ideal veteran. They claim, “You’re all heroes. Let us prove it,” even when the hero in that story is clearly not the veteran.

In this chapter, I critically examine military heroism, how it is achieved in the real world, and how arbitrarily stereotyping all veterans as “Heroes” robs them of their collective rights to self-definition. War, I have argued, recreates itself with each generation, first by luring disadvantaged youths into military service with myths of heroism, later by appropriating the symbolic authority granted to them as “veterans.” So far, I have harnessed an interdisciplinary, literary theorist’s approach to the topic of veteran identity, recognizing it as a product of mythmaking in the American unconscious. Since linear, historical narratives of war have failed to convince society of war’s cyclical nature, my organizing principle in this chapter is topical, not chronological. In the sections which follow, I take as my examples military training and indoctrination, Medal of Honor award citations, and film examples such as All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), Heroes for Sale (1933), Sergeant York (1941), and Top Gun (1986) to distinguish between actual feats of heroism and “Heroes” as they are presented in patriotic rhetoric.

Among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior” have emerged as the two most pervasive forms of veteran identity modeled by veterans in the real world. In the introduction, I argued that altruism precedes and often informs the recruit’s decision to enlist. For many, the decision to enlist in the military is an automatic qualifier for “Hero” status. However, altruism does not equate to heroism, at least not in all cases, and stereotyping all veterans as “Heroes” does little to improve perceptions of veterans. In fact, labeling all veterans “Heroes” devalues military service, replacing genuine reverence with a wink and a nod, appropriating honorable service so
that it might be understood more generally, generically, and with little care for the
individual veteran’s accomplishments or values. Real heroism, I argue in this chapter, is a
rare confluence of chance and ability. Later, my analysis of the lives of Medal of Honor
recipients will provide examples of such rarity. Mostly, military heroism exists in the
minds of nonveterans as an abstraction, a product of superficial patriotic discourse, a
mass application of the title, “Our Nation’s Heroes,” or “Our Brave Young Men and
Women in Uniform.” These abstractions are packaged and sold by recruiters to young
people seeking social status, respect, or merely an escape from a tumultuous upbringing
and an unpromising future.

Joining the military is no easy task. If fortunate enough to meet the physical,
mental, and educational requirements, a recruit can expect drug tests, criminal
background checks, as well as regular appointments and exams leading up to the day he
or she ships off to basic training. Failure to maintain these standards—even prior to
military service—can lead to setbacks or changes to a recruit’s contract. This newfound
responsibility accompanies an overwhelming sense of awe. For teenagers especially, the
military ushers in a new chapter in their lives, one in which the boundaries of the world
extend beyond the walls of high school classroom buildings and self-actualization is just
a matter of time.

Suddenly, a college education seems attainable. Distant lands seem reachable.
Recruits are told that they will have everything they need to succeed in their new lives:
training and education, pay and benefits, camaraderie and a chance to prove themselves.
Even better, the skills and experience earned in uniform translate to the real world—to
the “civilian sector,” should they choose not to make a career of the military. Twenty
years. Four years. One weekend a month and two weeks a year. “The length of service does not matter,” recruiters tell young men and women. “It is the courage to serve which sets you apart from your peers.”

If it is courage that drives young men and women to service, then it is blind courage. Most young adults view “the military” as a single entity, or as a single transformative experience. They fail to realize that soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines lead very different lives. Each branch of service has its own language, history, and values. I instructed on these topics in my Veterans Studies courses at Eastern Kentucky University because they’re not taught elsewhere. The day-to-day grind of the drone pilot could not be more different than that of the grunt patrolling the mountains of Afghanistan. Yet, at the same time, information about the diversity and intersectionality found in military cultures is intrinsically linked to any true understanding of what recruits must endure.

Recruits, who begin as civilians, aren’t fully aware of what military service entails. I, for example, struggled to grasp the difference between enlisted soldiers and

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21 Currently active, The National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth (NNOMY) provides a wealth of resources and information regarding military recruitment practices and misconceptions young people have about the military, and their website serves as a platform from which the organization engages in educational programs and activism. NNOMY concludes, “Military service is associated with hazards to mental and physical health for the very youngest recruits. Despite this, current US law mandates that public schools open their doors to military recruiters. Public health programs worldwide rely on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure the protection of children. Public health advocates who focus on children in the United States should monitor and, where necessary, rein in the behaviors of military recruiters in our schools as a matter of protecting child health and welfare and as a step toward bringing the United States into the family of nations that have ratified the treaty. Congress should remove the NCLB [No Child Left Behind] mandate that public high schools admit military recruiters. Military recruiters have sufficient access to adult recruits through community recruiting stations without accessing adolescents in the public schools” (27).
officers. At eighteen, while digging a hole or performing some other menial task, I perceived officers as a group of well-groomed twenty-somethings who held a considerable amount of power for no other reason than because they possessed college degrees. I called these individuals “Sir,” or “Ma’am,” ever aware of the likeness these practices shared with antiquated notions of gentility. I remained silent because the mission was more important, but also because I had no choice. Unlike rank or title in a civilian job, military rank gives individuals the power to punish soldiers mentally and physically, through embarrassing, demeaning forms of hazing known as “corrective training.” Usually, it wasn’t the officers themselves who oversaw these punishments. Rather, the responsibility fell upon the shoulders of senior enlisted troops. In that way, the military hierarchy displaces attitudes of resentment inspired by hazing by making the perpetrator “one of your own.” Of course, many veterans will laugh and question my loyalty just for saying these things. We all volunteered. And there were ways to report abuse, but not without incurring social and professional exclusion.

As someone who grew up in a region entrenched in anti-intellectual and anti-government sentiments, it wasn’t easy to submit to such power or understand why the highest ranking enlisted person yielded authority to the lowest ranking commissioned officer. Over time, it became clear that commissioned officers are responsible for executing the orders of the President, whereas enlisted leaders are responsible for the care and training of those soldiers tasked with carrying out officers’ orders. Enlisted troops filled sandbags, repaired vehicles, and burned feces. Officers did paperwork, attended briefings, and gave orders. The scenario I am describing isn’t universal, and I came to respect many officers during my time in the Army, especially those who went on
missions and put themselves in danger alongside their troops, but I never lost sight of the fact that a college degree, privilege preceding military service, and class were the things that separated us, at least initially. Given these conditions, it came as no surprise when my younger brother, Josh, asked if he could simply “sign up” to become an officer and a pilot in the Navy. “You’ll never be Tom Cruise,” I told him. “You’ll be Goose.”

**Little Brothers, Ghosts, and Top Guns**

“Tom Cruise” and “Goose”: an actor and a character, respectively, featured in Tony Scott’s 1986 blockbuster about elite fighter pilots, *Top Gun*. Tom Cruise is the “Hero” of the film, and Goose dies a tragic death (I had to look up the name of the actor [Anthony Edwards]). My joke, my attempt to confront Josh with an uncomfortable truth so that he would laugh rather than take offense, was this: You *think* you’re going to become a *hero*, but you’re more likely to end up *dead* and no one is going to remember your name. Crass, I know. True, too many veterans know. I wanted to make sure my younger brother was aware of *all* the potential outcomes that can arise as a result of military service, including less savory ones such as death. Josh wanted to escape poverty, to get an education without accruing tens of thousands of dollars in debt. He wanted to see the world. Mostly, I think, he wanted to become a “man” like Thomas in *Home*. Why wouldn’t he want to be an officer? Why wouldn’t he want to be Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*?

*Top Gun* also stars Val Kilmer, Tim Robbins, and Kelly McGillis. It is the story of “Maverick” (Cruise), a daring American fighter jet pilot whose mettle is first tested by Russians in the Persian Gulf. Maverick’s cockiness quickly catches up with him. After an incident with Russian fighters results in the dismissal of one of his peers, Maverick is
sent back to school where, presumably, he will learn about piloting and humility.

Maverick’s mystique as a boyish (sometimes shirtless) wunderkind follows him into piloting school. There, he forms a rivalry with “The Iceman” (Val Kilmer), learning, more than additional piloting skills, the value of a “wingman” and relying upon others for support.

*Top Gun* continues in the tradition of WWI films that first featured war pilots. In the twentieth century, films such as *Wings* (1927) and *The Right Stuff* (1983) present the valor of combat without the muck and interpersonal gore commonly attributed to war.22

Kevin L. Ferguson, author of “Aviation Cinema,” argues,

> The first pilots in cinema were war heroes, and the first picture to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, *Wings* ... exemplifies the kind of jingoistic ideological narrative that characterizes aviation war films during the first half of the century ... The film balances the pragmatic and the romantic aspects of war with scenes of routine military training, thrilling aerial dogfights, and comedic misunderstanding. As such, it works contradictorily to encourage young men to join the fight by warning them of the absolute and certain danger that faces them in the air. (319-20)

Ferguson claims that aviation cinema sends a “contradictory” message, one which presents wartime service as part of an “ideological narrative” which holds war as “thrilling” and, at times, “comedic.” The danger of death is downplayed, Ferguson indicates, and this rhetorical feat is achieved by appealing to young men (and now,

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22 Linda R. Robertson, in *The Dream of Civilized Warfare* (2003), explores the cultural iconography of WWI. Specifically, the author deals with the ways in which imagery of aerial warfare replaced images of ground combat deemed too ugly to enlist public support for the Great War: “Underlying all of the uses of the combat pilot as image is the carnage and stalemate of ground war. The iconography of the combat pilot reflects the failed iconography of the ground war, that is, the failure of the ground war to match the prior expectations of how a war ought to be fought, of the qualities and virtues that a war ought to invoke, and the disappointed hopes for an early victory” (88). Scholars such as Robertson agree that combat pilots were the closest WWI came in reproducing images of chivalric combat during a war of stalemate and mechanized slaughter.
women) who believe proximity to death brings them closer to perceived notions of military masculinity. In other words, recruits are conditioned as children to believe death and military masculinity go hand-in-hand.

Children see examples of veterans becoming men through brushes with death throughout mass media, including popular music videos. For example, the video for “The Ghost of You,” a song written and performed by the band My Chemical Romance in 2004, begins with a performance at a high school dance, or perhaps a military “send-off” event. Nothing in the lyrics indicates that the song is about war. In the video, however, the males are clad in WW2-era dress uniforms, the females wear their finest dresses, and the age-old story of “loss of innocence” is told through lyrics and imagery depicting a group of childhood friends traumatized by war. In the scenes which follow, friends are lost to extreme violence in a reenactment of the WW2 invasion of Normandy. In the battle scenes the band members play the parts of soldiers. One scene depicts the death of the bassist, Mikey Way, as the lead vocalist, Gerard Way (Mikey’s brother in real life), attempts to save him. Mikey dies, and later, at a bar, Gerard laments the loss of his brother as he grows more intoxicated and more unstable with each painfully delivered lyric. The characters in the video do not find glory. Instead, in the lyrics, they find death and a compulsion to stay ahead of memories of their wartime service:

At the end of the world
Or the last thing I see
You are never coming home, never coming home
Could I? Should I?
And all the things that you never ever told me
And all the smiles that are ever gonna haunt me
Never coming home, never coming home
Could I? Should I?
And all the wounds that are ever gonna scar me
For all the ghosts that are never gonna catch me (Lines 16-25)
The video begins with members of the band saying “goodbye” to high school sweethearts. Later, as scenes of war coincide with the lyrics such as “never coming home” and “[f]or all the ghosts that are never gonna catch me,” the illusion of military heroism fades, giving way to war trauma and regret: lost friends, lost loves, lost innocence. Ironically, the music video begins with the “old Lie” that going to war turns boys into men, and it ends with a broken, traumatized veteran looking for sympathy at a bar. The lyrics explain, “If I fall / I fall down” (26-27), indicating that the speaker will have to stay one step ahead of his war trauma, but also one step ahead of the past which precedes his wartime service—the past which reminds him of his brother. If “the ghosts” catch him, the singer is not sure he can survive it.

“The Ghost of You,” at least in my reading, is not pro-war. If anything, it presents war as an experience which forever scars its participants. But so does every literary and film example I examine in the dissertation. These representations of war are encountered by American youths prior to enlisting. Oddly, they’re enticing because they equate heroism with suffering. No doubt, some recruits had the lyrics “never coming home” in their minds even as their recruiters drove them to processing stations. *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge* sold over one million copies in the U.S. Despite the promise of trauma, and beyond aspiring to become heroes, war manages to sell itself as a way of staying ahead of the “ghosts” haunting these recruits before they enlist. Innocence is exchanged for various forms of wartime trauma, and wartime trauma grants recruits the agency they need to escape circumstances such as childhood abuse, unrequited love, socioeconomic disadvantage, and simple teenage angst. “If you’re lucky enough to encounter death and survive it,” the myth goes, “you’ll return home with status and respect unavailable to you.
in your present state.” Children listen to these songs before war, during it, and after. But the lyrics change meaning over time.

Figure 1: Scenes from "The Ghost of You"

The My Chemical Romance music video from the album Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge (2004) portrays the order of events which unfold in the lives of recruits bound for war. The lead singer, for example, begins in a state of innocence, must display bravery in order to survive, and ends the video drunk and angrily shouting to friends and strangers in a bar.

In Top Gun, Maverick also seeks out danger, finds it, and struggles to remain true to himself while living in the aftermath. Ferguson continues, “[A]viation cinema is characterized by its fluidity, exchange, liminal crossings, and other reorganizations of an initial narrative state. The airplane is an ungrounded space of transformation; it is always a different plane that lands, a different passenger who disembarks” (310). Ferguson’s critique is of aviation cinema—films about planes and pilots, not always military planes or military pilots. Yet, the themes presented by Ferguson correspond with the sorts of “transformation” sought by military recruits. Movies such as Top Gun are a particular subset of war cinema, one which provides examples of the “rites of passage” offered to recruits, but in a way that suggests that pilots, unlike their comrades on the ground, can emerge from such a transformation unscathed, or at least emerge from war without lifelong, debilitating illnesses. Ferguson recognizes Top Gun as the “most famous”
example of aviation cinema, and though it came out shortly after my birth, and more than a decade before the birth of my brother, it has clearly positioned itself symbolically in American culture alongside music videos such as “The Ghost of You.” These examples present war as form of escape, a way of transcending a world teenagers perceive as limiting.

However, *Top Gun* and Tom Cruise’s “Maverick” are both illusions: “*Top Gun* gets dismissed as a popcorn blockbuster about a pompous son-of-a-bitch. That's wrong – and worse, that's exactly the movie Cruise worked so hard not to make. We remember the highlights – the volleyball, the thumbs-up, the bitchin' Kenny Loggins soundtrack – but the real movie is darker and more complicated” (Nicholson 3). During his training at the Navy Fighter Weapons School in Miramar, CA, Maverick tries to win a school contest. In one scene, Maverick’s fighter jet gets too close to that of his rival, Iceman, and as a result, Maverick loses control, crashing into the ocean. Maverick escapes. His wingman, Goose, crashes into the canopy of the aircraft after activating his emergency ejection system and dies; his lifeless body parachutes slowly to the water below. The scene ends with Maverick, floating in the ocean, holding onto his friend’s body as a helicopter rescue crewman says, “You’ve got to let him go, sir.”

Much of the remaining film is about Maverick “letting go.” Later, when he and Charlotte Blackwood (Kelly McGillis), his former aviation instructor turned lover, sit in a car, reminiscing over the events which have transpired, Maverick says, “I think maybe it was my fault. I don’t know what the hell went wrong.” Charlotte offers to help, but Cruise walks away, and in the next scene he confides in Goose’s widow, Carole (Meg Ryan). Carole tries to encourage Maverick—to assuage some of his guilt—by saying,
“He’d have flown anyway, without you. He would have hated it. But he would have done it.” Subsequently, Maverick is assigned to the U.S.S. Enterprise. Along with Iceman and his new wingman, “Merlin” (Tim Robbins), the characters move from simulations to actual combat operations.

Indeed, the internal conflict present in Top Gun is complex. Amy Nicholson explains,

Cruise added depth to the script. He switched the gymnast girl friend to an astrophysicist, pushed to make it more about competition than war, and gave Maverick an emotional bruise that colors the whole movie: Maverick's dad, a pilot himself, disappeared in Vietnam and now the son must restore the family's pride. That's the key to the whole film: Maverick is insecure. He's not a cocky asshole – he's just pretending to be one. (6)

First, Maverick is compelled to reclaim his family’s name, and this compulsion results in reckless flying, remedial training, and later, in Maverick’s mind, Goose’s death. Cruise’s character is faced with the choice of giving up on his dream or pushing forward despite his grief. Later, in combat, the trauma of Goose’s death recreates itself when a Russian pilot gets caught in the exhaust of Maverick’s jet, causing Maverick to flashback to Goose’s death, which in turn forces him to briefly retreat from battle. The climax of the story involves Maverick overcoming his shame, his guilt, and his fear. When Maverick returns to battle alongside Iceman, they destroy several Russian fighters and force the remaining squadron into retreat. In the end, Maverick overcomes his past, becomes a flight instructor, and at the end of the film throws Goose’s dog tags into the ocean, signifying that he has found peace.

So, my younger brother wanted to be a fighter pilot. And the “most famous” example of a fighter pilot available to him before his enlistment was that of Tom Cruise’s “Maverick.” However, as Nicholson shows, Josh’s perception of veteran fighter pilots
was based on an illusion, one carefully constructed to produce a character who masks inner shame and guilt with bravado and cockiness. As a result, Maverick ignores the reality of war to his own detriment and to the detriment of those pilots with whom he serves. Iceman says as much in one scene, “You're everyone's problem. That's because every time you go up in the air, you're unsafe. I don't like you because you're dangerous.”

So, when I made my joke, “You’ll never be Tom Cruise. You’ll be Goose,” I was fully aware of the irony of the situation: A potential recruit, my brother wanted to be a fighter pilot, even when his conception of fighter pilots was based on “romantic” notions of aerial combat and a movie, *Top Gun*, which is really about an insecure, irresponsible kid trying desperately to prove himself as a man.

Perhaps, it wasn’t the allure of combat which Josh found so attractive. Maybe, because of the options available to him, the military was the best “rite of passage” he could find. Maybe, he listened to songs like “The Ghost of You” with lyrics such as “never coming home” and “for all the ghosts that are never gonna catch me” and concluded that the risks inherent in war, including death, were preferable to his life as a recent high school graduate in a socioeconomically depressed area. Teens fed elaborate fictions about military service as children bring many assumptions with them to the recruiter’s office. Many of their fantasies disappear into nothingness as the harsh realities of basic training and wartime service are weighed alongside the many benefits promised by recruiters. For others, the opposite is true: the exhilaration and camaraderie found in combat are the most enticing enlistment incentives of all. Combat is the surest way to become a “Hero,” and becoming a “Hero” is the surest way to become a “man.”
I remember talking to my friend Scott about these issues while we were in Iraq. We spent days at a time occupying the same vehicle—me as the gunner; Scott as the driver. One day, I told him, “Most of my high school friends are now drug addicts or criminals. At least, if we die here, they’ll remember us as ‘Heroes.’ No one back home gives a shit if people like us die otherwise.” This conversation took place not long after my older brother died. I was feeling pretty cynical at the time. But, I still agree with the assessment. War gave soldiers like us a way of staying ahead of the ghosts which preceded our time at war. It gave us a feeling of self-worth after society wrote us off as losers, delinquents, future addicts, or statistics.

Military Masculinity

In the introduction, I describe veterans as possessing innate altruistic drives, as having a desire to educate others about war and human resiliency, and as having a proclivity for leadership. Advancing through the ranks of the military is achieved by mastering one’s profession, and later by teaching the skills and values of that profession to lower-ranking peers. In this way, Maverick’s decision to become a flight instructor at the end of Top Gun is true to life. However, not all veterans become leaders; often their enlistment contracts expire before they have a chance. But these veterans continue thinking of themselves as future leaders.

Patriotic rhetoric paints veterans as exceptional examples, and while this portrayal does not preclude veterans from thinking of themselves as leaders, it does replace genuine interactions with superficial platitudes and gestures, preventing veterans from performing identity in such a way that indicates altruism, a desire to educate, or a desire
to lead. Conversely, cinematic portrayals of veterans include characters that are violent, unstable, and eager to bring war to the homeland. If anything, *Top Gun*’s “Maverick” is unstable. That’s his defining characteristic. He contradicts authority, showboats, and seems more invested in proving his manhood than serving his country. Patriotic conceptions of veteran identity and cinematic portrayals of veterans are different ways in which veterans are *perceived*; they are different iterations of veteran “difference,” and as the last section shows, many recruits seek out veteran “difference” consciously, as a rite of passage, as a proving ground for masculinity, or as an escape. Children play war games. They’re sold powerful versions of military masculinity in war films and music videos. And war itself emerges as a rite of passage to teenagers who feel as though their parents, their social statuses, or society as a whole limits their potential. After war, and once veterans return home, the mystique of military masculinity fades, replaced in many cases by the lingering effects of trauma or survivor’s guilt. Unlike Maverick, these veterans can’t simply toss a dead friend’s dog tags into the ocean and move on.

The pinnacle of military masculinity—that is, the identity which confers the most agency and the most power—is the “Hero.” Military heroes represent a model of masculinity at least as old as violence. Leo Braudy, in *From Chivalry to Terrorism* (2003), a comprehensive look at masculinity and its relationship to war dating back to Ancient Greece, argues that a fundamental difference, historically, in the lives of men and women has been the freedom of men to “escape from (or to express) biology, often in elaborate rituals of competition—for women, for possessions, for position” (xv). As Ferguson’s research claims in the last section, Tom Cruise wanted to make the film “more about competition than war.” However, war encompasses competition, makes it
violent, and leaves few survivors feeling like winners. Any portrayal of war that describes it as a “competition” is misleading. To kill others or die during war are just two forms of loss.

Increasingly in today’s military, Braudy’s “rituals” include women. If anything, twenty-first century warfare and the increasing presence of women on the front lines only reinforce the separation between sex and gender. In fact, military masculinity is easily read as a gender-based performance. The military provides access to a form of masculine power, and this power is available to all recruits, not just straight, white men, not even the “the best and the brightest.” Jack Judith Halberstam, whose Female Masculinity (1998) articulates an impressive number of alternative gender roles, warns readers against reducing masculinity “to the male body and its effects” (1). Nor should the claims made about masculine power or military masculinity in this chapter be applied only to men. The proliferation of “versions of masculinity that we enjoy and trust,” specifically, the “heroic masculinities” sold in recruiters’ offices, “depend[s] absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities” (Halberstam 1). The military privileges certain gender performances over others. To leave the military as anything less than a “Hero” connotes inferiority. As veterans, such inferiority leads to “subordination” and disinterest by and on the part of civilians who welcome them home. In short, inferior versions of military masculinity have no place among the exceptional examples found in patriotic rhetoric. This fact results in a peculiar hierarchy created and maintained in both civilian and veteran communities, one in which the content of the veteran’s character corresponds to his or her proximity to death—to killing, dying, or closeness to the same.
I see today’s veterans as largely caught between the pull of two stereotypes: the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior.” I deal with the “Wounded Warrior” at length in Chapter Two. Importantly, both of these stereotypes are not as simple as the difference between actively and passively surviving trauma. Rather, they are historically informed labels that function to institutionalize war violence as a means by which certain, usually socioeconomically disadvantaged youths, might attain agency through brushes with death. Further, I see both labels as inherently tied to public perceptions of PTSD.

Annessa Stagner, author of “Recovering the Masculine Hero: Post-World War I Shell Shock in American Culture,” argues that during and after WWI “American representations uniquely characterized shell shock as a short-term, curable injury of war. Such definition not only allowed for continued visions of heroic manliness in war, but also made women essential to male recovery, delineated male and female gender roles, and advanced often unrealistic social and cultural expectations for both men and women” (1). I argue that such optimism persists in representations of wars which came after WWI.

23 An extreme example of agency being attained through “brushes with death” or the experience of war can be found among stories of former slaves who fought for the Union army in the American Civil War. In Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves (1997) Kirk Savage explains, “To be a soldier in battle was the ultimate test of manhood, because men battled men and battled to the death. For the male slave the test was even more profound since his masculinity had been denied from the outset … As we have seen, in the representations of the dominant culture, the male slave could demonstrate his manhood only insofar as he resisted or escaped slavery. To become a Union soldier, then, was not only to acquire conventional trappings of masculinity but to resist the very institution that suppressed his masculinity in the first place … Wearing a uniform and carrying a gun did in fact give the former slave a sense of power and respect unimaginable under slaver. The annals of the war and its aftermath are full of anecdotes of former slaves, now soldiers, refusing to show deference to whites and sometimes even witnessing the spectacle of a former master crouching before them” (97). Of course, economic disadvantages do not equate to the experience of slavery. It is an entirely different thing to be viewed as property than to be viewed as a failed member of a capitalist society. However, war, its horrors, and the pursuit of increased agency and respect through feats of heroism are present in both examples.
Specifically, patriotic rhetoric and the exceptional examples contained therein portray veterans’ wounds as “short-term” and “curable” so that war might recreate itself. In *Top Gun*, Maverick’s trauma is “short-term” and so easily “curable” that it can be solved by throwing a pair of dog tags into the ocean. Charlotte and Carole—the female characters in the film—are “essential” to Maverick’s “recovery.” And Maverick begins his journey with the “unrealistic cultural expectation” that he has to restore his family’s name. It seems little has changed in more recent portrayals of veterans as “Heroes.” Importantly, and as shown in the music video, “The Ghost of You,” these portrayals underestimate the costs of war exacted upon individual veterans in the real world.

At the same time, it’s no secret that there are people who enjoy the exhilaration of combat, just as it is no secret that war leaves many of these same people forever traumatized. Stagner believes that the tradition of separating veterans from the trauma they experience is particularly an American phenomenon: “Examining shell shock when optimism still reigned in terms of veteran recovery provides a window into post World War I culture in the United States, particularly into perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and mental illness … scientific treatment and recovery of shell shock in the United States symbolized that wound’s very absence. It symbolized optimism not just about the recovery of the soldier, but the recovery of masculinity, of scientific certainty, and ultimately the recovery of the nation” (7). I believe that this optimism can be explained through the description of patriotism offered in this dissertation. In short, America’s robust military needs recruits, and an “all-volunteer” force is hard to maintain when public perceptions of military service focus on trauma instead of upward mobility or increased agency.
American exceptionalism. And, generation after generation, children look up to these veterans and see the military as a harmless rite of passage. Like *Top Gun*, these images of “Heroism” are carefully constructed to appeal to social groups denied agency as civilians.

I use quotation marks around the word “Hero,” in modified states (i.e., “heroism,” “heroics”), and in accompanying phrases (i.e., “Heroic Moment,” “Heroic Narrative,” “the hero treatment”) to distinguish between heroes, or veterans who personally commit some act of valor, and “Heroes,” a word recently diluted in colloquial usage to mean “any veteran who serves honorably during a time of war.” The word “Hero,” then, refers to veterans who passively allow that title to represent them. Sometimes, as in the cases of Medal of Honor recipients I examine later in this chapter, the title is warranted. Other times, it is an arbitrary assignment of a stereotypical version of veteran identity meant to keep veterans silent by harnessing the shame experienced by those who know they have not earned the title.

Halberstam believes “Heroes” claim a “‘dominant masculinity’ [that] appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power” (2). Indeed, becoming a “Hero” is the most straightforward path to becoming a “man”; at least, that’s the belief driving teenagers to join. However, and as women have shown in their desire to be included in every facet of military service, becoming a “military man” has less to do with *maleness* than it does with *agency*. No, we’re not as far removed from Braudy’s “elaborate rituals of competition” as we would like to think. If anything, contemporary branding of the “Hero”—by a media in need of ratings, a government in need of warriors, and a military desperate to prove that not all recruits come home mangled or in body bags—has made masculine ritual *more* compelling and masculine competition *more* rewarding. Again,
war is not a competition. It is a methodical extermination of human life meant to achieve political aims. In my reading, the “Hero” stereotype is designed to make death appear more compelling, to make killing appear more rewarding.

The Pursuit of Heroism

The literary example of Frank Money, Toni Morrison’s Korean War veteran character from the Deep South discussed in the introduction, shows that veteran identity intersects with racial identity. In Frank’s case, military service provides agency unavailable to him as an African American. However, this theme of youths seeking upward mobility, adventure, and respect is not limited to African Americans, or as the previous section argues, even males. Veteran identity also intersects with gender identity. The most prestigious form of military masculinity is the “Hero.” And Top Gun presents one example, a “fighter pilot on just the right side of the law but [one] … requiring the death of a partner in order to help the central character develop” (Ferguson 322). In movies, the “death of a partner” is a convenient plot device which helps protagonists grow into “Heroes.” In reality, the deaths of friends or loved ones in combat results in survivor’s guilt, other forms of psychological trauma, and disillusionment. So, in many ways, the scene in “The Ghost of You” in which the lead singer laments the death of his brother at a bar is a more accurate portrayal of military service than what is present in Top Gun. In Top Gun’s bar scene, which takes place before Goose’s death, the pilots are immaculately dressed in white uniforms, singing “You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling” to Maverick’s love interest. They’re not haunted by trauma because they have not yet

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25 For more on the topic of American intersectionality and race read Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s Intersectionality (2016).
experienced it. The two bar scenes depict the different perceptions of veterans outlined in the introduction: one is about a perpetually broken veteran; the other is about an exceptional example. Both are fictions, however, so recruits feel as though they have a choice.

Try to imagine this description as a recruiter’s pitch: “Don’t worry; you’ll get to see your friends die and it will make you a man.” I doubt that such a pitch, though accurate with regard to socially constructed versions of veteran identity, would help recruiters meet their quotas. Still, the military succeeds in selling hyper-masculine notions of military “Heroes.” Victoria L. Bromley lists some characteristics of hypermasculine characters: “aggressive, physically strong, dominant, authoritative, independent, detached, rational, objective, reasonable, and sexually proficient … Boys and men learn to conform to these stereotypical ideals” (153). Not all of these descriptors are pejoratives. They are traits which grant their performers access to power, to a place within a patriarchal society. They are different ways of looking at a single veteran identity, suggesting that the benefits outweigh the consequences of military service, positing military masculinity as something which cannot be achieved without first dying, or encountering death and overcoming it through masculine mettle.

Brian Mockenhaupt, a former infantryman and combat correspondent who serves as the non-fiction editor for Military Experience and the Arts, writes about the exhilaration of combat in “I Miss Iraq. I Miss My Gun. I Miss My War,” published in *Esquire* in 2007:

> I’ve been home from Iraq for more than a year, long enough for my time there to become a memory best forgotten for those who worried every day that I was gone. I could see their relief when I returned. Life could continue, with futures not so uncertain. But in quiet moments, their relief
brought me guilt. Maybe they assume I was as overjoyed to be home as they were to have me home. Maybe they assume if I could do it over, I never would have gone. And maybe I wouldn't have. But I miss Iraq. I miss the war. I miss war. And I have a very hard time understanding why. (2)

Mockenhaupt’s ambivalence toward military service is plainly stated: He loathes war. He misses war. And he doesn’t know how these two feelings can coexist. Perhaps, Mockenhaupt’s reflections are a product of the emphasis placed upon mental health in the twenty-first century. More likely, he’s exploring the very same anti-war sentiments expressed by war authors and veterans throughout this dissertation. He continues, “[W]ar twists and shifts the landmarks by which we navigate our lives, casting light on darkened areas that for many people remain forever unexplored. And once those darkened spaces are lit, they become part of us” (3). Specifically, Mockenhaupt refers to violence, to owning power unavailable to him as a civilian. War changes those who experience it, Mockenhaupt claims, exposing once-innocent recruits to inhumanity. Mockenhaupt recognizes how war recreates itself with each generation: “That men are drawn to war is no surprise. How old are boys before they turn a finger and thumb into a pistol? Long before they love girls, they love war, at least everything they imagine war to be: guns and explosions and manliness and courage” (5). In many ways, military service is a disavowal of childhood. It is a source of upward mobility. But many recruits, like Maverick in Top Gun, use military service to do battle with inner demons. Previously, I described a common feeling of “difference” among veterans. My brother, Top Gun, and Mockenhaupt all show that veteran “difference” is something recruits seek out purposefully, unaware of the true nature of war or the changes it will cause inside of them.
Mockenhaupt describes himself caught between two poles, expressing the shame he feels upon realizing that he misses war:

> For those who know, this is the open secret: War is exciting. Sometimes I was in awe of this, and sometimes I felt low and mean for loving it, but I loved it still. Even in its quiet moments, war is brighter, louder, brasher, more fun, more tragic, more wasteful. More. More of everything. And even then I knew I would someday miss it, this life so strange. Today the war has distilled to moments and feelings, and somewhere in these memories is the reason for the wistfulness. (6)

After war, Mockenhaupt reflects on the friends and colleagues he lost, concluding, “I felt disgusted with myself for missing the war and wondered if I was alone in this … I don't think I am” (18-19). Perhaps, the excitement of war is something only a child can experience. Perhaps, the growth promised to those who agree to fight wars is something which exists in the moment just prior to realizing the value of human life and how quickly life can be extinguished. Wartime experience, then, paradoxically results in forms of trauma that young men and women can only understand belatedly.26 Maverick throws his friend’s dog tags into the ocean at the end of Top Gun. But overcoming survivor’s guilt is not quite as simple for real veterans like Mockenhaupt.

Braudy refers to “heroism” as part of a “masculine myth” corrupted by nationalism. In the Introduction, I examine perceptions of veterans held by Machiavelli during the Italian Renaissance and by the Department of Homeland Security in 2009.

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26 Cathy Caruth, in Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996), explains that “[t]rauma … is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (4). It seems that the nature of military service, in that it recruits very young, underdeveloped minds to wage violence, allows members of the military to experience the exhilaration of combat, but at the cost of those same individuals experiencing trauma belatedly as “veterans.”
These perceptions portray veterans as threats to society. Braudy continues along this line of reasoning, describing governments wise to the needs of masculinity and their efforts to redirect its competitive urges into violence which then reshapes societies and political landscapes. “[W]ar,” Braudy claims, “is a purifying crucible that melts away the false and corrupt manners of a bourgeois society to display the basic masculine mettle beneath the dross” (29). This assessment insinuates that there is a truer, more essential identity available to men that cannot be explored outside of war’s context. It reflects the desires of recruits seeking agency, but also a desire to achieve a form of “manhood” which is superior to the gender-based performances of civilians. Historically, and thematically, war is concerned with masculinity, with its destructiveness, but also with purification. Cyclically, war relies upon masculinity for its violent energies, and masculinity relies upon war for its purifying effects. But it would be an error, especially today, to reduce wartime “heroism” to male performativity.

Nor would Halberstam argue that females in the military desire to be males: “[F]emale masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history rather than simply a derivative of male masculinity” (77). I recognize Halberstam’s claim in my assessment of military heroism, but also because my military occupational specialty gave me the opportunity to work alongside female soldiers. In general, they did not want to be treated differently. Even as the military imposed separate physical conditioning standards upon women, many of those women strived to perform in equal measures to their male counterparts. Otherwise, they would not be taken seriously by their male peers. And, later, as veterans, they would struggle to lay claim to the agency granted to veterans, a source of power rooted in masculinity, but one no longer limited to the male sex. In the
Introduction, I employed the theories of scholars interested in matters of race and culture to better understand the inescapable quality of veteran identity. I am employing a similar tactic in this chapter, analyzing “Heroes” through the lens of gender to locate veterans—male and female—at the top of a hierarchy of military masculinity. To ignore the role of gender, not just in the creation and maintenance of military masculinity, but also in articulations of military femininity yet to be considered, would be to ignore the very power and agency which attracts young men and women to military service.

In Chapter Three, I deal specifically with artwork and literature created by women veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. That exploration interests itself with the new forms of military femininity forged during war. Before that analysis can take place, however, it is necessary to describe military masculinity, or the identity which, over the course of human history, has been the sole inheritor of wartime glory and honor. Again, military masculinity, as articulated by the “Hero” archetype, is no longer bound to the male sex. Instead, the performance of military masculinity is an exercise in agency and power. The “military man” is an identity sought out by men and women alike. Language, in that there is no equivalent phrase to “military man” available to the female sex (with the exceptions, maybe, of “lionesses,” referring to all-female engagement teams in

27 Halberstam elaborates, “[T]he momentous negotiations about gender that took place at and around the turn of the century, which were created by earlier developments, produced particular forms of femininity and masculinity and clearly showed that femininity was not wed to femaleness and masculinity was certainly not bound to maleness. The transition from affiliation marriages and romantic marriages, the development of the women’s rights movement, the trials of Oscar Wilde, the social upheaval caused by World War I, and the development of sexological models of sexual definition all played a part in untangling once and for all the knots that appeared to bind gender to sex and sexuality in some mysterious and organic way. What remains to be demonstrated is how women have contributed powerfully and irreversibly to the constitutive terms of contemporary masculinity and how men have participated in integral ways in the foundations of contemporary femininity” (48).
Afghanistan, or “women warriors,” referring to all women veterans, but in a way that emphasizes their femininity as opposed to any soldierly qualities they may embody), simply hasn’t caught up. The Navy and Marine Corps, for example, are both undergoing changes to remove the suffix “man” from job titles like “Yeoman” or “Rifleman.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the accomplishments of women in the military suggest new forms of feminine heroism previously unconsidered. In addition to escaping the limitations of traditional gender roles, and striving for more equitable service alongside men, women are not only contributing to the war effort; they are using war in the same way men have for centuries: to discover new forms of agency unavailable to them as civilians.

The Expansion of Military Masculinity

The Army requires its recruits to memorize and live “The Army Values.” Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless-Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage form the acronym “LDRSHIP.” “Leaders of men,” soldiers learn, carry such high ideals with them into battle. The soldier’s actions, if honorable, reflect his or her commitment to “The Army Values.” Incurring dishonor by behaving as a coward reflects the opposite.

28 In June 2016, The Marine Times reported that “[t]housands of Marines serving throughout the infantry and in other key positions are about to get new gender-neutral job titles, but the service's top leaders are pushing to leave the word ‘man’ in some of its most iconic occupations” (Harkin 1). In the article, Defense Secretary Ash Carter is quoted as saying, “As we achieve full integration of the force ... this is an opportunity to update the position titles and descriptions themselves to demonstrate through this language that women are included in these MOSs [Military Occupational Specialties]” (Harkins 11). These changes reflect improved attitudes of inclusivity in the Marine Corps, the branch of the military considered the most hypermasculine by many, but it will take time before policy catches up with practice and perceptions of female veterans more closely approximate the sacrifices they make alongside male warfighters.
Dishonor was never something I feared. I knew, at least, that I was not a criminal. It was the looming threat of leaving war as “a coward” which hovered over my every move, especially during the beginning months of my first deployment. How does a person know if he or she is a coward until tried in combat?

War used to be a place to which males could escape and revel in violence, the suspension of morality, and hyper-masculinity. This myth, which has endured for centuries, dictates that the battlefield is where men prove their manliness at the expense of others. Brenda M. Boyle, in “Rescuing Masculinity: Captivity, Rescue and Gender in American War Narratives,” agrees that “[a] traditional way to persuade young American people they should go to war is to promise them war produces conditions in which they will behave heroically” (149). Boyle examines popular examples of wartime heroism in cinema, such as Blackhawk Down (2001) and Rescue Dawn (2006), to argue,

Because the captivity and rescue trope reveals how the urgency to perform masculinity ironically can result in the performance of femininity, it clarifies the precarious and mutable nature of masculinity even under war conditions that, according to the truism, are supposed to convert a (feminine) boy into a (masculine) man. While the repercussions of the situation—of being promised a masculinizing condition and finding oneself in its opposite—can be dire enough for the physical, mental and emotional well-being of the individual the presence of the trope indicates how such masculinist thinking and its repercussions are also dangerously manifested in war narratives at the national and strategic levels. The notion that war is a gateway, if not the gateway to masculinity normalizes and even makes seem necessary a nation’s using combat to resolve its conflicts. Given these conditions, war can appear to be the only and most natural solution” (149)

Again, war is sold as a source of agency, a path to manliness, and experiencing war violence is the only way to achieve the status of “military Hero.” However, and as I have shown, this tradition is no longer limited to male recruits, suggesting that either society is becoming less patriarchal, or the problem of war is becoming more widespread. In other
words, the fact that war offers agency to more and more members of this society means that war is wreaking more havoc upon other societies. It’s safe to say that not every soldier who goes to war becomes a man. And not every child who grows up through soldiering does so by perpetrating senseless violence. However, and historically, as discussed by Braudy, and with regard to gender, as explained by Halberstam, war is sold on precisely these terms.

The previous section refutes this myth, as does my personal experience. My small vantage point in the Iraq War more closely resembled the job of a police officer than that of a “warrior.” Between police officers and soldiers violence is the common denominator, and it is violence which has the ability to radically shape and reshape the lives of those who inflict and endure that violence, faced by unknown threats on one side, sworn to uphold the law and not overreact to those threats on the other. We were always under surveillance: by our leaders, in our calls home, by the media, and even by the Iraqi civilians who showed up at military bases demanding compensation for damages. We were never under the impression that we would leave war with dark secrets. People were around. Witnesses were everywhere. Each one had some tiny say in whether we would return home as heroes or cowards.

**Selling War to the Kids**

The active duty military is a closed society. Wars take place in distant lands. Civilians’ lack of knowledge about war and military service creates a void which veterans fill as symbols, passively or deliberately. Surveillance confers symbolic power upon veterans in the form of a localized sort of “fame.” In *The Frenzy of Renown* (1986)
Braudy argues that fame “is made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since” (14).

It’s not that every veteran ends up on the nightly news. Rather, it’s that every veteran returns home as a symbol of military service. As *symbols*, veterans “stand out of the crowd, but with the crowd’s approval” (Braudy, *Frenzy* 6). The vaguer the details concerning veterans’ lived experiences, the more powerfully those veterans function as symbols. The clearer those details, the more powerfully those veterans function as individuals.

As veterans, “Heroes” are lulled into their roles upon discovering that the “fame” accompanying them home is “a common coin of human exchange” (Braudy, *Frenzy* 4). Braudy recognizes the historic relationship between fame and military service. “War and war leaders,” the author argues, “had always been crucial factors in the history of public celebrity, with its Roman bias toward rooting personal honor in military and political action” (Braudy, *Frenzy* 556). Later, when these same men wrote histories of their wars, they imbued the narratives with “positive warrior traits—honor, integrity, self-sacrifice, camaraderie, openness….while purging negative ones” (Braudy, *Chivalry to Terrorism* 552). Obviously, these “positive warrior traits” are still present in military cultures, with the “Army Values” cited above as one example. Social architects wrote histories of war that bestowed intangible rewards like honor, integrity, or glory upon those who survived. Cowards and the dead were written out of history so that the myth linking war to heroism might continue growing. Importantly, these histories are written by “war leaders.”

I am not ashamed to admit that I asked for a job “other than the infantry or anything else that will get me killed” when I walked into a recruiter’s office in 2002. I
doubt I am the only one. And I have a great deal of respect for those individuals who knowingly request positions in units guaranteed to experience violence. Anthony Swofford, a Gulf War veteran and the author of *Jarhead* (2003), writes of a “moral high ground” when discussing his role in a combat arms unit. He suggests that there is something superior about the combat arms soldier, something more “Heroic” about perpetrating violence. Public knowledge of the decreased mortality and injury rates among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, massive military operations labeled as “police actions,” and the concept of an “all-volunteer fighting force” are sensationally promoted as facts that in turn serve recruiters’ needs to downplay war’s accompanying death and danger. Veterans like Swofford see through the recruiter’s tactics only because they’re among those recruits most invested in the myth which transforms boys into men. For everyone else, it would seem, violence is becoming a harder sell.30

One reason “Heroic” myths are becoming harder to believe is the consistent disavowal of war by veterans themselves. For example, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

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29 A Harvard University study conducted in 2005 entitled, “Ninety Percent Of U.S. Wounded Survive: In Iraq, Firepower Increases, Deaths Decrease,” found, “Better, faster medical care has reduced deaths from the more than 10,000 war injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan to the lowest percentage of any war in American history. In World War II, 30 percent of U.S. soldiers died from wounds received in combat; in Vietnam, 24 percent of the wounded died. In Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the horrific increase in the destructibility of weapons, mortality has dropped to 10 percent” (1).

30 WWI brought the relationship between wartime heroism and celebrity to its lowest point. In fact, Modris Eksteins’s reading of World War I reveals a decline in military celebrity and an increase in celebrity among those working to promote the war through media. WWI was a war, according to Ecksteins, that ended “not with a bang, but a whimper” (253), referencing T.S. Eliot’s apocalyptic vision in “The Hollow Men.” The disappearance of the hero from the public sphere, including his or her replacement by a non-descript, massively disseminated “Hero” identity, began in the trenches. The 65 million of young soldiers mobilized to fight in WWI discovered that the Romantic notions of heroism taught to them in stories and in the classroom were lies.
(1930), the protagonist, Paul, walks down streets featured in the opening scenes of the film, streets that appear deserted in the absence of soldiers marching happily off to war. He sees the schoolroom window he looked out of when he decided to enlist and hears the same nationalist rhetoric falling upon the ears of the newest crop of students. Paul stops. There’s no mistaking it: the look on his face is one of anger and conviction. To emphasize this point, the camera pans left as Paul exits the scene to the right. Without breaking the shot, the teacher continues his speech and Paul enters the room. The teacher says, “You must speak to them. You must tell them what it means to serve your fatherland.” Paul holds back his anger. He looks upon the students with pity. He doesn’t know if he should expose his true feelings: “I can’t tell you anything you don’t know. We live in the trenches out there. We fight. We try not to be killed. Sometimes we are. That’s all.” Since this description is devoid of propaganda, the teacher attempts to get more out of Paul. Once again, the pressure builds until the war veteran bursts with conviction, speaking for all veterans lured into war under false pretenses. Paul turns toward the teacher and exclaims,

I’ve been there! I know what it’s like … You still think it’s beautiful and sweet to die for your country don’t you? Well, we used to think you knew. The first bombardment taught us better. It’s dirty and painful to die for your country. When it comes to dying for your country, it’s better not to die at all. There are millions out there dying for their countries and what good is it?

The children become audibly concerned at this point; one calls him a coward. Paul replies that it is much easier to say “go and die” than to “watch it happen,” exiting the room, claiming he will go back to the front “tomorrow” because “he can’t stand it” in his hometown. Because of his imminent death, Paul speaks from the vantage of a ghost, representing all of those who died in the war. As a ghost, his proximity to death and
combat cannot be questioned. This vantage enables him to break down barriers to the narrative-making process: accusations of cowardice, stigma, and other resistances. Paul does not have to prove himself through hard work and principles. He does not have to prove himself by overcoming the symptoms of shell-shock. He channels the voice of those who perished and encourages those who will listen to learn from those who survived. In place of gallantry, power, and agency WWI was only death (millions dead on both sides), the mechanization of death (technology replaces battlefield prowess), and new ways of experiencing death (poison gas, barbed wire, and tracer rounds, to name a few), which robbed the individual soldier of the right to achieve heroic status.31

And for the disillusioned veterans who returned home, as well as for the civilians who interacted with them, cared for them, and tried to understand their wounds, war began to lose the appeal it held in Ancient Rome: “The old catchwords—freedom, dignity, justice—simply rang hollow. Even arguments relating to what had been averted by the war, as opposed to what had been achieved, offered little sustenance in relation to the sacrifice. Best not to ask such questions. Commemorate, yes; think, no” (Eksteins 254). This is a marked difference from Braudy’s description in the previous sections. Specifically, war is less “a purifying crucible” (Chivalry to Terrorism 29) than a carefully

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31 Lew Ayres, the actor who portrays Paul in All Quiet on the Western Front, a character distinguished by his innate sensitivity and abhorrence of war, became a notable anti-war figure after appearing in the film. Lesley L. Coffin’s Lew Ayres: Hollywood's Conscientious Objector (2012) references newspapers circulated around the start of WW2 which claimed “that it was the experience of making this film that led him to oppose all forms of violence and particularly war” (ix). Lew, after serving in a labor camp, would spend three-and-a-half years as a noncombatant in the Medical Corps. He became a Chaplain’s assistant, “a jack of all trades, and available to the men to simply talk, listen, and help them both medically and emotionally” (131). In 1942, he served in a relief hospital, treating children with “bullet holes in them” (128). News of Lew’s service in New Guinea connected his actual wartime duties with the Paul character and when victory was declared in Japan “Lew finally returned home, a war hero” (133).
orchestrated scam, a cull perpetrated against the poor and disenfranchised. And so Eksteins describes a situation familiar to this writer: A society which glorifies war despite a lack of veterans willing to attest to the glory which can be found there. Remember, it is the courage to serve which sets recruits apart from their peers. So, in the absence of real heroes, either because they died while committing acts of valor, or because they remain silent in an effort to prevent the appropriation of their stories, the “Hero” stereotype functions in the American unconscious as a primary symbol of veteran identity. In the end, there’s but one way civilians and profiteers keep the war industry booming: Call all veterans “Heroes” and be done with it.

Figure 2: Paul confronts his teacher in All Quiet on the Western Front.
Defining the Hero

Jay Winter argues that WWI altered an ongoing conversation about “memory” taking place in the early twentieth century. As new social collectives became carriers/transmitters of memory, Winter claims, victims and protestors joined the ranks of heroes, laying claim to wartime remembrances in “memory booms,” or the formation of groups whose solidarity was rooted in the perpetuation of common narratives. Eksteins and Winter recognize a fundamental shift in the way the world perceives war after WWI. But despite ample evidence—from war authors, clinicians, and law enforcement—that a terrible sin had been inflicted upon the generation which shouldered the burdens of the Great War, war itself only became more entrenched. It is written into our language, our basic ways of relating from one human to another, and into every sector of capitalist society. As Peter Karsten’s Encyclopedia of War and American Society (2005) explains,

> The intensity of war itself produces changes in language. Militaries use euphemisms to cover the true horror of war. Thus a man accidentally killed by a comrade is a victim of friendly fire. Civilians accidentally killed are collateral damage. Dead soldiers are wasted or lost. In cases where language offers no terms at all to describe new phenomena, soldiers invent them. The intentional killing of one’s own officers in Vietnam became to be known as fragging, a reference to the fragmentation grenades used in such incidents. Soldiers also use language to reveal their own image of themselves. Soldiers have often described themselves in animalistic terms, reflecting their close-to-nature existences and the general indifference with which they often feel civilians treat them. Thus soldiers call themselves

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32 Winter elaborates on the topic of “memory booms” in Remembering War (2006), “For some the memory boom is nostalgic, a yearning for a vanished or rapidly vanishing world. For others it is a language of protest, seeking out solidarities based on common narratives and traditions to resist the pressures and seductions of globalization. For others still it is a means of moving away from politics, and of resacralizing the world, or of preserving the voice of victims of the multiple catastrophes of the last century. And for some, it is a way of confronting the Holocaust at the very moment which survivors are steadily passing away. To capture their voices, their faces, and, through them, to establish a bridge to the world of European Jewry which the Nazis succeeded in destroying, is a major agenda fueling the contemporary memory boom” (19).
“grunts” or “dog faces” and they wear “dog tags.” They eat “slop” in a “mess hall” and, when not in a “fox hole,” they sleep in a “pup tent.” (412)

Notably, the examples provided by Karsten describe soldiers in “animalistic,” subjugated ways. In particular, soldiers are subjugated by two parties: civilians and officers. War, or more accurately, the skill with which Americans wage war, is written into the doctrine of American exceptionalism. Children learn a language in which soldiers are subjugated by design. In fact, their subjugation becomes a source of pride, and as I have shown, a source of agency. There is no one left—civilian or veteran—who is not either beholden to the security war provides or the chaos it causes.

Winter’s delineations between the types of memory associated with remembering war will be useful when interpreting the claims which follow. Specifically, Winter defines “memory” as “the product of a multitude of impulses, drawn together in the form of a collage, or approximation of a past event” (4). I, too, presume memory fallible but it is not my aim to reshape others’ approximations of war to more closely resemble my own. Winter defines “collective memory” as “not the memory of large groups,” but rather, it “is the process through which different collectives, from groups of two to groups in their thousands, engage in acts of remembrance together” (4). Winter continues, “It is no longer the generals and admirals, or even the soldiers and sailors, who dominate the story of war. It is the victims, more and more of whom have been civilians” (6). Perhaps, Winter’s reading explains some of my own disillusionment. I often feel as though I am writing to a specific subset of veterans. In particular, my readings are mostly concerned with enlisted men and women and those afflicted with war trauma. I feel that this emphasis on the “common man or woman” is a necessary addition to war scholarship. In
my estimation, access to forms of power which allow veterans to share their stories is impeded by class, by a form of privilege which precedes participating in war. Military officers always begin with a college education, with the tools and foresight needed to record their experiences, but also access to networks through which to promote their stories. The enlisted soldier, by contrast, begins learning these skills after military service, once he or she has enrolled in college, and must find or create new communities in which to craft veteran identity.

I feel the perspectives of both military officers and enlisted troops have value, as do the perspectives of civilians victimized by war. However, the perspectives of enlisted men and women, especially those afflicted by traumas which make recounting war difficult, are underrepresented. Perhaps, I am trying to improve upon the “collective memory” shared within veterans’ communities. Michael Rossington’s “Collective Memory” argues that “‘individual’ turns out to be inseparable from ‘collective’ remembrance. Moreover, collective memory occupies an important function, distinct from history, in conceiving of a society’s past” (134). So, my claims are not historical. Rather, they are rooted in the symbolic function I have attributed to veterans. Veterans, I have claimed, function symbolically as repositories for memories of war. And this function is possible through their exclusion in “conceiving of society’s past” as it relates to war.

Society’s memories and understandings of war differ from that of veterans. I have provided example after example of veterans disillusioned with war. Despite these examples, patriotic discourse positions the military “Hero” on a “moral high ground,” but
minus the right to self-definition which should accompany such a position. Further, as Jay Winter claims,

It is the struggle against forgetting, mediated in a host of ways in social practices, in literature and the arts. It is not only that much of the violent history of the twentieth century is intrinsically worth remembering, but rather that those who died or who were injured can so easily be forgotten. A painting or a poem may defer oblivion a bit, but most of those whose works we survey were well aware of the quixotic nature of their enterprise. What photographs, or plays, or poems, or letters provide are traces of a world that has almost vanished from both memory and history. The memory boom, therefore, may be understood as an act of defiance, an attempt to keep alive at least the names and images of the millions whose lives have been truncated or disfigured by war. (12)

It never felt that the 500+ works of veteran prose, poetry, artwork, and scholarship I curated as Editor-in-Chief of Military Experience and the Arts were parts of “quixotic” enterprise. My philosophy, which I am expanding upon in this dissertation, held that I could harness patriotic rhetoric and false perceptions of veterans long enough to get the attention of civilians. Once they were willing to listen, I yanked down the curtain, exposing our readers to uncensored, often graphic representations of war that our editorial board felt was a closer approximation of the real thing. My philosophy was based on the belief that, symbolically, veterans function as repositories for memories of war, keeping those memories secret so that they might exist comfortably within the confines of stereotypes. We provided a platform from which veterans could share alternative worldviews. Our storytellers transformed themselves from repositories to educators, destabilizing the symbolic function of the veteran and stereotypes of veterans at the same time.

With regard to the gendered analysis of veteran identity presented in this chapter, I am challenging the hierarchies which result from experiencing war, claiming that all
perspectives are valid, and that the notion of experiencing or witnessing death as a “rite of passage” is a rhetorical construct meant to serve the state, not veterans. I’m trying to “keep alive” the memories and perspectives of veterans otherwise shut out of the project of defining veteran identity. So far, I have examined historical conceptions of war and military heroism, the relationship between gender and veteran identity, and I have attempted to describe the hierarchies of “Heroes” created and maintained by patriotic rhetoric. In the following section, I examine real heroes, Medal of Honor recipients whose actions clearly indicate superior moral courage. These examples are exceptional. They represent actual accomplishments. And, often, the reality of wartime heroism conflicts with the needs of patriotic rhetoric.

**Extreme Heroism among Medal of Honor Recipients**

Several Medal of Honor recipients are discussed in this section, including one whose “Heroic Moment” lasts only a few seconds; another’s the length of a half-day gun battle; while the final veteran’s “Heroic Moment” includes behaviors and actions performed over a period of years spent in captivity. Did the last recipient’s actions equate to heroism only when considered cumulatively? Or, did the veteran who received the award for a single action in a single moment perform a more impressive feat? Awarding any medal for valor seems a subjective decision. Otherwise, lesser awards—Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, or ribbons which connote valor—would not exist. No, some heroes are

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33 According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, “The Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force which can be bestowed upon an individual serving in the Armed Services of the United States. Generally presented to its recipient by the President of the United States of America in the name of Congress” (Congressional).
more heroic than others. And when dealing with the most recent generation of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, some “Heroes” are not heroes at all.

By definition, a hero is a “man (or occas. a woman) of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; esp. one regarded as semi-divine and immortal” (OED). Heroes physically, mentally, and morally transcend human limitations in their “Heroic Moments.” The duration of a “Heroic Moment” corresponds to the duration of a threat. Afterwards, an official account, or “Heroic Narrative,” emerges from the tales of those who witnessed the hero’s feat. This narrative may highlight one instance or the cumulative effects of many instances of heroism to tell a single story.

Sergeant Alvin C. York is probably the most famous Medal of Honor recipient. He was born in 1887 in Pall Mall, Tennessee, and drafted into the Army where he served with the 82nd Infantry Division in WWI. The film detailing his exploits, Sergeant York (1941), stars Gary Cooper, Walter Brennan, and Joan Leslie. As David D. Lee explains in Sergeant York: An American Hero (1985),

York’s value as a symbol went far beyond his contributions as a citizen or soldier. He came to prominence at a time when the United States was reeling from the impact of the Industrial Revolution, a profound social and economic force that had changed a nation of agricultural villages into a great world power. In such uncertain times, York’s pioneer-like skill with a rifle, homespun manner, and fundamentalist piety endeared him to millions of Americans as a kind of “contemporary ancestor” fresh from the backwoods of Appalachia. As such, he seemed to affirm that the traditional virtues of agrarian America still had meaning in the new era. Furthermore, York’s victory over what was then the most deadly emblem of the machine age, the machine gun, represented for many the final supremacy of man over the instruments of destruction he had created. Thus, both York’s personality and his achievement were balm for the anxieties that gripped American society in the troubled months after the Armistice. (1)
If anything, it is York’s humility, his “fundamentalist piety” which endears him to audiences of the film bearing his name. York’s class is the primary component of his intersectional identity. He eschews military masculinity, which ingratiates him to audiences of military veterans and nonveterans alike by emphasizing a common humanity. Described as “the big lanky fellow, fourth from the end” among a trench of enlisted troops digging a ditch early in the film, York is reported to his commanding officer as a “conscientious objector.” This fact worries his leaders, at least until a later scene in which he displays his prowess with a rifle.

York’s marksmanship is put to the test. And bullseye after bullseye at the firing range impresses his instructors. York comments, “I reckon that there gun shoots a mite to the right,” even as he excels at the task. “Where’d you learn to shoot, York?” another soldier asks. “I ain’t never learned, Sergeant. Folks back home used to say I could shoot before I was weened. But they was exaggerating some,” York explains to laughter. York is presented as humble, exceptionally talented, and unaware. I’ve described military masculinity as a gender-based performance. York doesn’t perform. He is the military man; and as the movie progresses, others begin to mimic York’s behavior and look up to him for reasons other than rank.

In the next scene, York moves from trainee to trainer, teaching those in his unit how to pick out a target among “a flock of wild turkeys.” It doesn’t take long for the audience to realize that York’s demeanor—his accent, lack of knowledge about lands existing beyond the hills of Tennessee, his humility—are not, in fact, signs of simplicity or ignorance, but rather, evidence of forgotten knowledge, an untapped, essentially American quality described above by Lee. Later in the film, when York famously
captures a German trench, he does it without displaying fear, explaining to his superior officer, “You done give me command,” as he climbs over cowering and dead soldiers to make his advance. His Medal of Honor Award citation explains,

> After his platoon had suffered heavy casualties and 3 other noncommissioned officers had become casualties, Cpl. York assumed command. Fearlessly leading 7 men, he charged with great daring a machinegun nest which was pouring deadly and incessant fire upon his platoon. In this heroic feat the machinegun nest was taken, together with 4 officers and 128 men and several guns. (“York, Alvin C.”)

In many ways, York’s simplicity is his greatest source of strength. His unwillingness to perform a hyper-masculinity character allows him to account for the unexpected, for the realities of war not discussed patriotic discourse. For example, in the film, York uses a turkey call to distract the Germans closing in on him. One by one, as York disposes of the German soldiers, he says, “Just like a flock of turkeys.” It’s an almost comical scene until one stops to consider the moral implications. York must liken German soldiers to turkeys in order to kill them. The dehumanization helps him become a more effective killer. At the end of the scene, the Germans raise a white flag, signaling their surrender, and York emerges as one of war’s greatest heroes.

> “Heroic Moments,” like the one explained in the example of York above, is a prerequisite to two of three types of heroism. The first, *The Sacrificing Hero*, is an individual who may not display superhuman abilities like York, but one with a willingness to give his or her life for others, a trait indicative of superior *moral* courage. A popular conception of *The Sacrificing Hero* is a scene often repeated as a trope in both cinema and actual combat: a hidden enemy throws a grenade into a patrol of five soldiers; four of the five soldiers are paralyzed by fear; the remaining soldier sees the threat, makes a conscious decision, and throws himself onto the grenade, blunting the impact of
the blast and saving his or her friends. A recent example of this sort of action can be found in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). In the film, a “skinny” Steve Rogers is conducting group exercise at a training site before he gets his superpowers. A superior officer, played by Tommy Lee Jones, compares Rogers negatively to a larger, more accomplished soldier, saying, “You win wars with guts,” tossing a fake grenade into the group of soldiers. Every other soldier runs. But Rogers, jumping on the grenade, yells, “Get away!” Indeed, a recurring theme in the *Captain America* films is Rogers’ innate morality, his willingness to sacrifice. These traits come second to his superpowers.

Importantly, *Sacrificing Heroes* risk death even when they know the odds of survival are low. Kyle Carpenter might have watched films or heard stories about *Sacrificing Heroes* growing up. In 2010, on a rooftop in Afghanistan, he threw himself on a grenade to save a friend. Among his wounds were a fractured skull, shattered bones in his right arm, a perforated lung, two ruptured eardrums, loss of use of his right eye, shrapnel in his lower legs, and the loss of most of his bottom teeth. As of this writing Carpenter has undergone more than 40 surgeries (Miller, *CBS News*). Almost four years after his “Heroic Moment,” he received the nation’s highest medal for valor, the Medal of Honor: “I’m totally fine knowing that I gave part of myself to a bigger purpose and a bigger cause, to not only serve my country but try to make a better way of life for other people and much less fortunate people,” Carpenter later told reporters (qtd. in Miller). Internet search results change over time, but for this writer an initial search for Carpenter’s name ranked two results nearly as popular as the tale of his heroism. The first narrative tells the story of a Marine turned college student, one known for competing in grueling endurance challenges—even skydiving into sporting events (Bongioanni). In
In fact, Carpenter demonstrates how heroes must sublimate woundedness in order to maintain the appearance of “Heroism” in their postwar lives. Unfortunately, the narrative woven around Carpenter reduces him to an adrenaline-junkie caricature. More precisely, the narrative argues that Carpenter’s trauma—his woundedness, is not enough to keep him down. It never was. Something about his character prevents it.

In Sergeant York, it is York’s innate qualities, the derivatives of his life in the hills of Tennessee, even his instinctual aversion to war that underscores his heroic qualities. Mark Straw, however, believes that the myth of innate heroism is a “raced, gendered and sexualized form of hegemonic power in contemporary American culture [that] attempts to project the idea of itself as a victim, when the truth of the matter is that
it is a victimizer par excellence” (135). Straw’s premise would charge that the character of Sergeant Alvin C. York is portrayed as simple only to deemphasize his prowess as a killer. This myth of innate heroism is seldom challenged. On closer examination, myriad factors create a “Heroic Moment”: training, mental health, adrenaline, to name a few. The most important prerequisite for a “Heroic Moment,” however, is chance. A hero cannot emerge without a friend to save or a threat to neutralize, but this fact is quickly forgotten and Romantic stories about integrity and personal courage take its place. The myth of innate heroism ignores the circumstances mitigating heroic action, suggesting that heroes are born, not made. At least, that’s the story told to the generation tasked with fighting the next war. Veterans, civilians, recruiters, and history books don’t tell children that they can become heroes. They’re told that they’re already heroes; war simply allows innate heroism to rise to the surface. Maintaining this myth—Wilfred Owen’s “old Lie,” which I have cited repeatedly in this dissertation—is precisely the symbolic role “Heroes” occupy in their postwar lives. Real heroes are pressured to perform veteran identity in a way which conforms to the “Hero” stereotype. Stereotypes do not undermine the symbolic function of the veteran as a repository for memories of war. As a stereotype, the veteran’s memories are unspoken, his or her wounds unexplained, intentionally vague so that onlookers are free to perceive veterans in whatever way they see fit.

The other narrative surrounding Carpenter relies on a combination of photo-driven pieces depicting the veteran’s wounds and vaguely written articles about a misdemeanor hit-and-run charge which occurred well after his military exploits in 2015 (Howell). Heroes like Carpenter live in a state of constant performance, beating back those who would paint them as victims by living a life which defies victimization
narratives. It is impossible to say whether or not such performativity is an intrinsic desire of heroes like Carpenter. Most likely, heroes do not realize that attention and fanfare are little more than an attempt to assign them symbolic roles. Any veteran called a “Hero”—regardless of whether or not that title is earned—exists at the center of a war of appropriation waged by military and civilian cultures: “Scripts of American national identity therefore, through this repression give rise to mythical constructions of Americanness. This mythical construction of American national identity is strongly constituted on performances and ideas of masculinity” (Straw 129). Skydiving into a sporting event counters the hit-and-run story. Marathons counter photographs of Carpenter’s wounds. It’s not clear if Carpenter is actively using mass media to shape his public image, or if mass media is using Carpenter to shape America’s public image. Constantly reminding heroes of what was likely the most traumatic period of their lives certainly contradicts calls for “reassimilation.” In place of reassimilation, for veterans like Kyle Carpenter, a “bigger purpose and a bigger cause” is readily available, and it could be that heroes seek out the appropriating effects of a spotlight because it is preferable to suffering alone in obscurity.

Some veterans never get a chance to experience appropriation. They never get a chance to suffer alone. Donald Cook is an example of a Sacrificing Hero who earned the MOH posthumously as a Prisoner of War (POW). In fact, he remains the first and only

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34 Donald Cook’s entire MOH citation reads: “For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while interned as a Prisoner of War by the Viet Cong in the Republic of Vietnam during the period 31 December 1964 to 8 December 1967. Despite the fact that by so doing he would bring about harsher treatment for himself, Colonel (then Captain) Cook established himself as the senior prisoner, even though in actuality he was not. Repeatedly assuming more than his share of their health, Colonel Cook willingly and unselfishly put the interests of his comrades
Marine to receive the award as a POW. His award citation is a harrowing tale of deprivation at the hands of the Viet Cong, one in which he “establishe[s] himself as the senior prisoner” (despite not actually being the senior prisoner, suggesting that Cook’s immediate superior in captivity was either unable or unwilling to lead), gives “needy men his medicine and drug allowance,” and “refuse[s] to stray even the slightest from the Code of Conduct.” Cook’s sacrifices eventually cost him his life. His “Heroic Moment” lasts the duration of his imprisonment: 31 December 1964 to 8 December 1967. But his award was not presented to his family until 1980. Cook’s MOH was likely a comfort to his family. And maybe it righted some wrong recorded in America’s official history. But is there a valid excuse for such a lengthy delay?

Mostly, belated awards are given only after some racial or social injustice is highlighted as the cause of the delay. For example, President Obama awarded the Medal of Honor to “24 Army veterans, most of them Hispanic or Jewish, who were passed over for the nation’s highest military award because of their race or ethnicity” in 2014 (Southall 1). In this way, heroism gets appropriated as a salve to treat inequality in the
civilian world. *Sacrificing Heroes* like Kyle Carpenter and Donald Cook display very different forms of heroism, but both make conscious decisions to give of themselves.

*The Attacking Hero*, the second of three types of heroism, may not be willing to make the same sacrifices. Instead, he or she displays superhuman abilities in an *offensive* manner, *saving the day*. Dakota Meyer is a case in point.35 Meyer, after being ambushed by “more than 50 enemy fighters,” ignores incoming fire and puts himself at great risk, killing some enemies “at near point blank range” on three trips that saw the rescue of two dozen Afghan soldiers. Even Meyer’s wounds do not stop him from leaving the security of his gunner's hatch to “find and recover the bodies of his team members.” Carpenter,

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35 Dakota Meyer’s entire MOH citation reads: “[M]aintained security at a patrol rally point while other members of his team moved on foot with two platoons of Afghan National Army and Border Police into the village of Ganjgal for a pre-dawn meeting with village elders. Moving into the village, the patrol was ambushed by more than 50 enemy fighters firing rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and machine guns from houses and fortified positions on the slopes above. Hearing over the radio that four U.S. team members were cut off, Corporal Meyer seized the initiative. With a fellow Marine driving, Corporal Meyer took the exposed gunner's position in a gun-truck as they drove down the steeply terraced terrain in a daring attempt to disrupt the enemy attack and locate the trapped U.S. team. Disregarding intense enemy fire now concentrated on their lone vehicle, Corporal Meyer killed a number of enemy fighters with the mounted machine guns and his rifle, some at near point blank range, as he and his driver made three solo trips into the ambush area. During the first two trips, he and his driver evacuated two dozen Afghan soldiers, many of whom were wounded. When one machine gun became inoperable, he directed a return to the rally point to switch to another gun-truck for a third trip into the ambush area where his accurate fire directly supported the remaining U.S. personnel and Afghan soldiers fighting their way out of the ambush. Despite a shrapnel wound to his arm, Corporal Meyer made two more trips into the ambush area in a third gun-truck accompanied by four other Afghan vehicles to recover more wounded Afghan soldiers and search for the missing U.S. team members. Still under heavy enemy fire, he dismounted the vehicle on the fifth trip and moved on foot to locate and recover the bodies of his team members. Corporal Meyer's daring initiative and bold fighting spirit throughout the 6-hour battle significantly disrupted the enemy's attack and inspired the members of the combined force to fight on. His unwavering courage and steadfast devotion to his U.S. and Afghan comrades in the face of almost certain death reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.”
Cook, and Meyer all risk their lives. All three make conscious decisions to act when others might have given into fear. But Meyer’s actions, like York’s, are a chance meeting of skill and opportunity. His “Heroic Moment” is a “6-hour battle [that] significantly disrupted the enemy's attack and inspired the members of the combined force to fight on.” The moral authority that Attacking Heroes yield to Sacrificing Heroes, should one fall into the trap of creating a hierarchy, is compensated for by their physical and mental prowess in the heat of battle.

Audie Murphy, the most decorated U.S. soldier to serve in WWII, wrote a memoir and starred in a film adaptation of his exploits, To Hell and Back (1955). His individual story was amplified through its recreation and distribution as cinema, and it further cemented the legacy of “The Greatest Generation,” or that group of “Heroes” which rid the world of Nazis in WW2. Dakota Meyer, by contrast, had a ghost writer and was accused of exaggeration. The forces of appropriation move quickly upon heroes. In fact, in the moment after the first telling of a hero’s story, the hero and the “Heroic Narrative” begin to exist apart. As Meyer’s individuality crept into the larger societal narrative forming around him, he became mired in controversy. Subsequent developments in the life of Dakota Meyer reveal that he struggled with PTSD, alcoholism, and suicidal ideation even during the initial fanfare surrounding his receipt of the MOH. Meyer’s current focus is on raising awareness about these issues and helping veterans find employment, causes which may be more heroic than the symbolic role conferred upon him. Can a veteran become a hero after war? What if he or she misses the chance but still possesses that innate, heroic quality? There’s nothing to suggest
otherwise. In fact, Meyer’s work helping veterans after leaving military service is
evidence of the altruistic nature I attribute to veterans throughout this dissertation.

*Enduring Heroes,* the third and most prolific variation on “Hero” identity found in
the twenty-first century, are a recent invention. They have no need for a “Heroic
Moment.” Colloquially, and functionally, an *Enduring Hero* is simply a veteran. *That’s
it.* They are the individuals civilians refer to as “Our Nation’s Heroes,” as though every
high-schooler capable of etching his or her name onto an enlistment contract instantly
transforms into the embodiment of human courage. They’re the “Heroes” clapped
anonymously in airports. After service, only the most damning of evidence can disqualify
a veteran from enjoying *Enduring Hero* status: a “dishonorable” discharge, crime, or
particularly visible addiction. But the most peculiar thing about *Enduring Heroes* isn’t
their anonymity. The strange thing about *Enduring Heroes* is that they never do anything
*heroic.*

I believe Enduring Heroes gain their “Hero” statuses as a roundabout social
recognition of the altruism and proclivity for leadership found among veterans. However,
altruism is not synonymous with heroism. An *Enduring Hero*’s award citation might read
something like this:

Meritorious service while serving as a heavy wheel vehicle operator,
convoy protection platform gunner, and team leader during Operation
Iraqi Freedom III. Your skills and courage enabled you to contribute
significantly to successful combat operations.

The above citation is from the Army Commendation Medal I received after returning
from my second deployment to Iraq in 2005. It is the sort of award referred to by veterans
as a “wartime award,” which is another way of saying, “This is what I got for showing
up.” It lists my responsibilities, attaching words like “courage” to make me sound braver
than I am. Driving large trucks requires skill. A machine gunner’s hatch is a dangerous place to sit. And “Team Leaders” must care for their soldiers. But skill, danger, or responsibility do not equal heroism. From January 15 to December 24, 2005, I never experienced a “Heroic Moment.” I *endured* indirect gunfire and several IED blasts. But I did not sacrifice “life or limb” to save friends. I never responded offensively in any exceptional way. As the award states, I “contributed.”

I am not a hero. I am not ashamed of this fact. But many veterans are. Never experiencing a “Heroic Moment” is not a detriment to a veteran’s character. Being *called* a “Hero” when you know you more closely resemble a “perpetrator” or “survivor” is *more* damaging. I can’t even call myself a “servant.” I was paid. War boiled down to *perpetrating* and *surviving* violence. Existing within close proximity to that violence were *Sacrificing and Attacking Heroes*, not those like me: those who *endured*.

![Figure 4: Dakota Meyer receiving the MOH from President Barack Obama.](Photo from Associated Press)
Classically, there are two kinds of heroes: Sacrificing Heroes, like Kyle Carpenter or Donald Cook, make a conscious decision to give up personal safety and/or wellbeing in order to save others. Attacking Heroes, such as Alvin York or Dakota Meyer, make a difference offensively. Enduring Heroes, like me, are far more common because the only requirement is to “contribute” to the war effort. “Heroes” in this last category never experience a “Heroic Moment,” and because there’s no proof or evidence required to achieve “Hero” status in contemporary America, the “Heroic Narratives” of Enduring Heroes are viewed monolithically. Veterans, as Enduring Heroes, exist unanchored from such pivotal moments and memories, from the past as well as the present. Any trouble with reassimilation experienced by Enduring Heroes—troubles I have heard referred to as “the growing divide between military and civilian cultures” must be caused, in part, by the “Hero’s” inability to recall personal acts of heroism. In short, Enduring Heroes must remain silent in order to enjoy the “Hero Treatment”; otherwise the truth of uneventful or mediocre service disrupts the flow of patriotic rhetoric. Patriotism needs veterans to serve as exceptional examples.

Any veteran can exist as “Hero” in the American unconscious if he or she is willing to remain silent. But this stereotyping leads to a feeling among those who seriously consider war and its effects that real heroes do not exist. For years after my discharge I dealt with this “Hero Treatment” in one of two ways:

1) I passively accepted the title of “Hero” and became complicit in the denigration of real heroes, relegating my military experiences to the role of a backdrop in a play about “Heroes” defined most by its superficiality; or,

2) I existed in a state of constant conflict, personally rebuking civilian attempts to confer “Hero” status upon self and others. For example, after hearing the words “Thank You For Your Service,” I often chose
as replies “You’re Welcome,” “No Problem,” or “Any Time” to emphasize the irony of the situation.

These situations were ironic because those praising me knew nothing about what I did in uniform. Yet, for whatever reason, they were exceedingly thankful. My responses, for whatever reason, almost always result in nervous laughter, but only because they reflect the triviality with which civilians regard the dangers of military service. To be called a “Hero” is to feel like the opposite. Therapists blamed these confrontations on the anger associated with PTSD. But the problem wasn’t only what I perceived. If any of my guilt was deserved, then all of my anger was warranted. Civilians devalue the service of any veteran called a “Hero.” The act ignores the individual. It claims that his or her memories and experiences are not sufficient for the public narrative. It’s insulting.

Contemporary logic suggests that veterans are “Heroes” and heroes—well, they’re “Heroes,” too. The next section relies on a Depression-era film because it depicts veterans during a time when war heroes and veterans were separate entities. This distinction—acknowledging that military service does not equate to heroism, is necessary to explore the consequences of separating heroes from their heroism through appropriation. The “Heroic Narrative,” by its very nature, can exist only if memories of the “Heroic Moment” are translated and shared by others. It is at this juncture—during the first telling of the hero’s story—where appropriation begins. Eventually, inaccuracies seep in and outside forces twist the narrative to suit their purposes. The hero barely recognizes as fiction replaces experience, as the “Heroic Narrative” replaces memory. Where memory once granted these veterans a well-spring of talent and experience, there is only a lack. The narratives veterans accept about themselves as “Wounded Warriors” and “Heroes” are devoid of nuance, and they are devoid of lessons. Both are victimizing.
The pain of loss and adversity is instructional. And without these lessons, the hero of the next section finds, postwar society is a difficult place to navigate.

**Heroes. For Sale?**

Tom Holmes, played by Richard Barthelmess, the protagonist of William A. Wellman’s film *Heroes for Sale* (1933), resembles the “Wounded Warrior” discussed in the next chapter. He returns home from WWI perpetually broken, battling the pain of physical and psychological wounds. With the help of a friend, Tom manages employment at a bank, but he loses the job as a result of a morphine addiction. Destitute, he is carried away to an asylum, all while holding onto a secret with the power to restore him to a station of privilege and respect. A central theme within the film is “misidentification,” and this theme is explored through the eyes of Tom, a returning veteran mistaken for a drug addict, criminal, even a communist during different stages of his homecoming.

![Figure 5: Tom Holmes receives morphine from a German doctor in *Heroes for Sale*.](image)
Tom’s secret? He’s not a “Wounded Warrior.” He is very much a hero; an
*Attacking Hero*, to be exact. He didn’t sustain those physical and psychological wounds while suffering *passively*. Quite the opposite; Tom is wounded while *heroically* and *singlehandedly* capturing an enemy position, similarly to the title character in *Sergeant York*, and it is a feat rendered even more gallant by Wellman’s juxtaposition of Roger Winston, played by Gorden Westcott, cowering in an adjacent trench. Tom becomes an “addict” in a German hospital bed; he is presumed dead while his friend is falsely celebrated for his heroism. It is Roger who receives credit for Tom’s “Heroic Moment.” It is Roger who bribes Tom into silence with a job at his father’s bank. Tom may appear perpetually broken, propped up by the pity of others, and *silent*. But *Heroes for Sale* shows how, in the case of war heroes, appearances can be deceiving. Tom is an example of a hero separated from his heroism by transforming heroic action into an abstraction.

The veteran’s experience, I have argued, has value to a society closed off from war, in need of inspiration and instruction on the topic of human resilience. But not everyone agrees. In 1936, W. B. Yeats refused to include the works of the trench poets in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. “He objected not to method but to subject,” claiming, “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry,” Fred Crawford observes in *British Poets of the Great War* (24). I include that information here because of the symbolic exchange it represents. British Great War poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves were also veterans who chose to use their respective platforms to register protests against war. However, when it came time for their works to be considered alongside literatures not devoted to the topic of war, W. B. Yeats refuses on grounds of
sophistication, reducing the experience of war to mere “passive suffering,” but also implying that war writers are somehow deficient, that the experience of war is not a means through which true knowledge can be attained.

Yeats wasn’t the only one to discriminate against veterans after WWI. To return home wounded was to appear effeminate, or weak. Caroline Cox argues that early clinical descriptions of war neuroses were influenced by the invisible hands of sexuality and gender. Cox finds few mentions of “hysteria” in her research of medical literature from the period, but the author’s research does reveal that shell shock’s definitions were largely derived from researchers interested in women and hysteria, as the condition was understood in Sigmund Freud’s work. Otherwise, shell shock became censored consciously and unconsciously in the public sphere (288). Tom Holmes would have returned home to an environment hostile toward “broken” or “damaged” veterans. In many ways, he is discriminated against based on his gender, based on his inability to perform military masculinity, but also because his knowledge is derived from experience.

To survive, Tom must recognize the unseen forces shaping others’ perceptions. In one scene, he is berated by Roger’s father over the truth concerning his morphine addiction: “I wonder if you realize what this does to my standing in the community. After 25 years of public confidence, I find myself with a drug addict in my employ. A drug addict handling the depositors’ money. An employee of mine with this loathsome, cowardly habit. I can’t understand it.” The *dirty little secret* of Tom’s addiction is

36 For more information on hysteria and its relationship to psychological discourse throughout the nineteenth-and-twentieth centuries, read Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (1987). In particular, Showalter reveals how early psychiatric approaches to shell-shock were restrained by public perceptions of hysteria as a “feminine” illness, despite ample evidence that its symptoms corresponded with those of shell shock.
revealed, *except* that it is not the result of some “loathsome” or “cowardly” habit. Tom, well aware of the “Heroic Moment” which resulted in his wounds, sits angrily, wringing a rag, clutching the arms of his chair, scowling at the floor. Irony permeates the scene. The simple truth of Tom’s actions during the war would alter meaning, transforming his addiction into *just* another wound—his *wounds* into badges of courage. Tom recognizes for the first time exactly what Roger stole.

To be sure, much of Tom’s development as a character depends upon Wellman’s needs as a director. I have described an American public which welcomed veterans home, some with trepidation and fear concerning veterans’ mental illnesses, and others, like Yeats in British culture, with outright disrespect. Further, much of Wellman’s directorial decisions were determined by regional attitudes toward veterans and addiction. A series of letters between Warner Bros. executives and the Association of Motion Picture Producers (MPAA) reveals the work of censors in every step of creating *Heroes for Sale*. In March 1933 a letter from James Wingate, Director of Studio Relations for the MPAA, to Darryl Zanuck, the Warner Bros. producer at “the center of the studio system” (Gussow 2) who sent him the film’s script, the primary concerns were depictions of drug use. Wingate suggested that a scene in which “Tom tries to buy dope from a peddler” be cut entirely. Likewise, Wingate suggested, “It would be advisable never to mention the actual drug ‘morphine,’ as several censor boards are pretty consistent in deleting any such reference.” These references remain in the film, though it is not clear if they made it into the copies which were distributed regionally. In a complex movie about returning veterans’ struggles with addiction and misidentification, the primary concern of producers and censors was producing a socially acceptable film in as many regions as
possible. There were economic considerations which were more important than telling stories about veterans. Yes, Tom is a fictional character in the film. But I have shown examples of real veterans undergoing the same sort of manipulation: war stories stripped of their gore, war wounds made temporary, mental illness cured through school or the free market. Censor boards didn’t always get their way, but the practice of censorship exists today in different forms.

In May 1933, Wingate wrote J.L. Warner on behalf of the MPAA to express that the film was “satisfactory under the Code.” However, he anticipated concerns would arise from the various censorship boards overseeing the distribution of the film throughout North America:

From the standpoint of industry policy as well as official censorship, we feel somewhat concerned about the rather unfavorable and unsympathetic portrayal of police throughout the story. Although they are shown as acting strictly within their rights and in a manner which is entirely efficient, we are inclined to wonder whether there may not be some criticism of the fact that the general feeling in regard to the police is on the whole rather an antagonistic one. In view of the possibility of such an unfavorable reaction, we strongly suggest that wherever you can you trim the scenes in which the police are shown as overly officious and unfair in carrying out their duties. For instance, we believe that it would be wise to omit the scene in which the two detectives visit Tom after his release from prison and indicate that they are going to keep an eye on him and order him to get a job. In view of the fact that he is and has been entirely innocent of any wrong doing, the feeling of this scene is that the police are brutal and inclined to needlessly persecute the innocent.

Further, it would be wise to either shorten or omit entirely the action later on in which the detectives pounce on the two apparently innocent Italians and order them out of town. It is our belief that this portion of the story, especially in its relationship to the sequences which follow and show the unemployed being hounded by the sheriffs’ men in various communities is emphasized to the point where it may cause some difficulty, and for this reason we hope that you will give it very serious consideration.

With regard to official censorship, it is possible that some of the boards may object to the scene between Tom and the dope peddler outside the
bank, and it might be wise to shorten it as much as possible. Also, they will probably eliminate the expression, ‘son of a - ,’ which occurs in one of Tom’s lines. We suggest that it be cut.

References to Communism, police brutality, profanity, a nude drawing, and a lack of patriotic zeal are among the concerns raised by censorship boards in the New York, Pennsylvania, Ontario, Alberta, and Australia territories. Just because political boards objected to scenes did not mean that those scenes were automatically cut. In the version of the film which exists today, the riot scene includes absolute chaos: protestors hurling rocks at police; police firing into crowds; Tom’s wife struck in the head as police restrain him. In the next scene, Tom’s child is taken away as police officers linger in the doorway. Afterwards, Tom is sentenced to five years of “hard labor in a state penitentiary.” Different regions would have received different versions of the same film. In all versions, however, Tom Holmes remains pitted against the state, against decency, and for no fault of his own. The concerns expressed in the studio’s correspondence all indicate a preference for patriotic constructions of veteran identity over the truer-to-life example of Tom Holmes.

In October of the same year, the board in Quebec, Canada, officially objected to the last six words of one revealing statement: “Tom, that was a terrible thing that I, the way I – the way the old man and I made you suffer. And all because a medal and a couple of lousy ribbons.” In the end, this line also survives. It is a line which devalues military awards, suggesting that they’re not worth the horrors one must endure in order to earn them. It departs from patriotic rhetoric, reflecting the disillusionment with The Great War felt by society as a whole. Importantly, Tom retains the right to decide upon the meaning of his awards, his wounds, and his role in postwar society. But this right to self-definition
is permitted by the audience, not by the other characters or the country to which Tom returns. Even fictional veterans are subject to appropriation.

Tom discovers anger, as opposed to conviction or guilt, because the scene with Roger’s father finally causes him to realize what he lost along with his “Heroic Narrative.” Tom doesn’t understand that his story was appropriated by the same military which left him for dead. Roger can’t give it back. It’s too late for recompense at the end of the film, when Tom and Roger are both destitute, long after the war has ended, and after a series of deleterious life events and crimes. And there are more than a few clues—discomft accepting credit for Tom’s actions, pacing nervously in his father’s office—which suggest Roger might not have accepted credit for Tom’s “Heroic Moment” if it had not been forced upon him. Roger is more of a foil than an antagonist. Any anger directed at Roger by his former friend would be fruitless. Roger’s but a cog in a propaganda machine in need of exceptional examples. Tom, because of his addiction, could never serve as an exceptional example.

In the office scene with Roger’s father Tom is expected to sit idly by as his war narrative is written for him. Out of options, despised by one man in the room, harboring a terrible secret about the other, Tom can either conform or challenge the narratives that have been written about him. His testimony can transform the situation. However, and despite the truth of his wartime heroism, Tom turns to a victimization narrative to save face:

Whoa, wait a minute. How do you think I started taking that stuff? For fun or pleasure? Well I’ll tell you how. They gave it to me in a German

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For more on censorship and how it shaped individual and cultural perceptions of issues such as war, read Thomas Doherty’s *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema; 1930-1934* (1999).
hospital to keep me from going mad with pain. Pain. Agony. Continuing torture, day-after-day like a million ants eating me alive. Do you know what that means? No, you don’t. Because when I was being blown to bits you were sitting here safe and comfortable. And you’re still sitting here, in judgment.

Tom, unwilling to draw upon his “Heroic Narrative,” paints himself as something more closely resembling the “Wounded Warrior.” By occupying this privileged role of suffering, Tom places himself beyond the reproach of Roger’s father, a man who did not serve in WWI. And in so doing he perfectly illustrates the appeal of woundedness. Superficial understandings of war wounds and heroism enable Tom to exist in a liminal state between these two narratives. It is an example of a veteran trying to maximize his agency, one also present in the story of Bingo preceding this chapter.

The scene in the banker’s office manipulates an impulse, an urge to draw back the curtain and assert, finally, and for all to hear, “This man is a hero! Treat him accordingly.” If this discussion switches the tone of this chapter to something more spiritual, then it is by design. There’s an almost sacred obligation to recognize heroes. I say that this duty is sacred, as opposed to civic—like jury duty, voting, or picking up litter—because failure to recognize Tom as a hero says something about the character of the individual who remains silent. Roger paces nervously in his father’s office because he, too, feels the call of his sacred obligation. Roger’s failure reflects the audience’s own. He may have cowered nearby while Tom became a hero, but, in Roger’s mind, civilians didn’t fight at all. They cowered on the other side of an ocean. At least, this is the lie Roger tells himself to justify his actions. The “Heroic Narrative” Roger steals is a fiction. Wellman’s movie about hope does not rely on patriotic constructs. Instead, in the wake of The Great Depression Wellman portrays veterans such as Tom Holmes as one source of
salvation: honest, battle-tested, socially conscientious men who, despite the hardships imposed upon them, have not lost their faith in humanity.

![Figure 6: Shamed for addiction in *Heroes for Sale.*](image)

Tom is accosted for an unwanted addiction as Roger, who stole his war valor, paces nervously at the side in *Heroes for Sale.*

*Heroes for Sale* is relevant to a theory of veteran identity because it exposes heroism’s *precariousness.* Not only is Tom’s heroism something he can *lose,* it is something Roger appropriates in order to elevate himself within the eyes of the military, his father, and the larger community. In the hierarchy of military masculinity recognized in the preceding sections, Roger would have been elevated above his friend, claiming heroic feats in order to sit at that hierarchy’s pinnacle as a “Hero.” But Roger is not a real hero. In fact, his actions are dishonorable, not unlike his rich banker father’s actions: financial crimes leaving Roger and his family destitute. Roger merely occupies a symbolic role, and so it is fitting that he ends up destitute at the end of the film: poetic justice.
Roger, clinging to an unearned form of military masculinity, must bribe his friend into silence. Roger anticipates a callous homecoming (especially for cowards) because of his familiarity with his father, a man who clearly disdains “addicts” and veterans who can’t “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” and carry on after war. Back home, Roger enjoys the hegemonic privileges of military masculinity. He also enjoys the privilege of wealth afforded to him by his family. Most people, including his father, will never ask questions. They’ll praise Roger blindly and move on. Superficial interactions and a failure to consider war and homecoming critically keep both veterans from growing as characters. The “Hero Treatment” Roger enjoys is available to him only because he lacks the “cowardly” drug habit owned by Tom. But his status as a “Hero” is maintained by class, by an assumption which claims higher class equates to higher morals.

If heroism resembles American “grit” or “spirit” in *Heroes for Sale*, it is only because Wellman appropriates the trait for the needs of his civilian audience, and to the chagrin of veterans watching silently. Wellman’s heroism is uniquely “American.” He draws upon what I referred to briefly in this chapter as a “myth of innate heroism,” or the belief in the lie told to recruits, “it is the courage to serve which sets you apart from your peers.” These myths endear Tom Holmes to his audience. From there, the director paints a ravaged society, introducing Tom Holmes not as a hero or even a “Hero,” but as a pure soul taken advantage of by a calloused society. The film makes a simple argument: Tom Holmes is no different from the millions of Americans who lost their jobs and savings in an economic collapse. His devastation is their devastation. His appropriation is their appropriation. They all share the disadvantage of class.
In a society devastated by economic collapse Tom Holmes models heroic qualities which cinema scholar Philip Hanson recognizes as part of a search through “thirties global and national politics … [for] persons and strategies on which to model a response to the Depression” (40). Wellman, in the film, chooses the American WWI veteran as his “response.” The film ends with no less than a recitation of portions of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration address. In the scene, Tom preaches a uniquely “American” prosperity gospel, appearing to others as eccentric or perhaps in denial about his circumstances. But to the viewers, those who witnessed Tom’s “Heroic Moment,” it is a message delivered by a Christ-figure. It is innate goodness which propels Tom forward. He and Roger find themselves living side-by-side in a hobo village at the end of the film. Tom has given up all worldly possessions. His wife is dead. He has given up his child. Even without the grand speech the audience knows that Roger will continue on a dark path downward into despair and Tom—no matter disability, poverty, or secrecy—will emerge as the hero he was always destined to become. As a real hero, Tom could barely function. The reality of his addiction, combined with appropriation of Tom’s heroism by Roger, as much as a social climate which treats addicts as weak, feminine, and inferior all combine to set the protagonist at odds with the society to which he returns. Today, as fewer and fewer real heroes return home from war, a product of decreased mortality rates, decreased numbers of troops mobilized, and the disappearance of “the front lines” in combat, “Heroes” are taking their place. Wellman tried to warn us about the dangers of misidentifying heroes and cowards. Now, society ignores such warnings, up to and including those provided by veterans themselves.
Recruiters and Skull Tattoos

Gone were the days of enlistment bonuses, guaranteed duty stations, and picking your job when I took Josh to the recruitment station. Those benefits were commonplace when I enlisted, as the Afghanistan War heated up and talk was leading to an invasion of Iraq. No, Josh turned eighteen and sought out the military at a time when massive cuts to the number of active service members were already underway. “The military is only taking the best and the brightest these days,” one recruiter told us. What did that make the people I’d served with? Fortunately, there were a number of subpar jobs with no incentives that needed filling. Maybe, if Josh was lucky, he could scrape by. Promise one thing, deliver another: I wondered how many kids fell for that trick each day. Perhaps the recruiters were more generous with the number of bonuses and the amount of choices given to each recruit as the deadline for their quotas got closer.

Josh had all but settled on the Navy when I took him to see the Army recruiter. “Never hurts to explore your options,” I told him. The recruiter we met was a Staff Sergeant. His uniform told me he’d deployed multiple times, earned multiple awards, and performed in such a way that the Army thought it befitting to assign him to the public sphere. From his crisp haircut to his perfectly creased uniform and massive stack of ribbons, the Staff Sergeant appeared the consummate soldier. But one thing was off: His short sleeves. Specifically, tattooed lines of skulls wrapping around his arms didn’t fit the usual recruiter’s office decorum: flags, motivational posters, tracking boards, pictures of local high school legends living exciting lives in exotic locations on the government’s dime.
Skulls. Death. Pain. That’s what I read on his arms. His black metal bracelet told the rest of the story. It was an item that became popular just as I was leaving active duty: A simple, tin bracelet bent around the wrist, painted black, engraved with the names of friends lost in battle. Looking a little closer, I could see inscriptions near skulls tattooed on his arm. I couldn’t read them. But there were other things to read: “Red eyes. Messy hair. But his uniform is so perfect,” I thought to myself. It felt like the crisp and clean image of the soldier perpetuated by the military was doing battle with a veteran who knew better. He spoke the words of a recruiter. But the sum of the message he delivered painted a more nuanced story of military life.

I was probably the only one who recognized the irony of the situation: A teenage boy who wanted nothing more than to be Tom Cruise in Top Gun sitting across from an obviously war-weary soldier who likely dreamed of the type of service depicted in those Hollywood films. I wondered why his superiors let him wear short sleeves. Maybe the issue had been contested behind closed doors. Maybe the staff sergeant with skulls on his arm didn’t realize he was actively performing veteran identity.

His tattoos were fine art. His bracelet was a label explaining it. And when juxtaposed alongside a crisp, polished Army dress uniform, one weighted down at the chest by medals and other accolades, the recruiter’s art registered as a political statement. He was not a “Wounded Warrior.” Nor was he a “Hero.” He was an individual. And though his pitch didn’t dissuade my brother from joining the Navy, I respected his honesty, and I appreciate now the complexity his every encounter adds to civilians’ understandings of military service.
A conscious, *active performance of veteran identity* is one which uses subtle actions and demeanors as much as stories of service to fill the void created by civilians’ lack of military knowledge. Active performances of veteran identity work against stereotypes. Active performers see through vague representations of veteran identity like “Wounded Warriors” or “Heroes.” Civilians already have a token “veteran” narrative—forged from education, films, and superficial interactions with veterans—in their minds. Active performers of veteran identity disrupt those narratives.

In this chapter, I explored military heroism, examining it as a gender-based performance, revealing military service as a “rite of passage” sold to recruits using myths of “heroism.” In *Heroes for Sale*, Tom Holmes re-assimilation is forestalled because of his addiction to morphine, an addiction viewed as “feminine” and “weak,” showing that there are many pitfalls and obstacles which can prevent recruits from succeeding in these “rites of passage.” In the story about the tattooed recruiter, masculinity also plays a role, but the artwork running up and down the Staff Sergeant’s arms are hypermasculine—skulls and death, but juxtaposed alongside his professional obligations in such a way that it sends a contradictory message. Both Tom Holmes and the recruiter must confront the intersectionality of gender with veteran identity. Otherwise, they risk losing the right to define what their military service means to them.

Many recruits join the military because society offers them few better options. They see it, alternately, as an escape, a proving ground, or a place where at least their death will *matter*. Military masculinity is not limited to males, and it is increasingly becoming available to female soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines seeking agency through wartime service. And this practice of trading blood for social status has endured
for thousands of years. Children watch films like *Top Gun* and think, “I can do that. I can survive war,” paradoxically, even as veterans of wars claim otherwise. The military “Hero” occupies a moral high ground, but most conceptions of the military “Heroes” are socially constructed advertisements for war. Real heroes are much rarer. And, as the Medal of Honor recipients discussed in this chapter reveal, they, too, struggle with constant attempts by society to appropriate their narratives. I defined three types of heroism: the *Sacrificing Hero*, who gives his or her life for others; the *Attacking Hero*, whose skill meets with chance to accomplish some remarkable feat of violence or survival; and, finally, the *Enduring Hero*, who is not really a hero, but who is treated as such so that patriotic rhetoric might have a plentitude of exceptional examples to use in selling war to the next generation of recruits.

The arbitrary assignment of the “Hero” identity describes much of the homecoming experienced by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In the next chapter, I examine the “Wounded Warrior,” the other version of veteran identity modeled by contemporary veterans. “Wounded Warriors” and “Heroes” are both defined by a proximity to death. The “Wounded Warrior,” always in search of evidence that will support a victimization narrative (or, more accurately, evidence that will *imply* a victimization narrative), will comb the past for brushes with death—with *almost* dying. Those memories serve the needs of the “Wounded Warrior’s” audience: civilians eager to dispense pity. “Wounded Warriors” do not recognize themselves as such. Instead, veterans cede partial truths and bits of memory to socially constructed victimization narratives until the “Wounded Warrior” identity replaces their own. This phenomenon is found among those veterans who are disabled, who object to war, or who do not fit neatly
within patriotic rhetoric as exceptional examples. In the end, and like “Heroes,”
“Wounded Warriors” sacrifice agency and the right to self-definition, the very things they
thought military service would provide.
CHAPTER TWO

The Wounded Warrior

we are the stories
we tell ourselves
especially
the ones we’ve worn out
and broken in
like boots,
for now we can march for days
where once we would get blisters
on our soles

Randy Brown
“We Are the Stories” from Welcome to FOB Haiku (2015)

The phrase “Wounded Warrior” was made popular by the United States Army’s Wounded Warrior Program, but even more by The Wounded Warrior Project (WWP), a Florida-based non-profit organization. The latter has raised millions of dollars for veterans’ assistance initiatives—among them, one that sends me a free hat, water bottle, or magazine each year. The emblem of WWP, a silhouette of a soldier carrying a wounded comrade to safety, is always at the forefront. The vulnerability of the wounded veteran (the soldier being carried), when depicted alongside the glorification of charitable aid (the soldier who is carrying), draws upon notions of camaraderie and sacrifice common among veterans. It also draws upon a civilian desire to shape the destiny of
veterans they deem “Wounded Warriors.” I believe the organization began with noble intentions, but over time it has begun to privilege profits over individual healing.

![Figure 7: Wounded Warrior Project Logo.](From the Wounded Warrior Project Family of Sites, 2016)

WPP’s donors are mostly civilians, suggesting that the non-profit organization has succeeded in marketing camaraderie—the feeling of carrying a wounded comrade to safety—to the masses. By donating just a few dollars civilians can play the role of the rescuer. In 2014 alone the organization received more than $300 million in charitable donations (Reid, “The Wounded Warrior Project” 5). WWP advertisements have been featured during the Super Bowl, and there are few Americans who would fail to recognize the organization’s name. In the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, WWP emerged as the pre-imminent non-profit organization combating “the invisible wounds of
war”: PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury. The organization’s influence is such that the words “Wounded Warrior” have come to represent all veterans dealing with war-related disabilities.

I first encountered WWP when an employee asked to give a presentation to my class of student veterans in 2012. He listed their initiatives, some very impressive, including a desire to see WWP branches at every college. He brought professionally made brochures. And he spoke about WWP from the perspective of a veteran whose life they’d saved. To paraphrase his story, “I was on the verge of suicide when WWP showed up at my doorstep and gave me a new purpose in life.” It was a wonderful story. At least, it was wonderful until I started encountering it again and again, in region after region I visited while building my own veterans’ nonprofit organization and presenting research on veterans’ issues. At each college or event, in a booth or as a featured speaker, WWP had stationed members of its “Warriors Speak” initiative:

Warriors Speak® is a group of wounded veterans and caregivers who share their personal stories of service and sacrifice with the public to raise awareness for the needs of this generation’s injured service members, their families, and caregivers. Our warrior spokespeople share how Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) aided in their recovery process and helped in the transition back to civilian life. Our caregiver spokespeople share the often-untold stories of what it’s like on the other side of that life-changing experience and how WWP was there not only for their loved ones, but for them as well. (“Warriors Speak”)

“Warriors Speak” teaches a veteran how to self-narrate. But the narratives produced are skewed by the motivations of a non-profit organization in need of donations. Essentially, WWP helps participants craft victimization narratives that are in turn appropriated to solicit donations. Judith Butler describes this process of appropriation in a concise manner: “The subject loses itself to tell the story of itself, but in telling the story of itself
seeks to give an account of what the narrative function has already made plain” (Butler 11). WWP knows every veteran who speaks publicly about his or her wounds represents twenty or thirty who cannot. “Warriors Speak” lifts the veil separating veterans from civilians just long enough to fill in the blanks about veteran identity with tales of veterans in need of civilian saviors. WWP gets its donations, but at what cost?

WWP raises money for mental health and educational programs which supplement those provided by the government. They also host nature retreats and banquets. However, WWP always concludes its efforts by leaving veteran identity a little more damaged—collectively, in the minds of civilians—than when they started. They elicit pity, then a signed check. I imagined the “Warriors Speak” representatives I saw as disproportionately healthy when compared to those representatives I could not see. The statics cited by their speakers about veteran PTSD and suicide rates painted a picture in which the speaker was but one in a growing cast severely disabled veterans. “Who will question the veteran missing an arm or a leg when that person says the Wounded Warrior Project saved his life?” I often wondered. The answer, for many years, was “no one.”

It was all a little too good to be true. The free hats, water bottles, expensive brochures, and salaries paid to their public speakers always struck me as lavish wastes of money. In January 2016, CBS News confirmed my suspicions, featuring the organization in an investigative report: “According to the charity's tax forms, spending on conferences and meetings went from $1.7 million in 2010, to $26 million in 2014. That's about the same amount the group spends on combat stress recovery—its top program” (Reid, “The Wounded Warrior Project” 16). Only 60% of the money raised by WWP makes it to veterans, a number at odds, the report finds, with comparable organizations such as the
Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust and Fisher House, whose rankings are in the 90-percentile range during the same year (3). It didn’t take long for one of WWP’s public speakers to change his story: “You're using our injuries, our darkest days, our hardships, to make money. So you can have these big parties,” said Erick Millette, a former Army Staff Sergeant who received both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star in Iraq (Reid, “Reforms” 9). Millette, in questioning the large salaries paid to those leading WWP, reveals how “Warriors Speak” participants are damaged the most by WWP’s practices. How will he cope with the loss of purpose and the sense of betrayal sure to follow him in the coming years?

Veterans are trained and conditioned to recognize threats and uphold systems of conduct beneficial to their collectives. Erick Millette stepped outside of the stereotypical role assigned to him by WWP and began giving testimony once that institution’s failures were revealed. Veteran “storytellers” are not necessarily novelists or artists. Veteran “storytellers” are those veterans who recognize society’s implicit demands, expectations of conformity, and duplicitous patriotic double-speak. However, veteran “storytellers” go beyond just recognizing these phenomena; they engage with stereotypes and rhetoric as a means of self-definition. When veterans like Millette challenge the preconceptions of larger society they change that society, they change themselves, and they offer healthier models of veteran identity to other veterans hoping to do the same: “I’ll be damned if you’re gonna take hard working Americans’ money and drink it and waste it,” said Millette (Reid, “Reforms” 2). Millette didn’t write a short story, a poem, or a manifesto. He simply stood up to corruption. In order to take that stance, however, he had to first
recognize the forces of appropriation robbing him of the ability to self-narrate. He had to make his story his own.

My goal in articulating the veteran’s symbolic existence is to create a guide other veterans can use to recognize the forces of appropriation in their own lives. The “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes examined in this dissertation are not complete identities; they are placeholders, the works of a culture beholden to war, but one unable or unwilling to confront war’s costs. In this chapter, I deal with the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype. Just as veterans, when stereotyped as “Heroes,” remain silent about military service out of fear that they will fail to live up to the exceptional examples of patriotic

Figure 8: The Wounded Warrior Project’s “I Am Living Proof” campaign.

This advertisement was featured in the organization’s After Action Report publication in Spring 2017.

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rhetoric, “Wounded Warriors” remain silent out of fear that they will fail to fit into neat categories of woundedness. In place of agency or symbolic authority, “Wounded Warriors” are pitied and marginalized as a result of the visible and invisible wounds of war, or more accurately, how these wounds are perceived. The Wounded Warrior Project is just a conscious example of the work of stereotyping and appropriation which happens to individual veterans every day. How did this heavily commodified conception of veteran woundedness emerge? How did we get here?

The Historical Treatment of Military Veterans in America

In The Wages of War (1989) Richard Severo and Lewis Milford examine how veterans were treated after each of America’s major conflicts. Their overall impression isn’t promising, and it corresponds with my assertion that war recreates itself with each generation, first by luring (or forcing) disadvantaged youths into military service through myths of heroism, later by appropriating the symbolic authority granted to these same individuals when they become veterans:

Throughout American history, even after “popular” wars, veterans have had to struggle against a Government that has mostly sought to limit its financial liability, more like a slippery insurance company than a polity rooted in the idea of justice and fair reward. Veterans have struggled, too, against a society that saw nothing wrong with patriotic civilians who amassed huge profits from wars, but saw something terribly wrong with civilian soldiers who tried to use military service to earn money and to obtain educational opportunities that might otherwise be denied to them. There were times in American history, including recent history, when such soldiers were lured into service with offers of generous pay, bonuses, and benefits, only to be scorned as mercenaries and social parasites when they tried to collect their due. (16)

Severo and Milford reveal a bait-and-switch: encouraging military service with promises of upward mobility, denying veterans access to these forms of agency, and inexplicably
shifting the blame for this denial upon veterans themselves. Veteran reassimilation has only become more complicated since *The Wages of War* was written in 1989. Today, veterans must deal with both the “slippery insurance company” and a powerful confluence of rhetoric and mythmaking which relegates them to stereotypes in the American unconscious. As “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors,” the stereotypical identities performed by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, veterans lack the symbolic authority needed to challenge lies and the powers responsible for war.

In the last chapter, I juxtaposed Medal of Honor award citations with stereotypical conceptions of military heroism in cinema. Real heroism, I argued, is a rare confluence of chance and ability. “Heroes” are much more common, and I used quotation marks around the word to distinguish between those individuals who commit extraordinary acts of valor or sacrifice, and those who *endure* military service without distinction. The “Hero” identity bestowed upon and modeled by contemporary veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars is a stereotype. It is created and maintained to benefit the state, not individual veterans. And by devaluing real feats of heroism, the title robs veterans of agency by robbing military service of meaning. I am describing the means by which the treatment described by Severo and Milford takes place. But “Heroes” are only one example.

In this chapter, I trace the creation of the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype back to descriptions of the war wound in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), arguing that the “Wounded Warrior” identity descended from a much older stereotype: the “Coward.” In a later section, I provide sources and evidence of the historical narrative
I am about to present. For now, I would like to present my own reading of the historical treatment of veterans to establish the “Wounded Warrior’s” lineage.

In the wake of the American Civil War, “Cowards,” as portrayed in Crane’s novel, are described as effeminate, as lacking the quintessentially male qualities of military heroes. As knowledge about war and the toll it exacts upon the human mind and body grew after WWI, the stereotyping forces which once labeled veterans “cowards” shifted their focus upon veterans’ wounds. Psychological wounds, in particular, were labeled as “cowardly,” but this change was not an improvement in how larger society regarded veterans. In the wake of WWI, veterans’ psychological wounds were likened to “hysteria,” a stereotypically female condition, and this was a cause of much concern for those social architects seeking to preserve war as a male “arena of instinctual liberation” (Leed, *No Man’s Land* 196). After WW2, the myth of the “Greatest Generation,” so powerful because the lines between good (democracy) and evil (fascism) were easier to discern, fewer images of unstable, violent veterans emerged, and the sacrifices of WW2 became synonymous with American economic and military might, with American exceptionalism. In many ways, WW2 veterans, unlike veterans who came before and after, succeeded in functioning as the exceptional examples of veterans found in patriotic

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38 The term “The Greatest Generation” was coined by journalist Tom Brokaw in the book, *The Greatest Generation* (1997). In the book, Brokaw explains, “During NBC’s coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, I was asked by Tim Russert on *Meet the Press* my thoughts on what we were witnessing. As I looked over the assembled crowd of veterans, which included everyone from Cabinet officers and captains of industry to retired schoolteachers and machinists, I said, ‘I think this is the greatest generation any society has ever produced.’ I know that this was a bold statement and a sweeping judgment, but since then I have restated it on many occasions. While I am periodically challenged on this premise, I believe I have the facts on my side” (xxxviii). It is interesting to think that this phrase did not emerge until the late 1990s. Cultural memory seems to indicate that WW2 veterans always held this exalted position. In fact, my reading of the treatment of veterans before and after WW2 serves as proof.
rhetoric. In this way, WW2 veterans functioned symbolically in the American unconscious as “The Greatest Generation” of veterans long before Tom Brokaw came up with the title in 1997.

I argue that after WW2 the emergence of a “therapeutic culture,” a tendency among members of American society to craft and draw power and inspiration from stories of trauma, represents a historical shift in which the victimized gain power from taking ownership of the stories which describe their traumas. In a later section, I will define therapeutic culture and traumatic narratives using the research of Tim Aubry, Trysh Travis, and Stevan Weine. For now, suffice it to say that therapeutic culture underestimated the suffering of veterans, presuming that their problems could be entirely accounted for as problems of the human psyche. Korean and Vietnam War veterans were among those who found power in victimization narratives. However, this focus upon veterans’ mental wounds stripped veterans of credibility and certain rights to self-definition. For example, POWs from the Korean War were publicly ostracized, for reasons such as accepting food and shelter from the enemy; more importantly, they were used as examples of a decline in American masculinity, a threat to society as a whole. McCarthyism and “Red Scare” campaigns treated Korean War POWs as “cowards,” presenting psychological wounds as a source of infirmity, a lack of American resilience. Likewise, veterans of the war in Vietnam were viewed, alternately, as the victimized and the victimizers of an unpopular war. The emphasis placed upon PTSD and other wounds of the mind by those who perceived veterans of the Vietnam War as “baby killers,” “imperialists,” or the aforementioned “mercenaries,” resulted in cultural representations such as John Rambo, Travis Bickle, and other violent caricatures discussed in previous
chapters. Again, the emergence of a therapeutic culture shifted the emphasis of stereotypes from a problem of gender to a problem of psychology. By stereotyping veterans as violent and insane, veterans lost the symbolic authority needed to challenge lies and comment upon the wars in which they fought. They lost the ability to communicate with larger society.

As with the “Hero” identity, I will use quotation marks to distinguish between wounded veterans who openly share and shape the meanings attached to their war wounds, and those who perform the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype in ways that rob them of symbolic authority. “Wounded Warriors” lay claim to woundedness as the primary source of their identities. These stereotypes are rooted in earlier conceptions of cowardice, not bravery. Patriarchal societies describe wounded or disabled veterans in essentialist, gendered terms, as those who display feminine weakness, not glorified military masculinity. And the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype ultimately functions like its “Hero” counterpart: devaluing war wounds—mental and physical—so that veterans damaged by war are made invisible, their experiences marginalized, and so that they will exist silently, or at least in passive support of the wars and military actions which will create the next generation of veterans.

I begin with a close reading of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a novel believed to have reshaped war writing as a whole, revealing the ways in which nineteenth-century representations of war likened woundedness to femininity, but also how wounds were used to establish veteran identity absent feats of military heroism. In the following section, I provide historical context for the claims made above and contextualize representations of veteran woundedness within the emergence of a
“therapeutic culture,” making claims about how its emergence in American society transformed civilian perceptions of veterans as well as veterans’ perceptions of themselves. I provide an example of the “Wounded Warrior,” Clint Eastwood’s character, Walt Kowalski, in the film *Gran Torino* (2008), explaining why veterans perform woundedness, arguing that the performance feeds into the avoidance mechanisms of PTSD. This performance keeps people at a distance by harnessing stereotypes of violent, unstable veterans, but at the cost of veterans remaining stuck in the past, defined only by perceptions of what they endured during military service. Finally, I examine Kevin Powers’s novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012), a story about a young soldier not dissimilar to Crane’s protagonist, but one who causes the reader to anticipate trauma as opposed to cowardice as the story unfolds. In this way, the chapter comes full circle—moving from the American Civil War to the Iraq War—by tracing the origins of the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype from the nineteenth century to the present.

**Stephen Crane’s Lasting Depictions of Cowardice and Woundedness**

Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, perhaps the most famous cultural representation of the American Civil War, tells the story of Private Henry Fleming, a young soldier who lives in constant fear of combat. More accurately, he lives in constant fear that he will emerge from combat as a “coward.” As a result, his fear drives him to desert his unit during battle, and after receiving a wound to the head from a fellow soldier, he rhetorically alters the meaning of the wound so that it comes to represent an allegiance to patriarchal society, but also so that it will serve as evidence that he is not a coward. In this chapter which interrogates the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype, I examine
Crane’s novel to ask a complex question about the nature of “woundedness.” Given its associations with femininity and castration, how is it that a wound becomes for Henry the antidote to cowardice?

Importantly, Crane’s depiction of Henry Fleming emerged as the premiere cultural representation of military service in the American Civil War, defining notions of cowardice and bravery leading into the twentieth century. Eric Solomon, in “A Definition of the War Novel,” remarks,

*The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) stands by itself in nineteenth-century English and American war fiction. Indeed it is still the masterwork in English among the abundance of war novels that two world conflicts and dozens of smaller wars have produced. Stephen Crane’s novel is the first work of any length in English fiction purely dedicated to an artistic reproduction of war, and it has rarely been approached in craft or intensity. The novel became part of the literary heritage of the twentieth century, and whether or not a modern war writer consciously recalls Crane’s performance in the genre, *The Red Badge of Courage* remains … a touchstone for modern war fiction. Crane gave the war novel its classic form. (181)

Interestingly, the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane, is not a war veteran. In fact, as one of fourteen children, Crane grew up the son of a Methodist Episcopal minister. He was born after the American Civil War, in 1871, and began writing in the 1890s as a freelancer. His first book, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), is a story about the abuse of a young girl and her eventual suicide. It was not a successful novel in its time, and *The Red Badge of Courage*, in addition to reshaping the ways in which people write about war, rescued Crane from obscurity.

So, the novel held by critics such as Solomon to be the premiere, foundational, and most enduring representation of the American Civil War is not written by a veteran, but rather by a man who conceived of his protagonist through research and oral histories
decades after the Civil War ended. I cite these facts not as evidence of the novel’s inauthenticity; quite the opposite. In *Red Badge of Courage* the protagonist, Henry Fleming, is a teenager who enlists in the Union Army to become a “man” by achieving battlefield glory. However, he soon realizes that war guarantees neither glory, nor survival, and as the story progresses, as each painful moment of waiting registers as anxiety and fear for Henry, he discovers a “problem” within himself, a predilection for survival which outweighs his desire to fight and earn his manhood.

Henry Fleming’s “problem,” or his central internal conflict, a worry about emerging from war as a “coward,” is based upon civilian perceptions of veterans and attitudes toward military service. As I have argued, youths begin as civilians, become warfighters in the military, and return home as “veterans,” a peculiar hybrid-identity comprised of traits found in both civilian and military cultures. So, Henry’s “problem,” if anything, is evidence of the socially-constructed nature of veteran identity. As the last chapter explains, the military hero sits atop a masculine hierarchy of veteran identities. To leave war as anything less than a hero connotes inferiority, in the minds of veterans and civilians alike. At the bottom of this hierarchy sits the “coward,” colloquially understood as any person who refuses to contribute to the war effort or who puts other soldiers at risk.39 In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry’s fear of becoming a “coward”

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39 Many civilians and members of military communities would consider the story of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, a veteran of the Afghanistan War who deserted his unit in 2009, as an example of modern day cowardice: “Sergeant Bergdahl left his outpost in Afghanistan without permission in 2009 and was captured by militants, prompting a dangerous but fruitless search. His captors held him in brutal conditions for five years, including locking him in a cage and in darkness for lengthy periods” (Savage, Charlie 4). Many members of his unit accused the POW of desertion, expressing disdain over the subsequent missions and raids launched to retrieve him. And, although allegations of American troops dying in these missions were eventually proven false, the added risk of death and injuries
precedes his decision to desert his unit. In many ways, Henry’s preconceived notions of war cause him to become a coward, a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Henry’s fear is the fear of any person who imagines him or herself in combat. The novel speaks to both veterans and civilians. For example, in “A Remarkable Book,” a review of Crane’s novel published in 1896, George Whyndam writes,

> It is glorious to see his youth discover courage in the bed-rock of primeval antagonism after the collapse of his tinsel bravado; it is something higher to see him raise upon that rock the temple of resignation. Mr. Crane, as an artist, achieves by his singleness of purpose a truer and completer picture of war than either Tolstoï, bent also upon proving the insignificance of heroes, or Zola, bent also upon prophesying the regeneration of France. That is much, but it is more that his work of art, when completed, chimes with the universal experience of mankind; that his heroes find in their extreme danger, if not confidence in their leaders and conviction in their cause, at least the conviction that most men do what they can or, at most, what they must … It is but a further step to recognize all life for a battle and this earth for a vessel lost in space. We may then infer that virtues easy in moments of stress may be useful also in everyday experience. (241)

I cite Whyndam because the passage provides an example of how war is perceived by outsiders looking in. Glorification of war aside, Whyndam ultimately agrees with my assertion that war can instruct on the topic of human resiliency. The American Civil War, unlike wars fought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, devastated all of society, not just those who fought in it. Crane’s novel gained popularity during a time when memories of war and its destruction remained fresh in the minds of his readers. And since endured by his fellow soldiers—men and women already dealing with IED, Mortar, and ambush attacks on a daily basis—are undeniable. Still, I remain ambivalent about the series of events, wondering if “justice” has not already been served given the conditions of his capture and imprisonment. Further, I’m left wondering about the mental state of any young soldier who thinks he can simply walk off of a military base in hostile territory and survive.
these memories, preconceived notions, and stereotypes were rooted in the actual experiences of Civil War veterans, *The Red Badge of Courage* succeeds in producing a true-to-life protagonist. In other words, veterans like Henry Fleming were still around.\(^{40}\)

Crane had many real sources of combat to draw upon when constructing his imaginary war veteran. Henry, like the characters examined in the preceding pages, is young, naïve, afraid, and in search of some battlefield glory which will cure him of these afflictions. These traits are true-to-life.

**Henry Fleming’s “Problem”**

Henry wrestles with his fear, attempting to sublimate it, justify it, and by the end of the novel, redefine it as a wound of its own. Of course, Jim Conklin, who is described as heroic in the novel, works as a foil, contrasting with Henry in a way that implies *heroism*, rather than *cowardice*, is the rarer character trait. However, Jim Conklin dies. Henry survives. And the guilt displayed by Henry is part “survivor’s guilt,” and part a feeling of inadequacy. The protagonist’s inner-world merges with the reality of war to create a unique perspective: Henry survives war, but he’ll never be the same because of it. And because his guilt is a psychic wound, Henry’s story becomes one about seeking out a physical referent through which he can explain his woundedness.

\(^{40}\) Crane wrote an addendum to the life of Henry Fleming entitled “The Veteran” in 1896. In the story, Henry explains the American Civil War to those who did not experience it, noting that “their opinion of his heroism was fixed” (230). However, when Henry finally admits that he ran away from battle, his grandson, “Little Jim,” named after Jim Conklin from the novel, “was visibly horror stricken. His hands were clasped nervously, and his eyes were wide with astonishment at this terrible scandal, his most magnificent grandfather telling such a thing” (230). The story depicts Henry as an old man, and its climax involves the protagonist trying to save animals from a barn fire, rushing into the flames repeatedly to save the animals. The moral of the story seems to be that older, more experienced men are better prepared to survive dangers such as war.
I argue throughout this dissertation that veteran identity begins to develop long before the actual experience of war. As such, Henry cannot anticipate the complexity of survivor’s guilt, but he can certainly imagine the physical pains of gunshot and shrapnel wounds. So can his mother. Early in the novel, Henry watches “two tears [leave] their trails on his mother’s cheeks” before departing to fight (6). His mother warns him not to go, silently relenting, however, so that her son can lay claim to wartime masculinity. She, too, sees the value of what men gain through participating in wars. Crane presents a protagonist without a father, and like Tom Cruise’s “Maverick” from the previous chapter, Henry views war as a way to prove his manhood: “He was forced to admit that as far as war was concerned he knew nothing of himself” (Crane 9). War, in the mind of Henry Fleming, is a proving ground: he will emerge dead, as a hero, or as a coward, a perception which is telling, because it does not permit the veteran to exist in the much more common space in between.

As scholar of nineteenth-century American masculinity, E. Anthony Rotundo suggests, “Men devised experiences that helped transform the impulsive passions of the boy into the purposeful energies of the man” (21). In other words, some young soldiers view military service as a stepping stone toward careers outside of the military, hoping that military service will provide them with the type of masculine experience and homosocial bonding needed to attain positions of privilege in larger society. Henry’s country is ravaged by war, and apprenticeships and academies are not the most readily available sites of masculine transformation. And as Leo Braudy, whose gendered analysis of military masculinity helped facilitate a deeper understanding of “Heroes” in Chapter One, claims,
[W]ars not only end lives, revise political boundaries, and upset social values. They also require such a focus on one prime way of defining what a man is that the reaction against them is central to either the revision or the bolstering of traditional gender ideas … Whenever war and competition occupy the national spotlight, the contours of masculinity are thrown into high relief. (*Chivalry to Terrorism*, xviii)

Henry Fleming is an interesting case example because he both revises and bolsters notions of military masculinity. As a public representation of a “coward,” his example merges with prior examples of war and war veterans in society’s collective memory to make the coward archetype appear *more* common in the eyes of outsiders looking in on war. Contrariwise, his cowardice, when juxtaposed with heroic archetypes in the novel such as Jim Conklin, underscores stereotypical conceptions of military masculinity by exposing Henry’s inferiority.

I have described the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior” as stereotypes modeled by contemporary veterans. A gendered analysis of *The Red Badge of Courage* reveals that such binaries have precedents. Specifically, the binary faced by Henry Fleming is that of the “Hero” and the “Coward.” In fact, the novel presents the war wound as a commodity used to escape the “Coward” label, and under the right circumstances, it allows the veteran to exist as a “Hero.” In other words, the “Hero” and the “Coward” exist unconsciously in the minds of soldiers. But the unconscious does not have a preference, and both archetypes exist simultaneously and both symbolic positions are there for soldiers to draw upon *consciously*. Importantly, both archetypes are deeply influenced by stereotypes of gender. Indeed, *The Red Badge of Courage* throws “the contours of masculinity … into high relief” (Braudy, *Chivalry to Terrorism*, xviii). And these contours are more clearly defined through the juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity in the novel.
Despite Henry’s fear, he must learn how to be a “man” in the harshest of conditions. If he fails, he gains access to none of the rewards such risk provides. In Chapter Six of the novel Henry experiences combat:

He began to exaggerate the endurance, the skill, and the valor of those who were coming. Himself reeling from exhaustion, he was astonished beyond measure at such persistency. They must be machines of steel. It was very gloomy struggling against such affairs, wound up perhaps to fight until sundown.

He slowly lifted his rifle and catching a glimpse of the thickspread field he blazed at a cantering cluster. He stopped then and began to peer as best as he could through the smoke. He caught changing views of the ground covered with men who were all running like pursued imps, and yelling.

To the youth it was an onslaught of redoubtable dragons. He became like the man who lost his legs at the approach of the red and green monster. He waited in a sort of a horrified, listening attitude. He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled.

A man near him who up to this time had been working feverishly at his rifle suddenly stopped and ran with howls. A lad whose face had borne an expression of exalted courage, the majesty of he who dares give his life, was, at an instant, smitten abject. He blanched like one who has come to the edge of a cliff at midnight and is suddenly made aware. There was a revelation. He, too, threw down his gun and fled. There was no shame in his face. He ran like a rabbit. (33)

The images of “dragons” and “imps” cited above underscore Henry’s childishness, the innocence he will undoubtedly lose. War is an abstraction in the protagonist’s mind. At least, it is an abstraction until he experiences it first-hand. Finally, when he makes the decision to run “like a rabbit” there’s “no shame in his face” because, logically, he is engaged in the biological act of self-preservation. Juxtapose this drive to survive with
“the majesty of he who dares give his life” and it’s hard not to discern the true power of patriotic rhetoric, of shame triumphing over the biological imperatives.41

Crane depicts veterans as fearing a future experience of “shame” more than any other wound. For example, one soldier remarks, “‘It’s my first battle, old boy,’ said the latter, with intense gloom. He was quite pale and his girlish lip was trembling” (23). The description feminizes fear. Henry’s perspective indicates that he is critical of fear, both in himself and others. His inner thoughts police the veterans around him. He projects his fears of cowardice upon others, and because the reader learns about war from Henry’s perspective, it appears as though the other soldiers are not suffering from Henry’s “problem,” at least not explicitly:

“I thought you was objecting to this march a little while ago,” said the youth [Henry] coldly.

“Oh, it wasn’t that,” explained the other. “I don’t mind marching, if there’s going to be fighting at the end of it. What I hate is this getting moved here and moved there, with no good coming of it, as far as I can see, excepting sore feet and damned short rations.”

“Well, Jim Conklin says we’ll get plenty of fighting this time.”

“He’s right for once, I guess, though I can’t see how come. This time we’re in for a big battle, and we’ve got the best end of it, certain sure. Gee rod! how we will thump ’em!”

41 For example, the narrator explains of Henry, “He was occupied with his problem, and in his desperation he concluded that the stupidity [of his leaders] did not greatly matter” (22). Henry’s treatment of war can best be described as “cerebral.” He boils war and combat down to logic, to deciding how close he will bring himself to death in order to avoid being labeled a coward: “How do you know you won’t run when the time comes?” he asks one soldier (16). He’s genuinely curious. He’s genuinely afraid. He doesn’t believe in himself. But war, he hopes, will change all of that. It will make him a man. In Henry’s mind, he has no choice in the matter, and he berates himself, over and over, for not giving himself wholly to the project of war. Importantly, Henry considers his thoughts a form of cowardice at least equal to the act of running away from battle.
He arose and began to pace to and fro excitedly. The thrill of his enthusiasm made him walk with an elastic step. He was sprightly, vigorous, fiery in his belief in success. He looked into the future with clear, proud eye, and he swore with an air of an old soldier.

The youth watched him for a moment in silence. When he finally spoke his voice was as bitter as dregs. “Oh, you’re going to do great things, I s’pose!”

“How do you know you won’t run when the time comes?” asked the youth. (15-16)

This conversation takes place before Henry decides to run. It is clear that myths of heroism motivate the soldiers; they all appear to march toward the same masculine proving ground. Yet, as they get closer to battle, fear (deeply associated with femininity) overtakes Henry. Further descriptions reveal even “[t]he captain of the company...coaxed in [a] schoolmistress fashion” (27). Such associations of fear and femininity continue in their preparations for battle: “There was rustling and muttering among the men. They displayed a feverish desire to have every possible cartridge ready to their hands. The boxes were pulled around into various positions, and adjusted with great care. It was as if seven hundred new bonnets were being tried on” (26). As projections, these descriptions provide a wealth of detail concerning Henry’s view of war. He is deeply concerned about appearing feminine, weak, and he is deeply invested in patriotic myths which portray men oppositely. In many ways, Henry’s shame, which I interpret as a wound of its own, precedes war. It emerges in the protagonist as a sense of inadequacy, likely the result of growing up without a father, of living without a special place in the patriarchal order. Ironically, as Henry wrestles with thoughts about his mortality, he can’t help but see the preparations for war and the organizing principles behind it as devoid of masculinity. He begins to wonder if war is a carefully orchestrated scam.
Anything related to fear, or, more succinctly, not killing, emerges as feminine in Crane’s novel: “schoolmistresses,” “bonnets,” and the aforementioned “girlish,” “trembling lip” are all Henry’s projections. After deserting, Henry finds refuge in the feminized space (or what Donald Pizer has called “the chapel”) of nature. In fact, Crane presents two opposite and opposing spheres: The patriarchal, masculine sphere emblematized by war, or the fear that Henry wants to conquer; and the feminine sphere represented by nature, or the place where Henry finds solace and time to reflect after deserting his unit and before getting a second chance at manhood. “Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment” (31). Nature is opposed to war, to masculinity—to “devilment”—in this telling. Henry runs to nature like a “rabbit,” the way a boy might run out of fear and into the arms of a protective mother. When Henry flees battle he flees the masculine hierarchy created by war. Naturally, in these circumstances, he returns to the arms of a mother figure—of someone who nurtures and protects and coddles him—until he gains the courage needed to regroup and attempts to transform into a man again. 42

But there is more to military masculinity than a willingness to die; Henry must abide by a moral code. When the narrator asserts that “[t]he youth pitied them as he ran” (34), he registers awareness of this code. He becomes aware of his own cowardice. And when he returns, Henry will deal with his ignorance of this code, with shame and self-pity. He will have to explain his lack of woundedness. Henry’s “second chance” comes when is given a blow to the head and some time to reflect.

42 Crane’s treatment of “nature” as feminine, as a sanctuary, or as a temple in The Red Badge of Courage was common among Transcendentalist American authors of the nineteenth century. For more information about American Transcendentalism read Joel Myerson’s edited collection, Transcendentalism: A Reader (2000).
Red Badge portrays veterans as cowards and heroes, without much room in between. The experiences of “Cowards” are described as feminine; the experiences of “Heroes” describe war in masculine terms, focusing on the glory available to those who brave death or sacrifice themselves for others. Of course, these archetypes are extreme representations of veteran identity; most veterans exist somewhere in the middle, wrestling with feelings of fear, inadequacy, and a desire to prove themselves even as they’re actively fighting. In the following sections, I discuss how nineteenth-century masculinity plays a part in this feminine/masculine dichotomy, and how patriarchal societies reinforce such dichotomies today in maintaining the stereotypes of the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior.”

The Appeal of Woundedness

Henry’s story is a cautionary tale about the “possibility of anarchy,” a fear woven into performances of masculinity that scholars such as Rotundo claim is caused by men who refuse to become parts of the patriarchal order (20-22). Henry avoids conflict, but also masculine conformity, which is anarchic during war and within military institutions. In other words, it is hard to manipulate the bodies of many men to create a single, destructive force when those men are running in different directions. In addition, Pizer underscores the precariousness of Henry’s position:

Put briefly, the riddle is the seeming disjunction between, on the one hand, a structural center of initiation, in which a young man, after at first failing, successfully meets a community standard of conduct, and is thus welcomed back into the group, and, on the other hand, the painfully evident continuing fatuosity of the young man’s notion of his own character and actions. (2)
Ironically, Henry suffers from a defect of character when he claims—very reasonably—that “[i]t was criminal to stay calmly in one spot and make no effort to stay destruction” (35). His “flaws” further emerge when he “regard[s] the wounded soldiers in an envious way” (43) and when he wishes that he had “a red badge of courage” (43). The result of his failings become the invention of his own brand of courage, one he creates after wandering back to his unit, nursing a wound exacted upon him by another Union soldier (56): “I got shot. In th’ head. I never see sech fightin’” (60). Henry believes honor is something legitimized by a physical wound. He is unwilling to sacrifice himself within a community of brothers. But the experience of marching toward war, running away from it, and becoming wounded educate him about what such sacrifices entail. As a result, he is able to concoct a story which allows him to legitimize his wound in the eyes of men he feels are braver than himself.

Henry harbors a secret which allows him to lay claim to military masculinity. He accepts that “[w]ar, the red animal, war, the blood-swollen god, would have bloated fill” (55). At first, in his moment of weakness, he proves unwilling to give the “blood-swollen god” any blood of his own. However, in Henry’s mind, he has earned his manhood, and as far as anyone knows, he has proven his allegiance to the masculine order. Finally, he displays bravery. And he does so by embracing the most visible sign of masculinity on any battlefield, a flag that was “projected, sun-touched, resplendent” (32). Henry leaves the feminine altar of nature for the altar of masculinity, carrying the phallic guide-on—the regimental colors—valiantly into battle. Pizer claims that Henry “experiences a number of basic emotions” (6) and lists pain among them. However, it is not the pain of being shot or hit in the head to which Pizer refers. Henry’s rhetorically-constructed
wound is his pain. It is equal parts guilt, post-traumatic stress, fear, and physical. This constructed pain becomes his emblem of masculine allegiance, of his willingness to sacrifice and join masculine society. His red badge of courage is based on a lie, but it provides him with pain, which in this case is a commodity.

Henry’s notion of manhood is tainted by “the old Lie,” the trap that Wilfred Owen warns about in “Dulce et Decorum Est”: “My friend, you would not tell with such high zest / To children ardent for some desperate glory, / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria morti” (25-28). Henry never believes, even for a second, that it is fitting and proper to die for one’s country. But he finds ways to circumvent his lack of belief. He transforms himself into something other than a coward by redefining the wound he receives from a fellow soldier. He uses this physical wound to replace a psychic wound that members of patriarchal society will not accept. In this way, Henry’s story is a precursor for the “Wounded Warrior” identity described in this chapter. Structurally, Henry’s feat of bravery, his way of proving his manhood, is rhetorical. He experiences the fear leading up to war, the pressure to conform to social expectations of military masculinity, and he risks death; he is wounded. But his wound is not socially acceptable. It’s a friendly fire incident reframed internally and externally so that the aspects of war he did experience—fear, pressure to conform, and physical harm—gain meaning. So, I return to the question I asked at the beginning of this discussion. Given its associations with femininity and castration, how is it that a wound becomes for Henry the antidote to cowardice? The wound is a commodity, one sought out by recruits who have little knowledge of war, and it is one which grants its owner a position in the hierarchy of military masculinity.
Evolution of the “Wounded Warrior”

Again, the “coward” of Crane’s novel is not synonymous with the “Wounded Warrior” of today. I’m not arguing that “Wounded Warriors” are deserters, malingerers, or in any way deficient in their military service. However, I am arguing that the “Wounded Warrior” identity is a stereotype, one that can be traced back to notions of cowardice, when such displays were more common, and Crane’s Henry Fleming is one example of a veteran who goes to war intent on being wounded. He may not consciously realize his intent. But it’s clear in his actions that he views wounds as commodities which can be brokered in exchange for position and respect.

Henry does, after all, experience war. In fact, the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype took over a century to evolve, and that form of veteran identity, today, is far removed from its predecessor. The common denominator is gender bias—its effect upon interpreting war, warriors, and war wounds. As Crane shows, in patriarchal societies “cowardice” is defined as a feminine experience, whereas in the last chapter military heroism showed strong correlations with masculinity. Wounds, or “red badges of courage,” are described as feminine, as evidence of victimization by a powerful male enemy and as evidence of losing control over one’s own survival. These wounds remain, ironically, masculine war trophies to those soldiers lucky enough to survive them.

Wounds are proof of combat, of occupying the moral high ground of the combat veteran. And in the absence of heroism, some veterans regard abstract notions of woundedness as evidence of a veteran identity. I call these individuals “Wounded Warriors.” But how does the combatant’s wound result in a new form of identity? Petar Ramadanovic’s “In the Future … : On Trauma and Literature” engages with Freud in
search of a “narrative of trauma” (179). Ramadanovic’s reading of *Fort! Da!*, Freud’s reflection upon his grandson’s use of the words “Gone” and “There” to describe the sensations felt when moving a toy in and out of view, argues “that the compulsion to repeat translates the wound into terms that are not entirely the wound’s own and carries it (the wound) to the level of symbolization, allowing for the possibility of its identification and for the emergence of a subject (in/of trauma)” (198). The wound precedes trauma. It is the physical site of traumatic experience that trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argue must be experienced *belatedly*. So, without awareness of what the wound signifies—victimization, betrayal, mortality—veterans latch onto the much easier to explain *physical* referent. And, as Ramadanovic explains, this *latching-on* results in a form of subjectivity, one defined by a trauma the veteran cannot possibly understand in the present. Finally, the “Wounded Warrior” subjectivity results in a performance of identity which unconsciously recreates the circumstances of being wounded. This performance can be easily recognizable: high risk behaviors, suicide attempts, drug abuse which brings the veteran closer to the death he or she *almost* experienced. Or, the performance can be more subtle: disgruntledness, vaguely articulated anger, keeping loved ones at a distance until the veteran can figure out what the wound signifies on his or her own. Ultimately, the “Wounded Warrior” subjectivity, as modeled by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, will result in future generations of veterans who seek out their own wounds in the same way Henry Fleming sought out a “red badge of courage” in order to define himself.

Now I will provide some evidence of the historical narrative I presented at the beginning of this chapter. Public perceptions of veterans and their lived experiences
began to differ after WWI. For example, Modris Eksteins, in *Rites of Spring*, explains the homecoming of WWI veterans: “Veterans’ organizations had been founded but relatively few veterans wanted to join. Employers were encouraged to hire former soldiers, but many found them a poor risk. The incidence of unemployment among ex-servicemen was pitifully high” (254). As the American Legion fought to have shell-shocked veterans treated humanely, American employers turned their backs on returning veterans in droves. Instead of commodities, the psychological wounds of these soldiers were viewed as threats to stability and safety in the American workforce.

I believe part of the veteran’s alienation can be attributed to the availability of fictional veterans in mass media and cinema. For example, in *Reel Patriotism* (1997), an examination of war films produced in the 1920s, Leslie Midkiff DeBauche argues that films focused on “[c]elebrating the end of the war, relegating the war to the historical past, and directing attention away from its presence in new releases were signals of a basic fact about feature film production in the late 1910s: an industry which took almost fifteen months to convert one-fifth of its feature production to war-related stories could not demobilize over night” (165). DeBauche recognizes that war changed cinema. The public, for the first time, could glimpse war from afar. And they were enthralled. Pursuit of profits, in turn, changed the way audiences viewed war. War became a commodity, a product with all of the excitement and propaganda of military service, only with none of the sacrifice. Representations of war came to shape audience expectation, not just demand. Paradoxically, veterans wounded psychologically were ostracized. It was as

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43 For more on how the American film industry manipulated the public’s attitudes toward war to turn a box office profit, and for more about how propaganda within films was directed by key industry insiders, read J. E. Smyth’s *Reconstructing American Historical Films*. 184
though the public was willing to look to any place other than the veteran for answers about war. Instead, the proliferation of physically and mentally wounded veterans in cinema led audiences to believe that the average veteran was either severely disabled, unstable, or both.

The relationship between veterans and psychological wounds changed after WWI, after the myth of chivalric combat died, and especially after invisible wounds such as Shell Shock were acknowledged. As Severo and Milford claim, when these veterans returned home, they were viewed, alternately, as welfare cases or job thieves. Much of this mistreatment can be traced to the public’s lack of regard for war neuroses, or disrespect for those men and women who dealt with them. In “Invisible Wounds,” for example, Caroline Cox argues that post-WWI society had to “find a new understanding of mental illness” (281). Prior to WWI, Cox claims that understandings of war neuroses were influenced by the stereotypes of gender: “[S]hifting terminology in academic and popular use divorced the psychological problems of soldiers from those of women and men in civilian life. Pre-war associations of the condition with hereditary or moral weakness disappeared when the condition struck men from all ranks of society” (Cox 287). In this way, it can be said that it was the war veteran who ameliorated mental

Cinema: From Cimarron to Citizen Kane (2006). Smyth argues that the nature of modern warfare, coupled with an industry keen on selling war as a source of entertainment, gradually turned the “doughboy” into “a nameless and passive American reacting to the horrors of war and the poverty of the aftermath” (236). Running counter to this trend are examples such as Alvin C. York of Sergeant York fame—extreme notions of heroism claiming a superior position within the hierarchy of postwar narratives. I am arguing that war narratives are inherently equal and that focusing on exploits and illnesses alike are mechanisms by which society recreates war through the appropriation of veteran identity.

44 The American Legion, Cox claims, fought against military establishments in the United States and Britain which “saw a blurred line between shellshock and cowardice” (291). Cox’s research concerns the American public’s debates about “war neuroses” in the wake
illness in the eyes of society, not the other way around. At first, as Cox claims, returning veterans suffering from mental illnesses perceived as effeminate were regarded as the scourges of their families, as evidence of some infirmity among the family line. However, and with the help of Veterans Service Organizations, these views toward mental illness changed. Veterans of WWII would have benefited from this amelioration, but the reassimilation of “The Greatest Generation” did not take place without struggle.

During WWII, for example, the president of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins, anticipating the influx of returning veterans, warned that “colleges and universities will find themselves converted into educational hobo jungles. And veterans unable to get work and equally unable to resist putting pressure on the colleges and universities, will find themselves educational hoboes” (qtd. in Severo and Milford 288). At the same time, during both WWI and WWII, clergy warned against the “sin” of soldiers infiltrating society (291), suggesting that war corrupts the souls of those who fight in them. In Male Subjectivity at the Margins (1992) Kaja Silverman examines post-WW2 cinema in which “the ‘hero’ returns from World War II with a physical or psychic wound,” arguing that such wounds imply that the veteran is “somehow deficient, and which renders him incapable of functioning smoothly in civilian life” (53). In these examples, the bodies, minds, and souls of veterans are all used as evidence in arguments against allowing veterans back into society. So, new understandings of war neuroses after

of the Great War, and in examining the first appearances of shell-shock in cinema and public debate, the author concludes that “[t]he pressing needs of war-neurotic veterans and the Legion’s activism on their behalf helped shape this public attitude. Building upon cultural portrayals of fear, courage, duty, and heroism, the Legion ensured that questions of cowardice never clouded the reputations of shell-shocked veterans” (305). However, these problems were not resolved after the First World War. Cox’s claim that “Americans began to see those suffering from nervous disorders as people like themselves” is at odds with the century of wars, police actions, and precarious homecomings.
WWI took that shame away from the families of soldiers, but it remained a stereotype faced by veterans themselves. Silverman elaborates,

As we have seen, *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* suffer in varying degrees from ideological fatigue, induced by the historical trauma of World War II and the recovery period. Like a number of other Hollywood films from the same period, they attest to the forced confrontation of the male subject with castration, as a consequence of his massive exposure to the unbinding power of the death drive. They also dramatize his resulting dislocation from the paternal position, and hence from the dominant fiction. (106)

Silverman’s application of the psychoanalytic lens is useful in this instance because it ties characters like Henry Fleming to veterans of WW2. Silverman argues that cinematic representations of WW2 emphasize “castration,” or in plain terms, a wound to the male ego as a product of exposures to extreme violence. The author “challenge[s] the phallic identification upon which masculinity depends by insisting upon the lack at the heart of all subjectivity, and by isolating historical trauma as a force capable of unbinding the coherence of the male ego, and exposing the abyss that it conceals” (121). Influenced by Lacan, Silverman is saying that we are all castrated, and that coherent masculinity is a fiction that gets revealed by war wounds. This “lack” is Henry Fleming’s “problem,” his fear of emerging from war as a coward, as deficient. It is the same lack experienced by the characters “Maverick” and Tom Holmes in the last chapter. After war, however, and after war violence destabilizes the male ego, this “lack” is relocated and experienced as an obsession over not suffering enough, or not suffering in the right way. Abstract notions of woundedness contained in stereotypes such as the “Wounded Warrior” provide evidence to the contrary. They provide every veteran with an invisible, but undeniable wound.
How might other veterans experience this lack? Did life first imitate art or did art first imitate life? Is Henry’s “problem” a product of Crane’s research? Or, did subsequent generations of veterans draw upon examples such as Henry Fleming as they performed veteran identity themselves? I believe that the inability of WW2 veterans to confront the damage done to the male ego during their war is a by-product of patriotic rhetoric. Specifically, it is a product of the myth of “The Greatest Generation” which assumes that all veterans from that war came home and immediately picked up where they left off. At this point in history, when memories of the gruesome experience of WW2 were replaced with a collective memory of what is now regarded as America in its prime, veterans were assigned their symbolic function: they become repositories of memories of war, keeping the horrors of war a secret so that America might shine as an exceptional nation.

After the Korean War, veterans became the targets of “Red Scare” campaigns. Severo and Milford explain that speakers on the national circuit used veteran POWs as their primary sources—a kind of victim shaming—when describing a lack of fortitude in America’s youth: “From the Army’s point of view, the Americans who had been held prisoner had exhibited a weakness that was nothing short of psychopathological” (334). In “We Didn’t Do That Did We? Representation of the Veteran Experience,” Anne L. Shewring attributes negative attitudes toward Korean War veterans to America’s inability to accept defeat:

Society as a whole did not know how to position its reaction to defeat. In the case of Korea, home-grown treachery was seen to be to blame, and here was a cause with which the country could do battle. In the midst of McCarthy’s ‘Red’ hysteria, communist infiltration into the State Department and indeed into the army was posited as the real reason for America’s failure. The national belief that fighting communism was necessary held and, rather than dealing with America’s failure to do this
successfully in Korea, there has been a tendency to ignore the conflict.
(59-60)

Clearly, it was Korean War veterans who bore the consequences of America’s misguided shame. Much of their pain, I believe, has to do with their failure to live up to the “Greatest Generation” myth. POWs, who suffered untold abuses at the hands of their captors, became scapegoats for political malfeasance after the Korean War. Not even WW2 veterans came to their aid.45 They couldn’t. America still assumes some wars are more just than others.

After Vietnam, Severo and Milford continue, “soldiers who fought … became objects of scorn. They were despised on the college campuses they turned to after their discharges; they were shunned by veterans of World War II” (352). Unlike Korean War veterans, veterans were no longer stereotyped as communist sympathizers after Vietnam. Instead, the massacre of My Lai and other atrocities resulted in a generation of veterans held in contempt and feared as murderers. Kendrick Oliver writes about the massacre:

[E]ven as the massacre was dominating the news headlines, the conditions for the ethnocentricity which later characterized its memory were already in place. The story of the massacre progressively evolved into a story about Americans, about the burden of blame carried by Calley, Medina, and their men, and about the wider distribution of guilt upwards, through the ranks of those who managed war, and horizontally across American society as a whole. The actual victims of the massacre were displaced from the centre of the debate and concern thus rendered powerless to make their claims upon American memory and conscience stick. (9)

Oliver’s concern, and justifiably so, is with the way in which collective memory emphasizes the suffering of Americans over the suffering of those Vietnamese killed during the Vietnam War. In fact, Oliver’s book, The My Lai Massacre in American

45 For a comprehensive look at the Korean War read David Halberstam’s The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War (2008).
History and Memory (2006), is a prime example of the way in which the Vietnam War is remembered, and such memories shape unconscious attitudes toward veterans as well as the conscious and unconscious views that veterans hold of themselves. Oliver’s writing is a type of memory, one predicated on shame and guilt, feelings so prevalent in the wake of the Vietnam War that the sufferings of Americans and Vietnamese cannot seem to occur simultaneously. Oliver later discusses the experiences of American soldiers:

In Vietnam, horrors were often routine. Whilst the atrocities in Son My may have been exceptional in scale and whilst the personal conduct of most young Americans who fought in the conflict was probably conscientious and humane, the battlefield practices of the US military exaggerated the ordinary viciousness of a civil war to such an extent that the boundaries of ethical behaviour became obscure for many of those concerned. By establishing the body count as the central index of operational success, the command created incentives toward the killing of anyone whose corpse might subsequently be reported as that of any enemy soldier. Meanwhile, even historians keen to rehabilitate the war as a necessary and noble cause have condemned as ‘immoral’ the reliance of American armed forces upon technology-intensive forms of war fighting, including long-distance artillery shelling and bombing from the air, which provided only limited scope for discriminating between legitimate enemy targets and the homes and bodies of South Vietnamese civilians. (11)

I’m not trying to “rehabilitate” the Vietnam War. As I explain in the Introduction, my underlying assumption is that all wars are evil. My concern is with veterans, how they were treated after the Vietnam War, and how they are remembered. Today, when Vietnam Veterans look back upon their wartime experiences, when they search the historical record for their personal places in history, or when the topic of the Vietnam War is broached in casual conversations, these descriptions of violence, inhumanity, and suffering dominate the discourse. I imagine it to be a terrible burden with which to live.

This brief history of the treatment of veteran identity stands, it would seem, in stark contrast to the reception of Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans. Corporations today
tout veteran hiring initiatives. Veterans with access to generous Post-9/11 GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation benefits are welcomed to campuses as sources of revenue. Fear of veteran “sin” is nowhere to be found in the pulpit; veterans enjoy an almost angelic treatment by social conservatives. No longer are veterans considered “sympathizers” or “murderers.” Rather, they’re called “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors,” accepting a privileged role in the minds of their fellow Americans, but occupying a symbolic role in the American unconscious which connotes the opposite of privilege. Access to these titles does not outweigh losing access to self-definition. Veterans are told to reassimilate in what appears to be a culture invested in their success. But they find, ironically and over time, that reassimilation amounts to forever being defined by the time they spent in uniform. The “Wounded Warrior” stereotype asks veterans to perform a character whose traits can be self-destructive and always limiting. Rather than focusing upon the altruistic nature which leads recruits to war, and instead of emphasizing the veteran’s capacities for leadership or education, those labeled “Wounded Warriors” are defined by abstract notions of woundedness, and in a way which is similar to Henry Fleming’s repurposing of the war wound to prove his manhood in Red Badge of Courage. This type of woundedness is rooted in much older, gendered readings of military service which treat woundedness as the opposite of heroism, as evidence of some hidden cowardice. Today, the “Wounded Warrior” and “Hero” stereotypes are nearly interchangeable, but the “Wounded Warrior,” in particular, gains status, or respect, or “manhood” by allowing outsiders to perpetually wrangle with the meanings of wounds which are designed to eschew definition.
Therapeutic Culture: The Entanglement of Veteran Identity with PTSD

In this section, I explain the terms “therapeutic culture” and “therapeutic narratives” as they are defined by scholars such as Tim Aubry, Trysh Travis, and Stevan Weine. My goal is to illustrate how civilians make assumptions about veterans’ wounds. It’s a different form of mythmaking involving what I refer to as the “traumatic assumption,” or the belief that every veteran, in some way, must emerge from war physically or psychologically wounded. One of my central tenets has been that the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary strips veterans of agency, of the right to self-definition by marginalizing their stories, experiences, and lessons to the fringes of society. “Heroes” are marginalized due to patriotic rhetoric and the state’s need to showcase exceptional examples of wartime bravery. If individuals labeled “Heroes” exist openly and honestly regarding military service, they risk not being exceptional enough. “Wounded Warriors,” on the other hand, are never considered exceptional examples; their wounds preclude it. However, the rhetoric which shapes the identities of “Wounded Warriors” is not patriotic; it is “therapeutic.” For “Wounded Warriors,” the risk is not one of failing to be exceptional. Rather, they risk not being wounded enough or in the right way.

The conditions I have described in this dissertation have not emerged in the isolation of military or veterans’ communities. They are products of American culture as a whole. With regard to “Wounded Warriors,” the pressure to exist within the confines of a stereotypical identity is rooted in the pressure to define oneself in terms of traumatic experience. In Rethinking Therapeutic Culture (2015) Aubry and Travis explain,

Our age is therapeutic. If prior generations turned to their local pastors, their first selectmen, or their community elders for help and guidance, the
twenty-first century Americans tend to believe that mental health experts hold the answers to their problems. The well-off willingly seek out therapists and gurus, pursuing the elusive state of happiness that their affluence has, curiously enough, failed to secure. Meanwhile the poor are referred to social workers who vet their mental and moral fitness for government benefits. Just about any individual who violates social norms—by committing violence, using ethnic slurs, or refusing to work or attend school—will invariably be encouraged to see a mental health counselor. And those who lead perfectly conventional lives but nevertheless find themselves frustrated, bored, sad, unfocused, or angry will likely end up, at some point or another, in the same place. Whether we are “in treatment” or simply know people who are we all recognize the jargon. Whether the heartfelt zeal or an ironic shrug, we all acknowledge the importance of “attitude adjustment,” “emotional fulfillment,” and “personal growth.” Why? Because we have made the individual psyche the primary object of our attention. We treat its improper functioning as the principal source of society’s ills and see its balance and well-being as the ultimate goal of our strivings on this earth. (1)

This reading states that therapists, in all of their different forms, and with all of their varying degrees and qualifications, have come to replace clergy, elders, and educators as subject matter experts on the human mind, but also on the human soul. Aubry and Travis argue that “therapeutic culture is an especially American phenomenon” (2), a “complex web of shared assumptions, behaviors, and institutions that brings individuals together and shapes their values and ideals” (3). Social theorists, both liberal and conservative, have criticized “therapeutic culture,” and Aubry and Travis discuss alternative views of this phenomenon, views which indicate such a culture “dupes, demoralizes and pacifies those it claims to help—it deepens their problems rather than resolving them” (4).

Therapeutic culture represents a shift in emphasis. Whereas Americans, such as Henry Fleming in the preceding pages, once sought out challenges in the physical world through which to define themselves, now they look inward, to constantly shifting notions of mental illness and human resilience, locating themselves within a larger narrative of
illness, a story which gives pain meaning by making it part of a collective experience, but which makes participants vulnerable to stereotyping and appropriating mechanisms.

“Wounded Warriors” are a product of therapeutic cultures, paradoxically, because of the clinicians and scholars seeking to make sense of their abstract wounds: “Indeed, the growth of mental health services for soldier and veterans, especially during and after World War II, helped to destigmatize therapy, as huge numbers of purportedly normal individuals availed themselves of it” (Aubry and Travis 7). As I have argued, the “Wounded Warrior” functions on the assumption of trauma. Individuals who model the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype remain silent, sometimes to make wounds appear less threatening, sometimes to make them appear more threatening, but always in service of the veteran’s symbolic function as a repository for memories of war. Indeed, therapeutic culture and the veteran’s symbolic function seem to go hand-in-hand. Veterans are given a choice: remain silent about war, avoiding the triggers and memories of trauma associated with war; or, speak openly about wartime experience, risking the appropriation of their stories—their pain—by a larger collective.

Unlike “Heroes,” who are defined by civilian conceptions of military masculinity and heroism, “Wounded Warriors” are defined by how civilians perceive woundedness, or the lack thereof. In The Red Badge of Courage, Henry worries constantly that he will emerge from war as a coward. In fact, he worries so much that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The protagonist of Crane’s novel never believes in military heroism. He seeks, instead, a wound, “a red badge of courage,” some evidence that he has endured the harsh realities of war. In many cases, “Wounded Warriors” do experience combat. They do have wounds. And they suffer for years after their wars end. However, the way the
“Wounded Warrior” stereotype frames war, as an experience which is *defined by* woundedness, robs veterans of their symbolic authority in the same way that therapeutic culture has the capacity to rob survivors of their testimony. Put another way, therapeutic culture and the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype remove war wounds, physical and mental, from their contexts.

The existence of the “Wounded Warrior” centers on the act of *testimony*. Testimony is the source of the power veterans relinquish when they exist *silently* as “Wounded Warriors.” Stevan Weine defines the act by its “ability to ‘fuse’ or create a shortcut between the private and public worlds, combined with its considerable redemptive promise, have given it a unique therapeutic and cultural power” (143). When discussed in scholarly circles, “testimony” tends to refer to individuals who speak out against atrocity, such as Holocaust survivors, people who survive traumas like rape or attempted murder, and certainly veterans and noncombatants who survive war. Testimony has the therapeutic value of helping survivors reimagine their respective places in the world after trauma. It has the social value of reshaping collective memory. Therapeutic culture, however, includes the confluence of *many* acts of testimony, describing a society *obsessed* with personal narratives of triumph over adversity. But not every veteran’s story is one of triumph. And, sometimes, the needs of the listener do not reflect the need of the veteran storyteller. Veterans experience this dissonance as a pressure to tell stories in which they, too, triumphed over adversity. For example, Bingo, a student veteran introduced earlier in this dissertation, was pressured to present college as a form of therapy. The narratives of “Wounded Warriors” are vague, ignoring negative
aspects of military service such as perpetrator’s guilt or lifelong disabilities so that the story might become one about healing.

When I refer to “veteran storytellers” or “veteran authors and artists,” I am implicating veterans as *survivors* of war, each with the capacity to give testimony. Likewise, therapeutic culture, as a phenomenon stretching beyond veteran subcultures and into mainstream society, informs veteran homecoming by means of audience anticipation. This confluence of expectation and anticipation results in a problem unique to veteran survivors of war: “the traumatic assumption,” or the expectation of war trauma in *every* instance of veteran testimony. The “traumatic assumption” not only influences individual narratives of war, it skews collective understandings of war so that the war veteran returns home pitied by default, irredeemably broken by design, a “Wounded Warrior.” The “Wounded Warrior” stereotype cannot function as a complete identity because it requires veterans to remain in a perpetual state of victimization. Veterans who model the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype unwittingly accept the privileges of conformity and the comfort of silence in exchange for individual rights to testimony.

Unfortunately, remaining silent about one’s past prevents veterans from developing healthy, complete identities—from continuing to evolve as individuals after military service. Children tell stories about themselves to *conceive of* and *relate* who they are to others. As adults, these same children continue telling stories about themselves, evolving as characters to accommodate new lessons, new challenges.46 The implications of omitting memories of war from testimony, or skewing them to approximate collective

definitions of the word “veteran,” are real, not symbolic. Veterans, like everyone else, begin as children, and they do not stop narrating after war ends. Instead, I argue that many veterans adopt either the “Wounded Warrior” or “Hero” stereotype as a place-holder for identity, and these stereotypes prevent further growth. Weine recognizes both the symbolic and the practical implications of survivor testimony:

Although injustice and suffering are nothing new for humankind, the phenomenon of testimony as we know it today is in many respects a product of modernity. Its central ambition—“If I tell my story, I may remake myself, but others and perhaps even the larger public”—is literally “self-centered,” and broadly therapeutic. Its narrative form and its growing prominence in everyday life have fueled the therapeutic critics’ complaint that investment in the personal can come at the expense of the social … Thus if we wish to understand the role testimony plays within therapeutic culture, we must speak not only of the testimony giver’s therapeutic ambitions or of the ways that the act of testifying may reiterate the centrality of the self … It remains uncertain who is looking out for the interests of the testimony story itself as it enters into the public realm. (147)

Weine highlights an integral component of testimony that is often overlooked: it becomes public property. And whereas critics such as Weine work against the appropriation of traumatic narratives, testimony, as I’ve shown in the accounts of veterans provided throughout this dissertation, is always fraught with outside interference. Veterans are not exempt from therapeutic culture; they’re prime examples of its damaging effects. When they bow to pressures from third parties—governments, media, or even fellow veterans calling for a single record of events, they forfeit the rights to their narratives. Often, they experience a growing sense that they’re different; that “the act isn’t working,” or that they’re not meant to exist as more than victims who once wore a military uniform. I believe veteran feelings of “difference” stem from the problems outlined above. Simply put, war wounds have both physical and mental referents; they cannot be summed up by
schools of thought which presume all of the answers regarding the human condition are located in the mind. Further, veterans cannot engage with the outside world or give testimony if the identity they model requires them to exist silently within the parameters of psychological definitions of illness.

Sebastian Junger’s *Tribe* (2016), first discussed in the Introduction, might have benefited from considerations of “traumatic assumptions” and “therapeutic culture.” In describing the experience of veterans entering the VA health care system, he perpetuates the dangerous stereotype that veterans claiming disability benefits for PTSD are cheating the system:

> Horrific experiences are unfortunately a human universal, but long-term impairment from them is not, and despite billions of dollars spent on treatment, roughly half of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have applied for permanent PTSD disability. Since only 10 percent of our armed forces experience actual combat, the majority of vets claiming to suffer from PTSD seem to have been affected by something other than direct exposure to danger. (87)

It’s a simple logic: only a fraction of veterans experience combat, so the record rates of PTSD reported among them must be a fabrication. Junger goes on to explain that “most disability claims are for hearing loss, tinnitus, and PTSD—the latter two of which can be imagined, exaggerated, or even faked” (88). He cites evidence of veterans dropping out of treatment after receiving total disability ratings, listing off the amount of compensation these individuals receive each month, but failing to consider whether or not these “drop outs” are simply able to afford better treatment. He quotes angry veterans, the “real deals” who fantasize about physically assaulting these *fakers*, but he never contemplates whether or not such hostility scares away other veterans who deserve treatment. Nor is there much concern for the overlap between PTSD and other disorders. This particular line of argument within *Tribe* strikes me as similar to efforts by conservative politicians
to recruit minority voters by claiming much-needed social services are the source of their problems. Junger may be correct that veterans risk becoming a “victim class,” but that eventuality is linked to civilian perceptions of veterans, not the amount of compensation veterans receive for fighting wars.47

To be fair, Junger admits that the “vast majority of traumatized veterans are not faking their symptoms” (90). Ultimately, however, his argument leaves me searching for generational or occupational norms attributable to PTSD which I doubt exist. I think we might agree on this point: veterans returning from the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the “Global War on Terror” have different rates of disability and recovery because they returned to very different countries. Junger advances this argument:

Unfortunately, for the past decade American soldiers have returned to a country that displays many indicators of low social resilience. Resources are not shared equally, a quarter of children live in poverty, jobs are hard to get, and minimum wage is almost impossible to live on. Instead of being able to work and contribute to society—a highly therapeutic thing to do—a large percentage of veterans are just offered lifelong disability payments. And they accept, of course—why shouldn’t they? A society that doesn’t distinguish between degrees of trauma can’t expect its warriors to, either. (103)

More likely, veterans’ struggles with reassimilation are a combination of the literal and symbolic limitations placed upon them. Whereas Junger’s overarching thesis about veterans searching for the comforts of tribalism in their postwar lives is a needed addition to discourse concerning veterans, his perpetuation of veteran stereotypes is not. Junger is right to criticize the VA for misdiagnoses. But how does implicating veterans as a disparate group of welfare cases serve them collectively as a culture? I agree with Junger that veterans should resist victimization narratives, but his fears of rampant abuse in the VA healthcare system only exacerbate the guilt felt by deserving veterans who are simply unsure about how their traumas stack up. Among members of any population there will be those who abuse the system. But as one example of a veteran who used his education benefits and disability compensation to support himself while earning a PhD and as an educator who has worked with dozens of veterans also seeking to better themselves, I can state for a fact that those individual fakers do not represent the whole.
Junger correctly questions the meaning of therapy, wondering why factors such as unemployment and low wages are not considered alongside the problems of the mind as factors forestalling veteran reassimilation. Existing symbolically as a veteran does not remove the burden of existing as a civilian. So, it stands to reason that Junger is correct; some of the problems veterans experience during homecoming are also experienced by civilians. As a whole, Junger claims, our society lacks the resilience needed to deal with these problems. I hold that veterans who give testimony about war and what comes after are educators, and the lessons veterans teach absolutely instruct on the topic of resiliency.

Figure 9: The VA’s General Rating Formula for Mental Disorders (1 of 2).

100% … Total occupational and social impairment, due to such symptoms as: gross impairment in thought processes or communication; persistent delusions or hallucinations; grossly inappropriate behavior; persistent danger of hurting self or others; intermittent inability to perform activities of daily living (including maintenance of minimal personal hygiene); disorientation to time or place; memory loss for names of close relatives, own occupation, or own name

70% … Occupational and social impairment, with deficiencies in most areas, such as work, school, family relations, judgment, thinking, or mood, due to such symptoms as: suicidal ideation; obsessional rituals which interfere with routine activities; speech intermittently illogical, obscure, or irrelevant; near-continuous panic or depression affecting the ability to function independently, appropriately and effectively; impaired impulse control (such as unprovoked irritability with periods of violence); spatial disorientation; neglect of personal appearance and hygiene; difficulty in adapting to stressful circumstances (including work or a worklike setting); inability to establish and maintain effective relationships

50% … Occupational and social impairment with reduced reliability and productivity due to such symptoms as: flattened affect; circumstantial, circumlocutory, or stereotyped speech; panic attacks more than once a week; difficulty in understanding complex commands; impairment of short- and long-term memory (e.g., retention of only highly learned material, forgetting to complete tasks); impaired judgment; impaired abstract thinking; disturbances of motivation and mood; difficulty in establishing and maintaining effective work and social relationships

(“38 CFR Book C, Schedule for Rating Disabilities: Mental Disorders”)

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“Degrees of trauma” are among the considerations that go missing when veterans are restricted to symbolic roles in their postwar lives. They’re among the aspects of identity that get misconstrued when veterans try to conform to a larger “therapeutic culture.” Veterans struggle to define themselves after war because their personal experiences of trauma do not fit into pre-established narratives of veteran identity. Or, they experience some form of debilitating shame as a result of never experiencing trauma. As the story of Henry Fleming illustrates, such shame will force veterans to seek out trauma retroactively. Many veterans experience trauma before military service. Many experience it after. The problem with therapeutic culture is that it requires its members to form identities around their traumas. And, as I have shown, veteran identity is always under siege by third parties looking for “Heroes” to praise and “Wounded Warriors” to pity. As stereotypes, veterans lack the ability to learn—let alone teach—resiliency. Veteran silence and conformity persists to the detriment of larger society. Describing trauma separately from veteran identity permits further variations upon that identity, and it allows alternative definitions of the word “veteran” to emerge absent “the traumatic assumption.” PTSD should not dominate discussions of veteran identity. PTSD should inform those discussions, especially when it is an obvious influence in the life of an individual veteran. But discussions of PTSD, as they take place in America’s therapeutic culture, suggest every veteran should be mentally or physical handicapped. Further, therapeutic culture keeps veterans silent by blaming the veteran’s struggle on some deficiency in the human mind, even when wars and those who start them exist as a much simpler, easier to define sources of that struggle.
Testimony vs. “Get Off My Lawn”

I remember Vietnam and Korean War-era veterans greeting a returning unit in Texas in 2005. I had shared a plane with them while on my way home from Iraq to my brother’s funeral. I, too, was in uniform, so it was assumed that I had completed my “tour of duty” and deserved a “hero’s welcome.” Obviously, given the circumstances, I did not feel like a “Hero.” Nor did I feel like usurping praise meant for others. So, during my layover, I avoided the scenes of heartfelt reunion and chatted with the older veterans.

“Start your claims now,” one said.

“I am still waiting on mine,” said another. “Don’t take no for an answer, always appeal.” It took me a while to figure out what they were talking about. My understandings of the world were so very limited when I enlisted that I knew nothing about the VA health care system. The nearest VA hospital to where I grew up was over

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Occupational and social impairment with occasional decrease in work efficiency and intermittent periods of inability to perform occupational tasks (although generally functioning satisfactorily, with routine behavior, self-care, and conversation normal), due to such symptoms as: depressed mood, anxiety, suspiciousness, panic attacks (weekly or less often), chronic sleep impairment, mild memory loss (such as forgetting names, directions, recent events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Occupational and social impairment due to mild or transient symptoms which decrease work efficiency and ability to perform occupational tasks only during periods of significant stress, or; symptoms controlled by continuous medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>A mental condition has been formally diagnosed, but symptoms are not severe enough either to interfere with occupational and social functioning or to require continuous medication</td>
</tr>
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(“38 CFR Book C, Schedule for Rating Disabilities: Mental Disorders”)
an hour away. I’d heard a few things, all bad, and those gentlemen only made the system sound worse. More importantly, for me, was the fact that they were filling in blanks about what it meant to exist as a “veteran.” Specifically, those first lessons taught me that I would return home (eventually, after the funeral, and after I finished my deployment) “wounded,” that my life would revolve around proving that fact.

They weren’t wrong. I’ve since gone through many battles for compensation related to injuries—physical and psychological—that I sustained as a result of serving in Iraq. To be sure, I’ve felt guilt about receiving a check. Writers like Sebastian Junger, with whom I took issue in the previous section, argue that veterans receiving compensation for disabilities, especially those who appeal and try to get the amount they’re owed according to law, are somehow cheating the system. I try to remind myself of the countless hours I had to spend telling and retelling stories of war to establish those claims. I try to remind myself that larger society would not have made benefits available to veterans had they not wanted those benefits to be used. And I’ve proven my case again and again behind closed doors. I fail to see how a significant number of veterans could be so guileful as to meet all the criteria for a 30% rating (Fig. 10), let alone the mental criteria for “total disability” listed at 100% (Fig. 9). A more important question might be, “What are the cumulative effects of forcing veterans to shape stories of military service around narratives of trauma, repeatedly, and for a biased audience such as the Department of Veterans Affairs?”

The word “survivor” is intentionally used when referring to “testimony” because it indicates the giver’s accomplishment. To speak about atrocity, individual trauma, or war robs those experiences of their power. Testimony gives that power to the individual.
It is the power to reshape meaning, to redefine one’s existence, to help others avoid the same. The veterans I met at an airport in Texas were using their stories of struggling with the VA to help me. They engaged in the act of testimony, and it’s likely they did not realize it. The power of testimony is that it drags the unspeakable into the light of day, revealing its ugliness, describing the survivor’s weakness only to show how far that survivor has come. But, given the conditions I have described—therapeutic culture, patriotic myths, and the symbolic function of veterans as repositories for memories of war—is such testimony even possible?

Indeed, the stories told about veterans are often written by others, by civilians more interested in becoming saviors than allowing veterans to reassimilate. Veterans aware of the “traumatic assumption” often use it as a defense mechanism to avoid uncomfortable questions and truths. And, especially in those cases of veterans dealing with PTSD, this defense mechanism feeds the avoidance symptom which gives the condition its staying power. I am not referring to a large-scale phenomenon, but rather local performances of victimhood by individual veterans. The assumptions made about veterans define the characters they perform. For instance, one assumption holds that veterans hate those with the ethnicity of the country against which they fought. Clint Eastwood’s disgruntled Korean War veteran in Gran Torino (2008) is an example. Gran Torino is a film about a veteran trying to reform a teenager who tries to steal his car. A certain level of racism in his portrayal of Walt Kowalski is accepted under the pretense that he suffered brutal trauma at the hands of enemies in the Korean War. Kowalski is acutely aware of this assumption and performs it in his interactions with the outside world. He uses the “traumatic assumption” to keep people at a distance.
Gran Torino is at its core a film about letting go of anger and sadness. Its lessons and thematic elements pertain to human experience, not just veteran experience, echoing the sentiment that veterans have much to teach society as a whole. However, there are some uniquely “veteran” challenges for the protagonist to overcome. Namely, Kowalski must confront the source of his racism: fear. This confrontation within the protagonist corresponds to an external conflict in the real world. In dealings with a young Hmong boy who tries to steal his car, Kowalski develops a relationship with the boy and his family. His veteran “difference,” or that apartness that the veteran feels in relation to civilian society, fades away. Soon the reason for his loneliness—for his veteran-disgruntledness—is revealed as the performance of veteran identity. Kowalski realizes that keeping people at a distance has robbed his life of meaning.

Perhaps the most famous scene from the film comes when Kowalski, pointing a gun at a group of young Asian gang members, utters his famous line, “Get off my lawn.” The line is an homage to the lawn-obsessed, “crazy veteran next door” many children
encountered growing up. But it is also a window into that character’s psyche. Soon after the iconic line, in a matter-of-fact tone, Kowalski states some context, “I blow a hole in your face and then I go in the house... and I sleep like a baby. You can count on that. We used to stack fucks like you five feet high in Korea... use ya for sandbags.” The gang members accept this highly unlikely scenario as fact and retreat. And so the psychological trauma of the veteran in *Gran Torino* is ultimately a source of power. Sure, it forces a gang into retreat in the night in the film, but what about the days, months, and years Kowalski spent performing that character? How much of his life was spent in service of that one moment of power?

Eastwood’s trademark grimace and tendency to drink to excess (Fig. 11) perfectly complement his hardboiled tough veteran character. In fact, it is a character so stereotypical and misunderstood, or so *exceptionally* “veteran” that pity yields to intrigue. Kowalski has a rough exterior, and penetrating that exterior in order to identify with the protagonist results in the audience’s empathy. The more Kowalski reveals about his past, the more his stereotypical façade melts away. He’s not “telling a story” in the literal sense. But in his interactions with those around him, especially in those instances in which the character moves beyond the limitations imposed upon him by his veteran persona, Kowalski begins to self-narrate, continuing to evolve where previously his stereotypical existence prevents it. Kowalski rejoins humanity, and in the process reshapes attitudes toward veterans. His actions employ Weine’s “shortcut,” erasing those boundaries which separate private suffering from public performance. He resists the appropriation of his narrative, an act common in America’s “therapeutic culture,” by dealing directly with the racism and violence assumed to be inextricable from his
identity. In return, the characters in Gran Torino, its audience, even those reading about the film through this third party, must confront Kowalski’s individuality. This scenario is exactly what I mean when I say veteran storytellers do not have to be authors or artists. When veterans are consciously aware of the act, the performance of veteran identity is its own work of art.

**Yellow Birds and the Evolution of Veteran Identity**

In this chapter, I examined the historical treatment of veterans dating back to the American Civil War. As with the “Heroes” of the previous chapter, the work of mythmaking which leads recruits to war once again plays a part in the creation of “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes. And, once again, these stereotypes were found to be rooted in gender bias and essentialist understandings of veteran identity. I argued that the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype ultimately functions like its “Hero” counterpart: devaluing war wounds—mental and physical—so that veterans damaged by war are made invisible, their experiences marginalized, and so that they will exist silently, or at least in passive support of the wars and military actions which will create the next generation of veterans. My reading of The Red Badge of Courage, for example, revealed that cowardice is often defined in patriarchal societies as a feminine trait. I then traced these perceptions to WWI, finding that shell-shocked veterans were likened to the “hysterical women” found in nineteenth century medical literature, and as a result, the mental illnesses of veterans were used to denigrate and marginalize them. In examining WW2 and the wars which followed, I applied the work of scholars such as Tim Aubry, Trysh Travis, and Stevan Weine to discuss therapeutic culture and its effect upon
perceptions of veterans. Whereas testimony and the cultivation of traumatic narratives can, at times, be healing and liberating to survivors of violence, veterans must resist the appropriating effects of third parties.

“Wounded Warriors,” I argued, are particularly prone to such appropriation because of veteran’s symbolic function within society. But also, they are prone to appropriation due to veterans using wounds as means of self-definition, wounds that can only be understood belatedly according to trauma theorists such as Ramadanovic and Caruth. Veterans, I have maintained throughout this dissertation, function symbolically as repositories for memories of war the rest of society would prefer to forget. In place of narratives of war, “Wounded Warriors” are defined by a “traumatic assumption” which holds that all veterans—even “Heroes”—return home from war physically or psychologically wounded, and that each veteran is likely more wounded than the next. Importantly, this assumption leads recruits, members of the military, and veterans to seek out wounds, consciously and unconsciously, which will validate their experiences. Coupled with the avoidance mechanisms written into PTSD, as shown in Clint Eastwood’s character, Walt Kowalski from *Gran Torino*, the “traumatic assumption” allows veterans to exist as stereotypes when such an existence is easier or more comfortable than discussing the truth of war.

In short, the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype, when modeled by veterans in the real world, robs veterans of their rights to self-definition. “Heroes” remain silent because they cannot measure up to the exceptional examples of veterans found in patriotic rhetoric. “Wounded Warriors” remain silent because they cannot fit into neat categories of woundedness. I will conclude this chapter with a reading of Kevin Powers’s *The
Yellow Birds (2013), a novel not dissimilar to Crane’s, except that the audience’s anticipation of cowardice is replaced with an anticipation of war trauma. In this final example, I demonstrate how America’s therapeutic culture has come to shape war novels in the same way that stereotypical notions of feminine weakness shaped representations of war in the nineteenth-and-twentieth centuries. In Crane’s novel, Henry Fleming’s fear of becoming a coward results in a self-fulfilling prophesy. In Powers’s novel, Private Bartle is a character defined by the audience’s anticipation of war trauma, which, in its own way, results in another self-fulfilling prophesy.

Kevin Powers’s novel The Yellow Birds has been hailed as “compact and powerful as a footlocker full of ammo” by Benjamin Percy, writing for the The New York Times shortly after the book’s release in 2012. Powers, who enlisted in the US Army at the age of 17 and went on to deploy to Iraq, tells his story through the remove of fictional characters. The protagonist, twenty-one-year-old Private Bartle, befriends a seventeen-year-old Private Murph not long before deploying to Al Tafar, Iraq, in 2004. The sergeant in charge of these two hopelessly young and inexperienced privates is Sgt. Sterling, an experienced veteran who “had been to Iraq already, on the first push north out of Kuwait, and had been decorated, so even the higher-ups looked at him with admiration” (33). The first chapter of Yellow Birds, a traditional in medias res telling of a combat mission in 2004, is followed by a chapter that introduces these three soldiers to each other. In the third chapter, Murph hasn’t survived the deployment; he hovers like a ghost over the plot, a ghost whose backstory is filled in through the psychological symptoms of grief, loss, and post-traumatic stress found often among those who survive war.
Bartle reveals much about the intersections of “therapeutic culture” and veteran identity. Specifically, his story must conform to the audience’s expectation that trauma will emerge as a foundational part of his identity. Bartle’s foil is Sterling, who exists at a different stage of self-definition. Sterling, as Powers implies through his backstory and demeanor, is already haunted by war, and his behavior is subject to its influence. Bartle’s struggle, on the other hand, is to craft his own subjectivity in the face of similar trauma, even as that trauma is alluded to during the plot’s development. Bartle is expected to endure trauma by an audience lacking knowledge about his wartime experiences. In *Yellow Birds* that trauma is guaranteed.

The question posed to the reader is this: “Will Bartle’s experiences in Iraq result in his ending up like Sterling?” Post-traumatic symptoms haunt the plot of *Yellow Birds* as anticipation for an answer to this question. Percy addresses that anticipation in his *New York Times* review as he comments on Powers’s leaving the audience to guess about the circumstances of Murph’s death:

This serves the story in two ways. First, it turns readers into active participants, enlisting them in a sense as co-authors who fit together the many memories and guess at what terrible secret lies in wait, the truth behind Murphy’s death. Because they lean forward instead of back, because they participate in piecing together the puzzle, they are made more culpable. (4)

Percy’s claim that *Yellow Birds* requires readers to recognize their own culpability for war fits into the theories of collective memory and therapeutic culture discussed in this chapter. I have levied the same culpability upon those civilians and veterans responsible for creating and maintaining “Wounded Warrior” subjectivity. Implicating the reader is certainly not new to war literature. And, in *The Yellow Birds*, the reader is meant to piece together Bartle’s pain so that the narrative might take shape. In this case, does a largely
civilian audience’s power to construct Bartle’s narrative in *Yellow Birds* limit him as character? Does this veteran find a source of power in the audience’s willingness to help him work through his trauma? Or, does Bartle relinquish power along with the rights to his own subjectivity? The answers to these questions, though centered on a fictional character, should explain something about veteran narratives and the importance of the veteran author.

A relationship between power and woundedness exists. Walt Kowalski used others’ assumptions about his wounds to keep them at a distance. However, this power is not limited to the veteran population. In fact, those civilians responsible for spinning “Wounded Warrior” narratives around individuals like Bartle may think they are doing their veteran counterparts a favor. They may believe that such narratives are the norm for veterans, that by speaking openly about veteran woundedness they are somehow normalizing such discussions. However, these narratives ultimately rob veterans of the freedom of self-definition and deliver that power, instead, to civilians.

Eva Illouz argues that traumatic narratives are sources of power in *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007). Like Weine, Illouz recognizes both “therapeutic culture” and testimony’s potential for individual and collective healing. Freud, as read by Illouz, psychologized normality (8) before self-help literature emerged, providing “vocabularies through which the self understands itself” (10). Next, psychology moved from the upper class to the military, from the military to the workplace, and finally to the individual in 1946 with the National Mental Health Act (25). Psychologists became “healers of the psyche” (25) who instituted changes in the workplace and redefined masculinity by requiring male leaders to take on “feminine
attributes—such as paying attention to emotions, controlling anger, and listening sympathetically to others” (15-16). In the end, Illouz claims that this shift in gender normativity “democratized the power-ridden relations between workers and managers and instilled the new belief that one’s personality—individually of social status—was the key to social and managerial success” (17). This belief transcended the workplace and took root on a national level, realigning “emotional cultures” (23) and turning empathy and introspection into valued commodities. Illouz’s description of therapeutic culture explains how war wounds, once viewed as shameful and signs of femininity among members of hypermasculine military cultures, were ameliorated through a shift of emphasis to the psychological experience of trauma.

Illouz’s account helps to elucidate the dynamic of *Yellow Birds*, a novel which explains the transformation of an active duty soldier into a “veteran.” Not only does the novel provide the protagonist/antagonist dynamic in the form of a “worker” and a “manager,” but it is a lack of what Illouz labels “feminine attributes” which causes much of their strife. This combination of feminine attributes and veteran identity is a far cry from depictions of femininity and cowardice, as shown in Crane’s novel at the beginning of this chapter. Illouz engages with social theorists who recognize that “modernity and capitalism…created a form of emotional numbness which separated people from one another, from their community and from their own deep selves” (1). Indeed, these divisions were what Aubry and Travis revealed in the previous sections in describing the appropriating effects of therapeutic culture. Illouz shows that emotions are intrinsic parts of capitalism that follow “the logic of economic relations and exchange” (5). The framework guiding these relations resembles a “therapeutic narrative,” one which
intertwines victimhood with self-help, fostering an environment where the individual is free to both create and cure his or her own misery. That individual needs only to find some physical referent, some “red badge of courage” through which to explain preexisting psychological trauma.

Veterans differ from civilians in this last point. “Wounded Warriors” are not expected to find a cure because the wound itself belongs to the state; it is commodified and injected into the currency of emotional capitalism, of “therapeutic culture.” The wounds of “Wounded Warriors” are their defining traits. They’re not something they want to give up because, in many cases, they represent a form of power, or at least a firmly entrenched avoidance mechanism. In other words, veterans are expected suffer in silence until a time yet-to-be-determined. That said, this duality—this ability to create and cure one’s own misery—is present in *Yellow Birds*. The severity of the impending trauma is underscored in the work’s second chapter, most clearly in the innocence and youth of the novel’s two main characters, Bartle and Murph. In the third chapter, when Bartle and Sterling leave the war to deal with its aftermath, the trauma takes shape as one of loss. The remaining chapters, then, can only be a working through, a recovery of those repressed chapters—those traumatic sequences resulting in the loss of Murph. Powers’s plot structure is a therapeutic narrative.

Paradoxically, Sgt. Sterling is defined by a lack of those “feminine attributes” now attributed to psychological resilience. This lack also positions Sterling as Bartle’s antagonist. Not long after Bartle is introduced to combat in the first chapter, the reader is introduced to Sgt. Sterling: “I hated him. I hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination. But more than that, I hated the way he was necessary, how I
needed him to jar me into action even when they were trying to kill me” (19). The reader is reintroduced to Sgt. Sterling in the second chapter, which takes place in 2003, before the deployment. He dresses down the two privates, especially the seventeen-year-old Murph. When Bartle promises Murph’s mother that he will bring her son home alive, a switch flips in the sergeant and he knocks Bartle to the ground, striking him twice in the face, saying, “Report me if you want. I don’t fucking care anymore” (48). Sgt. Sterling refuses to accept the realigned “emotional culture” described by Illouz. His actions are excused, however, because he is only capable of achieving what is possible for a stereotype, a “Wounded Warrior.”

Somehow, somewhere in his first deployment, the gifts of empathy and introspection were taken away from Sterling. At least, this much is implied by the fact that Sterling is a war veteran. The “Wounded Warrior” subjectivity forming around Bartle has an example to draw upon. It is clear, before trauma emerges in the narrative, that those characteristics missing in Sterling will be those that Bartle struggles to maintain. Those “feminine attributes” anchoring him to home and peace are also at stake because Sgt. Sterling, his leader, views them as a threat.

In Yellow Birds’ third chapter, Bartle and Sterling, along with their unit, stop in Germany on their way home. Though restricted to base for acclimation, Bartle decides to go AWOL (Absent Without Leave) for the evening, going out instead to explore the nearby town of Kaiserslautern. He takes a cab, experiencing during the ride what can only be described as a panic attack:

As I looked out onto the trees that edged the road, my muscles tensed and I began to sweat. I knew where I was: a road in Germany, AWOL, waiting for the flight back to the States. But my body did not: a road, the edge of it, and another day. My fingers closed around a rifle that was not there. I
told them the rifle was not supposed to be there, but my fingers would not
listen, and they kept closing around the space where my rifle was
supposed to be and I continued to sweat and my heart was beating much
faster than I thought reasonable. (53-54)

In the cab ride sequence lie all the hallmarks of combat, minus the actual combat.
Bartle’s struggle is a psychological one. But his behavior—the decision to pretend that he
is holding a rifle—is performative. The imaginary rifle is helpful to Bartle because its
real presence in combat once provided him with a sense of security and agency. Just
because the rifle is imagined, and just because Bartle’s behavior is performative, does not
mean that his psychological turmoil during the cab ride is any less real.

Bartle’s pain is clear to a priest he encounters in a church after his cab ride. The
priest tells Bartle he looks “troubled,” and offers to listen should the soldier want to talk.
Bartle avoids the conversation, leaving with the priest’s advice: “You are only as sick as
your secrets” (54). It should come as no surprise that this saying is commonly used in
Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The priest automatically assumes two things: 1) Bartle
is a veteran (a likely scenario, given his age, speech, demeanor, and location in
Germany); 2) Bartle is an alcoholic (much less likely, unless the priest works from the
assumption that all veterans are alcoholics). Bartle’s silence perpetuates the lie, but his
silence also allows him to avoid further reminiscences of war. The traumatic narrative
forming around Bartle is one that excuses both his negative emotions and his negative
behaviors. The priest, it would seem, picks up on this fact and offers the young soldier a
warning about the road he is travelling. In effect, the priest warns Bartle not to give into
the forces compelling him toward silence and self-destruction.
If, as Illouz indicates, “identity is found and expressed in the experience of suffering and in the understanding of emotions gained in the telling of the story” (53), then Sgt. Sterling’s flaws are predictable in *Yellow Birds’s* third chapter. When Bartle makes his way to a brothel after his interaction with the priest, Sterling emerges with a crash: “Coming down the steps, careening from wall to wall, was Sergeant Sterling … He was shirtless and bleeding from the side of his mouth” (66). He tells Bartle that he’s “[l]iving the fucking dream” (66) as he proceeds to assault the woman working the bar, threatening her to the point of crying because she has threatened to report Bartle as AWOL. Both Bartle and Sterling are off base in opposition to the standing orders of their supervisors. They try, briefly, to escape the military, to escape memory. But the first thing the sergeant wants to talk about is the look on Murph’s face when “that hajji blew herself up in the DFAC,” or dining facility (67). He’s in a bad way. And it has everything to do with Murph, the preordained topic of the conversation between Sterling and his soldier. The subject of their deceased comrade must inform every conversation between the two. There’s no “traumatic assumption.” Murph has already died. The plot functions by inserting a real trauma where previously the audience had only an assumption.

Also preordained, however, is Sterling’s inability to be anything other than a “Wounded Warrior.” Though Powers has revealed very little of their war at this point in the novel, the “negative emotions” and attributes of Bartle and Sterling are more than accepted, they’re accounted for as parts of a “therapeutic narrative.” Bartle’s struggle, again, will be to avoid the trap that has already ensnared Sterling; his trauma will either result in personal growth or he will give in to the pressures of silence and conformity which inform a “Wounded Warrior” identity.
In conclusion, it is the reader who has the power to excuse the behavior of these two soldiers. Further, granting this power to the reader mimics how another form of power is taken away from veterans in the real world. *Yellow Birds* is a story of catharsis. But it engages its civilian readers in the same way the Wounded Warrior Project engages potential donors. *Yellow Birds* pressures its civilian readers to anticipate Bartle’s trauma, just as donors to the non-profit organization anticipate the wounds of soldiers their donations are meant to help. The knee-jerk reaction of the reader is to steer young Bartle down the path of the “Wounded Warrior.” Civilian readers encourage Bartle’s silence so that they can imagine a war narrative that they deem appropriate. In other words, readers of the novel perceive Bartle’s mental state, make their own assessment, and then imagine Murph’s death as violent on a scale which corresponds with their preconceived notions. It’s a circular way of defining veteran identity which omits the actual veteran. This happens to veterans in the real world every day. It should be the veteran’s role to explain war. Veteran identity should not be defined by the guess work of “traumatic assumptions.” And veteran self-definition should be capable outside of the narrow parameters defined by America’s “therapeutic culture.”
EXAMPLE

Suzanne: The Veteran Storyteller

Suzanne Rancourt says that she learned to “swim underwater at an extremely young age.” She also “had to be resuscitated numerous times,” resulting in out-of-body experiences that became “second nature.” These were among the first things she told me after I said I wanted to offer her as my example in this section on the veteran storyteller. I met Suzanne at the first Military Experience and the Arts (MEA) symposium in 2012. She certainly stood out. Amidst a group dominated by male veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, Suzanne strode in barefooted, wearing the flowing skirt of a 1960s flower child, unmistakably proud of the tightly bound, grey braid extending the length of her back. But it wasn’t her appearance that made me follow her work closely during my five years as the Editor-in-Chief of MEA. Suzanne’s poetry and prose is structurally and lyrically exceptional, and her writing presents military identity as fluid, as something informed by the veteran’s life before service and after. As such, her work is accessible to both veterans and non-veterans; it invites genuine dialogue between both parties by refusing to acknowledge the existence of “civilian” experience or “veteran” experience, replacing both, instead, with “human” experience.
Veterans like Suzanne work against silence. The mechanisms that relegate veterans to a generic “Hero” or “Wounded Warrior” identity have no place in their literature and artwork. I took it as my personal mission to help veteran storytellers gain exposure during my time with MEA. A few in-class writing assignments grew into a campus journal and quickly evolved: we published more than 500 works of fiction, non-fiction, artwork, poetry, and research in eight edited collections during my tenure. Three more collections have been published since I stepped down in spring 2015. MEA has discovered hundreds of veterans across the world looking for an outlet—a community in which they could share their works. The outside world simply wouldn’t acknowledge them.

Publishers serve as gate keepers, rejecting works that do not conform to their criteria. Veterans willing and able to share their stories quickly find that not fitting a certain mold precludes them from contributing to national dialogue on the very military they experienced firsthand. Criteria for exclusion includes the exaltation of particular forms of prose by affluent MFA programs, the market mindset of agents catering to a “war weary” audience (at least, that was the excuse given to me on several occasions), but mostly mainstream publishing venues demanding only those stories which fit into the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” molds. Publishers of veterans want three things: war porn, victimization narratives, and feel-good stories.

These problems increase exponentially when veterans with important stories to tell are limited by disability. I founded MEA on a single principal: To help any veteran publish high-quality prose, poetry, and artwork. Its staff of dozens, including educators, professional authors, clinicians, and military veterans, continue working with anyone
willing to put in the effort. MEA doesn’t publish everything. Instead, they give veterans access to the skills, training, and mentors needed to get their works where they need to be. They help veterans put their best foot forward. Suzanne is a prime example of the work organizations like MEA have undertaken. Though an experienced author with several publications under her belt, she came to us with a story that was incredibly difficult to write. It took nearly three years of drafts; she worked with three different editors, and the end product certainly made all parties proud.

“The Bear That Stands”—her work of short non-fiction that details her rape by a Navy sailor, the deaths of lovers and family, and her acknowledgement to herself that she needed to work through these things—begins with Suzanne standing at her kitchen table, wondering why “some people don’t understand the word no” (29). Fed up with a stalker’s intrusions, threats, and acts of vandalism on her property, she finds herself in a closet, fumbling through the dark in order to locate “the familiar” (30), a weapon which awakens a military identity she’d struggled for years to bury:

A tingling, an unexpected steadiness, a clarity of action, a defined discipline of fingertips, a unified moment, all in my hands. Kinesthetic. Tactile. Warm wood, cold steel. Exhaustion, exhilaration, profound focus. I don’t know why this happens. Of course, that’s a lie. What I’m really saying is that I know exactly why this happens and where this thought could lead me. There are dark places that I have done my best to cap over with tombstones. Places that I simply don’t want to visit anymore. Or places that I thought had been thoroughly buried and mulched. Then something happens, catches me off guard. Me, off guard! (30)

Suzanne loads “the familiar,” “creating a solid plan” (47) in the two kitchen table sequences that bookend the story. At first, it appears as though “The Bear That Stands” will be one of the veteran returning to violence. But Suzanne is above such stereotypes. She nuances the story, locating in the weapon both strength and the pain she sought to
bury along with her military past. “The Bear That Stands” is less about violence and more about learning to separate the strength from the pain.

Between the decisions made at that kitchen table are a number of flashbacks. She describes Terry, a boyfriend whose death resulted in her decision to join the Marine Corps: “My first love was my first loss. I still have every letter that he sent to me from Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, S.C. Let’s call him Williams, Terry E. [referencing the military’s unaffectionate use of names] DOB 24 April 1958” (31). Terry is “the third of six” (33) sudden deaths endured by Suzanne before she decides to enlist. She’s assigned to “an 81 mm mortar platoon as a photojournalist” (33), describing both camaraderie and the difficulty of serving in a military just beginning to open itself to women. Along with mentions of racial strife and drug use, it’s clear immediately that Suzanne is not interested in whitewashing the military’s imperfections.

A short time after enlisting, she wakes up to

a tornado in my head and a man on top of me. His pockmarked face so close I remember the large pores and oily skin that smelt like rancid fry-o-lators. His narrow, bony hips pumped a frenetic rhythm and pressure. Pressure from his pelvis, pressure from his abdomen, chest, and shoulders, pressure from his mouth on my face, on my mouth, a thick slobbering tongue in my mouth that dragged across my face as my head flailed side to side. I was mumbling, and pushing with my forearms at his throat. (34-35)

It’s not clear in the story whether Suzanne was drugged or clubbed over the head and dragged back to that barracks room. But “his face, black eyebrows too close together, his bony-ass rabbit-pumping pelvis, smells, and the pounding on the door” are vividly accounted for in the story (35). The “pounding on the door” is the frantic effort of “two Marine brothers,” and as the story continues, their concern exists in stark contrast to a military institution indifferent to the crime inflicted upon Suzanne.
Her rape is traumatic in two ways, with the first being the rape itself and the second being the treatment she receives because of it. Suzanne’s ostracism begins when a new officer arrives in her unit. He repeatedly makes sexual advances, and after lodging a formal complaint, Suzanne is given the choice of remaining silent or fighting against cultural norms much larger than herself. The officer accuses her first of stealing, then of malingering. But Suzanne stands her ground. And her decision to fight ends with the male officer’s early retirement. Unfortunately, the events also force Suzanne out of the military, a separation she likens to the deaths in her story. In addition to Terry, Suzanne discusses her mother’s death and that of Jaime, “a Vietnam vet, 101st Airborne, combat wounded. He always said, ‘If you didn’t have a drug problem before you went through Phang Rang hospital, you did when you left’” (40). In dealing with each death, Suzanne’s identity remains fluid. Her military experience influences the way she came to interpret the death of her mother when Suzanne was a child. That death influences the way she understands the deaths of Terry and Jaime. And the rape which results in her discharge from the military, which Suzanne considers a form of death, is worked through in a story that understands the psyche as intrinsically bound to its own past, present, and future.

“Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors” do not have this option. In accepting silence in exchange for patriotism, they limit themselves to the past. As such, they deprive themselves of the kind of catharsis present in “The Bear That Stands.” The story itself undermines that silencing exchange. Its protagonist is more “human” than “veteran.” Her pain is something capable of instructing civilians. It is not put onto a pedestal and hermetically sealed off as the trauma experienced by veterans who “don’t like to talk about it.” Suzanne, as a veteran storyteller, invites her readers into a story about the
present. She refuses to be confined to the past. And the steady progression forward to that kitchen table in 2011 suggests that she is capable of charting her own future. She’s not a victim, a hero, or a bystander. She is Suzanne Rancourt: an individual.

The weapon Suzanne pulls from the closet is a form of self-protection. But it represents the intricate weave of strength and pain associated with her past. First, she explains how, after her discharge from the Marines, she was beaten daily by her first husband. Suzanne explains how she stood up to that abuser, just as she stood up to the male military officer in the Marine Corps, and finally she applies those experiences to her present problem with a stalker: “He thought he had found a victim, easy prey, but had woken a sleeping bear. The rage, indignation, memories, flooded my mind” (47). Then, as Suzanne steps out of her front door the “world shift[s] like Code Red alarms, flashing lights: OUT OF CONTEXT!!! OUT OF CONTEXT!!! I stopped. What was I doing?!?” (48). In this moment of clarity Suzanne recognizes that the indoctrination and training that taught her to respond to threats with deadly violence has no place in the civilized world. But the threat itself is not entirely what awoke the bear. It was that her stalker, even in the civilized world, more closely resembles the rapist from her past. Even the villain in her story proves that military and civilian cultures are not sealed off from each other. Further, a culture which permits such evil to exist extends throughout the military and into civilian society. This acknowledgement renders idealized perceptions of veterans impossible.

So what, then, is “OUT OF CONTEXT”? I argue that it is the myth of national unity, the pressure put upon veterans to remain silent about their experiences when those experiences do not match societal expectations or patriotic myths. As stated earlier, the
myth of national unity is similar to the doctrine of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism holds that America has a special role in human history, that America has a special role in humanity’s future. Suzanne’s reaction itself is not out of context. Idealized notions of America, veterans, and reassimilation are out of context. The stalker would be “easy prey” for someone with Suzanne’s training. But silence is more insidious: “There are only so many casket flags a person can receive before closing the heart to the various vulnerabilities of daily living some folks call ‘normal.’ I thought I had removed myself from the arduous exposures of emotional contact with others” (31). Recognizing that veterans do not stop living after military service is essential to Suzanne’s survival. Eventually, she turns to the veteran community for help:

I realized I needed help. I realized something was “not correct” and I had to ask people to help me, people young enough to be my grandkids for Christ’s sake. The next generation. I began writing again, connected with other female vets, participated in Art Reach: Project America, attended expressive arts experiential retreats and Military Experience and the Arts conferences. And I began to remember. I chose people and groups wisely, people who understood the harsh dichotomies of military and civilian cultures. I chose the military, where someone always had my six, where I was safe to share without the infamous and political “therapeutic repercussions.” (46)

Immediately, these words reinforce the fact that a clear dichotomy between “sick” and “better” does not exist. Unlike the narrative constructed around Bingo in the previous section, Suzanne’s story doesn’t present itself as evidence of a panacea. At the end of her story, that “something” which Suzanne recognizes as “not correct” within herself remains. She finds community. She becomes aware of both the strengths and traumas wrapped up in her military identity. But her story remains open-ended: “I refuse to forget. I refuse to drink the waters of Lethe because my survival is proof of existence. Atrocities
happened, horror happened, and it is my duty to speak, to defend and protect, my family, my home, myself. Warriors have not died in vain” (48). Her veteran identity is not silent. Her future is not written off as an eventual reassimilation that will never come. The veteran in “The Bear That Stands” exists now, learning, growing, and asking her readers to do the same.
CHAPTER THREE

Veteran Storytellers

“You’ll pretend that you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.”

Kurt Vonnegut – Slaughterhouse Five, or The Children’s Crusade (1969)

In the introduction, I set out to create “a theory of veteran identity.” However, it has never been my desire to render that theory complete. Rather, the concepts outlined in this dissertation are meant as opening statements in what I hope will become a larger debate about the symbolic roles veterans play in their postwar lives. My argument remains: war recreates itself with each generation, first by luring disadvantaged youths into military service with myths of heroism, later by appropriating the symbolic authority granted to them as “veterans.” Despite centuries of literary and artistic depictions of the horrors of war, contemporary representations of war and homecoming provide veterans with only two forms of identity to model: the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior.” These identities fail to account for the unique obstacles faced in each veteran’s attempt to rejoin society. They do not provide veterans with outlets for the altruism and desire to grow into
leaders instilled in military service. They are symbolic positions created to sustain war, not the veteran. Stereotyping and placating veterans—the “thank you for your service” urge of the twenty-first century—robs them of the moral authority to comment on the wars they fight, but also the right to self-definition, the agency which leads young men and women to war in the first place.

Chapters One and Two deal with the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes, respectively. This chapter examines “Veteran Storytellers,” and I begin with a few of my own stories to explain the veteran’s feelings of “difference,” a feeling which took shape in my relationship with my brother as both a distancing mechanism and a form of power. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I draw upon works of nonfiction, fiction, and artwork created by contributors to Military Experience and the Arts (MEA). I argue that MEA authors and artists—veteran storytellers—recognize veteran “difference,” the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary, and the forces of appropriation, dealing with them thematically in their works, providing veterans with alternative examples of veteran identity to model in the process. For the veteran authors and artists featured in this chapter, organizations such as MEA are a platform from which they can engage in dialogue with civilian and veteran audiences alike. Communities which form around acts of written and artistic expression provide outlets for the veteran’s innate altruism, and the work of editing and managing such communities, I will show, is educational, reshaping attitudes and perceptions based upon stereotypes so that they more closely approximate the realities of veteran homecoming.

I wrote about my younger brother, Josh, and his decision to join the military in Chapter One. Now, I want to return briefly to that story, to describe what came after his
decision to enlist and to explain how we came to perceive each other differently after he completed Basic Training. Josh graduated from the United States Navy’s boot camp not long after I wrote the first draft of the introduction to this dissertation in 2016. As I explain in Chapter One, he had dreams of becoming a fighter pilot. Like a lot of teenagers, he wanted to become his own version of Top Gun’s “Maverick.” Oddly enough, he ended up as a submariner, and he completed a highly-secretive first deployment from Fall 2016 to Spring 2017. So, instead of flying above the clouds looking for Kenny Loggins’s “Danger Zone,” he ended up doing the exact opposite: floating under the sea, waiting for danger to find him, all while those of us back home hoped it never would.

We exchanged hand-written letters in the weeks leading up to his graduation from boot camp. And, as our correspondence progressed, I learned of the various physical and psychological programming techniques used to transform civilian teenagers into adult sailors. In all cases, Josh expressed dissatisfaction with himself. He worried until the last day of training that he would fail. In his letters, he explained how he could break an unwritten rule, fail to live up to the standards of physical and psychological tests, or simply get sent back to repeat some prior stage of training. Before he left for the Naval Training Station in Great Lakes, Illinois, I did my best to prepare him, knowing all along that the deciding factor wouldn’t be innate physical ability or mental intelligence. Rather, Josh would have to submit. He would have to stop thinking like an individual, trust his chain of command, and embrace the military as an institution invested in his success. I told him, “At some point you just have to wake up and accept the fact that you signed
your ass over to them for four years. You no longer have any choice in the matter. You do what you’re told.”

The letters I sent were no doubt irrelevant by the time they arrived. Josh, like millions of sailors before him, sped through training and indoctrination while life back home crawled at a snail’s pace. Sticking with generalities and framing my responses around his own words, I reminded my brother that “feeling like a fuck up” was “necessary for the brainwashing to take hold.” I tried to insert logic, asking him if he really thought himself a modicum worse than the worst sailor to ever graduate. At the end of each letter I wrote, “I remain confident in your ability to succeed.” Truth be told, I was scared to death that he would fail. I knew I was his biggest inspiration for joining. I took him to each recruiter’s station and dropped him off at the processing center before he left. And, because I’d seen more than one life spiral downward after failing to live up to the military’s exacting standards, I knew I’d bear a large deal of the blame if Josh came home the wrong way.

Josh succeeded, of course, and it was as though the dark thoughts penned in his letters were instantaneously erased from his memory. Despite nearly half of my own basic training cohort’s failure to graduate due to physical injuries or, as their records now show, “failure to adapt,” I remember basic training fondly. It’s actually quite easy when one gives up on the trappings of individuality. It’s not so bad when you realize that everyone is being belittled, embarrassed, and bullied into submission. My fellow recruits, those who fled or took enough over-the-counter medications to be deemed suicidal, never reached those conclusions. Those of us who remained at the end laughed when a drill sergeant suggested that those troops on “suicide watch” could have tied the cords of the
floor buffers around their necks and tossed the machine out the third story window. He knew, and we knew, that they just wanted to go home but were too ashamed to ask.

“I felt the same way, and so does everyone around you,” I replied in one letter particularly driven by my brother’s fear of failure. “Of course I had self-doubts,” I wrote, even as I tried to figure out where he’d heard otherwise. I expected him to be free of the burden such expectations bring with them if he graduated. And when I drove our parents to his graduation, I brought along his letters.

“How did you know I would want them?” he asked.

“Because I’ve been there. Now, get rid of them along with the rest of your self-doubt,” I smiled. Performing the seasoned veteran was fun. I’d thought long and hard about the line I would deliver when I handed him those letters. I believe the “self-doubt” bit was something I heard Captain Picard tell Lieutenant Commander Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Josh didn’t need to know that I had gotten this bit of wisdom from a socially constructed version of mature military identity. And after leaving me with our parents to spend a moment alone, he returned without the letters and with some assuredness that I would take the secret of his short-lived lack of confidence to the grave.

Josh’s day of “liberty” was as much character performance as heartfelt reunion—for both of us. Our parents were one audience. For them, my brother stood straight and proud. He treated his uniform as though it were sacred, keeping it a considerable distance away from their cigarette smoke. He tensed up when they asked him to return affection. Later, as night crept up in the hotel room Josh and I shared, it became clear that we were also performing for each other.
“I’ve already decided that I am going to do my four years and join the Army,” Josh told me as he compulsively folded the room’s unused towels.

“How would you do that?” I asked.

“Because I’ll never be able to match what you did with my current job.”

“Match me how?”

He fumbled around with a few words before implying that it was my “trauma” he was after. I’d never made the fact that I have PTSD a secret to Josh. But I found it disheartening, perhaps a bit ironic, especially on the day of his graduation, that Josh thought he’d have to become traumatized in a warzone in order to win my approval—to win his own approval. I also remembered a conversation at a steakhouse when Josh was sixteen, when the first inklings of a decision to enlist in the military began to surface.

“I want to join the military. I mean, I think I’d be good at it. But I don’t want to end up like you.”

“End up like me, how?”

“You know. Always looking around the room. Nervous. Waiting for something bad to happen.” I loosened the grip I had on an unused steak knife, raising my eyes to meet my brother’s, playing my demeanor off as a joke that Josh wouldn’t truly get until he became a sailor two years later.

When that time came—when Josh, absent his chain of command and fellow sailors, thought he needed to withhold affection and fold unused towels, he said, “I respect you as my superior now.” He made several references to “the old military” when I brought up my experiences. “It’s different now,” he kept saying. I saw a lot of myself in him. I remembered treating older veterans the same way. In my mind, their testimonies
were shrouded in mystery. All I knew for sure was that every veteran to wear a uniform before me was tougher, had suffered more, and had dispatched more enemies of freedom than my generation could ever hope to dispatch. Josh saw me the same way and it truly bothered me that such a shroud had been draped between us. I know now that Wilfred Owen’s “old Lie” feeds upon this assumption; the ability to recruit youths with promises of glory has always been in literature. I know now that the claim to fame of “The Greatest Generation” isn’t the rate at which they fired rounds during combat, but rather, the resilience they displayed after war and during homecoming. I needed Josh to avoid defining himself solely based upon military service. He needed to see the military as one stage in his life. He needed to know that he would continue evolving after his time in the military ended.

In other ways, his training made us more similar. We spoke the language of drill and ceremony. His humor had darkened a shade closer to my own. And we could both lament the slow-moving wheels of military bureaucracy. But Josh didn’t understand my psychological wounds. Instead, he saw my PTSD as a set of character traits to embrace. He wanted to be the seasoned veteran sitting in a steakhouse opposite a naïve sixteen year old. In a hotel room just north of Chicago Josh found glory and honor in the parts of me I felt were damaged. Had the United States Navy produced a sailor that, for some godforsaken reason, thought PTSD was a badge of courage? Or, was it the culture Josh came from that made him yearn for those traits I attribute to PTSD? How much of a role did his older brother play?
Interpellation

Before joining the military, Josh saw veteran identity only as a source of power. At some point, he decided that he wanted veteran “difference” for himself. He likely saw me as an outsider, the one constantly being “thanked for his service” at Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners with the extended family. He might have attributed my success as a college student to my military training (and I must admit, as someone who dropped out of college before joining the military, the self-discipline I honed in uniform certainly played a role in that success). It might’ve been the GI Bill, the disability compensation, or any number of incentives that ultimately sold him. But I am more interested in the moment that he saw me as someone other than the brother who, as thirteen years his senior, helped him learn to walk, wrestled with him as a toddler, and taught him his first curse words. At what point did I begin to exist as a “veteran” in his mind? And what did my behavior tell him about veterans?

Here’s a story I am ashamed to tell. I’d been out of the Army for two months. Josh, ten years old at the time, kept pestering my fiancée—playing jokes, ribbing, vying for the affections of his long-lost brother. I asked him to stop. My fiancée told me to make him stop. Suddenly, I grabbed a plastic ketchup bottle and smacked him across the face. I didn’t hit him hard. His pride was hurt more than anything. But it was enough to make him run to our mother in tears. She shouted at me, telling me “not to lay a finger on that boy ever again.” I knew I was wrong, but I yelled back some gibberish about “respect” and “discipline.” She dropped the issue. I don’t think I ever apologized, at least not until he was older.
PTSD is no excuse for my behavior. My fiancée and I found an apartment the next day. And the event has become an unfortunate part of the relationship I share with my brother. Sure, we joke about it now. And I’ve even offered to let him return the favor on more than one occasion. But hitting him with that ketchup bottle, no matter how I look at it, stands out to me as the moment I first acted against my best interest to perform veteran identity. The circumstances were not dissimilar to those experienced by Walt Kowalski in the last chapter. I was performing the seasoned veteran, with all of its ugliness and violence and instability, to keep my brother at a distance. At the same time, my act was an exercise in power. In that moment, even if it was fleeting, it became clear that something about Josh’s “big brother” had changed. My mother’s anger quickly subsided as I gave my performance, ranting about “respect” and “discipline,” and her assumptions about my wartime experience became excuses for my actions. To Josh, I was no longer the person who had cared for him before he could walk and talk. I was someone else; someone with the power to lash out at others without consequence. Over time, I believe, Josh decided that he wanted that power for himself.

I withdrew from my family. In their eyes, I behaved erratically for the next few years. But I was beyond reproach. Everyone in my family accepted that those changes were intrinsically bound to serving in the military. Yes, I have suffered from the uncontrollable symptoms of PTSD: hypervigilance, insomnia, paranoia, anger—so much anger. But each of these symptoms began with a struggle. My conscious mind fought back against the impulses and triggers every moment of every day. Ultimately, I made a decision each and every time I allowed those symptoms to surface for others to see. I
could hold in the pain. But it was so much easier just to let it loose. And, for a long time, I did.

It must have been confusing for Josh. He couldn’t have liked the changes he saw in me. But at the same time, he saw someone showered with praise and respect for a brand of military service no one knew anything about. I subsisted on the assumptions made about me. I allowed the unspeakable to excuse my actions. I was a “veteran.” I got a free pass because of the mystique surrounding all military veterans, an ideology which promotes military service while encouraging veterans to exist in a perpetually broken state. I became a “Wounded Warrior.”

I can’t recall the specific moment I first recognized veteran “difference” in my own childhood. I was influenced by reruns of the television show *M*A*S*H*, mostly because the humor the characters employed was also useful to a child growing up in a broken home. And I have one uncle who served in the Marines. We were not very close. But it is painfully obvious that I have been the military’s greatest ambassador to my brother. I shaped his perception of all veterans. And given that I was such a poor example, I can’t help but wonder if it was my freedom to exist as an outsider that influenced his decision to enlist. Yes, I found my escape. But, in my mind, it came at great cost.

**Repetition (With a Difference)**

I am using the word “difference” in two ways: 1) as feeling “different” from civilians; 2) as a means of escaping definition by third parties such as the state. Judith Butler’s central tenet in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) is that
it is the “possibility of a repetition that repeats against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power” (94). In other words, through repetition, ideology resembles reality; yet at each moment of repetition the possibility of change arises. My brother, as a newly minted sailor, began as an individual: a teenager from rural Kentucky with a limited set of options in front of him as an adult. He enlisted in the Navy and began the work of self-definition, drawing not only upon a collective history of military veterans, but upon an unspecified repository of power, one which enables him to not only walk in the footsteps of an older brother, but to repeat those steps with a difference: “subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (Butler 11). Even as he lamented the harsh reality of Basic Training, he was learning that enduring trials and overcoming them were allowing him to redefine himself. Josh, as part of his natural development, became entirely capable of reinventing himself—of becoming a “veteran” subject—without seeking out war trauma. The problem he faces, however, is a society whose mythmaking and addiction to war is predicated on taking that agency away. And, as I have shown in the preceding chapters dealing with “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors,” stereotypes and the appropriation of war trauma are two ways in which veterans lose rights to self-definition.

Interpellation is a process of referring to a person which, by acknowledging that person in a particular way, also defines who or what the person is. The spoken and unspoken forces which shape veteran identity and inform the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes are really a constant reminder, a “Hey, you there!” which relegates veterans to their symbolic roles. Louis Althusser uses the example of a police officer
shouting this phrase at a citizen, an act which defines the symbolic roles of both parties, but one which also presumes that the citizen is vulnerable to the power of the police officer. To perform “vulnerability” is, according to Butler, what makes a subject available to exploitation:

Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugural alienation in sociality, if such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself. (28)

In this dissertation, I have repeatedly emerged against myself, against my past performances of veteran identity, against the mythmaking which led me to war, and against the patriotic rhetoric and stereotypes which would render me and other veterans silent. The “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary renders veterans “vulnerable” by allowing military service and postwar identities to be defined by others: civilians, prior generations of veterans, governments, and arguably, works of scholarship such as this one. Often, for those struggling with the symptoms of PTSD, with survivor’s guilt, or just the shame of not suffering enough or in the right way, stereotypical forms of veteran identity become a penance, a way of punishing oneself. Relationships with loved ones that subsist on silence and assumptions are not a necessary evil. Veterans do not have to exist apart from society so that future generations will serve. By speaking out, as many veteran storytellers have, they can complicate veteran identity. They can use the act of interpellation for themselves. In the same way that Althusser’s example creates two subjectivities, the citizen and the police officer, veteran storytellers can consciously lay claim to their veteran identity, a form of “subjectivity” often defined by others, and in the
process of differentiating between veteran and civilian, they can develop “individuality” in veteran identity to suit their individual needs.

Veterans must first recognize that they are hurting and limiting themselves through their performances. They must recognize that trauma carries with it the burden of guilt. And they must recognize that the performance of a broken identity is a process which continually reinaugurates that guilt: “If all ‘imaginative phenomena’ are the result of this violent interiorization, it follows that the genealogical account will be one of these phenomena, a narrative effect of the narrative it seeks to tell. The unmasking of the narrative is its remasking—inevitably” (Butler 77). Butler’s argument, an attempt to conceive of new identities absent the influence of systems of definition rooted in the state, shows that there is power in the opposite of silence, but the risk of appropriation remains. The story of the “Hero” cannot apply to every veteran. “Wounded Warriors” can’t possibly suffer in the exact same way. Instead, the story contained in the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary is circular, always returning to its point of origin because it is nonsensical. War is nonsensical. Stereotypes simplify military service so that it can be understood by an outside audience, so that the veteran stereotyped implicitly supports war. However, exceptional feats of heroism and a damaged identity are not necessary prerequisites for a veteran identity.

The Fine Line between Symptom and Performance

I was an undergraduate at Eastern Kentucky University in 2009. While I worked on a Bachelor’s degree, the university worked on a new science building adjacent to where I attended class. The humdrum noises of machinery and hammers pounding nails
were annoying, to say the least, and they played nonstop before, during, and after each class session. After a while, I learned to drown them out, anticipating the order in which they occurred. The pneumatic lift on the dump truck, for instance, preceded the sound of debris tumbling out of its bed and onto the ground. I knew the first strike of a hammer would be followed by dozens more. Chatter and laughter meant the workers were on break. For whatever reason, I catalogued these noises in my brain even while participating in class discussions.

Other times, the noises were unexpected. Once, while I walked past the construction site to another building, a thunderous clap arose suddenly from the ground. Someone working high up on the building must have dropped a board, or a sheet of plywood, or a tool. Regardless, the sound echoed off the brick walls around me and shot straight up my spine. My adrenal pathways received a familiar, cold shot of adrenaline as my vision became cloudy. My periphery shrank to the size of a single tunnel. I’d been triggered because the noise reminded me of war. I was having a panic attack.

Immediately, I jumped behind a brick column and took a knee. I didn’t think about the action. No one was there to see me. It felt instinctual. Making oneself a smaller target would certainly have been a sensible precaution in a warzone. Even those unfamiliar with combat can point to scenes from war films where a similar action is required: The squad is out on a foot patrol; the person in front spots something dangerous and raises his hand; everyone takes a knee to assess the situation. I did this outside the entrance to a university classroom building. And it makes perfect sense for someone diagnosed with chronic PTSD. Right?
I never went on a single foot patrol during my two deployments in Iraq. I was a transportation soldier. Not once did I react to a threat by taking a knee. And, to the best of my knowledge, neither did anyone I served with. In fact, I spent most of my time in vehicles. Most often I sat in a machine gun turret atop a tan Humvee. My remaining hours “outside the wire” were spent behind a steering wheel. On convoys, we were trained to “get out of the killzone” when attacked. This amounted to flooring the gas and sending as many bullets as we could “down range.” We were simply targets trying to get from “Point A” to “Point B” unscathed. It would have made more sense for me to take off running when I heard that thunderous clap. So why, more than two years after my last deployment, did I react like an infantryman?

It has taken me some time to admit that taking a knee behind that brick column was a performance. Perhaps, it was one I learned in Basic Training seven years prior. However, to me at least, Basic Training seems an unlikely answer because my experiences in Iraq were nothing like my training in Missouri. I was triggered by a sound from my past. I thought of IED explosions, of war. But the situation, two years removed from war, was new. So, I borrowed something I’d forgotten from training, seen on television, or heard in another veteran’s story. I took a knee. Those around me probably thought I was tying my shoe.

Practically, the action provided an outlet for the adrenaline and panic I was also experiencing. Through therapy, I learned to anticipate such triggers: sights, sounds, or situations which recreate aspects of war, sometimes eliciting physiological responses. I’ve yet to learn how to stop panic attacks at will, but I have learned patterns of behavior which shorten the duration of panic attacks and lessen their symptoms. These patterns of
behavior are performances. Employing a learned coping mechanism that contradicts instinctual impulses toward fight or flight can be likened to wearing a mask, reading from a script, or emphasizing an affectation belonging to someone else. These tactics, which I learned in a therapist’s office, are no less real than those I learned in Iraq. One is simply an alternative to the other.

At first, avoidance was my response to triggers. I stayed away from places I thought would elicit panic attacks. Over time, I learned to respond differently: deep breathing at the first sign of a racing heartbeat, meditating mindfully to escape tunnel vision, going for a walk to calm shaking hands. These coping techniques are taught. They are performed. No, they don’t work for every veteran, and they’re not always successful when employed by me. But the fact that I was able to establish new patterns of behavior—to alter my veteran identity—suggests that the same is possible for other veterans.48

48 Stephen Joseph’s What Doesn’t Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth (2013) explains that “[t]he idea of transformation through trauma goes against the grain of all that is written about the devastating and destructive effects of trauma. Psychological studies have shown that adverse life-events are often the trigger for depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress. Psychiatrists, too, recognize that life-events such as serious illness, accident or injury, bereavement, and relationship breakdown can be threatening to mental health” (xi). However, Joseph also believes that “the grit that creates the pearl, is often what propels people to become more true to themselves, take on new challenges, and view life from a wider perspective”(xii). The author cites studies on post-traumatic growth by researchers such as Patricia Frazier, concluding, “People do grow following traumatic events, but they are not necessarily accurate when it comes to recalling and reporting how they have actually changed and in what ways” (Joseph 82). When I worked with Military Experience and the Arts, a veteran particularly interested in the practical implications of post-traumatic growth, Joseph R. Miller, proposed the idea of a journal which would assist veterans in writing stories emphasizing the ways in which they had transcended the lingering effects of trauma. We conducted writing workshops in a closed Facebook group, sharing drafts along with details about our day-to-day lives, and the result was the publication of Blue Nostalgia: A Journal of Post Traumatic Growth (2013). I recommend the collection to any researcher or veteran interested in
If I didn’t learn to take a knee in training, combat, or therapy, then where did I
learn it? Further, how much psychological suffering can be blamed on the unconscious
performance of veteran identity? All identities are performative: racial, gendered, and
socioeconomic iterations of self are all influenced by larger cultural connotations, social
constructions, and historical intersections. But when it comes to veterans (and especially
their traumas), *performance* is a taboo subject. It’s as though the word is dirty when
juxtaposed alongside high ideals like “honor” and “selfless service.” Something about
performativity seems *inauthentic*. But performativity is at the heart of both military
training and wartime service. One *becomes a veteran* by first *pretending to be a*
“veteran.”

Wartime identities are paradoxical in that the traits which increase lethality and
survivability during combat are the same traits feared by those on the homefront.
Developing a veteran character requires an individual to suppress traits that are
counterintuitive during war. Dave Grossman presents a number of compelling arguments
about training and combat in *On Killing* (2009). For instance, Grossman elaborates on the
commonly accepted “fight or flight” model: “[This] dichotomy is the appropriate set of
choices for any creature faced with danger other than that which comes from its own
species” (5). Instead, Grossman adds “posture” and “submit” to those options available,
explaining much about my decision to take a knee. “Posturing” more accurately describes
my response, suggesting that the reason I went against my training—the reason I knelt
instead of fleeing—was that I had already adapted or replaced traits useful during war
with traits more appropriate in my life as a veteran.

reading stories written from the premise that veterans can shape the narratives of trauma
and the lives that come after.
To understand veteran identity it is also necessary to understand wartime identity, not because all wartime experiences are the same, but because “veteran status” grants individuals the right to perform and adapt the traits of other veterans to suit their needs. I’m not talking about “Stolen Valor,” or the practice of wearing medals and claiming false narratives of military service for personal gain. The right is part of what I have called the veteran’s “symbolic authority.” I am describing veteran performativity as a process of filling in the gaps resulting from lost memories, of employing testimony as an “ability to ‘fuse’ or create a shortcut between the private and public worlds” (Weine 143). Collectively, veterans each have the capacity to function as “shortcuts,” or points of intersection, between military and civilian cultures. It helps to be aware of these cultures, of the traits found and perceived among both civilians and service members when performing identity as a veteran.

Grossman describes posturing as “the name of the game in war” (7). Central to the arguments outlined in his work is a single fact: “[T]he vast majority of combatants throughout history, at the moment of truth when they could and should kill the enemy, have found themselves to be unable to kill” (Grossman xviii). It should seem like common sense, “Of course people don’t like killing one another.” I am not talking about a problem unique to the most recent generation of veterans. Grossman claims that only 15-20 percent of American troops in WWII fired at the enemy (3). Historically, he explains, most soldiers chose to fire into the ground or over the heads of enemies, leaving the killing to someone else. But Grossman’s depictions of “The Greatest Generation” aren’t the images connotated by films like Platoon (1986), Saving Private Ryan (1998), Jarhead (2005), or The Hurt Locker (2008). Instead, troops presented by the media
engage in nonstop killing. They rarely wrestle with the moral implications. They are machines. And any citizen who questions these narratives is immediately accused of cowardice or a lack of patriotism. Veterans themselves perpetuate this phenomenon through silence, finding it easier to allow civilians to make assumptions than for themselves to make apologies.

This instinctual revulsion to killing is part of what Grossman calls the “midbrain safety net” (xxii). When military psychologists figured out this phenomenon, they began incorporating classical and operant condition into Basic Combat Training deliberately to increase firing rates. Such conditioning was so effective that, in the Vietnam War, it “increased the firing rate from 15 percent to 90 percent” (36). The majority of soldiers in that war still did not take lives. But when presented with a combat situation, a drastically greater proportion of troops were willing to use lethal force. The military began training soldiers to perform as killers. And it worked. But the narrative of veteran violence remains one that is largely overblown.

Earlier, I argued that wartime identity is paradoxical in that those traits which make a person a good “warrior” are counterintuitive outside of war. My performative act of “taking a knee” was part of a character I began creating long before joining the military. As a child, I began to conceive of veterans based on those I saw on television, read about in books, and interacted with at the workplace as a teenager. Later, when I joined the military, I began to define the word “veteran” for myself. Training added new behaviors to my repertoire. Combat made those behaviors second nature. When I finally became a veteran, it was as easy as stepping out of uniform and into a costume. It should not come as a surprise that psychological conditioning is an impediment to veterans
struggling to acclimate to civilian life. Grossman claims that new recruits are “inoculated against hate” (81). They learn to lock away their emotions during stressful situations. Combat further conditions them. Eventually, they develop, as I have already described in myself, a pattern of unconscious behavior. Just as I learned to “posture” and take a knee from sources other than combat, many performances of veteran identity cannot be attributed solely to what is experienced in uniform.

That day outside of a university classroom building the sources from which I drew my character traits were long forgotten. Oddly enough, when I think back to the day, I remember holding an M-16 like the one I carried in my 2003 deployment. But that doesn’t make sense, so within this text I filter out false memories and try to create a story which does. I suffered from psychological trauma. But beyond that, I also suffered from a crisis of identity. In my post-war life, when I encountered new threats and new situations which demanded resiliency, I lacked healthy models of veteran identity on which to base myself. Instead, I had only hyper-violent representations of combat and broken veterans to model. I’m not arguing for a single narrative of veteran identity. Rather, I am interested in any narrative of veteran identity which provides alternatives to fighting, fleeing, posturing, or submitting. These instinctual responses are insufficient in post-war life. Veterans need storytellers to provide examples of veterans succeeding as civilians. They need examples of veteran identity which go beyond the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary.
Military Experience and the Arts

Bradley Johnson was among the few contributors to the first volume of The Journal of Military Experience (JME) who was not one of my students. His short story “My Life as a Soldier in the ‘War on Terror’” explores his decision to enlist in the National Guard, homecoming after a deployment to Iraq, and subsequent struggles in the areas of marriage, work, and education. If anything, the story succeeds because of its simplicity: a snapshot of life before war, a stark contrast to life after. When it comes to combat, however, Johnson provides few details: “This isn’t the part of my story where I give a play-by-play of my time in Iraq. This is the part where I say that Iraq sucked, people died, people shot at me, and I shot back” (51). As Johnson’s editor, I casually suggested that he should elaborate on what he did during the war. “Iraq sucked,” which serves as an abrupt transition from his life before war to his life after, is a refusal. And, like the phenomena discussed in the previous chapters, “Iraq sucked” represents a negotiation between two parties regarding one party’s veteran identity.

I will return to Johnson’s story in the next section. For now, I want to focus on the negotiations which take place between editors and writers. I performed the role of editor many times from 2011 to 2015. The JME, the journal initiated at Eastern Kentucky University which first ran “My Life,” evolved into four new publications housed under the umbrella of Military Experience & the Arts. In 2012, I wrote an article entitled “Combat in the Classroom” for UC-Davis’s Writing on the Edge to discuss the progression of The JME from a classroom workshop environment to an international scope in its submissions and publication process. The Writing on the Edge article explains the “editing to completion” model that I adopted for The JME and provides
further insights into the production of veterans’ creative works within a classroom environment, including the relevance of bibliotherapy—writing and reading as a form of therapy—in a university setting.49

In “War, Trauma, and the Writing Classroom: A Response to Travis Martin’s ‘Combat in the Classroom’” Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson draw upon their work within The Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) “Task Force on Student Veterans,” site visits and interviews with student veterans and writing faculty, and surveys which assess “how academic classes impact veteran students’ transitions to college and how faculty become aware of these students’ veteran status,” factors which “suggests a high potential for disclosure of that status via these personal narrative assignments” (38). Hart and Thompson argue,

This problem of disclosure leads to questions about the still-pervasive use of personal narratives in college writing classrooms, particularly where veterans are concerned. While many of us likely believe that personal writing helps practicing writers negotiate the idea of voice, identify differences in types of evidence, or even find motivation to invest in their own learning, such writing, as has been often discussed … also brings with it significant challenges. In the case of veterans—especially combat veterans like Travis Martin—those challenges likely move beyond most of our training as writing instructors. Indeed, of those responding to our survey, only 8% reported having received any training related to veteran students, and only 12% stated that their departments had engaged in

49 Deborah Dysart-Gale’s “Lost in Translation: Bibliotherapy and Evidence-Based Medicine,” published in The Journal of Medical Humanities 29.1 (2008), argues that the use of writing and reading for therapeutic means has historical precedents: “As advocates of bibliotherapy point out, the restorative and healing value of literature was known to Plato, the Romans and Benjamin Rush; spiritually and emotionally edifying literature has long provided readers with comfort and guidance … Bibliotherapy has been identified as an important area of medical research for several practical reasons as well: it is a form of alternative or traditional medicine; it has the potential to help patients who might not otherwise receive therapy” (34-35). I’ve found that veterans unwilling to trust the VA healthcare system are often willing to engage in the act of writing. Others, such as me, engage in the act as an adjunct to therapy.

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formal discussions about the increased number of veteran students on their campuses. (39)

The authors recognize my attempt to “make combat visible to audiences that have no personal experience with war” as well as my belief that such writing can be healing, can bring order to chaotic memories, and can create communities comprised of both veterans and non-veterans. Ultimately, Hart and Thompson conclude, “The space that Martin asks us to occupy is complex, and it does not come without its own cost” (40). What are these costs? The authors suggest that my classes were ultimately traumatic experiences of their own. Did my attempt to make war visible and provide student veterans with a community in which to write have damaging side effects?

Hart and Thompson’s article is split into sections written independently by each author. Thompson argues that my writing assignments are evidence of “transference” or “parallel processing … a sense that the work of his students helps to shape his own learning and expression, his own understanding of himself” (41). And while Thompson believes that such work can be “rewarding” for instructors, “it does come with costs” (42). Specifically, Thompson explains, using his experience working with a student veteran as evidence, “[I]n reading his account, I am uncomfortably reminded of the intensity, the activation of deeply personal emotions and histories, and the unresolvable trauma that rose up in me as I lived with Shannon’s own fractured narrative” (42). “Perhaps,” Thompson wonders, “This is simply an issue of differentiation, an ability to separate and delineate the boundaries of oneself from another … [But] war trauma will linger in the background of our writing classrooms, and I am still unsure whether that space is the best place to give it a voice” (42). Thompson argues that the writing classroom is not the appropriate place to discuss war trauma. In fact, the author suggests
that my project had more to do with my own healing or need for a community than helping my students. However, and given the stances taken in this dissertation, I still agree with my original assessment that our work was not some isolated case of therapeutic writing, but rather, an example of veterans engaged in the work of self-definition, work which should be a part of any veteran’s homecoming.

The courses I taught were not exactly writing classes. They were orientation to college courses comprised only of “at risk” student veterans. It just so happened that these classes were designed and taught by me: a veteran, a writing instructor, and one interested in literatures of war and the use of writing as a form of healing. In the end, the students who took my classes showed better outcomes in terms of retention and graduation rates. All of the writing assignments were offered as “extra credit,” meaning that they were optional. Further, the students picked their topics, and often they chose to write about war or trauma of their own accord. I did not dance around this issue. In fact, one of our course textbooks was provided free of charge by the Military Order of the Purple Heart, a book entitled *Tears of a Warrior: A Family’s Story of Combat and Living*

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50 For more about the classes I taught at EKU read two articles published by *The New York Times* in 2013. James Dao’s “A Million Strong: Helping Them Through” and Cecilia Capuzzi Simon’s “Warrior Voices: Veterans Learn to Write the Words They Could Not Speak” discuss different approaches to helping student veterans taken by college campuses and writing as a therapeutic intervention.

51 For more information about the veteran-cohort classes I taught at EKU, and for a more detailed account of how these classes were parts of a larger “Bridge Program” initiated by Brett Morris, read “A Bridge Program’s Effect on Non-College Ready Student Veterans” (2013). Morris writes, “Through validation, they developed confidence in their ability to learn and gained a heightened sense of self-worth. This recurring theme is clearly verbalized by the VBCS [Veterans Bridge to College Success] focus group participants. Simply being in a classroom surrounded by fellow veterans with similar readiness issues was perhaps the first step toward validating the decision to pursue higher education; knowing that there were others who had chosen the same path and started at the same level of readiness was critical” (124).
with PTSD (2010). I put this book on my syllabus before I met my students, not because I assumed they would all suffer from the condition, but because I was aware that others—students, professors, and family members—would make that assumption. I told the students, explicitly in our class discussions, that “writing about war trauma can trigger memories and emotions which are uncomfortable.” I suggested, “If you do not want to write about war, you can write about Basic Training, life in a garrison environment, or even your experiences as a veteran.” However, and unlike Bradley Johnson, the students I feature in the “Combat in the Classroom” article repeatedly chose to write about war and trauma. Why?

I’ve provided a number of answers to this question in this dissertation. Mostly, I believe the students were interested in establishing some historical record of their military service. They cared about their legacy. As Chapters One and Two explain, veteran identity is hierarchical, and combat experience positions veterans near the top of this hierarchy. So, one reason they chose to write about combat over Basic Training or life in a garrison environment is that they felt writing about combat granted them credibility as authors. They were harnessing the veteran’s symbolic authority. Another explanation emerges when one considers the silencing effects of stereotypes such as the “Hero” and the “Wounded Warrior.” The majority of my students were recent veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. War was fresh in their minds, and it was often a topic broached in our class discussions, but in a way which contrasted war with the campus environment. For example, my student veterans often complained in class discussions about non-veteran students “using cell phones,” “playing on computers,” and “disrespecting their instructors,” making light of an education they’d worked hard to earn. These
conversations reflect veteran culture: respect for the chain of command, veterans conditioned to someday serve as leaders and educators themselves, and especially the importance of paying attention to details. Many of my students performed jobs in the military which taught them that “paying attention” can be a matter of life and death. They felt that their fellow students were ignorant. Worse, they felt that disruptive behaviors were signs of disrespect, not to their teachers, but to themselves and other veterans occupying the same classroom.

They felt silenced. And, when given the opportunity to engage in the work of self-definition, they told stories about their experiences, describing themselves and veteran culture in ways which explained to civilian readers why they cared so much about mundane things such as classroom decorum. I simply disagree with Thompson’s assessment that the writing classroom is the wrong place to discuss war. If anything, the writing classroom and the college campus are the ideal places to discuss war. In an educational environment, publications featuring works of student veterans can be used to enrich classroom discussions, to provide additional details about wartime service and homecoming not included in history texts, and to reinforce to students that “veterans” are not some abstract social class, but rather, real men and women all around them. Further, Thompson’s claims leave me with the impression that veterans should be infantilized and that college instructors should not have to dirty their hands with the topic of war. I find these claims to be similar to attempts by larger society to silence war veterans.

As I have stated, the veteran’s symbolic function—the result of stereotyping veterans as “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors”—is that veterans come to function as repositories for memories of war that the rest of society would prefer to forget. My
students didn’t need to write dissertations to figure this out. They chose to write about war. And they did it because the only other option, beyond creating a traumatic narrative in a secret disability claim read by the VA, was to remain silent. Thompson inadvertently suggests that veterans should be censored based upon the belief that they are too broken or sick to possibly talk about war without the risk of suicide or being triggered. Is that not the “Wounded Warrior” stereotype? Again, the writing was optional. Should I have told my students that they were not allowed to discuss war or trauma?

Hart’s contribution to the article addresses masculine stereotypes and the overrepresentation of male authors in the *JME*:

Travis, Nathan, George, Michael, and Micah—all men, all combat soldiers who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF), all embodying the “warrior” archetype, all fitting the stereotypical public image of the American military veteran, all highly deserving to be featured in an essay on “Combat in the Classroom.” Stereotypes emerge, of course, from observations of actual trends, and, indeed, men make up a majority of today’s active military members: 86% …so it stands to reason that many of the post-9/11 veterans who are currently returning to college will fit the stereotypical profile of the male combat veteran, as do Martin and the “student-soldiers” he profiles. Not all student veterans will fit this stereotype, however, which was my concern when I read Martin’s essay—an essay in which the only reference to a female military member is contained in an excerpt from Micah’s personal narrative. (43)

In particular, Hart takes issue with a story by Micah Owen, “Put the Truck in Gear and Drive,” in which Owen describes his anger with a female soldier who berates him for returning fire during an ambush. Because it is the only mention of a woman veteran in my article, Hart worries that “female student veterans, in particular, and non-combat veterans, in general, will also encounter skepticism or remain invisible in college classrooms if their personal narratives, their wartime experiences, and their post-traumatic stressors are excluded or overlooked in scholarly essays like Martin’s” (44).
fact, I am inclined to agree with Hart and recommend reading the response article for those interested in learning more about the unique obstacles faced by female veterans seeking to rejoin society. Female veterans were underrepresented in the first two volumes of *The JME*. However, there were only one or two female students in my veteran-cohort classes, and the writing which took place in those classes was the focus of my article. As for Owen, he expresses that the trauma of the ambush he experiences is exacerbated by the female veteran in his story. He describes being shamed by a fellow veteran even as he tries to defend himself. I should know. We were in the same platoon. Again, I don’t see it as the responsibility of college instructors to tell veterans what they can and cannot write about in optional personal essays. When *The JME* moved to the umbrella of Military Experience and the Arts, female veterans, including Suzanne Rancourt featured before this chapter, as well as Tif Holmes, a veteran whose artwork I will discuss later, were represented to the best of our abilities.

Hart and Thompson conclude,

> However much as we admire that class and Martin’s ability to create that safe space for those veterans, we find ourselves wanting to say something more to teachers of writing, something that conveys the idea that the effects of war cannot be contained by a single individual or even a single classroom community. This is not to suggest that we believe Martin argues that they can, only that as writers and teachers of writing ourselves, we want to honor the type of space needed for veterans of combat and other military trauma, in particular, to negotiate their experiences. That is a space we suspect few of us are truly prepared for. The academy will never attract enough veterans, let alone enough veterans like Travis Martin, to be able consistently to create the type of space that our veterans need as they return to civilian life as students, so perhaps the greatest work we can do as writing instructors is to ensure that our students are aware of the services and other safe spaces available to them on their campuses and in their communities. To do that, we must first ourselves become aware. Reading work by Martin and other veterans may be the first step. Reaching out to veteran service is likely the next. (46)
I hope that Hart and Thompson are still reading my work, because their conclusion leaves me worried about writing instructors, in particular, and non-veterans, in general, passing the buck. Campus resources for veterans are almost exclusively dedicated to processing GI Bill and Vocational Rehabilitation benefit claims. They’re about money. And they do not typically result in unique courses for “at risk” veterans. They’re certainly not interested in challenging stereotypes or providing veterans with meaningful spaces in which to engage in the work of self-definition. In fact, the story of “Bingo,” included earlier in this dissertation, shows that college campuses deal in stereotypes as a way of recruiting more student veterans—as a way of making more money. If the college campus and a liberal education are not the places for veterans to explore their collective culture, engage with the perceptions of their fellow students, learn about the costs of war, and engage with the psychology of the combatant, something is wrong and veterans are not getting an education in the humanities. I am describing a problem with society. College campuses are just one example of how the experiences of war veterans are censored by stereotypes as well as a reluctance of larger society to take responsibility for war and the veterans it creates.

Hart and Thompson are not alone. I’ve faced criticism for my theories and classroom modalities since I began teaching and writing about veterans’ issues in 2011. This resistance, coupled with my realization that universities are businesses, eventually led to the creation of MEA as an entity separate from the university in which such work could take place. From its origins up to its current process, MEA never rejects a submission outright, allowing authors to work one-on-one with their editors through as many drafts as needed. Works not completed prior to the publication of one volume
simply get shifted to the next. When I served as Editor-in-Chief, adding countless drafts to the workloads of my volunteer editors didn’t make me popular. However, veterans who otherwise would have gotten cold rejection letters received, instead, a podium and a megaphone. I recruited a team; our contributors ceased being students hungry for extra credit. But they weren’t exactly young writers hoping to use MEA as a stepping stone toward a book deal, either. Each submission, whether from a veteran recently returned from the Afghanistan War, or from a seasoned veteran of World War II, had something to do with the contributor’s legacy.

Poetic, artistic, and prosaic endeavors are pure agency, providing veterans with a space in which to craft war narratives, protest poetry, and shades of veteran “difference” in writing and upon canvases of paint and charcoal. As MEA’s founder, I often felt torn between the legacy and the literary, meaning I had to find a middle ground between each submission’s potential, our internal deadlines for producing the next volume, and the amount of progress contributors made with their respective editors. Of course, the teaching styles and literary tastes of MEA’s editors influenced contributors as much as deadlines and innate writing ability. Poetry, during my tenure, was only lightly edited, and was often created in one of MEA’s workshops. Artwork, though sometimes arranged thematically, tended to appear unadulterated alongside short essays by the artists. Brian Mockenhaupt, a journalist and combat correspondent in his postwar life, remains MEA’s nonfiction editor. His one-on-one work with contributors places emphasis on factual accuracy and plot development. Daniel Buckman, MEA’s fiction editor, is a novelist and college instructor; he emphasizes character development and internal/external conflicts between protagonists and antagonists. Mockenhaupt and Buckman are examples of
veterans who believe in the power of bibliotherapy as well as the responsibility of writing instructors to help veterans with the work of self-definition.

Personally, I held an academic interest in war memoirs and a partiality for writing as therapy. I was more excited when an author finished a piece. To me, it represented a form of healing: the ability to rein in chaotic wartime memories and control them on the page. Many times, as I explain in the Writing on the Edge article, war authors will present their works to close loved ones to compensate for an inability to discuss wartime experiences openly. In this way, the creative act becomes an integral part of homecoming. My roles as editor and facilitator allowed me to be a part of these moments, which served as motivation to put in the many hours required to produce each edited collection.

MEA’s community manages to do what society will not: listen to the testimony of returning veterans. They edit grammar and punctuation while listening, but ultimately bring complete strangers—some veteran, some civilian—together to focus on veterans’ creative works. This collaborative environment results in a convergence of writing and teaching methods. And, sometimes, styles clash. In those instances of disagreement, two or three professionals come together with their respective skills and motivations to truly engage with veterans’ works and, by extension, veterans’ issues. The work helps veterans articulate their thoughts and ambitions, but it also educates each volunteer, editor, or discussion moderator. Hart and Thompson’s claim that writing can be a triggering event may hold true in individual cases, but the serious revision required to complete a story results in dialogue, repeated returns to the site of trauma, and always, the freedom to walk away.
I don’t see such depth within veteran-civilian interactions often, which is unfortunate, because it is impossible to remain mired in stereotypes and patriotic rhetoric when confronted with the reality of veterans’ lives on a day-to-day basis. As for MEA’s contributors, even the solitary blogger doesn’t blog about or from within a vacuum. MEA influences its contributors, sure, but it ultimately provides a platform which otherwise would not exist. Collectively, MEA’s contributors leverage the power of testimony. Thomas Elsaesser’s “One Train May Be Hiding Another” argues that testimony is necessary because in the future individuals “will never be able to tell fact from fiction” (62). Elsaesser suggests that different forms of media have different effects. For example, the documentary is a democratization of history. Television is the perfect house guest or host. Infinite personal histories are now available for consumption, each with its own claim to authenticity. The author recognizes that the reality occupied by individuals such as those contributors to MEA’s edited collections shapes collective notions of reality, or how it is perceived, in discernible ways. Elsaesser continues, explaining that the irony of this situation “has to do not only with history’s relation to truth and the real; it also affects our place in space and time, in short, our identity” (62). In The Things They Carried, Vietnam War veteran and author Tim O’Brien argues, “A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior” (68). O’Brien recognizes that the war story takes place after war. Combatants and survivors of trauma typically aren’t paralyzed by the moral implications of war. They’re interested in survival. Writing about war becomes the space in which these questions of morality can be broached for the first time, not explicitly, but by describing the absence of morality and the implications of this fact. So, as MEA’s contributors
slogged through the work of recounting ugly war stories in eloquent ways, they were each shaping their own identity; they were playing a part in defining collective and individual *legacies*. But Hart and Thompson are correct; our contributors were shaping my identity and the identities of our readers at the same time. Testimony matters.

Other proponents of testimony argue that self-definition and creating historical records often emerge as the same project. For example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1991), a text based largely upon the authors’ interactions with Holocaust survivors, is considered a foundational work in the field of testimony. In it, the authors argue that the listener comes to play a part in the very experience of trauma:

> 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 listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. 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. (Laub, “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” 57)

In the Introduction, where I lay out my grand vision for a cultural center of power from which to record and share veterans’ stories, I base my logic upon the experience of functioning as a “blank screen.” I will return to that vision after this chapter. For now, suffice it to say that I did not view myself as a psychoanalyst. I do, however, remember performing the role described by Felman and Laub. I remember how listening to veterans’ stories transformed me, and I wonder if listening, on a societal level, would in turn transform society. In Chapters One and Two, as well as in the examples of “Bingo” and Suzanne Rancourt, I describe the damaging effects of veteran silence, both for society and for individual veterans. During my years with MEA, I discovered that
veterans want to give testimony. Much rarer were people willing to listen, to truly consider veterans’ narratives in ways which did not interrupt their formation or impose outside beliefs. Veterans write for themselves. They write for their families, civilians, sometimes even the people they fought against. Importantly, veterans don’t always have an intended audience. Because veterans work through war and trauma as they write, their reasons for writing, like the experience of trauma, is something which emerges belatedly. Authors such as Tim O’Brien claim that writing a “true” or “moral” war story is impossible. I believe this impossibility resides in the fact that war writing is so rarely a premeditated act. Few war authors go to war in search of chapters for a book. It’s much easier for their stories to become chapters in someone else’s book. It’s easier for third parties to take snippets of veterans’ stories—the way Hart and Thompson took snippets of my article in Writing on the Edge—and concoct an argument which functions in direct opposition to the author’s stated intent. MEA publications are the opposite of appropriation. They are acts of expropriation. Veteran storytellers reclaim narratives of war and homecoming from the general public, refashioning the memories to better represent the realities they experienced. They engage in the work of collective remembrance, working against the currents of mythmaking in the American unconscious which would reduce them to stereotypes.

“Iraq Sucked”: Bradley Johnson’s Veteran “Difference”

Bradley Johnson’s “My Life” in The Journal of Military Experience articulates the veteran’s feeling of apartness, or difference from the rest of society. Johnson, reflecting upon his interactions with the VA healthcare system, asks, “Are they paying
me so that I can walk away or so that they can? For all intents and purposes, the fighting I have done cost me my sanity and sense of normalcy. Even now, years later, my best friends in the world tell me that I’m different...that I am any number of things that are...different” (53, Johnson’s emphasis). Johnson’s emphasis on the word “different” indicates a special meaning for the author. He doesn’t mean “different” in the sense that going to war “turns boys into men.” No, in his own words, he lists the perceptions others have of him: “Supposedly, I am violent, aggressive, loud, agitated, and not very nice. These are the descriptions that tend to top the list” (53). These are also the descriptions associated with stereotypically “disgruntled” veterans—with “Wounded Warriors.” Veteran “difference” is paradoxical in that, on one hand, it results in exceptional treatment through official channels and in patriotic rhetoric, while, on the other hand, it creates a hierarchy in which veterans must rank themselves according to how much or how little they suffer. In many ways, the word “difference,” as one used in describing homecoming and life after military service, is a simpler way of explaining the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” stereotypes examined in Chapters One and Two. Both of these stereotypical identities are predicated on the veteran existing as “other,” alternately praised and pitied in ways which appropriate the veteran’s right to self-definition so that his or her identity serves the wars of the state.

Veteran “difference,” when described as a feeling or as recognition of how one is perceived by others, reflects the veteran’s symbolic function as a repository for memories of war. One way to relegate veterans to the performance of this symbolic function is to infantilize them, to censor their stories under the auspices of protecting them from painful memories and triggering events. The irony of this situation, of course, is that
representations of war permeate society, and as elaborate fictions, these representations
are often much more violent and damaging than works veterans would produce
themselves. As I have maintained, veterans remain silent as a result of the appropriating
effects of stereotypes, and by remaining silent larger society finds in the veteran a
distancing mechanism, a way to avoid its culpability in perpetrating wars. Censoring
veterans or dictating the contents of their stories in the writing classroom are two
examples of this phenomenon. Veteran silence creates assumptions, which can mean
anything to any person. Veterans such as Johnson see through this façade and challenge it
openly:

The inability to share or even have emotions is not something to be sought after. Five—almost six—years later that fight is still going on. I know you have seen the commercials with smiling people saying, “Veterans are a priority,” and “helping them” is our job. Well, all that glimmers isn’t gold. I have a chest full of medals, some that you can only get from being in combat. But to get the care I needed I still had to prove to the VA through letters from my peers that I was in combat. (53)

Johnson refers to a VA policy which requires veterans to “prove” they were in combat, a prerequisite for receiving disability compensation or medical benefits. The official wording of this policy is missing, but its impact upon Johnson is clear. He has experienced combat. He lives daily with evidence—in his mind, on his body, as medals. However, when he chooses to make use of the pact made between soldier and civilian, the one which promises healthcare and respect should that soldier return home injured, he is asked to prove himself. Unlike MEA, the VA doesn’t care about the legacy or the literary in asking for such proof. They only want to reduce the veteran’s narrative down to facts, to a kind of pain that can be medicated. Precisely, Johnson is asked to measure himself against the VA’s conception of the “combat” veteran. In other words, he is asked
to treat himself as “other” and to create a narrative in which he is “different” before he can receive benefits. It’s as though the VA begins with a list of assumptions and then asks veterans to conform to them.

Again, many recruits join the military as a source of upward mobility. In the last chapter, Severo and Milford’s reading of veteran history finds the government to be a “slippery insurance company” and war an arrangement in which “soldiers were lured into service with offers of generous pay, bonuses, and benefits, only to be scorned as mercenaries and social parasites” (16). Johnson presents his story as a case-in-point. He describes no guilt or qualms about getting the benefits owed to him. However, Johnson sees arbitrary policies and the entanglement of healthcare with monetary compensation as an attempt by the VA to invoke guilt and create obstacles to his recovery. In these ways, veterans share similarities with the social class Guy Standing calls the “precariat.” In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2014), Standing elaborates,

Utilitarians and neo-liberals ignore the need for universal economic security as a means of enabling people to internalize principled behavior. They tend to see people who are failures of a market society as a collective “other.” Thinking of targeting a group of people called “the poor” is to pity and condemn in roughly equal measure. “They” are deserving, underserving or transgressing, to be benevolently helped, reshaped or punished according to how we good folk judge them … The precariat’s retort is that they are us or could be us at any time. (174)

Standing believes that displaced workers and marginalized groups are products of globalization who pose a real threat to society. The author argues for economic reforms and income redistribution as ways of staving off the threat of populism. And, given the historical treatment of veterans, the ways in which they have been marginalized through stereotypes, and how the VA healthcare system and American workforce treats veterans like Johnson as “social parasites” and “mercenaries,” it is hard not to imagine veteran
identity as intersecting with Standing’s precariat identity. On one hand, Johnson is held to the standards of the “Hero” stereotype: he must produce some document or record of his achievements in uniform. On the other, Johnson is treated like a “Wounded Warrior”: silenced for not suffering enough or in the right way. When the author says, “Well, all that glimmers isn’t gold” (53), he’s effectively saying to his reader, “this could be you.” In this instance, the veteran’s testimony transcends veteran culture to warn civilians about a predatory government.

In Chapter Two, I include the exact percentages used by the VA to rate mental disability. To receive a rating of 10%, for example, a veteran must display “[o]ccupational and social impairment due to mild or transient symptoms which decrease work efficiency and ability to perform occupational tasks only during periods of significant stress, or; symptoms controlled by continuous medication.” Without diagnosing PTSD in Johnson, it is easy to find in his narrative most of the symptoms listed in the VA’s description. And, given that Johnson describes interacting with the VA, it’s possible he filed a disability claim for the condition: “Are they paying me so that I can walk away or so that they can?” (Johnson 53). More importantly, tens of thousands of other veterans in situations strikingly similar to Johnson’s have filed those claims—I am one, and each good day thereafter contained a small amount of guilt. To receive a rating is to have a board of professionals conclude, based on all available evidence, that the veteran’s life corresponds to descriptions such as the one above. To exist outside of the boundaries created by that description—even briefly—threatens both the veteran’s sense of honesty and his or her financial status. Critics of the VA’s disability compensation system such as Sebastian Junger suggest that existence within those boundaries prevents
veterans from evolving beyond them. Judith Butler, discussed earlier in the chapter, argues that “subjection” is “an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (11). Veterans such as Johnson are forced into a narrative of mental illness, becoming an “other” defined by the assumptions of the VA. Symptoms and scars may be plainly visible, but the veteran may harness them for his or her personal benefit only if the narratives surrounding them conform to the criteria for a disability rating. Stereotypes are Butler’s “assumption,” reinforced by the VA which functions as “instrument,” resulting in veteran subjects “becoming” something other than what is in their best interest. Veterans have the possibility to repeat this process of subjection “with a difference,” but only by risking, as Severo and Milford show, financial disincentives and being “scorned as mercenaries and social parasites” (16). How can emotional recovery take place within a system which is dedicated to establishing illness as a matter of fact, historical record, or a set of symptoms that every vet should exemplify?

Of course, it should be possible for veterans to interact ethically with the VA, receive care for conditions like PTSD, TBI, and Military Sexual Trauma (MST), but also continue the work of self-narration after returning home from war. However, Johnson describes a situation in which the act of self-definition must take place within a clinical setting. His wartime experiences are reduced to evidence used to support disability claims, claims which take place under the presumption that veterans are gaming the system: “Many control policies that politicians, their advisers and bureaucrats devise may appeal to prejudiced minds and gain votes, but they are costly and largely counterproductive … It would be better to offer disinterested advice, as a service, not as a thinly disguised sanction” (Standing 174). I suppose it is possible for veterans to live only
within the lines drawn by disability ratings, but it’s not a difficult feat to imagine lives which contain those symptoms but also growth. The VA is not the reason veterans feel alienated from society. Veterans feel “different” because they don’t measure up to any of the expectations others have about them. They’re not a monolith. And proving that veterans are also individuals was among the priorities found in each MEA editor and contributor.

Organizations like MEA are less concerned with veterans receiving money than with there being alternatives to the VA’s reductionist ratings system. The dissonance Johnson describes, his veteran “difference,” could be the result of failing to live up to the VA’s descriptions of veterans. More likely, it is a combination of failing to live up to many expectations: his family’s, his fellow veterans’, his educators’, my own.

Eventually, a young graduate student reads “My Life” and tells him, again, to prove himself. I’m not trying to paint myself as the villain. Rather, it is my intent to show the delicacy of homecoming and make others aware that they are probably already involved in the process. Johnson taught me the importance of my role at a very early point in my career. In 2011, I asked him to include combat in his story because I felt it would endear him to his audience. I felt it would provide some context for the beliefs and extraordinary circumstances described in “My Life.” However, I inadvertently suggested that testimony of life after war is valid only when it conforms to my expectations. I helped to foster a kind of unreality around his experiences which suggested that his symptoms, as well as his veteran identity, were not enough to prove his claims of combat service. The difference, however, between my demands and those of the VA, was that I wanted to see development. The bureaucracy, in contrast, is only interested in describing the veteran’s
past so that this description can in turn be used to rate a disability. Earlier, I defined “difference” in two ways, as the veteran’s feeling of “apartness” from his or her civilian counterparts, but also as a performance used to evade definition. I learned as an editor that the best way to approach veteran writers was to allow them to describe difference themselves. “Difference,” as a way of describing alienation, would emerge naturally as a recurring theme. As the veterans describing “difference” grew as writers, they became more enigmatic, and they found that the act of describing “difference” also resulted in a form of veteran identity unique to the individual.

Johnson might have regarded my pressuring him toward the use of violence thematically in his story as a form of “microaggression.” Derald Wing Sue’s *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (2010) shows this term “first coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s to refer to the everyday subtle and often automatic ‘put-downs’ and insults directed toward Black Americans.” While the author’s theorizing focuses solely on racial microaggressions, it is clear that “microaggressions can be expressed towards any marginalized group” (5). “The power of microaggressions,” Sue continues,

lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in a behavior that threatens and demeans the recipient of such a communication … Because no one is immune from inheriting the biases of the society, all citizens are exposed to a social conditioning process that imbues within them prejudices, stereotypes, and beliefs that lie outside their level of awareness. (xv)

Johnson’s description of the VA certainly reflects a “social conditioning process.” If my interactions with Johnson resulted in a form of microaggression, I, too, was unaware. It could also be the case that Johnson, who openly admits to dealing with psychological illness in his story, viewed my suggestion as a threat, as an attempt to provoke post-
traumatic symptoms. In any event, I admit now that the circumstances surrounding
Johnson’s refusal were outside my level of awareness.

Bradley Johnson didn’t want to write about war. He refused my suggestion
because matters of the present were more pressing. In fact, Johnson uses his space in The
JME to deconstruct veteran stereotypes:

My time in Iraq produced an interesting combination of “I’m a bad
motherfucker” and “Please let me get home to see my son.” It’s an odd
combination of “Fuck you. Bring it on motherfucker” and “I just want to
go home.” On the one side of the coin, you are trained, ready and willing.
Above all else, you are fucking pissed off. At points, you go from feeling
like you are wanted and needed by the locals to feeling like they don’t
want you there at all. So, you think, “Fuck it.” You feel like equal parts
Arnold in the end of Predator and Mel Gibson in the beginning of
Braveheart. You’d rather not fight, but as long as you have to, you are
going to rain down hell upon the enemy. I realize this all sounds cruel and
illogical, but so is war. You truly stop caring. You don’t want to shoot, but
you will. And you won’t think about it, until you get home that is. (52-53)

That Johnson must use fictional characters from Predator (1987) and Braveheart (1995)
is revealing. He is not telling his own story in those instances. Instead, he draws upon
touchstones corresponding to a veteran identity he feels his reader will recognize.
Veterans, in the perception of Johnson’s imagined reader, are big, strong A-listers who
don’t show emotion. “Five—almost six—years later that fight is still going on” for
Johnson (53)—that is, his inability to show emotion. Could this inability be linked to
warrior archetypes that also refuse to show emotion? Braveheart’s William Wallace, a
character invested in Scottish independence, is a far cry from Predator’s “Dutch,” a
commando ambushed by an Alien hunter while on a secret mission in South America. In
fact, these two characters describe the distance between the exceptional examples of
patriotic rhetoric and the victims of therapeutic culture. Johnson argues that he exists
somewhere in between revolutionary and imaginary.
Johnson describes performing these roles while at war, but in a way which suggests he has transcended them in his postwar life. When Johnson writes, he instructs on veteran identity, revealing perceived stereotypes at the root of his problems. Once Johnson establishes that he, too, embraced the fictional examples of war films, he gains his audience’s trust. Then, and only then, can Johnson deconstruct the veteran stereotypes found in so many of his favorite action movies. In place of an ideal Johnson offers insights from his life as an actual veteran. He claims that the pomp and circumstance of wartime service quickly fades, not all of the decisions made during war are “heroic,” and he never had much of a choice in the actions anyway. Worse, when he returns home
Johnson becomes the target of stereotypes; his experiences are deemed worthless by the VA; and, as poor explanation for their cold treatment toward him, Johnson’s closest loved ones simply tell him that he is “different.”

Reassimilation, I claim elsewhere in this text, seems out of reach to veterans who feel “different.” Collectively, in dealing with veteran storytellers, one begins to notice a common “difference,” an echo of the claims issued by Johnson and veterans like him. A feeling of inescapable “difference” coalesces around these veterans—around an entire generation of returning veterans. “Veterans have developed a culture of their own,” is the argument I offer in the introduction. Veterans share the trait of being targeted by certain prejudices. These prejudices are found thematically in MEA literature, but they are also part of the glue which binds veteran storytellers together as a community, as what Toni Morrison refers to in *Playing in the Dark’s* (1992) treatment of African American identity as an “amalgamated not me.”

Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), a text which proved useful in Chapter One because the language of theater and stage directing corresponds to performances of veteran identity, describes the seen and unseen forces which would create in veterans such as Bradley Johnson a feeling of “difference.” This dissertation attempts to describe at least some of those forces, in the VA health care system’s diagnosis of mental illness, in my own demands as an editor, in stories and artwork created by veterans throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In each instance, recurring themes of normalcy and pathology emerge in service of national goals, creating “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors,” or stereotypes of the most recent generation of veterans invested in the justification and continuation of war. Goffman
recognizes how the individual performances of identity reflect the power of these seen and unseen forces:

The past life and current round of activity of a given performer typically contain at least a few facts which, if introduced during the performance, would discredit or at least weaken the claims about self that the performer was attempting to project as part of the definition of the situation. These facts may involve well-kept dark secrets or negatively-valued characteristics that everyone can see but no one refers to. When such facts are introduced, embarrassment is the usual result. These facts can, of course, be brought to one’s attention by unmeant gestures or inopportune intrusions. However, they are more frequently introduced by intentional verbal statements or non-verbal acts whose full significance is not appreciated by the individual who contributes them to the interaction. (209)

Goffman uses the language of stage acting to describe both commonplace and extraordinary interactions between individuals. Specifically, the author deconstructs social situations to reveal underlying fears and motivations among participants. Johnson describes veteran “difference” as I have, as a feeling of apartness from the rest of society. Seen from Goffman’s perspective, that feeling might persist as a result of repeated instances of “embarrassment” caused by “dark secrets” or “negatively-valued characteristics,” which in the case of the veteran refers to any characteristic which falls outside collective definitions of the word “veteran.” That Johnson’s closest loved ones get lumped in with the rest of society only underscores the power of that feeling of “difference.” Each failure to live up to the expectations of others damages his position within a larger community, one which demands veterans engage in constant “impression management” (Goffman 208), or what Goffman describes as an effort to achieve “familiarity” with those in his community (238). Johnson’s interactions with the VA healthcare system and his family are examples of his having to engage in impression management in his day-to-day life.
For example, compare Johnson’s description of his postwar relationships to descriptions of the bonds forged during service: “I also made some of the best friends one could ask for. We are still brothers in the truest sense, despite being separated by distance and time. The bonds that we forged on the battlefield are bonds that cannot be weakened by time or distance. The people I served with are the only people in the world I would trust with my kids, my woman, or my booze” (51). He repeats perceptions of veterans as exceptional examples, suggesting that members of the military are somehow superior at managing interpersonal relationships. Johnson’s juxtaposition begins with a tranquil moment of reflection and ends with a clichéd equation between immediate family members and “booze.” It’s a common defense mechanism: couching an uncomfortable truth in humor. The circumstances in which Johnson feels it necessary to employ this technique, however, require further scrutiny. In particular, the loss of the camaraderie the author felt in the military, coupled with his need to relate painful and complex emotions and memories in the present, suggests that his post-war life does not contain an adequate support network through which to share his stories.

The friends Johnson served with remain his friends despite no longer wearing a military uniform. Johnson says their relationships remain true “despite being separated by distance and time” (51). Tropologically, or with regard to figurative meaning, the strong friendships found among veterans in literature functions to enhance the mystique of battle.52 In short, the greater the intensity of the pair’s shared combat experience, the

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52 Michael Kimmel’s *The History of Men: Essays on the History of American and British Masculinities* (2005) would explain these relationships as examples of “homosocial bonding,” or relationships predicated on a standard of behavior meant to enforce community among members of the same sex.
more loyal the friends will remain to each other. In cinema, subtle gestures or catch phrases, spoken between two war comrades among a group of unaware civilians, connote not only familiarity with each other, but familiarity with the act of war. Johnson’s war buddies do not appear in “My Life.” But it is not hard to imagine the introduction of a character possessing the level of familiarity with the narrator described above. More importantly, beyond tropes and beyond wartime bonds, there remains the fact that Johnson and his “war buddies” continue to commiserate. For example, the letters Johnson must provide to the VA represent a form of community predicated on suffering. Importantly, Johnson’s “My Life” describes his life before war; it describes his life shortly thereafter, but it does not pretend that Johnson is finished with the work of self-definition.

I was exceedingly proud of The JME’s first volume. My introduction to the collection is particularly revealing. Between the lines, in an attempt to hide my pride under humility, I also attempt a story. It is the story of veterans like Bradley Johnson, individuals who would come to MEA over the next four years befuddled by a world of fictions and patriotic rhetoric, individuals who believe that what happens after war is at least as important as what happens during:

Not all of the stories and poems that follow are about combat or service overseas. Yes, some of the authors write about the unspeakable things that they have been asked to do, or more accurately, that have been done to

53 Continued research on the topic of military camaraderie and male homosocial bonds will undoubtedly account for the increasing presence of women in combat. For example, Johnson uses the phrase “my woman,” referring to his spouse, but he does not refer to his friends as “my men.” Johnson’s phrase could be read as sexism, as reducing his spouse to property, or it can be read as a lighthearted joke, which I believe is more likely given the permanence of publishing one’s life story. However, questions remain. How is camaraderie described between plutonic friends of the opposite sex? What similarities and differences can be found in male and female homosocial bonding?
them. But some focus solely on that work of translation, making sense of a warrior culture and the mentality of an individual who has been bred, trained, and conditioned by a society in desperate need of a few willing to sacrifice for the many. In this way, all of the following works are interrelated—bound by a common bond of service—and speak with a unified voice to a fragmented audience of believers and skeptics alike. (ii)

The *JME* began in a small classroom. The first volume was 135 pages with all of the hallmarks of a young editor. The second volume was nearly triple the size and included scholarship. This growth was a product of opening submissions beyond Eastern Kentucky University, a surprising amount of media coverage, and recruitment of writers during MEA’s first symposium in July 2012. After a third volume, the MEA board voted to end production of *The JME*. Faced with a university partner demanding permanent ownership of all intellectual property published in future editions, I felt the decision was in the best interest of MEA’s contributors, whose agency was forged in their publications by making their experiences known to others, giving them a reality outside of the veterans’ memory. But this story of stories doesn’t end there. MEA would launch four *new* journals, three germane to a particular genre, one as MEA’s new flagship publication, and each controlled by a veteran-run organization.

**Engaging Fiction: MEA’s Blue Falcons**

*Virginia Woolf would Charleston her knees black and blue if she knew a group of veterans were inspired by her notion that women writers needed a room of their own inside the male-dominated British literary establishment. The workshop where this volume was produced was conducted online and via phone in strict accordance with the idea that military veterans, like women writers in the 1920s, need a room of their own in a civilian-dominated literary establishment. Over the last months, I believe we created a room and the stories written in this room are good enough to keep Virginia Woolf dancing for a good long time.*

—Daniel Buckman, Managing Editor, *The Blue Falcon Review*
It’s no fiction that the military gets carried away with acronyms. A meal, the kind ready to eat, becomes an “MRE.” Push-ups, sit-ups, and running are forms of physical training, so they become “PT.” The list goes on. Sometimes, young soldiers take up the mantle of acronymizing things for themselves, and often with humorous effects. Someone particularly prone to getting a group into trouble, for example, is referred to as a “Buddy Fucker,” which acronymizes to “BF,” which in military/veteran colloquial usage has become a “Blue Falcon” for reasons unbeknownst to me.

The title of MEA’s first fiction publication, *The Blue Falcon Review* (BFR), is a dig at civilian ignorance of veteran language. It’s also a deceptive title, granting those readers *in the know* an advantage over those who are not. I felt it was a push back against the notion that all military-themed literature must be about the dark, the macabre, or hyper-violent, like the war porn of popular movies. Veterans, like many people forced to confront boredom and hardship, use humor to cope. The complexity of veteran identity was something we hoped to capture.

Daniel Buckman, a former infantryman and the author of four novels featuring veteran characters and themes, became the managing editor of *BFR*. His expertise complemented my increasing ability to teach online, and we designed a workshop built around both. The *BFR* workshop consisted of nearly two dozen veterans representing different eras of service, branches of services, and nationalities. Over the course of several months we offered writing prompts, reviewed drafts, and facilitated peer review sessions to help the authors create works that we felt were *literary*. 
Each contributor to MEA interacts with fellow veterans, fellow authors or artists, educators, or just volunteers eager to help them with some small or great feat linked to the presentation of self. Goffman recognizes that “[s]ociety is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (13). Theorists of veteran culture such as Sebastian Junger argue that veterans are living up to their end of the bargain, providing what society lacks, the “social resilience” needed to overcome traumas such as war (103). Other theorists of testimony and “therapeutic culture,” such as Stevan Weine in Chapter Two, recognize the risks of appropriation associated with testimony, but conclude, “Testimony is an act that guarantees no results but is sometimes worth trying. Testimony is an imperfect balancing of the individual and the social, the local and the universal, the private and the public, but it might just be good enough” (Weine 153). Weine’s attitude reflects my own as an editor. I never knew which stories would resonate. It couldn’t be predicted by grammar, eloquence, or even the nature of the author’s service. The success of each piece, I now believe, depended upon its ability to alter, in some small or great way, the impressions of others.

With BFR, the literary matters more than the legacy. The path veteran fiction writers must travel in order to challenge society’s prevailing fictions is much more winding than that of the memoirist. The authors in BFR could not rely upon wartime service as ethos. No, veteran fiction writers must deal in the subtlety of language, with the veteran ideal itself. They must change the meaning of the word “veteran” so that the meaning better represents them as individuals. Few of MEA’s authors are as skilled at this craft as Jerad W. Alexander. His contribution, “Cold Day in Bridgewater,” opens
with a toothache. It is a pain which follows the narrator throughout his day-to-day duties
as a bartender, even after a veteran shows up at the bar looking for a drink:

The light shifts around him, or maybe it’s just me. I don’t know what it is. We don’t get too many around here, but when you find out someone is a serviceman, I tell you, it’s like the scenery changes. At least it does for me, I guess anyway. To hell what you think if you don’t believe that. (62-63)

The bartender, after offering his patron two free drinks, uses the phrase “Thank You for Your Service.” The interaction has not concluded, however; slightly before these words, the following thoughts come to the bartender: “My tongue darts over my bad tooth and sparks a little twinge and makes my back tighten. Luckily the Orajel gets ahold of it before it gets too bad” (63). It’s not just that the narrator’s tooth hurts. It is the complexity by which he narrates his pain which paints the scene. Throughout the entire conversation the tooth remains foremost in his mind. He compares his pain before interacting with the veteran to the pain he feels during. This affliction is neither recent nor severe. He describes it as nothing more than a nuisance at the beginning of the story, forgetting about the pain entirely before commenting on the weather. The line added just before “Thank You for Your Service, Steve” (63) is revealing precisely because it shows the bartender’s lack of concern for the veteran standing in front of him.

That damned slogan ends the first section of “Bridgewater.” But it is not the last example of the narrator’s disregard for his veteran patron. As the story progresses, the bartender’s racist attitudes are apparent. He also has opinions about veterans: “Ahh, hell. I figure any guy that goes over there is a hero, I don’t care what they did” (64). This comment carries double meaning: regardless of what the soldier did, he’s a “Hero,” but it also suggests the speaker truly does not care what soldiers have done or, at least, that he
doesn’t want to hear about it. Here, the bartender pays the veteran an insult disguised as a compliment, lowering the value of Steve’s service so that it is equal with even the worst Marine. In addition to bartending and racism, the narrator also displays skill in giving career advice: “You a 20-year man?” he asks before adding, “Good benefits to be had in the military. Retirement, medical, dental, all that. Stuff don’t come cheap … And hell, it’s a damn job in this country that ain’t been taken up by some illegal” (65). In his every attempt to praise military service, the bartender merely manages to be offensive, reducing his patron’s service to “a damn job.” Further, he reduces Steve’s motivations for serving to “benefits,” and he tries to secure the veteran’s complicity with a racist worldview. For the reader, the tension in “Bridgewater” is palpable at this point in the story.

The climax involves Steve baiting the bartender into a hypothetical discussion. The bartender, along with his reductionist views of policies toward the Middle East, offers the following suggestion, “We oughta just bomb them all back to the Stone Age. Every last one of them. We’re gonna have to eventually anyway” (67). The veteran butters his potato, beginning his meal, and a tense scene develops in which Steve suggests increasingly vile and inhumane acts of war to satiate a warmongering bartender.

“Where do you wanna start?” Steve asks, drawing the bartender into his trap: “We might have trouble at first with their army, but my boys are good. I mean, we can do some real damage. I’m talking total destruction, and we don’t miss much, either. Oh sure, we might get a civilian here and there, maybe a kid, which sucks, but to hell with it, right? What difference does it make, right?” (67). The narrator becomes uncomfortable, attempting to backtrack on his prior assertions by ruling out the murder of children. Steve does not relent: “Don’t worry, we’ll pay them. In a lot of those countries a dead goat
costs more than a dead person, anyway … I mean, they’re not really people. Not in God’s eyes, anyway, right?” (67-68). His tone is that of mockery. His words are the stuff of vitriol. The veteran in “Bridgewater,” like Bradley Johnson in “My Life,” sees through the bartender’s fiction:

“We’ll go over there in rotations, just like we do now. Seven months over, seven months back. I dunno, maybe some guys will have to stay there longer, but we’ll build big bases with McDonalds and Burger Kings with shopping malls and swimming pools and Wednesday night salsa dance lessons. Ship over Toby Keith and we’ll have concerts. Keith is still touring, right?” (68).

Steve lists a number of offerings from consumer culture meant to ease the discomfort of deployed soldiers, revealing them as nothing more than paltry compensation for the sacrifices required in war. Didn’t the veteran view the free beers offered to him earlier in the story in the same light? He probably feels the way I felt when I asked for the free burger offered to veterans in Toby Keith’s restaurant: cheap.

Each elevation in the veteran’s tone corresponds with an earlier moment of silence. Alexander, through his veteran-civilian dialogue, indicates that the prejudices leveled upon veterans are resulting in a tension close to a boiling point. Chapter Two shows how the expectations of racism in Clint Eastwood’s veteran character in *Gran Torino* influences that character’s patterns of behavior, but Alexander presents a veteran character aware and in control of these expectations from the beginning. How does the civilian narrator respond? How does he deescalate the situation? After *provoking* Steve he merely *ignores* him. Offering only bits of replies, tonguing his tooth, the narrator hopes the next shift will arrive soon. Earlier in the story, between the narrator’s racist tirades, the work of the “Arab” technician, as he is referred to by the narrator, intrudes
upon the conversation between Steve and the bartender. Later, after both parties reveal themselves, the veteran’s reality begins to intrude upon the civilian’s fiction:

My tooth pounds. I rub in more Orajel. I turn to face the Marine. He looks at me, eyes wide and alive, clicking fires. The corners of his mouth are turned down in a smirk, maybe. Or maybe he’s just sick, or about to get sick. The light vanishes from his eyes, like maybe he’s sad or something. Tired, maybe. I don’t know. But anyway, I never asked for all that. Who wants to hear all that? I don’t want to hear all that. I look back at the television. He saws off another piece of steak. (68)

I read the toothache as a hidden wound. Perhaps, it is a product of the veteran’s symbolic function. Steve refuses to be a mere repository for memories of war. But his antagonist, a civilian in favor of war and war violence, will not allow war to be portrayed honestly. These circumstances result in discomfort, perhaps even pain. “Who wants to hear all that?” is the bartender’s honest reaction to the veteran’s testimony. He tries to suppress knowledge of the common humanity shared between combatants on opposing sides of a single war. At what scale, or, after how many similar interactions between veterans and civilians, do attempts to suppress veteran testimony resemble the repression of a class of people?

Ignored, Steve asks for the bill, calling the bartender by name on his way out. Steve also offers the words “Thank you for your service.” This small act equates the veteran’s service to the bartender’s serving up dinner and racism. He’s holding up a mirror for his antagonist in this instance, reflecting his carelessness to prove a point. The words “Thank you for your service,” once used by a bartender to avoid what he perceives to be an unpleasant conversation, are appropriated and their superficiality is plainly stated by the veteran. The phrase evolves from a way of avoiding conversations about war into a sense of agency in “Bridgewater” because it is the veteran who uses the words. The
veteran in “Bridgewater” engages a struggle with the bartender for the right to define the word “veteran.” In other words, Steve takes control of his own identity and how it is perceived by others.

Veterans are not the only group stereotyped by the bartender. The bartender projects his racism and xenophobia and inhumanity upon those around him. It is the privilege he enjoys as a civilian—as someone not burdened with memories of war or violence—which allows him to simply ignore Steve. Steve, however, cannot do the same, at least not entirely. Veterans do not have the privilege of ignoring their veteran identities. Their identities persist. If not required to self-identify in exchange for entitlements, individuals like the bartender provoke veterans into self-identifying through protest. “Bridgewater” provides evidence of both veteran “difference” and the stereotypes leveled upon veterans. However, it is also a story about agency and the ability to recognize fictions before they become one’s source of self-definition.54

What does it say about how veterans are perceived when a civilian thinks it is fitting, perhaps even proper to project racism upon them? How did Steve’s veteran identity become synonymous with a worldview he clearly rejects? The two main characters in “Bridgewater” speak the same language. However, they do not share the same brand of patriotism. The bartender expects the veteran to behave rudely toward the Middle Eastern technician, as he did himself in a previous scene; he expects him to share his vile thoughts of bombing Muslim countries; the bartender expects Steve’s silence.

54 It is important to point out that Alexander’s civilian bartender is also a stereotype. Not all civilians project racism or dismissive attitudes toward military culture upon veterans. However, this problem does occur, as shown in the repeated theme of alienation in cultural representations of veterans. Alexander’s bartender is a fictional stereotype, one the author uses to work through the larger cultural problem found in the real world.
This silence, which will linger so long as the veteran allows him or herself to be passively defined by others, is the echo chamber in which “Heroes” and “Wounded Warriors” live. The bartender speaks from a position of advantage, of privilege. The climax in “Bridgewater” results in Steve subverting the narrator’s privilege, asserting his individuality and preventing the appropriation of his post-war identity. “Bridgewater” portrays a fictional world, but it also provides veterans with guidance about how to behave when stereotyped. It provides an alternative form of veteran identity.

Together, Johnson and Alexander write from the same disadvantage: they must describe the act of appropriation even as it happens to them in their day-to-day lives. Alexander, like Johnson, demonstrates the strains imposed upon veterans through depictions of “difference.” “Bridgewater” takes this discussion a step further, however, introducing the type of double-speak veterans must endure on a daily basis. Patriotism, especially in its negative form, silences real veterans by extolling all veterans as exceptional examples. However, and as “Bridgewater” shows, there’s nothing exceptional about the veterans imagined in the minds of racists or xenophobes. Veteran identity, as defined by those who are not veterans, is often limiting and ugly. It does not permit the veteran to exist beyond superficial understandings of war or warfighters. Testimony, however, in both fiction and nonfiction, allows veterans to add depth to these understandings, it allows veterans to engage in the work of self-definition so that other veterans will have more than the passive, silenced “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary to draw upon in their postwar lives. BFR, as a fiction publication, allows veterans to explore themselves further than that which is possible in nonfiction. They’re free to create fictional protagonists and antagonists if they want to distance themselves from painful
memories. They’re free to distill many instances of subtle discrimination or misunderstandings into single, powerful events. In the end, fiction and nonfiction are different ways of exploring the individual experience of veteran subjectivity.

Further Complications: MEA’s Veteran Artists

Artwork by combat veterans often addresses particular themes, and subtle meanings are frequently imbedded into the work that is inherently understood by those who have been a part of a military community … The artwork produced resonates for those with similar knowledge, but without some levels of interpretation it does not easily translate for civilian observers whose experiences have been very different.

—Tara Leigh Tappert, Managing Editor, Artwork, JME, Vol. 3

What do veteran artists do once they have broken through society’s prevailing stereotypes regarding veterans? After escaping pressures to remain silent—to conform to one in a set of prescribed identities, the fiction and nonfiction authors of the previous sections use their skills to complicate veteran identity further. Bradley Johnson publicly denounces the cold treatment given to him by loved ones and his government. Jerad W. Alexander, through the guise of a fictional bartender, details the process of reducing veterans to mere extensions of civilian racism and angst. The veterans in these stories do not remain silent. Johnson and Alexander refuse patriotic gestures and the lies that accompany them. MEA’s artists, though in an entirely different format, engage in the same, countercultural work of resistance.

Tif Holmes lends her skill to the work of combating Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Sadly, many veterans deny military sexual trauma’s existence, denying not that it happens, but arguing that it is no different than any other sexual crime—that there’s nothing “military” about it. On the other hand, others argue that the unique situations of
male and female soldiers who are assaulted sexually—usually by superior officers, in a situation in which it is impossible to escape—constitute a new form of sexual trauma. For women veterans, artists such as Tif Holmes argue through their visual rhetoric that MST is yet another inescapable component of veteran identity.

In *Prisoner of War* (2013) (Fig. 13) Holmes depicts a female soldier held silent. Camouflage melts into the red, white, and blue of the American flag to disguise an unspeakable crime. Holmes, in the description of the piece, explains that the “black shadow-figure standing behind the soldier in the image represents any combination of a
multitude of captors, physical and mental, that keep veterans prisoner: shame, regret, fear, intimidation, anger, depression, PTSD, psychological responses to physical wounds and limitations, physical beings, or the military institution itself—the list will vary from veteran to veteran, but the concept remains that something or someone keeps us prisoner beyond the battlefield.” Holmes continues, “On my own very personal level, it represents a physical being—a comrade—who betrayed my trust and sexually assaulted me repeatedly during my military service” (295). The level of bravery involved in the creation of a work like this cannot be overstated. Not only is Holmes using art to provide testimony to undermine rape culture in the military, the artist takes a series of her most traumatic memories and repurposes them, transforming art into protest, wounds into weapons. In a way, the artwork could be read as undermining the narrative of veteran suicide by placing the act within context and presenting cause alongside effect. Tif Holmes, in many ways, tells a “war story,” but the black hand of the enemy belongs to a fellow veteran.

Many individuals, male and female, come to MEA hoping to make similar impacts with their written and visual works. MST, because of survivors such as Tif Holmes, has become a part of the American consciousness. Suzanne Rancourt’s “The Bear That Stands,” a story examined in the pages preceding this chapter, is set decades ago, during her service in the Marines, but it also depicts the struggles of women veterans living in the aftermath of rape. In Rancourt’s story rape is not the last transgression; it is the first of many, a starting point in a series of denials, a pattern of ostracizing and continued sexual harassment which ultimately brings her career to an early end. The message of works like “The Bear That Stands” and Prisoner of War is one of urgency:
28-33% of women and 1-12% of men will experience sexual assault at some point during their military careers (Castro, Kintzele, et al.). That percentage is the reality women like Holmes and Rancourt hope will dispel society’s larger fictions, idealized notions of veteran identity, and calls for reassimilation by a public which, for many years, has refused to recognize MST.

The harm inflicted upon families by war is also a recurring theme in MEA publications. Giuseppe Pellicano’s *Tea Time* (2012) (below) adorns the cover of *The JME*’s final volume. It is part of a larger *Grenade Series* that the artist views as “a soldier’s attempt at re-familiarizing him or herself as the father/mother figure within the family” (343). In the work, a young girl sits at a table replete with an imaginary tea set. The bright colors and stuffed teddy bear larger than the child create a playful atmosphere, one shattered by her playmate: a very large grenade. The scene is striking, of course, due to the close proximity of a child to a weapon. The grenade, which represents the girl’s father, is both a stereotype and a real acknowledgement of the psychological struggles many veterans face.

The bartender’s failure in “Bridgewater” (one of his many failures) is that he attempts to assert his voice in place of the veteran’s. Hence, the veteran usurps the bartender’s voice by using the “Thank You for Your Service” on the way out of the bar. It’s not that non-veterans can’t discuss the topic of PTSD, the horrors of war, or the roles of veterans in their post-war lives; those are the very things I have argued that civilians *must* discuss. Rather, authors like Johnson and Alexander, as well as artists who share the motivations of Holmes and Pellicano, simply want to be included in the conversation. Why shouldn’t they?
*Tea Time* (Fig. 14), a work of photography dealing heavily in stereotypes and symbolism, conveys a message that can be sent only by a veteran. Pellicano turns the notion of “invisible wounds of war” on its head, externalizing the dark, often violent thoughts and memories which can accompany the condition. The work shows that there’s nothing literally dark about PTSD. Instead, the artist uses bright colors which emphasize the impulses and intrusive thoughts common to the condition. The “ticking time bomb” character referenced by the grenade is present at the little girl’s table, but that character is not in control. The skull represents the unspeakable, the horrors of war, loss of innocence, or perhaps the veteran wrestling the theme of mortality. Pellicano’s act of testimony begs a deeper questioning of the “time bomb” stereotype, but not at the expense of pretending all is well with returning veterans. It is a work which, rhetorically, and in the wrong context, would be derogatory if produced by a civilian.

![Tea Time](image)

*Figure 14: Tea Time* (2012). Digital Photography, 18 X 28 in., by Giuseppe Pellicano

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If a civilian were to paint the scene above using the same assumptions and stereotypes, it would be an entirely different act. The difference would be one between labeling and re-appropriating. Such stereotypes already exist. By depicting a domestic, interior scene, Pellicano shows the intrusion of PTSD into the homecoming, not media spectacles such as “Returning Veteran Greeted by Loving Dog” or “Deployed Veteran Surprises Child in Classroom” with a million likes on social media. Pellicano doesn’t invent the “Wounded Warrior,” or the violence and instability attributed to veterans; he recognizes them as perceptions held by others and deals with them through extreme depictions. Just as the bartender in Alexander’s “Bridgewater” appears to be a stereotypically racist civilian, the grenade symbolizing a veteran in Pellicano’s works represents a stereotypically dangerous veteran. Pellicano’s vantage as a veteran allows him to deal with stereotypes in a way which does not subject other veterans their appropriating effects. The Grenade Series, as a whole, succeeds because of the authority granted to the artist by his veteran status. As further evidence that homecoming should include the act of storytelling, Pellicano demonstrates that some stories, in instances when prevailing fictions converge upon uncomfortable truths, need to be told by a veteran. Representations of veterans created by civilians, such as Stephen Crane’s Henry Fleming, can at times capture the truth of military experience, but evaluations of veteran identity by veterans themselves keep these representations grounded in reality.

Oh Happy Day (2012) (Fig. 15) is another work from Pellicano’s Grenade Series. In it, a young, distraught woman sits on the edge of the bed with a pistol. Lying next to her is the grenade from Tea Time. Pellicano claims that Oh Happy Day provides a glimpse of the desperation of the other half in coping with the soldier’s disabilities. The stress and hardships spouses or loved ones often
contend with impact their own mental and physical health. They can feel helpless in providing support and understanding to their returning soldier or they are unintentionally abused and suffer alongside them. (344)

“Secondary PTSD” is the name of the condition described by Pellicano. It’s a condition, like MST, that members of military communities disagree upon. Again, however, it is one that I have found increasingly hard to ignore after interacting with dozens of military spouses. It is not an official illness, at least not in the DSM. Still, close romantic relationships deal in emotions. Everything changes for the veteran afflicted with PTSD: where the veteran goes, how the veteran feels, how the veteran relates to others. Anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, anger attacks, and flashbacks are bound to have effects which extend beyond the veteran and into the lives of those people who care for them. How often does the spouse blame him or herself for these changes? And how often does the spouse experience those symptoms and feel guilty for having them, for needing help to cope with these symptoms? How would acclimating to this new reality change the spouse’s relationship with the world over time? Finding an answer to this question and others like it was one reason military spouses became contributors to MEA publications.

Oh Happy Day depicts a tearful woman holding onto a pistol and grenade pin.

Pulling the pin, of course, will set off the grenade, and this is the fact which, presumably,

55 Spouses struggling to cope with PTSD among their partners is not a recent occurrence. Jennifer D. Keene’s reading of the “Bonus March” in 1932 reveals the plights of veterans “having to reinvent their lives again a mere twelve years after their previous attempt to do so” (182). The Great Depression took an even greater toll on those veterans already struggling with war-related disabilities, and “Agnes Brewington, suffering in a violent, alcoholic marriage … which she blamed on his combat experience, convinced Brewington that she was as much a victim of the war as her husband. Those wives who also descended on Washington with their spouses during the bonus March may not all have agreed with her conclusion that their husbands would only waste their money on drink, but they certainly accepted that her husband’s quest had become their own as well” (183). More on this topic is available in Doughboys, the Great War, and the Rethinking of America (2003).
has brought the woman to tears. The focus of *Tea Time* is the daughter. In *Oh Happy Day* it is the wife. Earlier, I described the grenade as “a ticking time bomb.” If, as this stereotype suggests, it is just a matter of time before the veteran turns violent, it is the woman in the image who will be the trigger. Alternately, the work could be read from the spouse’s perspective. For example, the spouse has alcohol on her nightstand whereas the veteran has pills. Importantly, the skull present in *Tea Time* now belongs to the spouse, suggesting that she is the one dealing with the unspeakable, the horrors of war, or mortality. Both drugs are ways of self-medicating. But few stop to consider how military spouses endure their own traumas, some having little to do with the military. Further, the spouse holds a gun, a tool of violence as dangerous as the grenade. What are the spouse’s triggers? Society assumes that veterans are always the “killers,” the “abusers,” the eventual perpetrators of some horrific murder-suicide. I do not believe Pellicano’s approach to be denigrating toward military spouses. Rather, I believe Pellicano’s attempts to engage with spouses, to empathize with their guilt, and to show them that they are not alone, reflects the humanity of veterans—their abilities to empathize and see themselves through the eyes of others—as well as the struggles of military spouses, those men and women who are often the sole individuals willing to help veterans hold onto their humanity. Life as “a ticking time bomb” is no life at all, to be sure, but neither is life lived in anticipation of that bomb’s explosion.

While homecoming is the most common theme in works published by MEA, the majority of the submissions I worked with over a period of four years were predicated on altruism, a trait I’ve attributed to veterans throughout this dissertation. This fact should be the prevailing narrative surrounding military veterans: They retain the sense of collective
responsible instilled in them through training and combat experience. The future of veteran literature and art, if MEA is any indication, will be storytellers using their skills to engage with more than veterans’ issues and larger society. Imagine the good authors such as Johnson, Alexander, and Rancourt could do if their talents were so employed. Imagine artists such as Pellicano and Holmes tackling rape and family strife on a national stage, for all Americans.

Figure 15: Oh Happy Day (2012).
Digital Photography, 18 X 28 in., by Giuseppe Pellicano

Again, it has never been my desire to render this “theory of veteran identity” complete. The examples given in this chapter—Johnson, Alexander, Holmes, Pellicano—are among a growing cadre of veteran authors and artists finding means through which to express themselves. Future studies into the homecoming experiences of military men and women will, undoubtedly, focus on those instances in which veterans further complicate veteran identity. As the opportunities for veterans to give testimony increase, and as more nuanced images of veteran identity rise to the surface, the veterans will cease to resemble a monolith. Veteran authors and artists will be among the first veterans of their
generation to see and to depict identity beyond the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary. From there, using the skills and courage displayed in the sorts of works I encountered as an editor at MEA, it will be their job to change the meaning of the word “veteran,” to repair the damage done by stereotypes and silence, and to encourage military men and women to adopt identities which aid re-assimilation rather than forestall it.
I imagine that many veterans will read this dissertation and find similarities to their own experiences, to homecoming and attempts to define themselves after military service. Other veterans, undoubtedly, will disagree with my arguments and conclude, “Travis Martin doesn’t know what he is talking about. He was just some fucking POG (a military euphemism, meaning ‘Person Other than a Grunt’) who did convoys in Iraq.” Or they will conclude, “He was so young and inexperienced while serving in the military that he can’t possibly understand the burdens placed upon leaders—the bigger picture.” In fact, I agree with these assertions. But I am not basing my arguments solely on my experiences in the military. I am proud of how I performed as a soldier. However, I consider my service atypical. I served as a Motor Transport Operator (88M)—as a truck driver and convoy platform machine gunner—in the United States Army from 2002 to 2006. I was stationed in Mannheim, Germany, as part of a battalion which has been deactivated and on a base which has been closed and returned to the German government. I spent my entire enlistment in a single unit, deploying to Iraq from May 2003 to February 2004, and again from January 2005 to December 2005. I advanced from the
rank of Private (E-1) to Sergeant (E-5) during my four-year enlistment. I was not a member of a “Combat Arms” unit, and I do not know what it is like to send younger, less experienced troops into combat. I know what it is like to be one of those soldiers, but I most certainly do not know what it is like to have a soldier die under my command. I don’t even know what it is like to be stationed in the continental United States, or “stateside.” However, the reason I draw upon non-fictional and fictional examples of veterans from literature and cinema, and the reason I combine such analyses with research in the fields of sociology, psychology, and history, is that I know my “veteran” perspective is insufficient to embrace the full range of veteran experience. No veteran’s experience is all-encompassing.

Still, my goal has been to create “a theory of veteran identity.” I wanted to discuss veteran identity in general, and I hoped to comment on the shared experience of homecoming, of emerging from the many perspectives found in military cultures. As such, I wrote about all veterans, about the combat arms and support troops, the young enlisted soldiers and the seasoned officers. All of these military subcultures are represented in the works I analyze in this dissertation. In fact, a puzzling aspect of veteran identity, I argue, is that each veteran is perceived in general. The word “veteran” stands for all of these subcultures, and the result of combining such disparate experiences ontologically is that veterans struggle to relate their experiences to an audience in search of a single author, or a single artist capable of describing military service as a whole. There’s just no way to write about war or express oneself creatively about military service which accounts for the thousands of occupations, eras of service, or types of combat experienced by veterans.

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As I have shown, stereotypes such as the “Hero” and “Wounded Warrior” pressure veterans into silence. One sure way to marginalize veterans is to lend credence to that silence. So, beyond friendly rivalries and beyond taking pride in their individual accomplishments, veterans need to be careful not to give in to the myths and rhetoric which create hierarchies. Again, larger society perceives military veterans stereotypically, in general. When veterans devalue one another’s experiences, points of view, and attitudes which do not match their own, it only undermines veteran culture. My goal—as a veteran, scholar, advocate, and publisher—has always been to conceive of a veteran identity which permits plurality, myriad perspectives, and dialogue between veterans and civilians regarding war.

What veteran’s perspective is all-encompassing? Where is this veteran and how can I help that person write a book? Likely, such a person does not exist. At least, in my interactions with hundreds of military veterans, I have yet to come across one. In this way, I believe my atypical military experience has its own value. For example, veteran identity, I argue, is a peculiar hybrid-identity, a product of both military and civilian cultures. In this way, veterans exist in a state of liminality—in a perpetual space of transition between two larger, sometimes conflicting and more powerful identities. I have come to regard my military occupation as a truck driver in Iraq as one which is also liminal, existing in the space between “combat” and “support” roles, one which has provided me insights into both professions and the cultures built around them. When I returned from war, I did not return to the United States. I returned to my duty station in Germany, to protestors standing outside of the gates of our home at Turley Barracks. This was not a traumatic or threatening experience. I simply found it to be an odd contrast to
“Welcome Home” banners and standing ovations given to veterans who returned stateside. I was not present in my home country when patriotism was mistaken for dialogue with veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when veteran identity was reduced to the “Hero” / “Wounded Warrior” binary. As such, my experience has provided me with further insights into patriotic rhetoric, a phenomenon so pervasive and dominant that it shapes the way veterans relate to civilians, their families, and to each other. My perspective is not all-encompassing, but it has value. And so does the perspective of any veteran.

The Future in Six Months

In the Introduction, I suggest that some of my readers would have to suspend belief in patriotic rhetoric. It wasn’t possible to address the stereotypical identities damaging veterans while still embracing the larger system of mythmaking responsible for their creation. Now, I ask those readers to resume belief in patriotism, in the high ideals which bind our nation together in order to imagine a way to help veterans in the work of reassimilation. In the opening pages of this dissertation, I imagine the small non-profit organization I helped to establish existing on a much larger scale:

What I envision is something much more prominent, a center of power devoted to the sharing of veteran ideals, an entity or a place so great that the words issued from within carry weight in both the physical and the symbolic realms. For veterans, conveying the experiences, emotions, and lessons of war should be as normal as standing for the national anthem, wearing a uniform, or carrying a rifle. I imagine self-definition as an explicit part of the return home process.

In most of the books, films, poems, and works of art I examine, I keep getting the same impressions: War is evil. It causes terrible physical and psychological wounds. The
socioeconomically disadvantaged are overrepresented. The intensity of a veteran’s combat experience tends to create a disdain for war, sometimes even for larger society. At the same time, and paradoxically, the alienation experienced by returning veterans often results in a desire to return to war, to feelings of purpose and camaraderie felt while serving in uniform. In my work, I have witnessed veterans of all types and backgrounds begin the work of self-definition. Given a community of their peers, mentorship from established writers or artists, and a place in which to express themselves publically, the veterans I have worked with achieved new levels of self-awareness. It didn’t cure their wounds. And no individual writer has ever solved the problem of war. But it gave them purpose, perhaps even a direction to take in their postwar lives.

*Six months.* In order to approach the problem of veteran reassimilation holistically, I would add six months to the end of every military career. Or I would dedicate the last six months of a military career to the process of reassimilation. All veterans would travel to a final duty station, preferably near the nation’s capital, a place where they could see and learn about the monuments made to previous generations of warfighters. They would have access to one-on-one conversations with their political leaders, generals, and strategists responsible for war. And they would become parts of a final military community, one not dedicated to waging war, but to ensuring that veterans have access to medical and mental health care, job training and placement, and a way to record their stories for themselves and for the American public. There would be no exceptions. All members of the military would agree to the six-month commitment in their initial contracts they sign. Importantly, the experience would not just benefit combat veterans, or disabled veterans, or any subset of military culture. It would apply to all
veterans, reinforcing plurality in order to create a more complete picture of military service in the American consciousness.

This final duty station could be called the “Service Member Adjustment and Recording Transition,” some elaborate military name which can translate easily into an acronym such as “SMART.” Six months out from the end of their contracts, younger troops would begin saying, “I’m heading off to get SMART soon.” They’d make jokes and some, undoubtedly chomping at the bit to get ahead in civilian life, would view it as a waste of time. However, they would soon find themselves in a new community. The rhetoric shaping this community would constantly reinforce the importance of veteran reassimilation, of the veteran’s importance to the rest of society. It would reinforce the veteran’s symbolic authority. The time, attention, and money spent on the task by the American public would also work against veterans’ collective feelings of alienation.

Again, it would all be very liminal, a mix between active duty military, workforce training, college, and therapy. The structure would be military, including a chain of command to provide leaders and lower-enlisted troops with day-to-day duties, but the “Missions” of these soldiers, or the goals of the program, would revolve around preparing veterans for reentry into “the civilian sector.” Both leaders and their subordinates would take part. A daily routine might resemble this one:

- 0630 – Physical Training and Conditioning
- 0900 – Daily Formation and Briefing
- 1000 – College or Vocational Training
- 1200 – Chow
- 1300 – Duties and Public Service
- 1400 – Interview Strategies and Job Placement
- 1500 – Mental Health / Physical Therapy / Wellness Programs
- 1600 – Group and individual meetings with national and local leaders
- 1700 – End of Day
Of course, there would be managers and experts on the obstacles veterans face upon reentry, guiding each individual veteran’s schedule. Severely wounded veterans, obviously, would not have to do PT in the mornings. However, veterans who are not severely wounded could find purpose and meaning in helping the severely wounded in the process of rehabilitation. And “Duties,” would take different forms: docent roles at war memorials, non-profit work, community service, specialized trainings which introduce veterans to different forms of leadership and teach them ways to contribute to the workforce and larger society. Ideally, the veterans taking part in the SMART program would become an integral part of the experience of visiting the nation’s capital. In addition to learning about American history, visitors would interact with veterans on a daily basis. Civilian perspectives and attitudes toward military service would come to reflect the actual experiences of veterans. The experience would teach veterans how to succeed in these interactions in a formal setting, but in a way which teaches them how to discuss military service after the six months end and they return home. A lot of emphasis would need to be placed upon allowing veterans to individualize the six-month program to suit their tastes and needs.

Immediately, upon arriving at their final duty stations, veterans would be evaluated for mental and physical disabilities, and the amount of compensation owed to them would be guaranteed as a monthly payment at the end of the six months. No more waiting years for a VA claim to be approved. And veterans with severe disabilities preventing them from rejoining society would be allowed to extend their final tour of duty to get the care and resources they need. Veterans would have the option of taking college courses or vocational training from local and newly established centers of higher
education. This training would be free of charge, and it would not subtract from the number of months provided by the GI Bill or other veterans’ training and education programs. Instead, veterans would enter college with a distinct advantage, but one predicated on the veteran’s innate sense of altruism, on his or her ability to serve as a leader and an educator in life after military service.

Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines would “graduate” from SMART in six months by completing a capstone project, “The Veteran’s Official Record of Military Service” (VORMS). Every single member of the military would create a record of military service, not a one page summary of service such as the DD Form 214, but rather an expressive project reflective of the veteran him or herself. Further, veterans engaged in the project would receive writing instruction and college credit along the way. A VORMS database would, at a minimum, contain stories and descriptions of military service from every branch of the military, every occupational specialty, and every rank or position. Yes, there will be issues that need to be addressed in order to make the project feasible for veterans suffering from the lingering effects of Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, or Military Sexual Trauma. And I imagine that some stories will have to be redacted to protect vital national security interests. But these issues emerge in veterans’ lives every day, and at present, veterans have little or no help separating trauma from the rest. VORMS would have several implicit goals:

1) Making veterans effective communicators in the colleges or workplaces they enter after service.

2) Teaching veterans, especially those exposed to extreme violence, how to talk about military service in a way which leaves them comfortable and open to dialogue.
3) Destabilizing stereotypes and understandings of veterans in general by creating an online database of veteran records (through the Library of Congress, or in another public database that is not classified) which describes military experience in total.

Veterans would officially record their contributions to national war efforts and other actions. They would spend six months focused on this project while learning about national history as well as how to interact with nonveterans, how to get the care they need, and how to create individualized plans for reentering civilian society. Beyond the individual veteran’s need to deal with trauma or other delicate issues, and beyond protecting national security secrets, much attention would be placed upon preserving the veteran’s intent. That is, veterans would not be censored and their stories would fall outside the authority of the military chain of command. Instead of the military providing an evaluation of the veteran in discharge paperwork, veterans would get the last word. These stories won’t match the pitches given by recruiters. But they won’t match hyper-violent depictions of war found in movies, either. Instead, and collectively, the database will emerge as an honest appraisal of military service, one that future recruits are required to study prior to enlisting or becoming commissioned officers.

Of course, there will be a lot of logistics involved in creating a program such as SMART. It will cost a lot of money to house and care for such a larger number of veterans. But it seems that the current approach to helping veterans rejoin society is broken, or at least insufficient. And, as I have shown in this dissertation, veterans face cultural and psychological impediments to growth and recovery. This dissertation asks readers to reimagine the practice of patriotism. Why not make growth and recovery a part of military service? Why not create an official, public record of military service representative of all veterans? Just as SMART will help veterans in the process of
reassimilation, the VORMS database would be extremely valuable to future recruits
deciding whether or not to join the military. It would be of value to clinicians, historians,
social theorists, and military strategists interested in helping veterans. And as part of a
comprehensive program dedicated to veteran healing and preparation for life after
military service, self-definition, as an explicit part of the return home process, would
provide veterans with a chance to reflect and chart a path toward success and a future of
their choosing.
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Vita

TRAVIS L. MARTIN

Education

Graduate Certificate in Social Theory, University of Kentucky, December 2014
Master of Arts in English, Eastern Kentucky University, May 2011
Bachelor of Arts in English, Eastern Kentucky University, December 2009
Associate of Arts, Somerset Community College, May 2008

Professional Positions

Teaching Assistant, University of Kentucky
  Fall 2011 - Spring 2012, Fall 2013 - Spring 2015, Fall 2016 - May 2017
Part-Time Faculty, Eastern Kentucky University
  Fall 2010, Summer 2011 - Summer 2014
Part-Time Faculty, Somerset Community College
  Summer 2013
Graduate Assistant, Eastern Kentucky University
  Spring 2010 - Spring 2011
Founder & President, Military Experience and the Arts, 501(C)(3)
  Fall 2010 - Spring 2015
Workshop Leader, ArtReach: Project America, 501(C)(3)
  Fall 2012 - Fall 2013
Sergeant / Motor Vehicle Instructor, United States Army
  Fall 2002 - Fall 2006

Scholarly Publications


**Honors and Awards**

Dissertation Year Fellowship, University of Kentucky, 2015
Robert L. Doty English Graduate Support Fund Award, University of Kentucky, 2015
Patricia and William Stacy Endowed Fellowship, University of Kentucky, 2014
Chairs’ Memorial Scholarship, Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2013
Travel Grant, Northeast Modern Language Association, 2012
Program of the Year for *The Journal of Military Experience,* Student Veterans of America, 2012
National Literacy Grant, Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, 2011
Recognized, Kentucky State Assembly, 2011
Madonna Marsden Writing Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2011
Graduate Writing Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2011
Phi Kappa Phi Chapter Fellowship, Eastern Kentucky University, 2010
Creative Non-Fiction Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2010
Graduated “Summa Cum Laude,” Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
Dean’s Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
McNair Scholar Scholastic Achievement Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
Presidential / McNair Scholarship for Excellence, Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
 Stellar Scholar Award for Non-Traditional Students, Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
Undergraduate Writing Award, Eastern Kentucky University, 2009
Outstanding Service Award, Eastern Kentucky University Student Government, 2009
Graduated with “High Distinction,” Somerset Community College, 2008
Academic Achievement Award in “History,” Somerset Community College, 2008
President’s Award, Somerset Community College / Eastern Kentucky University, 2008-2009
Dean’s List, Somerset Community College / Eastern Kentucky University, 2007-2009
Honorable Discharge, United States Army, 2006
Purple Heart Award, United States Army, 2005
Army Commendation Medal, United States Army, 2005
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