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"I DREAMT OF HOME": U.S. VETERANS' REPRESENTATIONS OF WARTIME EXPERIENCES

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THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
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By

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

"I DREAMT OF HOME": U.S. IRAQ VETERANS' REPRESENTATIONS OF WARTIME EXPERIENCES

This thesis employs several books from the Veterans Book Project, focusing on the stories of white male veterans of the Iraq War. I analyze these books through the lenses of banal nationalism, masculinity, feminist political geography and embodiment. Using archival and visual methods, I analyze how these books reproduce imperial logics and what this suggests about the veterans' role in the everyday realities of war. Through analysis of these books, I examine the representation of the veterans' wartime experiences and the reconstruction of veterans' identities. This research seeks to understand how personal narratives reproduce imperial projects and colonialism through discourse and representation. I argue that the veterans hold a tense position within the imperial project, both complicit in and victim to the state's violence.

KEYWORDS: Iraq War, Imperialism, Digital Archives, Veterans and Trauma, Representation, Embodiment

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends, for all the support during this process.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On September 8th, 2002, national security advisor Condoleezza Rice implied to CNN that Iraq was harboring weapons of mass destruction. This, she declared, was unacceptable and a threat to the world's safety. Six months later, the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom, which would turn out to be a decade-long invasion of Iraq, resulting in the assassination of Saddam Hussein, the deaths of over 4,000 American troops, and countless Iraqi civilians (Zoroya 2019). The Iraq war, beginning less than two years after September 11, 2001, was a continuation of a new war on terror that the United States employed to invade the Middle East and restrict the privacy rights of U.S. citizens and non-citizens. The Iraq war resulted in 4,400 soldiers and countless Iraqi civilians dead. Between 9/11 and the end of the Iraq war in December 2011, hate crimes against Arab Americans increased by over 500% (1A, 2021). Public figures were emboldened to reveal their racism, such as Donald Trump questioning Barak Obama's citizenship and claiming he was a Muslim insurgent. Though support for the war waned over time, the United States' colonial project in the Middle East bore on. The Iraq war ended in 2011, but 50,000 troops remained to 'maintain peace' long after (Al Jazeera, 2010). During its time in Afghanistan, the United States assassinated Osama bin Laden, continuously fought the Taliban, instituted an interim government, and developed a constitution (CFR, 2022). After nearly twenty long years, the U.S. government finally conceded to the Taliban and fully pulled out of Afghanistan, leaving the country in turmoil, and causing a massive influx of Afghans seeking safety in the United States and other countries. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq produced three million veterans (Shane 2021), many of

whom go untreated for PTSD and 48,000 of whom are at risk for homelessness (Zoroya 2014).

Research Questions

This project seeks to understand how U.S. veterans of the Iraq war represent their wartime experiences, and what this reveals about their changing relationship with the nation and colonialism. I examine books from the Veterans Book Project, written by eight white male veterans. The Veterans Book Project is an open art project developed by photographer Monica Haller. I specifically use feminist and whiteness lenses to study what these veterans' books reveal about ongoing experiences of colonialism and war. These books vary in length and form, with some acting as traditional books and others as pieces of art or collections of poetry. Several veterans included pieces of artwork and diary entries. All included photos taken during their service. Haller intended the project to be a way for the veterans to "deploy" their photos from their tours and process their experiences. The use of the term deployment is particularly interesting. While pulling on language associated with military service, it likewise suggests that the photos can be employed to a particular end. I employed archival methods in my research by treating the veterans' books as primary source archival materials. This project sits within feminist, decolonial, and whiteness literature and is intended to understand how veterans choose to represent their wartime experiences and what these choices reveal about the veterans' everyday complicity in colonial projects. The following research questions guided my analysis:

1. How do U.S. veterans of the Iraq War represent their wartime experiences through the Veterans Book Project?

2. What ideas about the war in Iraq exist among veterans who served in Iraq?

3. What do the veterans' shifting experiences of complicity and disillusionment reveal about the everyday enactment of colonialism and racism among soldiers in Iraq and the role of the soldier in war?

Throughout my research, I seek to answer the questions and better understand the relationship between veterans, coloniality, and war.

The Veterans Book Project

The Veterans Book project is an open art project organized by artist Monica Haller. Haller is a photographer, with a background in peace and conflict studies (UW-Madison, 2022). She launched the Veterans Book Project with the first book, *Riley and His Story (2009)* written by veteran Riley Sharbonno. Sharbonno had served as a nurse at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq from 2004 to 2005. Haller and Sharbonno used the hundreds of photos he had taken during his deployment. Using this first book as a framework, Haller began working with over fifty veterans from various wars to create a collection of memoirs. The website describes each book as "re-deploy[ing] volatile images with the aim of rearticulating and refashioning memories. [They] stand both independent of and in concert with the larger collection" (Veterans Book Project, 2010). The project seeks to "provide a place or 'container' that slows down and materializes the great quantity of ephemeral image files that live on veterans' hard drives and in their heads" (ibid). Indeed, all the books feature dozens of photos taken by the veterans. These photos include landscapes, soldiers, tanks, gun collections, Iraqi civilians, and dead bodies. The photos hold a position equal to the narratives but often stand independent of

the prose and poetry. The photos tell their own stories. The Veterans Book Project held workshops around the country, helping veterans to put their experiences on paper and process their feelings about their deployment. The workshops could last up to a week with three to six participants. Haller and other artists would help the veterans compile their photos, develop their narratives, and format both into a book. Haller works closely with each veteran to design their books- thus, no two books are identical. Some use traditional chronological narrative, following the veterans' journeys from enlistment to returning home as a veteran. Others use poetry or artistic use of space, with entire pages devoted to a single word or sentence for emotional impact.

Each book is referred to as an 'object for deployment'. As such, we can understand these books as a way to make sense of veterans' experiences; to use their photos and memories as a way to externalize difficult experiences and turn them into resources for other veterans. For civilians, they offer a glimpse into the everyday realities of war. The books combine imagery and narrative- photos often float through the books without comment or context, the people and places depicted unnamed. Often, the text seems to stand separate from the photos- other times, the two lean on one another heavily. The veterans' words and photos provide a lens through which we can understand their experiences in war. However, though the project is named the Veterans Book Project, many non-veterans also participated. About seven Iraqi refugees also created books as part of the Veterans Book Project. The inclusion of their stories renders the Veterans Book Project an inquiry into the war itself, rather than just its impact on veterans. While the refugees' stories provide a different lens through which to understand the Iraq war, I focus exclusively on the white men who served in the Iraq war. As a white

graduate student, I felt that my research would be best served focusing on the role of whiteness and masculinity in war and its interactions with theories of coloniality and imperialism. I further limited my analysis to books that described the veteran's full experience, from enlistment to their return home. Several veterans focused solely on their reunion and reintegration- while these accounts provided rich analysis of the failures of the government to provide services to veterans, my research instead focuses on wartime experiences. As such, I chose not to include accounts of post-war experiences in my analysis.

The Iraq War

The Iraq War officially began on March 20, 2003. Journalists and scholars have citied various motivations. Derek Gregory (2004) argues that oil was an inevitable motivator for the Bush administration, as was "sovereign power itself" (ibid, 191). However, the Bush administration grounded the war in claims that Saddam Hussein was tied to al-Qaeda and was developing weapons of mass destruction. Both claims were baseless. Regardless, the Bush administration invaded Iraq on the 20th of March and would stay in the country for the next eight years. In the following section, I will offer a brief overview of the Gulf and Iraq wars Extensive literature exists on the nuances of these wars- however, engagement with these complexities is beyond the scope of this chapter. As such, my summary of the wars will be reductive, though I acknowledge the intricacies of both.

The Iraq War can be traced back to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Over the previous decades, the United States had developed a good relationship with Saudi Arabia,

a major consumer of American weapons and a source of oil (Gregory 2004, 157). When Iraq invaded Kuwait in late 1990, the first Bush administration claimed that the invasion placed Saudi Arabia in a vulnerable position and required the United States' defense. Thus began Operation Desert Shield. The United States placed heavily armed troops along Kuwait's southern border- though, as Gregory writes, "expert analysis showed no military build-up on the Iraqi side of the border" (ibid, 160). In November, the United States issued an order for Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait by January of 1991- if he did not comply, the United States would engage with "all necessary means" (ibid, 161). Operation Desert Shield morphed into Operation Desert Storm on January 16th, 1991 (ibid, 162). The resulting war was brutal in its efficiency and ruthlessness. When the Iraqi army tried to withdraw, the United States blocked the troops with plows, burying Iraqi soldiers hiding in trenches and killing hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians (ibid, 164-166). Over the next decade, the United States imposed 687 heavy sanctions on Iraq (ibid, 173), of which civilians bore the greatest brunt. By the time the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the country was "extraordinarily weak: enfeebled by the slaughter and destruction of the first Gulf War, by a decade of damaging sanctions, and by continuing air raids within and beyond the "no-fly zones" (ibid, 194).

By April of 2003, the United States Army had taken control of Baghdad. The second Bush administration had expected the invasion to be swift and efficient. They imagined that the collapse of Baghdad would signal the fall of the Ba'athist regime, allowing the United States to withdraw (Bacevich 2007, 133). They assumed that "the regular Iraqi army wouldn't fight, that the Iraqi people would greet arriving U.S. and British troops as liberators, and that major Iraqi institutions would survive the war intact,

facilitating the rapid removal of all but a small contingent of occupying forces" (ibid, 133). However, the invasion caused not only the collapse of the Ba'athist regime but the toppling of Iraq's political infrastructure (ibid). Though Bush declared victory on May 1st, 2003, the United States remained in combat in Iraq until 2007, finally withdrawing completely in 2011. From 2003 to 2011, the United States was primarily engaged in combat with insurgency groups. The military's failure to adequately employ counterinsurgency tactics led many journalists, scholars, and politicians to draw comparisons between the Iraq and Vietnam wars (Elliot 2006, 18). As the Bush administration realized that there would be no easy end to the Iraq war, their mission became regaining public support rather than rebuilding Iraq's political and physical infrastructure (ibid, 32). Iraqi citizens suffered from consistent power outages, resulting in a myriad of serious public health concerns, including sewer water in the streets and severely under-resourced hospitals (Gregory 2004, 217). Following the 2003 invasions, most of the Iraqi people and many other Arab countries agreed that the Iraq War was an imperial project and a colonial occupation (ibid, 229). Public support for the war rapidly decreased, especially following the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in 2004, in which the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib became public knowledge. The United States began withdrawing troops in 2008, with a full and final withdrawal complete in 2011, leaving just 50,000 troops behind. I offer this overview of the Iraq war to situate my argument within the greater context. In this thesis, I will go into greater detail about the politics and nuances of the Iraq war. My research primarily focuses on the veterans' military service conducted in 2003, 2004, and 2005, following the fall of Baghdad and during the early years of the insurgency.

Contribution

While work exists on veterans and trauma in geography (see Benwell 2021; Cowen 2005; Herman and Yarwood 2014), there remains a large gap in the literature. The topic is rich for geography- it explores place-based experiences as they travel through time and space and manifest in bodies and emotions. Ehrkamp, Loyd, and Secor (2019) studied how Iraqi veterans understand and experience trauma, using the same Veterans Book Project analyzed in this project. However, no other geographers have used the Veterans Book Project to research veterans' experiences of trauma. I seek, with my thesis, to contribute to this gap in the literature. Additionally, the methodology in this thesis draws on research employing participatory art. Scholars such as Vacchelli (2018) and Cope (2008) have used participatory art to research various populations' conceptions of home and migration. Similarly, Gillian Rose's key book, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (2001), is a crucial text on using art and photos to conduct qualitative research. My research builds on this work, analyzing veterans' narratives, photos, and drawings to argue that they hold a complicated position within the imperial project that was the Iraq War- they were both complicit in the violence committed against the Iraqi people and victims of state violence themselves.

Methods

To conduct this research, I utilized archival and visual methods. The decision to use archival and visual methods was made of necessity- I was unable to employ other methods due to time constraints, and the research was best suited to archival and photo analysis. I constructed themes from coding the veterans' books, which provided the

framework for my empirical discussion. I will discuss the sample selection process, the research design, and data analysis in this section.

This research seeks to better understand the veterans' everyday and shifting complicity in the colonial projects of the 2002-2011 Iraq war by analyzing the books they wrote as part of the Veterans Book Project. The project features books from 49 veterans and refugees. I choose to limit my sample to young white men, aged 18-25, who served in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. I further limited this selection to accounts that focused on the veteran's time serving in Iraq. Several books by U.S. veterans of Iraq explore their experiences with the Veteran Affairs department and receiving services post-deployment. However, my research questions require accounts that represent active service. As such, I chose to leave these books out of my sample.

My research design consisted of two parts: initial data collection, and coding and analysis. To collect primary data, I read each of the eight veterans' books closely, pulling out key quotes to later code. Reading each book in turn allowed me to focus closely on the story being told. These books are first and foremost stories. In geographical research, "stories express something irreducibly particular and personal, and yet they can be received as expressions of broader social and political context, and their telling can move, affect, and produce collectivities" (Cameron 2012, p. 574). Keeping this in mind, I focused on pulling information from the books that spoke to both the everyday and overarching structures of colonialism and inequality. Cameron further notes that personal stories- the way the author chooses to represent their experiences- can "reinforce structural and systemic forms of oppression and differentiation" (ibid). Throughout my data collection, I kept in mind that like stories, the information provided was deeply

personal and impacted by the veterans' personal beliefs, which changed from recruitment to writing the book.

The Veterans Book Project is an open-source digital archive. As such, I have relied on geographic literature on archival methods. Archives have traditionally been collections of records, diaries, notes, and other documents held in libraries and museums. However, the advent of the internet has expanded archives to include digital information such as digitized library archives, websites, social media, emails, and so forth (Mclennan and Prinsen (2014, 81). Archives are highly political bodies of information. Ketelaar (2001) and Mclennan and Prinsen (2014) both note that archives are defined not only by what they include but also by what they omit. Thus, archivists must ask why and for whom texts have been written, and to what purpose (Mclennan and Prinsen 2014, 82). Every document reveals the political beliefs of its creator. As Schwartz and Cook (2002) write, "Archives are social constructs" (3). They go on to write

> Archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations. They are a product of society's need for information, and the abundance and circulation of documents reflect the importance placed on the information in society. They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies. (13)

Thus, archivists must pay particular attention to the power differentials within their archives, and whose voices are being privileged. Archives are not apolitical bodies of information- just like every method, they carry the politics and power dynamics imbued in every culture. When approaching the Veterans Book Project, I will be reading to analyze the veterans' shifting relationship to the imperial project. I will employ archival

methods to understand how the veterans, through what they write- and what they omit-, participated in the imperial invasion of Iraq.

In this initial data collection, I also collected photos from the books that I felt were particularly important to my research. To collect photos, I provided myself with a framework through which to assess the included photos. This framework featured six key themes which would likewise be used in later coding. These themes are as follows:

1. *Masculinity*
2. *Nationalism*
3. *Landscape*
4. *Complicity*
5. *Iraqis*
6. *Disillusionment*

Each book included dozens of photos taken by veterans throughout their tour in Iraq. All were fascinating- however, I limited my inclusion of specific photos to my coding and visual analysis. I only pulled photos that spoke to any of the six themes explicitly- for instance, photos that featured local people they interacted within negative ways (a photo of six Iraqi men, the photographer holding a machine gun so it appeared to be pointing at the Iraqi men- Iraqi men covered in blood, on their knees with their hands held above their head, etc.) or photos that indicated a specific type of masculinity (soldiers posing with gun collections or else bottles of hard liquor). In the next section, I will discuss the process I used to analyze these photos.

Meghan Cope (2003) writes that coding should be "an active, thoughtful process that generates themes and elicits meanings, thereby enabling the researcher to produce

representations of the data that are lively, valid and suggestive of some broader connections to the scholarly literature" (p. 457). Following her suggestion, I used both descriptive and analytic coding. This is to say, I coded both for instances in which the codes came up directly in the text as well as codes that emerged "from a second level of coding that comes after much reflection on descriptive codes and a return to the theoretical literature" (ibid, p. 452). Once I had built a document of key quotes, I reviewed them using the codes mentioned in the previous paragraph. I organized the quotes according to themes to better streamline the analysis process. When coding, I looked for instances in the quotes and texts that directly and indirectly applied the code in question.

When analyzing the photos I collected, I relied heavily on Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2001). Rose writes

> That is, it is crucial to look very carefully at the image or images in which you are interested because the image itself has its effects. These effects are always embedded in social practices, of course, and may well be negotiated by the image's audiences; nevertheless, it seems to me that there is no point in researching any aspect of the visual unless the power of the visual is acknowledged. (ibid 31).

Rose's book provides key instructions on analyzing visuals, including how to assess composition, reflect on your own biases as well as the potential biases of those taking the photo, and the structures that may have influenced the photo. For instance, she writes that "visual images do not exist in a vacuum and looking at them for 'what they are' neglects the ways in which they are produced and interpreted through particular social practices" (ibid 37). Informed by this, I analyzed the photos not just by what was featured in the photo itself, but also by the context of the war, the existing theoretical literature, and what the veterans had written in their books. While Rose's book has extensive sections on the

compositionality of paintings, I focused primarily on her suggestions for identifying the implied structural biases, as the veterans likely did not make too many compositional choices while taking photos. However, I did attend to the focus of each photo, as Rose suggests (2001, p. 45). The veterans took their photos to highlight a specific instance of their service. By focusing on the object of the photo, I was able to infer the intent of the photo. The photos provided a way for me to better analyze the veterans' experience. The visual aspect of this research allowed for a more nuanced and creative approach to understanding how the veterans chose to represent their service in Iraq.

In chapter 2, I will discuss the various literature that has provided a framework through which I conducted my analysis. Among these are feminist geographies, representation, whiteness studies, and colonialism. These bodies of literature provide various critical lenses that directly apply to how the veterans discuss their time in Iraq. Chapter 3 is my empirical chapter, committed to analyzing the various themes that came up in my research h and what they imply about the veterans and their relationships to the war. Finally, I provide a conclusion with key findings and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I will discuss the literature on a variety of topics: nationalism, imperialism and Iraq, masculinity and militarism, veterans and trauma, representation, and feminist political geography. While the breadth of literature I cover is wide, they represent necessary facets of the veterans' experiences. The Iraq War was an imperial project. As I will discuss in this chapter, imperialism has a long and intricate relationship with white masculinity and nationalism. The United States relies on willing male bodies to fuel their wars- to ensure this supply of soldiers, they endorse nationalist rhetoric. I pull on feminist political geography to discuss how the everyday realities of war lead to the development of trauma and disillusionment. Finally, representation theory informs my analysis of the veterans' books. Throughout my research, I rely heavily on Derek Gregory's (2004) analysis of the Iraq war. His work provides crucial insight into the context of the Iraq war and the various motivations behind it. While Gregory is my primary framework, his analysis could be further informed by feminist political geography. Thus, in my analysis, I attempt to perform a deeper and more feminist investigation into the everyday realities of soldiers in Iraq by pulling on the work of feminist political geographers such as Patricia Ehrkamp, Alison Mountz, and Robyn Longhurst. By incorporating feminist political geographers, I can utilize Gregory's macro analysis of the Iraq War's colonialism while focusing on the mundane and banal aspects of the veterans' accounts, including their relationships with their masculinity, whiteness, and trauma.

Nationalism

There is a significant amount of literature on nationalism. Scholars have long focused on how nation-states form and how national identities develop from this process; Hooson (1994) wrote about the role of geographical thought within various nation-states; Dijkink (1996) outlines a new geopolitics that influences national identity, focusing on the role of the Cold War in the development of this new geopolitics; Rogers Brubaker has contributed notable work on nationalism (1996; 2004; 2009; 2020). While this literature is significant to understanding nationalism more broadly, I will primarily focus on Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism (1995) and recent literature that takes up this concept. Billig's work provides a valuable framework for understanding how nationalism is reproduced in everyday life. The veterans in this study regularly enact nationalism in their service and their narratives of their service.

Billig's book puts forward the idea of 'banal nationalism'. He writes that nationalism is often associated with extremities, such as moments of crisis or white nationalism (1995, 4). By placing nationalism on the "peripheries" (ibid, 4), Billig argues that scholars ignore the ways that the nation-state reproduces itself in the everyday- "one might hypothesize that a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations, and practices must also be reproduced. Moreover, this complex must be reproduced in a banally mundane way, for the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary times" (ibid, 5). Thus, Billig puts forward his theory that nationalism does not occur exclusively in moments of intensity. It is reinforced and reproduced through quiet moments that are easily overlooked and accepted as natural, such as the unnoticed waving of flags (ibid, 37). This banal nationalism relies on simultaneous forgetting and remembering. He writes, "national identity in established nations is

remembered because it is embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or 'flag' nationhood. However, these reminders, or 'flaggings', are so numerous and they are such a familiar part of the social environment that they operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully" (ibid, 37). Billig suggests that nationalism necessarily depends on internationalism- without the 'other,' there would be no 'us' (ibid, 67). In this way, those outside the nation can be transformed into "enemies of international morality" or even the "moral order of the world itself" (ibid, 80). Billig's theory of banal nationalism is key to this study's theorizing of veterans' multiple identities. The veterans regularly cite loyalty to the state as a motivating factor for enlisting, and throughout their service, they reproduce this loyalty through the banal day-to-day.

Various geographers have taken up Billig's concept of banal nationalism. The theory is inherently spatial in how it tracks reproductions of nationalism through the mundane, everyday spaces of citizens' lives. Mamadouh (2017) notes how "nationalism is not equally important everywhere but appears in different shapes at different times and places" (ibid, 8). Recently, scholars have expanded on Billig's theory. Erdal and Strømsø look at the role of race and first impressions in national identity, suggesting that race plays a prominent role in "who is or is not assumed to naturally belong" (2021, 121). The embodied experience of first impressions is rooted within the day-to-day; they are both banal and exceptional instances of nationalism being enacted within individuals' lives in that they reinforce who belongs to a national identity and who does not (ibid, 121). Everyday discourse also produces national identity (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 538). Discourse, like first impressions, can be both banal and exceptional. Fox and Miller-Idriss suggest that studying nationalism through discourse "draw[s] attention to how

nationhood can also be creatively and self-consciously deployed and manipulated by ordinary people" (2008, 539). Thus, individuals can reproduce and reassign meaning to nationalism in mundane and banal ways through discourse. Merriman and Jones (2017) take some issue with Billig's theory. They argue that while Billig's scholarship is essential to the literature, he does not pay significant enough attention to the affective tendencies of nationalism. They seek to apply affect theory to the ways nationalism is enacted in the day today. Rather than rooting nationalism in physical bodies or things, Merriman and Jones instead focus on the "relational configurations" (2017, 605) which occur between specific bodies and the "auras, atmospheres, and emotions which become bound up with nations (ibid, 604). For instance, the veterans in these books regularly include photos of other soldiers, as well as the American flag and guns. These items and the emotions they produce are closely tied with the veterans' ideas of the nation. Drawing on this literature, this study shows how banal nationalism surfaces in the veterans' books.

Imperialism and Iraq

While imperialism has long been a staple in geographic literature, the concept gained new attention after the Iraq War began in 2003 (Anderson 2017). Scholars have given the war various names- Derek Gregory (2004) called it the 'colonial present,' Neil Smith (2005) 'the endgame of globalization,' and David Harvey (2007) the 'new imperialism.' This section will offer a working definition of imperialism and its subsequent colonialism. I will then discuss the 2003 Iraq War and how scholars have discussed its relationship with America's imperialist projects. Finally, I will examine the

parallels between the Iraq War and the Vietnam War, suggesting that both reveal the United States' failed attempts at expanding its influence.

Historically, imperialism meant "a state taking over other people's territories by force or theft" (Anderson 2017, 1), ruling remotely or through colonies. The state justifies imperialism by claiming to 'civilize' the occupied population. Colonialism is a function of imperialism- the construction of colonies in occupied territories allows the imperial state more control and influence (Watts 2017,1). Watts describes colonialism as "the means by which disparate parts of the world are subordinated to the typically nationalist interests, drives, and dictates of a separate and distant imperial center" (2017, 2). The British Empire is an informative example of traditional imperialism through colonialism. The British established colonies throughout the world, in the Americas, Africa, and large swaths of Asia and the Pacific (Watts 2017, 1). Imperialism evolved through the twentieth century. David Harvey calls this the "new imperialism" (2007), arguing that "there have been many kinds of empire and that we should therefore entertain the idea of many imperialism" (ibid, 57). Indeed, today's imperialism is largely informed by foreign direct investment (FDI) (Anderson 2017, 7). FDI allows states to maintain claims to sovereignty, despite there being significant economic interference from imperial states and foreign bodies (ibid). Anderson writes that the "new imperialism can usefully be described as less territorial, less direct, more informal, and more economic than the old imperialism" (2017, 9). Thus, when discussing the United States' invasion of Iraq, I will employ the term 'imperialism.' While I will necessarily be reducing debates on neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, I will attend to the intricacies of U.S. imperialism in Iraq and its subsequent colonial actions and influences.

In his 2004 book *The Colonial Present*, Derek Gregory offers a scathing look at the 'war on terror' and its consequences in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq. Gregory suggests that the colonial wars waged in these countries are symptoms of the 'colonial present,' which he defines as

> not produced through geopolitics and geoeconomics alone, through foreign and economic policy set in motion by presidents, prime ministers and chief executives, the state, the military apparatus and transnational corporations. It is also set in motion through mundane cultural forms and cultural practices that mark other people as irredeemably "Other" and that license the unleashing of exemplary violence against them (2004, 16).

Gregory then sets out to place this argument in context. He summarizes how Palestinian, Afghani, and Iraqi civilians were rendered *homines sacri* through administrative plans, military actions, and media representation. In the Iraqi context, Gregory notes how Iraqi civilians and soldiers murdered by the U.S. military and U.S. sanctions were reduced not even to numbers, as the Bush administration refused to keep track of how many died, but rather "just *dead"* (2004, 207). This disregard for life can be seen in military tactics and the Bush administration's refusal to sufficiently rebuild the necessary physical and political infrastructure they destroyed during the invasion (ibid, 222). Gregory argues that the goal of the U.S. occupation of Iraq was to, in part, "build defense capabilities beyond challenge ("full spectrum dominance") and to establish military bases around the globe- so that no adversary would ever equal "the power of the United States"" (ibid, 193). He also points to oil as a primary motivator for the occupation (ibid, 190). Gregory claims that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was an imperialist project. The Bush administration sought to construct a stronghold in the region, to begin the process of "dissolving the distinction between "outside" and "inside"" (ibid, 253)- in other words, to extend American influence throughout the Middle East.

Neil Smith makes a similar argument in his 2005 book *Endgame of Globalization*, suggesting that "the wars since 2001 [...] should be seen less as moral crusades against terrorism and more as an expression of what I called at the beginning "endgame global America," the culmination of a US-center (but *not exclusively American*) political and economic globalization. They represent the political face of globalization, leading to nothing less than a US-centered global hegemony" (2005, 12). Whereas Gregory focused primarily on the cultural justifications for and the military action in the wars in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Smith instead focuses on the political and economic history that led to the Iraq war, tracing his way through the World Wars and the formation of international bodies of governance. He draws on these histories to argue that the twentieth century of American hegemony and its subsequent gradual fall from influence in the face of other global superpowers has led the United States to seek hegemony once and for all through military action. Smith sees the war in Iraq as the United States' "endgame of globalization"- imperialism masked by claims of moral crusades and defensive action. Smith and Gregory approached the topic of American imperialism in Iraq from very different places. However, their arguments provide a crucial framework for this study. By drawing on both Smith and Gregory's work, I can construct a holistic understanding of the United States' intention in going to war with Iraq and the evolution of the war from an imperialist project to an essentially face-saving mission (Gregory 2004, 216).

The parallels between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars are crucial to this discussion. From 2003 onward, many journalists and administrators noted the similarities between the two wars, often as a way to criticize the Iraq War (Elliot 2006, 18). It is important to

note that the two wars are incredibly different. The Vietnam context differs from the Iraq context in significant ways- one example is that whereas the Vietnam population was incredibly rural, the Iraqi population was concentrated in cities (ibid, 30). However, many of the lessons from Vietnam can be applied to Iraq. Both were imperial projects through which the United States sought to expand its influence, by establishing a stage from which the U.S. military could "eradi[cate] the conditions breeding violent Islamic radicalism" (Bacevish 2006, 128) or to prevent the spread of communism, which was antithetical to the U.S. capitalist identity. By tracking imperialism from Vietnam to Iraq, Elliot (2006) notes three main lessons that we can take away: to know better whom we are fighting and with whom we are allying; to apply the failures of military actions to future conflicts (i.e., continue to teach counterinsurgency in training); and "the lesson about the limitations of American power as an instrument of global transformation" (ibid, 42). Bacevich (2006) comes to a similar conclusion, writing that "the World's Sole Superpower possessed neither the wisdom, nor the will, nor the resources required for such an enterprise" (ibid, 134). By assessing the parallels between the Vietnam and Iraq wars, we can understand how the United States seeks and fails to extend its influence to different contexts adequately. The Bush administration expected "that the regular Iraqi army wouldn't fight, that the Iraqi people would greet arriving U.S. and British troops as liberators" (ibid, 133). This was not the case. However, we can see how Gregory's argument that the colonial present is constructed through cultural imaginaries. The United States imagined itself as a liberator, even as it sought to occupy Iraq. This misconception appears regularly throughout the books of the veterans analyzed in this study.

Masculinity and Militarism

Geographers have made essential contributions to the study of masculinity over the past few decades, often connecting the subfield to literature on nationalism and war. Several scholars suggest that masculinity is crucial to constructing national identity and vice versa. Likewise, they argue that hegemonic masculinities are closely tied to military identities (Anand 2007; Dowler 2012; Nagel 1998). This section will review the foundational texts upon which geographical work on masculinity pulls. I will then discuss literature on masculinities, militarism, and nationalism and how this works provides a crucial framework through which I can understand veterans' representations of their time in Iraq.

Peter Jackson provided an essential foundation for geographies of masculinity with his 1991 article on the cultural politics of masculinity. In this article, Jackson pulled on the cultural turn of geography to inform the (re)production of masculinities. For Jackson, cultural politics, in which "meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested" (1991, 200), is crucial to understanding how masculinity is socially constructed in various ways. Mike Donaldson (1993) relates this concept to that of hegemonic masculinity, in which "women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men" (644). However, R.W. Connell's book *Masculinities* (1995) expanded the concept of hegemonic masculinity and provided a foundation for future work on masculinities. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy

of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (ibid, 77). Like Jackson and Donaldson before her, Connell notes that masculinity exists only in relation to femininity. Notably, Connell noted the plurality of masculinities, presenting four types: hegemonic masculinity, subordinated masculinity, complicit masculinity, and marginalized masculinity (ibid, 77-80). She argues that "hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation" (ibid, 77) that is continually (re)constructed. In the years following Connell's book, geographers such as Lawrence Berg and Robyn Longhurst took up masculinity in their reviews of the place of masculinity in geography. Geography has long been a male-dominated discipline and seldom investigated the nature of masculinity (ibid, 353). Berg and Longhurst argue that "given the importance of contexts, relationships, and practices in both the (re)construction of masculinity and the way we come to understand the meanings of the term, it should be clear that masculinity is both temporally and geographically contingent (2003, 352). They note that in the eight years following Connell's book, subfields such as rural studies, emotional geographies, urban geographies, and post-colonial geographies have taken up masculinity to inform their work (ibid, 354). This early work on masculinities is crucial to this study's understanding of masculinity and how it is constructed and performed- however, I will be more closely applying work on masculinity and militarism to frame my argument that white male veterans maintain a nuanced- yet problematic- relationship to the military.

Much like masculinity, Bonnett (2016) notes that whiteness is constantly shifting, though persistent and ever-present (ibid, 2), and is privileged heavily over other races (ibid, 3). White masculinities, then, are constructed from an intersection of two

hegemonic identities. In writing about his research on white nationalist and white antiracist groups, Matthew Hughey argues that white masculinity is often constructed in relation to black masculinities (2011, 2012). He notes that racism that was once publicly accepted has recently moved into private spaces (ibid, 133). Hughey writes, "These [private] sites are crucial spaces for the reproduction of white male identity as a sense of group position to both nonwhite "others" and idealized forms of the white male self" (ibid). The construction of white male identities in private spaces can be applied to the military. As noted later in this study, service members often find themselves in the company of men who share similar identities and political beliefs. This creates, as Hughey argues, "a secure location for navigation of what white masculinity means in these actors' everyday lives" (2011, 150). As these soldiers process their deployment, their relationship with masculinity and the nation morphs, many come to understand their masculinity, rather than being tied closely to nationalism, as informed by more traditional standards such as protecting the weak and standing up for what they believe is right.

Additionally, as Connell (1995) and Jackson (1991) argue that masculinity is relational to femininity, Hughey (2012) argues that white masculinity is often constructed in relation to black masculinity. Pulling on the same research on various white political groups, Hughey suggests that stereotypical discourse on black men informs how white men should perform and serve as "potent reservoirs for the narrative reproduction of white male identity" (2012, 117). This can be seen among white service members as well. Partis-Jennings (2019) discusses how several Marines talk about the Taliban insurgent they had just shot, unaware that they were being recorded. They dehumanize him, using slurs and expletives, and avoid calling a medical helicopter (260). This event reveals that,

in (assumed to be) private spaces, masculinity is (re)constructed through its relation to the other. Ehrkamp (2008) writes about how migrant men's masculinities are constructed in relation to other non-migrant men, as well as migrant women, and how these masculinities shape public spaces.

There is a significant body of literature on the ways masculinity, militarism, and nationalism produce one another. This literature is significant to my data analysis. The veterans I am studying are all white men in their early twenties. They were heavily influenced by the military masculinities discussed in these works. The literature cited in this section provides a crucial framework for my analysis and understanding of the identities the veterans seek to reproduce in their books. Nagel (1998) seeks to understand how nationalism and masculinity have influenced one another in the United States. She notes that "masculinity was tightly woven into two nationalist imperialist projects: manifest destiny [...] and the Monroe Doctrine" (ibid, 249), and this relationship continues to the present day. Nagel argues that nationalism is closely tied with elements of masculinity and militarism (ibid, 252). Militarism pulls on notions such as patriotism, honor, protection, and courage- all traits of hegemonic masculinity- to convince men to join the military (ibid, 259). For many men, service offers "the allure of adventure, the promise of masculine camaraderie, the opportunity to test and prove oneself, the chance to participate in a historic, larger-than-life, generation-defining event" (ibid). According to Nagel, military projects are crucial to nation-building, and, in the American context, the military is a crucial part of the national identity (248). Anand continues this connection between nationalism and masculinity, writing that "the state is an embodied institution reproduced through discourses of masculinity and nationalism through

practices of violence and control" (2007, 257). The role of masculinity in nationalism cannot be understated. Dowler (2012) examines the everyday militarization of the state, through the lens of gender (491). She argues that the military is hyper-masculine and reproduces hegemonic masculinities, which produces a state founded on hegemonic masculinities (ibid, 492). The connections between nationalism, militarism, and masculinity are crucial to this study. The veterans' identities are built on these pillars and influence how they understand the war and their involvement in it. I will use this literature to inform my analysis of the veterans' book projects, arguing that the veterans are reproducing nationalism and hegemonic masculinity through their everyday relationship with the war. However, this literature, which emphasizes the plurality of masculinity, provides insight into the veterans' eventual disillusionment with the military.

Scholars across various fields have addressed militarized masculinities in different ways. Hinojosa (2010) connects militarism explicitly to hegemonic masculinity, arguing that the military is appealing to men because it provides "access to the resources of a hegemonic masculinity" (ibid, 181). Ashe (2012) focuses more exclusively on the development of militarized masculinity, arguing that "militarized masculinities become dominant or hegemonic models of masculinity in nationalist cultures and act as arenas for "achieving masculinities"" (236). The veterans in this study regularly enact militarized, hegemonic masculinities. I will pull on this literature to conduct visual and textual analyses of the veterans' photos and narratives. A vast majority of these photos feature soldiers posing with guns. Guns, as Gahman (2015) notes, are increasingly associated with hegemonic masculinity, as both imply "power, control, and dominance" (ibid, 1204).

Veterans and Trauma

Trauma is a topic of interest to scholars across a range of disciplines. Geographers have only recently begun studying trauma (Pain 2021, 973). Trauma is a spatial and temporal experience; rather than being located in a singular event, geographers argue that it reproduces itself across time and space (Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas 2017; Trigg 2009; Blum and Secor 2014). This study focuses in part on how veterans' struggle with traumatic experiences in Iraq influences their disillusionment with the military. As trauma is a relatively new topic in geography, there is a lack of geographic literature on veterans in general, particularly how trauma influences veterans' lives. I seek to address this gap. This section will provide an overview of geographical work on trauma, as this will provide a basis for understanding how trauma moves through time, space, and bodies. I will then discuss interdisciplinary work on veterans and trauma before discussing David Flores's pieces on veterans' political beliefs after returning from service.

Geographical literature explores how trauma is "sustained, entrenched, reduced and reiterated" across time and space (Pain 2021, 979). Rather than employing the individualized and medicalized understandings of trauma that exist in psychology and among various institutions (Loyd, Ehrkamp, Secor 2018, 377), feminist, queer, black, and indigenous geographers argue that trauma is often located and re-made in the various contexts through which people move (Pain 2021, 974). Coddington and Micieli-Voutsinas (2017) argue that it is trauma's movement through contexts, time, and space that allows it to be "relationally experienced across scales, bodies and emotions" (3).

Trauma has a unique relationship with time and space. Rather than being located in a singular moment and place, it is constantly reformed, (re)produced, and re-experienced in different contexts. Blum and Secor (2014) draw on Freudian theory to suggest that trauma is a topological phenomenon. That is to say, “the “origin” of trauma is not a single event localizable in time and space, but rather a topological constellation in which ordinary ideas of space (such as distance and location) are distorted and subject to ongoing transformations” (105). The veterans ' books show that trauma is multiple and constantly shifting. Through the veterans’ narrative of their time before, during, and after their service in Iraq, we can see how they continually readdress and reconfigure their various traumas.

Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor (2018; 2019; 2022) address the geopolitics of trauma in their research on refugee resettlement practices in Turkey and the United States. Their theorizing of war-based trauma provides a valuable framework for my study. Notably, they write that scholarship that argues that trauma “[originates] in the space of war is part of a geopolitical imagination that works, but fails, to create linear time and discrete geographies” (2022, 717). Rather than approaching trauma as originating from a singular event, Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor frame trauma as a “set of serial emplacements and displacements across multiple sites” (718). Through their research on resettlement practices, the authors can extend the argument that war-based trauma is not exclusive to the places of war. Instead, it is caught up and multiplied across various institutions and temporalities (720). This argument can be applied to veterans. Veterans’ traumas are not contained to their deployment; they are, as Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor write, ‘multiplied’ within their transitions to civilian life, access to veteran services, and interactions with

various political bodies (Brewin 2011, 1739). In this way, veterans' trauma can be used to show how "militarized violence persistently escapes from ideologically circumscribed war zones and their discrete temporalities" (2019, 117). Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor's theory of spatial connectivity, when applied to veterans' experiences, prove to be incredibly useful in understanding the multiple spatial configurations of war-based trauma.

I will apply these geographical conceptions of trauma to interdisciplinary literature on veterans and trauma. By doing so, I hope to better understand how veterans' war experiences are spatially and temporally informed. Much of this literature focuses on veterans' transition from service to civilian life. Within this transition, we can see how the topological make-up of trauma applies to veterans. Their trauma is not singular to their wartime experiences- it is remade and reoriented by 'becoming' citizens once again (Herman and Yarwood 2014, 41). Moss and Prince (2017) support geographical literature on trauma by pointing out that "the traumatised warrior emerges out of various and multiple events, processes, and practices that have been part of the soldier's emotional or psychological collapse" (58). A significant element of this transition is the reconfiguring of veterans' identities (Spector-Mersel and Gilbar 2021). As discussed earlier in this chapter, hegemonic masculinity is closely entwined with military identities. After discharge from the military, many men find it challenging to maintain militarized masculinity while coping with transition stress and trauma (ibid, 864). Trauma "contradicts hegemonic expectations that require men to control their emotions, as it involves feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness" (ibid). Thus, many men are forced to renegotiate their relationship with hegemonic masculinity, resulting in shifting

perspectives of war. This identity struggle is produced by shifting spatial experiences- the veterans find themselves in a new context, in which they are expected to move through life much differently than in the military. Veterans' struggle with their former military identities is a crucial aspect of transitional stress, contributing to trauma's topology (Mobbs and Bonanno 2018).

As mentioned early, there is little work in geography on how veterans' trauma contributes to shifting attitudes toward war. To develop a conceptual framework on why veterans' political attitudes change and how this connects to the trauma they may have experienced, I will be pulling primarily on the work of sociologist David Flores (2014, 2016). Flores conducted over forty interviews with veterans of various wars to better understand what causes prowar and antiwar sentiments among veterans. Through his exhaustive research, Flores found that these political shifts can be tracked through the veterans' experiences before, during, and after service (2014, 99). Veterans who expressed "gung-ho" attitudes about war and associated service with patriotism and honor were more likely to become disillusioned with war and express antiwar sentiments following their service (ibid, 111). Alternatively, Flores found that those who did not idealize war but rather enlisted due to a sense of obligation were more likely to maintain prowar attitudes as veterans. Flores suggests this is due to the veterans' traumatic experiences during their service (ibid, 115). Those who idealized war struggled with the realities of battle. They felt they had morally degraded themselves in service for a cause that had very little meaning to them (in the context of Iraq, many soldiers enlisted thinking they were fighting to liberate the Iraqi people- after arriving in Iraq, they realized most Iraqi citizens did not want them there. Vietnam veterans echoed this

sentiment) (2016, 203). Thus, we can see that it is the veterans' traumatic experiences contrasted against their idealistic hopes for war that lead many veterans to antiwar sentiments. However, despite these antiwar sentiments, Flores argues that veterans' activism is simply another way of deploying their patriotic beliefs (ibid, 200). He writes that antiwar veterans

> share a moral argument in which antiwar resistance is the highest form of patriotism, and that it is the duty of soldiers and citizens to oppose what the define as unlawful and morally unjust wars. Importantly, their personal life stories and soldier identities are used to assert moral authority and validate group goals of remaining committed to the values, ideals, and principles that compelled them to become soldiers in the first place. (ibid, 207)

Flores's argument that the veterans employ antiwar activism to maintain the patriotic identities that propelled them into service mirrors my findings. Though disillusioned with the military, the veterans in my study maintained support for the United States government and its various projects. Flores's work provides a critical framework through which I can conduct my own archival analysis of veterans' experiences.

Representation

This study utilizes veterans' narratives of their wartime experiences to explore how imperial projects are enacted in the day-to-day of war. As such, literature on representation heavily informs my analysis. Much of geographical work on representation pulls on the scholarship of Stuart Hall. His 1997 book, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices,* remains a crucial text in media and race studies. In this book, Hall presents his theory of cultural representation. He describes how we can measure representations against the original object to assess accuracy. Hall argues that this idea is a fallacy- it implies that the original object has a fixed meaning.

Whether they are people, items, or cultures, things do not have innate meaning (1997, 9). Instead, it is the representation of those things that provide meaning. For this study, I will be analyzing how the veterans apply meaning to their experiences through what they include and how, as well as the experiences they choose to omit. The veterans create meaning for their wartime experiences through their representations of their service. Often, the veterans rely on stereotypes of the Iraqi soldiers and civilians with whom they interact. Stereotypes, Hall argues, are results of power inequalities and are overwhelmingly negative (ibid, 258). Hall's theory of culture is also crucial to this study, particularly in how it applies to national and masculine identities. He suggests that culture is how we make sense of and give meaning to the world, often as a group. Without common frameworks of intelligibility (MEF, 1997), we would not be able to communicate with one another. Thus, he argues that culture results from shared conceptual maps or the common ways we classify and organize the world (Hall 1997, 21). Culture, therefore, is a system of representation (MEF 1997). These classifications and how we produce them are what Hall names practices of signification or the practices that produce meaning. In the United States, as discussed earlier in this chapter, national identity is rooted firmly within cultural practices. This national identity is further deeply associated with masculinity and militarism. Thus, when discussing cultural conceptual maps of the United States, we can assume that these conceptual maps are influenced by nationalism, militarism, and masculinity. I will apply this contextual understanding of conceptual maps to my analysis of how the veterans employ representation of wartime experiences to produce specific meaning.

In his article on diaspora, Hall (1990) discusses other forms of representation- this time, cultural self-representation. He discusses theories of representation through language, focusing on the theories of reflective, constructive, and intentional representation. Hall suggests that representation through language forms culture and cultural identity. He also explores representation through imagery and cinema, arguing that we construct cultural identity through self-representation (1990, 224). Self-representation is often a retelling of the past, whether shared pasts, in the case of diasporas or personal histories. The act of self-representation constructs identities within their multiple contexts. Self-representation offers insight into how identities are understood and constructed. Representations are an engagement with the world around them, offering more profound insights into participants' navigation of their past, present, and imagined futures. I will be using Hall's theories of culture and representation as I engage with my research. The Veteran Books Project are archives of representation- how veterans represent themselves and their experiences, the war and Iraqi soldiers and people with whom they interact. Hall's theories of representation offer me a framework through which I can position the white veterans' narratives of their wartime experiences as representations of the hegemonic group. As white men from the United States, the soldiers in Iraq- part of an invading army- hold claim to the dominant social group both in the United States and globally. When they write about their beliefs around their presence in Iraq or the citizens they hold in prisons or go to war with, they reproduce representations from the ruling elite. As Derek Gregory (2004) points out,

> The colonial present is not produced through geopolitics and geoeconomics alone, through foreign and economic policy set in motion by presidents, prime ministers and chief executives, the state, the military apparatus, and transnational

> corporations. It is also set in motion through mundane cultural forms and cultural practices that mark other people as irredeemably "Other" and that license the unleashing of exemplary violence against them. (ibid, 16)

These soldiers' representations create colonization on the ground within their mundane and everyday practices. How they perceive and share their actions reinforces colonial narratives and solidifies representations of Arabs as 'other'.

Samina Najma (2011) discusses the self-representation- and the representation of Iraqi people- of poet Brian Turner, who wrote while on active duty in Iraq. Najma notes how Turner distances himself from his poems- he does not claim his whiteness or masculinity (ibid, 59). She draws this in direct comparison to another war poet, Yusef Komunyakaa, who wrote about his experiences serving in the Vietnam war. Unlike Turner, Komunyakaa explicitly mentions his blackness (ibid, 59). Najma connects this to the presumed universality of whiteness (which I will discuss further in the next section):

> In part, this happens because whiteness has the privilege of not having to name itself in authorial contexts: both writer and reader assume that if an author, narrator, or speaker is white ("neutral"), race has no bearing on the text. Thus while Komunyakaa's blackness and its relationship to his Vietnam War poetry has been the subject of lively discussion, to date, no review of Turner's work has commented on the role that whiteness might play in his work. (ibid, 59)

Najma comments on how Turner's writing style serves to "camouflage" his whiteness. By writing in a detached narrative style, Turner can separate himself and his positionality from his poetry. Despite this, Najma praises Turner's ability to attend to everyday life's small and mundane specifics in a war zone, painting an "Iraqi landscape inhabited by normal people" (ibid, 61). His poetry takes special care to detail the lives of Iraqis that Turner met. His poem "Trowel" describes two Iraqi people preparing their homes for a holiday.

On the other hand, however, several of his other poems reveal his inability to reflect on his positionality within Iraq. He writes about a sex worker in Iraq and a woman

hanging clothes on a laundry line. These verses are "fraught with sexual and racial tension, in which the white male subject gazes on a racialized, exoticized, and sexualized female object" (ibid, 62). Through Najma's analysis of Turner's poetry, we can see how representation of oneself and others can reveal information about political beliefs, positionality, reflexivity, and racism. I intend to employ Najma's article as a reference while reading the Veteran Book Projects.

Feminist Political Geographies

Research by feminist political geographers on nationality, fear, and violence is particularly informative to this study. Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo (2016) attend to banal and hot nationalism as the analyze fear among college students and U.S. soldiers experiencing sexual violence. The authors take up Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism–discussed in more depth earlier in this chapter–to form their argument. They argue that more engagement is necessary between political geography's employment of banal nationalism and the work of feminist political geography (2016, 65). The authors seek to fill this gap by applying Billig's theorizations of "hot" and "banal" affect experiences of fear, drawing on Cindi Katz's conception of "banal terror" (2007). Specific fears, they argue, are rendered invisible when they do not suit the nation's goals, while others are employed to reproduce national identity (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016: 65). The authors draw on this rich body of literature to challenge Billig's unclear explanation of the relationship between "banal" and "hot" (ibid, 65). Instead, the authors argue to approach nationalism, and fear, as a web in which hot and banal entwine in complicated and often indistinguishable ways (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016, 66).

Indeed, the authors point again to Katz's argument that the everyday use of fear–such as checkpoints, surveillance cameras, and flags–are constant reminders of national identity. The authors argue that "this focus on the everyday experiences of fear in relationship to the reproduction of the nation points to an important direction for expanding banal nationalism's engagement with emotions [...]. Therefore, through this grounded and embodied approach to fear, feminist geopolitics facilitates a cross-scalar exploration of fear as an intimately global, banally hot phenomenon" (ibid: 67). This theorizing of an "intimately global" and "banally hot" approach to embodied experiences is useful to this study. The subjects of this research write about their days in Iraq. However, they are acting as agents of the state. Their experiences are multi-scalar- they are narrating both their embodied experiences as well as how they reproduced state goals and beliefs. Their stories are, as the authors write, "banally hot" (ibid., 67).

In a similar vein, Pain and Staeheli (2014), in their introduction to the *Area* collection on intimacy, geopolitics, and violence, outline how violence is multiscalar, moving from the bodily and the personal to the social and institutional. They particularly focus on the relationship between intimacy and geopolitics across scales (2014, 344). The authors also pay particular attention to how intimacy-geopolitics can act as both a spatial relation and a mode of interaction, (ibid: 346). Staeheli and Pain's discussion offers a specific way to situate feminist geopolitics into the intimate, especially intimate violence. Their concept of intimacy-geopolitics provides a lens through which to examine veterans' stories as intimate narratives of violence. I approach veterans' stories as embodied experiences of enacting war, produced both through interpersonal and state-level

interactions. Thus, their stories "dissolv[e] the customary boundaries between global/local, familial/state and personal/political as objects of study" (ibid: 344).

While the body and embodiment have been taken up within geography, political geography has been slower to include the body (Mountz 2018, 759). Mountz suggests this may be due to the challenge of tending to the many understandings of what makes a body while also engaging with various approaches to the political (ibid, 760). However, by including the body in discussions of political geography, scholars can marry the personal and political and attend to how politics are performed within the mundane and everyday. This perspective mirrors Foucault's theorization of the body as a site upon which power is enacted; Mountz approaches the body as an "analytical tool, scale, site, space of representation, commodity, and physical organism with its own dimensions" (ibid, 761). Researchers are also interested in the embodied experiences of politicized bodies. There is growing recognition that while bodies are spaces upon which politics are performed, bodies also make meaning through their various functions (Silvey 2017, 4). Postcolonial approaches, drawing on this theorization of the body, suggest that the body might be "untranslatable" (ibid, 5), especially bodies that are othered through discourse and practice (ibid, 5).

Auto-biographical narratives regularly employ the body as crucial to the production of stories–authors describe their hearts racing, sweat beading on their lips, and the metallic taste of fear to communicate their experiences. These fleshly descriptions reveal how the body reacts, to refer back to Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo (2016), to "banally hot" instances of fear and politics. Personal stories, especially those about war, offer "knowledge of war through bodily participation, which is a specific kind of

knowledge that those not present in war cannot share" (Caddick 2021, 3). War stories render bodily experience into legible narratives, requiring "the compression, abstraction, and translation of embodied experiences" (ibid, 5). The veterans' stories employed in this study make this clear: the veterans regularly attempt to communicate their bodily experiences through narration and photos; however, these embodied realities are necessarily reduced and limited by their transformation into stories. Feminist political geographies, then, offer an important framework for this study–by reintroducing the personal, the physical, and the embodied into theorizations of political geography, these scholars move through scales of political experience that reveal the ways grand political schemes reproduce themselves through the everyday.

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The literature discussed in this section provides the framework through which I approach my empirical chapter. Though I tackle many different theories, the veterans' stories pull them together into a constellation of white male experiences in the military. In the following section, I will use Derek Gregory's *The Colonial Present* (2004) as my primary framework. His analysis provides important context for the veterans' stories. However, as the veterans' narratives focus closer on the day-to-day and the little events of their deployment, I incorporate feminist political geographers' work on the importance of the everyday and mundane in geopolitics. Stuart Hall's work on representation helps me understand how the veterans' stories can be studied as how the veterans view themselves and construct their own identities. The literature on whiteness and masculinity is crucial to this research, as the veterans repeatedly reinforce the importance of these

elements to their identities. In the following section, I will employ this framework to discuss the veterans' books and answer the research questions posed in the first chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the books of eight veterans, all of whom are white men in their twenties. All the veterans served in Iraq in the early years of the Iraq War. In this section, I analyze several themes that came up in the veterans' narratives. I focus on the veterans' portrayal of and relationship with nationalism; how masculinity and war is presented and discussed in their books; the veterans' representation of the Iraqi landscape; the veterans' representation of the various people they meet and interact with while in Iraq; and the veterans' oscillation between complicity in the war and disillusionment with the war's morality. Ultimately, I argue that the veterans held a tenuous position in the Iraq War. They reproduced the colonial project while serving in the war. However, they become disillusioned with the war's effect on Iraq and the United States government's treatment of veterans. Their books are testaments to the dynamic position they hold.

Nationalism

Eight of the veterans cite serving their country as the main motivator for enlisting in the army. Ian writes, "I wanted to serve a country I believed in. To give back to a country that gave me privilege and everything I asked for. Looking back, I had a need to be part of a greater cause, however misdirected it may have been" (9). As Billig (1995) suggests, nationalism is not confined to exceptional circumstances. It is banal and reproduced every day. Additionally, Nagel (1998) argues that U.S. nationalism was formed alongside masculinity and imperialism (ibid, 249). She writes that this close relationship between nationalism and masculinity leads many men to join the military (ibid, 252). Ian's desire to serve his country speaks to this banal masculine nationalism.

His interest is not exceptional- he sees it as an obligation, a way to give back. Another veteran, Nathan, includes a picture of himself before enlistment. In the photo, he is wearing sunglasses and a sun hat, grinning and proudly holding an American flag. Billig (1995) discusses how the prevalence of flags reproduces national identity through the everyday and banal of daily life. Nathan's inclusion of this photo reveals how the use of these flags and the identification he seemed to hold with them played a role in his eventual enlistment.

The presence of American flags continues through the veterans' books. Drew includes a photo of a unit posing for a photo in front of a Humvee, holding an American flag. Jon likewise includes photos of soldiers standing at attention, all saluting an American flag hoisted above them. Billig describes the constant reminder of national identity as 'flagging' (1995, 6). Flagging can be, of course, flags. It can also be national imagery on coins, soldiers in uniforms walking through college campuses, or the recitation of the national anthem in schools across the country. He writes that "the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (ibid, 6). Of course, Billig's ideas of banal nationalism and flagging take on different meanings when applied in the military context. The flag is neither banal nor exceptional on army bases. Rather, it is a reminder of the soldiers' duties and a consistent reproduction of the militaristic-masculinist national identity. By including these photos in their books, the veterans are implicitly connecting the Iraq War to reproductions of national identity. The presence of the flag on the bases- and the veterans' inclination to photograph them- reveals how prevalent and imbued with meaning the flags are.

War and Masculinity

Masculinity, especially in the U.S. context, is tightly entwined with militarism (Nagel 1998, 249). The veterans of the Veterans Book Project certainly connected their role in the war to their masculinity. The books, which detailed the veterans' journey through the various stages of military service, were steeped in a specific type of masculinity. Many of the photos featured (white) soldiers posing with guns and armored vehicles, or otherwise photos of dozens of shotguns and boxes of bullets and mortar shells. Gahman (2015) connects hegemonic masculinity to gun possession. He suggests that "the symbolic value of a gun is tied to the performance of hegemonic masculinity because the characteristics of both are associated with power, control, and dominance" (ibid, 1203-1204). More than the photos shared, the way the veterans discuss the war and their actions reveal both a lack of awareness of their positionality as well a reflection on the many issues war creates for structures and individuals. In this section, I will discuss the various ways that the veterans display masculinity in their descriptions of war and service.

Many of the veterans expressed a rich excitement about deployment, mixed with a healthy dose of fear and anxiety. One soldier, Aaron, discusses his training at Fort Dix in New Jersey. His unit was to be trained in detainee operations. He writes, "While we were in the process of mobilizing for Iraq, half of my unit was de-mobilizing from a year in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. From them, there was almost a sense of jealousy that we were going where all the action was, instead of being confined to one area on the small tropical island" (26). The jealousy that Aaron describes is rooted in a desire to 'be where the

action is'. The men are drawn to the military due to its "masculine allure of adventure" (Nagel 1998, 252). Nagel writes, "men's accountings of their enlistment in wars often describe their anticipation and excitement, their sense of embarking on a great adventure" (ibid, 252). The veterans in this study write about their initial excitement for joining the military, both so they can participate in the action and defend their country. The excitement for an idealized experience of war is further shown by Luke. He describes his arrival in Kuwait: "An Army sergeant got on the plane and shouted "Welcome To The War!" like we had just landed in Disneyland. Everybody cheered as if we had just won a beautiful vacation" (6). The men that Luke describes seem excited to be there. They are joining a long legacy of men fighting for the freedom of their country. The excitement that the sergeant builds by yelling, "Welcome to the war!" masks the fear and anxiety that the veterans describe later in their books.

The soldiers described in the veterans' books also have a fixation on guns and weapons. Each book contains dozens of photos of the veterans' lives in Iraq and the vast majority feature soldiers posing with their shotguns. Weapons play a large role in the descriptions that the veterans offer. Aaron, for example, writes, "We also all went through extensive weapons training and qualifications. My weapons of choice were the M-2 Browning fifty caliber machine gun, and the Squad Automatic Weapons (S.A.W.). Like most people, I named my firearms; they all shared the name Eleanor. There was no significance of the name; I just liked the way it sounded" (25). The naming of weapons, which is standard, according to Aaron, reveals how closely the soldiers feel about their guns. Neville-Shepard and Kelly (2020) point to the long connection between guns and White male identities (468). White men in the U.S. have long associated their masculinity

with the ownership of guns- this relationship is intensified within military settings. By giving his firearm a name, Aaron is raising it to the position of a companion, something to be cherished and taken care of. This dynamic is further proven by Aaron giving the rifle a woman's name. The soldiers' naming of guns speaks to their closeness and reliance on firearms. It also implies a sexual relationship with their guns. Guns often stand as references to cis-men's bodies- "for many White men, the strategy of embracing a gun reveals a naked sense of hypermasculinity that is a part of their brand, requiring an arresting display of gender identity that galvanizes fanatics and antagonizes critics" (ibid, 471). This fixation becomes clear when one sees the photos the soldiers take with various artillery. At the end of this chapter, I have included photos from several veterans. The first features thirty-some soldiers posing on and in front of army Humvees (see Figure 3.1). They stand in their army fatigues, holding their rifles and frowning at the camera. The soldiers seem as if they are trying their best to be intimidating. The group photo reveals how the soldiers implicitly view themselves- as imposing figures, supported by fearsome artillery and a powerful nation. They are trying to embody the might of the U.S. military in their poses. Their stances, along with fatigues and arsenal of weapons, mark this photo as a show of strength and power. The second photo features Ian, the author of one of the books, posing in his fatigues next to a collection of firearms (see Figure 3.2) The third photo is similar, in which Aaron proudly displays a massive machine gun, while others are displayed on the table in front of him (see Figure 3.3). These photos are just two of other similar examples. The soldiers who pose with guns are displaying their fascination with weapons. They set the guns into a display of sorts- showing the wide variety and range of firearms that they have. The last photo features two young white

soldiers, out of fatigues this time, posing with guns, liquor, and cigarettes (see Figure 3.4). They stare unsmiling into the camera. This photo differs from the others in its casualty- one of the soldiers is shirtless, wearing only his dog tag. The other wears a light blue T-shirt. Whereas the other photos featured soldiers in fatigues, presenting themselves as state actors, this photo shows two soldiers in their free time, posing with their firearms. By taking the photo in their casual dress, the soldiers are framing themselves outside of their position as soldiers- in this photo, they are simply themselves. The soldiers are embodying the militaristic masculinity of the army. The man on the right is shirtless, staring at the camera intensely. He holds his gun upright, one finger ready on the trigger. His slouched position implies that he does not consider this of much importance. The photo signifies an embodiment of his position. He has accepted militarism into himself. The man on the left likewise holds a gun, as well as a bottle of liquor in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth. He too slouches- the men's arms touch as they lean together. The photo suggests closeness and a level of camaraderie. The men are very comfortable together. The presence of cigarettes, guns, and liquor suggests that these men have embodied the militaristic masculinity that the army requires of them.

The photos with guns, as stated above, promise a certain level of domination. These men are given power in their roles as soldiers in an occupying army. The United States government did not keep track of Iraqi civilian casualties- this gave the soldiers almost free reign to do as they wished in Iraq. Iraqi lives did not count. Whereas American and British soldiers had ties to families and friends, Iraqi civilians and fighters were cast as boundless- "cut free from the ties that bound them to others, they disappeared- neither bodies nor even numbers- but, as Barnes said, just *dead*" (Gregory

2004, 207). The soldiers often acted violently toward Iraqi civilians with impunity, claiming fear for their lives as justification. One soldier, Jesse, describes a situation in which an Iraqi man approached their convoy with his hands in his pockets. Fearing the man was a bomber, Jesse yelled at him to stop. The man wouldn't. Jesse writes, "One guy went over and muzzle punched him. I'm glad he did, because I was going to shoot the guy" (151). Later, Jesse mentions that the man was not a bomber, but likely "just slow or something" (152). In another situation, soldier Aaron, who was serving as a guard at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, torments juvenile detainees. He writes,

> Every so often, the military dogs were walked through the compound and, like clockwork, the kids from the juvenile tent would always run to the front gate and harass the fierce beasts as they strolled by. The kids knew that they were safe from the dog because they were behind a fence. One day when I saw the dogs heading my way, I discreetly unlocked the gate to the juvenile tent. When the dogs walked by and the kids ran to the gate, the gate flew wide open and they were suddenly face-to-face with their worst enemies. The look on their faces was priceless, and they ran back inside their tent. Looking back, I know this was a mean thing to do. It exemplifies my frustration with the relentless, trouble-maker teens who were probably just being teens in a very tense situation.

Both Jesse and Aaron describe events in which they dominated local Iraqi men. In Jesse's case, he is glad that his fellow soldier punched the man so that Jesse didn't need to kill him. However, the situation clearly shows the power the soldiers hold over Iraqi civilians. The ability to beat or kill Iraqi civilians, especially men, who pose even the slightest threat is the ability to dominate the locals Alternatively, Aaron uses his power as a prison guard to traumatize the children detained at the prison. He does so out of annoyance- as he says, he was annoyed at teens making the best of a bad situation. Though he expresses regret later, at the time he found the situation funny, giving little regard to the fear the children likely felt at having no protection from a snarling German Shepherd. Both Jesse and Aaron express the power they have over their counterparts, Aaron with some

apology, and Jesse without. They both framed these examples as culminations of building stress- Jesse, from traveling through Iraq, not certain who was an enemy and who was a civilian; and Aaron, from working endless days as a prison guard. Their stress is understandable. The veterans write about the constant fear and anxiety they learned to live with. However, their ability to treat the Iraqi children in such ways speaks to the disregard the military held for both soldiers and the locals. Aaron and Ian's accounts reveal how their masculinity is defined at the expense of the other. this case, the veterans' reaffirmed their militaristic masculinity by asserting dominance over local Iraqi people, especially prisoners.

The veterans likewise have a strained relationship with their trauma due to the toxic masculinity encouraged by the military. Though most of them struggle with PTSD, depression, and anxiety, they only express these experiences in the context of their return home. Several scholars have written about the role of emotional suppression in militaristic masculinities (Hinojasa 2010; Mankayi 2008; Partis-Jennings 2019). Soldiers are discouraged from "admitting they are emotionally vulnerable as this is potentially threatening to military morale" (Mankayi 2008, 27). The military demands a lack of emotions, or otherwise a certain level of emotional control (Partis-Jenkings 2019, 255). Thus, the veterans had to look for other ways to express themselves. In Figure 3.5, a soldier in full fatigues mockingly holds the barrel of a shotgun in his mouth, playing at committing suicide. Rather than openly discussing the rampant depression among soldiers, this photo implies that it was more acceptable to make joking references. The photo also harkens back to the sexualization of guns. The photo has a sexual element- it implies engagement with the phallus through fellatio, revealing the hyper-sexualization

and preoccupation with homosexuality present among the troops. Nagel (1998) writes about the sexualization of military troops, referencing Julius Caesar telling troops not to engage in sexual behavior before battle to save their vitality as well as the sexual language used to describe military action- “bend over, Saddam” and “the rape of Kuwait”. (ibid, 258) The photo also implies a homosexual engagement with the gun, previously discussed as having phallic associations. The military has a long and troubling relationship with homophobia (Belkin 2001, 85). This photo may be an example of such homophobia- or it may imply a fascination with homosexuality.

Other soldiers decided to express themselves creatively. One veteran, Ian, expressed his struggles through poetry and art. He did not have access to paint while in Iraq, so he drew the following sketch with a ballpoint pen in a journal. The drawing expresses his mental state while serving. The clock appearing out of his open head is swirled and confused, symbolizing the strange temporalities soldiers enter while serving abroad. Around the main drawing are a collection of words- “Youth Taken”, “Over Load” and “Chaos” are just a few. Ian was feeling overwhelmed by his time in Iraq. The chaotic nature of the drawing reveals his chaotic interior. Ian went on to find a loophole in his contract that allowed him to leave service early. He went on to join Iraq Veterans Against the War.

The veterans cited in this study regularly reinstate their relationship with hegemonic masculinity. They were drawn, as Nagel (1998) writes, to the military due to its promise of adventure and action (ibid, 259) as well the access to hegemonic masculinity that the military promised (Hinojosa 2010, 180). Most of the veterans expressed a desire to serve their country, referring back to the complicated and

intertwined relationships between militarism, nationalism, and masculinity. They further enact militaristic masculinities in their phallic relationship with guns. By regularly posing with their collections of artilleries and naming their weapons, the veterans reveal their fascination with guns, often associated with White male identity production (Gahman 2015). This relationship also holds a sexual component, as can be seen in the photo featuring a soldier holding a gun in his mouth. The veterans reproduce their hegemonic masculinities. They do so through the photos they include and the stories they tell. Masculinity and nationalism are closely tied in the United States- by performing these hegemonic masculinities, the veterans are reproducing national and militaristic identities.

The Iraqi Landscape

The veteran authors of the books studied regularly reference the Iraqi landscape, and even more regularly include photos of the roads they drive and towns they visit. To adequately analyze these inclusions, I will offer a brief overview of the literature on landscape studies. Pierce Lewis wrote about cultural landscapes in 1975, writing that "*all human landscape has cultural meaning*- no matter how ordinary that landscape may be" (6, emphasis in original). He suggested that every landscape offered insight into the culture of that nation. Rose (2002) furthers the role of landscape studies in geography, arguing that landscapes are produced through everyday practice (ibid, 457). In this vein, geographers studying landscapes have taken up the issue of racialized landscapes. Richard Schein writes about how race manifests itself across space, noting that racialized landscapes normalize power structures and racist practices (2003, 204). However, even as

landscapes are racialized and used to normalize such racialization, Schein points out that there is always the possibility for resistance within landscapes (ibid, 217). Echoing this, Mitchell (2003) writes that "beneath the dreamwork and groundwork of empire lies a very different relationship between people and their landscape, one that is never fully repressed: there is a struggle for landscape, and it is at the same time the struggle for justice" (ibid, 788). He argues that landscape is a crucial tool in imperial projects (ibid, 787). Drawing on Olwig (2002), Mitchell suggests politics and the land are closely entwined, with imperial states remaking the land to reflect changes in politics and governance (ibid, 788). I will draw on Schein and Mitchell's theorization of racialized and imperial landscapes to analyze the veterans' representations of the Iraqi landscape.

In their descriptions of the Iraq landscape, the veterans regularly discuss the barrenness of the land, the tanks rotting by the side of the road, and the anxiety it instills in them. Drew describes Iraq: "Trash and blowing soil. Burned out rubble in the desert from the remnants of war" (89). Drew worked primarily in transportation, bringing trucks of captured weapons to various bases around the country. He describes viewing the landscape as a large part of his job. For him, the long stretches of road and scenery are imbued with war and fear. He writes,

> During that summer I drove thousands of miles. The land began to have a rhythm. To the west there were irrigation farms. To the south, the open desert and salt ponds. To the east, the river valleys and canals. To the bunkers that housed the weapons. Shepherds and children, traffic and the sweet smell of burning diesel. Broken tanks and roadside markets. Orange and white taxis and blown up buildings. (45)

To Drew, war is as much a part of the landscape as the ponds and deserts. The militarization of the land- the creation of roads, bases, watchtowers; the abandonment of tanks and bullets and bombed buildings- writes imperialism into the land and physically

marks it as a place of fear and violence. Similarly, Ian describes a morning when he woke "to the realization that I am now living a life of endless dust and a country bombed to rubble" (99). The veterans describe a landscape destroyed by imperial conquest. Mitchell notes that the destruction of a landscape is necessary for imperial states to rebuild it as one of production (2003, 788). By representing the Iraqi landscape as one of destruction, the veterans are reproducing imperialist discourse. The war is written into the fabric of the landscape. Nathan observes abandoned tanks left to rot on the side of the road, writing, "They almost looked like part of the natural landscape, rusting and slowly returning to the earth" (99). The veterans see the military infrastructure as natural to Iraq, part of its identity and environment. By connecting the landscape so closely to the war, they are rewriting the "autobiography" of the Iraqi landscape (Lewis 1976, 6). Richard Schein (2009) discusses how landscapes are politicized rather than apolitical entities. He focuses on both the production and the consumption of landscape, paying particular attention to how various types of power such as race, class, gender, and ability are written into various landscapes. He writes that "racial processes take place and racial categories get made, in part, through cultural landscapes" (ibid, 6). In the context of Iraq, the landscape was written as racialized through the imperial landscape of the war. Coming from a nation actively vilifying Arabs, the soldiers both consumed the landscape as a place of terror and violence and, by enacting war against Iraq, produced the landscape as a place of war.

Ian writes that he has "been stung by the Iraqi crud. It left me with a sore throat and clogged nose. I wish I could kick it but it's claws are deep" (107). To Ian, the Iraqi landscape is not just an external threat. It has entered him and become a part of his body,

marking him the same way the war has marked the countryside. The anxiety of the landscape has become the anxiety of his body. Similarly, Aaron writes about his first convoy trip through Iraq:

> Thoughts of not surviving the final leg of my journey were stuck in my head. Dusk quickly turned to dark. I could feel my blood pressure rise, and I felt extremely nauseous and vulnerable as I left the protection of the miles of concrete barriers and razor wire. I had to lie on my back atop a layer of duffel bags with no ammunition in an open, back-up, armored, five-ton truck. I was told that all of the ammo was waiting for me in Abu Ghraib. The ride to my new home-away-from-home was gut-wrenching. (89)

Aaron experiences the landscape as a place of intense anxiety. He embodies this relationship, writing about his nausea and rising blood pressure. In this way, the imperial landscape is not confined to the physical environment. It has moved through the boundaries of Aaron's skin and into his physiology, writing itself into his bodily experiences. The veterans' narratives of the landscape and how they moved through it offer what Caddick (2021) calls "flesh witness", or the "knowledge of war through bodily participation, which is a specific kind of knowledge that those not present in war cannot share" (ibid, 3). The descriptions of the landscape offer this flesh witness. The veterans' stories reproduce the imperial conquest of the land. Through their embodied fear and anxieties, the veterans blur the boundary between the landscape and the body, allowing the cultural significance that they take from the land to represent itself as bodily experiences of fear. These discussions of the landscape further suggest that the veterans hold complicated relationships with the imperial project.

Representation of the Iraqi People

The veterans' stories follow their journey to and from war. Though they are autobiographical and seldom explore the veterans' interpretations of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, their stories regularly brush up against those of Iraqi civilians. The veterans' descriptions of the Iraqi people they meet reveals more about their feelings about the war than their actual words. To refer back to Hall (1997), we produce meaning through our representations. The veterans regularly seem taken aback by Iraqi culture, pointing out habits and events that they find odd or unsettling. They share photos of Iraqi men, children, and women that at times feels voyeuristic. However, many of the veterans also describe the deep bonds they formed with their interpreters or doctors, or muse on the children they met and how badly they feel for them. Like the other themes which arose during my research, the veterans' relationship with the people they meet is not black and white. It is nuanced and complicated. The veterans are part of an occupying army; they are young men who have been trained by their country to fight for a cause. However, they are also often lonely and traumatized, looking for connection and meaning. The veterans' representations of Iraqi soldiers and civilians reveal the layers of racism, colonialism, fear, connection, and hope that the soldiers felt in their everyday lives while in Iraq. In this section, I will pull on Agambin's (1998) concept of *homo sacer*, or 'sacred man', to analyze how the veterans discuss the Iraqi people with whom they interact.

Often, the veterans reproduce to contemporary media narratives of Iraqi civilians and Middle Easterners more broadly. Ian recognizes this tendency in himself, writing,

> Racist thoughts taint the mind. They cloud the judgement [sic] and it turns the brain to mud. Dirty mud full of hatred, unable to love at all. A sad thing occurs when you close your eyes and become prejudiced. Scrub the mind of thoughts that make it stink. I hope I will be forgiven for my thoughts. I am colorblind; actions and character speak much louder than skin. (125)

Though he shies away from the racist thoughts he notices forming in his mind, he leans instead towards ‘colorblindness’, a claim that white people often make in response to accusations of racism. To claim colorblindness in order to claim that one does not see race- often, it assumes whiteness as neutrality. However, other veterans do not acknowledge their racism. They lean into the idea of all Iraqi people being potential terrorists. In a photo of a journal entry, Aaron shares a rap that he wrote while serving as a prison guard at Abu Ghraib. The rap is as follows:

365 days in Abu Ghraib, more like Abu Grave,
Spending my year 12 hours a day babysitting insurgents that cannot behave,
Dodging the motors, ducking strays,
Keeping my head down cause that’s what I’ve been told.
Damn mister mister is getting old.
The days are 101 and 80 feels cold.
I’ve got 3 calendars counting down the days,
Teaching the terrorist that killing Americans just don’t pay.

The poem requires some unpacking. Aaron arrived in Abu Ghraib a year after news broke about the horrific torture taking place at the prison. He was well aware of what had happened there- he referenced it at the beginning of his book and again at the end, claiming Abu Ghraib was ‘home’ to him despite its notoriety. However, when he calls Abu Ghraib “Abu Grave”, it is clear within the context that he is referring to his own hardships within the prison rather than its bloody history. This is made clear through his descriptions of detainees as “insurgents” and “terrorists”. It’s also worth noting that he uses “that” rather than “who” when describing the ‘insurgents’, implying a level of objecthood rather than personhood. His line, 'Damn mister mister is getting old’, refers to a common refrain of the detainees that he explains later in his book. The inmates would regularly ask, “Please, mister, mister, why am I here?” Aaron later included this line on a commemorative coin he makes, showing that he takes their distress lightly. He finally

concludes that he is ‘teaching terrorist that killing Americans just don’t pay’. This rap reveals Aaron’s acceptance of Iraqi prisoners as *homines sacri*. By reducing them to terrorists, the United States strips insurgents of the protection offered by the Geneva convention (Gregory 2004, 212). Abu Ghraib is a notorious example of this. Gregory (2004) notes that of the 5,000 Iraqi soldiers and civilians held in American custody at one point, only 500 were officially recognized as prisoners of war (ibid, 221). The others were coined “unlawful combatants”, shuffling them into a legally gray zone where they were “beyond the scope of international law” (ibid, 65). Aaron’s rap, as well as his joking addition of the Iraqi prisoners’ pleas onto his coin, reveal how he has accepted the Iraqi detainees as *homines sacri*. The government is not concerned, so neither is he.

Aaron writes that many of the other guards at Abu Ghraib thought of the juvenile detainees as “little terrorists” (140). Others write about how the constant fear of mortar attacks and shootings made them want to kill whoever was behind them. Jesse writes, “I never saw the people who were shooting the rockets and mortars and setting off IEDs. I wanted to kill that person but I never saw him” (1). Later, he writes, “I never saw the people shooting at me. Eventually, I became so pissed off and frustrated that I couldn’t kill the guys” (140). He goes on to write, “Eventually, you just don’t care anymore. You just want to kill the guy who is trying to kill you. You begin to feel in your heart that violence is the only way to survive; if I didn’t have my foot on someone’s neck and a gun to their temple, then they would have me in that exact same position” (140). The unseen enemy led Jesse to want to kill his assailants, but he never could. He expresses, again and again, his desire to kill the Iraqi combatants behind the attacks- to put his boot on their neck. His description of utter domination- stepping on someone’s throat while holding a

gun to their head- speaks to the ultimate power he wanted over the invisible people attacking him. However, he never saw them. He began to suspect everyone to be a possible terrorist- “You can’t tell who’s a friend or an enemy. Everyone looks the same from that perspective” (199). Jesse’s uncertainty and suspicion of who was a threat and who was an innocent civilian speaks to the veterans’ descriptions of Iraq as a land of fear and anxiety and a landscape that has been racialized. When one can’t see who their target is, everyone becomes one. Civilians become soldiers; homes become sanctuaries for terrorists. This belief is reflected in the U.S. military action. The United States, in its imperialist mission, saw its invasion of Iraq as a crusade against the “terrorist, tyrants, barbarians” of the world (Gregory 2004, 195). Though they claimed to use smart bombs which reduced civilian casualties (ibid, 168), in reality, the invasion led to a massive number of civilian deaths. While the actual number remains unknown, estimates place the number of Iraqi soldiers, combatants and civilians killed during the invasion between 184,382 and 207,156 (Watson Institute, 2021). In an approach similar to that of the Vietnam War, the United States government treated all civilians as possible insurgents. Homes were regularly raided, and men were rounded up and detained for days (Gregory 2004, 72). The veterans echo this sentiment in their stories.

Other veterans speak about Iraqi peoples’ plight without much sympathy. Jon, for example, shared several brutal photos of Iraqi men, dead and alive. One features a man, on his knees, covered in blood. Others are more graphic, showing Iraqi children and adults who have suffered mortal and disturbing injuries. Aaron writes about an experience he had during his time at Abu Ghraib. They had moved the prisoners into tent zones and turned the cells into soldiers’ quarters. Aaron notices that the walls of his cell

were covered in Arabic writing. After consulting with an interpreter, Aaron finds out that they are the names of prisoners who had been kept in the cell, who had written their names in ash. Aaron decides to 'leave his own mark' by keeping a "prison-style tally calendar" (99). He writes that "each new tick mark on the wall meant another day of survival" (ibid). Aaron's co-opting the walls of his cell, where prisoners stayed who had likely experienced awful torture at hands of the U.S. military, to keep track of his time as an occupying force, feels wildly disrespectful. He is certainly in a dangerous situation and many American soldiers have died in Iraq. However, to add his marks alongside the names of Iraqi prisoners who suffered at the hands of Aaron's military reveals a disregard for their experiences. It also implies that he sees his own experience, working as a prison guard, to be comparable to being an Iraqi prisoner in Abu Ghraib before the prison scandal was exposed. Aaron had filled his cell with handmade bookshelves and a desk, art made by his wife and friends, a DVD player and a radio, and a French press he used to make his own coffee. Meanwhile, Aaron was confiscating art from detainees, some of which he kept for himself. By keeping a tally alongside the names of Iraqi prisoners, Aaron is revealing how little he has thought critically about his role in Abu Ghraib and his relationship with the prisoners and the war in general.

Other veterans recognize parts of the war that don't sit well with them- however, like Aaron, they fail to think critically about their role in it and its legacies of colonialism. Aaron discusses the juvenile detainees held at Abu Ghraib. He writes, "It's tough because they are called detainees, but in actuality, they are prisoners of war. The juveniles ranged in age from ten to eighteen; it was hard knowing that the kids were just innocent pawns in the deadly game of war" (140). He recognizes that the children were given a label that

didn't accurately represent their status in the greater context; he also recognizes that most of them were innocent. These children, I might note, are the same whom Aaron torments by allowing the military dog access to their gated area. Aaron recognizes the oddity of having children held at the prison but doesn't engage in critical questioning of the situation. In a similar situation, Luke writes about a time he had to turn away an injured Iraqi boy while working as a guard at a hospital. The boy was around thirteen years old and had "been wounded by a car bomb in another city and they had traveled here because some sergeant out in the field wrote them a note saying they could receive medical attention at the army hospital" (71). Luke asked his superiors if they would be able to treat him. They said no. Because the boy had been injured by a car bomb rather than the U.S. forces, he was not allowed to receive treatment at the hospital. Luke explains he had previously allowed people to receive treatment who otherwise would have been turned away- but because there were no available surgeons, Luke had to turn him away. In this scenario, Luke understands that they are doing harm by not providing treatment to local Iraqi people. The protocol that only those injured by American troops can receive forces takes responsibility for only their immediate actions, rather than the broader situation the U.S. intervention has exacerbated. Though Luke mentions this incident, he does not discuss it further. He feels that the situation is wrong- he writes that he "can't help but think there was more that [he] could have done" (72). Luke internalizes the situation rather than looking at the broader structures that have exposed this boy to harm and then denied him treatment. Both instances are examples of Iraqi civilians being reduced to *homo sacer*, or bare life. They are not granted personhood through adequate treatment or care. Instead, Iraqi children are detained in high-security prisons while others are

denied medical treatment. The reduction of the Iraqi people to bare life is a necessary part of the imperial project. As Gregory (2004) points out, imperialism requires the belief that the invading state is superior as well as the othering of those in the invaded state (4). The Iraqi people are marked as 'Other' and thus denied personhood (ibid, 16).

Others do take the step to begin thinking critically about the experiences that unsettled them. Nathan joined the military right after graduating high school, just weeks before September 11, 2001. He was one of the first units deployed to Iraq. Nathan notes that "popular opinion in my unit was that the war was retaliation for Saddam's role in 9/11" (9). We know now that Iraq was not involved in the terrorist attacks on 9/11- Nathan's mention of this reveals how unclear the news was about the war and how heavy was the propaganda. He opens his book with the sentence, "The recruiter never mentioned the kids" (5). Iraqi children continue to reappear throughout Nathan's book. They heavily influenced him. He shares in his book some of the poems he wrote about his time. One, "Diesel Truck Time Machine", focuses on an experience he had in a convoy. An excerpt of the poem is as follows:

> Tires and trash / are burning / We announce our presence with a cloud of / dust / Barely enough room to turn the convoy / around / People are running from us / Tank columns blasted their way through here / weeks ago. / A tall man holds a shovel and is standing above / two graves / The child clinging to his leg barriers his face in / trousers / Don't stop here / I point my weapon and finger the trigger / He points back with an accusing finger / Points at the graves. (49)

Nathan's poem is a confession to his complicity in the war. He purposefully draws a parallel between pointing his weapon and fingering the trigger and the man pointing at a grave with an accusing finger. As a soldier, Nathan has directly contributed to those graves being necessary. The man is making Nathan's responsibility clear by pointing at the grave. Nathan's poem reveals his embodied experience, as well as that of the Iraqi

people he mentions. His descriptions of the air- *tires and trash are burning, we arrive in a cloud of dust*- firmly signal that this is a bodily experience. The parallel actions between him and the Iraqi man signal the difference between the two and the roles they inhabit. He goes on to share another poem, "Charlie Battery Has Places to Go." A few lines are particularly of note:

> A mother wails and claws at her face / Blood and dirt cover the front of her Abaya / My insides are grinding / Guthrie says "Shit" and I see the kid / A skinny boy, maybe 8 years old / His face is covered with a jacket / I stare at his dirty bare feet. (69)

Though this particular poem is somewhat exploitative, focusing on the grief of an Iraqi woman, it shows unflinchingly the impact of the war on locals and soldiers alike. Nathan communicates his shock through the last line, "I stare at his dirty bare feet." He focuses on one small detail, trying to comprehend. Nathan includes that his face was covered by a jacket to note the wartime care given to the dead- until his family or others can remove him somewhere else, they have tried to give the child some small dignity by covering his face. This poem, like the one before it, communicates Nathan's fleshy experiences- he notes his 'grinding insides' and the mother clawing at her face. In doing so, Nathan is conducting the "compression, abstraction, and translation of embodied experiences into a (supposedly comprehendible, graspable form" (Caddick 2015, 5). The poem is about a convoy, which Nathan names 'Charlie battery', traveling through Iraq, twenty cars strong. Nathan notes that "Charlie battery has Iraqis to liberate" (69). This line is juxtaposed by the scene above, of some type of conflict resulting in a dead boy. The graphic scene is meant to shock, especially after the poem's claim that Charlie battery is there to 'liberate' the Iraqi people. Nathan is critically struggling with the supposed ideology of the war and the reality of the war, as well as his complicity within it.

Even while many of the veterans reckon with their racism and role in occupying Iraq, many also write about the friendships they developed with the locals they met. Aaron became close friends with several interpreters while working at Abu Ghraib. He had had issues developing relationships with his fellow soldiers. Instead, he began spending most of his time watching Iraqi soap operas with the interpreters and playing Yahtzee. He writes that "some of my most memorable moments were sitting down together and eating and socializing" (125). One of the interpreters would write Aaron's name in Arabic calligraphy- after Aaron returned home, he had the interpreter's calligraphy tattooed on his arm. Aaron is adamant that his friendship with the interpreters was one of his "greatest assets" (125) while at Abu Ghraib. Luke, who served as a guard at the hospital, developed a close friendship with one of the Iraqi doctors, Dr. Muhammad, working there. Luke gave Dr. Muhammad and his family a Christmas tree- despite the fact they were Muslim- as well as a disposable camera to take photos of their family. The doctor appears regularly throughout Luke's account. Luke writes that he wishes he could get back in touch with Dr. Muhammad and find out how he is doing. He writes,

> The people I feel a deep connection with are the people that I meet and become friends with. I consider my friends from all over the world as part of my community. It doesn't matter that they live in another country. The Iraqis and Kurds that I've met here have become my friends. They represent my community much more than any citizenship can. (27)

Luke and Aaron both formed close relationships with the Iraqi people they met while serving abroad. These friendships exist simultaneously with instances of racism and violence. Both Luke and Ian write about their desire to kill terrorists; they write about occasions in which they asserted their dominance over strangers they met on the road.

However, they also formed deep and lasting ties with Iraqi doctors, interpreters, and civilians they met. These various relationships and representations reveal how nuanced soldiers' experiences in Iraq are. They can separate their fear and hatred for Iraqi 'terrorists' from the Iraqi people standing in front of them. They can feel sympathy for Iraqi children while also tormenting them. The Veterans' Book Project shows how veterans can hold many ideas about the Iraqi people at once- maintaining friendships doesn't keep them from holding racist thoughts, and vice versa.

The representation of the Iraqi people is a crucial part of motivating support for the Iraq war. Gregory writes, "In order to advance from the grounds of killing to the killing grounds themselves, imaginative geographies were mobilized to stage the war within a space of constructed visibility where military violence became- for these audiences at least- cinematic performance" (2004, 198). This is exacerbated by the Bush administration's refusal to track the number of civilian deaths. By refusing to engage with the "body-count business" (ibid, 167), the administration signaled that Iraqi peoples' lives were meaningless. They were reduced to *homo sacer*. The veterans' stories provide a useful insight into what this looked like in the day-to-day of the Iraq war. The soldiers had complicated relationships with the Iraqi prisoners, doctors, and civilians they interacted with however, they mirrored the administration's stance on Iraq more generally. For instance, Gregory writes that "ordinary Iraqis could only be allowed into the frame once they had appeared in the streets with the requisite display of jubilation" (ibid, 213). The veterans write fondly only about the Iraqi people who seemed happy that the United States was there- whether it was doctors at the military hospital or children who greeted them with cheers, the only positive relationships that the veterans discuss are

those with people who had positive inclinations towards the war. Otherwise, the veterans' representations reduce the Iraqi people to *homines sacri*.

Disillusionment and Complicity

Many of the veterans whose books are included in this study later r became staunch opponents of the Iraq war. Several joined organizations like Veterans against War or Iraq Veterans Against the War. They write about their growing disillusionment with the military and the war's mission. However, even as they grapple with the war, they are actively complicit in reproducing harmful narratives and engaging in a violent occupation.

When the soldiers joined the military, they almost all were just out of high school or in their early twenties. They were excited to serve their country and protect the United States freedom. Ian described the recruiter who convinced him to enlist as "someone that you would trust with your best interest. He talked a smooth game and promised the world. All of those things sounded very attractive to a young man ready to make his mark" (28). Many of the other veterans have similar stories. They were told that joining the military would teach them discipline and skills they could carry for the rest of their lives. Some came from poor backgrounds and the military was a seductive choice due to its benefits and pay. Beyond these benefits, the military promises adventure and access to hegemonic masculinity (Hinojosa 2010, 180). Additionally, when the state is in crisis, many young men fear that not joining the military will make them seem cowardly (Nagel 1998, 252). Ian was only 17 when he enlisted in the Air Force- his mother had to sign

over guardianship. The military has long focused its recruitment on young men. They provide the perfect combination of idealism and naivety, with little obligations or responsibilities to leave behind. However, these young men often realize quickly that they were misled once they are sent to training.

The veterans write about the experiences and shock they have once they enter basic training. The brutality of boot camp is notorious, but the veterans were still taken aback by the intensity of the training. Ian describes his first few days at boot camp, writing,

> There was a big waiting room filled with about 100 people; it was hot, humid and it stunk of confusion. There was a sense of unease about what was to happen. We all started to doubt our motivation. I waited in line for last names, R-Z. From that point on, I was no longer "Iggy", the carefree senior; I was now Trainee Sharpe. (14)

Ian sets up a metaphor of boot camp feeling like a slaughter yard here. He notes how almost everyone there immediately started doubting their decision to join the military. Most importantly, and something that stays with Ian throughout his account, was the sense that he was giving up his identity and sense of self. There was an expectation for him to conform to the military's expectations. He goes on to explain how the trainers woke them up, "throwing garbage cans, banging metal and screaming orders instill fear and establish dominance" (16). Later that day, the trainees had their blood drawn and received immunizations. Ian describes it as the "most humiliating and non-empathetic experiences of boot camp" and a "direct reflection of the military's disregard for human life". He sat in line in the intense heat, watching men passing out and being woken by a slap. Men were vomiting and being ushered down the line. When Ian had his blood drawn, he collapsed and was woken by a trainer yelling for him to regain his composure

(18). As Ian says, the tone of the event is likely meant to 'toughen up' the soldiers in training. However, the dehumanization of boot camp left Ian feeling more like a herded animal. He writes, "If you have ever wondered what it is like to be a cow, pig, or chicken headed to get branded or slaughtered, join Uncle Sam and you'll get the original experience" (17). The direct comparison between the military and a slaughterhouse is poignant. Many of the veterans go on to write about the horrors they saw in Iraq and most went on to suffer from PTSD. Several lost friends in explosions or attacks. The training process was, for most of these veterans, the first indication that the military was going to be a difficult experience. Atherton (2009) notes that this intense training is crucial to the construction of military identities. He writes that

> First and foremost, a military identity is performed within a strict hierarchy of power and subordination, maintained daily through the willingness of one individual to be obedient to another. The upper echelons of power are achieved through conforming to the control of superiors and eventually demonstrating the ability to command and earn the obedience of other troops lower in the hierarchy. This rigid system is rendered acceptable in part because of the accompanying emphasis on a hard-bodied form of masculinism that is both put to the test (and 'proven'), and, importantly, further attenuated, by the particular training regime required by the military for its recruits. (2009, 824)

The rigorous and demeaning training at boot camp demands new soldiers to conform to military expectations and identities. However, it is the first step in many of the veterans' disillusionment.

Several veterans noted that they experienced growing resentment during training due to feeling as though they had been misled or betrayed by their superiors and recruiters. Ian had signed up because his recruiter had told him he would be able to go into Space Systems Operations. Instead, he was assigned to Aircraft Electrical and Environmental Systems. He notes that this was the first time he realized that the military prioritized their own interests over the interests of individual soldiers (30). While Ian's

resentment may have been fed by a certain level of entitlement due to his positionality, he was also explicitly misled by his recruiter. Aaron experienced a similar situation. He had been told, before deployment, that he would be serving as convoy security. Once he arrived in Kuwait, however, his superiors told him he would instead be serving as a detainee guard at Abu Ghraib prison. He writes,

> Once again, I was in shock. The news that I would be working as a detainee guard, instead of convoy security, was very unsettling to hear. I suddenly had the images from the torture scandal flashing in my head. Then I realized why we went through the last-minute detainee operations training. I felt as if a bait and switch had just occurred. (58).

Though Aaron's story is slightly different- he had already been in the military before being deployed to Iraq- it is clear that the military is using whatever they can to convince young men to enlist. The government needed bodies to perform the war they sought. Thus, it would make sense that recruiters would tell young men whatever they wanted to hear to convince them to sign up. This is a direct cause of the veterans' disillusionment with their service. They were promised a noble and honorable cause and reassurance they would be given desirable assignments. Instead, they found themselves engaged in and exposed to daily violence, or otherwise subjected to long periods of boredom with little contact with their loved ones at home.

Many of the soldiers began to question the war while actively serving. Several note the intensive conformity expected in their units. Ian describes other soldiers as "mindless bodies" who "march to the beat of a silent rule" (103). Later, he calls them "mindless half-wit grunts marching to a deaf drummer" (127). Interestingly, many of the veterans find disillusionment in how the military treats their own, rather than the actions of the military against the Iraqi people. However, multiple scholars point to this as a main

concern of veterans (Brewin and Andrews 2011; Herman and Yarwood 2014; Mobbs and Bonanno 2018). The veterans' feelings of betrayal are rooted in their desire to give back to a country that, they believe, has given them so much. However, once they begin serving, they realize that they mean very little to the actual government. Jesse explicitly notes this, writing, "With the ambiance of burning trash and shit and the lack of ceramic plate inserts for my body armor translates to this: my life isn't worth much to the people on up the line from me" (6). It is clear to the veterans that they are simply bodies on the field, rather than heroes serving their country, as the traditional narrative goes. It is interesting to note, though, that the soldiers' bodies often mean more to the government in death than they do post-service. Gregory (2004) regularly discusses the Bush administration's refusal to track deaths of Iraqi civilians and soldiers; however, it kept a careful count of how many troops died during the war. For Ian, his experience in the military helps him realize that he is "far too liberal to be involved with the conformist military" (140) and that he "does not stand for what [he is] fighting for" (138). Several other soldiers likewise begin questioning the morality of the war and its cause. Ian, as stated above, begins to question whether he supports the war. Likewise, Jesse writes, "I find this war and violence and its resulting loss of moral compass changes perspective on everything" (5). Many others write about similar feelings of losing track of what is right and wrong. They echo a common refrain among veterans- feeling as though they have been fundamentally changed and "morally diminished" by their service (Brewin and Andrews 2011, 1737). These soldiers are isolated from their family and friends and under an almost constant barrage. They live in a constant state of fear and anxiety, to the extent that they cannot tell who is a threat and who is a civilian. The military gives them guns

and stories of mass weapons and insurgencies. It is easy for them to lose focus on the bigger picture.

However, several veterans write about how they began critically thinking about the war. Isaac describes the war as such:

> Want to know what it's like over here? Go out into the middle of the worst part of Chicago, take about 60 people you don't know with you, tell the citizens there that you are here to help them, accidentally kill a few of them, live in a tent in the sewer, bring a lot of stuff that you don't need and carry it around with you where ever you go, only contact your family by email. That about sums it up. (40)

Isaac's description primarily focuses on the awful living conditions the soldiers must endure. His line about telling the citizens you're there to help them and then killing several of them, however, touches on his perception of the (obviously) tense relationship between the Iraqi locals and the soldiers. He's aware that the local Iraqi people do not trust the soldiers, especially when the military accidentally kills innocent civilians. If Isaac seems taken aback by this, it is likely because soldiers had been told that "they would be greeted as liberators" (Gregory 2004, 225). He is aware that the military is not living up to its promises to local Iraqi people. Similarly, in his poem "Exit 2011 to Slogansburg", Nathan discusses his doubts about the intentions of the war. He writes,

> Feeling soured today / If you've burned the veteran's hero bridge long / ago / A scary road indeed / That feeling in your heart that you've been / criminally filled with nonsense / Only a fool can believe rich man's State Terror, / will beat the poor man's Religious Terror / A sign reads Rough Road Ahead. (63)

Nathan's poem reveals his growing disillusionment with the Iraq War. He references "burning the veterans hero bridge long ago" -something that implies his belief that the government does not truly treat veterans as heroes. He notes that he feels as if he's been lied to about the war and its mission. He refers to the "rich man's State Terror", which we

can understand as the Iraq war, and the poor man's religious Terror, which we can understand as Islamic fundamentalism. Nathan expresses doubt that U.S. intervention can prevent religious terrorism and whether it is the right thing to do. His distinction that the war belongs to the “rich man” implies that he considers the war to be motivated by the ruling class's interests and that the war itself is a form of terror against the people of Iraq. He is correct. As Gregory writes,

> The message was clear: "the United States must be obeyed." As Aijaz Ahmad commented, the message was delivered not just to the regime but also to the Iraqi people at large. "The intent is simply to terrorize the population, to demonstrate that if the most majestic buildings in the city can go up in balls of fire and sky-high splinters of debris, then every one of the inhabitants of the city can also meet the same fate unless they flee or surrender immediately.” (2004, 198)

Gregory’s quote, which references the United States’ shock and awe campaign in Iraq, notes that the Bush administration sought to assert control over Iraq by emphasizing their superior strength and resources. Of course, at this point, the Iraqi population at large did not want U.S. soldiers in their country. Nathan's poem offers insight into what soldiers on the ground thought of this campaign. He did not approve of it- it did not match his idealized vision of war, which Flores (2014) argues is a leading cause of disillusionment among veterans.

However even as Nathan and other veterans critically engage with the war and its intentions, other veterans reveal their complicity in the occupation. Aaron, for example, writes, “I was the master of performing shakedowns. There were many occasions when I would find trash bags full of contraband. It’s a shame my hard drive crashed on the way home from Iraq and I lost the majority of my photos. I had photos of people’s important belongings as well as weapons” (151). Aaron, who was serving at Abu Ghraib, clearly did not critically reflect on his position as a prison guard. His pride in successfully

confiscating materials from prisoners speaks to the dehumanization that prisoners face while in detention. Additionally, it almost feels as if Aaron is taking photos of confiscated items as souvenirs. He wishes to show off the different things that he'd collected from prisoners while he was serving. In one instance, Aaron confiscates a painting from an Iraqi prisoner. He keeps this painting, despite it not being a weapon or contraband. Aaron goes on to discuss the medical care that was given to the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. He was serving at the same time as Hurricane Katrina and wrote that he felt that the Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib were receiving better healthcare than Americans. His distaste for the medical treatment given to prisoners shows that he does not think Iraqi people, but especially prisoners, are deserving of the same medical care as Americans. Aaron's belief that the Iraqi people shouldn't receive adequate healthcare contains echoes of Agamben's *homines sacri.* This was a stance taken by the Bush administration, shown time and time again in their strategy, refusal to track Iraqi deaths, and blasé reactions to the destruction of infrastructure (Gregory 2004). Alternatively, Aaron may be expressing his growing disillusionment with the American government's lack of care for its citizens. Another veteran, Drew, writes about traumatic experiences he had in the war. He writes, "We drove over a car filled with a family. We woke up in the night to the thumping of mortars walking in. We watched blood stain the streets and listened to the rising resistance. We had rocks thrown at us by children and were spit on by teenagers. Men stared at me and I dreamed about home" (93). These experiences stayed with Drew. The first sentence- that they drove over a car in which there was a family- is truly horrifying. Drew included these accounts in his book because they made him realize the violence of the war. He knew that the Iraqi people did not want them

there. He notes that the children throw rocks at them while the teenagers spit at him. By combining these two experiences into the same paragraph, Drew is connecting the violence of the soldiers (we drove a car filled with a family) and the distaste of local Iraq (children throwing rocks, men staring, etc.) to show that the local Iraqi civilians had good reason to hate the soldiers. Gregory (2004) notes that in the Middle East, throwing rocks is a gesture that symbolizes resistance to occupiers and is highly symbolic (ibid, 225). However, other veterans do not as critically engage with their complicity. Jesse writes that he wishes he had been able to kill the people who were bombing them. The veterans are complicit in the occupation and subsequent violence. However, only some reflect on their complicity. Others find disillusionment with the war, focusing on how the military does not treat them as individuals- the irony of which is that they often do not see Iraqi prisoners, children, doctors, or soldiers as people either. This echoes the Bush administration's refusal to track Iraqi deaths while keeping careful track of U.S. troop losses. The Iraqi people are cast as *homines sacri*, while the U.S. soldiers are both valuable in what their bodies can offer, and invaluable as individuals.

The veterans also find disillusionment with the war while suffering from PTSD during their service. They witness and engage in horrific events. They regularly describe friends dying, people being blown up, and children dying. Witnessing these events and their subsequent PTSD are large factors in the veterans' disillusionment. Aaron, serving as a guard at Abu Ghraib, was present during a significant attack on the prison. He was guarding prisoners when a mortar landed just thirty feet away. He was protected from the shrapnel by a building but suffered later from extreme PTSD. Bomb drills and guard duty gave him intense panic attacks. He was reassigned to guard the medical tent. Once he

returned home, he was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury. It was during this time that Aaron began feeling as though the military did not fully care for his health or well-being. Another veteran, John, formats his book as responses to common questions he receives. One question is whether he saw any dead bodies. He writes that he saw many dead bodies and that they continue to haunt him. He saw coffins of fellow soldiers who died while serving and the bodies of Iraqi children. It would be difficult to see these things and not begin to question the war and those who order it. Jon regularly refers to the troops' self-medicating. Because they were expected to serve for up to a year, the soldiers have to find ways to cope with the horror around them. Jon included photos of long lists of medications for anxiety, insomnia, shaking, and depression. Similarly, he writes that many of the soldiers turned to heavy drinking to cope with the stress and boredom. Many of the veterans wrote about the disillusionment caused by the brutality they witnessed and the lack of support they felt while serving.

Most of the veterans write at length about their post-war experiences. Almost all of them suffer from PTSD and lasting physical injuries. Here, we can begin to see the intense disillusionment that the veterans develop, not just with the military, but with the US government as well. The veterans explain early in their books that they enlisted because they wanted to give back to the country that had given them so much. They signed up for the military and flew across the world to serve in a war in which they had very low stakes. They left the war with mental and physical scars that continue to plague them for the rest of their lives. Once they returned home, they discovered how difficult it is for veterans to receive mental health care, jobs, and support for the transition back to civilian life. It was during this transition that the veterans write that they felt abandoned

by their government. They had given years and their mental health to the war, and upon returning home received very little in return. Flores suggests that this disillusionment is most common in veterans who had idealized war (2014, 109). Compared to soldiers who entered the war with more realistic expectations, soldiers who enlisted due to a desire for adventure were much more likely to hold antiwar sentiments after returning from service (ibid, 110). Drew writes about how after he returned home, he found out that many of his friends died in an explosion while driving convoy vehicles. He goes on to write that many of his friends who returned home from the war didn't fully make it out. Several moved into their parents' basements, while others commit suicide. He explains the return home in this way:

> It can be like this: / I am a veteran and I carry it in my back pocket- an old camouflage hanker chief… (break) A tip of the hat to those who have come before. /A tip of the hat to those who might notice a familiar pattern, or hesitate and want to talk. / It can be like this: / I am sewn with the stolen threads of youth, in company with the occupied murmurs of the enemy. / I am stolen youth. / I am the occupied. / I am the occupier. / I am the enemy. / But I know it's like this: / I am a veteran and I keep on the move. No, I'm not a veteran. I'm an artist who has memories.

Drew's poem powerfully encapsulated the feelings that many bedrooms have about the war in their role in it. He writes that he carries his service like a handkerchief that he cannot get rid of. He acknowledges those that had served before him in those who will serve after him but does not feel that they are necessarily doing the right thing. He writes about the severe mental trauma that most veterans carry with them. Drew feels as though the government has stolen his youth and struggles with the sense that his PTSD is occupying him, while simultaneously struggling with his complicity as an occupier. He both claims and refuses the label of a veteran. By refusing to call himself a veteran and instead identifying as an artist, Drew is turning away from the military and its claim on

him. Instead, he chooses to live creatively and process his grief and PTSD in non-government-sanctioned ways.

Other veterans share similar stories. Ian writes about his intense depression following his return home. In one section, it seems as though he is contemplating suicide. He goes on to write about the government's response to veterans. He writes, “They give you rewards for surviving attacks. They give you achievement medals that arrive three years later. Does this signify a successful military career? Is this what it means to be recognized?” (183). Ian feels that government medals are not enough. He notes the irony that as he suffers from depression and PTSD, the government sends him awards instead of adequate services. This is not to say that there are not organizations that work hard to support veterans. There are hundreds of nonprofits and advocacy groups that seek to improve services for veterans in the United States. However, it is well documented that veterans are often abandoned by the country they served. Brewin, Garnett, and Andrews (2011) write that “A dominant theme was of being ‘out in the cold’ after leaving the forces and returning to civilian life” (ibid, 1737). Likewise, Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) note that transition stress is one of the main barriers veterans face upon their return home from service. It is not until many of the veterans returned home that they began actively protesting the war. Ian goes on to join Veterans for Peace, even serving as treasurer for the organization. His experiences in the war and the government’s failure to support veterans convinced Ian that more had to be done to prevent war. He writes, “There have been 4259 American military casualties, tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Iraq casualties and we have a Veterans Administration that cannot deal with the survivors and countless Iraq war veterans on the streets” (211). The veterans grapple with

disillusionment and their complicity in the war. However, it is very interesting to note that the disillusionment they feel comes from feeling as though their country has abandoned them. This connects to the nationalism that prompted many of them to enlist in the first place. They had felt a deep connection to America. They wanted to perform the masculinity that America asked of them, so they joined the military. However, it wasn't until they arrived in Iraq, witnessed the horrors that war and colonialism had to offer, and returned home to little to no support that they fully realized the pointlessness of war. Regardless, the veterans who protest the war continue to support the United States. They believe in the paternalistic goal of helping the Iraqi people, reflecting the imperial belief of 'civilizing' the Other. Flores (2016) suggests that veterans who engage in antiwar protests do so to reconstruct their moral identity (ibid 197). Many veterans who protest the war "share a collective moral argument in which antiwar resistance is the highest form of patriotism, and that it is the duty of soldiers and civilians to oppose what they define as unlawful and morally unjust wars" (ibid, 207). As such, even though the veterans in these stories eventually turn to protest the war, they maintain their patriotism and nationalism. They instead approach it from a non-militaristic place.

…

The veterans' books are political archives of their experiences with the Iraq War, a function of an imperial state seeking to expand its influence in the region. As such, the veterans' stories are important not just in what they discuss, but in what they omit. The books are 'objects for deployment'- they serve as containers for the veterans' memories, photos, and stories. They also operate as a tool for the veterans to reconstruct their identities post-service. Trauma narratives often serve as a way for the storyteller to defuse

"traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self" (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, 40). These books are not objective sources of information, then. They stand as personal recollections and memory-works of those who engaged in a hyper-political and traumatizing event. By engaging with these books, I both have had to sort through the veterans' reconstruction of their experiences as well as the meaning I applied to their stories. I did so by drawing out several main themes. The veterans are not innocent in the Iraq War. They were the bodies on the ground, representing the United States through their presence and actions. The Iraq War was additionally not a conventional war, as Gregory (2004) has made clear. The United States sought time and again to bypass the Geneva conventions and allowed its soldiers to kill with impunity (ibid, 225).

The veterans regularly enact nationalism and militaristic masculinities throughout their books. Whether in discussing their fondness of the United States or their hatred for the unseen Iraqi combatant, they enacted imperialism both in the actions they describe and their narratives of their service. They are complicit in the imperial project. However, the veterans also describe how little their superiors cared for their lives and wellbeing. The veterans are both enactors of everyday imperialism and subject to its violence. They were brought to Iraq to fight and, when they had served their purpose and were no longer of use, were deposited back into civilian life with what they felt was no support. I argue that while the veteran authors of these books are complicit in the Iraq War, they also hold a tenuous position within the imperialist project. They have embodied the imperial project and reproduced it in their descriptions of the Iraqi landscape and people. The

veterans exist within the tension of imperial logic, which renders each body productive only to the extent that it can further the states' goals. Their senses of self and identity morph throughout their deployment, as they struggle with their nationalism, masculinity, and relationship to the 'other'. They move through complicity and disillusionment and often reckon with their own responsibility in the Iraq War. Through Derek Gregory's analysis of the Iraq War and feminist political geography's attention to the body and the constellation of trauma through time and space, I have attempted to understand the soldier-veterans' position in the colonial project. By analyzing their narratives, I have paid attention to the everyday and banal aspects of their deployment, marrying feminist political geography with broader analyses of the Iraq War

Figure 3.1

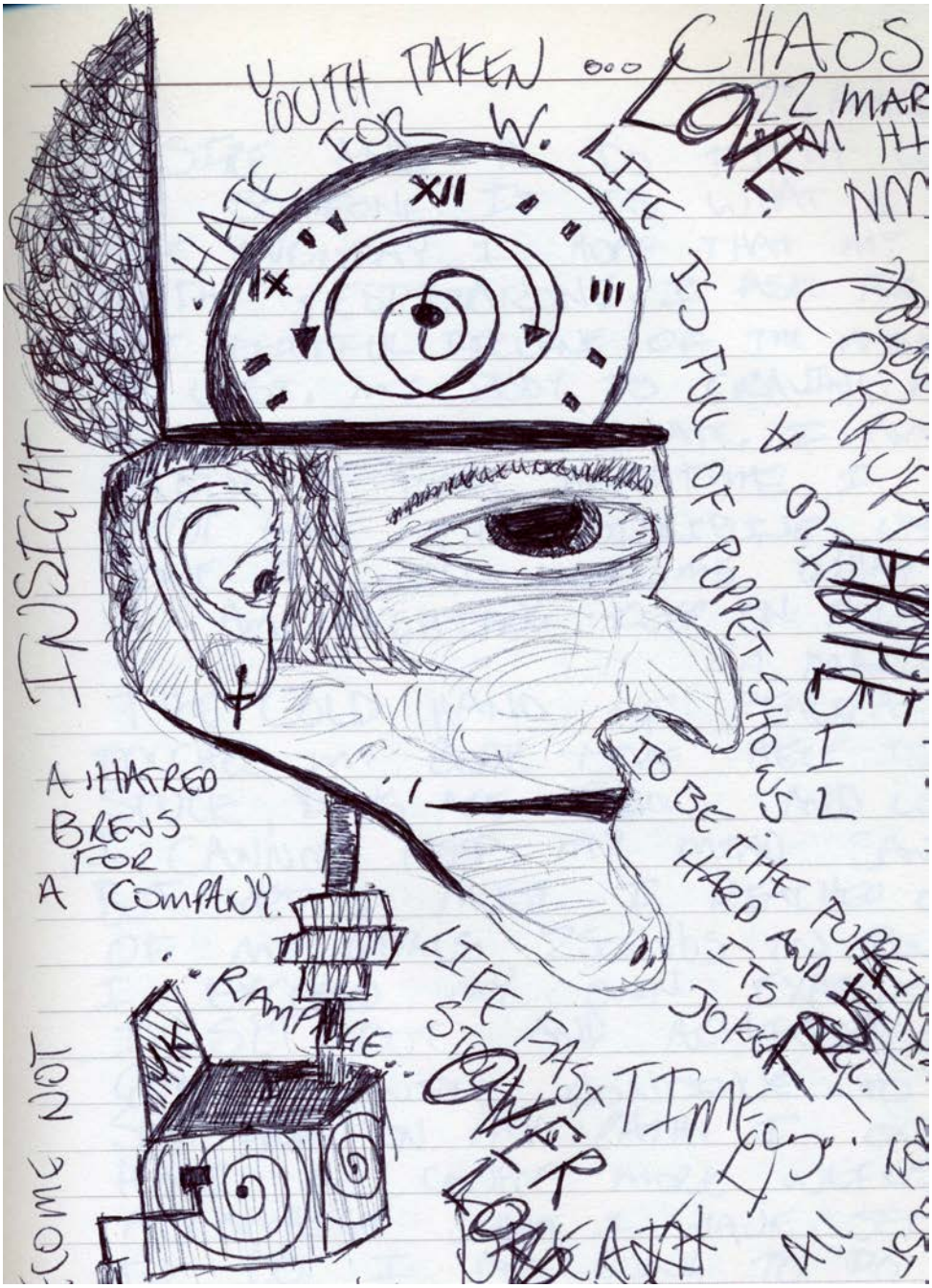
Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5

Figure 3.6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CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

This thesis examined U.S. veterans of the Iraq War's complicated and nuanced experiences with the Iraq war through the books they created in the Veterans Book Project. By employing their photos, poems, drawings, and journal entries, the veterans offered specific representations of their service. As first-hand accounts, their representations were not objective. They were influenced by their own beliefs, biases, and prejudices, as well as how they wanted others to perceive them. Veterans largely focused instead on their emotional day-to-day experiences. My feminist analysis allowed me to understand these emotional narratives by focusing on the mundane and lived experiences. However, these emotional accounts turn the attention away from the larger scope of the war and instead toward the veterans' own experiences. Thus, the richness of the books lies in how the veterans chose to represent specific aspects of their service.

The veterans revealed a wealth of nuanced conceptions of the Iraq war. They were both uncritically complicit and increasingly disillusioned with the military. The veterans grappled with loyalty to a country that continuously failed them, throwing into question their initial ideas of American exceptionalism and what it meant to be a man. They represented the Iraqi people both as friends and as threats and terrorists, regularly falling back on racist tropes and the idea that most Iraqis were terrorists. However, many of the veterans went on to protest the war, pointing out the many ways the government failed their soldiers, veterans, and Iraqi civilians. In most of this discourse, the veterans use paternalistic language to discuss the U.S. government's responsibility to Iraq,

highlighting the colonial intent of the war. The veterans overwhelmingly had an incredibly nuanced relationship with the war that changed over time. Many attempt to write their books from the perspective they had at the time- how excited they were to enlist, followed by their stress and discomfort during training, their exhaustion and depression during their deployment, and finally their resentment for how the military and government failed them as veterans. They can protest the military's treatment of soldiers and veterans without critically reflecting on the war's impact on Iraqi civilians. The veterans are both victims of the war and perpetrators of violence. They hold a tense relationship with the war, one that they grapple with throughout their books.

Finally, the veterans stood as interesting figures within the overarching colonial project that was the Iraq war. They were the ones who enacted colonialism and imperialism in the everyday. By enlisting in the military and serving in Iraq, they were actively conducting imperialism. Through their representations of Iraqi prisoners, interpreters, doctors, and civilians, they reproduced colonial narratives of the Iraqi people at large as religious zealots, all of whom posed a potential threat, regardless of age. They embodied and produced colonialism in their day-to-day activities during their service. However, the veterans also suffered due to the war. Many discussed how they were misled by recruiters. They felt that they had been lied to and manipulated into enlisting. Once they began training and then deployed, their morale quickly deteriorated, leading to many veterans resenting the war, their superior officers, and their positions in the military. Throughout their tour, they lived in a near-constant state of anxiety and fear- some of which were likely artificially produced by commanding officers. They were encouraged to view Iraqi civilians, regardless of creed or background, as threats. The

military worked hard to turn the soldiers into colonial actors. However, through their books, many veterans expressed how uncomfortable they began to feel with what was asked of them. They shared small acts of resistance, such as sneaking local Iraqi children into army hospitals to receive treatment. Many of the soldiers formed close relationships with the Iraqi interpreters and doctors they met. One or two actively sought ways to leave the military and went on to protest the war in Iraq. Almost all of the veterans experienced a lack of support following their service. They all suffered from PTSD and many left Iraq with chronic injuries. The Veterans Association, many veterans noted, was not adequately equipped or funded to support the number of veterans who needed care. The veterans all felt abandoned by the government they served. The imperial project harmed them as well, though in different ways than those in Iraq. They were convinced to join the military and then given awards rather than treatment. The veterans stand at an interesting intersection of complicity and harm, both having enacted colonialism and suffered from it.

This intersection surprised me most during my research. I began this research with my own biases. I became politically active well after 9/11 when it was widely known and accepted that the Bush administration had lied about Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction. The war on terror was a constant topic of discussion and conflict. I was not close enough to the contemporary moment to have an emotional attachment to the war, so it was easy for me to take a more detached anti-war stance. I entered my thesis under the assumption that U.S. soldiers and veterans were a homogenous group that fully supported the war and held traditional racist and colonial beliefs. I expected to see this reflected in the veterans' book projects. I admit I had a

hypothesis already in mind, that I would be able to prove that the veterans enacted colonialism everyday without critical reflection or consequence. While that was true to a certain extent, they certainly had their reservations and did suffer many consequences. I was most surprised by how poorly the veterans had been treated by the government. Despite my own feelings about much of what the veterans wrote in their books, they all suffered traumatic experiences. That the government would allow them to go untreated and without support should not have been surprising, but I was surprised. The research yielded much more nuanced results than I anticipated. I was likewise surprised by the number of veterans in my sample who went on to join organizations protesting the war. I would be interested to learn more about the current state of veterans, especially under Trump's nationalist term, during which he regularly used pro-war and pro-troop rhetoric.

I would recommend that future research take up this topic in deeper detail. As the Veterans Book Project was several years completed when I took it up, and due to time restraints, I was unable to perform deeper research on veterans' representation of wartime experiences. Future research might employ participatory art projects to narrow the focus to representation through music, art, or poetry. Researchers may also find value in studying the Veterans Book Project as a topic in itself. How did the artist begin the project? What did the workshops consist of and what specific methods were used? How did the veterans experience the project, and did they find it useful? Additionally, future research could expand the focus from exclusively white male veterans serving in Iraq, as this thesis did, to study veterans more broadly, or else conduct a parallel analysis of veterans serving in Iraq alongside Iraqi refugees. To do so would provide dynamic and rich insight into the varied impacts of the war. The Veterans Book Project is

overwhelmingly an underutilized resource that could provide a wealth of knowledge on the intersection of geography, art, representation, and war.

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