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Matthew Allen Lewis Date

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WAR:
An ethnographic study of storytelling and the work of words

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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It is assumed that war is traumatizing. However, not all soldiers assess their deployment as traumatic. Drawing on life-narrative interviews, extensive participant observation, and literary sources describing the experience of war, this qualitative ethnography focuses on the experiences of high-functioning male veterans of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. How do they tell the story of what it means to go to war? Their personal narratives are a combination of subjective experience and the cultural conventions that help provide frameworks for interpretation. Therefore, this study also explores how cultural meta-narratives facilitate and/or negatively impact the ability of those working to make meaning of their war experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of [the] individual. (1)

Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

When we think about wars and those who fight in them, it is common to assume that the experience is in some way traumatic. Consider, for example, two long-form narrative nonfiction articles published in the *New York Times Magazine*: 'The Fighter'[1] (Dec 2016) and 'The Wounds of the Drone Warrior' (June 2018). The former, written by C.J. Chivers, who was an infantry officer in the Marine Corps before his career as a journalist, tells the story of Marine Corps veteran Sam Siatta. As the subtitle of the article explains: "the Marine Corps taught Sam Siatta how to shoot. The war in Afghanistan taught him how to kill. Nobody taught him how to come home." The focus of the more recent piece, 'The Wounds of the Drone Warrior,' is on how we should collectively understand and define the trauma experienced by drone pilots– "could their injuries be moral ones?" Taken together, the articles underscore that we intuitively assume the violence of war is a traumatizing experience. However, not all soldiers understand their deployments, and their return home, in these terms. They do not subjectively assess their war experiences as traumatizing and when they return to their families and friends from overseas they seem to reintegrate successfully.

This dissertation examines the experiences of high-functioning[2] veterans of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These veterans have experienced not only the proximate violence of battle during deployments but experience the symbolic violence of return and have figured out a

[1] 'The Fighter' received the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing.

[2] I use high-functioning here, and throughout the dissertation, in an intuitive psychological sense: individuals who maintain jobs, a number of healthy relationships, and do not have untenable psychic discomfort when discussing their military service. Furthermore, the focus here is on individuals who do not describe their war experience as traumatic and how their narrative work aids in personal meaning and/or identity.

way to reconcile and live with such experiences. I explore how these soldiers make sense of and narrate their experiences. How do the stories they tell mediate what does or does not feel "traumatic" both to themselves and others? How do they make sense of the violence of war and their own participation in it? In what follows I broadly explore both the content and form of veterans' stories. How do they tell their stories and what do they say? What can we learn from these veterans' war stories about how narration influences one's felt sense of well-being after participating in such violent encounters?

When I study veteran's narratives, I understand the stories they tell to be both individual and collective. When they speak from the personal 'I' they are in fact also speaking through existing stories found in the cultural landscape; therefore, how an individual tells their life story, what they consider to be traumatic (and what is not), and how they understand violence (e.g., as a necessary means to an end, as inhumane, etc.) is a combination of subjective experience and the cultural conventions that help provide frameworks for interpretation. Furthermore, as sociologist Jeffery Alexander writes in the introduction to his essay collection *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*: "[trauma is] widely experienced and intuitively understood…[and yet]… trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (2). These societal constructions, how we understand trauma and the traumatic, for example, prefigure the narrative possibilities available to anyone working to understand what they have seen/done/experienced in battle. I therefore also explore how these meta-narratives might facilitate and/or perhaps negatively impact the ability of those working to make meaning of war.

Finally, this dissertation explores in what ways certain experiences are ineffable or beyond description? When it comes to an experience like war are there times when the cultural narratives are so pronounced the individual experience is silenced? Even if someone can tell the

story, might the finished product feel wrong, as if it is impossible to capture the exact tone and texture of how life felt? Might the words or images simply not exist and the content be forever stuck in the amber of silence?

This is the point of departure and the overarching question proposed by my dissertation: how do recollections, reconstructions, the way we tell our story – in the face of what may feel hopeless and overwhelming – function to make meaning? After all, even a cursory review of war stories highlights certain universal features experienced by everyone, not just the soldier. For example, the inescapable specter of mortality, love as a possible avenue to 'combat' death, and the senselessness (the bad luck and the good luck) that defines our lives. Mercifully, unlike soldiers, most of us will never experience war and will therefore likely avoid confronting many of these unavoidable dilemmas, at least for a while. Claiming war stories are a portal or prism through which we might understand our own lives has a limit point (and certain ethical entanglements). So, while it is true that war narratives are unique it is also true that inside the volcanic tumult of these stories can be found elucidating material of how we all navigate the instability of life. As Michael Herr wrote in *Dispatches,* "war stories aren't really anything more than stories about people anyway" (245). It is a complicated research proposition and one that needs theoretical specification.

Memory and trauma / Narrative, storytelling and trauma

The memory of a traumatic event and the narrative of the same experience are not one and the same. According to Sigmund Freud, one of the first to thoroughly analyze the topic and a reference point in the pages that follow, individuals repress traumatic memory. In a clinical setting the patient will describe having no memory of a traumatic event and yet the content of his unseen wound will take shape as an unconscious act, an act that will continue repeating itself. In

Freud's *The Uncanny* he narrows the scope from something that is generally unfamiliar to that which is kept private from oneself but nevertheless originates from the self. Thus, the memory is unknowable and yet vaguely familiar (in German the uncanny is loosely defined as the opposite of what is known). And when one finds he is overwhelmed by these uncanny experiences, cognition, our intellectual capacities, are replaced by somatic anxiety and fear. It is the eclipsing opacity of this doubling effect that defines the uncanny for Freud. By extension it broadly describes the work of traumatic memory in Freudian theory.

Cathy Caruth, professor of English and Comparative Literature, whose scholarship in large part originates from Freudian thought, grafts her thinking on to the idea of the uncanny but punctuates it with more emphasis and explicit reference to trauma. In her terminology, the uncanny is a "wound that calls out." In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth writes that traumatic memory is experienced as an iterative loop. Ultimately, for those who have endured or witnessed such "catastrophic events," even after such moments have receded to ostensibly become the past, the memories, nevertheless, "seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them" (1).

Caruth accepts, however, that when one's own traumatic memory calls for testimony and is then reflected and understood anew through the listening work of another, something different is produced. It is a conclusion echoed by Freud who discusses the role of the analyst and the need for a clinical relationship if a traumatic memory is to be freed from its repressed state. Clearly, another particular act involved in trauma, and one in need of account, is the out-loud remembrance and the role of listening to another's wound. Essentially, Caruth and Freud are delineating the difference between traumatic memory and the story of trauma.

In the third chapter I analyze the granularity of this distinction in more depth. For now, it is enough to note that there is a slight but important difference even between the individual who is stuck in a contaminated repetition of narrating past events – what might be labeled as unhealthy narrative persistence, or rumination – and the uncanny persistence of traumatic memory (wherein, the individual experiences a bodily undoing). The difference here is one of agency: traumatic memories control; stories of traumatic events are authored. To put all three – narrative, trauma, and memory – in context: in my work narrative is the technology (to use an idea from Michel Foucault) with which to transmit past memories, while trauma is the particularity of setting. Again, many high-function veterans reject outright that war equals trauma. In this dissertation, that type of narrative construction – the pushing against these cultural assumptions – is my focus.

Finally, regarding the conflation of narrative and storytelling.

As is already evidenced by this introduction, I deploy the words 'narrative' and 'storytelling' interchangeably. Scholars of narratology would likely take umbrage with this fluid use of language. Oral storytelling, journaling, fictional retellings, reporting, and textual analysis all loosely nest beneath the umbrella of narrative. While there are necessary and important distinctions made by scholars of narrative between these forms and their function, in the realm of practical politics there is a division between the scholar and the colloquial language of the everyday that ultimately does a disservice to both. By collapsing the distinction between narrative and storytelling I am privileging the practical politics of everyday life.

Another necessary distinction to articulate upfront is how these wars differ from the wars that came before.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the specificity of our recent history

Journalist George Packer, writing for the *New Yorker* in 2014, described the inevitability of certain clichés when writers communicate the experience of war. One such contrivance: every war is the same yet every warrior's experience different. For Packer, these sound bites are "more or less true but open for qualification." It begs the question: in what ways are the Iraq and Afghanistan story emblematic of war stories in general? How do they repeat and amplify the tropes found in narratives focused on previous wars? Conversely, and perhaps more importantly, what makes these wars different from others? Initially, one notices a historical difference in base life (Taco Bell, Starbucks, the various creature comforts of forward operating bases); the difference in fighting a war that, unlike Vietnam, is at best a vague presence in the at-home-consciousness (and yet our engagement in Afghanistan marks the longest war in our history); technology (we have new life saving medical interventions, bodies are repaired but forever physically altered); and, finally, the war soldiers find when they return home (the particulars of acclimating after these wars). This list represents a start. Scholars like historian Andrew Bacevich (who specializes in security studies, American foreign policy, and international relations) would include the particular ways Vietnam, as a still-present cultural hangover, impacted both the consciousness of the citizen population and the mindset of military command.[3] If the entry point for my research is the narrative meaning-making between individual soldiers and society, the lasting history of Vietnam (and the narratives from veterans of that war) must be part of the story.

[3] This is not abstract for Bacevich who fought in Vietnam and lost a son in Iraq. See his book *The New American Militarism* and any number of in-person interviews.

Chapter outline

The chapters in this dissertation are as follows. The first chapter, 'Methods,' presents the case for the multi-method ethnographic research methodology used in this study as well as the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach to theory. In chapters two and three – 'Toward a Working Theory of Narrative;' 'Toward a Working Theory of Trauma' – I present a theoretical framework of narrative and trauma that guides the final two chapters. In chapters four ('War Stories') and five ('The Return') the salient theory becomes the lens through which I view the voices and narratives of soldiers who have deployed and returned to tell the story. The research questions asked in this introduction and clarified in the first chapter provide the coherence and the thread connecting the following pages. What follows in the next five chapters is a creation – a new narrative, which always includes subjective categorization and analysis. There is more that could be said. My hope is that the voices presented here create a harmonious anthem. That is not to suggest, however, that there exists one unifying principle within a subject matter this immense. For now, I will let this juxtaposition of elements speak for itself before I over-narrate and speak on its behalf.

CHAPTER 1

Methods

Narrative scholars of various stripes seem to concur with the proposition that lived experience can be understood through the stories people tell about it. Stories are ways not merely for telling others about ourselves but for constructing our identities, of finding purpose and meaning in our lives. (5)

Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry

The dialogue between participant and observer extends itself naturally to a dialogue among social scientists– a dialogue that is emergent rather than conclusive, critical rather than cosmetic, involving reconstruction rather than deconstruction. (7)

Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis

The focus of this research was how veterans, in service of making meaning of their experience of deployment, write, loosely narrate, redefine, negotiate, and also adopt or reject narratives about war found in the wider cultural contexts. Specifically, I was interested in interviewing veterans of the wars in Iraq and/or Afghanistan who currently self-identified as "doing well." How did they narrate their war stories? By collecting their stories, I hoped to uncover and amplify larger questions about the tensions that exist for any individual who confronts a deeply challenging life experience through storytelling. In service of these research purposes, this dissertation utilized a mixed method ethnographic research methodology consisting of three elements: life narrative interviews, a year of participant observation, and literary sources describing the experience of war (primarily Iraq and Afghanistan, but Vietnam as well).

Initially, I hoped to design the ethnography to split my time equally between life narrative interviews and participant observation, so that the two would unfold concurrently. The goal was to embed in a veteran community and through conscientious engagement and continuity over time develop productive research relationships organically. I contacted several nonprofit groups, government supported organizations, and informal networks created to support

veterans. One national nonprofit offered a quid pro quo: I could conduct my research if I provided program evaluation. Another group told me journalists, academics, and government officials voyeuristically parachute in, thank veterans for their service, and leave; the answer was an unequivocal no. The explanation from another nonprofit was illuminating. The executive director explained that they receive a number of requests from 'outsiders' – individuals who did not serve and don't have a direct connection to the military – to research and/or observe the organizational mission in action. He discovered these interested parties often have an agenda that ultimately predetermines what they see, learn, and conclude. Therefore, he always politely declines such requests.

Overwhelmingly, the description of my research intentions provoked suspicion and reticence. I learned that veterans are an insular community, access to this in-group required trust, building that trust would have to start in one-to-one relationships. Step one would have to be the life narrative interviews. Ultimately they became the focal point of the research.

Interviews

This study included twenty-nine life narrative interviews. These interviews were the focal point of my multi-method ethnography.[4] Additionally, I conducted fifteen informal interviews with subject experts knowledgeable in the field: social scientists, military scholars, and servicemen willing to give direction – that helped define the scope of my ethnography and initial approach to my inductive analysis.

[4] I reached saturation at the twenty-fifth interview but had already confirmed additional interviews that would bring the total to over thirty. Then, two men canceled their interviews. The final tally became twenty-nine.

Table 1 – List of Interviews

Name (pseudonym)	Military Branch	Job	Deployments	Age (at time of interview)	Ethnicity (self-defined)	Date of Interview
Aaron	Army	District Manager, national retail chain	1	36	White	4/4/2014
Ben	Navy	Retired from SWAP / looking for work	2	49	White	3/31/2015
Braulio	Marine	Finishing degree and security guard	2	26	Hispanic/Latino	4/9/2015
Cesar	Army	Active duty Army	2	31	Hispanic/Latino	7/13/2015
Christopher	Navy	Paper factory	3	31	White	2/27/2015
David	Army	Full time position at university	2	37	White	4/16/2015
Elijah	Army	Industrial Engineer	3	43	African American	8/12/2013
Elliot	Army	Full time MBA student and still active duty	2	31	White	2/16/2015
Frank	Marine	Full time PhD Student	3	28	White	3/14/2014
James	Army	Between jobs	2	46	White	5/23/2014
Jason	Army	IT and web design for a yoga studio, applying grad school	2	30	White	11/13/2014
Koffe	Navy	Full time PhD Student	1	34	African American	1/31/2014
Kurt	Army	MBA student	3	32	Asian American	9/13/2013
Lee	Marine	Marine Corps, reserve	1	41	White	8/16/2013
Mason	Navy	Full time undergraduate student	2	33	White	2/28/2015
Matthew	Marine	PhD and research assistant for a defense contractor	3	42	White	9/14/2013
Nash	Army	Department of Veterans Affairs	5	36	White	4/14/2014
Nate	Marine	full time undergraduate student	1	27	White	8/6/2013

Ned	Army	Looking for work after graduate school	1	30	White	7/3/2014
Noah	Army	U.S. government	2	36	White	6/10/2014
Noel	Army	Two real estate investment companies	2	39	White	4/23/2014
Randy	Marine	Activate duty Marine	2	23	White	8/6/2013
Sam	Air Force	Full time / International Guard	4	33	White	2/27/2015
Sean	Army	State Department / security	4	33	White	4/11/2014
Steve	Army	Not currently working	4	55	White	11/21/2014
Tim	Army	Retail, unloading trucks	2	28	White	11/21/2014
Troy	Marine	Retail, Jewelry Specialist	1	26	African American	8/22/2013
Tyrone	Navy	Field Operations Manager, cable company	1	30	African American	7/7/2015
Walker	Air Force	Active duty Air Force	1	53	White	4/9/2015

In developing the parameters for my sample of veterans, I sought out variation in race/ethnicity, branch of service, officers vs. enlisted men, number of deployments, and age. However, I elected to limit this study to male soldiers.[5] I made this decision partly for demographic reasons. I needed to limit the number of axes of variation in my sample and while the makeup of the military has changed in recent years, it is still highly gendered and overwhelmingly male.

But I also made it for theoretical reasons.

Because my research focuses on the space between the rootedness of individual experience and what is constructed/prefigured socially, it made practical sense to focus on male soldiers. If the title of cultural historian Leo Braudy's lengthy and well-researched book on masculinity and war – *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* – does not state clearly enough the point that masculinity and war have always been

[5] Therefore, I largely you the pronoun he/his/him in this dissertation.

entwined – the book begins with a quote from the Iliad: "As for war, that is for men." As the war journalist Sebastian Junger explains in *Tribe: on Homecoming and Belonging*, young men are often drawn to the idea of military not necessarily because they are sharply attracted by the idea of violence, but, instead, to find a sense of maleness, a sense of self.[6] Clinical psychologist Ira Brenner iterates on this conclusion, in his book *Injured Men*. "*Injured Men* is a unique casebook of clinical material pertaining to men who have sustained trauma [and how these] presentations may be obscured by the masculine overlay" (xiv). Brenner enumerates various case studies intended to support this thesis, emphasizing the study *must* include the undeniable masculine pulse of combat. "Of course, [this book includes experiences of] combat and war" (xiv). This idea – of course a case study of 'injured men' includes a focus on combat and war – is so thoroughly embedded in collective consciousness it has become an a priori truth.[7]

While the military has many well-established narratives that provide specific modes of understanding, some are more pervasive and entrenched. Consider the idea of masculinity and how closely tethered it is to the image of the hardened warrior- the teenage boy transformed and transported by the military and his war experience into a mature man. It is worth remembering that men took their own lives in WWII when deemed unqualified for military service. There are elements of the masculine ideal that transcend time and culture and are found across history in writing about men and war. As such I anticipated that how soldiers reach for or adopt meta-narratives of masculinity, honor, or the concept of a soldier's creed in ways that may feel agentive would be key themes in the work. However, in my interviews, while I heard stories that affirmed there is a relationship between how one experiences combat, trauma, and understands

[6] See the chapter 'War Makes you an Animal.'

[7] See also the introduction of Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* where she references Virginia Woolf's insistence in the 1930s that war "is a man's game" (6).

masculinity, it is a misconception to imagine this trope in simplistic terms. The role of masculine identity is always contextualized anew in a particular socio-cultural/historical moment; therefore, I also clarified how this category functions specifically with these wars and these men.[8]

For the life narrative interviews I focused on both male veterans still in the military and those who have since left; in both cases, individuals considered for inclusion were high-functioning and did not self-report being acutely traumatized by their wartime experience.[9] Exclusion from the interviews was self-selecting: if someone fit the criteria but did not want to engage with the topic, he opted out. In this way, there existed a built-in safeguard during recruitment.[10]

In the early stages of developing the specific procedures of my interviews, it became clear that an organization's public mission often clouds and complicates the process of narrative disclosure. For example, several veterans warned me that soldiers have conflicting views regarding the medical and psychosocial support systems associated with the Veterans Administration. If I was going to recruit through the VA, the relationship could be problematic before the interview even began. Having learned, again, that there is a culture of distrust between veteran and civilians, it made sense to begin by recruiting several respondents through existing social networks, and then using these multiple starting nodes to continue with a

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[8] During my fieldwork a Vietnam veteran told me that he would rather the outright vitriol he experienced than "benign neglect" the young men returning from Iraq and Afghanistan faced.

[9] As discussed in the introduction, I use high-functioning in an intuitive psychological sense.

[10] It is also worth noting that this relates to the discussion in the introduction to the 'uncanny' and traumatic memory. While I did hear disclosures of what could rightful be defines as the uncanny return of traumatic memories, if someone was still unable to share his story, if he was stuck in memory-work, he would not fir the criteria for inclusion.

snowball sampling (i.e., asking participants to refer me to others they knew who fit the eligibility criteria).

Initially, participants were primarily from the greater Atlanta metro area; however, phone interviews were included as well. When contacting participants that fit the criteria for inclusion, I explained that the general topics covered in these interviews included: the reasons for joining an all-volunteer military, what deployment was like, and broadly, life since returning home. If the interview took place in person, the interviewee decided location. Often this meant meeting in a public space: coffee shops, quiet bookstores, or other areas selected for their suitability. If preferred, I met them at their homes. The interviews lasted between 1-2 hours.

Institutional Review Board approval for the research was already secured before recruitment began.[11] All interviewees were reminded that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw from the process at any time, elect to ignore any question I asked, and, finally, that there was no incentive to participate other than helping to advance knowledge of the field. After the interviews, I protected the confidentiality of all participants through assigning them pseudonyms on all electronic and paper files and altering other potentially identifying markers or biographic details.

The design of the life-narrative interviews was inherently inductive. I was not testing a predetermined hypothesis but exploring a set of questions about how those who experienced what seems from the outside like a traumatic event – going to war – make meaning of that life event. As the data collection unfolded, I regularly engaged in preliminary analysis to identify emergent themes. I used these early emergent themes to guide subsequent recruitment, seeking

[11] In the summer of 2013, upon completion of course work, I applied to Emory's Institutional Review Board for approval to begin the life narrative interviews. The IRB designated the project eligible for expedited review (it was determined my work posed minimal risk to human subjects). On July 29th, 2013 the project was approved.

additional informants whose experiences might be different to secure maximum variation. In this way, the interviews informed the recruitment orientation as I proceeded. For example, in a number of my early interviews it was explained that if a soldier deployed to Iraq in 2010 his reality would be markedly different than Afghanistan in 2002- time and location impacted experience more than rank and branch of the military.

At the outset, I drew on the social science literature outlining the techniques needed for a successful qualitative life narrative interview to shape interviewing strategies. For example, I worked to steer the conversation to get the information needed, as demonstrated in professor Robert Atkinson's book *The Life Story Interview*. "Being a good guide that can anticipate exactly what needs to happen next is a real key to a good interview" (Atkinson 40). I drafted an interview protocol that would prompt respondents to develop narrative detail and provide concrete information (see *Letter From Strangers* by sociologist Robert Weiss). "Most important in an interview is obtaining concrete information in the area of inquiry" (Weiss 74). However, as the interviews continued, I abandoned the idea that the interviews needed to follow a highly predetermined, theorized structure. My discovery: empathic listening was more productive.

As opposed to the ethnographer who adheres to an interview style meant for disclosure instead of dialogue, I found my primary task when engaged with an interviewee – regardless of how tangential the conversation became – was to listen, reflect, echo, share my thoughts, and/or relate the events described back to my life.[12] The model that emerged was closer to psychologist Carl Rogers' conceptualization of unconditional positive regard whereby the listener reflects positively what he heard without editorializing or pushing the person in a specific direction

[12] Contrast this listening style with that of the clinician who synthesizes, suggests, summarizes, and ultimately intervenes. In the coming chapters I will note that while I utilize insights from the clinical/psychoanalytic literature, it was not an orienting principle of my research.

(Rogers 15-27). There are strengths and limitations to simply parroting an interviewee's responses ("yup… ok… I hear you…"). Similarly, offering some of myself ("what you are saying makes me think about when I was 20…"), and/or reflecting back in new language what I imagine is actually being conveyed ("it sounds like you felt a kind of malaise, like you were sleepwalking"), can also be productive but may also be limiting.

The result of my intentional yet organic framework was twofold. First, because I hoped to make immediate and demonstrative my commitment to deep and close listening – so as to invite additional narrative exploration for the interviewee – my questions were, at times, reflective as opposed to directed. Second, the net result of this approach was not strictly speaking what one would consider an interview, but rather something akin to a conversation. The narratives were constructed for a particular listener in a particular moment. Ultimately, all stories have a context– the question for the respondent is how he is going to present himself in *this* context to *this* person.[13] It will never be the same the next time around. As in life, that is the nature of qualitative ethnography. It is not as if as the primary investigator I can legitimately claim that if I asked questions in a different manner I would have received the *real* or *truer* life narrative.

Participant observation

In order to help parse the relationship between individual meaning-making and the current American zeitgeist, I conducted a yearlong conduct participant observation of a structured program for eliciting veteran's stories. I elected to do this work at Syracuse University because their commitment to veterans' services is long, storied (the past president of the university helped write the GI bill), and includes a current pledge to be the leading university

[13] This will be covered in more depth in the first chapter, 'Towards a Working Theory of Narrative.'

campus for veteran support.[14] Access to the Syracuse community ultimately came through a preexisting relationship. For finalizing the research site, it also helped that I was able to describe the emergent themes from the life narrative interviews.

While I was at Syracuse my fieldwork focused on the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, a writing group centered on the veteran experience with an established history and robust membership that meets once a month.[15] There, I studied how veterans tell stories about war both formally and informally (e.g., formal writing and informal narration in conversation). I analyzed both what was said and how it was conveyed. These were veterans writing their life story – drafting, editing, and rewriting a final story of war experience. This was a kind of overt storytelling work I was interested in because I could assess whether such efforts, meta-processes, of literally putting pen to paper within a community of individuals who share similar experiences create a different mode of personal understanding.

Of the many materials used in this research these written stories were the most constructed; the formal interviews, though more free-formed and perhaps less focused were still structured; therefore, the last narrative valance in need of exploring were the stories told about these wars in community spaces. To that end, I also did observational fieldwork of how the Syracuse community at large formally and informally authors the story of these wars including events like Memorial and Veterans Day Services, in public art events focused on the 'veteran experience,' at academic conferences on moral injury, at public readings, and at community gatherings like the Syracuse Student Veterans Ball. What kinds of stories were most often told

[14] In the fall of 2014, I submitted an amendment to the initial socio-behavioral IRB application. I received permission from both Syracuse University and Emory University for my yearlong participant observation protocol.

[15] The group describes itself as "open to all veterans and their supporters [interested in] writing nonfiction accounts or 'true stories' of life in and out of the military."

about what it means to go to war? The secondary observational work sharpened my analytic lens regarding the substance of the life narrative interviews.

Table 2 - List of Formal Settings for Participant Observation[16]

Date	Event	Location	Description
11.11.14	Veterans Day Service	Hendricks Chapel | Syracuse University	"Veterans Day ceremony to pay tribute to the men and women who serve."
11.11.14	Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group and Moral Injury Project | Veterans Day reading	ArtRage Gallery | Syracuse, New York	"In honor of Veterans Day, The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group presents a public reading of nonfiction and poetry on the topic of Moral Injury."
11.20.14	Poet Brian Turner public reading	Downtown Writer's Center of the YMCA's Arts Branch | Syracuse, New York	"Hosted by Syracuse Symposium, U.S. Army veteran Brian Turner reads from his poetry collections and his memoir *My Life As a Foreign Country*."
11.22.14	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	"Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group is open to all veterans and their supporters. The focus of the group is constructing written accounts – primarily nonfiction but also poetry and fictionalized stories – of life in and out of the military."
12.13.14	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
1.17.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
2.28.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
3.25.15	Novelist Emily Gray Tedrowe, public reading	Hall of Languages | Syracuse University	"The Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University hosts a reading of *Blue Stars*, a novel by Emily Gray Tedrowe about military family life."
3.28.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
3.28.15	Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group celebrates their five year anniversary	Sheraton Syracuse University Hotel an Conference Center | Syracuse, New York	An informal lunch for members of Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group in honor of five years of collaborative writing.
4.17.15	Moral Injury pre-conference Art Exhibit	914 Works | Syracuse, New York	"Art exhibit of original work focused on the individual experience of Moral Injury."
4.18.15	Moral Injury Conference: What Did You Fight For? What did you Bring Home?	Hall of Languages | Syracuse University	"The two-day conference will bring local, regional, and national scholars, clinical practitioners, writers, and artists to address the psychological, spiritual, and artistic dimensions of Moral Injury among veterans."

[16] Quoted descriptions represent the language used on websites and/or materials intended for publicity.

4.25.15	Syracuse University Student Veterans Ball	Sheraton Syracuse University Hotel an Conference Center | Syracuse, New York	"A student veteran-networking event for student veterans from the Central New York area (hosted by the Syracuse University Student Veterans Organization)."
5.16.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
5.25.15	Memorial day tour of the September 11th Memorial & Museum	National September 11 Memorial & Museum | New York, NY	"An educational and historical institution honoring the victims and examining 9/11 and its continued global significance."
11.7.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14
11.11.15	Reading	Hall of Languages | Syracuse University	"In honor of Veterans Day, The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group presents a public reading of nonfiction and poetry on the topic of Moral Injury."
12.5.15	Monthly meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group	Writing Center | Syracuse University	See above- 11.22.14

I also conducted thirteen background interviews with individuals associated with the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group and/or with veteran life at Syracuse. These informal conversations helped further elucidate the told and untold stories that defined the community. All interviews and field notes were transcribed. The data was then analyzed for thematic coherence with software that allowed me to code, group, and filter the life narrative interviews and field notes. The focus on the discovery of meaning systems, rather than a preexisting conception of theory, led me to elect an iterative theoretical approach to the study of these questions.

Analytic induction and constant comparison is commonly used with qualitative research to help structure and guide the analytical process. Ultimately, this approach enabled me to pay attention to themes that emerge from the data, then articulate categories and concepts that handle the interplay between cultural elements and how they interact/intersect with individual experience without deductively applying predetermined themes. To achieve this end I first

coded concepts from the raw data, defined analytical categories, and, finally, used this as the basis for my conclusions.[17] Additionally, using this methodology and placing the coded interviews and coded field notes alongside one another punctuated (1) the perceived relationship between the individual and his community and the impact of this relationship on the formation of stories; (2) the important differences between an individual's narrative understanding of his time in the military and the impact on how he made meaning of going to war; and (3) the limits of language, the role of silence and non-verbal elements like laughter, and the sometimes ineffable quality of our life story. In the end, by complementing the analysis with observational data, I additionally clarified the research questions, especially the relational element, the co-authorship between individuals and the public, inherent with traumatic stories.

Including publicly available war stories

The stories we tell are never entirely 'new' and thus it is important to understand them as a part of an existing genre. What are the stories already present – poems, memoirs, works of fiction, films, documentaries, adapted works from one form to another – and in what ways are these Iraq and Afghanistan narratives emblematic of war stories in general?

The preeminent war story in the western cannon, and a place to begin as it still has resonance today, is The *Iliad*. In many ways Homer's epic remains a diffuse symbolic placeholder for the idealized warrior and a rich description of battlefield realties both painful and life affirming. This is a fact recognized by such books as *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*- a scholarly nonfiction account of psychologist Jonathan Shay's work with Vietnam veterans in which he raises the subtle yet important distinction between post-traumatic stress and what Shay labels "moral injury." The distinction between a physiological

[17] See Michael Patton's introduction to *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.

battle wound and a moral one is framed by Shay through analyzing the journey of Achilles in *The Iliad*.[18] Shay's theoretical lens underscores the notion that every war story has some basic DNA and should be situated alongside the foundational texts. Thus, for contextual purposes it is necessary to articulate how Iraq and Afghanistan war narratives repeat and amplify themes found in stories focused on previous wars; however, in my own work it is perhaps more important to delineate what makes these wars different. Again, this required I read extensively the stories already available and highlight the connective tissue that crosses genre and representation.

Consider, for example, four fiction titles released in the last five years: *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk,* by Ben Fountain, the story of Bravo Company and their participation in the halftime festivities in Dallas Cowboy stadium; *Hold it 'til it Hurts,* by T. Geronimo Johnson, a novel about two adopted brothers returning home from war that reads as an existential polemic on identity and trauma; *Fobbit*, a sweeping narrative centered on the often-satiric lives of those marooned on a Forward Operating Base Triumph, by David Abrams; and, *Yellow Birds*, by Kevin Powers, the story of two friends and the closeness formed during their deployment to Al Tafar, Iraq. One thread that runs through all these stories is the sense of disconnection and isolation between the lives of U.S. soldiers and civilians back home. This prevailing trope of the soldier's return, or inability to return, is found again in Sebastian Junger's *War*; in journalist Dexter Filkins 2012 account for *The New Yorker*, 'Atonement,' in which the focus is on one particular solider grappling with demons after returning home from Iraq; and in 'Home,' by George Saunders, a fictional but similar account of a soldier's uncomfortable reintroduction into 'normal' life.[19] These titles do generally map the topographical narrative territory of the Iraq and

[18] I will return to Shay's work and moral injury in the third chapter.

[19] I expand on this discussion in the final chapter.

Afghanistan wars. And while the idea of a soldier's felt sense of dislocation when returning home is certainly not unique to these wars, as an ethnographer of life narratives it is an element I listened for carefully during my interviews.

Including the personal 'I'

I have always been deeply interested in storytelling and trauma. For certain individuals, when it comes to what others would assume is a traumatic encounter, making sense of the event, telling the story, seems easy, as if coherent language merely bubbles up to the surface of the mind's eye. For others the words never arrive. No narrative can make whole what will forever be experienced as a rupture. My interest in puzzling through how one grapples with trauma, and subsequently how stories narrated about such events function to create meaning, or perhaps fail to do so, was nurtured through my college years as a theology major and later in a Master's Program at the Harvard Divinity School studying mortality, grief, and narrative theory. Alongside the academic exploration it remained a thread I followed professionally volunteering with organizations like Mother Teresa's Home for the Destitute and Dying and working for The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (a summer camp for chronically and seriously ill children). In and out of the classroom I found myself returning to the question of personal stories and trauma.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz quipped that ethnographies are often "a strange cross between author-saturated and author-evacuated texts" (Behar 7). One might continue Geertz's thought by noting the historical tendency was often for the author-evacuated text, eschewing the personal I for that elusive yet revered scholarly objectivity. However, in response to the continued development of disciplines such as feminist theory, as well as other academic fields focused on a shared awareness of hierarchical privilege, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. Every ethnographer must now account for his/her own perspective. This too is part of

fieldwork. As anthropologist Ruth Behar recounts in her book *The Vulnerable Observer*, 'the observer par excellence' does not "stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand" but instead opens her "own heart" to the material she studies (2). In short: the ethnographer must become part of the story. The personal "I" becomes a portal. The "I" is a window and a mirror, both reflecting and refracting the nuanced identities of those ostensibly being studied.[20]

Loic Wacquant's sociological ethnography of a Chicago boxing gym (*Body and Soul*) provides an instructive example. Wacquant utilizes his own somatic experience as a participant in the gym he studies as an examination, on every level, of the interplay between the private and public realm. Boxing is personal. No one else can throw a punch on your behalf. No one else can receive the pain when a punch lands. Wacquant deploys this author-centric lens to highlight this back-and-forth quality between the personal (the individual body) and the community (the gym as an institution). In this way, *Body and Soul* animates how every community is a composite of its parts, and, inversely, how specific lives are understood by how they situate collectively.

In the context of my own observational fieldwork within a bounded community – like the writing group – utilizing my own presence was similarly helpful. Moreover, monitoring my own reactions to the stories I heard in the life narrative interviews and crafting a story attuned to my own responses as a witness with an open heart (to use Behar's language) guided my critical thinking in territory that is, by turns, deeply personal and densely nerved.

Throughout my research, I followed a Behar-like methodology that included my own personal reactions and responses to the stories heard and recounted by the male soldiers with

[20] See also the edited collection, *Violence: Ethnographic Encounters* (particularly chapters one, three, and nine)

whom I worked. If there were a *wrong* way to have enacted this self-aware scholarship, it would have been to unintentionally slide from subjectively oriented criticality and into unmediated narcissism. I diligently worked to track and avoid this pitfall.

An interdisciplinary approach

My ethnographic research fundamentally requires an interdisciplinary approach. The central question of how people use stories to make meaning, understand, and integrate traumatic experiences, is, at the core, a question of how people make sense of themselves and their lives. This type of narrative adjudication – the working out and working through of important life events with stories – extends the point of inquiry beyond the isolated experiences of a single individual by himself to include the self as part of a larger cultural milieu. Ultimately, and as noted in the introduction, how the prefiguring cultural elements manifest in personal storytelling (both in texts/writing and in the oral/spoken construction of life narrative interviews) is one of the principle foci of my research. Because the premise is about individuals in social contexts, this dissertation has to include an interdisciplinary approach. As such, I draw from a wide range of academic traditions and a variety of research findings (in key places leaning on some fields more than others).

The claim for interdisciplinarity is not only about scholarship and literature.

While insights from sources like the psychological literature on narrative and trauma (unpacked and explored in chapters two and three) helped me understand what I was hearing and reading when I encountered the complex, multidimensional stories in the narrative interviews, conducting participant observation, and when conducting close readings of war stories, my research required additional sharpness with regard to narrative and the work of words. Even with an interdisciplinary approach to the salient scholarship, the interplay and relationship

between how the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are actively framed within America and how, in turn, this cultural element impacts the individual experience, necessitates understanding what cultural meta-narratives veterans utilize in their everyday lives. This is less a question of academic rigor and more a matter of finding what stories matter (and why) to the men included in this ethnography.

To address this, my research held scholarship and theorization alongside a wide sweep of stories from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (again, collected from personal interviews, participant observation, and from what already exists in books, articles, poems, movies, etc.). Deciding what to place alongside the academic theory required I select what is representative. And I take seriously the warning offered by Margot Norris in her book *Writing War in the Twentieth Century,* that all narrative scholarship must exclude certain materials. "Examples are culpable in advance of selectivity that does violence to what is left out, what is not honored by inclusion, what appears disrespected by inattention" (5). My hope is that I included theoretical, ethnographic, fictional, poetic, and cinematic narratives (even stories from national radio broadcasts) that were emblematic of what is excluded so as to not do "violence to what is left out."[21]

Concluding thoughts

Always, my aim was to listen to the individual experience of soldiers, how they describe their world from the inside. Regardless of the academic context, this was my first task and a primary ethical commitment: to empathically hear and remember there are lives, *real people*, behind these stories. The men I met through this research, the stories I heard, recorded, collected

[21] For example, while certain voices from my ethnography are quoted more than others every life narrative interview is referenced at least once in this dissertation. And while certain events are referenced more than other from the participant observation, the entirety of time in the field directly impacted my analysis.

through participant observation at Syracuse University, transcribed, coded, and analyzed are not merely untethered narratives floating inside this dissertation. There are people behind the words repeated herein. The subjective artifice of a reconstructed story for the purposes of academic understanding does not negate the embodied reality of those who lived through the experiences I analyze.

As quoted at the start of the chapter: stories are ways not merely for telling others about ourselves but for constructing our identities" (*Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry* 5). This was necessary for me to remember throughout my ethnographic data collection. Because there is always a life connected to a story. Therefore, my interdisciplinary, multi-method research methodology aimed to be "emergent rather than conclusive, critical rather than cosmetic, [and] involving reconstruction rather than deconstruction" (*Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* 7).

CHAPTER 2

Toward a Working Theory of Narrative

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (345-46)

Margaret Atwood*, Alias Grace*

I asked Tim the same question I ask every veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars interviewed for this dissertation: what do you think about our cultural understanding of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in America and have you had any experience with it?

> *Tim*: No. Not really. I don't actually have [PTSD] but let me phrase it this way…
>
> [Continues]
>
> I've got some issues that are probably induced by stress but it's not Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. And a lot of my problem coming back was…[well] I've been in this mindset of go, go, go, kill, kill, kill for fucking six years. And now I'm coming back from that, and transitioning over to: let's be nice and friendly and make money and pay our bills and be suburban happy family. You don't … you don't fucking go from one to the other very quickly. It's taken me about three years, two and a half to three emotional breakdowns, probably more that I'm not remembering off the top of my head, at least three girlfriends. I almost wrecked my truck
>
> [Pause]
>
> *Tim*: But I'm doing okay now.[22]

Tim was twenty-eight at the time of our interview. His knee bounced. His lip was packed with tobacco. In one hand he had a plastic bottle for spit. The other hand was often occupied by readjusting his hat. When he left the Army Tim was an enlisted specialist, a Team Leader- a fact he emphasized in his story to me. This fact mattered. In the same way PTSD – the very word, with all the loaded assumptions that come with this placeholder – had meaning.

[22] Reminder: transcriptions are written to capture the tone and tenor of the words as they were originally spoken. Additionally, I reproduce transcriptions informally with my first name and that of the interviewee.

The language of cursing was also important to Tim because it conveyed nonconformity, or allegiance to an uncivilized brand of discourse. And I returned his profanity with my own to let him know I was listening and adopting his rhetorical frame. Getting the narrative *right* mattered to Tim. The details. The places. The people. And that I heard him *right* was equally important. In this twofold manner – both how the story was told and how it was received – the narrative was sharply and immediately meaningful.

Another Tim, the celebrated and prolific writer of Vietnam War fiction, Tim O'Brien, echoes, albeit with more literary gloss, my understanding of the above testimony. In his now iconic book *The Things They Carried* O'Brien writes that the primary work of stories is to psychologically order the world.

> That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where your are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.[23] (O'Brien 36)

When returning from war, or when making sense of chaotic events, narrative works to shape fractured episodes into a coherent thread. Through stories we locate a more structured sense of self and, in turn, describe for those willing to listen what personal meaning has been made of one's life events.

But is this always the case? Albeit a fictional text, the epigraph at the start of this chapter from Margret Atwood's novel *Alias Grace* makes the process of narrative construct appear simple. Like a tuning fork, Atwood's passage on storytelling vibrates with a message similar to that of Tim O'Brien's in *The Things They Carried*: stories organize, cohere, and make meaning

[23] In these lines (and, for the matter, in the rest of the book as well as in his other novels) there is an implication in O'Brien's writing that the basic DNA of every war story includes trauma and the traumatic encounter. I will handle the complexity of trauma – and how it relates to narrative – in greater depth in the next chapter.

of the sometimes-chaotic events that constitute a life. Narrative works to remake the self. But, again, is this always the case?

Does narrating personal episodes produce a clearer sense of identity? Does it help in achieving a more meaningful relationship with the choices and outcomes one experiences in his life? If yes, how? How does the relational aspect like that of interviewer (myself) and interviewee (Tim) shift the story? How do cultural elements interplay and prefigure what is experienced as personal and individual? If constructing a life narrative is in fact collaborative (between two people) and contextual (exists inside a socialized landscape of norms and meta-narratives), how does language, the words themselves, mark one's sense of community and in-group? And, by extension, who is the out-group? Finally, how does time shift and change one's perspective and thus the content of one's narrative? What is the role of temporality?

These are the questions that drive the analysis in this chapter. Moreover, in order to understand the ethnographic retelling that follows in chapters four and five, it is necessary to first create a theoretical frame regarding narrative and the meaning-making work of stories. Towards this end, I begin this chapter with a review of the psychological scholarship of narrative.[24] Psychology is not the only field to examine personal stories. But from the foundational model of Freud through to the present, narrative investigation remains an orientating principle; therefore, it will be the primary academic reference point for how I frame narrative inquiry in this chapter. While the focus of this chapter is theoretical, I have utilized moments from my fieldwork and

[24] In the introduction and in my methods chapter, I elaborate why I lean on particular scholarship for this interdisciplinary ethnography.

additional written accounts – dispatches from those who have experienced war – to situate the scholarly insights alongside the lived experience of veterans.[25]

This chapter should be read as an overview that sharpens how I define certain terms, frames my analytic approach to the ethnographic data and, ultimately, invites, as opposed to forecloses, additional inquiry.

Psychology and life stories

What does it mean for someone like Tim to give voice to his war stories and what does one find in the salient psychological literature to answer this question? Within the psychological field, theories of narrative as a source of meaning-making began with the practical assumption that individuals have stories to tell, narratives to construct. If the context is clinical, and a patient articulates his narrative with maximum fluidity and minimum psychological dissidence, he will experience a sense of well-being and should be considered psychologically adjusted. At first glance this storied way of living may indeed be widely understood and accepted, nevertheless it is a subject requiring a high degree of reflexivity. One of the central texts often cited as articulating the early theoretical structure towards a storied nature of psychology is clinical psychologist Theodore Sarbin's *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*. For Sarbin, narrative is the root metaphor for the psychological endeavor; after all, distilled to its most basic, every human life, the entirety of that one story, is essentially the result of many episodes experienced over time, then constructed into a plot, so that one can make sense of personal history. Every individual creates narrative cohesion. Therefore, stories become the "organizing principle for human action" (Sarbin 3). Sarbin's primary intellectual focus is the

[25] For example, at the end of the chapter I highlight the work of novelist Kevin Powers and the memoirist, poet, and short story writer Brian Turner.

psychoanalytic and clinical setting but elsewhere one finds psychologists like Donald Polkinghorne and David Polonoff similarly echoing the idea that narrative meaning-making is a foundational process for personal identity.[26]

While many have since elaborated theories of narrative (shifting the focus or reorienting the analytic lens), regardless of where the locus is defined, the proposition that through personal narratives we enumerate, reflect, and refract a felt sense of what makes us unique, that these stories we tell about ourselves are intertwined with the process of identity formation, has largely become an accepted psychological fact.[27] Emblematic of this established ubiquity is the publication in 2007 of therapist and social worker Michael White's now widely read *Maps of Narrative Practice*. The introduction focuses almost entirely on what it means to 'map' within the therapeutic context. The second half of the title – *Narrative Practice* – receives very little specification or unpacking by the author. White's assumption is that the narrative construction of an independent self (and by extension, mapping our reality through stories) is a self-evident premise.

Even if in psychological discourse narrative theory is simply assumed, taken for granted (and it seems it often is), it does not follow that the method and approach to it is simplistic. Theories of narrative understanding remain complex. This became particularly evident to me as I tried to apply psychological theorization to the stories I collected and encountered in my

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[26] It is also worth noting that many writers in the psychological field cite thinkers from other disciplines as the ground from which their own thinking evolved. For example, cultural and cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner largely focuses on the French philosophical phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur and his theory of identity as 'emplotted' in his article 'The Narrative Construction of Reality.'

[27] Consider: cultural psychologist Dr. Robyn Fivush's writing on silence- "to a large extent, we are the stories we tell about ourselves" (88); or, lawyer and academic psychologist Dr. Shelley Sclater's article on narrative as connecting and connected to ideas of self: "our very 'selves' are 'storied' […] persons think, feel, act and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (317).

ethnographic research. Navigating this complexity begins, at least in part, with a more complete understanding of the following issues.

First, that narrative work – the narration of a person's life – is a relational activity: stories are told in the context of having a listener and audience; and/or they are told in consideration of collective stories that have been heard and internalized.[28] In my fieldwork, I often heard about a veteran's memory of Vietnam as it was mediated to him through films. Like the satirically dark boot camp scene in *Full Metal Jacket* when Gunnery Sergeant Hartman explains to the new recruits that if they survive basic training they will be "weapon[s], minister[s] of death praying for war." Or, I would hear about that first viewing of *Apocalypse Now* and how seductive the depiction was of the Vietnam War as a spiritual odyssey transforming those bold enough to travel into the heart of darkness. As Leo Braudy writes in the introduction of his book *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the changing Nature of Masculinity*:

> I therefore write simply as an ordinary modern man and citizen, steeped in a never-ending barrage of stories about men and war. It is the perceptions of war, how they trickle into the bloodstream of a culture and into the imaginations of individuals that is my subject. (XVII)

These personal relationships with other stories, and other people, sculpt and focus one's own narrative in particular ways. And because of these relationships, life stories will always be transient, not fixed, always open for new, even surprising, iterations, and should be viewed as process (not product).

Second, in constructing life narratives, language matters. Even the selection of particulars words, or the omission of others, produces a variety of meaning-markers that specifies personal experience in important ways. In my interview with thirty year-old Jason – a

[28] The gender theorist and social/political philosopher Judith Butler writes that the telling of one's life – the explanation of self – begins "when many things have already taken place to make [a person] and [his] story possible." As such, we are always "recuperating [and] reconstructing" (39).

Lieutenant during his first deployment to Afghanistan in 2008 – I summarized what I thought he had articulated regarding a general malaise and indifference he experienced before deploying. The word I used to capture this feeling was 'sleepwalking:'

> *Matt*: That malaise, that kind of like… sleepwalking feel, did that carry over into your first deployment to Afghanistan?
>
> *Jason*: I wouldn't use that word sleepwalking […] I was emotionally starved. I didn't know how to feed myself so I was looking for nourishment and sustenance.

Jason is a writer. When he sat for our interview, he was anxiously waiting to hear from graduate programs in the fine arts where he had applied for creative nonfiction. It is not surprising that he would correct my choice of words. However, the distinction made between 'sleepwalking' and 'emotionally starved' is not merely about the artistry of language. Jason needed me to understand that he was malnourished, hungry for purpose, and in need of connection and community. Language does work. For Jason, and I found this to be true throughout my fieldwork, language was used carefully, with intention. It was important that I hear *exactly* what was articulated.

Finally, the process of narrative formation is largely dependent on emotional temporality, which is often, but not necessarily, connected to the literal passage of time. An illustrative example is my interview with brothers Nate and Randy.

Nate and Randy were my first interview. We met at Nate's house in a suburb of a large southeastern city in the fall of 2013. Twenty-seven-year-old Nate served in the Marine Corps but was no longer on active duty when we met. Thanks to the GI bill, a gift from the military he mentioned with gratitude more than once, Nate was finishing an undergraduate business degree at a nearby university. Over the two hours spent in his kitchen Nate did most of the talking (later, I wrote in my ethnographer's notebook that I would need to work on corralling the interviews with more interjections and pointed questions). Randy – an active duty Marine who

at the time of the interview had served two tours in Afghanistan – is four year's younger. He was quiet, wary of the conversation. But he listened intently to our back-and-forth. Often he nodded agreement, a small acknowledgment that he heard his own experience reflected in his brother's outpouring of words. Occasionally he verbalized a thought. Beyond preparing an interview protocol, and taking a course in qualitative research methods, I was new to the data collection of life narrative interviews. However, I intuited that Randy would not respond if I directed my questions to him or pushed for additional verbalization. He was not ready yet.

> *Randy*: I guess I don't have as much time as Nate away from the Marine Corps so I am still… I'm still processing.
>
> *Matt*: [To Randy] So, your brother said earlier that [his] wife needed to push him [to talk] … do you think every person has his own time [when it comes to his own story]? What do you think?
>
> *Randy*: Umm, I would say… I think it takes time to get it out, to get it out of the system- just takes time.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Randy*: Yea that's what I think. Since it soaked in for Nate he is able to voice his opinion about it, whereas I can't.

He didn't know how to talk about going to war- what he found and the complexity of his return. In his words: it takes time for it to soak in and then get it out of the system. The writer Raymond Chandler explained that a story "cannot be devised; it has to be distilled."[29] Randy's response underscores that the idea of distillation may be particularly appropriate when considering ones narrative of going to war. For Randy, more time was needed before his story would be ready. And yet, even in this state of tumult, in which language is elusive and thoughts are still half-formed, because of his brother, Randy participated in the interview. After all, as

[29] See Chandler's own letter quoted in the introduction of *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: A Centennial Celebration* by biographer Frank MacShane.

Nate explained to me before the interview, it was his big-brother's-assurance that I could be trusted that convinced Randy to join the conversation. That included the promise that he didn't have to speak if he did not feel comfortable. Nate would do the talking. Randy's story was dually articulated by both his own silence and his brother's voice. In the moment, his narrative was constructed through and by a relational context.

Stories are relational constructions

Nate and Randy are a good example of how narrative is relationally constructed. Through the immediate connection and familial intimacy with each other, a story is co-authored and someone like Randy moves from silence to articulation. Similarly, in April 2015, at "The Syracuse University Moral Injury Project Conference," Dr. Roger Thompson (now an associate Professor of English at Stony Brook University) and Shannon Meehan (a retired Army Lieutenant who deployed as a tank commander to Iraq in 2007), describe the hopeful events that led to them co-authoring the book *Beyond Duty*.[30] Professor Thompson explained that Shannon had been his advisee and a student in his writing class when he taught at the Virginia Military Institute. They lost touch when Shannon deployed. But then Professor Thompson received an email from Shannon – literally in emotional distress – disclosing that while Shannon was on a mission in the city of Bokouba he called a mortar strike that killed an innocent family. The two began a correspondence. Slowly, Shannon gave his former teacher details and specifics. Over time, together, they published *Beyond Duty*. Thompson told conference attendees that "ultimately [the book is] about trying to examine what can and cannot be said. What can you say, what's not allowed to be said. And Shannon was essentially trying to speak through some of

[30] They spoke on a panel titled 'Veterans Narratives: Making Sense of Moral Injury.' I was a respondent on the same panel.

those boundaries." And while the book itself highlights that a dedicated partnership may puncture what initially feels like a narrative boundary or limit (what cannot be said), Thompson acknowledged that this is not always the outcome. In his words, many war stories are silenced by our culture and this can have "serious and profound consequences. [Moreover,] it's worth thinking about the constraints that control our storytelling." This begs the question: how, specifically, does the relational element of narrative – the good as well as the problematic – unfold in everyday life?

Consider the work of cultural and cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. Writing as both a contemporary of Sarbin and collaborator in the field, Bruner believed along with Sarbin that the stories we tell about our lives constitute the foci of personal identity. "The method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interoperation is, it seems to me, one of the crowning achievements of human development" (*Acts of Meaning* 67). However, Bruner is, at times, more critical of what he imagines to be the false supposition in psychology that the narrative process is attached to a 'biological substrate.' Instead, Bruner proposes an alternate thesis: the question for meaning is not the byproduct of somatic biology but the search is in itself the powerful drive beneath our human endeavors. "Culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action" (*Acts of Meaning* 20). If Sarbin broadly outlined how individuals approach and conceive of their lives as storied (*my experiences are puzzle pieces and I have to order them into a meaningful narrative*), Bruner extends the frame to consider persons as part of a larger community context (*the ordering process of narration is a collaborative engagement with that which surrounds me*).

It is important to note that the literature often focuses on the Sarbin-like individual experience. But even with Bruner, who considers the prefiguring element of one's community

and culture, what remains opaque, or is not always studied, is *how* the individual narrative is shaped by societal constructions (and if this dynamic is always positive). Emblematic of the sideways glance toward the cultural impact, is the scholar of personality and narrative psychology Dan McAdams. McAdams' lens is uniquely American (as evidenced by the subtitle of his book *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*) and his point of inquiry is the continued persistence of certain meta-narratives in American life and how these stories impact personal identity. One cultural trope described in his book is what he terms the 'redemptive arc.' "The Puritans and the ex-slaves shared their redemptive stories with others, hoping that their words would motivate others to act in a positive way" (McAdams 28). According to McAdams, when Americans experience an undoing – the coordinated terror attacks on September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, or a more localized personal tragedy – embedded in the fabric of our life view is the assumption that we can transform our pain into something positive. McAdams highlights a number of supporting examples. But even when he notes the role of an audience and listener within the redemptive sequence – "storytelling [always] involves a relationship between a particular teller and particular audience" – his analysis remains oriented on how particular individuals journey along this path of narrative redemption (McAdams 93). The frame of critique remains divorced from *how*, specifically, the bridges and tensions between the wider landscape of community, culture, and country interact, prefigure, and direct the meaning-making process of personal storytelling.

When I interviewed Ned in July of 2014, he addressed the relational dynamic of narrative in practical terms. In 2008, Ned deployed to Afghanistan for a year. He was in his mid twenties and a Platoon Leader for an Infantry unit in the Army. Now, five years later, no longer active duty, having just finished a graduate degree in International Studies, he was thoughtful and

measured in his responses. At the start of the interview he acknowledged that his personal story changes depending on his audience, yet he was unconcerned with the implications of how he picks and chooses his narrative-truth.

> *Matt*: How would you tell the story of joining the military?
>
> *Ned*: I don't want to make this too complicated but that's actually a much more complicated question than it might seem like on the surface.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Ned*: Okay. Well, the thing I would say is that what I've learned about the way I have to answer this question – because it's one that people commonly ask, especially ones who knew me in college who were shocked that I eventually elected to join the military – what I've discovered is that it really depends on who's asking this question… what answer I give them. And so part of that is once I realized that, I had to take a step back and think, 'okay, am I lying to people? Why did I really join the military?'
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Ned*: Let's say if somebody is talking to me who is sort of anti-military or I know that they were shocked and surprised that I would do such a thing. That's an audience that I might say something about what had happened in Iraq and how this really frustrated me because this was 2003 when the Abu Ghraib scandal hits. That's when I was a junior in college. So this is a pretty important time in terms of how I'm just beginning to become politically sophisticated enough to understand how awful this is and so I tell them something like that. Like I felt like I needed to be able to put my money where my mouth was instead of criticizing what they were doing from my sofa; put myself out there and see if I could do better at whatever it was. But if I'm talking to somebody who not necessarily one way or the other is gonna care whether or not I joined the military but is just looking for a quick answer, I just tell them 'look, I needed a job.' Which is true, that was part of it… but there are other jobs, you know?

As our conversation continued I quipped that I hoped at least I would be "getting the true story" in the interview. Ned was quiet, reflective, and then answered.

> *Ned*: I'll try to be honest with you but one of the things that—and we can talk about this more later—one of the things I find really interesting about your project is the trick is that soldiers use stories in a lot of different ways and they use them in ways that… they're not necessarily trying to convey truth. Like, they're trying to create a reality with the story. And a lot of that is guys telling combat stories about how badass they are in the chow hall. They're trying to impress people on some crappy base where nobody ever fights anybody. Guys will come in from way out in the middle of nowhere and if nobody who's really been in battle with them is there, then all of a sudden they're a war hero, you know.

Even at the time, I wondered if Ned was responding to an academic with an academic's response. Regardless, Ned's comment appears alongside Bruner and Sarbin as a clarifying note that the work of stories is a both/and relationship. Soldiers use personal stories not to 'convey truth …[but] to create a reality with the story.' This echoes Sarbin's framework: narrative can be a practical tool that functionally orders disparate episodes into a coherent script; moreover, through the process of story construction the individual become intelligible to his social setting. However, as Bruner suggests, this personal reality is preemptively created by cultural conventions, norms, and expectations. The individual reports his life narrative to make sense of his own history while simultaneously adapting personal experience based on who constitutes the audience and constituency. At this point in the interview Ned seems to indicate that any deliberate showmanship or unintentional obfuscation that transpires during this process is incidental and not sharply troubling.

Michael Pitre, the acclaimed novelist of a thinly veiled fictionalization of his own experience as a Marine twice deployed to Iraq (titled *Fives and Twenty-Fives*), had a more biting conclusion than Ned when discussing the role of storytelling and the expectations of his audience for the national radio broadcast *This American Life*. In Pitre's radio episode – "Once More, With Feeling" – the author describes the iterative process he endured as he learned how to talk to others about his time overseas. The first lesson came during the holidays after his first deployment. While watching fireworks with his family, Pitre observed that they reminded him of airburst mortars. Innocently, his brother asked if he had any direct experience with these weapons. Without considering the consequences, he responded by telling his family the story of a Naval officer who, in front of his eyes, took shrapnel in her neck. Pitre explained that he would always remember how this officer was "bleeding to death; and she [was] scared, and it's

me and these three Marines getting her into the back of a Humvee, and she [told] us what to tell her kids." Despite the best intentions of his family – they wanted to listen; they wanted to support – the story prompted a stunned and uncomfortable silence. When he tried to talk about the war with his friends he mostly received the same sideways look accompanied by the same muted response. On the radio show, the journalist asked Pitre what he imagined people thought during these conversations:

> *Michael Pitre:* That I was damaged. That I had nothing else to talk about. That I was a violent person. That I wasn't a normal person. And if you say I don't want to talk about it, then you're the truculent vet who is going to be sitting brooding in the corner, and that carries its own stigma.
>
> [Continues]
>
> I think what people hear sometimes is '*I* don't want to talk about it because it bothers me so much.' And sometimes it's, 'I don't want to talk about it because it's going to bother *you*,[31] and you don't even know [how to respond].'

So Michael Pitre learned to tell 'decoy' stories. If he was asked about what he experienced in Iraq he would talk about the point of origin with a mortar, or, in bathroom humor shorthand: a mortar's POO. This would get a laugh from his listener. Another go-to decoy story was the one about Fred the scorpion. Fred was the platoon mascot that survived every element of war including an unfortunate swim in a gasoline container. What was left unsaid, but nonetheless caught in Pitre's mind's eye every time he talked about Fred, was the rest of the scorpion story from Iraq. Because of the heat in Iraq, families often slept on their roof, where they risked the possibility of being bitten by a scorpion. If and when this happened families had to decide if they would drive to the hospital after curfew. If they went to the hospital, the military may mistake the speeding car for a suicide bomber. There were no good options. As Pitre recalled: "scorpions are not just innocuous- a scorpion bite for an Iraqi family causes an

[31] Italics used to emphasize the speaker's inflection and tonal force.

impossible decision and puts Marines in impossible situations." Erin, Pitre's wife, could see and feel the tension these stories created for her partner.

> *Erin*: I could recognize that it was a mask, that it wasn't the real thing. I mean- he was vaudeville. You know, and I was guilty of being like, 'Mike, tell us… tell us the time with the [mortar] POO.'
>
> [Continues]
>
> But, I would hear people ask him questions. And I would catch him telling decoy stories. I think he just wanted a break, and he wanted to live, and he wanted to be happy, which was OK.

If Dr. Roger Thompson's question to "The Syracuse University Moral Injury Project Conference," that everyone must consider "the constraints that control our storytelling," seems abstract, let the voice of Ned and Michael Pitre ground the conversation. In the space between the stories we want to hear and those that we prefer remain unspoken, there exist real lives and lived experiences.

Sean had an even harsher adjudication regarding cultural myths and what may seem to an outsider as the harmless glorification of war through stories. I interviewed the thirty-three year-old in 2014. He was unguarded about his time in the Army with his special operations unit and his four deployments- the first two in Afghanistan (fifteen months and four months) and then two in Iraq (four months and one month). However, when I asked Sean about his current work – which he explained was for 'the government' – he deferred to vague generalities on why it brings him back to Afghanistan at a moment's notice. I assumed some sort of military contract with special operations, but I did not push. It was clear that details concerning his current professional life would not be part of the life narrative interview. Whatever the case may be it is safe to assume Sean is, in some way, still soldiering. By any measurement or any standard he was and is a fine soldier. He was an Army Ranger who, when shot during one of his deployments to Afghanistan, returned for medical leave, healed, and shipped out again. On first

impression Sean reminded me of a Homeric warrior: stalwart, pious in his dedication to the cause, unafraid. Yet, in his view, it is exactly this type of characterization – one that he seems to embody – that he finds problematic. In the interviews I always ask if there is one particular takeaway I should remember from our conversation. Sean did not pause before giving his answer.

> *Sean*: The glorification of war is almost criminal. And I get that you probably need it to some extent to get an army, but I think that you have world leaders that buy into it, and don't really understand what goes into it, and think that it's this noble, glorious, proposition, when in fact it's the complete opposite, it's the worst thing in humanity, so I think that if there is a way to change that, or whatever, I'd welcome it… so hopefully you write something about that.[32]

Again, the theoretical frames offered by thinkers like Sarbin and Bruner does not fully account for what Sean articulates here. While the literature animates how personal stories can create pathways for us to begin to understand the events we experience, and, moreover, that emplotted self is relationally codified, Sean's reflection asks that I, the ethnographer, consider the violent ends made real through and by the work of stories. Any citizenry that proposes a moral conscience must be ever vigilant about what is wrought by the sometimes-opaque relationship between individual lives and cultural myth-making. Words themselves – honor, heroism, battletested – have private and public meaning that hold sway and steer lives. It is not enough to simply note that the two are connected. Additional specification is needed, particularly with regard to language choice and the use of words.

[32] Sean's anger was particularly acute when describing how promotion-seeking mid and senior level officers often adulate the idea of battlefield heroism. He called this an "immense failure" in need of account. His rage over this issue is emblematic of moral injury, a helpful lens for understanding war trauma articulated in greater detail in the next chapter.

The complexity of language

How does one respond to the anger voiced by Sean regarding the abuse and misuse of language? The psychoanalytic scholar Donald Spence and social psychologist Kenneth Gergen address this question. Both Spence and Gergen question some of the basic assumptions about language made in the field of narrative and psychology. By including their arguments, the theoretical frame of this chapter deepens and widens in specific ways that help address Sean's simmering frustrations.

Like Theodore Sarbin, Spence is primarily interested in the practice of individual meaning-making, but challenges the idea that personal storytelling is the "organizing principle for human action." He begins by questioning the very notion that a single life can be narrated as if it were a 'text.' In *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*: *Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*, Spence's critique focuses not on the author's own contemporary moment but instead on Sigmund Freud and his model of the patient case study. Freud's case study still structures many elements within psychology as it relates to the narrative approach. Within Freudian thought the primary mistake, according to Spence, was imagining that personal stories were descriptive copies of the lived past:

> If the patient is assumed, by virtue of his free-associating stance, to have privileged access to the past, and if the story we hear is assumed to be the same as the story he is telling, then it is tempting to conclude that we are hearing a piece of history, an account of the 'way things were' […] and the very coherence of an account may lead us to believe that we are making contact with an actual happening. (27)

> [However, there is] no pure language of observation, […whenever…] the patient must speak his thoughts, he will always be influenced by what [might be] called the conditions of describability. (266)

For Spence describability is a multifaceted problem. The context here is psychoanalysis, specifically the Freudian setting, and in this setting the speaker/patient will always leave out and edit parts of his life story. Spence's argument is that when one narrates particular events, this

necessitates silencing other episodes that do not fit; moreover, whatever one elects to present will likely be the relatively coherent elements immediately available in the conscious mind of the patient. If, however, free association produces a fragmented collage of memories, the analyst must use a heavier hand to make meaning of the varied pieces. Lastly, and adding to what Spence imagines as the unreliability endemic to the project of describability, is the slippery quality of language itself.

According to Spence, the Freudian assumption is that language exists as an always-available toolkit. When an event necessitates verbal elucidation we access our archive, retrieve the 'right' words, and the story is seamlessly deployed. But even robust descriptions can never *actually* be a true referent. Either the narratives fall short and are unable to express the entirety of our personal history or they produce artistic reconstructions that are something else altogether. "Language is both too rich and too poor to represent experience adequately. [Therefore, it can be said that] language both reveals but it also conceals" (Spence 49, 54). Spence concludes that the style, tone, and intonation of what is said remain more important to hear and address than the content itself.[33] While a fuller description of this idea is tangential to the main argument here, Spence calls this "interpretation as an aesthetic experience" (268). And so Donald Spence concludes that the confessional narrative in psychoanalysis must be rightly understood in the following manner: the clinical relationship between an individual and mental health professional is just that- a relational event where the storied past, the unearthed personal truth, is not a reconstructed discovery of some inner self, but, in fact, a new creation between two people, a co-created fiction with many trappings and layers. "The real world has vanished and the fictive world has taken its place" (Spence 52).

[33] Practically, this is one of the reasons this dissertation includes participant observation alongside life narrative interviews.

Kenneth Gergen, like Spence, is concerned with the ubiquitous assumption that our descriptions of lived experience directly map onto an experiential truth. Gergen, who advances a narrative approach situated along the lines of social constructionism, views culture in a way that suggests similarities to Dan McAdams or Jerome Bruner; however, Gergen's conclusions diverge. Concerning the role of collective norms and how they impact the formation of individual life stories, Gergen is more postmodern; by which I mean that he argues that signifiers in fact signify tacit social constructs created by implicit cultural buy-in and codification. In his forceful polemic "The Social Constructions Movement in Modern Psychology," Gergen begins with our historical categories of knowing. He argues that fields of social thought pivot in large part on a tradition of empirical thinking. For Gergen even what is labeled scientific knowledge is in fact a product of cultural subjectivity. Social constructionists understand that 'objective facts' are merely a communally adopted vicissitude normalized through social processes, or by "microprocess," to use Gergen's terminology (268). "The locus of scientific rationality lies not within the minds of independent persons but within the social aggregate. That which is rational is the result of negotiated intelligibility" (272). Observe, for example, how both ethnography and history demonstrate that certain terms – Gergen focuses on the idea of childhood and the noun 'child' – evolve through the cooperative process of persons in social relationship to one another. According to Gergen, psychology, built upon the same foundation as scientific theory, wrongly approaches the idea of childhood as an a priori reality with characteristics and governing patterns that can be verified. Social constructionism redirects the focus to the social, political, moral, and economic realms of exchange to examine the biases upon which knowledge blossoms, language is constructed, and identities form (Gergen 267). Ultimately, Gergen succinctly defines his ambitious social constructionist agenda – in the abstract for his article – as

a "discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange" (266).

Like Spence, Gergen believes that traditional scholarship misses the nuanced realities of one's relationship with an interlocutor (singular or plural), and, in turn, how this complicates language and the work of words.[34] Culture and language are often atomized as unalloyed entities when in fact they converge and in that confluence Gergen locates misconceptions in need of correcting. Taken together, Spence and Gergen have broad implications regarding language and the work of personal narratives. They force us to ask a twofold question: what is the truth-value of personal stories if the building blocks of language often produce as much ambiguity as elucidation? And, beyond the Bruner-like insistence that culture matters, what are the primary relationships in someone's life that drive and predetermine how an individual structures his story? However, because their scholarship centers on moments that do not deviate from the everyday human condition (our search for clarity within psychotherapy and/or our shared cultural understanding of common vocabulary), it is necessary for us to first consider if war, because it is outside what most individuals have experienced (an unknown world), further complicates the efficacy of language, and if so, how to make sense of this additional complexity.

In his essay *Losing the War*, the journalist and cultural critic Lee Sandlin suggests that war requires a new language scheme. War, writes Sandlin, cannot be captured by ordinary words. Ostensibly, *Losing the War* begins as the author's own attempt to understand his father's experience flying bombers in the Korean War for a squadron known as the 'Flying Tigers.' As a

[34] Of the two, Gergen's claims seem to provoke a more spirited response. The anthropologist Michael Jackson, in his book *The Politics of Storytelling*, addresses the byproduct of the postmodern tradition: "postmodern shattering of subjectivities – self, community, culture, and nation – [can rob] narrative of its credibility as a model of existential order" (Jackson 20). Michele Corssley's 'Formulating Narrative Psychology: the limitations of contemporary social constructionism.' echoes Jackson's conclusion. "It seems postmodern thinkers like Gergen are not only amending the narrative project in psychology but to a degree also implying its outright overhaul."

child he remembers the porcelain figurine, "a tiger about half the size of a house cat," that his father kept on display in the family den (1). Even at a young age Sandlin had an awareness of the object's profound meaning. But his father never spoke of his time in Korea. If he had, could any son really understand what it felt like inside a cramped cockpit flying above the Korean peninsula? The article begins with this personal history; however, the questions that drive the essay are existential. Are we ever capable of knowing what it means to go to war if we have not ourselves lived that reality?[35] How much of a soldier's experience is lost in language of translation? "That's the common fate of mementos. They are never quite specific enough. No matter what their occasion, they sooner or later slip free and are lost in the generic blur […] this is particularly true of the mementos of soldiers" (2). A gap will always exist between the meta-narrative commoditized by a porcelain tiger and the *actual* story (if there is such a thing). The reader understands that Sandlin intends this both literally as well as metaphorically. Moving past the author's anecdotal experience, the essay largely focuses on the faulty remembrance of WWII. Sandlin takes particular umbrage with the historical bifurcation of the good Allied forces and the evil Nazis in Germany. This narrative must be recast. After all, it is a more complex story.

According to Sandlin, this problematic cultural language-work is tethered to the shortcomings of language itself. For example, the story of the Allied forces victory at the Battle of the Bulge, or, later, the German surrender- these moments are now widely accepted as the chronological facts of the war. For Sandlin, at best this is an incomplete story, because "[war] can't be described with ordinary words" like victory and surrender (Sandlin 33). Sandlin directs the reader to the evidence of how Scandinavian Vikings wrote about war. "When [the Vikings]

[35] Vietnam veteran and bestselling author Karl Marlantes writes that going to war is like travelling to Mars- the soldier travels to a planet wholly unknown. Once there, he finds a world entirely disconnected from this one (see chapter one in his book *What it is Like to go to War*). By implication, the shared language of earth (as it were) will not accurately map on to this unknowable reality.

wrote about battle, they were unsparingly exact" (Sandlin 33). But they also understood that the sharpest truths of war required the Vikings to articulate neologisms that more fully encapsulated the felt experience of battle. For example, the "berserk-state" was the Viking term used to refer to a soldier suddenly possessed by a desire for bloodlust (what Homer refers to as Agamemnon's 'inhuman rage' in *The Iliad*).[36] Another Norse word created to talk about war was "fey," which loosely translates to a feeling of doom. But to the Vikings "fey" was deeper and more specific than an internal sense of dread. In war, fey was the total loss for the instinct to live and survive. To animate the exact meaning of "fey" Sandlin quotes the American journalist Tom Lea who reported from the South Pacific during the battle of Peleliu. Lea writes about his experience of that battle: "I suddenly knew I no longer had to defend my beating heart against the stillness of death. There was no defense" (Sandlin 34). Therefore, when we collectively remember a historical moment (or moments) that ended a war – when we think of victory and defeat – we shouldn't focus on the strategic outcome of a particular battle; rather, we should remember that a "berserk-state" of rage continued to grip many soldiers even after the outcome was determined. Furthermore, it was not pragmatic diplomacy that finally moved the Axis powers. It was an utter emptiness, an absolute "fey."

> War has a different logic. A kind of vast fayness can infect a military bureaucracy when it's losing a war, a collective slippage of the sense of objective truth in the face of approaching disaster. The later years of World War II the bureaucracies of the Axis – partially in Germany, almost wholly in Japan – gave up the pretense of realism about the their situation. Their armies were fighting all over the world with desperate berserker fury, savagely contesting every inch of terrain […] while the bureaucracies behind the lines gradually retreated into a dreamy paper war [when] they were on the brink of [annihilation]. (Sandlin 35)

[36] Like Sandlin, Leo Braudy refers to the Viking language of war in *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*. Braudy directly connects the Vikings to the *Iliad* in chapter seven, 'The Shape of Fury.'

Sandlin's essay is a historical analysis of the cultural attitudes and assumptions that facilitate the creation of the muddy diegesis about war that over time becomes accepted fact. It is unclear if Sadlin thinks a common understanding of words like 'fey' and 'berserker' would help undo the narrative artifice created when we separate wars into the categories of victor and vanquished. Again, we must ask: does language elucidate or get in the way? As part of my interview protocol, I directly addressed this tension with anyone who wrote about his war experience. I framed the question by repeating a quote by a veteran of the Iraq war in a documentary about writing and war: "experiences written down necessarily sanitize, because you are fitting [them] into words and no matter how good the words are, there's a limit point to how much they can convey" (*Operation Home Coming: Writing the Wartime Experience*). I next invited the interviewee to consider his own experience with language and then respond. Overwhelmingly, I heard outright indifference to the premise- so what if language conveys a fraction of reality? The forceful answer from Jason, the Army veteran pursuing a graduate degree in creative nonfiction, was emblematic of how dismissive respondents were to the idea that storytelling and language are an insufficient mimesis.

> *Jason*: I mean no shit. That's obvious- words are never gonna capture it... I think that's kind of the joy of writing though; creatively finding ways to do the best job you can [...] that's the craft of it.
>
> *Matt*: Okay, there's a limit point to language; it doesn't mean that you don't use language.
>
> *Jason*: Yeah. It's like 'oh, okay, well, yeah, sure [language isn't perfect].' So do you have a better suggestion? I don't.

It is also possible to acknowledge the validity of the critiques offered by Sandlin, Gergen, and Spence without completely abandoning the idea that the language of life stories (even stories about war) does have legitimacy in so far as it reveals important psychological elements of

personal identity. In fact, Jerome Bruner directly addressed how to conceptually reconcile Gergen, Spence, and others who might seem dismissive of the 'narrative turn.'

> The "narrative turn" had some surprising effects. It gave new punch to already lively disclaimers about the universality of the so-called Western conception of selfhood…
>
> [Continues]
>
> Once one takes a narrative view, one can ask why one story rather than another. And just such questioning soon led to the suspicion that "official" or "enforced" might be used to establish political or hegemonic control by one group over another. (*Acts of Meaning* 114)

How does Bruner suggest reclaiming 'the narrative turn?' First, narrative meaning within psychology must focus on the idea of self as it is defined by "*both* the individual *and* by the culture" (*Acts of Meaning* 116).[37] To do this well we must recognize that the language of this relational exchange between the self and another – be it a single person or a wider collective – is an alive and multifaceted reality. Finally, Bruner notes that narrative psychology must "attend to the *practices* in which the meanings of Self are achieved and put to use" (*Acts of Meaning* 116).[38] It is this last point that should be emphasized. Bruner urges that the psychological field commits its intellectual frame to narrative *practice*, an interpretive unfolding, as opposed to the final stories that people *produce*. The work of personal narratives should be considered a transient meaning-making process as opposed to a final summation. There will always exist dynamic relationships between a soldier, his family, friends, even the larger American story he is a part of, and these elements will script what feels highly personal. Kenneth Gergen is right: there will remain elements of the self that are constructed from the outside in. Bruner is right as well: we can account for the postmodern warnings and not do away entirely with the subjective

[37] In the original text there is italicized emphasis of the words 'both' / 'and.'

[38] If these two operations are done in conjunction Bruner concludes even Gergen's Self, "[a constructed] Self from the outside in" can be satisfied and integrated into the psychological turn towards narrative.

experience of self. It can be a both/and. This is perhaps enough to keep the project of narrative inquiry intact, a commitment to both problematize and honor what is private and personal. Therefore (and returning to the voices quoted from my fieldwork), it is clear that the life story, the words themselves – the selected details – are always psychologically important. As a successful poet and Vietnam veteran explained to me, if it is true that war brings us to the limits of language, and that words ultimately fail, that unfulfilled lack becomes an access point through which one might know the reality of war.[39] If one assumes that words miss an essential truth (and the reality of war exists outside of language) that too is an important articulation. Coherence and incoherence come in many different layers. Just because self-knowledge is never fully possible, just because there is no simple, absolute way to recall events doesn't mean that the struggle to do so is useless. For someone who returned from Vietnam to dedicate his professional life to writing, he insisted that even when stories lose coherence, or language fails to accurately capture the 'big' truth, the resulting incoherence becomes the new story in need of account. Accordingly, from his perspective, language always contains hopeful possibilities; however, and he was forceful on this final point, crafting his story of Vietnam (being able to both talk and write about it) took time.

The role of temporality

The confusing yet substantive impact of time is a common theme in many literary accounts of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In his award-winning novel about the Iraq War, *Yellow Birds*, Army veteran Kevin Powers highlights how time can feel fractured by making it a structuring element of the story. In the first chapter he writes: "the war tried to kill us in spring […] then, in summer, the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all color from the plains […]

[39] This was an informal background interview regarding my research.

we hardly noticed a change when September came" (3-4). Early in the story time is a lullaby: gentle, unassuming, the opposite of what the reader would assume to be the case in a war zone. Then, Powers moves the reader with dizzying speed backwards to before the war. What follows is a seesaw of moments, snapshots – sequencing is controlled by how events felt – telescoping the reader's focus towards the inner landscape of the characters in the story. In one scene the protagonist Private Bartle is asked by his mother what 'happened over there?' As he considers the question his unspoken response articulated only in his mind summarizes the treatment of time throughout the novel:

> What happened? What fucking happened? That's not even the question, [Bartle] thought. How is that the question? How do you answer the unanswerable? To say what happened, the mere facts, the disposition of events in time, would come to seem like a kind of treachery. The dominoes of moments lined up symmetrically, then tumbling backward against the hazy unsure push of cause, showed only that a fall is every object's destiny. It is not enough to say what happened. Everything happened. Everything fell. (148)

Powers uses his training as a poet to animate the raw confusion of temporality. And poetic verse, with its looseness and creative construction, is a well-suited storytelling mode to address the transitory nature of time as a soldier experiences it. Take, for example, the collection of poems *Phantom Noise*, by Iraq veteran Brian Turner. Like Powers, Turner handles time as a mercurial object, impossible to hold steady. In the title poem Turner utilizes a lyrical mode to achieve a feeling that becomes, in itself, the narrative.

> There is this ringing hum this
> bullet-borne language ringing
> shell-fall and static this late-night
> ringing of threadwork and carpet ringing
> hiss and steam this wing-beat
> of rotors and tanks broken
> bodies ringing in steel humming these
> voices of dust these years ringing
> rifles in Babylon rifles in Sumer
> ringing these children their gravestones
> and candy their limbs gone missing their

static-borne television their ringing
this eardrum this rifled symphonic this
ringing of midnight in gunpowder and oil this
threading of bullets in muscle and bone this ringing
hum this ringing hum this
ringing (35)

If the plot details are lost along the way, if the words and spacing confuse, the reader should focus on the tone, the voice, and the sound. Turner wants everyone to feel this phantom noise. It is a ringing that becomes an internal ticking clock marking psychological time. It is a drumbeat of seared images that populate the mind ceaselessly and without invitation. In the same collection, in a poem titled 'Aubade: Layover in Amsterdam,' the speaker find himself in bed with his lover in California. But as the scene animates the assumed personal 'I' of the author drifts upwards and away, to another time. In mind alone, he is transported back across the topography of personal history to another encounter. It was 2004, the speaker, returning to war in the Middle East, found time for a quick layover in Amsterdam to pay for a last stolen moment of intimacy with a prostitute.

My lover turns in the California bedroom's
Watery dark, arching her back […]

[I am] rising over the cold waters of the Atlantic
to 30,000 feet, I begin to sense the imminent

descent towards the Red Lights of Amsterdam,
the clock reversing itself to the spring of 2004,

where I lie with a woman who knows
I'm a man heading back to war,

and I want her to whisper in my ear,
even in a language I've never heard before,

just to hear another human voice, just to breath in the dark. (9)

In the two poems time acts as a wedge distancing the individual from his world.[40] This is a common theme in war poems. Consider Vietnam Veteran Bruce Weigl's celebrated poem 'Song of Napalm.' In the poem Weigl tries to turn away from his memory of war. He wants to simply enjoy sitting on a porch with his wife. He wants to enjoy the afternoon rain as it sweeps across the visual horizon. But he can't. "I turned my back on the old curses. I believed / They swung finally away from me ... / But still the branches are wire / And thunder is the pounding mortar" (34).

Even when two beings are as close as flesh-against-flesh, or as intimate as husband and wife, they still exist in different time zones: hearts, heads, and minds stuck in separate narratives. Turner demonstrates that war suspends and upends time. In the emotional interior, temporality is a force that undoes one's felt sense of connection, inhibiting his ability to feel part of a community. In this way, time is a chaotic element disrupting the linear cohesion of personal storytelling. Holding Powers, Turner, and Weigl shoulder-to-shoulder highlights that the distance between a soldier and well-meaning loved one may not be intentional. The narrative of the citizen and the soldier may in fact be locked in different time schemes. I highlight these literary accounts to underscore what I heard in the interviews during my fieldwork. Interviewees told me about their 'lost time' between deployments, how they floated through days and weeks. Or, how certain events seem to become frozen in time. Or, for some, time still exists as an uncanny presence too tactile, too sensory, and too surreal for words.[41] As the scholar and essayist Daniel Mendelsohn writes about his own experience watching the airplanes crash into

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[40] A salient note: Turner's contribution to the edited short story collection, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* (his story is titled 'The Wave that takes Them Under'), reiterates the temporality trope we find in his poetry with more literal language.

[41] In the next chapter on trauma I will unpack the slight but important differences between traumatic memory and trauma stories, the latter being the focus of this project.

the twin towers while in New York City on September 11th: "there was no coverage yet, no media, no commentary, no evaluation, no interpretation. It was just a raw event. What had just happened had not yet become the story of what happened" (443). Mendelsohn's experience echoes what Randy told me sitting in his older brother's kitchen: he was not yet able to get his experience "out of [his] system." This was succinctly explained to me during my fieldwork at Syracuse University. In an interview regarding the Veterans' Writing Group, I asked a Vietnam Veteran if there was anything unique about the stories written by the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. He responded that it was all so recent for them. In his experience it takes many, many, years before the story of war becomes clear. An early Tim O'Brien Vietnam War novel, *Going after Cacciato*, punctuates this point.

Going after Cacciato is defined by a hallucinatory war-terrain within which the author explores the possibility of psychological escape from the traumatic wounds of war. In the story protagonist Paul Berlin chases after Cacciato, a soldier in his unit gone AWOL so as to tunnel his way to Paris. In one scene Cacciato magically flies off a mountain. In another, Berlin and his fellow soldiers in pursuit of Cacciato metaphorically disappear into the Vietcong tunnel system. Throughout the novel O'Brien elevates surreal elements and the reader is never entirely sure what constitutes reality inside the diegesis of the novel. Closer to the actual time of the events described (it was published in 1978), the book focuses on the meta-world of emotional content. The inside world defines the outer universe, as if there is a pressing need to write in abstraction because war itself remained an incoherent narrative. The book is not shaped by our shared sense of historical time. As such, the reader experiences the fictive creation as the author's own sense-making of his time in Vietnam. Any polemical undertone is not because of embedded

commentary on issues like race but instead a byproduct of having unearthed the internal dimensions of a soldier's experience in war with lucidity.[42]

We understand how time alters individual perceptions of events. The same is true collectively. For the noncombatant citizenry who remained home there is also a need for reflection before articulating the shared story. Furthermore, as we do the work to achieve shared understanding, over time, as a nation, we also change the collaborative story of history. The documentary *Maya Lin: a Strong Clear Vision* is a good example of this tendency. The film recounts the unlikely origin of the Vietnam War Memorial. At the time of its inception in the early 1980s, with the collective wound still fresh and the enormity of the experience a specter in everyday life, its possible construction was highly contentious. For the detractors of Maya Lin's winning submission – a national competition was held to choose the design – the unknown twenty-one year old proposed a monument that resembled a dark scar cleaved into the earth. More vitriolic and racist comments referred to Lin's assumed ethnicity (the word 'gook' was freely deployed). Now, it is largely beloved in America. The receding marble slabs invite private reflection, an inward facing gaze, in a shared public space. Today, this narrative remembrance is lauded for emotional acuity. Regarding the Vietnam War and where it fits in our history, it is currently the story we seem to desire. But this evolved over time.

This evolution and iteration of socially accepted historical stories – the narrative flux across time – impacts personal accounts. Consider the bestselling Vietnam War novel *Matterhorn*. Separated from Vietnam, both temporally and emotionally, Karl Marlantes published the sprawling epic *Matterhorn* in 2010, at a time when the Vietnam legacy, although

[42] A book like Philip Caputo's *Rumor of a War* (originally published in 1977, a year before *Going after Cacciato*) is another example of an emotionally raw war story. It is inconsequential that Caputo's work is memoir as opposed to fiction.

upsetting and unsettling, was now firmly in our collective rearview mirror. Unlike *Going after Cacciato*, in *Matterhorn* nothing is surreal. Reality is a thick viscous fluid the soldiers must ford each day, and then again the next. In this fictive construction there is too much reality. The heat is oppressive. The lack of food is suffocating. The daily ritual of humping (hiking) through unknown territory, digging in at night, pulling bloated leeches from skin, suffering through the waking-dream state of exhaustion, combines for a mental onslaught equal to that of real bullets fired from real guns. The power of race and racism both within the unit among the enlisted men and as a reflection of, or reaction to, culture back home in America further reflects that *Matterhorn* is very firmly located in a time and place. Marlantes' fiction pivots away from the parameters and limits of fictive re-imagination, metaphor, and personal memory. The lives in his stories illuminate against the backdrop of our changing cultural consciousness regarding the Vietnam War. A war that has historical and political consequences; a legacy made manifest with time.

O'Brien's fiction similarly shifted as he continued writing. His novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, published in 1994, has a different feel than *Going after Cacciato*. Like *Matterhorn*, the story is highly conscious of temporality and setting. The psychological and political ramifications of the Vietnam War define the characters in the story. Emotional time is historicized. Therefore – and returning to Tim O'Brien's suggestion in *The Things They Carried* quoted at the start of this chapter – if in fact stories are "for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are (36)," it is clear that this narrative work expands over time beyond the raw emotion of an individual's experience to incorporate – or push against – our shared experience of history. Tracking the evolution of Vietnam War fiction is not my attempt to pyschologize these authors. Rather, it demonstrates

that time shifts the narrative frame. Also, that time matters in a variety of ways for different people. For many, like Randy, the raw data of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is a wordless-unfolding-reality. They are still in process with the story. Yet, *Yellow Birds* and *Phantom Noise* demonstrate that a persistent immediacy of past events does not necessarily paralyze story creation. There is no exact formula to determine when the words arrive, if personal meaning-making will reject or accommodate cultural meta-narrative, and finally, how this all may change with time. Psychologist Dr. William Cross, himself a veteran of Vietnam, noted as much in his public remarks at "The Syracuse University Moral Injury Project Conference:" "[War stories] are like swamp gas- they will come up and pop only when the conditions are right."

And so the working theory of narrative in my ethnography transforms from a twofold consideration into a triplicate framework: personal stories are relational activities; life narratives are confined and liberated by the use of language; and both the relational work and the work of language are directed by the unobserved but felt hand of time.

Concluding thoughts

In many ways the question remains: if the immediate relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, or between the storyteller and his cultural context, shifts the narrative, and, moreover, if both language and time change the story, how does this impact the scholar's project?

Holding together the voices from my interviews with the confessional prose of the writers referenced above, I argue that one of the most basic elements of war is that it disrupts. For the soldier, life is disrupted when he deploys; war shifts, unsettles, or upends his known world. Events that came before may no longer seem coherent. And upon returning from deployment, life may never be exactly the same. As if the two worlds – events before deployment & after the

return – are disconnected realties, lives lived separately. I will argue through the next four chapters that storytelling can do the work of repair.[43] The constructed narrative is a manifest effort to make sense of events, to give the episodic unfolding meaning, again. As social psychologist James Pennebaker writes, "the beauty of a narrative is that it allows us to tie all the changes in our life into a broad comprehensive story" (1250). Or, in the words of James Baldwin, who spent his professional life committed to the idea that the vibrancy of language was an important element of social enfranchisement and personal agency: "the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it" (Baldwin 166). So while we always remain bound by cosmological order (the relatively unmovable reality of space and time) narrative works to create our individual worlds. What's more, we can sidestep arguments of epistemology – does a life narrative make the world or is the world a preexisting truth logically ordered by individual narration? – by acknowledging that storywork provides a sense of rootedness. Narrative reminds us of the moments of choice that have made our life what it is. Through storytelling, we choose what our personal history means.[44]

Regardless of how narrative meaning is made, even if it is a somewhat fictitious creation told in jigsaw, ill-fitting vignettes, the story matters. Again, Tim O'Brien eloquently highlights this point in *The Things They Carried* when he describes the power of fiction as freeing one to pursue the 'seemingness' of reality, which, at times, like in war, can be more important than the exact facts. "What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way […] there is always the surreal seemingness, which makes a story seem untrue, but which in fact

[43] Words like 'disruption' and 'repair' prompt a discussion of trauma and how that is understood in the context of this research- this is why the next chapter focuses on the question of trauma and trauma theory.

[44] The assumption of agency here clearly has exceptions- for example, if one's circumstances include addiction. However, for the purposes of this research and the inclusion criteria of high-functioning individuals, we can assume choice with the construction of personal narrative.

represents the hard and exact *truth as it seemed*" (67-68).[45] Therefore, when I use the word narrative in this dissertation I am incorporating O'Brien's term of 'seemingness' for it explains best the nuanced truth of a story's varied elements.

However, regardless of the profundity of the storied 'seemingness,' I will never mistake these accounts as access to one's *actual* lived experience. As Rudolph Binion writes in the introduction to his book *Traumatic Reliving in History, Literature, and Film*, "induced reliving as in Balzac, or Pirandello, [is not] to be confused with spontaneous, unsuspecting reliving of traumatic experience" (3). The outsider can never wholly imagine his way into the experience of war. Or any experience for that matter. James Chapman humorously addresses this point in his book *War and Film*. He considers the potent opening of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Regarding the realistic quality of the Omaha beach sequence, Chapman reminds us that "the only way for cinema audiences to experience what it was like to be involved in combat would be to fire live ammunition at people sitting in the movie theater" (25). Lee, a Marine Officer, reiterated this idea at the end of our interview. "You can tell a story but if you didn't hear the sounds, and feel the percussions, and smell the smells, you know… feel the heat, that's all part of the experience. [Continues]. So yeah, I mean [the interviewer] can get a sense of the story but you won't [live it] 3D." Describing this same tension, the writer Nick Flynn, in his memoir *The Ticking is the Bomb*, a book that is less personal and more a forceful polemic on the Bush administration and our shared responsibility for Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse, states that "there is a moment, as there will be in every story, when words are not enough … these words are about [a tortured] body, it was his body this story happened to" (88).

[45] Italics added for emphasis.

Even if the details of a story seem to transport the outsider into unknown worlds there will always be a limit to the narrative connection of civilian and soldier, or ethnographer and participant. Further, and in response to Sean who deeply distrusts how words like heroism can manipulate young men into war, I must widen the frame beyond the interviews collected and discussed herein, to question how the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were (and still are) actively framed within our culture. What stories are being told and retold?[46] How are these wars being remembered? The types of narratives one listens for, reads, repeats, and believes, are not discussions of historical fact but rather of daily interpretation. And with the ongoing debate regarding American intervention in Iraq and Syria with the Islamic State, the government program of drone strikes and targeted killing, the question of authorship and authority is not abstract.[47] Cultural stories about war ripple out and have direct impact.

With the above working theory of narrative in mind, I turn to the connecting thread that ran through the pages of this chapter: trauma.

[46] As a practical matter, and as discussed in the methods chapter, in large part, this is the purpose of my fieldwork in Syracuse.

[47] See Adam J. Berinsky's *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* or Emily Rosenberg's *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory for a fuller discussion*.

CHAPTER 3

Toward a Working Theory of Trauma

[With trauma,] before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything – we should listen. (4)

Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*

In the introduction to her comprehensive study *Trauma: a Genealogy*, Ruth Leys outlines one of the inherent difficulties faced by scholars of trauma: how do you define the subject? What is trauma? To highlight the knottiness of this question, Leys reminds readers of two events, both occurring in 1998, to demonstrate that even the word *trauma* can be problematic. Her first example is a profile written by Elizabeth Rubin for the *New Yorker* on centers in Uganda for children trying to heal from events they witnessed and participated in as child soldiers. The goal for these centers was straightforward, to create spaces of psychological and physical safety that would, ideally, begin the process of repair. They found that if they could simply teach these children how to forget, that would be a start (Leys 1). Leys then discusses the case between claimant Paula Jones and President Bill Clinton. In court documentation Jones claimed that as a result of her alleged sexual trauma she suffered Post Traumatic Stress. Situating both events beneath the umbrella term 'trauma,' Leys writes:

> Between them these examples illustrate the spectrum of issues raised by the concept of psychic trauma in our time. On the one hand, there is the absolute indispensability of the concept for understanding the psychic harms associated with certain central experiences of the twentieth century, [like] the kind experienced by the kidnapped children of Uganda. On the other hand, it is hard not to feel that the concept of trauma has become debased currency when it is applied both to truly horrible events *and* to something as dubious as the long-term harm to Paula Jones. (2)

For Leys it is self-evident that there is no equivalency between the Post Traumatic reality encountered by Paula Jones and the experience faced by recovering child soldiers in Africa.[48]

Trauma: a Genealogy, covers many disciplines (largely literature, psychiatry, and neurobiology) and an impressive sweep of time (she begins with the pre-Freudian conceptualization of trauma and continues to recent theorizations by scholars like Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Bessel Van Der Kolk). The scholarship is precise and her analysis lucid. While the impressive breadth and depth of the book provides an exhaustive survey of the topic, for the purposes of this dissertation and my research, the most salient question is the one proposed in her introduction: how do we define trauma?

In the previous chapter on narrative, to provide an analytic lens for my ethnographic data I reviewed germane scholarship and outlined a conceptual framework: the triplicate frame that considered relationships, language, and time. Similarly, in this chapter, without offering exact conclusions, or articulating concrete answers, another threefold framework emerges from the inherent confusion, startling revelations, outright misconceptions, and endemic tensions that arise with any analysis focused on the nature of trauma, trauma studies, and trauma narratives. First, even the most personal trauma narratives are circumstance specific (in this case, prompted by academic research). Second, relationships (like one between a veteran and a scholar who never served in the armed forces) help define what is and what is not traumatic. Finally, trauma is also defined by meta-narratives and cultural tropes (including, but not limited to, a military-warrior-ethos that, even today, remains overwhelmingly connected to ideas of masculinity). Even with the clarity of this premise, for the scholar and ethnographer alike, defining trauma

[48] One could argue that the comparison trivializes Leys' case and/or trauma in general. However, Leys begins with the anecdote merely to animate that trauma – what counts and what doesn't – is an assumed category.

requires accepting a high degree of ambiguity. The same is true for individuals trying to understand their own personal history.

Leys argues that there is a social element to how we collectively/culturally understand trauma. While we may agree on the manifestation of traumatic symptoms, how (or who) ultimately decides what is or what is not a traumatic event? My interview with Tim from the previous chapter is a good example:

Tim: I don't actually have [PTSD] but let me phrase it this way…

[Continues]

> I've got some issues that are probably induced by stress but it's not Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.[49] And a lot of my problem coming back was…[well] I've been in this mindset of go, go, go, kill, kill, kill for fucking six years. And now I'm coming back from that, and transitioning over to: let's be nice and friendly and make money and pay our bills and be suburban happy family. You don't … you don't fucking go from one to the other very quickly. It's taken me about three years, two and a half to three emotional breakdowns, probably more that I'm not remembering off the top of my head, at least three girlfriends. I almost wrecked my truck

[Pause]

Tim: But I'm doing okay now.

Tim gave additional detail regarding what he meant by "emotional breakdowns." He described the uncanny return of certain memories. Two soldiers in his unit died during his deployment and without warning the memory of these friends often arrive at the surface of his consciousness. In these moments he is eclipsed by an overwhelming sense of sadness. Often, he will experience outright paralysis. Tim knew that when he was in the thrall of these emotions he was experiencing a reality beyond his control (he labeled it his battle with "survivor's guilt") and admitted that in the past it had prompted suicidal ideations.

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[49] There is a distinction between what is and is not trauma and what is and is not Post-Traumatic Stress. They are not one and the same- Tim's admission that he experienced trauma, but denial of having PTSD requires additional analysis. I will return to this later in the chapter.

> *Tim*: [My] emotional breakdowns [are with ideas like]: 'I should be the one that's dead. I should be back in Iraq. What the fuck am I doing out of the Army? What the fuck am I doing with my life? Where am I gonna go? What am I gonna do?' Just jacked the fuck up … and just weeping, tears and shit. And other times, survivor's guilt is coming at me in a different way, with like a question that freezes me: 'what the fuck good am I? These guys should've survived… I'm a piece of shit.'

As the interview concluded I felt both professionally and personally obligated to ask if Tim was unsteady due to our conversation. I wondered out loud if we should connect with anyone for mental health support. He assured me he was fine, repeating a phrase he said often- "I'm doing okay now."[50] To me, everything did not seem ok. But it was not my story. My job was to listen, reflect, and respond as a way of demonstrating to Tim that he was heard. Intervention was not my purpose. Therefore, I did not explain that the story sounded to me like someone still wrestling with trauma. I kept quiet.

But after my interview with Tim, later that night, the images from our conversation haunted me. When I finally fell asleep, I was greeted by a feverish nightmare. I was in an unknown landscape with my brother. I was terrified but the root cause of my fear was formless. I only knew that we were not safe. Then, without an apparent cause, my brother's throat ruptured. As if he was shot, blood poured down his shirtfront. I tried to cover the bleeding but found that my hands were weighty bricks stuck to my side. I was unable to reach his wound. I could not help.

Awake. Disoriented. Cold.

Coming back to myself, I discovered that my shivering was a result of the sweat-soaked sheets of my bed. My hands ached from balling them into fists. I realized I was crying. None of

[50] Even with Tim's assurances, I contacted a professor on my dissertation committee to enquire if any additional follow-up would be responsible and necessary. I also asked Tim directly three weeks later if the interview stirred anything in need of additional engagement from a mental health professional.

this was felt as emotional distress. My tears seemed to be an instantaneous reaction to what my sleeping mind imagined.

In my sleep, having listened to the testimony of the day and having reviewed the interview from my recorder, I personalized the content and responded with the somatic manifestation of sweat and tears, as if I had been traumatized. It is not surprising for outsiders who engage with topics like war to experience their own searing.[51] As I said in the first chapter, this does not mean there is equivalency between the soldier and the secondhand experience of the witness. Yet, my visceral response is also not entirely tangential. In fact, it is instructive. This exchange reflects that a disconnect may exist between what the insider feels, then narrates, and what the outsider hears, then concludes. My claim is not that my dreamtime reaction undermines or rewrites the felt reality of someone like Tim. When he says with confidence 'I am ok,' that story may be true for him. And when the listener hears the same story and feels pain, grief, hurt, and, in turn, constructs a terrifying nightmare set in a disquieting war-like-landscape, that too is a true interpretation.

It is not simply that an experience is traumatic (or not). Trauma is continuously being reconstructed *in* the act of telling and listening (an activity that exists between people and is given context by culture). The quote by sociologist Jeffery Alexander reference in the introduction (from his essay collection *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*) is worth repeating: "[trauma is] widely experienced and intuitively understood…[and yet]… trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (2).

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[51] While an ethnographer and an embedded reporter are not one in the same, the following accounts from reporters home from warzones highlight the traumatic response from a second-hand witness: Chris Hedges' violent outburst in an airport ("war's sickness has become mine" (*War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* (6)); Sebastian Junger's description of panic attacks while in a New York subway (*Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*); and Kevin Sites, who writes about his own uncontrollable guilt and depression after returning from covering wars in the middle east (*The Things They Cannot Say*).

But, also like the previous analysis on narrative, my claim in this chapter is that the multi-dimensional and contradictory ways the category of trauma is framed, theorized, and understood – both for the individual seeking to clarify his own personal history as well as for the outsider responding and listening – does not foreclose inquiry. It invites it. Without ignoring these complexities, and based on the discoveries of my ethnographic work, my conclusions will echo the quote by Jonathan Shay: alongside the scholarly categories and theories, embedded in any psychological or clinical intervention, and threaded through our sincere desire to help those we feel are in pain, must be a sustained effort to listen and listen closely.

Theories of trauma and war

A nonacademic theory of trauma would loosely define the term as occurrences that shatter an individual's sense of well-being (like an encounter with human violence, a natural disaster, or an unexpected death). Simply put, trauma is any event producing psychological rupture.[52] For current scholars and clinicians specifically focused on the experience of soldiers and our recent wars, the analytic frame is largely dominated by diagnostic interventions associated with Post Traumatic Stress and understanding the chemical responses hardwired into the brain because of a traumatic event. Others would argue that PTSD doesn't account for everything that is traumatic and how a wider scope of experiences can ripple out to reshape a soldier's idea of the world. For academics informed by a background in comparative literature and memory studies, trauma is often conceptualized as a psychic absence that uncannily proliferates in the mind as mimesis and misremembrance. Today, despite growing interest in trauma both in clinical settings and as a field of academic study, a consensus definition remains deceptively difficult. When ideas are codified diagnostically or widely accepted in circles of

[52] See Alexander's "lay trauma theory" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2).

scholastic theory, the landscape then shifts and is revised. It is therefore helpful to trace the historical antecedents that predate much of what we find in the contemporary theories of trauma and war.

Literally translated from its Greek root the word itself means "wound." Historically, the traumatic wound was associated in and on the body. The gradual shift to our contemporary understanding that includes the psychological impact began in the late 1800s. In *Trauma: a Genealogy*, Leys attributes work done by British physician John Erichsen and German neurologist Paul Oppenheim at the turn of the nineteenth century as facilitating a shift in the clinical understanding, moving the focus from physical manifestations and towards a conceptualization of trauma as a form of psychic distress. Erichsen's research focused on railway accidents and the resulting "undetectable organic changes in the brain," which was later categorized by Oppenheim as a "traumatic neurosis" (Leys 3). However, even with the acknowledgment of wounds beyond the physical, attention largely remained on bodily harm, particularly physical damage in the brain. Gradually, through to the early 1900s, the emphasis began to reorient towards questions regarding the psyche and understanding the "sudden, unexpected, emotional shock [or, to use another term] the hysterical shattering of the personality" (Leys 4).[53]

If before the First World War the analytic lens was already moving away from the precipitating causes and traumatic bodily harm, war cemented a shift to psychological damage more broadly conceived, as if the experience of war itself was by definition traumatizing. As Judith Herman explains in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*: "[after WWI] the existence of combat neurosis could no

[53] Leys highlights the work of J.M. Charcot, Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet, Morton Prince, Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud as collectively contributing to this shift (pg 3-4).

longer be denied" (20). This presumption has persisted and aligns with our current nonmilitary/lay understanding of what happens to men at war. Furthermore, equating the two – war and psychological trauma – fits with the diffuse cultural narrative of the 20th century. As Cathy Caruth writes, in our collective consciousness war is a particularly relevant example of the traumatic wounding.[54] "The experience of the soldier, faced with the sudden and massive death around him, [this] is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (*Unclaimed Experience* 11). From this perspective, when any individual deploys he will face several hard truths: his own fragile mortality; the dehumanizing anonymity of death, both of friend and foe; and at the very least, he will experience events that dislodge his belief in the world as benevolent and safe. Therefore, if our working definition of trauma reflects Jeffery Alexander's "lay theory," a fracturing of one's sense of self resulting from a sudden encounter with an emotionally unmanageable circumstance, the evidence demonstrates – from the First World War through Iraq and Afghanistan (from shell shock through Post Traumatic Stress) – that the experience of war *is* traumatic. War traumatizes soldiers.

It is worth noting that this assumption posits that trauma is a locatable reality. Trauma is a 'yes' or 'no'- a wound exists or it does not exist. Not everyone agrees with this simplification. As an example, Cathy Caruth's scholarship – that focuses on parsing the complexity of traumatic memory – is referenced by Leys as challenging this diagnostic bifurcation.[55] Regardless, a cursory overview of the history demonstrates that trauma, once considered a strictly physical wound, has evolved to encompass psychological damage as well. As part of that evolution, perceived sources of trauma have migrated from specific instruments, a gunshot for example, to

[54] See introduction for a general outline of her thinking as it connects to Freud and the uncanny.

[55] Beyond what I already wrote in the introduction of this dissertation, much of Caruth's theoretical critique is beyond the scope of my research because it focuses heavily on memory and acts of misremembrance.

broad categories of disruption, such as war. However, my ethnographic research indicates that this perception has become too broad and that deployment is not always traumatic.

Consider my interview with Noah.

Noah joined the army in peacetime as a second lieutenant. On September 16, 2001, five days after the twin towers fell in New York, he was assigned to his unit. When he deployed with the 101st Airborne Division to the mountains of Afghanistan/Pakistan, he was the youngest platoon leader in the battalion. After a brief return from his first tour, Noah redeployed to Iraq for nine months.

Over three-days – in successive conversations building from where we ended the previous discussion – Noah and I spoke on the phone as he commuted home to Virginia from his position with the federal government in Washington DC. In our first conversation he stated forcefully that he was open to all questions and reiterated more than once that I should ask him anything. Noah was thoughtful, blunt, unconcerned with pleasantries, and loathed equivocation. His verbal style had three distinct movements, each usually lasting the same length: articulate his thoughts with quick bursts of prose-heavy description; pause and consider if he truly believed what he said; then, refine and synthesize his thinking. If I spent too long framing a question, he interrupted and offered an answer. Being delicate with the topic of war was simply a waste of time. So when I asked Noah a question I ask in every interview – *as an outsider, are there any dumb questions one shouldn't ask a soldier about his war experience* – he quickly reminded me that nothing was off limits. Almost universally, the answer I heard from veterans was to avoid

asking if a soldier killed someone.[56] Noah, without additional prompting, told me the story of the man he killed.

> *Noah*: [We were in a] firefight and shot four people; [I] killed a guy, right before I left Iraq.
>
> [Continues].
>
> *Noah*: We got in a car chase with these guys, then they pulled an RPG, swung it out the rear door of the car, tried to fire it. The RPG wouldn't fire so they dropped it in the road. This all happened in a matter of seconds. As soon as they dropped it they picked up another one and tried to fire it. We lit them up with machine guns and stopped the car, shot everybody in the car, killed the driver. It was kind of a bloody mess. None of us got hurt. That was the only time that I had ever been in a position where I had to fire my personal weapon and I emptied a magazine into that car.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Noah*: I was so fucking pissed because the thing about this stuff is that nothing ever changes about fighting. Whether you're fighting in the schoolyard in middle school or fighting in the street in an Arab country, like nothing changes. So you feel the same way about stuff. I was infuriated at those guys. I mean they insulted us. They tried to kill us. You know, they essentially tried to take away everything that I had; so, you know, they died.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Noah*: Combat is a lot more personal than people make it out, when you see it on the news or in movies because these are *actual* guys. You know- we're looking them in the eye. And they attacked us and they came out really the worse. But that was the one time I ever killed anybody and I really didn't think anything of it. I mean I had nightmares about bombs falling on me but I don't have nightmares about that.

The details of Noah's story are striking. Vivid specificity animates the scene: an RPG swings out the rear door, a misfire, the second attempt, and then the illuminating glow from the rapid-fire machineguns as Noah and his men respond. The listener feels the emotional grip of

[56] They emphasized that the question should be avoided because it 1) assumes a closeness that likely doesn't exist between the person asking the question and the veteran being asked, 2) risks the possibly of re-wounding, and 3) it seems voyeuristic.

this experience. Nothing is minimized in this narrative.[57] It does not take a significant leap to imagine that pulling a still-warm body, bloodied and recently dead, from a car filled with an enemy that almost killed you *would* be traumatizing. When Caruth notes that the 'central and recurring image of trauma' in our time is a soldier engaged in battle, Noah's narrated encounter certainly fits this iconic and symbolic iconography.

Noah integrates this violent encounter by framing the story in a way that makes it similar to an event we all have known: 'kill or be killed' becomes simply 'us versus them.' "Nothing ever changes about fighting," explains Noah. "Whether you're fighting in the schoolyard in middle school or fighting in the street in an Arab country […] they insulted us […] they tried to kill us […] so, you know, they died." He has a storyline that makes this no different than a schoolyard fight, a way of narrating the experience that renders the emotional content ordinary. This framing is consequential because in the retelling the experience becomes normalized. This is the work done by the story and how the story works. The narrative produces meaning that helps render it psychologically manageable.

No trauma is disclosed.

Noah told other stories with a markedly different tone and tenor. Like the moment he realized that his felt sense of purpose when enlisting was completely misplaced and wrong. But over the three days, I came to realize that there was a larger idea Noah was narrating to me that he named outright early in our conversation: the story of closure.

> *Noah*: I don't talk about [war] anymore. I don't tell war stories. I don't bring it up. It's really not a part of my life anymore, which is interesting for me because when I got back, first like five years after I got back, that was all I did was write about it, talk about it, and I think that's all sort of natural. When I got back, I think I had to *do* something with it.
>
> [Continues]

[57] I will analyze the work of narratives that minimize in the fourth chapter, *War Stories*.

> *Noah*: I mean, I guess I do think about it periodically but at this point it's sort of become another thing that happened and not *the* thing that happened.**[58]**

Speaking to me ten years later – with emotional distance and after distilling why he went and what he saw both verbally as well as in writing – Noah contained (without psychic dissonance) the many experiences in one larger narrative of war.[59] That story may still be multifaceted and complex, but it is over. Through narrative, meaning-making became meaning-made. Furthermore, while reflecting on the interview transcript the following week, it became clear to me that throughout the conversation Noah presented an ethical stance in how he intended we both approach our life narrative interview. Not talking about the experience of his deployment because of an imagined taboo would produce a cultural violence far worse than rearticulating difficult memories.

Unlike Noah, who, despite a range of emotions, feels his war story is concluded, for many of the men who participated in this research, there remained an unresolved and persistent ruminating. Closure was not simple. In my interviews, I heard described the specter that follows many (even after coming home) of the *true* war experience they missed.[60] Often this was in reference to the story of not doing more to support forces engaged in the dangerous areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, a persistent sense of guilt felt even now, years later. Steve – a polite, direct, 55-year old retired Army Public Affairs Officer who deployed to Afghanistan three times – lamented that he was "only a Public Affairs Officer" who rarely was 'downrange' where the real "sense of fraternity [and] brotherhood of war" exists. Sam, a graduate of the Air Force

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[58] Italics added to highlight tone.

[59] As analyzed in the previous chapter, temporality changes the story. Clearly, it impacts how we experience trauma as well.

[60] I will return to the question of what soldiers assume constitutes a *true* war story in chapter four.

Academy, whose job during his deployment was flying cargo for midair refueling, talked about the war as something happening in a world far below him. "We were basically like a flying gas tank for the whole war that was taking place underneath us." For Sam, war was not scary; his combat time was similar to the daily routine of a commercial airline pilot. In their language: they were not in the fight. Many soldiers narrated variations of this theme. Like the Navy sailors who joked that their deployment was largely defined by video games, boredom, and making 'BFC's' (big fucking circles) in the ocean.[61] Similar to my conversation with Noah regarding the man he killed, these stories eschew the perception that war is traumatic. The psychic dissonance was not linked to an event, or a particular wartime experience (though these stories also emerged). Rather, they imagined they hadn't had a deployment that merited the catchall of 'thank you for your service,' heard in airports and public service campaigns. Their trauma was a low-grade shame of not having soldiered in a way that they imagine could have led to *actual* trauma. Again, in these stories deployment is not traumatic- the difficulty manifests when fitting the story within the perceived mold of what war should be.

Finally, for others like Tim, the degree to which the experience of going to war was damaging remains undefined (or ill defined).[62] In his version, he is "doing ok now." However, in his story, I hear inconsistency between being "ok" and his list of pain points. As the ethnographer and outsider, I did not then, nor am I now, making the claim that Tim's story is wrong. Instead, the scholar works to make sense of the narrative incoherence when someone

[61] From the following interviews: Koffe, Christopher, and Mason.

[62] Reminder: Tim lost fellow soldiers and friends, acknowledged his survivor's guilt, thoughts of suicide, he laments relationships that did not materialize with women who did not understand him or he drove away, he almost wrecked his truck, and suffered three breakdowns ("probably more that I'm not remembering off the top of my head")

claims to be without trauma and then describes lingering wounds. This relational adjudication between veterans and civilians – and by extension society – requires additional analysis.

Between soldiers and society. Between veterans and civilians.

As stated in the introduction, the veterans I interviewed experienced not only the proximate violence of battle during deployment but also the symbolic violence of returning to sort through how they might reconcile their experiences. Because Sigmund Freud's work on the First World War not only represents much of the early theorization on wartime trauma, but also outlines the problematic misunderstandings that exist between soldiers and 'civilized' population, let me return to Freud's writing.

In his 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death,' Freud explains that before WWI throughout Europe the prevailing assumption was that if war did erupt, it would be contained.[63] "[War would] limit itself to establishing the superiority of one side." Furthermore, soldiers would work to minimize the suffering inflicted to actions that were absolutely necessary- "we pictured it as a chivalrous passage of arms" (277). But when noncombatants witnessed the horrors reported from the trenches, there was an immediate and total disillusionment that chivalrous battle could exist. Freud atomizes two factors that were particularly upsetting for the noncombatant civilian Europe. First, the countries involved, armed with advanced technologies and with disconcerting ease, ignored international policy that set parameters on battlefield norms. Bloodlust was mechanically weaponized. Second, and on the individual level, as young men on both sides seamlessly enter the Viking "berserk-state," Europeans discovered that given the right circumstances there was no threshold for brutality and human violence. This manifest reality regarding human nature was suddenly undeniable. In the end, the disheartening truth was

[63] Written in 1915- see volume XIV of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*.

twofold: societies were not as 'civilized' as imagined and individuals could easily backslide into the mud of low morality. According to Freud, the appalled civilians safely watching from afar had simply experienced the undoing of an illusion. "There is something to be said, however, in criticism of [such total disillusionment]. Strictly speaking it is not justified, for it consists in the destruction of an illusion" (279). World War I did not create a new the landscape within the known world. A previously unknown evil did not emerge from the yellow smoke of mustard gas. Instead, Freud concludes that war simply upended the fallacy that countries had ever been so ethically righteous and demonstrated that human's have in them an irreducible drive to cruelty. To support this conclusion the essay turns to the psychoanalytic, probing deeply into the realm of primal drives (particularly the death drive), which is freed on the battlefield only to again be socially repressed for the soldiers upon their return.

Approximately fifteen years after 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death,' despite Freud's claim he knew too little to comment on the wartime experience of soldiers (at the time, both the quantitative and qualitative data was sparse) he was again writing on the subject. Prompted by the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, Albert Einstein wrote Freud inviting him to engage in a conversation about the possibility of preventing war and how a governing body might achieve this end. The letters – compiled together in an essay titled 'Why War?'[64] – quickly become theoretical and deeply philosophical. While the content of Freud's writing here is less colored by psychoanalytic terminology, as was the case in 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death," through an examination of innate human impulses and the work of social repression, he again repeats his previous conclusion. "For our immediate purpose then, this much follows from what has been said: there is no use in trying to get rid of men's

[64] See volume XXII of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*.

aggressive inclinations," (210). Freud admits that societies have always been an "admixture" of both idealistic impulses (Eros) and destructive impulses (Death). Problems arise when we imagine war as an atypical event that civilians are not answerable to or for, that it is somehow outside of *normal* reality. Perhaps more importantly, in the later essay Freud more specifically illustrates that we create a secondary wound for those returning from war by imagining they represent something we are not.

My focus is not the historiography of Freudian war theory.[65] However, consistently in his writing, Freud notices that soldiers returned at the end of the First World War to find they were strangers in their own homeland.[66] The war brought an otherwise avoidant culture face-to-face with the awesome reality of individual mortality and the drive for destruction. And death is something civilized man, in his daily routines, avoids at all cost. "The psycho-analytic school might say that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality" ('Thoughts for the Time on War and Death,' 289). After World War I, it was no longer possible for society to close their collective eyes and turn away from death's presence. The soldier was now that reminder. The result was that a chasm opened between the soldier and the civilian. Despite best intentions, and even though the outsider may ask questions, there will forever remain a feeling that the civilian doesn't *actually* want to know about the experience of war.

What I heard in my interviews is that civilians can't understand and don't care. Even if it is unconscious, the nonmilitary population doesn't want to know about the experience of war.

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[65] For this line of inquiry see Cathy Caruth's introduction to both Unclaimed Experiences: *Trauma, Narrative, and History* as well as *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*. In both, Caruth locates Freud's definition of trauma principally in *Totem and Taboo* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

[66] In Chapter 5, *The Return*, I will briefly evaluate the Freudian lens and how it focuses the analysis regarding stories from my ethnographic data constructed in response to what it means to return from war and the tensions of integrating 'back.' How this dovetails with understanding trauma narratives is what I focus on here.

Referring back to Michael Pitre, often when there is interest, civilians still prefer decoy stories. To take Freud's thinking seriously and acknowledge its relevance – and I argue that voices like Noah's and those in the previous chapter underscore that he is and we must – is to accept that war trauma is not a story relegated to the battlefield. It is not only about an experience one survives or mercifully avoids. Instead, trauma is authored relationally. Trauma exists, and is created, between the one and the many, between soldiers, civilians, and within our co-created society. Furthermore, what feels traumatic by soldiers may not be the event of war but instead the feeling that they are not able to author the story upon their return.[67] Again, Noah's comments are representative of what I found in the rest of my ethnography:

> *Matt*: Do you think that while you were deployed, while all this was unfolding, while you were over there, do you think we [back home] cared about it as a culture… or did we kind of miss it?
>
> *Noah*: I think everybody sort of missed it. I don't think anybody really understood what was going on. But I also don't know if that's really any different from other eras. When I was in Iraq, what I was experiencing nobody in the United States had any fucking clue what was going on […] and truthfully they really didn't want to know. But I don't know if that's ever been any different.

Noah's assessment that the indifference and misunderstanding is an unavoidable historical truth is another example (see the introduction) of what journalist George Packer calls an inevitable war cliché, "more or less true but open for qualification."[68] Mark Twain stated it similarly when he wrote that "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." I heard this aphorism for the first time during my fieldwork at Syracuse University. In November 2014, the poet Brian Turner was on campus to read poems and selections from his recently published memoir. He was asked if there was something different about his war and those fought by

[67] I will return to this point in both chapters four and five.

[68] See his *New Yorker* article 'Home Fires: how soldiers write their wars'

previously generations. With the artistry of a poet, he recalled Twain's quote as a way of answering the question both yes and no. After all, there is always a social and political context supporting or truncating/silencing one's experience. And the language available to soldiers in Freud's time – the range of narrative options – is not the same as what it is today.

Before the categorizing language of PTSD and moral injury (the focus of the next section in this chapter), we had: "nervous disease," "nostalgia," "soldier's heart," "shell shock," and "combat fatigue."[69] But, even as medical and mental health professionals engaged with the new reality of war neurosis in WWI, they still overwhelmingly categorized symptoms of psychological suffering with the uncomplicated yet harmful conclusion that soldiers were simply 'malingering.'[70] "The majority of physicians remained indifferent to the psychic suffering of the shell-shocked solider, who was widely accused of malingering" (Leys 4). General George S. Patton's now infamous slap of a soldier under his command on bed rest during the Sicily Campaign in WWII amplifies the point. Patton asked about a soldier's injuries; then, when he was told there were no physical injuries, became enraged, slapped him across the face and called him a coward.[71] Clearly, more time was still needed before the 'experts' would consider a soldier's psychological pain a legitimate diagnosis. Judith Herman argues the point convincingly in reference to our more recent experience with the Vietnam War- "[it was] the national experience of defeat in a discredited war [Vietnam] that made it possible to recognize

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[69] See the introduction of the article by Dombo (et all), 'The Trauma of Moral Injury: Beyond the Battlefield,' for a succinct review of how this language developed and changed over time. See also Kluge Fellow Thomas Dodman's lecture at the library of congress, titled: 'Before Trauma: Nostalgia, or the Melancholy of War.'

[70] Of course, the signifier of 'mental health,' so widely used today, did not exist at the time. I use it here in a tongue and cheek manner to demonstrate that language changes and is changed by the agreed upon norms authored by our collective understanding.

[71] This raises additional questions around what it means to be brave, to be a soldier, to be a man, against which trauma and traumatic injury is defined. This line of inquiry will emerge in clearer focus in the coming chapters.

psychological trauma as a lasting and inevitable legacy of war" (Herman 28). As such, the American Psychiatric Association did not recognize Post Traumatic Stress in the diagnostic canon until the "moral legitimacy of the antiwar movement" had significant and widespread support (Herman 27).

Steve, the retired 55-year old retired Army Public Affairs Officer, explained that the America his father returned to after fighting in the Korean War, the norms at the time, the general idea of war and military service, prefigured his father's story in particular ways.

> *Steve*: Here's my father- a Marine Corps vet who has fought as an infantryman in the Korean War for 18 months, saw all kinds of combat, saw his fellow marines die, was himself severely injured, and comes out of the war and goes into the peacetime mode. He assumes his duty. He finds his civilian career, works that, gets married, has kids. Hardly ever talks about the military. And it always puzzled me.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Steve*: This is Vietnam era like 1967 to 1969, 1970, so people are talking about war—and I'm like, 'dad, I want to be like General Wes Moreland. I want to go to West Point, I want to serve, I want to lead,' and all these things. He hardly ever talked about it. He never said, 'hey, that's a great idea.' He was very, very quiet. Never shared his own wartime experiences.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Steve*: What I came to realize through the years: he saw a lot and he sacrificed a lot. And in talking with other vets I came to the conclusion that back then that the ones who really fought and suffered hardly talk about it. They keep quiet. They're very silent. And I know my dad did. And I know my dad had suffered. He doesn't admit it but I know he experienced PTSD, and I think it's something he wrestled with all his life but he kept it silent. Now, I don't know how healthy that is, but that is what he did. And he managed to keep his career; he raised a family of four kids, retired.

In the same interview, Steve described that for him there were a different set of requirements. He had to work on "civilianizing" himself by "rounding the rough edges."

> *Matt*: Can you give me more specifics on that? […] What does that look like on a day-to-day basis, the rounding of the rough edges?
>
> *Steve*: Well, being more patient with my two daughters and taking time to be a dad. Starting at the home front because I'm realizing they have a special set of needs and [I

> don't] always fit with what they need- they need a dad. I have to stop what I'm doing because when I engage in my work, whatever I'm doing, I'm going at a very fast clip. And then when my concentration is snapped, I get a little— I lose my patience. So I'm learning to be patient, I'm learning patience.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Steve*: And then the second thing, the other thing is just the art of conversation, going up and talking to neighbors about anything stupid. So that's the other thing that I'm doing to soften my edges, become more *civilian*.[72] The feedback I get, my daughters will say, 'you know, my friend told me she was afraid of you the other day when you were out in the front lawn raking lawns.' I say, 'why?' 'Well, you looked really mad.' I say, 'no, I was just raking leaves.' 'Yeah, but you scared her.' And I didn't say anything. I didn't even realize it, you know… and I think, 'my gosh am I that scary?' So I'm working even on that, my demeanor, to be more smiling and approachable to people.

Clearly, the expectation of appropriate post-war behavior depends on social attitudes and conventions. In the end, cultural meta-narratives both create and limit personal experience. Is it good or bad that Steve's father lacked the same access to a concept like Post Traumatic Stress? Later, for Steve, and all the men who shared their stories with me, PTSD was already an ubiquitous acronym discussed freely. This implicates Steve in a way that is reflected by the expectations his daughter has for her father (more smiles, participate in small talk, smooth the rough edges). But for his father, with stoicism, an eye steadied on what he imagined were his paternal and familial obligations, he returned from war, and with quiet determination reentered his life.

Ultimately, culture will give the feedback if someone is acting in ways that disrupt the collective norms of appropriate behaviors. The soldier is left with the conflict of sorting this out. If this line of discussion risks abstraction, my interview with Matthew provides grounding.

Matthew was a Marine in a Force Reconnaissance Company, the Marine Corps' special operations unit. He was a Team Leader. He deployed three times to Iraq. Upon leaving the

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[72] Italics added to highlight tone.

Marines he joined the National Guard, reclassifying into the Army Reserves, a progression he labeled with the descriptor: "door-kicker-to-geek." Taken as a whole, with his varied experience and multiple tours, he offered a multifaceted perspective regarding the inherent tensions that arise when moving across the civilian-military divide and the ensuing difficulties in regard to maintaining a coherent story between war and the return. Layered throughout Matthew's narrative, and at times this was explicitly articulated, was the question if what he had experienced was traumatic. In short, was he traumatized? At times a clear answer was not available. For example, home after his first deployment, while enjoying a meal with family and friends at a restaurant in North Carolina, Matthew found himself physically overwhelmed and in need of escape.

> *Matthew*: There was a smell coming from the kitchen that reminded me of the smell from Kuwait, and I had to get up and walk out and just get some air. And people with me are like, 'hey, you have PTSD.' I'm like, 'fuck you I don't have PSTD, go to hell.' Cause I think a lot of soft people play that card for attention.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Matthew*: I went outside, [and my wife was] like 'what's wrong?' I go, 'I don't know, I just needed to get out of there.' It was kind of like this— it was a food smell, it wasn't a bad smell, but it kind of reminded me of Kuwait for some reason… because we were in Kuwait before we invaded. It just reminded me of Kuwait and I remember I hated being in Kuwait— so I just walked out. I think I was more annoyed. But my wife, well my then-wife, looked at me and she said, 'you look like you were upset.' I go, 'no, no, no, I'm fine.' And I went back in.

The story here, like the rhythmic click of a metronome, pivots between the insider (Matthew explaining he is not traumatized) and the outsider (his 'then-wife' responding to a traumatic reaction). For her, something is clearly wrong. But Matthew responds: "no, no, no, I'm fine." Just like Tim, unequivocally he is ok. There was forcefulness in his voice as he recounted the event to me, as if beneath the words Matthew was also explaining that he has the final say regarding if he is or is not traumatized. Not his partner. Not his friends. Yet we live in

a world of social norms. If Matthew receives the information that what he thinks are normal responses to war seem off, does he, in response, consider himself traumatized? At a minimum this requires that he confront what being traumatized means *for him*, and/or if his behaviors are socially aberrant. Conclusively authoring a narrative that embeds a satisfactory answer to this twofold puzzle – what is a normal response to war and how does one conceive of the possibility of traumatic wounding on his own terms – often dovetailed with the moment in the interview when I focused the conversation on PTSD.

Post Traumatic Stress and moral injury: categories and categorizations

When I asked interviewees my question about PTSD, I aimed to frame the inquiry in a way that was open-ended and innocuous. Hopefully, the men would respond broadly if they preferred; or, if desired, they could focus on personal experience. It was up to them. With one notable exception (addressed in chapter four), to a person, everyone repeated that it was a positive step that our country was discussing PTSD. It is a needed conversation. Furthermore, in a discursive nonspecific way that referenced the psychosocial wellbeing of individuals, they thought it was generally good for soldiers to share what it is like to go to war. But with the exception of two outliers, every person who I engaged in a life narrative interview rushed to also explain that they personally did not suffer from PTSD. Tim – in the conversation that anchors the beginning of this chapter and the last – accepts Post Traumatic Stress conceptually, even noting symptoms (*I've got some issues that are probably induced by stress*), but rejects the diagnosis (*it's not Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*). Aaron, a captain in the Army who deployed for a 15-month tour in Iraq, echoed Tim, but more bluntly stated the point.

> *Aaron*: Here are some thoughts on PTSD in no particular order. The first is, if you had asked me when I came back, how likely are you to suffer from PTSD I would have said zero. Then I had a cold so I went to a VA clinic and they said 'hey, because you're in this time frame we have to screen you for PTSD… So, did you ever shoot anybody? Yes.

> Were you ever shot at? Yes, did you ever see anybody ever die or be killed? Yes. Did you ever have loud explosions or burning vehicles'… and there were a few other questions [like that], and my answer was yes to every single one.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Aaron*: The guy screening me says 'here is what you don't understand: […] it is guys like you that end up living under a bridge.' I will never forget him saying that, 'guys who have been through what you do are the ones that end up living under the overpass of the highway.'
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Aaron*: My general response on all of PTSD– no doubt I went through some pretty amazing events, and there were even more where more people were killed and other horrible shit happened, but at the end of the day, my great grandfather was in Korea for five years or four years, my grandfather was in WWII for however many years that lasted, and their [wars] were probably different but equally as challenging and they weren't little bitches about it … at the end of the day, you got to just go forward.[73]

What is the difference between acknowledging the category and accepting the categorization? What are the byproducts of these narrative labels and the work of labeling? The moment PTSD is codified in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980, there became a clear story of what qualifies as trauma and what doesn't; what counts and what doesn't count; events that are diagnostically valid and experiences that are not validated by the diagnosis. This implicit narrative is baked into the category itself. PTSD, therefore, sets parameters for what *is* and what *is not* traumatic. This is problematic. Acknowledging symptoms that clearly mirror PTSD but a strong refusal of the categorization prompts reflection on the public discourse, the social politics, of what being diagnosed with this syndrome means for a veteran.

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[73] Aaron's derogatory-language (*little bitches*), placed alongside Matthew's description of events in North Carolina (*the soft play the card of PTSD for attention*), highlight how normative associations of manliness and masculinity functionally serve a narrative purpose. Just as there are ideas about the *real* war there are often assumptions of *real* manliness. I will unpack the masculine overlay in the coming chapter on deployment and narrating war stories.

Through my research, I found that a byproduct of the ubiquitous and everyday nature of how we talk about and understand PTSD forecloses how men are enabled to talk about wartime injuries. It creates an inherently insidious bifurcation: either a veteran is a hero (and adulated with parades and 'Thank You For Your Service') or dangerously suffers in silence (consider the social media proliferation of the 22 Pushup Challenge to raise awareness for veteran suicide). In regard to the former, poet Brain Turner asked the audience at his poetry reading at the Syracuse downtown YMCA if clapping in airports for our men and women in the armed services is the same as knowing their story?[74] And in reference to the latter, the war reporter David Wood implores his reader at the end of his book *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of our Longest War*s, "let's stop defining veterans in terms of the PTSD [story] and twenty-two suicides a day. That's wrong and offensive […] suicide and PTSD do not define the generation newly returned from war" (Wood 263).

The felt presence of this culture narrative emerged in my interview with Nash, an Army veteran who deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq five times between 2003 and 2009. His anger regarding the widespread public misconception of the troubled PTSD-veteran was palpable. There was raw fury in his voice when he told me about a destructive and fallacious article that made the argument that veterans with PTSD were a societal threat. "They were obviously making the claim that people with PTSD commit murder!! Which is a complete fallacy, which is nowhere in any medical journal … it's sad and pitiful how they are perpetuating this myth that people with PTSD are dangerous." Additionally, the outsider can use the diagnostic conclusion of PTSD as yet another Freudian-WWI-type avoidance narrative. In my first interview with

[74] Reading took place in November 2014. See Table 2 in the first chapter.

brothers Nate and Randy, older brother Nate described PTSD as just another foil used by outsiders to avoid actually listening to his personal experience.

> *Nate*: [I] go to the doctor at the VA and they are like, 'oh you are depressed… you should take this medicine…we figured this out; we solved the rubric cube; on to the next thing and next person because we are so busy.' And I feel like people should not be so quick to just go to the PTSD label. I would not be so quick as to label [my experience that way]
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Nate*: Don't say I have [PTSD] until you have been with me a month. I think it is impossible to unwind someone's brain process or what someone has been through in an hour period.
> Much of what a soldier experiences does not so neatly categorize.

In his article 'The Morally Injured,' Tyler Boudreau – author, speaker, and ex-marine – uses his own experience in Iraq to construct a forceful polemic describing the psychological ramifications of categorizations. Boudreau never had a specific moment during deployment that he could then later identify as the primal scene that seeded his PTSD. Nevertheless, he returned from deployment gut-sick with guilt. He participated in the occupation of Iraq. He tacitly agreed to partake in a system that violated his sense of morality. And through the mundane daily work of occupation "[his] moral fibers [were] torn by what [he was] asked to do and by what we agreed to do" (Boudreau 753). Yet, he couldn't find *official* language for his experience. Boudreau found himself in a double bind: recognizing for himself that this traumatic feeling of shame was legitimate and telling the story to others in a way they could/would understand as trauma, even if it wasn't PTSD. "So when veterans or soldiers feel something hurt inside themselves, there is still only one brand to choose— PTSD. That's not good. It's not always accurate. And it renders soldiers automatically into mental patients instead of wounded souls" (Boudreau 749). Fortunately, and Boudreau retraces this for the reader in 'The Morally Injured,' he found the emergent psychological category called moral injury. For Boudreau, where PTSD

felt stifling and oppressively diagnostic, the more discursive definitional sweep of moral injury offered agentive potential and enabled him to more fully author his story.

Dr. Jonathan Shay popularized the term moral injury in 1995 with the publication of his book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Having spent years as a staff psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs, Shay realized that while there were vast differences between the Homeric setting in *The Iliad* and the experience of soldiers in Vietnam, what remained the same was the "violent rage and social withdrawal [by soldiers] when deep assumptions of "what's right" are violated" (Shay xiii). And "even in optimal operational contexts, some combat and operational experiences can inevitably transgress deeply held beliefs that undergird a service member's humanity" (Maguen and Litz, 1). War, after all, is a moral issue. As Vietnam veteran and writer Karl Marlantes explained in the New York TimesTalks ('Vietnam 1967: A 50-Year Retrospective') war "is a moral issue, not an abstract issue." The morality of war is meaningful in a different way. It is "sacred stuff" (Shay 5). Therefore, a moral transgression in wartime can have powerful ramifications that ripple out to impact the story one tells about *all* of humanity.

Deepening Shay's initial work with moral injury, and responding to "high levels of violence and its aftermath" experienced by service members deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, in 2007 Dr. Brett Litz introduced a therapeutic model for addressing moral injury based on principles associated with cognitive behavioral therapy (Maguen and Litz 2). Also working with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Litz was primarily engaged with military communities that may not evidence classic symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, but were nevertheless in need of moral repair after exposure to or participation in acts that came in conflict with their values. Litz observed that the violation often originates from the self- like Boudreau

noting his own role in what he defines as the occupation of Iraq. But soldiers may also "witness intense human suffering and cruelty that shakes their core beliefs about humanity." As Litz writes- "violence and killing are prescribed in war […] still, the actions, sights, smells, and images of violence and its aftermath may produce considerable lasting distress and inner turmoil, comparable to consequences of direct life threat" (Litz et al., 696).[75]

If it seems that moral injury is merely the resulting turmoil from passive inaction within the military system – such as Tyler Boudreau participating in the occupation of Iraq – consider Shannon Meehan from the previous chapter and the mortar strike from his tank that killed an innocent family in Bokouba; this too is an example of an act that resulted in moral injury. Or, consider the story told by Troy.

Troy was a Convoy Security Commander in the Marines. He turned eighteen in Boot Camp and twenty-one while he was deployed in Iraq. His job when his unit patrolled outside the wire was manning the second vehicle in the convoy. "We'd block off the intersection and allow the convoy to pass through without the interruption of other traffic and people and all that stuff– basically point the guns outward and just watch, because an intersection is perfect for an ambush." There is one mission that still haunts Troy six years later– a young girl approached his vehicle while his Humvee was vigilantly scanning the roads for possible threats.

> *Troy*: [My gunner yells to me:] 'I've got a girl running up pretty quick.' I'm trying to see but the dust is caked on the mirrors, and we clean our mirrors before we go out but just from driving that short road dust caked on there… I was trying to see if she had something like around her chest or waist, and I really couldn't tell. And my gunner sounds nervous. More nervous than I would expect, my driver couldn't see from his mirrors either.

[75] Even though moral injury is often referred to as a relatively new concept, and the scholarly research (quantitative and qualitative) on the topic still relatively nascent, there have been contributions to the field beyond Shay and Litz. Such as David Wood's *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of our Longest Wars*; Nancy Sherman's *Afterwar*; *Rita Brock's Soul Repair: Recovering From Moral Injury after War* and Ann Jones' *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return from America's Wars- The Untold Story*.

[Continues]

Troy: So the gunner is like, 'should I shoot?' He's screaming, 'she's coming, she's coming'… and I'm thinking, 'if this girl runs up to the truck and explodes or some shit like that, all of these motherfuckers are gone.' Or, I could just tell him to shoot her and she's gone. That was the call. And I said, 'no!' Then he moved his hands off and then right there she ran up to the truck and I saw her– a little girl, barefooted with like some kind of sack dress on like she's from the bible or something. And she just put her hand up like that toward the gunner for food… all she wanted was something to eat. And that little event fucked me up. What fucked me up even more, excuse my language, I hesitated… which I never expected that I would do because we did so much preparing for this and at this point I love my brothers; I love them… and I could have made the wrong call.

[Continues]

Troy: It still bothers me. At least I'm not crying about it. And the funny thing, nothing happened. Nothing went wrong. It was fine, but it just jacked me up. For a couple of years just thinking about it messed me up. I'm all right now, I can tell that story… but I wanted to be someone who made a difference in those moments because I trusted myself and a lot of marines, by the work I had done, trusted me too; I didn't want to disappoint them.

For Troy, as he remembered the young Iraq girl from the intersection, the categorization of PTSD did not produce catharsis, healing, or insight. As a category, moral injury, however, might create a psychological/emotional shift, perhaps even change the retelling of the story.

In my research, I learned that the experience of posttraumatic reliving of a past event is often associated with anger and/or anxiety. Moral injury, however, considers the betrayal of ideals, ethics, values, and the disruption in an individual's worldview. What distinguishes the emotional content of moral injury is the persistent feeling of shame and/or guilt. In this way, moral injury widens the narrative frame and allows for new dialogical and emotional analysis. Remarks by clinical psychologist Dr. Joe Currier – whose scholarship largely focuses on quantitative measures of Moral injury, particularly within military populations – at The Moral Injury Conference at Syracuse University in 2015 provides an instructive unpacking of these categories:

> The predominant emotions for what we might call moral injury are not necessarily anger or anxiety [as it is with PTSD] they are instead guilt and shame. Some of the soldiers I have worked with describe experiences in which they, or someone close to them, violated their moral code. [Continues]. Others are haunted by their own inaction, traumatized by something they witnessed and failed to prevent.

An individual may have concurrent symptoms accurately categorized as PTSD and also grapple with moral injury. In fact, symptoms like sleep disturbance, suicidal ideations, and somatically re-experiencing traumatic events, all common signifiers of PTSD and traumatic brain injury, can also represent the presence of moral injury. In the end, the most pressing question is not which label is correct (PTSD or moral injury); rather, while a theoretical frame, or trauma terminology, might work well for those on the outside (insofar as it simplifies complexity), that same narrative categorization creates an additional burden for the very population the category purports to define.

At the same Syracuse University Moral Injury Conference, Andrew Miller, the director of the Moral Injury Project and an Army veteran, articulated one of the practical byproducts to moral injury, in the following way:

> I would prefer the term moral injury to stay free of the DSM… so as to force the idea of moral injury back into our daily thoughts. [Continues]. The conversation that we hear about PTSD fails to include the same afterthoughts and worries that are characteristic of moral injury. [Continues]. I hope the term remains unshackled by the DSM so the bearers of morally injurious burdens will experience a more permissive and inviting culture.

Again and again, scholars of moral injury repeat this refrain: this is not only an issue for them (the military and the veteran population) but for us (the civilians) as well.[76] All too often those untouched by moral injury (or PTSD, for that matter), look across the divide to those who have returned with invisible wounds and conclude that the generalized story – battlefield heroes

[76] See the introduction of Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, Shay's introduction in *Achilles in Vietnam*, and the conclusion of both Brock's *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War* as well as Wood's *What Have We Done*.

and war torn veterans in need of medication – is a complete enough picture; or, that war will always be a life event wholly unknowable to an outsider. These types of assumptions, and the idea of an insurmountable psychic/emotional gap, produce an incomplete story and narrative misunderstanding. A reframing is required. For Tyler Boudreau, this is one of the benefits to moral injury as a narrative label- it requires a response and a shared responsibility.

> PTSD as a diagnosis has a tendency to depoliticize a veteran's disquietude and turn it into a mental disorder. What's most useful about the term "moral injury" is that it takes the problem out of the hands of the mental health profession and the military and attempts to place it where it belongs — in society, in the community, and in the family — precisely where moral questions should be posed and wrangled with. (Boudreau 750)

Moral injury represents an invitation/demand for participation. The question then is, how? The first step, we must listen.

Concluding thoughts

As Cathy Caruth writes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: "the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike" (vii). To repeat the Jonathan Shay quote, "before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything – we should listen" (4).

How do we listen well?

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis*, *and History* authors Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laumb suggest that "bearing witness" requires the listener must understand "'the lay of the land'– the landmarks, the undercurrents, and the pitfalls […] the listener must know all this and more. He or she must *listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech in the witness

and in himself" (58). As we have seen throughout this chapter, the 'lay of the land' with trauma narratives begins in the awareness of how the story is always circumstance specific, coauthored by persons in relationship to one another, and defined by meta-narratives and cultural tropes.

Ideally, this type of listening from a thoughtful witness will happen organically. For Michael Pitre – the teller of decoy stories – he finally felt heard, and that he could tell the real story, when his friend asked about the recovery of dead bodies from the battlefield and then allowed Pitre to tell the unsettling traumatic details without interruption. "We had to post a marine with a rifle to shoot dogs who are coming to try to carry away pieces of your dead friends. He just looked me in the eye until I was done […] And I realized it was fine, that I could talk to him." Pitre's friend 1) genuinely wanted to know about his experience and 2) wasn't interested in fitting that personal story into a mold, a cliché, or some version of every other war story. Marine Officer Lee instructed me that "to listen well" in my interviews was a relatively simple task- "you just let [a soldier] start talking and let the story unfold."

It is both wishful and naive to imagine listening/telling will mostly unfold seamlessly as it did for Pitre and his friend. In his book *Tribe: on Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger recounts an experience of speaking on a panel with his close friend Vietnam veteran Karl Marlantes. In the middle of the event rage boiled over for one of the participants in the audience, himself a veteran of Vietnam. After yelling obscenities at the experts on stage, particularly at Marlantes who the enraged man claimed didn't know anything about the Vietnam War, he left. Junger describes his friend's response. "'That,' Karl finally said into the stunned silence, 'is one of the things that's going to happen if you truly let vets speak their mind about war'" (122). At his poetry reading in Syracuse Brain Turner told a similar story. A woman confronted him

during one of his public events because she did not agree with the idea Turner articulated that war stories are also about love. Turner was happy to listen to her anger.

It will not always be civil discourse, or easy, but listening matters.

However, many in the civilian population don't want to look at war, know about war, or hear the stories. Not ever. That is one way to silence a soldier. If the collected 'we' does want to listen, invites the conversation, but then only engages in a one-dimensional narrative; this will be "[reducing] them all into versions of the same story." This is another form of silencing that is subtler but nevertheless important to understand. When this is the case, the soldier does not get to own his experience unless he tells the story in a way that fits categorization, stereotype, clinical definition, and/or the intuitive assumption. What if in my capacity as ethnographer I challenged Aaron or Matthew with the suggestion that he was *actually* suffering from PTSD; or told Noah that his narrative work compartmentalized unseen pain by taking the unavoidable fact that he ended another's life and arranged the details to make the whole episode no more eventful than a schoolyard disagreement. This type of intervention from the all-seeing eye of an armchair academic would have likely shifted the terms of the interview. This is one problem with an exterior definition of trauma. Consider the scholar who notes with certainty that if one has an experience of a certain type – loses a fellow solider on the battlefield – he has encountered trauma. While this is loosely the method of psychology diagnosis, there remains a paternal and even patronizing element to this approach because it privileges the observer's conclusion over and above the story from the person who lived through the event.[77] To the assurance offered by

[77] In *Narrative Therapy: the Social Construction of Preferred Realties*, Jill Freedman and Gene Combs echo the point. "It is hard for most therapists to learn to listen to people's stories as stories […] however, when we meet people for the first time, we want to understand the meaning of their stories for *them*. This means turning our backs on 'expert' filters" (43-44).

this kind of listener, *I know better than you what you are actually feeling and I will help you*. We hear the frustrated soldier respond, *I am actually ok*.

Aminatta Forna, a Sierra Leonean and Scottish writer (her publications include journalism, memoir, and fiction), whose work primarily focuses on memory, war, and the endemic tension between historical authorship and the specificity of personal narrative, summarizes the insider/outsider conflict anecdotally based on her own experiences. She observes that "the more a society tells you that you are irrevocably damaged by what has taken place, the more it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

> My family has seen what feels like more than our share of painful, you might say traumatic, events: the murder of my father who was a political activist when I was 11, followed by 25 years of political oppression, 10 years of civil war and even an Ebola outbreak. I'm often asked whether I was traumatized by events, and I have to answer, truthfully, no. Over the years, I have written a great deal about people who have managed to endure events with the power to ruin lives, and this is what I have learned…the ability to shape your own narrative, rather than having others shape it for you, is ultimately what matters most. The power of the story lies in the hands of the storyteller.[78]

Like Aminatta Forna, for Susan Brison this tension is very personal. In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Brison observes that when she retells the experience of her own sexual assault and near death, nothing feels missing. This runs counter to a theoretical fault line in trauma studies represented by scholars like Cathy Caruth who argue that the mind is unprepared for the shock of violence and death and therefore trauma narratives are based "not on direct experience of the threat, but the *missing* of this experience." Brison is incredulous. Her trauma story doesn't feel like it is based on absence. If anything, it is all too real. "In light of these ways in which I experienced the traumatic event, I am puzzled by Cathy Caruth's [writing and] discussion of trauma as an "unclaimed" or "missed experience" (Brison 32). As English professor Roger Thompson explained to me, he stopped teaching trauma theory to his students

[78] See PBS 'The Power of your Suffering is in how you tell your Story,' Mar 19, 2018.

when he worked at the Virginia Military Institute because they couldn't find their stories inside all the theorization.

In the short story collection *Fire and Forget*, written by veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the editors explain to the outsider (in this case the reader) that "one thing a vet will always tell you is that it's never like it is in the stories. Then he'll tell you his" (xiii). How do we listen to a storyteller's trauma in a way that he feels heard, especially when it does not include our own ideas of what is being narrated or undermines our nonmilitary cultural norm? When we overlay societal meta-narratives, how do we avoid the problem of reducing what is deeply personal into cliché? How do we utilize categories not to define but rather as a shared language in service of deep listening?

For the men I interviewed authoring their own story is of great importance. Because these personal stories directly relate to their sense of self. It is part and parcel of identity work. In this way, narration of a traumatic episode, and this extends beyond the context of war, can be agency made real. We have to allow for that subjectivity and specificity. After all, what is the purpose of defining trauma in a manner that mutes individuals when they seek to narrate their own experience?

CHAPTER 4

War Stories

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead […] and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly […] and in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It is about sunlight. It's about sorrow […] and [it's about] people who never listen. (76 and 81)

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Of all the people I met through my research Nash remained an outlier. He was a self-proclaimed 'fat guy,' with dimpled Santa Clause cheeks, expressive hands, an unabashed openness, and immediate warmth. When we first met, he seemed like an old friend I was reconnecting with after an unavoidable absence.

Nash lived out of state but was, theoretically, open to a phone interview. Before he signed a consent form, and told me his story, we broadly talked about the research (he wanted to know why someone non-military was interested in this topic), his thoughts regarding the military now (they had changed since he left), working for the federal government (he believed in the mission of his work), and his plans for graduate school (a Master's degree in Public Policy). When he did consent to a formal interview, he began with the biographical details. After ten years in the military and five deployments – Afghanistan once and Iraq four times – Nash retired as a member of an elite special operations unit in which he served as logistical support. Without embarrassment, he explained that his early days in the military were not easy– "it was difficult because I've always been a heavy kid." Regarding Post Traumatic Stress, Nash disclosed that he had PTSD and took medication to modulate the symptoms. He was the only interviewee to admit to a personal diagnosis of PTSD. Throughout the conversation, Nash was descriptive when he talked. However, even though his final deployment was six years previous, Nash still

found narrating his war story difficult. Not because it was traumatic; rather, it was too complex; the story was too big.

> *Nash*: It's hard… people don't normally expect [you] to be able to describe long complex experiences in little [concise] comments; it's almost absurd, it doesn't even happen in the regular world. So why should it when it comes to war?
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Nash*: [There is] a lot of just guarding shit– just standing there, not doing anything, just looking around. And then the fun side of it, people don't think that it is fun. But the camaraderie and the friends you make over there are like the tightest friends that you get, ever. Also, I don't think anyone could appreciate how dirty it could be in every sense of the word […] there are dust storms… and kind of just dirt covering everything. I assume it's very different from what most people imagine it is.
>
> I asked Nash to explain what most people imagine it is.
>
> *Nash*: For one, most of us hate the concept of fucking heroes. And that we're doing this for our country because we're proud patriots– all of which is absolutely true, but you don't think about that over there. And for me, being someone who is very politically engaged, towards the end, even in Iraq, I fucking disagreed with it the entire fucking time. I hated the concept of us going to Iraq; I thought it was bad, I thought it was stupid, and I completely, wholeheartedly disagreed with it. But I didn't think about that while I was there; you just shut it off. You're there doing a job, cause you're a professional and this is your job, and when you're in the bad times, in combat, you're just trying to keep you and your buddies alive.

As quoted in the previous chapter from the short story collection *Fire and Forget*: "one thing a vet will always tell you is that it's never like it is in the stories. Then he'll tell you his" (xiii). This is one of the many double binds that arise when narrating war stories. Nash highlights others. Nash hesitates with the culturally overused signifier of patriotism. He is politically minded. He disagreed with the American misadventure in Iraq (*I fucking disagreed with it the entire fucking time*). Yet, Nash considers himself a patriot. He considers having a discussion that articulates and honors the granularity of what that means exactly is difficult (perhaps impossible), so he simply confirms the story that all soldiers are proud patriots. Veterans almost universally believe that naive civilians will falsely understand what this means

for those who served. Furthermore, the men I met largely agreed that Americans are preoccupied with stories only about heroes and firefights; though this too is part of war, it is not the whole story. Because deployment also includes sand, heat, jokes, fun, boredom, death, fear, thrilling excitement, a deeply felt purposefulness, Sisyphean meaninglessness, and love. In the passage that starts this chapter, Tim O'Brien articulates this complexity well. War stories are not just about war, they are about "discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love." All of this is true. Additionally, from my ethnographic research, it became clear that war stories are also about the insider feeling that the outsider, even if he listens, cannot hear the story *right*. Finally, I learned that even within the in-group of the military, because there are implicit assumptions made regarding what qualifies as a true war experience, there is a tension (sometimes it was even an open hostility) of who is authorized to tell these stories.

War is boring, fun, funny, hot, and full of sand

Having scored in the ninety-ninth percentile of Defense Language Aptitude Battery Test (DLAB), the Marines offered Frank a spot in the seventy-two-week language immersion program for Arabic, but they required that he first remove the large anarchic symbol tattooed on his chest. He resisted. Eventually, a compromise was reached: he added shading and lines so that, from a distance, it was hard to discern what the permanent ink represented.

Frank is not what I imagine when I think of the Marine mantra *Always Faithful*. Broad shouldered, with blond hair, and a defined jaw line, physically, he looks the part; however, his personality is an amalgam of punk rocker, Jack Kerouac, and bellicose liberal agitator at a white pride rally. If Frank's opinions and intellectual interests defy military stereotype, his deployments were similarly unique. When he first arrived in-country to Afghanistan, at twenty, his job was translating between NATO psychiatrists and psychologists working with female

victims of the Taliban who had been raped, abused, and/or mutilated. "I was in counseling rooms essentially trying to translate between a Swedish psychologist who spoke broken English and Arabic speaking trauma victims… It was just fucked up." Then he deployed in counter intelligence as an antiterrorism specialist interrogating prisoners. "Nobody understood this work back home. It was so sensationalized, everyone thought it was torture." On his final deployment to Iraq, Frank's Humvee was hit with an RPG. He was in a coma for five days before waking up in a VA hospital in America. In the attack Frank lost pieces of his skull, suffered nerve damage in his leg, and had to relearn patterns of speech. But the most traumatic part of the experience was receiving the official word from the Marines that his brain injury meant he could no longer maintain security clearance and therefore could not keep his job. "So they were like, 'you can stay in if you want but you can't do your job anymore.' I fucking loved my job. That was a hard day."[79]

Frank and I talked for over two hours in an empty classroom at the university where he was pursuing a doctorate in English; his dissertation was on TS Elliot. Like Nash, Frank did not seem a representative data point for the other life narratives. And yet, just like Nash, towards the end of our interview Frank summarized his war experience not by reemphasizing the seemingly traumatic/dramatic chronology of his three deployments. Instead, Frank explained that war isn't what most people picture it as.

> *Frank*: Ninety-nine percent of the shit that happens overseas has nothing to do with taking houses or shooting people. It's crazy fucking boredom. And playing games like jackasses in the barracks in tents in the middle of Afghanistan, realizing that in Iraq it gets cold in the desert at night cause there's nothing to retain heat, so you are there and it's 140 in the day, and you wake up and you're cleaning frost off your rifles– shit like that that nobody knows … [and there is] sand everywhere– you [should really] shave your whole body, cause otherwise sand gets in everything.

[79] Frank also reiterated that it was much more traumatic translating from Arabic to English the experience of female victims of assault in Afghanistan than having survived a Humvee explosion.

[Continues]

Frank: Here is another good war story: a guy from motor-t thought somehow that he could jump the Euphrates River in a Humvee. So he sets this ramp he fucking fabricates up, tries to jump it in a Humvee, fucking sticks a Humvee face down, doesn't even make it in the water, it's in the silt bank, the fucking Humvee is getting swallowed by the mud… shit like that happens in war.

[Continues]

Frank: Another story: there was a guy that I was at this medical center with. This guy is the best person I have ever known. He's a hardcore Christian, joins the Marine Corps, he's deployed, gets wounded, gets shot in the leg or whatever, not that bad, so he gets two months in the hospital. Then he goes back out there into the field. And as soon as he's back out there they get the blood work back, he has cancer– lymphatic cancer it turns out. So he goes back and gets chemo and then quickly goes back into deployment with his unit. But he was also still back and forth at the med center… cause he was going to die from cancer. But he was the happiest human being I have ever met. He was the most joyful, saintly, freaking upbeat guy ever. He cared about being back with his unit… and those are the war stories that actually reflect what happened over there.

This is emblematic of what I heard elsewhere, from men that deployed multiple times and saw heavy combat to those who never left their forward operating base.

Elijah, 43, Company Commander for Army Special Operations, deployed three times-

Elijah: [After a firefight] we did our internal after actions reviews on what we did right and what we did wrong. And after that, the jokes started flying. 'I saw you run and fall like an idiot, you missed this guy, you could have had him, you can't shoot worth shit,' all that stuff. .

[Continues]

Elijah: In my unit, jokes were always flying. Once you get people laughing and you start talking about each other, you know, you just get over the war quick… it's just funny and fun.

Ben, 49, Explosive Ordnance Disposal for the Navy, deployed twice-

Ben: My tour in Iraq, I felt like a fireman. We did a lot of sitting around and then when we did get something it was like BOOM, we were spun-out within eight minutes and we're heading out the gate… but mostly war is a lot of sitting around and waiting and joking and being bored.

Tyrone, 30, Ground Radio Operator in the Air Force, deployed once-

> *Tyrone*: We've got this saying in the military, 'hurry up and wait.' So on deployments there's a lot of that, too. Just like you hurry up, you get there; you get off the plane and you hurry up to get into the tent or indoors from the flight line, and then you sit down. You're gonna be there for a few hours. You've gotta process new paperwork, you've gotta find out where you're gonna be bedded, what tent are you gonna stay in, where is your work center… on and on and on.

To hear the testimonies of the men I interviewed, war is often not the violent imagery we find in the Omaha beach scene in *Saving Private Ryan*. This was confirmed while in Syracuse for the in-person fieldwork. In the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, there were stories read about war as a monotonous and boring reality that one survives by allowing for the passing time, shading oneself from the heat, and shielding oneself from the oppressive wind and sand. There were also discussions within the group about how war necessities laughter, because the absurd logic of survival is, well, absurd.

But inside this laugher I often heard fear.

At my second meeting of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group (Dec 2014) a group of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans were humorously remembering the nonsensical/illogical Rules of Engagement (ROE) handed down from those higher up the command chain. Before you engaged the enemy you had to triple check that in fact they were firing bullets from their fully automatic guns. As the conversation drifted to silence I admitted that it sounded less funny and more terrifying. *Of course that is true*, was the collective answer from the group. As one person explained as we left, when a soldier is overseas death is always nearby.

War is fear. War is death…
But it could have been worse.

Aaron, the Army Captain who deployed for a 15-month tour in Iraq and associated PTSD with "little bitches," described that ninety percent of war is like what we see in the movies,

"band of brothers, having a blast, so much fun, [and] practical jokes." But "ten percent [is] really very bad– [and] your brain ends up tricking you into thinking that it's not as bad as it is so that you can figure out how to handle it. And then it's not until later that you realize that was horrible." Or, as Noah, the interviewee who unhesitatingly told me about the man he killed, explained, one month into his deployment he passed the Apache helicopters that would deliver him and his men downrange to their mission in Afghanistan and he realized, for the first time, that he *actually* might die.

> *Noah*: They were just shot to hell. They had bullet holes, pieces of fuselage hanging off, and hydraulic fluid all over the side. You could've heard a pin drop when we walked past those birds because nobody had ever seen anything like that before.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Noah*: I don't think I realized how wrong I got [war] until I thought I was gonna die, and then it's kind of an eye opening experience– then it just kind of got worse and worse. Combat doesn't really get any better.

In her book *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world*, author Elaine Scarry unequivocally states that war is measured by the amount of injury, damage, and death inflicted upon soldiers' bodies. "The purpose of [war] is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue" (64). Scarry argues that this fact is often lost when reading the pages of a history book, or a "strategic account of a particular military campaign, or [when listening] to many successive installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war" (64). In her chapter on war, Scarry concludes that regardless of the specific set of circumstances, we must understand that war, as a structural reality, has a single consequence: the unmaking of our world.

Sean, the Army Ranger I described in the second chapter as a Homeric warrior – stalwart and deeply pious in his dedication to the cause – understood all too well the truth that, ultimately, war unmakes the world.

> *Sean*: [On my first tour] we had responsibility for the whole Korengal Valley– we conducted a lot of small unit ambush patrols and counter ambush patrols in mountain terrain, very traditional infantry patrolling. My company, which was one hundred and forty guys, I think we had twenty-one casualties; we lost twenty-one guys. We just had an incredible number of casualties. I got shot…
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Sean*: You didn't even have to be that good at math, if you just looked around you, you saw that your chances of making it out unscathed were very, very, low– because basically one in five guys was getting shot.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Sean*: I basically accepted that I was not going to make it home… see I had R&R not long after I got shot, and then I went back. I just accepted there was no way I was going to make it home again.

Sean did not belabor the point or search for the right language to define how he handled this realization. He flatly stated that, in the end, everyone copes in his own way.

For others I interviewed, or heard tell/read their story, even if the experience of deployment did not contain this felt sharpness of mortality and personal finitude like it did for Sean, there was still a moment when the awful reality of war crystallized.

> Nate, 27, Supply and logistics in the Marines, deployed once-
>
> *Nate*: [Deployment] is where life and death comes into it– the idea of not knowing what is going to happen is terrifying. Granted only X amount of people actually do die… granted, a couple of thousand have died since then and it is completely random … but if you are infantry battalion in the Marine Corps, and you are over there, it is your duty to kill people. The reality of that job weighs on you.
>
> Walker, 53, Navy Officer, deployed once-
>
> *Walker*: I will tell you [about] one of my team members that deployed with me– during one of the rocket attacks one night in Afghanistan, [this person] curled up like a baby in bed, crying. Because of the anonymity of these interviews, you're probably one of the only people I've ever shared that with, because that is how it happens in a strict combat situation– people act differently. Not everybody is like you would see in the movies.

Elijah, 43, Company Commander for Army Special Operations, deployed three times-

Elijah: In war, everyone's scared. If you ever talk to anybody that says they're not scared, they're lying- so don't let anybody fool you. Everyone's scared– because at some point you really will think, 'am I gonna make it out of this."

Koffe, 34, Air Traffic Technician in the Navy, deployed once-

Koffe: So much about the military is about performing. Performing courage when you are actually afraid.

Noel, 39, Army Special Operations Officer, deployed twice-

Noel: I will tell you this though, the first time I got shot at, I had to jump out of the top of the Bradley so that no one saw me pull my pants down and shit on the ground and pull them back up– that much adrenaline, it made me lose control of my bowels for a second.

[Continues]

Noel: All this training, all that you go through, and you never actually think [you will go to war]- then you do… and when that happens, when you are actually in war, I was like 'oh, fuck, this could be really fucking scary, people could die.'

But the descriptions articulating fear were not only about personal safety. Often the more eclipsing anxiety – crippling when considered fully – was the possibility that a soldier would let down his men. Aaron told me that the night before he touched the ground of Iraq, he took account of himself in a bathroom mirror. In that moment he had one thought: "I can't let down my unit; I must live up to my responsibility." Matthew, the machismo Marine who bemoaned, "there are a lot of so phony toughs in the military," openly worried about leading his men and "living up to the expected responsibility." The enormity of what could happen if he did endanger his men was a consequence too heavy to narrate, even hypothetically. "You can't think about what happens if you make the wrong call," Matthew told me. Kurt, a shy infantry officer in the Army whose voice I had to lean in close to hear, "worried about making the right decisions outside the wire" and the ramifications if his vigilance slipped. However, when one of Kurt's men was shot, he explained that it could have been worse.

> *Kurt*: See, what happened was a fellow soldier, and actually he was one of my good friends, ended up getting shot. The bullet went through his side and out his back. So it was fortunate in the sense that it kind of skipped everything vital. It could have been worse.

This is emblematic of another narrative theme that emerged when discussing the overwhelming reality of war. Regardless of the combat situation, the phrase (almost a mantra) I heard over and over was that 'it could have been worse.'

In David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers*, a nonfiction account of the author's time embedded with Army's 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry during the surge in Iraq in 2007 (the 16th Infantry patrolled one of Baghdad's most violent districts), he describes the jarring explosion of an EFP (explosively formed projectile) against one of the Humvees. After concluding there were no major injuries, through the confusion, smoke, and disorientation, Col. Ralph Kauzlarich, the book's unflappable protagonist, assured his men that the situation could be "a lot fucking worse" (66). Throughout the book Kauzlarich articulates a variation of this theme to Finkel: what the Army's 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry endured was bad… but it could be worse.

Similarly, Cesar, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist, told me that after surviving two bomb explosions in a single deployment he said to himself: "well, it could have been worse." Convoy Security Commander Troy, who continues to ruminate on the young girl in Iraq he *didn't* give the order to kill, also decided his entire deployment could have been worse.

> *Troy*: There are so many things that happened [in Iraq] that really could have gone wrong, but it just didn't [...] I should have been dead. And we got careless; we got stupid. I will say it again– I really should have died. And we were still young, we made mistakes, but I'm not dead for some reason. It could have been so much worse.

In a follow-up conversation after our interview, Lee, the Marine officer who deployed for one tour to Iraq, explained that soldiers always know that their deployments could be worse because in mind's eye they place their war alongside "WWII, Vietnam, and [they] realize that [their] Forward Operating Bases have Pizza Hut, Starbucks, and [their] supply lines always come

through with resupply. Also, we all know the mortality rate would never be what it was for the Marines who came before."[80]

In psychological language, the movement of this storytelling turn – 'it could have been worse' – serves to emotionally down-regulate the experience of war.[81] Furthermore, this type of perspective review – processing one's own experience alongside the possibilities of what might/could have been, or what came before for preceding generations – is a key attribute for both resilience and redemptive sequencing.[82] And while this narrative formulation may partially function as a coping mechanism, I believe it was also a way of honoring a soldier's tribe; *it could have been worse*– it is like a guttural intonation to both those who came before and those who may experience an even sharper edge of the same war. Ultimately, it begs the question, was one of the reasons the men I engaged for this dissertation high-functioning *because* they told war stories in this particular way or was this narration style a *reflection* of preexisting psychological health? It is tangential to fully parse the difference between causation and correlation. What is most salient is the deep and powerful meaningfulness the men described when sharing an experience of something that happened that *could have been worse*.

War is meaningful. War is Brotherhood. War is thrilling. War is love…
But only when the mission makes sense.

For Cesar the two bomb explosions made him "feel immortal because [he] lived through it– and ultimately [he is] extremely grateful for having had the experience." Troy concluded that

[80] One wonders if this is always true. Were pilots in the Korean War collectively repeating that it could have been worse, at least they were not fighting the German Luftwaffe from WWII? Did the Allies Forces in Europe give thanks for avoiding trenches, rats, and the possibility of mustard gas?

[81] See for example the article 'Emotion regulation: affective, cognitive, and social consequences' by James Gross.

[82] See for example Werner and Smith's *Journeys from childhood to midlife: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery* and the discussion Dan McAdams in chapter two.

Iraq gave him purpose. "I left Iraq feeling like I had a huge purpose in this life." In the documentary *Operation Home Coming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, the Korean War veteran and author James Salter said in his own experience "life becomes intensely more bright after [war and combat]… you may feel for a moment that you have escaped the human condition. [Living to tell the story], it invigorates in a certain way." In the documentary *Restrepo* Sergeant Aron Hijar has the same takeaway regarding his deployment in Afghanistan. In a considered and earnest voice he told the documentary filmmakers of *Restrepo*, "I don't want to not have [war] as a memory because that was [an experience] that makes me appreciate everything that I have."

Restrepo was referenced often in the life narrative interviews, as an example of a cinematic representation that 'gets it right.' The film documents the fifteen months journalist Sebastian Junger and photographer Tim Hetherington lived with a group of American soldiers in a remote outpost in Afghanistan (named Restrepo in memory of a medic who was killed in battle).[83] Bivouacked in what seemed to be no-man's-land, Junger and Hetherington experienced the daily routine of drudgery and dread, but also the ephemeral lightness that comes with it– a charged sense of living fully, on the liminal edge.

At the end of retelling me about his violent and consequential time in the Korengal Valley, Sean mentioned that he likes to re-watch the documentary.

> *Sean*: After the fact, sure, each guy handles his own war differently. [For me], I'll say that the film, *Restrepo*, I really enjoy re-watching it because I feel like I am going home by watching it. I am able to go to a place that I haven't been in a long time, that place where I'd spent so much time and invested so much emotionally and physically– it was good just to see the terrain and have all those memories come back.

[83] His time embedded at Restrepo provided the research material for the documentary, the companion book *War*, and much of the practical and theoretical grounding for his most recent book *Tribe: on Homecoming and Belonging*.

Listening closely to what was conveyed by Sean, Cesar, and Troy I heard that war is indeed complicated. An eclipsing feeling of gratitude and love is part of that complexity.

This is the premise of Sebastian Junger's TED Talk 'Why Veterans Miss War.' In the speech Junger explains that soldiers don't love war because they are psychopaths that miss killing, getting shot at, and seeing their friends killed. They miss the brotherhood:

> Brotherhood is different from friendship. Friendship happens in society […] Brotherhood has nothing to do with how you feel about the other person. It's a mutual agreement in a group that you will put the welfare of the group […] above your own. In effect, you're saying, 'I love these other people more than I love myself.'
>
> [Continues]
>
> Many of you have probably read *The Iliad*. Achilles surely would have risked his life or given his life to save his friend Patroclus. In World War II, there were many stories of soldiers who were wounded, were brought to a rear base hospital, who went AWOL, crawled out of windows, slipped out doors, wounded, to make their way back to the front lines to rejoin their brothers out there.

It is a parroted contrivance we all have heard. In war there is an unparalleled closeness and intimacy between soldiers. In the quoted narratives from the start of the chapter, Nash directly named "that the camaraderie and the friends you make over there are like the tightest friends that you get;" Aaron referred to it as the glue binding the 'band of brothers;' and even if it was not directly named, when Frank described the 'guy from motor-t' who flipped a Humvee trying to jump the Euphrates River and the Christian with cancer who stayed with his Marines through chemotherapy, he is referring to a community that feels truly connected. Similarly, Elijah, a Company Commander for Army Special Operations quoted throughout the chapter, explained that the clichés told and retold about the trust between soldiers in wartime are not exaggerated.

> *Elijah*: The old saying is there's no atheists or racists in the foxhole- that is true. You go through some of the training I went through where you had to hug somebody because it's so cold, you have to pee on people, people pee on you to warm up, it's just– it's true about the brotherhood.

[Continues]

> *Elijah*: You know, you have everyone from different cultures, you have races [all together] and everything, but when you start suffering together, it goes away. I had card-carrying KKK member on my team– card carrying![84] But you know something? When the bullets started flying all that went out the window.

The meaningful brotherhood, this too is part of war.

In his quoted and referenced article for *Esquire Magazine* titled 'Why Men Love War,' William Boyles Jr. (a contributing writer for the screenplay *Saving Private Ryan*), affirms that based on his time in Vietnam, because he "ate, slept, laughed, and terrified" with his fellow soldiers, "the enduring emotion of war […] is comradeship."[85] However, while brotherhood is the easy part of the war-love-story, "the first circle we can talk about without the risk of disapproval," according to Boyles, the fuller truth is that "the love of war stems from the union, deep in the core of our being between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death. War may be the only way in which most men touch the mythic domains in our soul."[86]

In his book *War*, an account lauded as required reading for its accuracy by many people included in this research, Sebastian Junger describes that through his embedded experience in Afghanistan he learned that war is "insanely exciting." "The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know" (145). Junger's friend, author Karl Marlantes, reframes but repeats the sentiment in his memoir *What it is Like to Go to War*. "In Vietnam there were times when I swelled with pride at the immense destruction I could deal out.

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[84] Elijah is African American.

[85] Questions abound: it is unclear if this specific to war or true of any group that experiences trauma together. Also, are female soldiers socialized in the same manner or is masculinity expressed and codified in western society in particular ways? War both terrifies men but also allows for the expression of terror. The same may not be true for women. As I have noted throughout this dissertation, the analysis is intended to invite additional discussion.

[86] There are clear echoes here to Freudian theory described in chapter three.

There is a deep savage joy in destruction, a joy beyond ego enchantment. Maybe it is a loss of ego. I'm told it is the same for religious ecstasy" (63).[87] In the penultimate scene of the film *The Hurt Locker* the main character, an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialists, sits beside his baby's crib and tells him that war is the only experience he desires. War is the only world within which he fits. "The older you get, the fewer things you really love. And by the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one." He only loves the horrific clarity of war.[88]

In brief, war is thrilling.

Alongside his story of the bullet punctured Apache helicopters, and the realization that he might die, Noah told me the story about the night he watched American rockets light a starless sky in Iraq and felt overwhelming peace (with his place in world) and love (for his men).

> *Noah*: Wasn't it Sebastian Junger that said war is like life, only multiplied by some number no one's ever heard of. Its kind of true– I remember being in Iraq during the invasion one night and we were in the desert and we were watching rockets light up the night sky. They were firing towards [city omitted] and it was a really weird moment. We couldn't hear them because they were off in the distance but it was really beautiful, and I just remember thinking– '*this, right here*... it is where I'm supposed to be, in life.[89] I can't imagine being more alive than I am right now, just being swallowed up by this desert, in the darkness, in a war.' I don't think there's anything you can do to recreate that … and I love all the guys I was with over there who understand that experience."

If given the option, Aaron told me he would have stayed in Iraq forever. Because Iraq felt like home and everything he witnessed and accomplished during his deployment was more impactful, important, and meaningful than anything waiting for him in America. "If the military

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[87] As Sören Kierkegaard describes, suffering gives the soul language to speak to God. Without suffering we are not in touch with our own finitude. Without suffering we are not in touch with the fact that we are part finite and part infinite. See *The Prayers of Kiekergaard* by Perry LeFevre.

[88] If this film was referenced in my interviews, and a number of times it was, it was mostly with annoyance because it represents a specific type of war film. *The Hurt Locker* is symbolic of the sensational and unrealistic Hollywood blockbuster. However, this scene was cited as its one "true-to-life" moment in eight separate interviews.

[89] Italics added for emphasis

had said, 'you can lay down your weapon, leave your family behind, and stay here amongst the Iraqi's and stay as a member of their society'… I would have done it in a heartbeat." To his wife, Aaron would have easily parted ways, "sorry babe, love you, but shit happens." To his kids, "you're nice, but I haven't seen you in a year."

For someone who has never been through the experience, Aaron's confession may be hard to understand (or frightening to accept). However, when you consider that the heightened stakes of war is the most exciting reality "anyone engaged in war will ever know" (to quote Sebastian Junger), Aaron's wish becomes more understandable. If truthfully narrated, this life-affirming potency will emerge as an important element of war stories in need of account. But the powerful meaning-making associated with the fellowship of brothers in arms and the "deep savage joy" of destruction (to quote Karl Marlantes) was not the primary eclipsing emotion that defined every war story.

Tyrone, 30, Ground Radio Operator in the Air Force, deployed once-

> *Tyrone*: I chose to separate from the military because I no longer wanted to be a part of a mission that I couldn't believe in… I have nothing against our military at all or anything like that; it's just a matter of what's our mission and what's the purpose of that mission and can I believe in it.

Kurt, 32, Infantry Officer in the Army, deployed three times-

> *Kurt*: I was just kind of frustrated with my experience in the army. I guess I would say it wasn't exactly what I thought it would be or I wasn't having a good time. I was doing this work that did not seem to make a difference— so there's an argument that it is a good idea to train the Iraqi police... but the military was more worried about what our hair looked like and grooming standards. You end up wondering: what's the point?

Troy, 26, Convoy Security Commander for the Marines, deployed once-

> *Troy*: We had a mission, a convoy to deliver— a re-supply mission to deliver some water to a forward operating base, a little FOB way out there … The truck showed up full of water, we brought it out there, and we pulled up … and the guy was like, 'we didn't ask for water, we have plenty of water, why are you guys here? I was like, 'oh, so you didn't want the water?' This mission was a waste. [The guy in charge] was like 'well, we'll figure something out.' So I get back in the truck, we load up, we're turning around and I

> noticed that the valve on the back of the truck is now open and water is coming out. We drove all the way back with that valve open so that the truck would be empty upon return. And in the paperwork we put 'delivered' and billed the government for that water. It pissed me off— because my life was on the line. I didn't know what the fuck we were doing over there after that.
>
> Elijah, 43, Company Commander for Army Special Operations, deployed three times-
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> *Elijah*: Iraq was a civil war. We shouldn't have been there… the atrocities over there, just turns my stomach. The way they just butcher these children, women, kids in the name of religion. By that time I was in Iraq we were doing mostly training, foreign internal defense, training the military and my guys are out there refereeing fights between the Sunni and the Shiites, they're fighting each other, while we are [pointlessly] training them. It was a big mess. We should not have been there.
>
> There was also ambivalence about one's mission.

And anger when it appeared that military decisions makers were focused on triviality, unconnected/unconcerned with the possibility of negative outcomes and loss of life, or, that the entire military project was a tragic misadventure.[90] Along with the boredom, the sand, the fear, the abiding faith in the idea that it could always be worse, the exhilarating rush, and the love, the feeling of senselessness, this too is part of war stories.

What is a true war story, who is authorized to tell it, and who can understand?

Aaron, whose voice is referenced throughout this chapter and the last (*I would have stayed in Iraq forever; I don't have PTSD because I decided to not be a little bitch*), was not my most comfortable interview. We met at the local VFW. Before he sat for the interview, Aaron invited me to tour the grounds so he could show me how the company he works for, through his leadership, donated money and time to improving the outside grounds. A particular point of pride for Aaron was a plaque he had placed on a large stone honoring one of his mentors who

[90] Tyler Boudreau's personal account of feeling like an occupying force in Iraq ('The Morally Injured') is reflected and amplified by the above descriptions of men who felt like their mission was useless. I would argue is impossible for an outsider to define if this rises to the level of moral injury. As I wrote in the last chapter, that is for the individual inside the experience to decide.

died overseas. After he described the importance of the site we stood silently together for a moment. As we left, Aaron remarked that it probably "didn't mean shit to someone who didn't serve." He laughed indicating he was joking. In return, I laughed (nervously, and made a note so as to capture his language). As we made our way into the community room for the interview he explained that there would likely be veterans inside "hammering beers" and to not take it personally if they made fun of my "clearly-you-never-served-clothes." He laughed, again. I laughed back, again, while writing about the exchange in my notebook.

Even though Aaron left the Army years ago, not long after his one 15-month deployment to Iraq, he still wore his military background like a favorite shirt. When we met his face was flushed red, his hair was shaved high and tight, and wraparound sunglasses punctuated the dome of his head. Standing about five-nine, with a medium build, and shoulders that seem to pin the weight of his upper body down towards the center of his chest, he struck me as a weeknight drinker, weekend golfer, and gleeful whenever he finds himself in the company of people with which he can share a vulgar opinion. And he had many strong/vulgar views he was enthusiastic to share.

On the Abu Ghraib prison scandal-

Aaron: When I got back home and I saw the pictures from Abu Ghraib my first response was like 'no shit'… see I wasn't into the stacking naked dudes on top of each other but [when I had to interrogate someone] we just beat the shit out of people, but not in a fair way like 'hey let's fight it out.' More like 'you're detained and bad things are about to happen to you,' which was perfectly cool, perfectly justified.

On civilians understanding war-

Aaron: Not only is it impossible for the people at home to understand they shouldn't even fucking try because they will just get it wrong.

On the best questions I can ask in the life narrative interviews as an outsider who never served in the military-

> *Aaron*: Asking 'hey, who was closer to the action than you were and who was farther away'… take me one or two rungs up the chain and then take me one or two back. Who were the people you made fun of [for not being in the fight]? Then who were the people who made fun of you? And then they'll say 'well, actually, I know I said I killed a bunch of people but actually I was a transportation guy, but the infantry guys, those were the real guys.' Asking them to take you two layers closer to the action, or how many layers from the main effort they were… that's not a bad question.

Ultimately, my time with Aaron was a sharp reminder of the bounded/porous nature of particular in-groups. It is a theme briefly highlighted in the previous chapter– the internal calculus that the men I met through this research used to decide what counts as a real war experience, who is authorized to tell it, and who is able to understand. It was very important to Aaron that I know that while he was "killing Iraqi army regulars" other servicemen were living on a forward operating base – pejoratively referred to as FOBIT'S – eating "taco bell… and fucking enjoying salsa night." Also, he needed me to be aware of my outsider status at the VFW. That like the rest of the lay population, I will always be outside the experience of war.

Aaron was not the only person whose narrative fell along this fault line.

Braulio explained that in the Marines there are POG'S (personnel other than grunts that never experience real war) and GRUNT'S. "[POG'S] didn't fuck around with GRUNT'S because obviously GRUNT'S deployed and we did the shit people would see on TV, and they don't want to fuck around with that because when they deploy, they stay in these big ass FOBS." Walker, the fifty-three-year old Navy Officer who deployed once to Iraq, reminded me three times during our interview that he was not a "trigger puller;" therefore, everything he said must be understood as merely the opinion of someone far away from the fight. Tyrone, a Ground Radio Operator in the Air Force who deployed to Iraq, admitted, with embarrassment, that his tour included "zero combat." He explained that PTSD wasn't "even possible." But he had a

friend who was downrange and "maybe saw somebody's leg blown off, or something like that." However, Tyrone is not sympathetic of his friend's claim that he was traumatized.

> *Tyrone*: As a fellow Veteran, I'll talk to him and I can pretty much be like, 'stop whining,' you know. 'Whatever you saw, you're here, you're alive, what are you talking about, it's not that crazy.' And I make fun of him, too, because it's like, 'you went in 2010 so whatever you went and saw was lightweight compared to 2008, and I went in 2008 so whatever I saw is lightweight compared to 2002 or 2003.' Like the guys that went in from the door, I can understand some PTSD because they had to do more so-called dirty work. They saw a lot more, experienced a lot more traumatic things… they were sleeping in foxholes every day [and] we've got tents set up– we've got trailers, now there's hard brick and mortar buildings, and [Iraq] is just like any other country, like being in Korea or Japan.

For Tyrone, there were no bullets or immediate danger, so the question for him (and he extends the same unarticulated question to his friend): is it a *real* war story? Does the experience count? It is a question that brings the discussion back to Sam.

In the last chapter we met Sam, the Navy pilot whose deployment was "basically like a flying gas tank for the whole war." Sam was 33 when he sat for our interview. Despite a receding hairline, he seemed boyish. Despite a monotone voice, his image-heavy dialogue held my attention. Despite the slight frame and unassuming dress, his thoughtfulness was a presence in the room.

In 2008, against Sam's wishes, the Air Force transferred him to operate Remotely Piloted Aircrafts (RPA's). To use the public's language – which, he explained, is not the terminology preferred by the Air Force – he became a drone pilot. I asked Sam if operating an RPA is similar to our general understanding of drones.

> *Sam*: I guess I don't fully know what the public's perception looks like. I mean you're looking at the screen but you're fully absorbing what's going on, you know it's real and so your brain processes it as real. So it's like you get all the stressors of war except for the personal injury part. But dropping missiles and stuff and being concerned about them hitting the right target is extremely stressful… I don't think people have really come to terms with it or know how to react to it. It's like it's its own thing. And I haven't like fully processed what it means yet… It's pretty surreal.

[Continues]

Sam: I think a lot of the trauma from a life of a vet comes from just being shot at and the potential to get killed and stuff, but we don't have any of that. But at the same time it's like such a personal experience so there's a lot of visceral stuff … it's such a vivid kind of emotional experience. Even if it goes well, you're still reliving that. It's like burned into your memory… we have high definition systems now that we use. Like after the missile goes off, a lot of times if it's an ineffective strike, you know, somebody could be like literally coming apart as they're trying to move or walk. So we see some pretty bad stuff— a lot of times after the missile goes off the guys are like sort of in shock which I imagine is kind of like being in a dramatic car accident, so they'll be like picking up parts of their body, like picking up their arm and walking or running away with it, however far they make it. So it's like that type of stuff.

[Continues]

Sam: The public perception in general [is that] you're not even there, on the battlefield, so why is it such an intense experience? You're just making pixels move on the screen… the Air Force came up with this term virtual PTSD which everybody made fun of.
Matt: You're laughing even as you say it.
Sam: Yeah, and you know, because it sounds silly. It's like you're not really in harm's way or anything so why should this experience really bother anybody.

Sam's story was unique from the other narratives I collected. He was not deployed, or overseas, but nevertheless he was in the fight. His job existed in a space between war/not war and trauma/not trauma. He lived a normal life: wife, kids, the daily coming-and-going from the office and back home. And yet, the brutality of what he saw, and what he produced when dropping an ordinance was vivid; it was in high definition. I asked Sam if he shares the experience with anyone, like his wife. His response: "I try not to too much because I don't want to like freak her out, and I know she doesn't necessarily want to hear that stuff, like the gory details and stuff." Sam understood that he operated in a space that the people who love him don't want to know about. Not being able to talk about it with others was a sharp reminder that his life remained outside the realm of what is acceptable and civilized. Given this opacity, Sam's narrative, like Tyrone's, Aaron's, and that of others I interviewed or encountered through my participant observation, serves to define a sense of legitimacy.

Concluding thoughts

Stories like Sam's, and all those referenced in this chapter, required that I listen not only to what was said (language choices and overt references to where a story 'fits' within our shared social understanding) but also to what remained unsaid (the silences and gaps that underscore narrative moments that are not easily accommodated or categorized by cultural meta-narratives). When these multilayered/complex war stories were articulated during a life narrative interview, or when it was the focus of someone's writing in the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group, I noted in my ethnography notebook that there was a dual-address being narrated, the double bind highlighted at the start of the chapter, wherein a veteran feels compelled to explain but is certain he will not be understood. Furthermore, even if the lay public could understand – even if they could listen to the details and *truly* hear the story, as it is intended – veterans want to keep the unique otherness of *having* a war story. Because there is meaning in a personal narrative that can only be decoded by a select few. This is the double bind: veterans feel they want their war stories to be heard because the experience matters as an orienting life event, but they also want those stories to remain private, personal. This sense of privacy represents a mistrust of the larger, cultural narratives, and the ever-present fear of being co-opted. Most of us would be reluctant to tell our stories if we believed they would be re-narrated by others for their own purposes. This is the dilemma for a veteran: people are telling *your* story, or claiming to, but they have it wrong. For someone who deployed, he knows the true story, but is likely afraid that if he tells it, he won't be heard or, worse, he will add to the already ubiquitous cultural misunderstandings and/or stereotypes. Either way, by telling the story he risks further marginalization, which is not why we tell our stories. We tell them to create meaning, not to add to the sensational-hyperbolic-white-noise. We tell them to create coherence, not discordance. We tell them for a sense of personal legitimacy.

But this narrative tension also confirms a sense of belonging and specialness.

Dr. William Cross explained at "The Syracuse University Moral Injury Project Conference" that he is drawn to other veterans who understand what it means to come through the type of experience he had as a young man deployed to Vietnam. "I have found we – those who have deployed and been to far away places – have richer inner lives because of it." The quote from earlier in the chapter by Korean War veteran and author James Salter is worth repeating: "life becomes intensely more bright after [war and combat]… you may feel for a moment that you have escaped the human condition." So while there is active silencing of veterans stories, they are also silencing civilians. Perhaps it is another form of narrative coping. Perhaps telling the story that they know something we never can gives the veteran back some power, carves out a little space within the overwrought broadcasting of "thank you for your service" and "twenty-two suicides a day." Perhaps the veterans are right in their assessment. Aaron, Nash, Noah, Elijah, Sam, all of the men included in this research, perhaps they returned from overseas and now understand something we cannot.

CHAPTER 5

The Return

When I got out of the military my dad, he lived in an apartment above me… and I was really lost and I didn't know what to do. I was depressed. I couldn't get a job. I wasn't showering. I wasn't eating. I was really a terrible mess and every night I would go up and talk to him. And he never gave opinions; he never gave advice; he never was like, "hey this is what you should think." As drunk as I was… he just let me tell my story. He let me get the terribleness out of my heart. And my dad – whatever may have happened when I was a kid – he saved my life when I was 24. Just letting me get it out. He saved my life.

Brendan O'Byrne, *The Last Patrol*

In 2014, four years after the film *Restrepo* and the publication of his book *War*, Sebastian Junger released a final documentary on his war experience: *The Last Patrol*. The movie served as a coda for the celebrated stories he had already produced. It was also a way for Junger to honor his friend and longtime collaborator Tim Hetherington. In the opening scene, his voiceover (mournful but direct) explains his intentions behind making the film:

> The world had changed; Tim was dead. We were both reporters and he was killed in Libya while covering the civil war. [So, for this film], I invited Guillermo, a [European war] photographer who had actually been holding Tim's hand when he died, and Brendan and Dave, two soldiers Tim and I had known in Afghanistan, [on a trip.] The four of us would set out from Washington DC and walk north in a kind of high-speed vagrancy right up the east coast. We had all seen a lot of combat. We had all lost close friends. And we were all trying to come home. I thought a three-hundred-mile walk might help.

In one particularly evocative scene, the journeymen witness a dog as it is hit and killed by a speeding car. Brendan is visibly shaken. He tells the group that his brain cannot handle "stuff like that anymore." Since his deployment he cannot cope with this type of everyday unfortunate accident. Dave, his friend and brother-in-arms, humorously, but with compassion, says to Brendan that what "lingers as the major question of the night: what is more messed up, if it didn't bother you seeing the dog get hit, or if it did?" Later, Dave leaves the group to return for another deployment to Afghanistan. His explanation is simple. "I left *The Last Patrol* to return to Afghanistan because I missed it… I think I will always say I am not going back to [war]. But

it is not a reality. [Soldiers] always go back." Guillermo, the only member of the team who was not in Afghanistan for the shared deployment to outpost Restrepo, and is also an outsider to America, experienced most of the three hundred mile walk through the viewing-window of his camera, reflecting on the American community he sees along the way: "in America everyone is so individual. In other countries you see people helping each other. If someone has a problem the neighbor will help. In America I am sure that happens, but it is less. And you can tell that from the faces of the people." In a similar confessional tone, Brendan tearfully conveys his gratitude for the person who helped him the most after his return– his father. He acknowledges that he is same man who abused him as a child. "My dad really fucked me over in life." But after Brendan's deployment, he credits him with saving his life. "He just let me tell my story. He let me get the terribleness out of my heart." The viewer understands, however, that Brendan still searches for a sense of inner calm. Toward the end of the film he showers himself in a river and as the camera focuses on his undressed body he jokes that the image is what America gets now that he is home. "Balding, hairy, overweight, with Carpel Tunnel, and alcoholism, and PTSD– America, do you want me or not?" Sebastian Junger laughs like an older brother, worried that his sibling's theatrics are more unsettling than funny. For his part, at the end of the pilgrimage, the epiphany for Junger is delivered flatly, in a voice that reveals neither hope nor catharsis. "I realize my biggest challenge now is to feel like a worthwhile person without the steroid-injection of good feeling that comes from having done something dangerous and somewhat exceptional."

As Jonathan Shay writes, "the painful paradox is that fighting for one's country can render one unfit to be its citizen" (*Achilles in Vietnam* xx)

How does one come back from war and reintegrate? What are the narrative options available to soldiers upon their return? Are there ever words that can bridge the gap between the soldier and the civilian? These questions are not new or unique to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; however, the ubiquity of 'PTSD' and 'thank you for your service' seem to indicate that the dialogue around these simple yet far from simplistic questions is commonplace today. But when I turn my ethnographer's ear to the stories I encountered through this research, the impression emerges that much is still left unsaid, unseen, misunderstood.

The civil-military divide

When I met Elijah running a half-mile interval at our gym the first thing I noticed about him was the odd way he lumbered during exercise. He extended his lead foot as if to test the ground ahead for stability, then, he quickly pawed his way forward with a bewilderingly graceful hop that was both awkward and efficient. He was fast. After working-out together for six months I asked about his stride. Elijah explained that he spent too many years humping heavy packs through back woods and steep mountains. I asked if he was former military. He nodded. I dropped the subject.

Throughout the first year of socially knowing Elijah he never made eye contact, slipped in-and-out of the gym silently, and kept to himself. I was, therefore, surprised when he asked about the research interviews he heard I was conducting and offered to participate. When he did tell me his story, I was curious if he often shared with others experiences from his military service. I assumed the answer was no, and I was correct. "I don't talk about this. Not even to my parents or anybody. [My girl] asked me a couple of times and I avoided the question. See, she heard me on the phone talking to one of my friends one day. Before then, she didn't even know I served." They had been dating for eight years. Out loud, I wondered if he was

comfortable having the conversation with me because he knew I had to "sweat my ass off to run faster than him." "I've seen what you can legit do as a runner. I guess it's different because you and I shared pain when we're together… I can't talk to somebody who hasn't been *in it* with me. I need to know what kind of person you are."[91] As for the rest of the civilian population, "I really don't want the questions [from them] because most people when you get back from war are ignorant Americans."[92]

Like Elijah, days after Aaron returned to the wife he would have abandoned to stay in Iraq, he found himself not only worlds apart from America, but from his wife as well

> *Aaron*: She says 'look, you need a new toothbrush, you need some new clothes, let's go to Wal-Mart.' I walked into Wal-Mart and I actually had to leave because it was a lot of really fat American people with big jars of mayo and shit and I was like 'oh man, I hadn't seen a store, or seen the color red, there were no colors in Iraq, everything was just very plain, then all of a sudden I'm in a Wal-Mart. I actually left the Wal-Mart on my first trip there for just a toothbrush and some sandals. It was more than I need right then. And I feel like she should have known that.

For Nash, quoted extensively in the last chapter and in chapter three regarding his anger around the public misconception of PTSD, the separation from your old life (and from your previous self) is, simply, part of deployment. He seemed accepting: "I wrote letters here and there, called here and there, some of my closer friends, but the divide grows, with war, with time, and you come home to find you have less in common with your old friends and your old self." Elliot, an Army intelligence officer who attended West Point, deployed twice to Afghanistan, and was one of the few men I interviewed hoping to be 'career military,' the only family members he felt understood him were his grandparents who lived through WWII.

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[91] In a footnote of the last chapter I questioned if Elijah's ability to fight alongside a "card-carrying KKK member on [his] team" was specific to war or true of any group that experiences trauma/suffering together. In the same interview that prompted the question there seems to be an answer.

[92] While he did not include his family within the category of 'ignorant Americans,' Elijah did highlight that part of the reason he does not talk to them is because "they never ask." "I asked my mother, why haven't you asked about me overseas? She said, because I don't want to know."

> *Elliot*: The small cohort within our generation that's fighting this war, and the greatest generation, I think we have a different kind of connection. I can feel the connection when I'm talking about war with my grandparents more so than I can with my own parents.[93] And I think it's just because they lived through a war in a way that was total. We don't fight total wars anymore. Whether you're a parent of someone fighting or not, there's an aspect of how we fight wars today that is *not*[94] similar to the way we fought wars in the past. Because you don't have a national consciousness today that existed in the way it did back at that point in time. I mean my mother has no less concern for me than my grandmother. But during that period after I returned, and the way we as a country conducted ourselves in society back WWII, it made my grandmother far more tuned in to the way war was impacting me than my own mother could have been.[95]

Isolation, disorientation, and the seemingly irreconcilable separation between veteran and civilians, and how (or if) we can bridge that gap are themes often described and explored in the genre of Iraq and Afghanistan war literature. It is the orienting focus of George Saunders' short story appropriately titled 'Home.'[96]

In the beginning of story the first person narrator, Mike, home from war, is in familiar territory. His footing is sure and the setting idyllic. Everything about the landscape reads as welcoming and warm. "Like in the old days, I came out of the dry creek behind the house and did my little tap on the kitchen window." Once inside he finds "piles of newspaper,' 'magazines on the stairs,' and 'hangers sticking out of the broken oven,' but, to him, the unkempt chaos of the room is soothing, "all of [it is] usual" (64). The well-drawn but almost comically picturesque environment of 'Home' lasts two paragraphs. Saunders' foreshadows a darker tone, one that will

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[93] This was the same sentiment expressed in my interview with David. When I asked him about his military origin story – why he joined – he pointed to a picture in his office of his grandfather in his office and said, "because of my best friend."

[94] Italics added for emphasis.

[95] There is an open-ended and tangential line of inquiry if the closeness Elliot feels is connected to the nostalgic reconstruction of *The Greatest Generation*– one of the preeminent meta-narratives about war in this country. However, Elliot's reference to this understanding of 'total war' shared across generations and Elijah's calculus of shared pain and/or suffering equaling trust, begs the question if having shared experience accelerates collaborative storytelling? Intuitively, the answer is yes. I will return to this question in my concluding thoughts.

[96] See the 2011 *New Yorker* fiction issue. It was later included in his short story collection *Tenth of December*.

dominate the rest of his story, when, after entering the house for the first time, 'Ma's' new boyfriend Harris asks Mike forcefully "what's the worst thing you ever did over there." Thus begins the unceremonious homecoming of a soldier who committed a nameless atrocity while serving in Iraq (a court-martial pending). Throughout the story the presence of the violent act committed overseas is both opaque and sharp.

'Home' is a lucid snapshot of an emotionally knotted veteran wandering the hallways of his past life.[97] Mike glides through a world that he is physically within but wholly removed from. He passively accepts 'thank you's' from the public servant who evicts his Ma and Harris when they default on their home, from the sheriff who oversees the family moving out, and from his brother in-law's father. Everyone talks at Mike. He is an observer, as if caught in the jet stream of his own life. When he meets a group of men his own age he doesn't recognize himself in their faces. "They were sweet. Not a line on their faces. When I say they were kids, I mean they were about my age" (69). Everyone is uneasy around him. When his sister grudgingly yields her baby for Mike to hold, he knows the room is pensive, afraid of what might happen:

> Having all these people think I was going to hurt the baby made me imagine hurting the baby. Did imagining hurting the baby mean that I *would* hurt the baby? Did I *want* to hurt the baby? No, Jesus. But: did the fact that I had no intention of hurting the baby mean that I wouldn't, when push came to shove, hurt the baby? (74)

The story animates a mournful space within which Mike struggles to maintain even a slight modicum of buoyancy and joy. When his disconnected pain seems ready to elevate from simmer to boil, in the form of a plea, Mike begs the reader to "bring him back." "Then suddenly something softened in me […] I dropped my head and waded all docile into the crowd of know-nothings, thinking, O.K., O.K., you sent me, now bring me back. Find some way to bring me back, you fuckers, or you are the sorriest bunch of bastards the world has even known" (75). By

[97] Comparisons to Ernest Hemingway's 'Soldier's Home' are both obvious and appropriate.

tethering Mike's feeling of overwhelming separateness to the quotidian realties of everyday life shared between the individual and his family, neighbors, and even strangers, Saunders demonstrates that the experience of a soldier's return is a coauthored narrative.

It is a thread often explored in the genre of Iraq and Afghanistan war literature.

In the novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, the emotional action is again on the separation between soldiers and citizens. Author Ben Fountain presents the bifurcation as endemic to America and the narrative-spectacle of how we welcome our soldiers home. Told from the vantage point of Specialist Billy Lyn, the story follows Bravo Company's jarring PR tour over Thanksgiving weekend. After news outlets circulated the unit's bloody success while under fire in Iraq, the government co-opts – or celebrates, depending on which fictional character is speaking – Billy's company into participating in a football halftime show. The novel's central setting is the theater-like surrealism of Dallas Cowboy stadium.

In the novel, on one end of the metaphoric room is a collage of patriotic clichés regurgitated, commercialized, marketed, and packaged for general consumption. On the other side, graciously smiling their way through the confetti, the niceties, the proclamations of never-ending support, and the thunderous adulation is Billy and his men. Fountain places alongside this raucous cacophony Billy's internal dialogue, deliberately placing words on the page to make manifest the jarring reality of the situation. In this patriotic silo, language itself has no meaning; it floats free, whimsical and purposeless.

> There was one man in particular who attached himself to Billy, a pale, spongy Twinkie of a human being crammed into starched blue jeans and fancy cowboy boots […] the man embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain:
>
> terrRist
>
> freedom
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> evil
>
> nina leven
>
> nina leven
>
> nina leven
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> troops
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> currj
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> support
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> sacrifice
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> Bush
>
> values
>
> God.[98]

In this discombobulating chaos, Billy and the other men in Bravo Company find themselves stranded and alone amidst thousands. The adoration and respect numbs their senses. Just like a water tower holding darkness, there is impenetrable isolation in the confines of the stadium. This persists even when Billy connects with a possible love interest, a cheerleader named Faison with whom he begins a brief flirtation. But the two speak past each other, failing to understand each other's worlds. Faison explains that she needs to "be with somebody for at least three months before [she gets] to the trust point." Billy nods his agreement, but, in his head, he hears the voice of his men. "He knows what Bravos would say: Let's fuck now and I'll owe you three months" (155). And ultimately it is the allegiance to the latter, his intimacy to and with his fellow soldiers, even if he knows it is based on a type of crass-masculinity that will never 'situate' back in society when he returns, that will always make the most sense to Billy. In the tumult of Cowboy stadium it is the only real thing to which he feels truly attached. Even if he does return unscathed from another tour, even if blessed with a long and peaceful life, Billy

[98] See pages 1-2. I have tried to recreate the formatting with as much accuracy as possible.

will never find the capacity to care deeply for those he did not fight beside. "So what was the point of getting married, having kids, raising a family if you knew you couldn't give them your very best love?" (218). In the end, Billy will always be on the outside looking in. The 'know-nothings' tried to bring him back with open arms. The embrace, it seems, is a failing proposition.

Although 'Home' and *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* are fictional, they capture an essential difficulty that I heard again and again in my research.[99] How does a veteran even begin telling his story? Where do you start?[100] At one of my first meetings at the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group someone told me it is impossible to share your story once you have returned because everything about America feels like a "vivid and continuous dream." And that doesn't change. Ever. At the Syracuse Moral Injury pre-conference Art Exhibit in April 2015, one of the conference speakers, himself a veteran, approached and asked when and where I deployed. When I explained that I was a civilian researcher, he responded that I fooled him because I had 'the look.' What look? I asked. "Like you don't like being a zoo animal while all the normal people walk around and point at you and gawk." It is an image I will not soon forget. That ethnographic encounter reminded me that veterans often feel on edge about the civilian-military divide. Someone, somewhere gets the story wrong or asks the wrong question. Family members and loved ones don't understand so the conclusion is that it is better not to talk. What might

[99] Examples of similar nonfiction accounts, that handle the impossible of the civilian-solider divide, include the final chapters of *Eat the Apple* (memoir), the reflective narrative voice in *Dust to Dust* (memoir), and the concluding scene of *Generation Kill* (journalist Evan Wright's account of his embedded time with 1st Reconnaissance Battalion of the Marines)

[100] In the documentary *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* a serviceman articulates the fissure between himself and those who didn't serve with resigned indifference: "what do you say to someone who has not been there and they want you to tell them- hey what was it like? …Where do I even start?"

seem an innocuous encounter to an outsider deepens the wedge. In my research, never was this truer than when the subject of 'thank you for your service' was discussed.

Thank you for your service

Jason, who we met in chapter two, the thirty-year-old creative nonfiction writer waiting for news from MFA programs, liked keeping civilians off balance. At the yoga studio where he worked part time he always mentioned that he was former military. In social circles where he imagined the connecting thread was patriotism and pro American-sentiment, he only said that he worked in a yoga studio. Jason the stirrer of pots with his long hair and throwback denim jacket, he was eager to characterize a version of himself to keep everyone guessing. I think it was a way of protecting himself.

During our interview he was happy to share his strong opinions about being thanked for his service.

> *Jason*: So all these safe rituals, like 'thank you for your service' as people go to the parade to celebrate and cheer. I think people do that stuff out of fear of being perceived as otherwise ungrateful— but I don't give a shit, you don't have to be happy about what I did over there.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Jason*: I'm one of the [contributors] at this [pacifist] newsletter and a lot of *them* even look at me cockeyed because they know what I did over there. I mean they speculate about what I did. I don't really care. I'm happy to help out with them and I like some of the stuff they're doing. I disagree with other parts, but it's interesting work… I think the issue is people are coming to conclusions about war without all the information…they need to educate themselves to find their way into the conversation. Even if they go watch like *Band of Brothers* or something; it's cool and it's sad; but I mean even when they show people being severely traumatized or anything like that, like they still like sex it up. They still make it glamorous.
>
> [Continues]
>
> *Jason*: The families are the ones that know— that's only 1% of the population. The rest of America doesn't know, and in a broader sense I really think does not care to know… I

> think there's a lot of lip service. When you really think about it, how could 'thank you for your service' *not* be a cliché that's really insulting?[101]

In *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* the war reporter Chris Hedges writes that "the tension between those who know combat, and thus know the public lie, and those who propagate the myth, usually ends with the mythmakers working to silence the witnesses of war" (11). It is a sentiment that is as powerful as it is prophetic. And it is understandable that 'thank you for your service' could be interpreted as the myth, silencing the witness. But with Jason, and his propensity for snap reactions and exacting judgments, it was important to confirm that his interpretation and story was not an outlier. It wasn't.

Matthew, 42, Team Leader Force Reconnaissance Company, deployed three times-

> *Matthew*: I'll be in the grocery store and someone sees me with a [military] t-shirt [and say], 'oh, thank you for your service'… I hate that shit… People always cop out. It's like, 'I want to support the troops but I want to bring them home, I don't support the war.' It's like, 'fuck you'… People want easy positions to have. They want to feel safe. War scares people. They don't want to know too much about it. They want to make sure that they're not lumped in with the people we now criticize as having protested against Vietnam and spit on the soldiers and all that stuff. So they say, 'thank you for your service.'

Frank, 28, Marine intelligence, deployed three times-

> *Frank*: I had a fucking good resume after my return- I speak Arabic man... But I could not get a job where I lived after I got back from war… [even] working at a restaurant. I took my military service off my resume and got callbacks within days… they say 'thank you for your service,' but that was about the most disheartening thing ever.

Lee, 41, Infantry Officer in the Army, deployed once-

> *Lee*: I mean, honestly, I get embarrassed when people start with— 'thanks for your service, great job.' I appreciate it, don't get me wrong… but as someone who is not what I would consider a very outgoing person it's a little embarrassing to be put in that position, either someone you just met or someone you haven't talked to in a while is now kind of either congratulating you or just asking you about things that you may or may not want to talk about. Again, I appreciate it; it's just a little off-putting for me.

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[101] Italics added for emphasis

Kurt, 32, Infantry Officer in the Army, deployed three times-

> *Kurt*: People will say 'thank you, thanks for your service.' So I've gotten that a lot… It is a little weird. I don't know how best to respond to that. Recently, well, the past year or so, what I'll say is 'thank you for your support.'... We were compensated for our work, I think very generously. And so it's a job. It's not different than a lot of other jobs where you're compensated, if you're doing it on a voluntary basis, then that's different. But I think we were compensated very generously. And coming back, I'm thankful for programs such as the GI Bill that were set up to help me get education. I wouldn't say that I'm entitled to it. I'm certainly not entitled to anything I don't earn.

Noel, 39, Army Special Operations Officer, deployed twice-

> *Noel*: I'm irked by this culture of support our troops where it doesn't actually mean anything, it's a slogan, it's a bumper sticker, it's 'thank you for your service'… it's a really good tag line but no one in this country had to sacrifice because of the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq… recycling everything and having limited rations in WWII for the general populous, that's sacrificing, and that's where people feel the effect of a major war but our culture didn't go through that, [but that is] our society I guess.

When I asked about the catchall of 'thank you for your service' there were two responses that differed significantly. Walker, the fifty-three-year old Navy Officer who deployed once – and reminded me in our interview that he was not a "trigger puller" or *in the fight* – said that all conversations about war should be done in a "professional and nurturing environment." The example he gave: when he returned from his deployment he was greeted with a church welcoming with celebratory banners thanking him. "I got invited to speak in my wife's hometown church– the church was packed. And so people were interested and grateful… I've been very fortunate that I am a Christian and I've had churches supporting me. I also have a group of friends who share common experiences to lean on."[102] James, forty-six, a major in the

[102] Walker also stood out in regards to how he shared his war story with those close to him. While Elijah hid the fact that he ever served, Walked kept a journal for his wife to read when he got home. "I kept a journal because I couldn't tell my wife everything that was going on real time due to operational security and I just couldn't let her know those things. But when I did get home, I had her read the journal… It was very traumatic for her. She had no idea— you know, like any journal when you make a day-to-day entry, things go up and down, but I made reference to all those things. I wanted her to know all of it."

Army who served twenty-four years and deployed twice to Afghanistan, was similarly positive about thanking service members for their service.

> *James*: I mean it's a good thing when it happens to me… and I'll walk up and shake kids hands in uniform and say, 'hey, good job, thank you for what you're doing.' Makes them feel like— 'holy shit.' Makes them feel proud and important and all of that stuff. Shake a little 18-year-old's hand like, 'hey—it's not like back in the 70's where people thought that everybody in the Army is a druggie and a loser and all of that shit.' So there's a pride in the military and the rest of the nation.[103]

While Walker and James represent the exception that proves the rule, their story is part of the larger narrative defining the terms and stakes of what it means to come home. Ultimately, it is a difficult storytelling formulation to decode. For James, thanking younger military servicemen for their service symbolizes America has changed since the "70's where people thought that everybody in the Army is a druggie and a loser." Matthew understands the same exchange as absconding from having to know the *actual* reality of war. "They want to make sure that they're not lumped in with the people we now criticize as having protested against Vietnam."

A PhD student who wasn't directly involved in military life at Syracuse joined an event in where I was conducing participant observation. During a conversation about the topic of 'thank you for your service' she exasperatingly asked how anyone is supposed to know what the right thing is to say. I had no satisfactory answer. Now, the only addendum I would include is that while we commit ourselves to learning the cultural/social complexities and interplay, we can never know how a veteran – or anyone for that matter – feels internally.

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[103] Incidentally, as I reread the analysis for this chapter I realized that Walker and James are two of the four oldest men in my life narrative data set. Seeing if there was a possible correlation, I reread the interviews of the two other participants in that group of four (Ben and Steve). Ben's story overwhelmingly highlights a lack of warmth for anyone who didn't serve (regardless if they thank him). Steve said that 'thank you for your service' is "a reflex not coming from the heart and if you really wanted to know my pain, why don't you talk to me and get to know me. There's no time in this society for that, especially here in America."

The 'War Ego' and 'The Peace Ego'

In chapter three, in service of articulating a working theory of trauma, I framed Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theorization after WWI by underscoring his claims regarding the human drive towards violence that, in war time, ultimately leave returning soldiers feeling like alien citizens among their fellow non-veteran countrymen. Freud witnessed a gap between those who returned from war and the population back home, living their illusory lives, avoiding death. Later, in his essay 'Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses,' Freud more directly confronts individual neurotic disorders resulting from battlefield stressors, concluding that it is not only a byproduct of the distance between a veteran and his community (interpersonal dynamics); it also manifests because the war ego and the peace ego cannot coexist (an intrapersonal dynamic). "The war neuroses, in so far as they are distinguished from the ordinary neuroses of peacetime by special characteristics, are to be regarded as traumatic neuroses whose occurrence has been made possible or been promoted by a conflict in the ego" (209).

Some aspects of Freud's thinking miss the mark. In 'Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses' he states that neurotic disorders will only arise in volunteer armies and professional soldiers will not suffer the same consequences. As we know now, this is not the case. And in 'Thoughts for the Time on War and Death' he purports that soldiers will return "joyfully to his wife and children, unchecked and undisturbed by thoughts of the enemies he has killed whether at close quarters or at long range" (294). Such missteps are at least partially a result of Freud writing without a historical perspective of the post-war realities we have now collectively witnessed. However, taken together, Freud predicted that psychic, emotional, and spiritual dissonance precipitated by deployment – and in need of address through avenues like narrative when a soldier returned – was largely about the relational self but also partially about an individual's internal processing.

Matthew is an illustrative example.

In chapter three we found Matthew outside a restaurant in North Carolina in the grip of the uncanny return of memories from Iraq. He had to adjudicate the question of trauma – and if he was traumatized – based on the divergent responses between his wife's assessment and his own. There was a similar moment after his second tour while conducting research at his university when he again suffered the involuntary somatic responses because of memories connected to his deployment. This time, however, there was no second opinion from someone like his wife. He had to decide on his own how to hold in-tension the war ego and the peace ego:

> *Matthew*: I'd see Middle Eastern looking [students] and react— and people are like, 'oh, that's because you're racist.' I'm like, 'well, it's not really racist'… like we have a lot of Saudi students here on campus. If I see them and I see them like sitting there, I just get this— the skin and the hair on the back of my neck kind of stands up a little bit. I don't think they're all terrorists, I don't think that but yeah, those are the guys I fought against, you know? I'm sure if I came back from WWII and I fought in Japan or I fought in Nazi Germany, I would say the same thing if I saw the stereotypical blond hair, blue eyed Arian looking guy, wearing a brown shirt and a pair of khaki pants.

Matthew is narrating a story that normalizes these involuntary responses – be it physical, psychological, or emotional – because that is the normal way to act after coming home from war. This story makes these reactions just part of life, reasonable behavior after war. By extension the narrative enables him a modicum of control over these residual elements from his deployment.

The confluence of the war and peace ego was not always made manifest by a sudden disruption/eruption. What was more often the case for the men I interviewed was the experience of "fey."[104] Only the existential dread after the return was not centered on battlefield terror. Rather, it was a gripping realization that a soldier was now a veteran. As such, he was codified by and confined to the monotonous unfolding of everyday life.

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[104] Reminder from chapter two: *fey* is the Norse word for an all-encompassing doom, but more than boom, that eclipses someone's rational mind during war.

In my interview with Tim (quoted at the start of chapters two and three) he described moving at a fast pace – literally and energetically – during deployment. Then, in an instant, everything changed.

> *Tim*: I've been in this mindset of go, go, go, kill, kill, kill for fucking six years. And now I'm coming back from that, and transitioning over to: let's be nice and friendly and make money and pay our bills and be suburban happy family.
>
> [Later in the interview]
>
> *Tim*: Believe it or not I'm envious of the guys from Korea and before because they didn't have the 24 hours reality of me where you're on a flight and back in the world. They had decompression time because they're sailing from their war zone back to home so that they can sit down and talk with their friends and decompress and deal with their shit and come back and be normal fucking people. We don't get that because you're in the shit, you're out of the shit, you're in the shit, and you're out of the shit. And you come home and you look around … and you say to yourself, 'now what'

In the same interview referenced above with Elijah, I asked him what it was like returning from his final tour.

> *Elijah*: When we got back, we had a small hangar and our families were there, you know. It was just like, 'damn; I'm back here for good…' and I just drove back [home]. I hung out for a week back at [the Army base] working. It was just weird. I used to sit thinking 'like, damn, this time last week I was in a firefight. Now, I'm listening to this engineer who doesn't know what he's talking about.'
>
> *Matt*: Is life… is it boring after that… maybe good boring because you're not in a firefight?
>
> *Elijah*: I miss the adrenaline. You get an adrenaline rush big time. I never wanted to be one of those guys who needed that… Kind of weird though, because I'm still watching the military channel, still watching National Geographic specials. My son was talking to me the other day. I was watching 'Eye Witness to War,' on National Geographic. That's pretty good, those helmet cams. He was talking to me but I really wasn't listening to him because I guess I was so… too busy watching that. It's just weird. It took me awhile to get readjusted.
>
> *Matt*: And you're not an adrenaline junkie. You didn't want to keep going in private security. So what's your way to deal?
>
> *Elijah*: Running. I'm alone with my thoughts… I just escape. I just escape into my own little world. We had a treadmill and I broke it because I just get on there, throw a towel over it and just start running.

Tim and Elijah provide an accurate sampling of what I heard from others. Sean, who watched the documentary *Restrepo* because "it feels like going home," said that his return was: "awesome… but then it was like bittersweet because that part of your life is kind of over, forever." The always blunt and thoughtful Noah told me that at first he had a hard time letting go of war. "I had kind of an unhealthy love of combat because, I mean, I don't know if I want to say that I loved combat. I mean it was more like a drug addiction– do you really love the cocaine or the heroin or do you just want your fix?" Ben, who worked disposing explosive ordnance for the Navy and deployed twice, explained that it is not easy shifting into a more mundane life. "My whole life has been geared to one thing— a lot of my training, a lot of my experience was kind of culminating in us going to war and I came back and it's like, 'well, now what do I do?'

What is being articulated in these moments is closely related to the 'thrilling' nature of combat described in the last chapter. However, the question proposed by these narrative vignettes is how one makes meaning of his life *after* that thrill.[105] To repeat and expand on the quote from Sebastian Junger from the last chapter: "the machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know… don't underestimate the things young men will wager in order to play that game one more time (*War* 145).

In his book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*, Jack Kornfield writes: "in the spiritual life after the ecstasy comes the laundry" (xiii). Kornfield, writing from his Buddhist background, suggests the integration of the mundane by

[105] The fact that it does amplify many of the same themes demonstrates the porous reality between war and coming home.

means of meditation. If one can dissolve the artificial barrier between the banality of life and the euphoric plateau of spiritual alertness, then the laundry becomes bearable.

If only it were so easy.

It raises the question of what action (if any) is needed both personally and collectively.

Concluding thoughts

In an interview about his short story 'Home,' George Saunders said that "one of the fundamental goals of fiction is to keep trying to "de-Other" your narrator until you've established him as basically you but on a different day. Saunders hoped that through 'Home,' we too would 'become' Mike, feel his evacuated emptiness and longing. There is an implicit assumption that in the creative moment of story creation – where the 'seemingness' of reality, to use Tim O'Brien's language, is set ablaze by the carefully constructed sentence – something essential, important, and necessary is transmitted. Saunders is not alone in his abiding faith in narrative as a means of getting inside an experience and more fully understanding it.

In David Finkel's follow-up to *The Good Soldiers*, he 'embedded' with the same group of men for their return. It is Finkel's nonfiction account of the war that waits for soldiers after their deployment. He titled the book *Thank You For Your Service*. "Every war has its afterwar, and so it is with Iraq and Afghanistan, which has created some five hundred thousand mentally wounded American veterans" (11). He asks the reader how Americans will ever be able to make sense of the deeply unsettling enormity of this number. He proposes we begin with a story of a single soldier. The one in Kansas who drives through the night because he can't sleep and then "towards dawn returns home [and] puts the shotgun away" (11).

When the ex-marine and writer Phil Klay won the National Book award for *Redeployment*, his collection of short stories, he said in his acceptance speech "war's too strange to be processed alone;" we have to tell the story to others:

> I came back [from war] not knowing what to think about so many things…What do you do when you are struggling to explain to a father of a fallen marine exactly what that marine meant to you? What do you do when one of your best marines calls you and tells you that he has been dirking too much and feels isolated at college surrounded by 18-year-olds who can't make sense of him and he can't make sense of? What do you do when the middle school students you are teaching ask if you have ever killed anyone and are horribly disappointed when you say no? What do you do when strangers insist on treating you as psychologically damaged just because you are a vet or when the friends of yours that do legitimately have post traumatic stress find that they cannot express their legitimate feelings of grief and rage about what happened, and what continues to happen, both overseas and at home? I don't have answers to those questions… but the book was the only real way I knew how to start thinking them through.

Others seem focused on a formula of storytelling plus inclusion of a physical modality. In *The Last Patrol* Junger intuits, and obliquely states, that telling the story of the return while walking three hundred miles, being *in* and *of* the body, is perhaps the best salve for the vague sense of inner torpor (the fey) a soldier experiences after coming home.[106] Elijah does not overtly identify his purpose but running – until the treadmill breaks – reinvigorates the ineffable war ecstasy and maybe makes the laundry a little more palatable.

Ritual is an answer offered by many.

Vietnam Veteran Karl Marlantes insists that every veteran should go through a ritual where a skilled facilitator guides him through a reintegration process "designed to get returning veterans back on home ground and reconnected to the infinite through something besides dealing and avoiding death" (205). A priest who guides returning veterans through moral injury healing

[106] In *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Junger also highlights the remarkably low rate of PTSD in Israeli soldiers (2% compared to in America, 20%). "The Israelis are benefiting from what the author and ethicist Austin Dacey describes as "shared public meaning" of war" (97). It is unclear if Junger would go so far as to support mandatory military service. I know other military and war scholars have.

ceremonies told me that the methodological approach of ritual is important because it shifts the story away from diagnosis and treatment, focusing instead on meaning and forgiveness. Ritual changes the dialogue from one where the veteran needs an intervention, help, and fixing (we so quickly assume that certain experiences will damage us). Instead, the focus is on the life-changing experience and the need to process. Jonathan Shay writes in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* that:

> As a society we have found ourselves unable to offer purification to those who do terrible acts of war on our behalf. I believe this is something to be done jointly by people from all our religions, from the arts, from the mental health professions… what I have in mind is a communal ritual with religious force that recognizes that everyone who has shed blood, no matter how blamelessly, is in need of purification. Such rituals must be communal with returning veterans, not something done to or for them before they return to civilian life. (245)

Regardless of the particular resolution – if that is even the right word – to the problem – again, if we decide to understand it as a problem – one thing is clear: returning home is not as easy as stepping from the platform to the train. The gap is too great. The sense of alienation for the returning veteran is, frequently, overwhelming.

To be reflective/reflexive about our American mythology is to admit that we share the assumption that everything must/can be fixed. This creates an urge to take narrative disjunctions that currently exist at cross-purposes, such as those described in this dissertation, and try to recast them. Perhaps this is the wrong approach. Similar to other forms of life-changing events, maybe returning from war is an existential dilemma. Maybe the answer is not to *correct* the gap but instead to *learn* how to live with it.

I began this research with a working hypothesis that telling stories is a big part of how we work through traumatic material. I have found that the process is much more complex than I initially imagined. Narrative meaning-making is a beginning. But stories, and the work of words, also reveal that certain experiences may never be fully integrated.

CODA

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it. (105)
Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*

Summer 2015

After a year of participant observation at Syracuse University – a year of being an ethnographer 'in the field' – it was time to return south to Atlanta, GA. I packed my car the Friday before Memorial Day and planned my exit for Tuesday after the long weekend. I knew the relationships formed would continue. I had already booked a trip in the fall for Veterans Day to attend a reading by the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group. Many of the men who would be reading had agreed to life-narrative interviews for my research; they felt like my guys. And there was a Moral Injury Healing Retreat I was helping to plan for the following spring. The work would also continue. But I wanted a sense of closure, some way of noting the transition. I decided an appropriate final chapter for my ethnographer's notebook would be a visit to the National September 11th Memorial & Museum. It seemed like a good place to actively remember the intended reverence of the day. Coincidentally, my stepmother and father were visiting New York and good-naturedly joined with a promise to leave me alone so I could experience the memorial on my own, with a scholar's eye.

What follows are my field notes for that visit. I have offset my own processing with sentences in italics to give a sense of both what was observed and my real-time thoughts.[107]

> When: May 25th, 2015
> Where: National September 11th Memorial & Museum.
> Setting: The ticket line at the museum
>
> Once I am through the metal detectors and vault-like doors, I am surprised by a framed image of a rose on one of the bronze panels at the memorial pools outside. It seems so

[107] Portions of the field notes have been omitted. Also, so as to more sharply elucidate the experience, I have redrafted the language in certain sections to clarify and expand on what I observed.

out of place among the guards with their serious-faces. It is an artsy picture: shadows, structures, and contrasting light of the flower in relief. I take a picture with my cell phone. A guard in the security line immediately yells at me. No photography allowed by the security point. I explain that I am a researcher trying to observe the general story of the museum and just making notes by capturing images. I am forgiven the mistake, this one time.

The guard's response seems to be about the possibility of me capturing visuals of the security apparatus for nefarious purposes. Strange. This reminds me of TSA at the airport. I don't understand what affect is intended by this? I have never been welcomed into a museum as if I was a possible (probable?) threat.

The walls are clearly fashioned to mirror/replicate the foundation of the twin towers during/after the attacks. Steel, metal, and iron all warped, twisted, and torn. Now, I am in the 'Memorial Hall.' Searching by last name I find the father of a friend who died in the North tower. In the picture I see a twelve-year-old version of the person I know in a yard on the right side of his dad, his older brother on the left. Everyone smiles. I don't stay in this room long.

But… this photo isn't the real story. I always thought the public eye made it more painful for him. I am beginning to regret the visit. I feel guilty for finding the picture of his father, it assumes an intimacy that I don't have with him or his family. Nor does anyone else in this museum. I am a voyeur.

Winding my way to the exit, I find a room with posters of individuals that were never found. A group from the Midwest is listening intently to their de facto tour guide. I stand nearby eavesdropping. She explains that the missing posters don't only represent unrecovered bodies. She says that, "September 11th also provided cover for many con artists and criminals to disappear and escape the law." I write the quote.

Clearly, this is not the story that comes to my mind. In this place, I am not thinking about the opportunistic criminal element – if this is actually true – associated with September 11th. But there are so many stories and so many different ways narrative is deployed to make meaning. Right now, in this museum, it feels too much to contain. Honestly, I am dizzy from it all. To me, this museum feels like a forced act of collective memory. What would the veterans I know from Syracuse think? Many told me they don't do anything on Memorial Day. Should I even be here? Is this the 'right' way to do this day?

One the subway ride uptown my stepmother asked if anyone else felt afraid going through security at the start of the museum. I told her I noted that exact experience in my notebook. She was happy that someone else saw the museum in the same way. It affirmed her story. I explained that I didn't really enjoy the memorial; it felt off. I wondered out loud if it was my fault. Maybe I was stuck viewing the experience through an academic lens. The scholar

so consumed by unpacking every signifier the signified becomes overly theoretical, abstract, and unreal. Perhaps after a busy year of field research I had forgotten how to turn off my mind and *feel* an experience.

Then, I told them about the unofficial tour guide I encountered right before I left who gleefully told the details of criminals and con artists hiding in plain sight amongst the missing and dead. My dad laughed. He asked what I made of that interpretation. I told him I wanted to be mad but wasn't sure on whose behalf. I told him in my notebook I simply wrote: there are so many stories and so many different ways narrative is deployed to make meaning. Ultimately, it seems like personal choice what stories we reach out and grab, what stories we dismiss, or what stories we decided to let pass without objection. I wrote this conversation in my notebook with an asterisk to highlight that I should return to the idea later when recording my oral notes from the day; it was an insight worth capturing.

Spring 2018

I was rewriting the end of my dissertation, again. I still thought the museum visit was emblematic of something important: the construction of a public narrative intended to thoughtfully embody a shared traumatic encounter. It felt off putting to me, but might be highly personal and effective for others. I imagined there is important learning in this tension but I could not find the right place for this discussion within the dissertation.

Then I heard episode 644 of the national radio broadcast *This American Life*, "Random Acts of History." The program is focused on how we tell the story of history "either from a marker on the side of the road, or maybe a film, or in […] a museum" and how often "what you get from that experience is very different from what is intended." Writer and journalist Steve Kandell has the final word of the broadcast. Steve visited the 9/11 Memorial Museum in 2014,

the year it opened. His sister died in the Twin Towers. Six years later, as Steve read on air what he wrote about his museum visit, the listener hears in his voice acceptance, anger, ambivalence, and a hard-earned detachment.

> [Our family] declined participation in most of the ceremonies and pageantry in favor of figuring out for ourselves our family's new geometry, just like any family that has suffered a loss. Other families feel the opposite. The world's attention validated the size of their grief. We understood this and respected it. And we just chose another, quieter way… which is why the corner of Greenwich and Liberty on this bright Sunday afternoon, surrounded by a riot of mid-spring tourists with winkled maps and exposed knees, taking photos of cranes, is the very last place I should be. I am allowed to enter the 9/11 museum a few days before the grand opening for the general public, but why would I want that? Why would I accept an invitation to a $700 million refutation of everything we tried to practice, a gleaming monument to what happened, not what happened to us?
>
> [Continues]
>
> After the TSA-style security check, complete with body scan, there's a dark corridor with word clouds and photographs projected onto tower-like pillars, while disembodied voices tell snippets of stories about the morning-- an overture warning us about the symphony ahead. We were eased into it in a sense, lowered into the maw down a ramp along the original foundation of the towers-- girders and rubble and broken staircases among the ruins, an impossibly mangled hook-and-ladder truck, showroom parked… there is no way out until the end. And it's all so numbing that maybe this is the whole point. The exhibition starts with one shining, unfathomably terrible morning and winds up as all of our lives, as banal and constant as laundry, bottomless. I can feel the sweat that went into making this not seem tacky, of wanting to show respect, but also wanting to show every last bit of carnage and visceral whomp to justify the $24 price of admission
>
> [Continues]
>
> I think now of every war memorial I ever yawned through on a class trip, how someone else's past horror was my vacant diversion. And maybe I learned something, but I didn't feel anything. Everyone should have a museum dedicated to the worst day of their life and be forced to attend it with a bunch of tourists from Denmark … and people will find moments of grace or enlightenment or even peace coming here. I don't need to be one of them. I'll probably bring my kids one day, once I realize I won't have the words to explain. It can be of use. It's fine. I don't know.

I imagined that Steve Kandell's searing confession legitimized my experience. As if his story made mine truer. Furthermore, in the overlay and overlap of his story and mine, new

narrative material begins. There is never just one story and stories never function independent of context.

Concluding thoughts

The anthropologist Clifford Gertz stated that, "stories matter […] so do stories about stories." Example: the story *about* the story of the movie *American Sniper*.

In 2015 *American Sniper* was one of the films nominated for best picture at the Academy Awards. The movie focuses on the life of U.S. Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle (and is based on his autobiography), his military service, his deployments to Iraq, and, finally, his tumultuous homecomings. Regardless of the controversial reception, or any polemical investments on behalf of the filmmakers, in the first ten days the domestic gross for the film was two hundred million dollars. Americans arrived en masse to see this film. Interest in Iraq and Afghanistan, the story of these wars, had, for one reason or another, arrived. But, as audiences continued filling theaters, in Stephenville, Texas another story was unfolding: Eddie Ray Routh was on trial for the murder of the film's protagonist. The New York Times noted that, "it appeared to be the first time a popular film portraying a murder victim as a hero was playing nationwide at the same time as the trial of the alleged killer."[108] Writing about this confluence of events, journalist Amos Barshad concluded, "the story of *American Sniper* is an intersection of real life, memoir, and Hollywood."

> *American Sniper* made sure that [Chris Kyle] would be remembered forever, for his actions in Iraq, as a hero. However vociferous they get, the movie's critics can't get in its way now. It has become a cultural touchstone. We will be talking about this movie for a long time […] in some ways — no matter what happened to Chris Kyle, before and after his military service — *American Sniper*, a film directed by Clint Eastwood, starring

[108] See New York Times- ''American' Sniper' Jury Is Told of Troubled Ex-Marine Who Killed Chris Kyle.' Feb 11, 2015.

> Bradley Cooper, will become a more permanent record of Kyle's life than anything else.[109]

Intertextuality.

It is the word used by literary scholars to explain the interconnected relationship between texts. According to the theory, narratives are not hermetically sealed and distinct but in fact constructed by preexisting language systems, intermingled with other stories, unbounded. *American Sniper*, and the multilayered authorship of Chris Kyle's life, is evidence that life narratives are the same as texts. Intertextual.

There are so many stories and so many different ways narrative is deployed to make meaning. Even when we listen closely to a representative sample of storytelling (both in regard to variety of form and variation of experience), observe daily behavior to augment and deepen an individual's self-report, place all of this shoulder-to-shoulder with academic theory, reflect, then, with curiosity and openness, question the preliminary findings, read more, pull back (again) for additional reflection and distillation so as to finally formulate and articulate conclusions, even then, it is difficult to concretely define the entirety of what it is we are talking about when we talk about war.

"Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it," intones Hannah Arendt. Interpreting Arendt's declarative statement as a call to action, I end this story by returning to the scene of my first interview, sitting in a kitchen with brothers Randy and Nate.

I would like to report that our interview was similar to Raymond Carver's 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,' the story from which the title of this project was inspired. I would like to report that together the three of us committed to a rigorous afternoon of truth telling and that beyond the words shared between us, in the quiet of what was left unsaid, "I

[109] See Grantland- 'The Shadow of American Sniper.' Feb 26th, 2015.

could hear the human noise we sat there making together" (Carver 185). However, that would be the overwrought, sentimentalized version of events. That would be fiction. The more truthful rendering: I was new to life narrative interviews and didn't know how to interject productive questions into Nate's monologue, or how to reflect what I heard to help him focus and deepen his own telling of the story. Randy was still processing his deployment. He was happy to listen, but didn't want to share.

We did our best.

In certain circumstances, with certain stories, perhaps listening, understanding, and responding is too much to ask. Maybe the goal should be reframed: we must accept the fleeting moments when it seems the listener momentarily understands a sliver of our own experience; on the other side of the dialogue, we must accept the earnest attempts at narration. We don't need complete understanding. We need the sincere desire to want to understand.

So on any given day, if we find ourselves in a position to receive another's story, we must listen closely and hear not only the words but also the sound between sentences, the music in the pauses, and the significance of what language cannot define. If we find ourselves occupying the role of storyteller, our job is to trust that even though others may misunderstand the specificity of our experience, sharing stories is still valuable. Stories matter. So do stories about stories.

Thank you to all the storytellers.

Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

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