

SCRIPTED BY WAR: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WAR WRITING AS TRAUMA

TEXTS

by
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ABSTRACT

Though war writing abounds in the form of contemporary fiction and non-fiction, little has been evaluated for its usefulness to trauma recovery. While collections such as *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War* and *Retire the Colors* aggregate civilian and veteran experience of war and understand the importance of recognizing these stories, works like *American Sniper*, *Lone Survivor*, and *War Porn* are not only antithetical to the project of widespread appreciation of trauma's effects and how they can be combatted but are also actively damaging to sufferers of trauma as well as general readers. Without a dedicated effort to categorize and evaluate the writing that has emerged (and continues to emerge still) from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the project of surviving trauma's wounds—individually, from the battlefield itself, and socially, as a culture imbricated in war—will ultimately fail. This dissertation addresses this dangerous lack of assessment and offers a system by which one can gauge the potential efficacy of one work over another. This has been made possible by both recent and past contributions to trauma theory. From the past works of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra, a foundation of traumatization and recovery can be assessed. However, it is recent contributions from Bessel van der Kolk that allow for a more complete accounting of the effects and mitigations of trauma. The trauma theory that will be used throughout also intends to elucidate the position of the author in relation to the reader. Many authors of these war works are not only familiar with trauma but have lived it, yet many readers will be entirely ignorant of trauma's effects and mistake harmful symptoms of acting-out as spectacle to be consumed. In effect, trauma theory becomes the key to recognition—recognition

of these works as trauma texts *and* what ultimate effects these works might have. In the first chapter, I highlight the troubled history of trauma and weave into it the advent of war writing. In Chapter II, Chris Kyle's *American Sniper* will be shown as a text based in traumatic acting-out. Kyle (both knowingly and unknowingly) entices his readers with war porn—with spectacle—while drawing their attention away from the damage that war has done to him and those around him. In Chapter III, I evaluate Roy Scranton's *War Porn* as acting-out in fiction. While Scranton does much to humanize and otherwise Othered subjectivity in "the fall" section, he ultimately damages a reader in a potentially-traumatic climax. In Chapter IV, Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* and the short story collection, *Fire and Forget*, are shown to be efforts of working-through. Though certainly limited and dependent upon the reader's relationship with the text, these works disabuse their audience of the glammers of war and promote recovery. In Chapter V, I hold up Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* as the pinnacle of what I call vicarious working-through. Fountain, a civilian, imagines the plight of the soldier and uses that subjectivity to argue for the civilian population to take responsibility for their wars and the veterans who have been traumatized by them. Though veteran writing can be an important outlet for personal and sometimes public understanding of the war and one's experience, the onus rests on civilians to accept accountability for the damage that war has caused. This does not, by any means, relegate veterans to silence or aggrandize the importance of civilian writing in this sphere, it is an effort to stimulate discussion of disqualified knowledge and normalize the fact that war writing concerns everyone and should be addressed by everyone. In order to prevent trauma, as a subject, from fading into

obscurity as it has done so often historically, that which manifests trauma must be taken from the taboo and made normal. By interrogating contemporary war writing, it is my hope that other subjects and spheres may follow suit. Only then can we enable sufferers to heal and to prevent these traumatizations from occurring so rampantly in the future.

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CHAPTER I: THE HISTORY OF TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT

Introduction:

Historically, trauma has been pervasive, an epidemic, but one often relegated to exceptional status. And though there are records of trauma dating back thousands of years, trauma theory—and along with it, our attention to trauma as an affecting force within our world—has waxed and waned throughout. In our contemporary moment, trauma is at the forefront: sufferers from all spheres—domestic, racial, military—have been acknowledged in ways previously unheard of. However, if we do not understand the reasons for trauma’s resurgence now and previous dissolutions as an area of attention within society, we are doomed to slide back into willed ignorance. Such an ignorance places traumatized individuals in deadly obscurity, doomed to suffer without the necessary support required for recovery.

My intention with this dissertation is to take contemporary texts from the war writing genre,¹ a sphere of trauma studies that is currently highly visible, in order to evaluate these texts with established trauma theory and argue for their usefulness as tools for recovery—as a means to maintain attention to trauma. In taking advantage of this genre’s current conspicuousness, I hope to stimulate further discussion in areas adjacent to it. Within this overarching argument, there are distinctions to be made

¹ I use the term “war writing” to avoid complications of medium distinction between fiction and non-fiction, as well as differences between novels, autobiographies, and short stories. The term also acts as an inclusive label to allow wider participation in the genre by rejecting “literature” as it is typically used to engender inferiority in less visible works. The occasional use of the term “war literature” within this dissertation is a concession to extant criticism and is meant to alleviate any potential confusion when discussing interviews or scholarly articles.

between kinds of recovery: writerly recovery and readerly response. Recovery that is open to the writer of the text, or a writerly recovery through war writing that does not disqualify the reader from a similar recovery, also brings with it the potential for transmission of trauma. As will be described later, works that act as recovery paths for their authors could be actively detrimental to a reader, constituting a working-through via acting-out.² A readerly response to trauma recovery does not require that the author achieve (or even demonstrate) working-through, but as I will argue in later chapters, texts that eschew a glorification of spectacle—or war porn—and show acting-out to be a fruitless endeavor, typically provide the most probable avenue (while promising no guarantee) for recovery.

The purpose of this investigation is to recognize that all trauma writing is not equal, that there exist works that advance our attention of trauma in productive ways among texts that are actively detrimental to the study and treatment of trauma and its symptoms. To this end, several texts emerging from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have been chosen as a sample of this century's trauma texts within the genre of war writing: Chris Kyle's *American Sniper*, Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, the short story collection *Fire and Forget*, and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* comprise this survey, but by no means do these texts offer the total experience of these contemporary wars. At the very least, each is decidedly American, but they do offer a range of mediums for the discussion of war and its bearing on trauma. Within this short list is fiction and non-fiction, the novel and the

² This too will be described in greater detail within this chapter as we turn to Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

short story, veteran and civilian. No one mode or medium is privileged, but each is emphatic on the pervasiveness of trauma in modern war, from the battlefield echoing through to the home front.

Each of these texts is penned primarily by white men—with a few striking counterexamples within *Fire and Forget*³ and allusion to others found within *Retire the Colors*—the seemingly-default register for contemporary war writing. Despite far more diverse demographics within the United States military,⁴ writing has historically come from its white (and often male) service members.⁵ The novels of Helen Benedict (*The Sand Queen* is a novel that has gained some critical attention within trauma studies recently, as evidenced by Jennifer Haytock’s “Reframing War Stories”), Siobhan Fallon’s *You Know When the Men are Gone*, and scattered autobiographies, such as Kayla Williams’ *Love my Rifle more than You*, add much-needed female voices to the war, however, racial diversity within contemporary war writing is even more rare. Outside of American writing, Hassan Blasim’s *The Corpse Exhibition* is a noted work, but within the confines of this project, any writing from minority groups is virtual non-existent. The Amazon.com best sellers list for Afghan and Iraq War Biographies is a wall of bold, patriotic colors and white (mostly male) faces; The New York Times’ “A Reading List of Modern War Stories”⁶ is replete with whiteness; and even the Daily Beast’s more recent “15 Great Books about Iraq, Afghanistan” is

³ Mariette Kalinowski’s “The Train” will figure prominently into my arguments for working-through within chapter IV.

⁴ Pew Research Center has racial and ethnic minorities comprising 43% of U.S. military in 2017.

⁵ See Joseph Darda’s “Military Whiteness” and forthcoming monograph, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* from University of California Press. Darda argues that the veteran diversity group became synonymous with male whiteness and created an artificial sanctuary for that whiteness under the guise of diversity.

⁶ Though published in 2014, the list is contemporary with the works selected for this project.

without a single diverse voice that is also American.⁷ The possible reasons for this representation are outside the aims of this dissertation, but this deficit should be noted for the blind spot that it represents. And yet, this troubling lack of representation should not foreclose the potential value of my project—by acknowledging this default bias of material, my aim is to encourage a fuller representation within war writing by which we will continue to refine the value of these works to the process of trauma recovery.

Ultimately, an investigation of contemporary war writing within the scope of trauma theory demands for similar application to other spheres. It is my hope that this diagnostic approach to war writing illustrates the need for others to do the same with racial violence and injustice, with sexual assault and domestic violence, and with the agony of our prison systems. This is by no means the final word on the trauma endemic to war either, but it can serve as a starting point for a new evaluation of the texts that we offer up to the public as definitive of war-time experience and what it means to create relationships to combat and battlefields through writing.

In this introductory chapter, I outline the history of trauma theory as well as demonstrate what aspects and which theorists apply to my evaluation of contemporary war writing. This necessarily involves a history of trauma as a subject and the major developments in its definitions and practices as it comes into the hands of a variety of doctors, clinicians, psychologists, and theorists. It is my intention to show how we

⁷ My argument is not that these works simply do not exist but that they do not exist in the American public's understanding of Iraq and Afghanistan. Writer Christopher Paul Wolfe and poet/playwright Maurice Emerson Decaul are two Black voices in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars who exhibit works as counterexamples. Their stories can be found in the collection, *The Road Ahead*.

have arrived at the explication of modern trauma theory so that the reader may see how my invocation of it applies to a particular subset of trauma writing made even more narrow through the inherent bias within the genre itself. The genesis and revision of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) can be used as the yardstick for contemporary understanding and response to trauma and will be helpful in providing some structure to an overview of trauma theory throughout recent history. By tracing the development of trauma as a non-physical wound through the iterations of the DSM, we better organize the growth of trauma theory as a subject. As a final part of this chapter, I presage the remainder of the dissertation with chapter overviews meant to provide context for the larger discussion the dissertation points to.

A Brief History of Trauma Theory and Application:

Trauma has existed throughout western history, with some historians citing the first instance of posttraumatic reactions in medical texts of around 1900 BC (Figley et al. 1). Trauma is present in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Herodotus provides an early example of a "written narrative of chronic symptoms" (Figley et al. 1) in his accounting of the battle of Marathon in 440 BC. These accounts are instances (both historical and pseudo-mythical) demonstrating trauma's prevalence, particularly amidst war. However, trauma's breadth is such that it incorporates much more than battlefields and soldiers. It would largely not be until Jean-Martin Charcot's research into hysteria in the latter half of the nineteenth century that the study of trauma began to incorporate a range of experience.

Charcot, in his treatment of hysteria in women, concluded—converse to established practice—that hysteria was not physiological but instead psychological. Charcot’s treatment was then to recall the traumatic event through hypnosis, a “process that culminated in the abrogation of . . . symptoms” (Ringel and Brandell 1), rather than the previous treatment of hysterectomy. It was then Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud that continued the research of Charcot and established trauma theory in its modern conception after a turning away from hysteria. For Janet, who studied under Charcot at the Psychological Laboratory in the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris and who would later influence Freud, reintroduction to the traumatic moment was key to affecting (and correcting) patients’ behavior. And while Janet’s reintroduction method was also hypnosis like that of Charcot before him, abreaction, or catharsis due to reexposure to traumatic memory, became a more central concept in treatment (Ringel and Brandell 1).

As Judith Herman notably writes in her *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, “The dominant psychological theory of the [19th] century was founded in the denial of women’s reality” (14). Herman identifies Freud’s own turn from hysteria and into dream interpretation and wish fulfillment as an escape from the horrifying reality that so many women and girls had experienced sexual abuse in their lives. Herman writes that if Freud was to continue his research into hysteria, he would “be forced to conclude that what he called ‘perverted acts against children’ were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, where he had first studied hysteria, but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice. This idea was simply

unacceptable. It was beyond credibility” (14). Freud moved on to other theories and other explanations, but his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* did establish a framework for a modern understanding of trauma, despite his failing to recognize *and* address it in women.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is framed as a theoretical thrust into the contrasting human drives that Freud terms the pleasure principle and the ego-instincts (later to be reidentified by Cathy Caruth as the death drive). The two can be briefly defined as “an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” (3) in the former case, and the “pressure towards death” (52), or the purpose in “reach[ing] the final aim of life as swiftly as possible” (49) in the latter case. In relation to trauma, these conflicting yet compatible drives are important because for Freud, trauma—or what he calls “traumatic neurosis” (10)—is the result of an excitation of the mental apparatus that, through repression, “turns a possibility of pleasure into unpleasure” (8).⁸ This, coupled with the torpor associated with the death drive, accounts for Freud’s understanding of what we now know as trauma.

Described as a condition that results in “strongly marked signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia) as well as . . . a far more comprehensive general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities” (10), traumatic neurosis is fundamentally different than the comparatively straight-forward effects of physical trauma brought on by “mechanical force” that Freud organizes

⁸ Freud spells-out the over-saturated pleasure principle a bit earlier in his text: “for if the work of the mental apparatus is directed towards keeping the quantity of excitation low, then anything that is calculated to increase that quantity is bound to be felt as adverse to the functioning of the apparatus, that is as unpleasurable” (5-6).

under the heading of “organic lesions to the nervous system” (10). Freud further encourages theorization of what we now consider the field of trauma with his observation that “[n]o complete explanation has yet been reached either of war neuroses or of the traumatic neuroses of peace” (10). This gap in knowledge becomes the center of Freud’s investigation as he attempts to unravel the mechanisms of traumatization and the process of recovery from that trauma—a gap that will be pursued by a host of other theorists after Freud.

Freud’s initial observations of trauma have been seen as foundational for some in the field, and these devotees begin with his definitions of his key terms that persist throughout his discussion of trauma: *Schreck* (fright) is described as a state of surprise in the face of danger, an unexpected hazard, “emphasiz[ing] the factor of surprise” (11); *Furcht* (fear) is only possible when a subject has “a definite object of which to be afraid” (11); and *Angst* (anxiety) is a state of expecting and preparing for danger, “even though it may be an unknown one” (11). These terms—barring anxiety, for Freud believes that “there is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses” (11)—figure prominently into Freud’s characterization of traumatic neuroses given that to develop such a neurosis one must first be in a state of fright (*Schreck*) without anxiety or fear preceding that fright. Second, Freud claims the victim must also not simultaneously experience a wound or injury, which is an aspect of his theory that has had to be discarded in the face of countless domestic, war, and still other victims who exhibit all signs of trauma in addition to their very real wounds.

The method for Freud's process of recovery from trauma is to investigate dreams, because "[t]he study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes" (11). Dreams, Freud maintains, "have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of [their] accident, a situation from which [they wake] up in another fright" (11). This repetition of traumatization that is also a re-traumatization is something that Caruth will make much hay with in *Unclaimed Experience*, but for Freud himself the importance is that through dreams the therapist is able to treat the sufferer of trauma.

Between Freud's foundations of trauma theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the slew of theorists that emerge within the 1990s—theorists like Caruth, Felman, Herman, and Laub; many of whom will be discussed in varying degrees of detail within this chapter—there are pockets of theorists who address trauma, both within the confines of war and its aftermath and without. Most notable of these contributions comes from Frantz Fanon and his theory of colonial and racial trauma that emerges in the early 1950s in such works as *Black Skin, White Masks*. And though Fanon will not be employed within my dissertation, his theory is useful for future study into the relationship of race and war as it pertains to trauma.

Sujaya Dhanvantari writes in "The Violent Origins of Psychic Trauma" that Fanon's work in *Black Skin, White Masks* "critiques the 'invisible' causal structure of psychic trauma in the colonies and explores psychoanalytic theory for descriptions of the Black psyche" (40) before advocating for a "new hermeneutics" to "decipher the toll of psychic damage wrought by new systems of power" (51). In Kwame Anthony Appiah's Foreword to the Grove Press new translation of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the

author writes that though “[w]e may no longer find [Fanon’s] psychoanalytic framework as useful in understanding racism’s causes and effects . . . the psychological damage wrought on many colonial peoples—and on the colonizers who oppressed them—remains” (ix).⁹ Between these two writers, we find more than enough reason to linger over Fanon’s seminal text.

The author himself argues that society “does not escape human influence” (xv) and that European colonial civilization creates the conditions for the Othered existence of Black peoples,¹⁰ an “object among other objects” (89), that has been othered into inanimate non-existence. Fanon writes that the “image of one’s body is solely negating” (90) and this negation plays into his criticism of Freud. Within *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one can already begin to see Freud’s shift into an oedipal accounting of the human psyche (and to some extent, trauma), but for Fanon, this oedipal understanding fails to account for the Black experience of the world: “A normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world” (122). The collective catharsis that Fanon mentions exists as an outlet for societal aggression takes the form of the Other, but if the Self *is* this Other by virtue of society’s prevailing whiteness, the psyche is splintered, fractured. By being forced to adopt the subject position of white society,

⁹ Within his Introduction, Fanon writes that he will be eschewing methodology—or to be charitable, the *enunciation* of methodology—for the work, leaving “methods to the botanists and mathematicians” (xvi), alleviating our being beholden to such a method.

¹⁰ Within the context of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon rarely speaks to the African American condition but frequently to his Antillean compatriots. The use of the term “Black” is to denote the applicability of Fanon’s argument to people throughout the world; the term is proper for obvious reasons, but a skeptical reader need only consult “Why We’re Capitalizing Black” by Nancy Coleman of the *New York Times*.

the Black subject is made to feel inferior (127).¹¹ Fanon concludes his systematic—and accurate—tear-down of Freud’s theory with the idea that “[w]e too often tend to forget that neurosis is not a basic component of human reality . . . the Oedipus complex is far from being a black complex” (130).

And though it can be argued that Freud’s theory of oedipal society has largely been discarded in modernity (though literature, drawn rather broadly, has seemed to retain it as narrative shorthand for quite some time), Fanon’s implosion of it warrants further attention because it strikes upon a reality of trauma still largely left barren by contemporary theory. Fanon’s understanding of racial and colonial trauma acts as a jumping-off point for another investigation of trauma, one that must not be ignored.

In the years following World War I, Abram Kardiner emerges as a theorist and clinician in the treatment of trauma, known to him as the neurosis of war. However, like many who came before—and who come after, with the crucial exception of Fanon—Kardiner is linked to Freud. Like Freud (and Janet), Kardiner takes reenactment to be central to the problem of trauma, the compulsion to repeat that Freud discusses at length in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and elsewhere. Yet Kardiner’s work cannot be simplified as merely a modernization of Freud, forever doomed to linger in that monolithic (rightly or wrongly) shadow: at a time when soldiers suffering from trauma were treated as malingers or shirkers, he recognized that these symptoms were “normal response[s] to an unbearable situation” (Ringell and Brandell 3).

¹¹ Elsewhere in the text, Fanon writes that “[t]he Antillean does not possess a personal value of his own and is always dependent on the presence of ‘the other’” (186).

Kardiner continued his work into and beyond World War II with the help of Herbert Spiegel and their work with soldiers in that war continued to help sketch our contemporary understanding of trauma theory. With Spiegel, Kardiner continued to work with altered states and hypnosis to get soldiers to revisit the traumatic event,¹² but the focus on the insufficiency of that method is significant. The pair warned that cathartic experience was useless if the traumatic memories in question were not integrated into consciousness (Herman 26). There can be no quick fix for trauma, but for a military dedicated to getting wounded soldiers back onto the battlefield, minimal functioning equated to recovery.

In the publication of the first issue of the DSM in 1952, trauma was absent as a non-physical injury—though the plight of soldiers had been studied in that capacity since the 19th century up to (and continuing with) Kardiner and Spiegel’s work. However, GSR, or gross stress reaction, did make an appearance as “a reaction to an event, rather than an expression of an inborn defect or vulnerability” (Figley et al. 5). This new understanding of what would come to be known as trauma is an important departure from early theorists like Freud who believed physical lesions to be the cause of trauma.¹³ Figley et al. contend that it is Dr. Joseph Wolpe who “form[s] the foundation” for cognitive-behavioral treatments for PTSD in the mid-1950s, utilizing

¹² “As in earlier work on hysteria, the focus of the ‘talking cure’ for combat neurosis was on the recovery and cathartic reliving of traumatic memories, with all their attendant emotions of terror, rage, and grief” (Herman 25).

¹³ Figley et al. mention various of these “physical” traumas throughout the late 19th and early-20th centuries that were also theorized to have psychological origins, including railway spine (Herbert William Page), soldier’s heart (Jacob Mendes Da Costa), and shell shock, which emerged largely out of WWI (4).

what he referred to as reciprocal inhibition to “condition a new response to the originally feared traumatic stimulus” (5).

At the height of America’s next great conflict, the Vietnam War,¹⁴ Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan enmeshed themselves in the rap groups begun by Vietnam Veterans Against the War and helped establish Operation Outreach, an organization within the Veterans’ Administration dedicated to treating veterans through a “self-help, peer-counseling model of care” (Herman 27). This, writes Herman, “made it possible to recognize psychological trauma as a lasting and inevitable legacy of war” (Herman 27). National recognition and legitimacy granted by a government institution helped establish trauma as a persistent problem needing to be addressed, but as we will see later in Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, the focus on trauma waxes and wanes, perhaps because of the public’s uncomfortable relationship to war and shunning of taboo subjects such as sexual assault and racial violence.

The 1968 edition of the DSM departs from the forerunning definition of PTSD that was forwarded by Wolpe and instead makes use of stress reactions rising from the Vietnam War, termed post-Vietnam syndrome by Chaim F. Shatan (as published by the New York Times in 1972). Figley et al. note that in the 58,000 deaths and 300,000 injuries of American soldiers during the Vietnam War, no diagnoses—and no treatments—were given to these veterans (5). As a result, movement to replace the standing diagnostic tool in GSR with something that would allow for serving the veteran population gained traction. It was in DSM-III (1980) that PTSD was defined

¹⁴ The Korean War is often glossed over in the history of the United States’ wars and the lack of substantive development in trauma theory in this time may be telling, as well.

and used as a tool to identify traumatization. The definition itself, which classified trauma as an event outside the range of normal human experience, mistook traumatization as a rare occurrence—much in the same way that Freud did generations prior. The DSM-III-R (1987) made a similar mistake, one that Laura S. Brown in her “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” located within Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, rightly illustrates as failing to capture the experience of traumatized individuals suffering from habitual or repeated trauma from incest, sexual assault, or any number of other recurrent events.

Cathy Caruth herself enters conversation with Freud with her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) through Freud’s example of Tasso’s Tancred and the hero’s “wounding [of] his beloved in a battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again” (2) after her soul has been imprisoned in a tree. The moment, argues Caruth, “evocatively represent[s] in Freud’s text the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknown acts of the survivor and against his will” (2). Here, Caruth is very much in-line with that which was previously discussed in Freud, but already she chooses to engage with trauma through a literary register. In this, Caruth defends her approach by citing Freud’s own turn to literature to relate trauma (something he does more often outside of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* than in it): “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (3). It is this comparison to psychoanalysis and the importance of both knowing and not knowing

that grounds Caruth's own approach to trauma, and, I argue, causes her to fall victim to the same limitations that Freud is faced with.

Caruth continues to describe Tancred's trauma in particular, and trauma as a process more generally, when she says that it is something "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Further, she notes that it is this unassimilated nature of the experience, "the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance" (4) that causes this traumatic haunting. This is where Caruth's famous "speaking wound" makes its appearance: "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). The resonance of Caruth's assessment of Freud—that knowing and simultaneous not knowing—carries itself through these lines and throughout the rest of her book. This "attempt" that Caruth will return to is as modest as it is incomplete. Caruth's declared focus on "the language of trauma and . . . the stories associated with it" eschews "actual case studies of trauma survivors" and "the psychiatry of trauma" (4) and limits the possibility of substantive healing processes as a result.

Caruth moves on to establish another duality as an echo of her knowing—not knowing synthesis. At the core of the traumatic story, she argues, lies a "double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*." From this, the "incompatible and absolutely inextricable" (7) stories form the basis of what Caruth terms history. This too is something she gleans from Freud and his account of the accident. Of this, Caruth says that what is illustrated in the accident is not only

“the violence of a collision” but also “the impact of its very incomprehensibility” (6). Notably, Caruth drops the stipulation that Freud argues for in the exclusion of a physical wound in contracting trauma—a wise move on her part—though she still adapts the rest of Freud’s theory in order to maintain that “[w]hat returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6).

The difficulty, however, is in the knowing fully. To further complicate the possibility of that knowing, Caruth returns to her definition of history and adds to it the latency in the event of trauma, as the “historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (17). Put differently, traumatic events are preserved as history through their never having been experienced at their moment of initial occurrence; it is only after they have been repressed and unwittingly reenacted that they can become known. This is what Caruth refers to as the “indirect referentiality of history” (18), a piece of lived experience that is not yet subject to memory and “grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18). Additionally, she notes that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24).

It would seem then that the only access that we have to trauma is through dialogue, through an expression of story that we disentangle together. Caruth’s speaking wound must be *heard*, something that almost every serious trauma theorist acknowledges (Laub and Felman’s *Testimony* is a good example of this; though the text was published in 1992, parts of it were published in 1991 and were edited by

Caruth, which would at the very least indicate a connection between the importance of “hearing” across the field). This is at the center of Caruth’s plan for trauma recovery, for the “way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” creates the conditions for an “encounter with another, through the very possibility of and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (8). Caruth wants to understand history “as the history of a trauma” (64) in order to highlight the “imperative of a speaking that awakens others” (108) to their own traumas, and this necessarily creates a responsibility for the formation of a community of the traumatized.

Unlike Freud, Caruth moves the onus from the therapist and psychiatrist to the informed listener, to someone who has processed their own trauma enough to be able to hear it in the words of others. This egalitarian, mentor-like process of trauma recovery is attractive; it postulates that everyone can learn to be equipped for trauma recognition and treatment, but it leaves out mention of who exactly this community of sufferers is comprised of. By this, I mean how does an individual know that they *are* traumatized if the event has been sublimated, and at some point, forced into unconscious repetition? This is not to say that a sufferer would experience an amnesia of a violent event, but how should they know that the violent events of their life—car crashes, sports injuries, mandolin accidents, whatever—have installed trauma within them? What is missing from Caruth’s prospective treatment are the symptoms that trauma makes itself known (or rather unknown) by. This is something that the more empirical approach that Herman presents is careful not to leave out.

Judith Herman's 1992 text, *Trauma and Recovery*, explicates trauma's many and varied symptoms.¹⁵ Broadly, Herman's text sorts trauma's symptoms into three distinct categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. It is possible that symptoms of one category commingle with those of the other two, but Herman limits herself to the specifics of each individually without further acknowledgement of the hybrid symptoms. Hyperarousal is the state of "permanent alert" (35) in which the affected person experiences (among other things) a shattering of the fight or flight impulse and the inability to tune out stimuli that non-traumatized individuals might consider to be background noise (36). Additionally, Herman notes that hyperarousal consists of a mix of generalized anxieties *and* specific fears. Within trauma texts, hyperarousal has manifested in a traumatized soldier returning from war only to expect its violence at any moment. From Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away*: "On the Fourth of July, a firecracker sent me diving behind a car door, reaching for a pistol that wasn't there. I felt older than my father" (363). This is the war brought home, a psychological as well as physiological consequence of trauma.¹⁶

Intrusion is perhaps the most familiar of the symptoms in media as it is the *idée fixe* (to use Janet's term), the repeated event that has not been assimilated as normal memory. Importantly, Herman indicates that traumatic memory "lack[s] verbal narrative and context" (38), which only reinforces the necessity of narrativizing it in

¹⁵ In my gloss of Herman, I will also be making use of Bessel van der Kolk and his *The Body Keeps the Score*, a more recent text than Herman's that updates her cataloguing of symptoms and grounds them in the science of the body and its reactions to stress and trauma.

¹⁶ In Ch. 3 of Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, the author explains how trauma recall ignites the limbic brain and visual cortex, giving the sufferer the literal impression that the trauma is still present rather than past (42).

order to “get ahold” of it and commit it to past memory rather than a haunting present. As van der Kolk points out, “It is so much easier for them [the traumatized] to talk about what has been done to them—to tell a story of victimization and rage—than to notice, feel, and put into words the reality of their internal experience” (47)—a necessary component of recovery. Herman also speaks to the compulsion to repeat the event as the mind’s way of attempting mastery, and here dreams become one component of that attempt. However, she is careful to point out that most sufferers of trauma will avoid this repetition-to-mastery attempt that their subconscious might pull them toward. Instead, they “dread and fear” (42) it (recalling the general anxiety and specific fears of hyperarousal) and experience terror and rage in that stagnation.¹⁷

Constriction is that “state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve” (42), it is a closing down of the individual’s emotional fronts. Complicit in this process is dissociation, and if trauma victims are unable to dissociate naturally (physiologically), they opt for self-medication (44). Herman makes a connection to the dissociation that soldiers experience on the battlefield in the face of overwhelming loss and terror. Similar to John Wade’s magic tricks hidden amidst his medals from the war in O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods*, the turn to magic and omens and lucky charms (Herman 46) embodies an attempt to close off terror and take stock in something talismanic, something that will also be noted in Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper*.

Bessel van der Kolk refines Herman’s thought on dissociation in 2014 within *The Body Keeps the Score* when he labels it “the essence of trauma,” where

¹⁷ The idea of this compulsion to repeat begins with Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

“overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived” (66). And while van der Kolk’s dissociation appears very similar to Herman’s intrusion, a distinction is warranted in van der Kolk’s analysis of dissociation as the sufferer’s attempt to “cultivate an illusory sense of control” (67) in the face of trauma brought into the body. As van der Kolk cautions, “The challenge is not so much learning to accept the terrible things that have happened but learning how to gain mastery over one’s internal sensations and emotions” (68).

Depersonalization, however, is almost entirely new to Herman’s accounting of traumatic symptoms. For van der Kolk, depersonalization is the dearth of emotion in an encounter (whether past or present) with the traumatic, the almost catatonic response to the event—a bodily shutdown—that is a third alternative to fight or flight (this is also noted in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in Henry Krystal’s discussion of alexithymia, which is itself noted in van der Kolk’s sixth chapter).

Depersonalization is separation from the body and can even result in viewing oneself from a third-person perspective at the moment of trauma. Within texts of acting-out, depersonalization may manifest itself as broadly as narrative description—an author relates an experience *as if* it had happened to another, be it through perspective shift or description that deliberately obfuscates action (the horror trope, “someone was screaming” that is revealed to be the narrator is an example of acute depersonalization).

These traumatic symptoms comprise the various ways individuals react to trauma, consciously or otherwise, but the list is not exhaustive. There remains the possibility that still other symptoms can manifest as trauma—and our responses to it—are culturally and historically conditioned. The ways in which writers represent acting-out unconsciously, as a result of their trauma, may be subject to shifts from generation to generation.

Cataloguing the types of trauma symptoms is vastly important to Herman's project, because, as she points out in Chapter 6, "The testimony of patients is eloquent on the point that recognition of the trauma is central to the recovery process" (127). Only after trauma has been acknowledged can healing begin. And in similar fashion to her classification of traumatic symptoms, Herman clearly outlines the stages of recovering from trauma: "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (133). Herman's first stage in recovery is characterized by establishing relationships of trust. Herman typically expresses this as a function of therapy, and in doing so, outlines several prerequisites for this kind of therapeutic relationship. The therapist must respect "the patient's autonomy by remaining disinterested and neutral" (135) where disinterest is abstaining from the use of power over the patient for personal advantage and neutrality is refusing to take sides in the patient's "inner conflicts" (315). However, Herman is quick to delineate therapeutic neutrality from moral neutrality. The work the therapist does "requires a committed moral stance" as the therapist is there "to bear witness to a crime" (135). Along with the calculated therapeutic stance,

the therapist must also be aware of the potential for traumatic countertransference, or the emotionally overwhelming position of experiencing the “same terror, rage, and despair as the patient” (140)—Herman cautions that “[t]rauma is contagious” (140), and the individual tasked with listening (be it a therapist or empathetic companion) must be prepared for the surfacing of their own damaging personal experiences.

Ultimately, Herman wants to establish the therapeutic relationship as an “alliance between patient and therapist” that is “both a labor of love and a collaborative commitment” (147). This therapy contract places a premium on truth-telling “since the patient is likely to have many secrets, including secrets from herself” (148). This truth-telling is bound to be difficult initially, but it is essential to the work undertaken in Herman’s second stage. Before moving on to that stage, Herman carefully reaffirms the purpose of safety in the first stage of trauma recovery, the “gradual shift from unpredictable danger” that marks the traumatic experience and its symptoms, to “reliable safety” that the therapy contract promises. Without the foundation of safety, recovery can be stunted or even compromised. Herman illustrates the complications of a patient skipping right into the work of the second stage, where the mistaken belief that “pouring out the story will solve all their problems” embodies a kind of “violent cathartic cure” that aligns the therapist with the role of the perpetrator “invited to rescue the patient by inflicting pain” (172).

The second stage of trauma recovery is spelled out in, “Remembrance and Mourning,” and it is characterized by the “survivor tell[ing] the story of the trauma” (175). The patient takes the “prenarrative” of trauma and makes it into a narrative

through careful work with the therapist.¹⁸ Herman elucidates the direct exposure or “flooding” technique as a process by which the patient and therapist prepare a script “describing the traumatic event in detail” (182)—this script must contain the essential elements of context, fact, emotion, and meaning. The script or narrative must encounter the traumatic imagery imbricated in the event and the resultant affect. Of this, Herman says that, “The recitation of facts without the accompanying emotions is a sterile exercise, without therapeutic effect” (177). There is no escape from the telling of the event for it to have value to recovery. In this stage, initial sessions “are recorded and a verbatim transcript of the patient’s narrative is prepared” (182). The crucial next step is a revision done by both the therapist and the patient in order to present a testimony. In this process, Herman reminds the reader that reclaiming emotion, even grief, “must be understood as an act of resistance rather than submission” (188) to the traumatic even and its perpetrator. It is also in this stage that Herman notes a potential relief of trauma’s symptoms. Through the performative “action of telling a story” in a safe environment and relationship comes a “change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory” (183).

Finally, the third stage of trauma recovery is one of reconnection. Herman enumerates this stage as a process of learning to fight, where the survivor chooses “to actively engage their fears” (197) as a way of resisting the recurrence of trauma; reconciling with oneself, where the survivor “no longer feels possessed by her

¹⁸ Though Herman is careful to note that “[b]oth patient and therapist must develop tolerance for some degree of uncertainty, even regarding the basic facts of the story” (179). In many ways, the sufferer’s understanding of the traumatic event will be limited, so care has to be taken to allow the unknown and unknowable into the narrative of that experience.

traumatic past” and envisions the person she would now like to be (202); reconnecting with others, where the survivor is able to feel trust in others where her trust is warranted and regains the ability to feel autonomous in relationships to others (205); and finding a survivor mission, where the survivor takes up the mantle of social action or justice and “becomes a part of a larger, ongoing struggle to impose the rule of law on the arbitrary tyranny of the strong” (211).

The DSM-IV (1994) appears shortly after Herman’s poignant text and added to the definition of the DSM-III-R with its enunciation of its two Criteria A conditions: 1) The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and 2) The person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror (Appendix E). The subjective element that Figley et al. point to in the DSM-IV iteration (7) allowed for broader diagnosis, but the authors are also quick to add that “subjective emotional reactions to the trauma do not reliably predict later traumatization” (7).

Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, published in 2001, represents the most cogent approach to a writerly response to trauma recovery and it is the text that I rely on for its definitions of acting-out and working-through. These definitions will be more widely discussed in their relevant chapters, but initially, acting-out is the state where “tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (21), whereas working-through is defined as “mourning and modes of critical thought and practice” that “involve the possibility of

making distinctions or developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability” (22).

LaCapra also makes a distinction between absence and loss, terms that factor into recovery or one’s failure to recover. Losses “are specific and involve particular events” (49). They can be narrow and particular, as in the death of a loved one, or encompassing, as in the case of the Holocaust. Absence, however, is that which was never present, an “absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies, or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses” (50-51). An example of absence that has been confused as loss is the Christian Fall. LaCapra argues that “Paradise absent is different from paradise lost . . . It is not there, and one must therefore turn to other, nonredemptive options in personal, social, and political life—options other than an evacuated past” (57). Absence is not something that can be reclaimed as it was never lost, instead, it is a void that must be filled by other means.

As LaCapra’s previous example illustrates, there is a danger of conversion in both absence and loss. “When absence is converted into loss,” argues LaCapra, “one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community” (46). When loss is mistaken as absence, “one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted” (46). Either situation creates intractable trauma through insufficient responses that prevent proper processing.

In order to work through trauma, one must mourn¹⁹ the past in which we find loss and give “anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and [generate] the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome” (57), or, in the case of absence, recognize “both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others” (58). Finally, LaCapra notes that, “Accurate memory of the past may or may not be necessary for an individual ‘cure’” (95), but that ethical and accurate memory allows a “coming to terms” with the past for both the individual and the collective (95). And if Caruth can be believed in her claim that we are all imbricated in a history of trauma (Caruth *Explorations* 6), individual traumas that have been worked-through into normal memory (*a la* Herman) allow each of us some amount of reconciliation.

This understanding of absence and loss leads LaCapra to the possibility of working-through precipitated by acting-out: “the perhaps necessary acting-out of trauma in victims and the empathic unsettlement (at times even inducing more or less muted trauma) in secondary witnesses should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past and its losses, both in victims or other agents and in secondary witnesses, and that the very ability to make the distinction between absence and loss (as well as to recognize its problematic nature) is one aspect of a complex process of working through” (47). Here, the ability to distinguish between absence and loss illustrates a growth in one’s understanding. In terms of analyzing the war writing of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, transitional expression may be the messy but necessary

¹⁹ Of mourning, LaCapra says that it “involves a different inflection of performativity” than narrativization, “a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present” (70).

expression of trauma's symptoms—attempts at spectacle and war porn, and perhaps even a transmission of trauma—are all on the way to a deeper understanding and maybe even recovery on the author's part. It seems clear that this mode of acting-out is limited to the author themselves (with perhaps a slight consideration for a narrator more completely aligned to the author), whereas the other expressions of acting-out can extend to the characters. However, this may ignore the audience, the one who receives this potential cacophony. What may be missed here is that the possibility of readerly recovery may be foreclosed upon by this kind of acting-out.

After codifying the various ways in which war writing (and trauma writing more broadly) effects its acting-out, it is important to realize that these modes appear in literature prior to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, and that one aim of the dissertation is to acknowledge connections between the writing of previous generations and those under direct study in the dissertation. In fact, in regard to war writing, it seems very difficult to escape monoliths such as Tim O'Brien as one commits to writing, something that argues the validity of a writerly approach to trauma recovery given O'Brien's record as unwilling role model for a similar (and seemingly successful) approach to his own wartime experience.²⁰ Literary mentors, such as O'Brien, provide a framework for the type of telling theorists like Dori Laub advocate for.²¹

²⁰ "I did not look on my work as therapy, and still don't. Yet . . . it occurred to me that the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse" (O'Brien *Things* 152).

²¹ In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Laub speaks to the creation of an imaginative space for the telling, something that a witness (or psychoanalyst) is often asked to do (Caruth *Listening* 51, 57). But contemporary veteran writers are able to engage in writing with that space somewhat explored. This may lead to the argument that these writing mentors have already colonized the pace of opportunity and turned it into expectations, but even so, the value for beginning the writing cannot be oversold.

Another potential issue with the narrativization process of working-through that LaCapra identifies is one also noted by Herman (and Caruth, to a lesser extent). What was traumatic countertransference for Herman is dubbed “unchecked identification” in LaCapra, where “a confusion of self and other” brings “an incorporation of the experience and voice of the victim and its reenactment or acting out” (28). As Herman noted in *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma is contagious, and sometimes listening to the story of another’s trauma affects us as if we were the ones to have suffered the traumatic events. This problem of identification is unfortunately the cost of alleviating a sufferer’s trauma, and it is as Herman reminds, “Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma” (2). The answer to this difficulty is true empathy. Where Herman had no real answer to traumatic countertransference, La Capra argues for “a counterforce to numbing” where empathy “may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (40). Furthermore, “Empathy in this sense is a form of virtual, not vicarious, experience . . . in which emotional response comes with respect for the other and the realization that the experience of the other is not one’s own” (40). By no means is such empathy simple or easy, but it is an aspect of a sufferer’s working-through that will be essential for both the witness and the one testifying to their trauma.

As a final note to the historical overview of trauma theory and theorists, the current manifestation of the DSM, the DSM-V (2013), has the most robust definition of traumatization to date. In addition to introducing a variant criteria for children aged six and younger, its Criteria A allows for exposure to “death, threatened death, actual

or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence” to be defined as any of the following: direct exposure, witnessing the trauma, learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma, or indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma. These conditions allow for the transmission of trauma in ways previously foreclosed. However, missing from this refined list is exposure to trauma via media. The ways in which we react to trauma—and are possibly traumatized ourselves—through an interaction with film, televised news reports, and even fiction, cannot be ignored. My dissertation presupposes that this condition fits in with the others of Criteria A within the DSM-V and argues for its inclusion based on reactions to some of the investigated texts.

Chapter Overviews:

Beginning with Chapter II, writing from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be interrogated for their relationship to trauma and their usefulness to recovery, for both reader and author. Chapter II contends with the highly-visible autobiography *American Sniper*, written by Chris Kyle, America’s most prolific sniper. While Kyle’s book is perhaps one of the most well-known war texts of contemporary American society, it is also one of the most damaging. Applying Herman and van der Kolk’s understanding of traumatic symptoms and LaCapra’s enunciation of acting-out allows us to recognize the text as both enticing and harmful. Kyle engages—often seemingly-unconsciously—in symptomatic expression and creates a many-layered risk to the reader: In the allure of war porn and spectacle, the reader mistakes the glorification of violence and ease of death for a productive

relationship to war. Kyle's own clear symptoms of traumatization are then seen as medallions of experience, of a dangerous *knowing*. The success of Kyle's work also develops an expectation of spectacle within the genre, developing an already-overloaded feedback loop in media. *American Sniper* makes a virtue out of repression and using traditional (and conservative) narratives to reinforce one's experience, despite its detrimental effects. And while Kyle sometimes approaches an honesty with his experience—a reflection afforded by the writing process itself—his bestselling book does a disservice to our understanding of war and the trauma therein and our expectations for veterans and their roads to recovery.

Chapter III is dedicated to the ambivalence of Roy Scranton's novel, *War Porn*. Within his debut fictive work, Scranton intermingles the narratives of civilians distanced from the war, a soldier amidst the war (both on the battlefield and briefly removed from it), and the Othered subjectivity of one whose world is defined by war through America's invasion of Iraq. Scranton's decision to explode the traditional narrative of war—a personal accounting of chronology experience, like we find in Kyle's text—and incorporate different and disparate viewpoints is commendable. Qasim, as a character who would ordinarily be ignored, or at best, relegated to minor-character status, in many other American novels, is not only *War Porn*'s protagonist for a full third of the book but is one of a handful of characters within Scranton's world who can be seen as heroic. Scranton's attempt at going to the Other is not only admirable but relatively new to war writing (Benedict's *Sand Queen* being a notable exception), however, I still categorize Scranton's novel as an acting-out because its final section of "strange hells" (one of two in the book that work to bracket the

intermingled stories) does everything it can to cause the previous insights and progresses to implode. The traumatized Aaron (a soldier similar to Wilson of “your leader will control your fire”), whose story is not told by any of the three sections of the novel, envelops those of the other two. Qasim of “the fall” is tortured, perhaps to death, by Aaron, and Dahlia of “strange hells” and audience surrogate, is brutally raped and left mentally fractured. Aaron’s escape, from the novel, from his crimes—but not his trauma—has been identified by Scranton himself as a kind of wake-up call for readers, but is both more and less than that: Scranton’s undercutting of his own work in the recognition of the Other as Self in “the fall,” and the horrific violence done to Dahlia in the novel’s climax, is traumatic. Whether readers are traumatized by this transmission is secondary to the fact that Scranton intentionally positioned the novel to stimulate a visceral and negative reaction. And while there is little evidence to say that Scranton *wanted* the novel to be traumatic, it is, nonetheless, an illustration of deliberate acting-out from someone who knows the kind of damage that trauma can do.

Chapter IV moves on from acting-out to evaluate works that constitute working-through, either through their stories or through an illustration of where silence or acting-out must lead. Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue* is, narratively, a depiction of acting-out. The reason its message is not ultimately one of acting-out is that Ackerman is careful to bring the reader to the realization of the pointlessness (on a grand scale) of Aziz’s path. Aziz’s particular revenge is networked into a larger system of futile warfare, all of it stimulated by trauma. Like trauma, these wars are cyclical, and Aziz’s “ascension” to the position of Gazan, the man who maimed his

brother, represents the spinning-out of the protagonist's desires and how the narrowing of his world through trauma implicates all war. *Green on Blue* is, for these reasons, labeled a work of transitional expression (a label I reserve for works that approach working-through in their acting-out, or in the case of *Green on Blue*, those that argue for working-through in their education to the reader of the failures implicit in acting-out) due to its accounting of trauma and traumatic symptoms without itself being a promotion or transmission of these things. The violence of the novel is fleeting (though endemic on the whole) and not lingered upon. Absence reigns over the narrative rather than brutal violence, from Ali's missing leg that spurs Aziz's *badal* (revenge) to the lack of family and friends that almost all characters note in their stories. Ackerman is committed to dismantling the allure of the trauma hero that Scranton defines, and in doing so, he also does not fall prey to a regurgitation of trauma or an endorsement of it. In effect, he is able to represent trauma without embodying it for the reader, something Scranton fails to do.

In the second half of Chapter IV, I turn to the short story collection, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. The stories within the collection are each committed to working-through. Each has been written by a veteran, but not all of them approach recovery from trauma the same way. In the collection, I focus on "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere" by Jacob Siegel, "The Train" by Mariette Kalinowski, and "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" by Brian Van Reet as a progression of modes for engaging in working-through. The first story of the collection, Siegel's "Smile," places the reader within the subjectivity of a veteran actively opposed to moving-on from his experience. The narrator reunites with fellow veterans and resists their ways

of engaging with their pasts and effecting working-through. Though a writer with ambition to commit his experience to the page, the narrator demeans or belittles the processing done by his companions. It is not until the end of the story that Cole, one of the narrator's companions, forces him to confront his listlessness and inability (and/or unwillingness) to engage in working-through. In this way, Siegel brings the reader along in similar fashion that Ackerman does in *Green on Blue*: the reader is coaxed from the apparent safety of silence or acting-out and is confronted—through the narrator or protagonist—with the effects of neglecting a confrontation with one's experience. In "Smile," the narrator bemoans his deteriorating relationship with his partner but does nothing to abate that danger until Cole wrenches him from complacency and hazardous lingering in the past. Something similar occurs in "The Train." Our narrator-protagonist is introduced as deeply traumatized and tapped in a cycle of acting-out. In her particular case, she is literally embedded in a cycle, riding the train in pointless circles as her traumatic symptoms mount without relief. Kalinowski drip-feeds the reader the traumatic event that contributed to our narrator's current plight, and though she refuses to give us healing or recovery by the end of the story, she offers the possibility of taking that first step. In a measured response to doing away with acting-out and peering into working-through, the author communicates the importance of incremental progression and disabuses the reader of grand revelations of total recovery. Finally, in Van Reet's "Hunting Creek," our narrator (nicknamed Rooster) goes out into nature as a part of a disabled veteran excursion. The story heavily parallels Hemingway's own "Big Two-Hearted River," but where Nick forecloses opportunities for healing, Van Reet allows Rooster to

engage in (sometimes violent) contest with his past and prevent the cycle of trauma from renewing when he prevents something close to a rape from happening to two young girls also out by the river. And while Van Reet's story is often misunderstood as a pessimistic accounting of homecoming, I argue that it is actually another small measure, like "The Train," in which a character is taken from the agony of their situation to envision progress in their recovery. Each of these three stories offer lessons in working-through, complicated and often ambivalent though they may be, the stories avoid well-worn tropes, and by doing so, escape a valorization of the trauma hero. These stories offer a productive method for us, the audience, civilian or veteran, to view attempts to work-through trauma rather than be satiated by spectacle and traumatized (again, or for the first time) by transmission.

In my final chapter, I hold up Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* as the pinnacle of civilian war writing. My conclusion for this chapter, and indeed for the dissertation, is that Fountain best captures the responsibility civilians must feel about our contemporary American wars. Fountain does not overstep his "place" as a civilian in envisioning Billy but instead accepts responsibility for veteran healing and recovery in a way that is commendable. Much of the value of Fountain's work rises from his honest (and oftentimes, brutal) portrayal of civilian reaction to veteran "heroes" (although it would be fair to call Billy and his fellow Bravos heroes by normal metrics, I emphasize the label here as the *image* of the men that comprise Bravo—itself a misnomer for the purposes of visibility—that has been doctored). Though Fountain's novel has been called a satire for its depiction of civilians, these representations are in fact at the core of civilian-veteran relations after 9/11. Soldiers

become deified through unceasing “support,” but in doing so, they are flattened and robbed of the individuation of self and the trauma affecting them. This is one of the things that Scranton is misguidedly working against in *War Porn*. By ripping the image of the soldier down from its pedestaled heights, he hopes to disabuse us of the trauma hero. However, Fountain’s approach addresses the support-the-troops rhetoric as deification and argues for a civilian shift in thinking to a more nuanced understanding of the veteran. He shifts the burden of witnessing back to the civilian rather than letting it fall upon the veteran whose witnessing often only ever addresses the violence of the situation over *there* and rarely the frequently failed homecomings of *here*. *Halftime Walk* becomes a demand for civilians; the war writing that veterans have contributed throughout the past decades is already in place, but the proper reception of that work (excluding, of course, those works that actively engender spectacle or persist in various forms of acting-out) has lacked instruction. Fountain’s novel leads me to my conclusion that the onus for recovery rests on civilian shoulders in addition to veterans. Rather than removing impetus from soldiers to commit their stories (and hopefully, the beginnings of their recovery) to writing, and by extension, the public, I stress the need for reciprocity in the American public, a reciprocity that also demands responsibility for the wars we have sent others off to.

CHAPTER II: ACTING-OUT AS AVOIDANCE IN CHRIS KYLE'S *AMERICAN SNIPER*

The alternative to silence is to give voice to one's trauma. The intent of allowing the wound to speak is to empower the sufferer to begin a long, and often painful, process of recovery—a process that does not have a terminus in the status of “recovered” but enables the sufferer to make meaningful connections and live a rewarding life. As it pertains to war writing, this process has the potential to affect the reader as well as the author.

However, it is often not enough to give voice to one's experiences, memories, and trauma. As Bessel van der Kolk writes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, “helping victims of trauma find the words to describe what has happened to them is profoundly meaningful, but it is usually not enough” (21). There is no such thing as a talking cure, not on its own, but there are ways to promote recovery through expression. A writerly approach to trauma recovery is not just telling a story, or finding the words, it is meaningful engagement with one's trauma—a confrontation—that is as dangerous as it is painful. For van der Kolk, the telling is secondary to realigning the body and its inputs, one must first deal with its chemistry. Due to this harsh fact, a writerly response frequently yields texts that (in part or whole) can be understood as acting-out one's trauma. The acting-out results often as a consequence of one's trauma, but importantly, it can also be a way to *avoid* speaking about one's trauma—acting-out ranges from avoidance to traumatization of another. Acting-out is itself a recognized consequence of traumatic experience, but its place in war writing has yet to be sufficiently defined despite its frequent occurrence within the genre.

Dominick LaCapra's definition of acting-out within his *Writing History*, *Writing Trauma* is the most applicable in regard to a writerly approach to trauma recovery as it is LaCapra who recognizes the importance of a text as a marker for the world and its history. Acting-out, for LaCapra is a "melancholic feedback loop" (21), or the expression of the symptoms of trauma without the overt and sustained possibility of the recovery from those symptoms. In "acting out," writes LaCapra, "tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. And duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed or productive only of aporias and double binds. In this sense, the aporia and the double bind might be seen as marking a trauma that has not been worked through" (21).

In the context of a writerly approach to trauma recovery, the character, narrator, and/or narrative express these double binds and aporias. It is this understanding of acting-out, and its connection to a written processing (or failed processing) of traumatic experience that is bolstered by previous generations of writing "mentors," that offers the best hope for understanding much of the writing of contemporary veterans. And while it is true that Judith Herman identifies the need for writing as a part of the recovery process in her *Trauma and Recovery*, it is LaCapra who leaves the door open for the kind of in-depth personal accounting through fiction *without* the aid of a traditional therapist figure that I argue for as the best way to combat institutional silence.

The manifestations of acting-out, the double binds and aporias that LaCapra writes of, are as varied in their expression as they are in their intent and consequence.

Perhaps the most straightforward acting-out on the page, what we will call **unconscious symptomatic expression**, occurs when the author of the text does not recognize that they are engaging in representation of traumatic symptoms or ideas that create the conditions for traumatic transference. To identify unconscious symptomatic expression, I make use of Judith Herman's definitions of trauma's symptoms alongside augmentations and updates made by Bessel van der Kolk that I expressed in the introductory chapter.

Another expression of acting-out within narrative is not dissimilar from the first category; however, instead of an unconscious manifestation of traumatic symptoms and responses to those symptoms, the author *knowingly* relates responses to trauma or identifies symptoms in themselves (mediated by the narrator or otherwise) or their characters as a means of identifying—and perhaps transmitting—trauma for their reader. This expression will be referred to as **knowing symptomatic expression** for the sake of distinction. Knowing expression does not always require a clinical knowledge of traumatic symptoms—be they Herman's or van der Kolk's updates—instead, the knowing expression could be a result of one's imbrication with trauma on a personal or social level. This explains how so many authors who are ignorant of trauma theory are so easily able to write within that register.

Importantly, whether it is knowing or unconscious, symptomatic expression may also embody (in the text and on the page) moments of trauma. The danger of depicting trauma on the page is two-fold: First, representations of trauma often fall into the category of war porn, the taboo spectacle that entices and allures as it disturbs and upsets. It is the insider or forbidden knowledge “outside the range of human

experience” (Caruth *Explorations* 100; citing 1987 DSM III-R definition of PTSD) that portends to grant a dark and special vicarious knowing.

Second, depicted trauma can result in a transmission of trauma. There are two types of trauma transmissions, what is referred to as transmission, where a reader can experience the trauma of another as their own (I am damaged by the trauma you have expressed), and countertransference (I experience your trauma as my own—whatever trauma it is that I have—and am damaged by it). The dangers of trauma transmission, and by extension acting-out, will be covered later in the chapter.

Yet another expression of acting-out on the page is harder to categorize but can be referred to as **transitional expression**, or acting-out as a part of a personal arc that culminates in working-through. The possibility of acting-out culminating in working-through is forwarded by LaCapra (discussed in the previous chapter).

Specifically, I will split my analysis across fiction and non-fiction, electing a high-profile text from each category as my examples of the range of acting-out that I have enumerated as unconscious symptomatic expression, knowing symptomatic expression, and transitional expression—though this final category cannot be fully explored until Chapter IV, given its relation to working-through. In the realm of non-fiction, Chris Kyle’s 2012 memoir, *American Sniper*, will be used for this chapter.

The question as to the importance of the distinctions of acting-out should be answered before further investigation. My aims in creating these distinctions, broad though they might seem, is to provide some sort of structure to the assessment of war writing and trauma literature more broadly. The intent is to give readers and scholars alike the ability to make judgements on the utility of particular works to the field. The

reality is that trauma is pervasive and its transmission frequent; working in such a field—reading its literature—requires that we understand its dangers as well as its possibilities for recovery. LaCapra, through Herman’s work, determined overarching categories of traumatic response, but finer divisions within those categories are required in order to make full use of the texts that populate trauma literature. And though my focus is narrowed to American writing of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, it is my hope that these sub-categorizations may be eventually applied to works outside of war.

Acting-Out in *American Sniper*:

The first line of Chris Kyle’s memoir (after prefatory material) is war porn in its gratification of military vernacular and weaponry: “I looked through the scope of the sniper rifle” (1). The sniper rifle holds a dangerous glamour over the American mind, an image of the singular warrior able to dispense with a multitude of enemies—it is the American ideal of self-sufficiency in the form of gunmetal. Kyle’s line is emblematic of the entire text, a dedication to the simultaneous glorification of war in all its conviction, death, destruction, and glory and the mentality of a man who has experienced the best and worst of combat.

Throughout the Prologue in which that line is framed, Kyle and his co-authors, Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice, set up a Hollywood scene of violence that commingles patriotism and righteousness in its absolute, unwavering language. Few parts of the text read quite like this; it is a scene singular in its intent to hook the reader

with its war porn while simultaneously delivering the uncompromising moral stance that Kyle takes throughout his account.

At the end of the in-scene action, Kyle writes, “It was the first time I’d killed anyone while I was on the sniper rifle. And the first time in Iraq—and the only time—I killed anyone other than a male combatant” (3). The moment opens up uncertainty and invites the reader to see the soldier as a complex person filled with doubt despite their rigorous training; it invites us to see the fog that is war, something so much more than just uncertainty. However, immediately after the moment, a justification follows: “It was my duty to shoot, and I don’t regret it. The woman was already dead. I was just making sure she didn’t take any Marines with her” (3). The invocation of duty plants the reader in the realm of the moral, a black-and-white accounting of the events that can only ever be *post facto* in its rigidity. This could be, as Bessel van der Kolk writes, due to trauma becoming an organizing principle in one’s life, a “sole source of meaning” (18) after trauma’s symptoms disorder and destroy. Kyle views the woman as “already dead,” eliminating his responsibility in being the actual instrument of her death.

Of that woman, Kyle notes that, “She was too blinded by evil to consider” bystanders (4). Where ‘duty’ implicitly evokes morality, ‘evil’ drags it into the open. There is no room for debate in absolutes, and Kyle’s Prologue is nothing if not a rigid justification that looks to strike down whatever imagined opposition the book could face: “My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman’s twisted soul. I can stand before God with a clear conscience about doing my job. But I truly, deeply hated the evil that woman possessed. I hate it to this day”

(4). In a few lines, Kyle has painted himself as a crusader of God, waging war against evil for religious and moral reasons while simultaneously invoking the American value of doing one's job. Those lines etch a clear picture of a man who subscribes to an interconnected web of ideals and philosophies. There is the base utilitarianism of life weighed-out and valued, but it is tinged with the ineffable qualities of good versus evil and American versus the foreign. And such justifications are common in war, they are threads of meaning that oppose combat's disrupting forces.

Kyle reaffirms this stance of moral superiority throughout his Introduction: "Savage, despicable evil. That was what we were fighting in Iraq" (4). The line is one whose echo rings throughout the rest of the text, a reminder that Kyle has no room for compromise or introspection of his own role in a war waged for reasons both more *and* less complex than combating evil. And here the crusader image presents itself again. Just like the historical figures themselves, Kyle sees himself as righting wrongs in another country, purging evil and returning darkened parts of the world to light. There is no going to the Other here, there is not even an approach, something that precludes empathy and resigns us to war. Of the number of these "savages" killed, Kyle says that the number "is not important," and that "I only wished that I had killed more" because "I believe the world is a better place without savages out there taking American lives. Everyone I shot in Iraq was trying to harm American or Iraqis loyal to the new government" (4). And yet, still there is no questioning as to why Americans were put in front of Iraqi crosshairs.

However, there *is* something that sticks out to Kyle in his experience as a crusader: "I am haunted by the enemy's successes" (4). Again, it could be very easy to

see this statement as one instance of put-on humility in a sea of other examples, or it could be read as a rare moment of admission. Here, as in scant other places, Kyle may be alluding to the symptoms of his experience, things that are without a doubt traumatic. As will be discussed later, the sudden death of a close comrade and the unexpected death of an unknown Marine (that occurs literally on top of him) resonate as some of Kyle's clear moments of trauma. This trauma can be seen also in the memoir's Dedication: "I will bleed for their deaths the rest of my life." Here, Kyle is invoking Caruth's speaking wound, or "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth *Unclaimed* 4) in the death of Ryan Job and Marc Lee.

This Dedication can be seen as lingering trauma, a symptom emblematic of the wider array of trauma that deployment and its consequences yielded. Indeed, much of the memoir can be seen as a kind of oscillation between unconscious symptomatic expression of the trauma Kyle sustained and continued to live with (to what degree is certainly debatable) and the deliberate war porn of spectacle, a knowing expression that seeks to elide symptoms and focus instead on a retreat from introspection through satiating general reader expectations. To that end, Kyle's memoir is overwhelmingly constructed with the tropes one expects of the military life genre—a "boot camp" sequence, a traditional upbringing and inevitable pull toward the military, and a Hollywood moment of war porn, complete with extreme violence—but the actual meat of the text, the moment-to-moment movement, is stream-of-consciousness to the point of randomness.

In Chapter 3, a section titled “Christmas” discusses RC cars Kyle and his companions received on the holiday before devolving into an anecdote about an Iraqi working on base that masturbated into soldiers’ food. In that same section (though differentiated by a few empty lines), Kyle talks about seeing his first sandstorm. The next section, “60 Gunner,” talks about Kyle’s position as a vehicle gunner, and the previous section, “Scuds,” speaks to water-based missions that Kyle’s team was “lucky” enough to be a part of. The examples are endless and indicate the order of recall rather than a thematic or dramatic arc. However, an effort has been made here to organize Kyle’s memoir according to its resonance with trauma theory and my arguments about the place of war writing—through writing in good faith—in the trauma recovery process. The reality is that *American Sniper* is not just the bestseller-fodder of a made-for-Hollywood account of war, it is a deeply conflicted and sometimes confused story of a man who was conditioned to kill and returned home to write about it. Even our starting point, the war porn promised to readers, the spectacle that got them to crack the cover on a book about America’s longest wars, discloses the dangers of acting-out.

Knowing Symptomatic Expression Manifesting as Spectacle and War Porn:

In his essay, “The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to *Redeployment* and *American Sniper*,” Roy Scranton—who is also the author of the novel, *War Porn*, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter—describes the overarching texture of the film adaptation of *American Sniper* (directed by Clint Eastwood) in a way that almost precisely captures that of the memoir it sprang from:

Sniper focuses in tight on one man's story of trauma, leaving out the complex questions of why Kyle was in Iraq being traumatized in the first place . . . Yet the film obviates the questions of why *any* American soldiers were in Iraq, why they stayed there for eight years, why they had to kill thousands upon thousands of Iraqi civilians, and how we are to understand the long and ongoing bloodbath once called the "war on terror." It does that precisely by turning a killer into a victim, a war hero into a trauma hero.

Scranton writes against the veneration of traumatized men and women as heroes, the deification of soldiers for their traumatization. "By focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure," he writes, "we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for" ("Trauma"), and, as Scranton writes often elsewhere, what *we* are responsible as the public who sent those soldiers to war.²²

American Sniper—as a memoir—has always seemed to capture its audience's imagination as the ultimate depiction of a hero whose life was the personification of American honor, masculinity, and valor. Chris Kyle, the most prolific (i.e. the one with the highest confirmed kills total) sniper in American history, occupies that deified role. And while Kyle does not appear to have encouraged that identity,²³ he does engage in a surprising amount of deliberate spectacle within the memoir. It can be

²² "[W]hen the trauma hero myth is taken as representing the ultimate truth of more than a decade of global aggression, as with *American Sniper*, we allow the psychological suffering endured by those we sent to kill for us [to] displace and erase the innocents killed in our name" ("Trauma").

²³ "As I hope I've made clear, I don't feel SEALs should be singled out publicly as a force. We don't need the publicity. We are silent professionals, every one of us; the quieter we are, the better able we are to do our job . . . Unfortunately, that's not the world we live in. If it were, I wouldn't have felt it necessary to write this book" (315).

argued that though this is a manifestation of war porn, Kyle was pushed to fill his story with these Hollywood spectacle moments at the encouragement of his co-authors. This argument is somewhat bolstered by reporting that claims Kyle inflated his military service record in his memoir.²⁴ And whether Kyle deliberately inflated his military experience or did so accidentally, unconsciously, or by some other accident of memory, the representation of his experiences often falls into a dramatic, Hollywood blockbuster register.

The intent—and I will argue that there is intent in such a depiction by employing Kyle’s own words—is a knowing and informed acting-out that seeks to wall off engaging with his trauma by distracting readers with war porn. The reality is that spectacle sells book copies, and real and painful encounters with one’s trauma is a risk to the bottom line. However, it would be unfair to claim that Kyle and his co-authors intend to show *only* spectacle; as we will see later in this chapter, Kyle repeatedly slips into unconscious symptomatic expression as well as rare moments of honest engagement with his trauma in a nuanced way that could approach the label of transitional expression. Even in depicting moments of war porn, Kyle profoundly (and unintentionally) illustrates the necessity of trauma recovery.

²⁴ Sheelagh McNeill, as a part of *The Intercept*, obtained citation records as a part of FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request that revealed Kyle to have received one Silver Star and three Bronze Stars for Valor as opposed to his claim of two Silver Stars and five Bronze Stars. Another document showed two Silver Stars and *six* Bronze Stars. Cullen James, Navy Personnel Command Spokesperson, maintained that the one Silver Star and three Bronze Stars was the accurate count. The confusion surrounding Kyle’s citation record prompted fellow SEALs to speak on the “poorly-kept secret” (Gettys) of Kyle’s inflation: “Everybody went on a pilgrimage to his funeral at Cowboys Stadium, knowing full well that his claims weren’t true” (Gettys citing Cole and McNeill) and “The SEAL leadership was aware of the embellishment, but didn’t want to correct the record because Kyle’s celebrity status reflected well on the command” (Cole and McNeill).

Early in the memoir, Kyle relates his first moment of active war, not only being deployed but being in actual combat: “*Fuck, I thought to myself, this is great. I fucking love this. It’s nerve-wracking and exciting and I fucking love it*” (77). Behind enemy lines, firing his vehicle-mounted machine gun at combatants while American air support rains fire down from the heavens, Kyle illustrates the adrenaline rush experienced in combat. This surge is also something exclusive to extreme circumstances and is, as a result, outside the range of human experience (to borrow that DSM III-R PTSD definition). It is also part of the reason why so many veterans turn to self-medication after returning home, why caffeine and nicotine are consumed in vast quantities. Like adrenaline junkies, their bodies search for that same high, unsuccessfully, as their brain functioning has been altered by that constant state of extreme readiness.²⁵

Within another adrenaline-charged moment, Kyle pulls back to describe the disposition of his unit in combat: “The pace was hot and heavy. It made us want more. We ached for it” (271). Without recognizing the moment as war porn, as deliberate enticement for readers unaware of combat experiences, it would be wholly unclear as to why Kyle uses thinly-veiled sexual language to describe the intense combat experience. The anecdote that follows these lines pertains to a faux mummy head that was used to trick enemies into firing on it and revealing their location, but there is no thematic resonance with the sexual language—the only explanation for the otherwise

²⁵ Herman writes that trauma “appear[s] to recondition the human nervous system” (36), but it is van der Kolk who writes that, “People with PTSD . . . are on constant sensory overload” (70), and that one of the ways in which therapists attempt to deal with this overload is to help patients “tolerate the sensations, emotions, and reactions they experience without being constantly hijacked by them” (176).

odd and misguided description is spectacle deliberate in its attempt to provoke readers into its consumption.

In the “Geared Up” section of his memoir, Kyle describes everything that he wore on his person in a combat situation. Like an earlier section describing each of his sniper rifles and their uses, this section is unabashed in its intent to reveal to uninitiated readers the dark allure of war.²⁶ It shares insider information with the voyeur as a form of currency, a way to affirm the soldier’s identity as a sanctified object—but notably, as still an object of consumption rather than soldiers’ reality as people.

Similarly, Kyle makes use of war’s deadly seduction—a seduction that countermands Wilfred Owen’s aims in publishing “Pro Patria Mori”²⁷ and contributes to so many American youths’ desire to “know” for themselves—in order to reaffirm his credibility on the battlefield as a true “master” of death: “If you’re interested, the confirmed kills were only kills that someone else witnessed, and cases where the enemy could be confirmed dead. So if I shot someone in the stomach and he managed to crawl around where we couldn’t see him before he bled out, he didn’t count” (265). Kyle begins this section (and the quote does in fact comprise the entirety of that

²⁶ Examples include, “In 2004, I brought over a Springfield TRP Operator, which used a .45-caliber round. It had a 1911 body style, with custom grips and a rail system that let me add a light and laser combo” (126) and “Officially, the United States Navy Mk-12 Special Purpose Rifle, this gun had a sixteen-inch barrel, but is otherwise the same platform as an M-4 . . . I never used full auto on the rifle. The only time you really want full auto is to keep someone’s head down—spewing bullets doesn’t make for an accurate course of fire. But since there might be a circumstance where it would in handy, I always wanted to have that option in case I needed it” (100).

²⁷ Roy Scranton objects to Owen’s poem as it engenders the desire to know in the very youth Owen hopes to dissuade from war: “I know the truth, Owen claims, not because I read about it in Horace, but because I’ve seen it, heard it, and felt it. Owen means to malign war, but according to his logic, it is his very experience of war that gives him privileged access to moral truth beyond anything civilians like Jessie Pope can ever hope to achieve. Owen asserts that war’s truth is the truth of the soldier’s experience, which puts the issue of war beyond debate” (Scranton “Trauma”).

section) with the dismissive gesture, “If you’re interested,” but of course the target reader is interested, they have likely picked up this book for the fact that Chris Kyle is the most prolific sniper in American history—they are eager for the spectacle of such an experience, ready for war porn. This plays directly into the section in which he discusses (without ever revealing) his number. In describing what “counts” for that grim number, Kyle conjures up a horrible image of another’s death denigrated with the fact that it does not count, a horrifying concept in that even after the killing has been done, there is no value to the enemy, no sympathy or consideration.

In another instance of spectacle, we, the reader, see an unspoken consequence, a mentality that privileges a particular metric of war that excludes suffering and the reality of death. Kyle reveals further numbness to the death of the Other only slightly before his discussion of his “number” through a different kind of accounting, where the sum is still the devaluation of one’s enemies:

When you’re in a profession where your job is to kill people, you start getting creative about doing it . . . you start trying to think of new and inventive ways to eliminate your enemy . . . We’d use different weapons for the experience, to learn the weapon’s capabilities in combat. But at times it was a game—when you’re in a firefight every day, you start looking for a little variety. No matter what, we got plenty of insurgents, and plenty of firefights. (238-239)

The passage is war porn at the height of its shock-value, explicitly looking to shake the reader and force them to confront a reality bizarre to most in a manner that can only be acting-out. However, Kyle also implicates his experience here as traumatic, noting the repetition of events that were once horrific and now only commonplace and

illustrating the lengths that soldiers go to after being put in that situation repeatedly—we see desensitization even in spectacle. The fact that he calls this kind of combat a game shows a divorce from reality that can be another outpouring of trauma—a representation that is drenched in spectacle as an escape but that also marks the underlying trauma itself.

Beyond devaluing numbers and the death of the Other, Kyle enters into several descriptions of spectacle that look to bring readers even closer to the battlefield: “There were dead bodies everywhere. We saw one guy who’d literally had his ass blown off. He’d bled to death, but not before he tried to drag himself away from the planes. You could see the blood trail in the dirt” (78). The macabre scene is in the aftermath of Kyle’s first action, but it does nothing more than contribute to the memoir’s sense of spectacle. There is a grim comedy in the enemy combatant’s cause of death, and if that was not enough for the voyeur of war porn, Kyle describes the final moments of this man like something you would see in a box office thriller. The moment ends and Kyle moves on, no introspection, no internal monologue that categorizes or assesses the experience. Description of this sort, without any kind of attempt at understanding, criticism—anything—can only play into the public’s expectation of spectacle that is itself formed by these kinds of accounts.²⁸

²⁸ Piers Platt, in his own memoir, also plays into the grim comedy of war as spectacle. Platt seeks to demonstrate his “shenanigans” in a few small ways, the most clear being a range exercise gone awry:

However, as good as our thermal sights are, at 1,000 yards at night, a small herd of deer chewing grass can look *exactly* like the row of heated torso-shaped targets that we use as enemy infantry targets for our machine guns. Accordingly, my gunner and I destroyed six moving tanks, ten stationary tanks, three sets of troops, and four or five deer one evening, much to the delight of the German civilians responsible for operating the range. While my crew and I got an ass-chewing and a 20-minute safety violation stand-down, they grabbed their Tupperware and headed downrange to stock up on some fresh venison. (19)

Further on, Kyle gives another extreme example of war at its most heinous, and implicitly, most attractive to the voyeur who seeks to know:

In this one house, we heard faint moans as we went down into the basement.

There were two men hanging from chains on the wall. One was dead; the other barely there. Both had been severely tortured with electric shock and God

knows what else. They were both Iraqi, apparently mentally retarded (*sic*)—the insurgents had wanted to make sure they wouldn't talk to us, but decided to have a little fun with them first . . . There was a black banner on the floor, the kind the fanatics liked to show on their videos when beheading Westerners.

There were amputated limbs, and more blood than you can imagine. It was a nasty-smelling place. (163-164)

Incredibly (and unsurprisingly), this section is one of the most vividly described in the entire memoir. Not only that, but it is also where Kyle engages in the most imaginative speculation, apparent in the reconstruction of the intent of why these men were down in that house and what the black banner might represent. However, these imaginative retellings are to further ensconce the “evil” that Kyle sees in Iraq and the people he kills, not means of grappling with the situation and contending with trauma. It can—and should—be wondered what ostensible purpose sections like these serve in a

The entry reads like a schoolboy's act of rebellion, playing at mischief and wanting others to witness it. This is war porn, a deliberate tactic to make the audience either flinch or succumb to the spectacle. It does not breed witnesses. And if the initial episode did not make Platt's message clear enough, he continues: “Later that week a particularly tightly-clumped herd looked enough like a vehicle target to fool one tank crew, who sent a main gun round into their midst, with predictably mess results” (19). Platt never asks the reader to believe the claim that he and his fellow tankers mistook deer in various positions as enemy combatants of differing kinds, only that they play into this idea of rebellion and “fun.” As in *American Sniper* and other spectacle-based accounts, we, the readers, are enticed into sharing in—we are asked to play along.

memoir of war. Is it that Kyle wants to “tell it like it was” and commit every remembered detail to the page? Is it, as aligns with Scranton’s objections to the veneration of the trauma hero, to illustrate the horrors of his experience and encourage that narrative of redemption after war? In either case, what we see is Kyle shifting his narrative from an acknowledgement of trauma to a depiction of spectacle; the move allows him to elide trauma for the general reader, but it remains clear to trauma-informed individuals.

Consulting co-author Jim DeFelice’s memorial insert in the most recent edition of the text alludes to the inclusion of scenes such as these as a form of honesty: Chris and Taya’s “decision to tell *everything* without feel-good gloss is really the core of the book” (460). However, as in any written form, we are not told everything. Writing is as much a system of exclusion as it is one of inclusion. Kyle *chooses* to focus on the physical descriptions of violence or horror and neglects to contribute his impressions of what he saw. Without the mental accounting of these situations, a reader is left to catalogue them as they wish, and more often than not, scenes like this are filed under the literally incredible nature of war rather than the unnecessary terrors that contribute to individual and collective traumas.

In the “Dealing Death” chapter, Kyle describes a moment in which he is setting up his hide or sniping position: “I needed to be elevated. As I searched through the apartment, I found a room that had a baby crib in it. It was a rare find, and one I could put to good use” (140). What is striking about the brief description (which, it should be noted, ends with the above before continuing on to a new and unrelated paragraph) is that this moment occurs chronologically after Kyle expresses his

thoughts (one hesitates to call them expressions of his feelings) about the birth of his first child, and even in the text itself, this sniping set-up occurs less than thirty pages after the birth section. The point I am making is that there is not a second spared for anything that might have cropped up in Kyle's head upon using a crib, perhaps one very like the one his own child was sleeping in at that time, as a means to deal death more effectively. It is entirely possible that Kyle felt nothing when he saw and made use of the crib, just a means to an end, but Kyle's feelings on family are well-documented throughout the memoir—surely his own would warrant some kind of commentary when prompted by an item that might trigger such thoughts. Instead, we get far more description of a “handheld Tiger Woods golf game” (141) that he definitely didn't take from the same house against regulations.

Overarchingly, Kyle refers to the warzone as an absurd and bizarre place, one that resists summation—something that Platt also speaks to in his memoir.²⁹ But where Platt deflects, Kyle attempts to capture that absurdity, and, that “pain and suffering” as a dark levity:

Every op could mix life and death in surreal ways.

²⁹ “One of the first things a veteran learns when he returns home from a combat zone is that war defies easy summary” (i), and “Trying to summarize my experience is difficult, partly because there was nothing conclusive or absolute about Iraq” (168). Platt indicates both loved ones' desire to know, but also, “For all [his] willingness to share [his] experiences, [he] found it nearly impossible to describe it” (i). Instead, he describes the heat, such heat that a tank is impossible to touch without gloves. Though this can easily be read as a deflection, knowledge of wartime experience slips in with that deflection: the sensation of a tank's armor is largely unknown to a civilian population, let alone that armor heated to a degree of danger. Platt also writes that, “For all the absurdity of war, there is exponentially more pain and suffering” (i). And yet, as a reader will learn throughout the course of the book, Platt seems unwilling to share that pain and suffering. Whether for the risk of transmitting that trauma onto another, or because Platt himself is still incapable of relating it, we never learn.

On that same operation to take the hospital, we secured a house to scout the area before the Marines moved in. We'd been in the hide for a while when a guy came out with a wheelbarrow to plant an IED in the backyard where we were. One of our new guys shot him. But he didn't die; he fell and rolled around on the ground, still alive.

It happened that the man who shot him was a corpsman.

"You shot him, you save him," we told him. And so he ran down and tried to resuscitate him.

Unfortunately, the Iraqi died. And in the process, his bowels let loose. The corpsman and another new guy had to carry the body out with us when we left.

Well, they eventually reached a fence at the Marine compound, they didn't know what to do. Finally they just threw him up and over, then clambered after him. It was like *Weekend at Bernie's*.

In the space of less than an hour, we'd shot a guy who wanted to blow us up, tried to save his life, and desecrated his body.

The battlefield is a bizarre place. (274)

The reason I have chosen to quote the section in full is due to a number of competing areas of investigation. Throughout the text, Kyle has been prone to sweeping statements. Most often, those statements are about the just and righteous reasons for his being put in Iraq to kill people (which will be investigated further later in the chapter), but other times they are apparently more subtle: "It was always a delicate balance, life and death, comedy and tragedy" (275). That line appears on the very next page as a way to cap off a brief description of being fired upon. Before that, Kyle

speaks to how, “War and peace don’t seem to go together right” (167). In every case, the statement occurs at the end of the description of an event and looks to pin down some truth about experience that Kyle doesn’t seem to be interested in approaching any other way. These brief, almost terse, sage-isms close the book on moments of ambivalence in Kyle’s wartime experience and prevent further introspection. In the section above, the final line, “The battlefield is a bizarre place” is undoubtedly true, but that truth does little to communicate ambivalence to the reader, nor does it approach a kinship of feeling in other veterans.

Beyond the final punctuation that Kyle is prone to reach for in moments of uncertainty or ambivalence, there is the circumstance of the action itself. In Kyle’s description, he is careful to avoid discussing the Iraqi who was shot as an insurgent, or his more familiar term, a savage. In fact, the man in question did not appear to be armed at the time of his shooting (which may explain why they were literally dragging a body around after the fact). Kyle writes, “a guy came out with a wheelbarrow to plant an IED,” not that there was an IED in the wheelbarrow. As we will see, Kyle frequently speaks to the rightness of his actions, but here he is markedly mute on that front, sliding into a suggestion of wrongdoing rather than confirming evil. This may be an instance of Kyle’s unknowing symptomatic expression. His vehement confirmation of traditional values and the justice of his actions typically supersedes the situation, but the fact that it is missing in this episode suggests that some part of him knows that argument won’t hold up to scrutiny.

Throughout the text are moments in which reflection could yield something important to Kyle’s mindset—how he appears to the reader, or how a reader who has

faced similar struggles might manage their trauma. However, a large portion of my argument as it pertains to *American Sniper* is that the text fails to do anything positive for the traumatized, that it more likely reinforces stereotypical military values of bravado, toxic masculinity, and silence—or to put a finer point on it, acting-out.

In the end, spectacle and war porn are vehicles for rhetorical appeal for Kyle, cropping up when he wants to drive home his credibility and authenticity as someone marked by war and dissolve into clichés when his train of thought threatens the purpose of these induced spectacles. But for all the expressions of spectacle and war porn that Kyle introduces, there are countless justifications for his actions and his mindset in the warzone.

A Litany of Justifications:

Amidst the surge of spectacle that Kyle offers his readers are a litany of justifications for his actions, and more broadly, his role in the war. The purpose of illuminating these various reasons for combat is to show the logic of military intervention and to illustrate Kyle's need to flatten distinction and carve out reason (read: Reason) in his life as a SEAL. These justifications also constitute acting-out in their dismissal of wartime experience as any way outside daily experience, that war is both necessary and morally required for civilization. The ways in which Kyle defends war offers a perspective that looks to further entrench war and those who fight it rather than mitigate trauma personally, socially, and generationally. By evading the question of his trauma rooted in those few deaths that hit him hardest, he is both preventing a working-through and manifesting acting-out through normalizing this violence.

Kyle's Introduction, the same section containing the Hollywood-esque episode of Kyle's first kill, offers several up-front justifications about both Kyle and his wartime experience. In his blunt, almost plain way, he lays out the certainty of his life and convictions: "I learned the importance of family and traditional values, like patriotism, self-reliance, and watching out for your family and neighbors . . . I have a strong sense of justice. It's pretty much black-and-white. I don't see too much gray" (7). The admission stands out for its attempt to flatten the complexities of the world into "traditional values" and "black-and-white" justice. What makes this statement even further intriguing is the fact that the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are not easily compartmentalized into black and white—no war is. Moral injury, the damage done to an individual when they are forced to compromise their sense of ethics for duty, has the potential to fester in this set of circumstances, something that can be argued for Kyle's symptoms after returning home from the war. However, even if Kyle has not experienced moral injury, the over-emphasis on justice and traditional values potentially reveals how much he tries to bury his experience as extraordinary, as outside the normal range of experience. His certainty of mission is unknowingly a constriction, a symptom of trauma. Rather than looking to engage with his trauma through questioning—orienting himself in the multitude that is war—he clamps down on that possibility and assures himself of right(eous)ness.³⁰

³⁰ Outside of his understanding of *who* he was fighting, Kyle often lingers on the depersonalized accounting of *why* he was fighting: "I wanted to fight. I wanted to do what I'd been trained for. American taxpayers had invested considerable dollars in my education as a SEAL. I wanted to defend my country, do my duty, and do my job" (71). As elsewhere, Kyle defends his role in the war as a combination of several, familiar things: the moral responsibility to one's place of birth and residence (manifest in both his drives to "defend my country" and "do my duty"), the economic and ethical responsibility to uphold one's role in society (to "do my job"), and, in a new defense for Kyle up to this point in the text, to achieve the ends of his education as a SEAL (a kind of militaristic *eudaemonia*).

Kyle writes that people frequently ask him about whether or not it bothered him to kill so many people. He answers in the negative and engages in a further description: “The first time you shoot someone, you get a little nervous. You think, can I really shoot this guy? It is really okay? But after you kill your enemy, you see it’s okay. You say, *Great*” (6). Note the word choice before the bullet finds its target; Kyle humanizes the Other to some small degree, naming him “someone” or at least a “guy,” but after the body falls, he was only ever an “enemy.” The conversion is subtle, but is not to be overlooked because *post facto* justification is a prime method of distancing or dissociating oneself from the stress of the situation, traumatic or otherwise. He continues: “You do it again. And again. You do it so the enemy won’t kill you or your countrymen. You do it until there’s no one left for you to kill” (6). Kyle ends his thought with the claim that, “That’s what war is,” but a close reading detects a hint of desperation hidden behind undoubtedly steely resolve. The repetition of killing, again and again, until there are no targets left to acquire, is tragic. Kyle has been conditioned to kill—very well, apparently—but it is the momentum of that killing that he hopes to stabilize him.

This is very much an unconscious depiction of constriction. The dissociation that Kyle walks the reader through in that first quote is likely unintentional—it is born of training and conditioning, but more than that, the numbing that those suffering from repeated trauma often feel. As van der Kolk writes of the traumatized suffering from constriction, they learn “to shut down the brain areas that transmit the visceral feelings and emotions that accompany and define terror. Yet in everyday life, those same brain areas are responsible for registering the entire range of emotions and sensations that

form the foundation of our self-awareness” (94). Constriction in a combat situation can lead to constriction outside it. Kyle’s simplification of his wartime circumstances, and his overtly neutral tone about that experience, shows his potential for constriction.

Elsewhere, Kyle is open to the discussion of difference in religion: “I had never known that much about Islam. Raised as a Christian, obviously I knew there had been religious conflicts for centuries. I knew about the Crusades, and I knew that there had been fighting and atrocities forever” (86). And yet, Kyle later tattoos the crusader cross to his arm (something that actually makes him more identifiable to his enemies in Iraq, who take to calling him “The Devil of Ramadi” and offer large sums of money for his death), eschewing the play at subtlety that he invokes here. In fact, Kyle goes further, cementing his view of the enemy as truly Other: “The people we were fighting in Iraq, after Saddam’s army fled or was defeated, were fanatics. They hated us because we weren’t Muslim. They wanted to kill us, even though we’d just booted out their dictator,³¹ because we practiced a different religion than they did. Isn’t religion supposed to teach tolerance?” (86). The section, it should be noted, is entitled “Evil” and doesn’t leave much room for the tolerance that Kyle professes at the end. What’s more, he doesn’t seem to realize the fallacy he’s enthusiastically engaging in by citing the only reason of the enemy’s hate as religion even while noting that they, the Americans, had just “booted out their dictator.” Again, we note the manner in which Kyle seeks to flatten, and by doing so, alienate his enemy. When one’s enemy falls

³¹ Dr. Tahini Alsandook’s essay, “Heavy Steps,” within the *Retire the Colors* collection decries the Iraq War as only destabilizing, as giving nothing but destruction: “Who will be responsible for all the things that have happened in Iraq, and are continuing now? Who will be responsible for the lies of America? . . . Why does no one ask for the Bush administration to be served justice in destroying a whole nation and culture and history as old and majestic as Iraq’s?” (106).

into the antithetical category to the self, there need be no wavering in intention or violence.

In the next paragraph, Kyle practically addresses his dissenters by writing, “People say you have to distance yourself from your enemy to kill him.” Here, he seems to be reflecting on his previous words and attributing a justification. However, he continues: “If that’s true, the insurgents made it really easy . . . The fanatics we fought valued nothing but their twisted interpretation of religion . . . Many of the insurgents were cowards. They routinely used drugs to stoke their courage. Without them, alone, they were nothing” (86-87). The potential of introspection that came with the discussion of dehumanization evaporates in a doubling-down on religious extremism as justification for the death of the Other that also adds in a new wrinkle of the altered state that drugs bring. Now the enemies are not only religious fanatics, they are further outside their right minds with the aid of narcotics. What is evaded here is a questioning of American and Allied force’s involvement in Iraq. There is no critique of their mission, no introspection as to Kyle’s place there, just a sidestep and a religious (and moral) injunction for taking battle to the Other.

This injunction receives more fuel for its fire later when Kyle writes, “I’m not an expert, but it looked to me that they would cook up their own heroin and inject it before a battle . . . You could see that sometimes when you shot them. Some could take several bullets without seeming to feel it. They were driven by more than just religion and adrenaline, even more than blood lust. They were already halfway to Paradise, in their minds at least” (147). It is unclear if widespread use of narcotics occurred in forces engaged with American soldiers, but the impulse to create yet

another justification for their deaths is something that Kyle is familiar with as an expression of trauma's symptoms. By strangling the implications of what it means to take a life, he allows himself a reprieve from questioning his actions. Kyle is able to simplify his experience through constriction, which overtly sustains his worldview, but this process is dangerous as it prevents working-through and only ever allows the sufferer to engage in acting-out, acting-out that we have—and will—see can affect not only the traumatized but those around them.

In one of Taya Kyle's asides, Chris is shown to be "disgusted with everyone. With America, especially" (92; italics removed throughout). This disgust, explains Taya, stemmed from a lack of support of the troops, the "bullshit" Americans focused on rather than the war: "'People are talking about bullshit', he said. 'We're fighting for the country and no one gives a shit'" (92). The issue, of course, is that America—or any nation for that matter—has rarely assumed a unified civilian front in any conflict. However, the division, between warhawks, conscientious objectors, and everyone else on the spectrum of support or the lack thereof, certainly has the capacity to damage someone who has been traumatized for the sake of these ideals. For Kyle, the mission, and its apparent protection of the nation, is paramount, and the idea that there are those who refuse to lay their lives on the line for the increasingly-ephemeral ideal of freedom who criticize the mission creates a rift in purpose. As we see often in the text, Kyle views his place within the war as his duty, but others not agreeing to that definition of duty can shake the foundations of one's worldview. The anger that Kyle leverages against this fact is evidence to the volatility of that worldview. He *needs* his system of values and sense of justice to remain intact to be able to render his

experience meaningful; without it, he would be subject to even further harm doled out by his trauma. However, it should be recognized that Kyle's deferment from questioning and a realization that his experience does not serve justice and freedom does not exempt him from trauma's effect. Deferring engagement with trauma can only ever magnify it, but we are unable to chart that trajectory with Kyle given his untimely death.

Continuing his defense of America's wars, Kyle writes, "I realize that a lot of the problem has to do with the screwed-up culture in Iraq" (253). In a moment where Kyle believes himself to be judiciously outlining the difficulties of the war, he instead reinforces an imperial view of the situation:

Iraq as a country meant nothing to them, or at least nothing good . . . they didn't understand what that really meant—the other things that come with being free . . . they were so backward in terms of education and technology that for Americans it often felt like being in the Stone Age. (253)

Kyle never expresses what the "other things" of freedom are, they are ineffable, or at the very least, self-explanatory to him. However, the commentary on the situation of Iraq is telling. He views the people of Iraq negatively for failing to see their land as a country. An Imperialist structure that in no way is a requisite for freedom—and for their "backward" nature that is itself a product of imperialism's wars that have ravaged the country—the often-seen and always-misguided defense of imperial logic is that less advantaged countries are such because of their short-sightedness or inability to raise themselves up like more developed countries in the West, but this paradigm

always leaves out the reality that these developed Western countries have their progress soaked in blood.

And as a final cap to Kyle's assessment of Iraq, he washes his hands of the situation: "You can feel sorry for them, but at the same time you don't want these guys trying to run your war for you . . . And giving them the tools they needed to progress is *not* what my job was about. My job was killing, not teaching" (253). The simplicity of Kyle's stance has massive resonances in trauma. One of the ways to work-through social or generational trauma is to witness with empathy (Ackerman's *Green on Blue* as an extended empathy that runs the length of a novel will be discussed in a later chapter), but here Kyle does not even condone sympathy, "you *can* feel sorry for them" (*italics mine*), and flattens his role in the war (which he tellingly refers to as his own war by his use of the second-person) by again referring to the responsibilities of his job—Iraq is a killing job, the war an American one of stamping out evil. It's apparently that simple.

Kyle views the world as one driven by might, not diplomacy, which he sees as only the afterthought to violence. A microcosm of this mindset is evident as he nears the end of his memoir after demanding the reader to account for how Ramadi was taken:

We went in and killed all the bad people we could find . . . That's where the so-called Great Awakening came. It wasn't from kissing up to the Iraqis. It was from kicking butt . . . The tribal leaders saw that we were bad-asses, and they'd better get their act together, work together, and stop accommodating the

insurgents. Force moved that battle. We killed the bad guys and brought the leaders to the peace table. (317)

The kind of negotiation that Kyle describes can be seen in schoolyards or in the animal kingdom; it is brute and deliberately simplistic, and it equates might and right, ultimately. This again reaffirms a simplicity in war, in both aims and operation. Kyle's reasoning is, beat the "bad guys," but there is little thought given to who these people are, what they want, and how else those ends can be achieved outside of war.

And in the most staunch of Kyle's absolutisms: "But in that backroom or whatever it is when God confronts me with my sins, I do not believe any of the kills I had during the war will be among them. Everyone I shot was evil. I had good cause on every shot. They all deserved to die" (377). Kyle appeals to the highest power that he can conjure, God himself, and gives the ultimate justification of his actions. This moment occurs near the end of his narrative and such a resolute stand at the close reaffirms his narrative of the war and his place within it. This constitutes a minimalization of emotional reaction and therefore introspection in regard to his experience.

Shortly before Kyle's final word on his role in the war, he lingers over the experience of war itself and approaches an admission of war as a changer—and not a good one:

I'm not the same guy I was when I first went to war.

No one is. Before you're in combat, you have this innocence about you.

Then, all of a sudden, you see this whole other side of life.

I don't regret any of it. I'd do it again. At the same time, war definitely changes you.

You embrace death.

As a SEAL, you go to the Dark Side. You're immersed in it. Continually going to war, you gravitate to the blackest parts of existence. Your psyche builds up its defenses—that's why you laugh at gruesome things like heads being blown apart, and worse.

Growing up, I wanted to be military. But I wondered, how would I feel about killing someone?

Now I know. It's no big deal.

I did it a lot more than I'd ever thought I would—or, for that matter, more than any American sniper before me. But I also witnessed the evil my targets committed and wanted to commit, and by killing them, I protected the lives of many fellow soldiers. (376)

The passage begins as a cautionary tale, a story of slow change, one that degrades human capacity for regular-functioning emotion, but just as soon as that message begins to sink in, it changes. Kyle doubles-down on his experience and ends up justifying his actions as again that of good opposing evil, the organizing structure that sustains his wartime experience.

However, there are places where Kyle's justifications appear on the page more as pleas than as resolute defenses of an entrenched military culture of might equaling right and good opposing evil. Rarely, we see glimmers of a man looking to speak against the inevitable horrors of multiple deployments and a great deal of death:

“People back home, people who haven’t been in war, or at least not that war, sometimes don’t seem to understand how the troops in Iraq acted. They’re surprised—shocked—to discover we often joked about death, about things we saw” (273). This is as close as Kyle gets to recognizing trauma as a result of his wartime experience, but still there is no identification, no insight into the experience as (de)formative. He continues: “Maybe it seems cruel or inappropriate. Maybe it would be, under different circumstances. But in the context of where we were, it made a lot of sense. We saw terrible things, and lived through terrible things” (273). The overarching question about the memoir is then, why do you endorse your experience, why do you attempt to show the reader these terrible things about much more than the description necessary to impact them with that spectacle that is simultaneously a trauma? On that, Kyle is silent.

Unconscious Symptomatic Expression:

American Sniper is a memoir filled with trauma. Throughout this chapter, I have identified the various ways in which Chris Kyle has manifested acting-out, from the knowing expression of spectacle and war porn, to the justifications he employs to flatten ambivalence and create a bulletproof narrative of his own experience. However, Kyle also engages in a great deal of unconscious symptomatic expression in his narrative, identifying markers for his trauma that are unequivocal in their appearance within the text. These unconscious expressions manifest in the numbing (constriction) on the battlefield, in the transition between the warzone and home, and most acutely, in the occurrence and re-occurrence of Kyle’s central trauma: the loss of

his friends in battle and the death of an unknown Marine. However, the danger of venerating Kyle for his trauma is present, as well. The full expression of Scranton's trauma hero is rooted in the public's desire to assuage responsibility by narrativizing a recuperative arc in their soldiers, a purgation that happens external to themselves, and therefore, cheaply.

Faced with a daunting number of confirmed kills, Kyle writes that, "After the first kill, the others come easy. I don't have to psych myself up, or do anything special mentally—I look through the scope, get my target in the crosshairs, and kill my enemy before he kills one of my people" (143). The impulse to reduce the cost of killing always relies on the short-term. Akin to the infamous, "The only thing I felt when I pulled the trigger was the recoil" often heard after Vietnam, Kyle plays to the mechanics of the act rather than the psychological effects out of necessity and suppressing the cost of killing is a requisite for success on the battlefield. This is apparent elsewhere in Kyle's descriptions of combat: "My target fell. I looked for another. And another. And on it went" (166). We are met with rote description, the very language sterilized from emotion and introspection. This kind of writing avoids confronting lingering trauma, looks only to represent, and too often, transmit, with its dissociation.

Kyle writes on this process of numbing, of giving in to the repetition of the task and the mechanical action of pulling a trigger again and again, in the training of new unit members: "A little bit of hesitation was common for the new guys. Maybe all Americans are a little hesitant to be the first to shoot, even when it's clear that we're under attack, or will be shortly . . . Our enemy seemed to have no such problems. With

a little experience, our guys didn't, either" (270). Besides the obvious rhetoric Kyle is employing in order to dehumanize his enemy, he points to the numbing that the battlefield programs into those who fight on it, something that just doesn't return to its ordinary state after the wars are over. Such conditioning is not so easily forgotten by the structures of our brains. As van der Kolk writes, sufferers of trauma lack "a filter" and "[i]n order to cope, they try to shut themselves down and develop tunnel vision and hyperfocus" (70). As we have seen (and will continue to see), Kyle adopts a kind of hyperfocus in his singular idea of Right, Reason, and Justice, hewing closely to what he defines as the correct course of action in war—his war—throughout the memoir with little deviation.

On Kyle's last deployment, after witnessing death—dealt by himself and the enemy—losing comrades, and hearing that his daughter may have leukemia, the weight begins to set in: "The stress of the deployment had started to get to me well before that phone call in September 2006. The loss of Marc and Ryan's extreme injuries had taken a toll. My blood pressure had shot up and I couldn't sleep" (301), and in Taya's words, "When he got home, it seemed to me Chris was so stressed he was numb to everything . . . It was hard for him to pinpoint how he felt about anything. He was just wiped out and overwhelmed" (304; italics removed throughout). The "stress" that Taya and Chris speak to appears as traumatic symptoms of hyperarousal, constriction, and dissociation.

Taya enters into the memoir in a handful of dispersed and italicized entries, but these brief asides act as windows into another image of Kyle—one that is, more often than not, a man suffering. Her asides are crucial for identifying Kyle as someone

suffering from trauma because we get an opportunity to peer past the flattened, constricted writing style that Kyle has adopted. And while it cannot be claimed that Taya's words are the unequivocal truth, the presence of the additional perspective disabuses the narrative of a monolithic accounting of the aftermath of Kyle's experiences.

At first, these moments are general, vague pronouncements of the trauma that roils within: "Mostly, we didn't talk about killing, or the war. But then it would intrude" (157; italics removed throughout). Kyle "tests" her with harrowing stories, but she stays alongside him, after each deployment, and listens. Eventually, she begins to construct for the reader the mentality of her husband in these moments: "I think he was seeing death so often that he started to believe that people were replaceable . . . He thought dying on the battlefield was the greatest" (196; italics removed throughout).

In another of Taya's asides that a reader quickly recognizes as essential counter-balances to the memoir's unilateral thought, we encounter the common idea that life is considered cheap after countless encounters with death. This represents another form of numbing, a deliberate—if unconscious—degrading in order to lessen the impact of the loss of life. The coda to Taya's aside, that Chris values death on the battlefield, can be seen as an outlet to Kyle's rigid sense of duty that demands he give everything for his country—a counter to feelings of aimlessness or worthlessness after returning home from deployments or finally giving up the military life. This organizing structure of Kyle's experience requires rigidity in purpose, otherwise all those deaths, friend and foe alike, lose their meaning.

Even though Kyle does not appear to have experienced great pain in the dissent that inevitably went along with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, his multiple returns from deployments were never seamless: “He’d wake up punching. He’d always been jumpy, but now, when I got up in the middle of the night, I’d stop and say his name before I got back into bed. I had to wake him up before coming back to ensure I wasn’t hit with his basic reflex” (93; italics removed throughout). Here, Taya describes something like a basic state of combat, simultaneously Herman’s symptoms of intrusion and hyperarousal. While Kyle sleeps, he is back in a warzone, permanently ready for whatever new hell the threat of combat has to offer. As Taya says at the end of her section, “Slowly, we settled into some new habits, and adjusted” (93; italics removed throughout). This is a necessary and terrifying reality of soldiers’ homecoming. The new normal that presides over the time after or between deployments brings with it a host of new challenges that must be addressed before they grow into real threats to the safety of the soldier and even the loved ones around them.

Kyle himself speaks to the difficulty of his homecomings, albeit cautiously: “Every time I returned home from deployment . . . I wouldn’t leave the house for about a week” (94). It’s a rare moment where Kyle does not play into the spectacle-based expectations of a receptive audience. However, it can be seen as playing into a different set of expectations, that of the trauma hero returning home as seen in Scranton’s essay, where the veteran learns the truth of war, “a truth beyond words, a truth that can only be known by having *been there*, and unspeakable truth he must bear for society.” Scranton elaborates on this throughout the essay, calling into question the

mythology of a “special kind of authenticity” given to veterans returning “to the world of peace haunted by his experience.”

However, Kyle resists the full definition of the emerging trope by denying “flashbacks” or the impinging of the past upon the present: “I didn’t have flashbacks of battle or anything dramatic like that; I just needed to be alone” (94). Yet he does admit to having had something like a flashback when Taya returned home, setting off a burglar alarm: “It scared the ever-living shit out of me. I just immediately went right back to Kuwait” (94). Nothing else is said on the matter, no indication how exactly Kyle returned to his deployment. This could have been a flashback, but it could also have been yet another instance of a traumatic symptom rearing its well-known head in the form of hyperarousal—the loud and sudden noise forced Kyle’s conditioned body to react according to its training, training that places soldier’s on the edge of the knife at all times, mentally and physically.

Later in the text, Kyle again speaks to a difficulty in returning home: “But the transition from war to home was still a shock. One day, we’d been fighting. The next, we’d crossed the river to al-Taqaddum Airbase . . . and started back for the States . . . War one day; peace the next” (202). Here, Kyle points to his own dislocation in his dual roles as both soldier and father-husband. This transition from war to peace is so sudden that the body does not recognize and account for it. And, as we see with *The Body Keeps the Score*, even after extended periods after the transition, the body may still not recognize the difference in situation—war is burned into the body.³² The

³² Kyle also has a history of violence outside of a warzone, something that continues to affirm his issues in adjusting to life off the battlefield. Throughout the text, he comments on his many arrests (all of which led to no charges being filed), all seeming to stem from barroom altercations. There is an amount

symptom of hyperarousal is rooted in this transition. Those in high-stress combat situations experience a cocktail of bodily stimulus and endorphins, but those stimulants are rarely needed at home. There can be dissociation in this suddenness of transition, as well, forcing soldiers to ask how the person fighting through explosions and taking lives can be the same person taking their kids for ice cream.

The suddenness of the split that Kyle describes contributes to the difficulty of transitioning from war to peace. This is something that he identifies further in his description within this section:

Every time you come home, it's weird. Especially in California. The simplest things can upset you. Take traffic. You're driving on the road, everything's crowded, it's craziness. You're still thinking IEDs—you see a piece of trash and you swerve. You drive aggressively toward other drivers, because that's the way you do it in Iraq. (202)

Kyle relates what is very nearly a textbook example of a traumatized subjectivity. The aggression on the road points again to hyperarousal, that “permanent alert” where the sufferer “reacts irritably to small provocations” (Herman 35) and reacts as if they were in high-stress situations at all times.³³

In one of his returns from war, Kyle gets a tattoo, and his discussion of the event alludes to his understanding of his difficulty adjusting between the two fronts,

of bravado etched into each episode, but as the memoir winds to a close, there is room for some reflection: “But taken together, it was a bad pattern. It might even have been a disturbing trend. Unfortunately, I didn’t recognize it at the time” (327).

³³ Additionally, Kyle points to his extreme case of road-rage: “On the darker side, I was extremely hot-headed . . . it was more explosive now. If someone cut me off . . . I could get crazy. I might try and run them off the road, or even stop and whup their ass” (204).

between war and home: “On the front of my arm, I had a crusader cross inked in. I wanted everyone to know I was a Christian. I had put it in red, for blood. I hated the damn savages I’d been fighting. I always will. They’ve taken so much from me” (219). In a direct expression of the trauma hero, Kyle points to a number of underlying issues. To begin, there is the ever-present dehumanization of the enemy, the “savages” that he has fought and killed so many of, but now that has become couched in the vernacular of religious violence. The crusader cross tattoo identifies him as the Devil of Ramadi to his enemies, but it is also a very old symbol of religious violence and oppression; that Kyle knows this (as per his previous comments) and commits to the image anyway says much about his hatred of his enemy. Finally, the allusion to how much they’ve taken from him points both to the justification and rightness of this violence as well as permission for his acting-out—to recall loss and underlying trauma is a gesture to others that though objectionable, these actions have justifications that must be accepted. However, this kind of playing of the trauma card does not often lead to positive reintegration with the world as it walls-off the sufferer from those who do not understand the experience of war.

The act of getting the tattoo is something that Kyle comments on through the fears of his wife: “Taya saw it as one more sign that I was changing, becoming somebody that she didn’t know” (219). This, after he expresses that he knew she didn’t like tattoos, nor did she like the manner in which he went out and got them (drunk). This is actually a compelling rhetorical move that Kyle employs here; he is simultaneously making use of his trauma hero status to aggrandize himself and his role

in the war, but also tacitly expressing a vulnerability—this is not quite a cry for help, but at least a road marker along the way to one.

Another homecoming phenomenon that Kyle speaks to is the dissolution of friendships that had once seemed the strongest things in the world:

It's a cliché, but it's true: you form tight friendships in war. And then suddenly circumstances change. I became close friends with two guys in the Guard unit, real good friends; I trusted them with my life . . . Today I couldn't tell you their names if my life depended on it. (193)

This singular moment is used as an introduction to a brief description of fellow soldiers as “hillbillies” or “rednecks” without any further elaboration on exactly *why* these tight-knit bonds dissolved so utterly after returning home. Again, Kyle appears to point to a truth about war that is inconsistent with everyday reality and then abandons investigation of that truth. In this particular case, we might argue that war, as an extra-ordinary experience of adrenaline, boredom, fear, and heroics, forces friendships out of a necessity of the moment that ultimately fail upon returning home where no one is shooting at you but also where there is no cocktail of brain chemistry designed to sharpen your senses and keep you alive—in a world that appears drab after war, those bonds formed during war fall to gray, as well. Or, this could be an instance of what van der Kolk describes in depersonalization and trauma's consequence in denying meaningful relationships.³⁴ No matter the explanation, the important thing to note is that Kyle does not look to investigate the cause, the

³⁴ “To have genuine relationships you have to be able to experience others as separate individuals, each with his or her particular motivations and intentions . . . Trauma can make all that hazy and gray” (van der Kolk 104).

inconsistency in his truth, and instead chooses—or is forced to through his fears of audience expectation or the trauma he may have carried—to dance on the surface of his experience and glance off his own introspection. He moves on from the moment without any reflection, recalling what van der Kolk writes on regarding putting into words “the reality of . . . internal experience” (47): “The worst moments of my life have come as a SEAL. Losing my buddies. Having a kid die on me” (377). Here we can take Kyle at his word, for throughout the memoir, these two specific instances that he points to appear to be the most emphatic reminders of his trauma that fit diagnosis in just his discussion of those events.

After a member of his unit is severely wounded, Kyle agonizes over the situation that led him to that point: “A hundred kills? Two hundred? More? What did they mean if my brother was dead?” (283). At that moment, Kyle does not know that his friend will live (only to die later, tragically, in a surgery necessitated by his wounding in the war) and retroactively questions his decisions that put Ryan Job in that situation: “I’d put him in the spot where he got hit. It was my fault he’d been shot . . . Why hadn’t I put myself there? Why hadn’t I been standing there? I could have gotten the bastard—I could have saved my boy.” These thoughts stem directly from Kyle’s feelings of battlefield superiority as well as his regret;³⁵ note how he wants to

³⁵ Throughout *American Sniper*, Kyle struggles with death and its inevitability, especially given its closeness on the battlefield. This struggle often manifests itself as a simultaneous distancing and embrace of death through thoughts and feelings of invulnerability and talismanic thinking. As Herman describes in *Trauma and Recovery*, the “increased superstitious and magical thinking” and “greater reliance on lucky charms and omens” (46) is a marker of the traumatic symptom of constriction, and each of these elements can be seen clearly within Kyle’s memoir: “It may seem strange to say, given everything I’d been through, but at that point we were feeling pretty sure of ourselves. Cocky, maybe. You just get to a point where you think you’re such a superior fighter that you can’t be hurt” (210-211). Note, however, that there is also the flavor of masculine superiority that is tinged with a denigration of the Other alongside a Eurocentric “prowess.”

place himself in the line of fire, not so that he could have taken the bullet that wounded his friend but to have killed the shooter and eliminated the wound altogether. After this, Kyle withdraws into himself, saying that “[n]othing [he’d] experienced in Iraq ever affected [him] like this” (282), that he “was in a dark hole. Deep down” (283).

This darkness is short-lived, however, as the impetus for action and revenge quickly organizes itself. His chief interrupts his moment of despair and asks if Kyle wants payback. The answer, of course, is a, “Fuck yeah I do!” Kyle briefly alludes to planning for a mission of reprisal, but is very clear that that isn’t his focus: “I didn’t hardly have time for it, though. I just wanted blood for my guy” (283).

The deep and horrible irony in this situation is that Kyle just pointed out how he felt that poor planning or execution on his part led to Ryan’s wounding, that he should have been placed elsewhere in the operation. Now, even after that surge of survivor’s guilt, Kyle becomes shortsighted for the sake of revenge. It’s worth noting that Kyle did not seem in any way at fault for what happened to his friend, but to eschew planning in favor of bloodshed cannot act as a salve for such guilt.

“Snipers as a breed tend to be superstitious . . . During training and even afterward, I kept my guns a certain way, wore the same clothes, had everything arranged precisely the same. It’s all a matter of controlling everything on my end. I know the gun is going to do its job. I need to make sure I do mine” (106-107). The above can be read as the talismanic urge that Herman describes, as well. What is striking is Kyle’s admission of the attempt to control. In a combat situation, chaos and uncertainty reign and that desire to control is sometimes the only thing working against one’s hopelessness. “In a way, we all thought we were invincible. In another way, we also accepted the fact that we could die . . . I didn’t focus on death, or spend much time thinking about it. It was more like an idea, lurking in the distance” (269). In the apparent contradiction of death that filled the mind of Kyle and his fellow soldiers, there is also the generalized anxiety that those suffering from trauma know all-too well. Death does not appear to be at the forefront in moments of relative calm, but its lurking nature reveals the psychological impact that going to war has. “But I never did die . . . After a while, I started thinking, they can’t kill me. They can’t kill us. We’re fucking undefeatable” (337).

In fact, as we learn only a few pages later, that mission of reprisal leads to the death of Marc Lee, another friend in the unit. However, as they return to base, the only commentary we are met with is how the unit is required to stand down, which Kyle describes as “an official timeout to assess or reassess what you’re doing” (285). This means that even institutionally there was concern over Kyle and his unit’s actions, and it is not until later than Kyle pays some attention to the trauma of losing a friend in battle and then having that experience repeat itself almost immediately afterwards:

People who’ve heard this story tell me my description gets bare, and my voice faraway. They say I use less words to describe what happened, give less detail, than I usually do . . . I’m not conscious of it. The memory of losing my two boys burns hot and deep. To me, it’s as vivid as what is happening around me at this very moment. To me, it’s as deep and fresh a wound as if those bullets came into my own flesh this very moment. (286)

This is, without any obfuscation or deflection, Kyle’s deepest and most well-identified trauma. His description of his pain is almost textbook: he notes the unconscious manner in which he drifts from his current reality and experiences a dreamlike form of telling, he notes a burning memory buried within him, and he notes that that memory is physically wounding even as it replaces time and recurs in an eternal return, impinging upon the present. Van der Kolk writes that “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body” (21) which is reexperienced in the recollection of the event.³⁶

³⁶ Later, van der Kolk argues that, “Flashbacks and reliving are in some ways worse than (*sic*) the trauma itself. A traumatic event has a beginning and an end—at some point it is over. But for people with PTSD a flashback can occur at any time, whether they are awake or asleep . . . If elements of the

We can now retroactively see moments of high stress for Kyle being represented in barren detail as markers of trauma.

And yet, after the stand down is lifted, the CO approaches Kyle and asks if they'd like to go back out, making it clear that if they want "to take it easy" that he understands. Kyle's response, seemingly undaunted by experience and the emotional fallout of that experience, is almost identical to the one he gave on the reprisal that claimed Marc's life: "'Fuck yeah', we all said. 'We want to go out'" (289). In less than ten pages, Kyle has illustrated to us a cycle of trauma that only begets further trauma. Whatever introspection he has developed between woundings or death amounts to very little in the moment that another revenge is offered up.

This short-circuiting of cause and effect should not be seen as a deliberate blindness on Kyle's part, it is merely the nature of his response to trauma built-in by the military. For years, Kyle has been trained to kill, to strike out at the enemy that has been dehumanized to the point of inhumanity. There is nothing that equips him for this kind of pain and it has to be reduced to the physical pain of having been wounded himself: "To me, it's as deep and fresh a wound as if those bullets came into my own flesh this very moment" (286). Hurt the hurter is the crude logic of combat; to stop pain, you must inflict it, and Kyle is very skilled on that front. And so, when presented with the option, of course he chooses further violence, risks yet another wounding or death that will only add to his traumatic burden—there is no other realistic option for him to take.

trauma are replayed again and again, the accompanying stress hormones engrave those memories ever more deeply in the mind" (66-67).

The other defining moment, the death of “a kid” that Kyle identifies, happens earlier in the memoir: “The kid was about eighteen years old. He was really badly hurt. I could tell that he was going to die” (171). It is this moment, in which a young Marine falls on top of him after being shot, that sticks in Kyle’s mind, something that he points to directly as a cause of his unbidden wartime remembrances. And yet, the reader is only given description without introspection, something that van der Kolk used to evaluate patients’ mental activity as they relived their trauma, a script that removes emotional resonance (40)—description without introspection *is* a reliving of trauma without working-through. Kyle continues: “He died right then. He didn’t even live long enough to hear my lies about how everything was going to be okay . . . A bunch of Marines came. They lifted him off me and put him in the back of a Hummer . . . I went back to my block and continued the fight” (171). Kyle points to the fact that immediately after watching someone die in such an intimate manner he goes back to the war with not time at all to contend with the experience, and if Kyle alludes to this as a factor of this moment becoming such a traumatic one for him, he does so only in subterranean fashion. However, that lack of processing, an acknowledging of sudden loss and the impact of its proximity, *does* prove to impact trauma.³⁷

Later, when undergoing tests, Kyle comments on the sudden return of the moment that young Marine died atop him:

³⁷ Van der Kolk writes that “trauma survivors are prone to ‘continue the action, or rather the (futile) attempt at action, which began when the thing happened’ . . . Being able to move and *do* something to protect oneself is a critical factor in determining whether or not a horrible experience will leave long-lasting scars” (55). Though van der Kolk cites the defense of self in the above, the seeming randomness of the victim, the target, could contribute to feelings of helplessness and suddenness.

There was one simulation that left a deep impression on me. In this one, a Marine was shot and he went down screaming. He'd been gut-shot. As I watched that scene, my blood pressure spiked even higher than it had before . . . I didn't need a scientist or a doctor to tell me what that was about. I could just about feel that kid dying on my chest in Fallujah again. (358)

This is the eternal return of trauma, the re-occurrence of the event that is a rehappening, not dulled by time or the regular processes of memory that everyone from Caruth, to Herman, to van der Kolk, speak to.³⁸ “People tell me I saved hundreds and hundreds of people. But I have to tell you: it's not the people you saved that you remember. It's the ones you couldn't save . . . Those are the ones you talk about. Those are the faces and situations that stay with you forever” (358). While overtly cliché, the sentiment is certainly true considering Kyle's experiences, and rarely in his memoir, his willingness to engage in expressing them. However, these moments are still to be considered unconscious symptomatic expressions as they are expressed by Kyle as war-time givens—not traumatic episodes that return to haunt but the life of a veteran. In other words, Kyle misunderstands the import of these moments and what exactly they point to.

³⁸ Caruth writes of the eternal return in *Unclaimed Experience* in her description of trauma: “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Herman acknowledges the return in her description of intrusion: “The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). And finally, van der Kolk understands the return through study of traumatized patients: “Our scans had revealed how their dread persisted and could be triggered by multiple aspects of daily experience. They had not integrated their experience into the ongoing stream of their life. They continued to be ‘there’ and did not know how to be ‘here’—fully alive in the present” (47).

After Kyle returns home for the final time, after unconsciously uncovering his traumas, from the surface-level to the deepest-seated, he begins to unpack his experience through the memoir as a kind of personal accounting. In a beautiful and terrible metaphor, Kyle relates the consequences of his trauma:

Imagine climbing a tall ladder out over a river, a thousand miles up, and there you're struck by lightning. Your body becomes electric, but you're still alive. In fact, you're not only aware of everything that's happening, but you know you can deal with it. You know what you have to do to get down . . . So you do. You climb down. But when you're back on the ground, the electricity won't go away. You try to find a way to discharge the electricity, to ground yourself, but you can't find the damn lightning rod to take the electricity away. (354-355)

Kyle engages in the extended metaphor as a parallel for his inability to calm down or relax in opposition to his stress that he and his wife point to in the text, but it is also to be taken as a metaphor for trauma, which feels nothing like a far reach after having interrogated Kyle's experiences with trauma theory.

Even after everything he's been through, Kyle looks to mute his experience through comparison: "I'm sure some of the things I went through pale in comparison to what some of the guys went through in World War II and other conflicts. On top of all the shit they went through in Vietnam, they had to come home to a country that spat on them" (377).³⁹ What's worth noting in this brief aside that Kyle goes into is the

³⁹ This is something that appears in Platt's memoir, as well: "I'm almost ashamed of my time in Iraq, compared to the experience of other veterans in history—it wasn't like the accounts of I have read of Vietnam, or World War II, it wasn't epic or particularly life-changing or at all typical of the wars I had

classic attempt to play down one's own trauma in light of another's when in fact, trauma is trauma and one's own trauma should never be compared to another's. However, beyond that, Kyle rightly identifies the added difficulty of soldiers returning home to a population that does not support them—regardless of how they feel about the war itself.

However he feels about his experience, those around him are able to understand the weight that Kyle carries: “Since I’ve been back with [my parents], they tell me some of the shell that I built up during the war has melted away. My father says that I closed off parts of myself. He believes they’ve come back, somewhat at least . . . ‘I don’t think you can train for years to kill’, he admits, ‘and expect all that to disappear overnight’” (368-369). The shell and closing-off that Kyle’s parents speak to are representative of the symptom of constriction, what manifests in some as passivity and emotional deadening can be a narrowed understanding of future possibility in another. For Kyle, constriction often takes the form of a staunchness of justice and mission and a neutralized tone that belies flattening of emotion.

Perhaps this too is an explanation as to why Kyle was able to lead what is by all accounts a fulfilling life after his military career. And this also may tie into a statement that Kyle makes about wounded veterans returning home: “What wounded veterans don’t need is sympathy. They need to be treated like the men they are: equals,

studied” (168). Here, we find a direct invocation of the past, that Platt views his experience through the lens of previous conflicts. What’s more, this experience, harrowing as it surely was, is flattened: “I am grateful for having avoided that [traumatic experience], but I feel unfulfilled, like a minor-leaguer who never gets his at-bat in the big leagues” (168). In another reduction, Platt laments his chance at greater violence, to hit a home run on the field of battle, where he presumably would charge across France like in World War II or speed across the desert as in the first Gulf War.

heroes, and people who still have tremendous value for society” (371). On this, Kyle and trauma theory agree. To feel pity for another lacks identification. Only through true empathy, going to the other, can valuable bonds of trust and companionship be (re)established.

Room for Nuance:

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper* is not only a traumatic text but one that is almost entirely invested in the acting-out phrase of trauma, there is room for nuance in the memoir. Early on in the narrative, Taya—who we already know to be an alternate perspective to the willed ignorance of introspection of the author—introduces another side of her husband: “He doesn’t necessarily enjoy talking about feelings, but he has a sense of when it is appropriate or necessary to bring things out that I may have been intent on keeping in” (45; italics removed throughout). Further down the page, Taya shares a moment when she recognizes Chris as sensitive, something he misunderstand to mean “crying at movies and stuff.” These moments indicate two important things: that Chris Kyle knew the importance of an emotional relief valve, checking-in on one’s insides, and that he himself may not have recognized that fact.

Later in the text, Taya speaks again to the sudden intrusion of war but also reveals a certain kind of hope in these moments: “Stories would just come out. A lot of times, he said things to see what I could handle . . . I think he needed to know I wouldn’t look at him differently, and perhaps more than that, he knew he would deploy again and he didn’t want to scare me” (156; italics removed throughout).

Taya's asides always seem to reveal the effects of Kyle's multiple deployments.

Where Chris looks to describe flatly and cover "just the facts," Taya engages with the emotions that she identified in her husband well before he became the most prolific sniper in American history. In the quote above, she illustrates a moment that can be seen as a combination of acting-out (through a potential transmission of trauma) and tentative telling that may become a working-through. This is not something that Kyle ever engages with directly in his own writing, but having Taya's voice within the memoir cues the reader into the subterranean struggles the man certainly dealt with.

The moments that Taya shares in her asides are paid back modestly in a section where Kyle imagines the difficulty of his wife's wartime experience on the home front when he is forced into a state of helplessness as she gives birth: "Maybe it was a touch of what she'd gone through every moment of my deployment. It was a terrible helplessness and despair . . . A hard thing to admit, let alone stomach" (222). Here, Kyle refers to Taya's second pregnancy and his fears about his inability to help during her C-section. The brief comment that he makes an assessment of his feelings at that time are an attempt at empathizing with his wife's situation when he's in harm's way, an empathy that is all-too rare in his memoir.

And finally, Kyle expressions nuance—or a chance at working-through by his memoir—when he reflects on ambivalence within his experience: "Nothing that I had accomplished earlier could erase the feeling that I was letting my boys down . . . I know it doesn't make sense. I know I had accomplished a huge amount. I needed a rest, but felt I shouldn't take one. I thought I should be stronger than was possible" (356). The real value of a passage like this is that Kyle is open to admitting

inconsistency, an ambivalence of self in his retirement. He identifies a seemingly-intractable issue and is vulnerable enough to share it with a reader. These moments are truly rare in the memoir, but they can't go unnoticed. For all the spectacle that Kyle shovels in *American Sniper*, it is clear that his wartime experience has affected him and that he wants to resolve the feelings it has engendered within him. And while it does not appear that the text itself was key in his ability to reintegrate and live a fulfilling life (however cut short it was)—and while it cannot be claimed that *American Sniper* is a text that will catalyze others' working-through—the times in which Chris Kyle is willing to entertain uncertainty and pull away from entrenched military narratives and clichés offer promise for even the most devout practitioners of silence and repression.

CHAPTER III: ROY SCRANTON'S *WAR PORN* AS ACTING-OUT

Roy Scranton's debut novel, *War Porn*, represents a supreme act of acting-out for its dedication to the damaging spectacle that war porn represents. And while it is unlikely that this acting-out stems from the author's experiences directly (or any maliciousness toward the reader themselves), the novel is an acting-out nonetheless for its desire to encapsulate—and transmit—the experience of traumatized veterans and civilians alike. My argument pertaining to *War Porn* is that its acting-out is always a knowing expression, from small moments of aimlessness, uncertainty, and despair, to widespread accounting of what consequences the war brought on civilian populations in both Iraq and the United States. Scranton's section, "the fall," almost a novella ensconced within the novel, can be viewed as an empathetic approach to the Other that is built only to be ripped away in the novel's final "strange hells" section at the hands of the deeply traumatized Aaron.⁴⁰ While Scranton himself looks to expand the boundaries of the war novel, he does so at the cost of traumatization, an ambivalent consequence of both witnessing and understanding.

It is no coincidence that Aaron, the damaged veteran, is also the one to wreak havoc on the unstable peace of Dahlia and Matt, the readers' stand-ins for Americans who understand the war only in abstract political terms, without the visceral experience of combat and its consequences. While each element of acting-out is intended by the author—Scranton writes in an interview, "I think *War Porn* is pretty

⁴⁰ In fact, the seeming disparity of Scranton's sections within *War Porn* (namely "strange hells" and "the fall"), only makes sense in light of the through-line of acting-out. Qasim's fate, and Dahlia's, are both manipulated by Aaron—though "the fall" initially offers an approach of the Other and empathy, it too is relegated to acting-out in the novel's climax.

pessimistic when it comes to solutions—but I’m also not sure that I want to or that it’s my job. They’re the contradictions we live with. I want to make them visible so we can talk the out instead of acting them out” (Plum), he neglects the seriousness of trauma’s transmission, something that undermines the aims of his project.

While there is much to be gained from Scranton’s enunciation of the war novel (namely, the exploding of the traditional narrative in order to include the Othered subjectivities of America’s “enemies”), *War Porn* fails as a trauma novel for its dedication to acting-out. A quick look at the back cover of the 2016 Soho hardback illustrates just how ambivalent the novel’s reception has been. Matt Gallagher (of *Fire and Forget* fame) writes that the novel “exposes the dark heart of th[e] [Iraq] war for all to see” before stamping it a “stunning accomplishment.” Ben Fountain (another who we will discuss at length in chapter V) says that “Roy Scranton is merciless,” but questions why the novel should be otherwise, because “corruption soaks through every layer of life, and *War Porn* drives home that truth with unflinching, and ultimately harrowing, honesty.” And Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment* (and whose titular story is discussed as a part of *Fire and Forget* in chapter IV), speaks to the “meticulous craftsmanship” of the novel, but also the “intense and troubling” feeling that is “difficult to put into words.” He ends with the idea that this is “what all truly excellent literature leaves you with. A sense of something shattering.” However, for our purposes, we are not interested in “excellent literature” as a category of its own; instead, we are bent on the diagnosis of *useful* trauma literature, literature that enables working-through and recovery—in the author, in the reader. While Scranton’s debut novel is heralded as a masterpiece by the authors above (each of them writers of

trauma works, themselves)—and it certainly is masterful—*War Porn* does not achieve a status of productive war writing. Scranton aims for the shattering that Klay points to, but in the end that only leaves us with pieces.

Small Moments:

Scranton's novel is a dedication to trauma, but that trauma manifests in several ways. While the entirety of "strange hells" can be seen as a traumatic feedback loop, there are various less obvious nodes of trauma at play within the plot. *War Porn*'s traumatic static, housed in the sections of "babylon," represents a small moment of trauma and acting-act, something similar to Scranton's use of spectacle-based images throughout. Alongside other examples of confined traumas, it becomes clear that the author wants to permeate the text with trauma, not just blanket it in the overarching sense with the main thrust of the plot alone.

"babylon":

War Porn begins in "babylon," or as Nick Flynn writes, "babble—'babylon'—something that could have been generated by a computer, maybe from fragments of government propaganda, more poetry than narrative" (Scranton "Poetry"). Scranton affirms this in his conversation with Flynn, dubbing "babylon" as "the collective unconscious, as it were—as if the Global War on Terror could dream" (Scranton "Poetry"). This babble that bookends the novel as well acting as its interstitials brings the reader into a work of trauma where the reverberations of war are a collective guilt and suffering. Jumbled phrases of war-centered diction encroach in seemingly-random

fashion; things like, “Draw your wound. Defend the gun” (3) emerge alongside of chaotic sentences such as, “peace merciful, most compassionate, the government agreed: made values to kill God in remote deserts” (4). The sentences, strung together like mutated amino acid strands, always approach making sense before dissolving into the logic of war itself.⁴¹ Like the harmonious chaos of an orchestra tuning up before a piece, “babylon” is the raw data in which *War Porn* is contained, a marker of things to come. In this, the reader is brought to face the widespread enormity of trauma and its effects, forced to confront the bleed-through of trauma (its transmission) that will ultimately involve the reader themselves at the end of the novel in their own, potential traumatization.

However, this potential for damage to the reader is something that many of the novel’s advocates latch onto as a virtue: A reviewer writes that, “*War Porn* gives no comfort, and readers of Iraq and Afghanistan-related fiction deserve no easily digested narratives of tragic heroes” (Webster), and in that discomfort, they’re right. However, the claim that, “*War Porn* assaults those who want to read about the wars while cozily tucked into bed” (Webster) misses the mark, somewhat. In reality, *War Porn* potentially assaults *anyone* who reads it, but Webster wants to turn the knife in those who go in for spectacle, for war porn. And despite his dismissal of Qasim as “a blundering Iraqi academic . . . making mistake after mistake as the war closes in around him,” something that presents a damaging representation of the character that

⁴¹ Readers may note a striking similarity to Ben Fountain’s *Fantasy Industrial Complex* in his *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*. The babble of “babylon” mirrors the force of manufactured reality inundated by technology and consumerism.

is both false and unintended by Scranton's inclusion of "the fall,"⁴² Webster has a valid point here. The war porn public *should* be disabused of their safe narrative of trauma and redemption, of war's victims displaced onto our own soldiers—the Self—rather than its true victims, the Other, but the cost is a potential transmission of trauma.

"strange hells":

If the babble of "babylon" constitutes Scranton's first assault of small moments of trauma and acting-out, the uncomfortable domesticity of "strange hells" precipitates another. This discomfort stems from Dahlia's dissatisfaction with boyfriend Matt and the torpor their lives have taken on. Interestingly, that stagnation also breeds a sense of comfort: "We're all comfy where things are, another summer gone, the wars drag on, tomorrow Columbus Day and nothing changes" (14). In addition to installing a sense of complacency, Scranton also points to the war as a social reality, a constant in the modern world that is kept at arm's length for those who have not experienced it. War becomes a sign emptied of its meaning. People like Dahlia and Matt are allowed to be, if not ignorant, at least uninitiated and protected against the war and its depictions that we find later in Scranton's novel. This situation creates its own sense of expectation;

⁴² Webster's assessment of Qasim, the protagonist of "the fall" section in the novel and ultimately most pure-intentioned of Scranton's characters, is refuted by Scranton himself in his interview with Nick Flynn: "The two real moments of moral courage in the novel are Qasim's decision to go home to his wife and mother, and Othman's decision to go with him. Almost every other choice is self-serving in one way or another, through passive complicity, moral cowardice, or mere survival" (Scranton "Poetry"). Qasim generates the *only* moments of moral courage in the novel and the "mistake after mistake" that Webster accuses him of are, in actual fact, decisions to make a stand despite circumstances promising consequences. Qasim's dissolution as a character in the final "strange hells" section will be discussed further at the end of the chapter.

because Aaron is back from the world that the others are sometimes unaware, sometimes entirely mistaken about, he is returning as a disruptive force, the wolf among the unsuspecting sheep. The unease of “strange hells” acts as fertile ground for various small eruptions of trauma, each funneled through the mode of acting-out.

Readers enter “strange hells” amidst the preparation for a barbeque, in the world where “nothing changes,” and are introduced to a worst-case interaction between leftist civilians and a traumatized (and soon, we will see, traumatizing) soldier fresh from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Aaron, the roving veteran who is “just sort of traveling around right now” (26) is confronted by Mel after the standard, hollow pleasantries we associate with civilian–veteran interactions. Matt offers a canned, “thank you for your service” (27), but quickly assumes a role of war porn-hungry inquisitor alongside his friends, asking both questions of spectacle—was it dangerous (28); did you kill anybody? (31)—and philosophy, asking that Aaron defend his place in the war, his role in bloodshed. Aaron initially tries to steer the conversation away from Iraq, to deemphasize his role there:

“Look,” Aaron said, “Matt, Rachel, you seem like nice people and this is a great barbeque. I’m gonna say this one thing, then . . . Maybe let’s talk about something else, okay? Because Iraq’s a fucking disaster. The whole thing. Staying’s a disaster. Leaving’s a disaster. It’s a fucking shithole. And it doesn’t matter what the fuck we think about it, because the guys who run shit don’t give a rat’s ass what people like you and me *think*. Or do. Or say. Unless we’re blowing shit up or donating money, they could give a flying fuck. So I don’t know what to tell you.” (29)

Aaron's response is both defensive and dismissive. He attempts to both justify his presence (and resulting absence) while simultaneously disavowing any ability to alter the conditions of the country. Rachel, one of Matt and Dahlia's friends at the barbeque, calls Aaron out on his "pretty negative world view" (29), something that is anathema to the twenty-something liberal hosts of the summer party, but Aaron's response again augers the depths of his trauma: "Yeah, well, I'm all traumatized and shit. You know what it's like. You saw the movie" (29).

Scranton does something subtle here in Aaron's sarcastic but oh-so-close-to-the-truth reply: Aaron is traumatized, deeply, we will later learn, but despite his facetious admission of that fact, he does everything he can to avoid confronting his trauma—he insists on acting-out. Constant deflection, sarcasm, determining that his involvement in the war as something fated or without choice; each of these bespeaks an attempt to avoid one's own experience. The fact that America *thinks* it knows what trauma looks like, is also brought up in that same retort. "You saw the movie," Aaron says, in another dose of sarcasm, but one that points to the heart of an issue in representation. Here, Scranton has his character intimate that what the civilian population gets to see of the wounded warrior in media is not reality; he implicitly invokes the idea of the trauma hero, a narrative arc of traumatization and strengthening through recovery, but he is also referring (metafictionally) to works that have preceded his own. *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor*, two of the most well-known and renowned autobiographies of American soldiers fighting and suffering from the United States' longest wars, are invoked as evidence that veterans can face impossible devastation and cruelty in war and come out the other side as functioning

and productive members of society. Scranton is writing against that trope, something that is both valuable and dangerous. Aaron is a testament to the brokenness that can be found at the end of traumatization, the extreme difficulty of reintegration and even survival after war, but that same brokenness is also the catalyst of trauma itself, the feeding of the cycle that will claim these well-meaning and tone-deaf civilians by the novel's end.

The barbeque very quickly spills out into chaos, with the direct condemnation of Aaron's assumed role coming from Mel, Rachel's hot-headed partner: "I can't fucking believe I'm fucking sitting here with a fucking American Nazi." Her final condemnation is that, "I know you. I know what you are. I can see it" (32), and despite Mel's incredible lashing-out through her assumptions, she happens to be right. The beauty of this first "strange hells" section is that we are predisposed to defend Aaron in these moments of assault; he is the traumatized soldier who we, American civilians, are taught to thank for their service and nebulously support as a concept. The attacks on his person as someone who should be ashamed, as a Nazi, all initially feel blown out of proportion—on par with the spat-upon Vietnam veteran returning home. However, as we learn in the final moments of the novel, Aaron is a monster—he is the worst nightmare of anti-war liberals who smoke and drink and stare at the stars while they speak of poetry—but he is also a victim of the war, a traumatized individual, who, far from being a hero, still deserves help.

The extended scene of the first "strange hells" is a barometer for our identification with the involved parties: how opposed are we to the seemingly-radical attacks of Mel; how sympathetic are we to the besieged Aaron? The typical narrative,

the story of the trauma hero, often starts with the misapprehension of the veteran, a callous exterior that is supplemented by compassionate interiority later in the arc. As the reader, we expect this familiar narrative to unfold over the course of the novel (after, presumably, flashing-back to the war), but Scranton will disabuse us of that notion with horrible finality.

In the uncomfortability of that opening scene, Scranton implicates his reader, someone who reads literary fiction (even if it happens to be about war), by throwing the worst version of their own words in their face. We will learn later that he implicates the assailed veteran, as well, but the point is that the author refuses stable ground with its implicit assumptions and biases from the beginning. However, as the chapter draws to a close, the free indirect discourse of Dahlia opens the door for possible understanding, maybe even empathy: “who decides things? Who makes choices? You go do a thing, you commit to things, then something happens. Sometimes you just do things. Sometimes things just happen” (34). These words bear the weight of hidden prophecy as in the final moments of the text the trauma that Aaron was subjected to (though not directly; his trauma is also a trauma of transmission) is transmitted to Dahlia in a horrific act of violence and control. Despite the weight that hangs above these opening moments of the novel, these small moments of acting-out by Aaron—not limited to a pervasive pessimism and kicking Mel’s dog, Xena—offer up Scranton’s purpose as microcosm. Acting-out is central to *War Porn* and that double-edged blade cuts through the text throughout.

In an interview, Scranton writes the he “wanted to bring the reader in through Dahlia’s perspective because she’s one of the more relatable characters in the book”

(Plum). And while this serves as an entrance to the novel, it is more important that the weight of the novel's fallout lands on Dahlia, as well. If she is intended to be aligned to the reader for her relatability, the damage done to her at the novel's end is then intended for the reader, too. The chaos that Dahlia's thoughts imply at the close of the first section of *War Porn* will become essential to understanding not only the events of the novel but its existence *as* a novel, and more importantly, as an expression of acting-out that causes damage to its readers (and can potentially traumatize them) even as it attempts to teach them something.

Spectacle:

In *War Porn*, Scranton makes use of war's storehouse of images—truisms—that, if left alone, remain cliché. These images are often presented ambivalently, much like Scranton's ends in acting-out within the novel, but this acting-out is precisely why I argue the novel should be avoided as a productive trauma narrative. Though the push-pull that the author engages in with the reader is intended to complicate the reader's relationship with the spectacle they are confronted with, this spectacle ultimately works as detriment. One image, early in the "your leader will control your fire" section, presents a standard image of death but one that walks the razor's edge of gratuity: "A dead Iraqi grinned where fire had burned away his face, leaving yellowed teeth in a black ring, eye sockets smears of shadowed flesh" (48). A description of death, an inside look into the effects of war, can readily be classified as war porn in its invitation to the reader to view something taboo, to see something outside the realm of normal experience. However, Scranton complicates this somewhat. He deliberately

invokes war porn with his novel of the same name, but he does so in a manner that is not always gratuitous. In this instance, the description of death is aesthetic, divorced from a reader's reality for its unwillingness to adhere to strict verisimilitude. This, then, constitutes a resistance to war porn, to spectacle more broadly through a moment of defamiliarizing an image (despite a general reader's lack of experience with exposed human skulls in reality, its existence is not something entirely foreign). The horror of a person immolated in flame is traumatic in its witnessing, but Scranton's image of the aftermath presents itself as neutered, as a critique of war without its slaver impulse to carnage. For comparison, recall Chris Kyle's loving description of his array of war weapons or detailed recollection of torture chambers. Moments such as these in *American Sniper* are used to further an ideological point about the necessity of war or its justice—a belabored hammering into the reader—but Scranton presents the image as background, as texture for his larger project, and though the image is noted (through the act of calling attention to it in describing it), it is not remarked upon.

Scranton's image is also reminiscent of Tim O'Brien's description of the "star-shaped hole" in "The Man I Killed" within *The Things They Carried*⁴³ in its defamiliarization: "His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole" (118). Interestingly, O'Brien

⁴³ Of the connection between contemporary war writing and previous generations, Scranton writes, "The biggest difference between war literature today and post-Vietnam or post-World War II war literature is simply the fact that today comes after yesterday" (Ganiard). Or more simply, they are the of a kind and within a continuity. Implicitly, we can see Scranton as seeing himself in that tradition of literature—his ends, however, may diverge from the exploration (and perhaps healing) of O'Brien and align more with what Larry Heinemann is doing in *Paco's Story* (to be discussed at the end of this chapter).

has admitted that the image is not factually accurate, that he did not see such a hole, but the image's enunciation as fiction creates a more powerful effect. The same can be argued for Scranton's skull. It is a de-realized image, but its power is in its aesthetic foreignness. The terrible truth of what the skull represents (the sudden loss of life) is secondary to its meaning as an image. If Scranton had chosen to show the death of the Iraqi, to force the reader to witness the conversion from life to skull, there would be no escaping the reality of the event, but by placing a skull in the landscape of the story, an image—as opposed to that reality—is allowed to emerge.

It is also the context that allows both O'Brien's star-shaped hole and Scranton's skull to resist the definition of war porn. O'Brien's story focuses on remorse and regret at loss of life—it does not allow its reader to take comfort in its pages—and Scranton's image, appearing in one of the Wilson sections, “your leader will control your fire,” allows the pointlessness of war to take on a new edge as we rove, seemingly-aimlessly, alongside Wilson.⁴⁴ The image is used as setting, a setting that makes clear the desolation of war with its “bruised and blackening sky” and “coils of wire bloom[ing] along the highway” (48). Both authors impart something beyond spectacle with moments like these, but it is always possible for the reader to miss the forest for the trees. And yet, Scranton accounts for this when he says that, “The truth of war is always multiple” (Plum). A mistaken reading—one that misses author

⁴⁴ In my comparison of *Things* and Scranton's novel, I would be remiss if I did not give Scranton room to voice his writing opposite O'Brien: “The ‘war novel’ genre in America today is typically some version of a quest narrative. A young man goes to war with whatever vision or ideals he has and then finds out war is hell and when he comes back there is typically a moment of redemption or recuperation . . . This can be done in a complicated, aesthetically interesting, and beautiful way like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. This is the canonical work in this narrative and working against it was one of the key motivations I had in writing *War Porn*” (London). And while Scranton admits to be writing against O'Brien, his work is still dependent upon it.

intent—is still a valid reading, but in the case of *War Porn* (and war writing, more broadly, perhaps), such a reading brings with it an added danger of propagating spectacle.

In an interview with Hilary Plum, Scranton speaks to the difficulty of war writing as a genre, as something that is seen as sometimes reifying but other times calcifying:

As for the central question of ‘war porn’, of war as spectacle and of war as narrative, it was very important to me in writing this book to not just offer another soldier story . . . I wanted to show that story in a context, in a frame that breaks its implicit claim to authenticity.

In the same response, Scranton brings up O’Brien’s *Things* as understood as “a kind of ultimate authenticity” that elides O’Brien’s own, intended “critique of narrative.”

Scranton continues to say that, “Existence exceeds our ability to put it into language” and that it is not war alone—with all its trauma—that fails to be captured. For Scranton, that is why fiction exists, to tell its multiple truths and hold them up for inspection.⁴⁵ For war writing specifically, Scranton intends that we make the contradictions plain to the reader rather than obfuscated and deferred.

The idea that something as simple as an image of a skull can, first, contain multiple conflicting truths about war, and second, allow us to engage in dialogue that circumvents acting-out on a collective level, is fascinating. By sharing an

⁴⁵ Scranton describes his own drive to write fiction as “a way of surviving, a way of holding the world at a distance and, as with any art, translating it into terms over which I felt I had some control” (Plum). In this, he points to the power of fiction to aid its author in working-through the otherwise obstinate issues in their life. However, I argue that despite his seeming efforts to make sense of the world, *War Porn* itself becomes an acting-out and a danger of transmission for its reader.

understanding of the representation, we can deny spectacle its chance to take root in the reader (or viewer) and thereby become propagated in future media catering to the audience that *expects* that spectacle. It is in no way accidental that Scranton employs the language of trauma in his discussion of the multiple truths of fiction more broadly and war writing specifically. With his novel, the reader is always asked to hold up multiple, and sometimes conflicting, truths for inspection—for introspection—but it is a task that we may fail at. The skull, and the setting that surrounds it, point to the depravity of war, but they also point out the very allure of that depravity, to see and know the extraordinary (in the literal sense) experience vicariously. The two edges of the proverbial sword manifest in the image and question the reader's motivation in reading such a story. In this, we should take Scranton at his word that the novel intends a kind of working-through rather than an acting-out, however, as we will see in the novel's horrific climax, just because we are asked to scrutinize war in hopes of working-through, we are not immune to a transmission of trauma that stems from acting-out.

In an italicized section of the Wilson tryptic, Scranton gives a dreamlike account of soldiers entering the warzone through the air that constitutes another image, this one beholden to the past and a tradition of violence:

Dreaming Valkyrie wings: we'd be FNGs at first but locket-split start wasting hooches and fragging LTs, di-di-mauing back to the LZ, dropping bloopers into rice paddies, riding Hueys into the Shit, hog on our hips. We'd have hearts and minds sharpied on steelpot covers, tattoo our days down till we're short,

wear out shit all fucked up and say, “Fuck the regs, man, this is Indian Country. (54; italics removed throughout)

As “lifelong connoisseurs of hallucinatory violence,” Scranton’s characters are already embroiled in war, but it is another thing entirely to become a part of it in an active and *knowing* sense. The language of these dreams of war is explicitly that of Vietnam and the American war that gave rise to so much war writing of the last several decades.

The next paragraph continues, “We were the camera, we were the audience, we were the actors and film and screen: cowboys and killer angels, the lost patrol, the cavalry charge, America’s proud and bloody soldier boys” (54-55). The focus shifts from pure reference to totalizing narrative. The italicized speaker, most likely Wilson at his most privately poetic, chronicles the emergence of boys grown on war as warriors, those who fight war. They are both audience and actor, the replication of system, one that is inextricably bound up in that of trauma. Here, Scranton is calling out spectacle and war porn as a motivator, a lure that invites young men (typically) to take part in the tradition of their fathers and grandfathers, and in this calling-out we have the ambivalence of Scranton’s novel that simultaneously plays against and into the tropes of war and their own transmissions of trauma through the onus of military service, specifically of war-time military service.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This is recognizable in Piers Platt’s Epilogue of his *Combat and Other Shenanigans*: “I’m almost ashamed of my time in Iraq, compared to the experience of other veterans in history—it wasn’t like the accounts I have read of Vietnam, or World War II, it wasn’t epic or particularly life-changing or at all typical of the wars I had studied” (168). Comparison to his military forefathers leaves him being found lacking, but Platt fails to recognize the fact that despite the enormity of these previous wars, their experiences were not dissimilar to Iraq and Afghanistan. What Platt reacts to is his own reception of an *account* of wartime experience, leaving much room for modulation in portrayal—or, to put a finer point on it, the propensity for war porn to command the account. Platt, and the other soldiers of his generation, have inherited this “duty” to go to war like those before them, but in that inheritance is the possibility for trauma.

The Wilson sections, “your leader will control your fire,” continue to hammer the reader with stereotypical—and unquestionably true—images of war that represent the bulk of Scranton’s small moments of acting-out. Within the tryptic of the novel, it is Wilson deployed and transitioning between the battlefield and home that we find trauma’s symptoms (and much of the allusion to war writers of previous generations). These sections are the most war writing-like, an oftentimes stagnant genre that caters to audience expectation in an almost prescribed fashion for its fixity across time.⁴⁷ However, that is why Scranton builds-in his “strange hells” and “the fall,” he wants to make the war novel into something aberrant, something that defies expectation as much as it plays into them.

One of these small moments behind the eyes of Wilson speaks to the traumatic symptom of depersonalization: “After the shocks of Basic Training and moving overseas, months of pure action, I began to see myself again and wonder who was this strange and stronger man in camouflage” (75; italics removed throughout). Interestingly, it is not only that Wilson (or Scranton writing through Wilson, which we have good reason to believe might be the case as many of the “Wilson sections . . . are drawn from [Scranton’s] own time in Iraq” [Plum]) sees himself as changed after his wartime experiences, but that he has not *seen* himself throughout that time. We can’t take this literally, of course, though mirrors would be somewhat rarer on deployment

⁴⁷ Scranton writes that the “Wilson sections . . . are in this ‘authentic’ war-writing style, vivid, laconic, metonymic, with occasional flights into lyricism, which is the dominate style of writing in American war literature going back through O’Brien and Herr and Hemingway, even Crane” (Plum). They are war literature at its most recognizable and those sections are also most susceptible to spectacle due to our expectations as readers of war writing.

than in the domestic spaces of the home. Instead, we are meant to see this lack of seeing as a loss of self and introspection.

In moments of “pure action,” there is little time to think, much less time to think about the self and one’s place in a war. However, this loss of sense in the midst of war—only to bubble back to the surface a stranger after deployment—is consistent with trauma theory and traumatization. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, one of the consistent markers of trauma is the loss of self. Van der Kolk employs this fact as a means to advocate for bodily recognition after traumatization, but in Scranton’s diary-like Wilson asides, it is to communicate a familiarity with trauma—in the writer as much as in the character and narrator. And while only a traumatic symptom itself, a marker for a character’s wretched path into and through trauma, moments such as these add up to an acting-out by Scranton’s knowingly rendition of them—these symptoms are deliberate, and we know that even if Scranton were ignorant of trauma theory itself, he is widely read in the tradition of war writing, where the plight and suffering of soldiers has been magnified for generations.

Only a few pages later, Wilson again showcases the slow boiling that trauma engenders: “Later the heat and stink of the day, the yelling faces, rancor, noise, and fury broiling and thrumming in waves off the blacktop would make me both want and fear needing a reason to pull my trigger, to feel my grip buck in my hands, to tear jagged red holes in men’s flesh” (78). In another of his Wilson sections, Scranton depicts the stressors of combat and how situation dominates one’s available responses. In a warzone, the options boil down to fight, flight, or collapse, as described by van der Kolk (85). The “want and fear” for “needing a reason” to pull the trigger

represents the animalistic response to heightened stress, a lashing-out to combat the encroachment of a harsh reality. Choices that would be available to anyone outside of a combat deployment narrow to brutalistic reactions, reactions that often come at the cost of life:

This wasn't who I was, who I was meant to be. I was *sensitive*. I'd been a *poet*.
The solution seemed obvious: if I just shot a hadji, it'd all be okay. If I just killed one hadji, anyone, someone, then all the black bile, hatred, and fear would flow out of me like blood and water pouring from the wounds of Christ. I'd be transformed, transfigured. Please Jesus, I prayed, let me fucking kill somebody. (118)

In a horror of a scene, Scranton again reveals the pent-up rage that a warzone creates. The purgative release that Wilson seeks in a twisted rendition of the death drive is a result of trauma—or at least its precursor—in the stress and anxiety of war that demands action and can't stand inaction. The yearning for violence, for death, in this case is also a threshold event of knowing, of truly experiencing war and hoping (mistakenly) for authenticity in its results.

Wilson engages in a variety of fantasies, methods of escape that are reminiscent of his Vietnam War-writing forefathers. In one such fantasy, Wilson imagines going AWOL, sinking into the terrain of Iraq, somewhere where he could “learn to breathe again” (99), something that may also be seen as an implicit reference to another of O'Brien's novels, *Going After Cacciato*, a magical-realist take on going AWOL and escaping from war. In moments like these, Scranton is illustrating the claustrophobic nature of war, the always-on stress, and constant wear of readiness.

These fantasies are offset by litanies of the consequences of continuing wartime experience, of the deterioration of a mind and body. The narrator notes that, “A guy in Bravo Battery named Pizza had started walking around naked.” The event is noted as odd, but when “he got up one afternoon and pissed all over the floor, he was put on suicide watch.” That same soldier, thinks Wilson, “screamed in the night, eerie piercing howls of terror” (106). From there, the list of symptoms increases its pace, looking to rattle off a quick collection; “Villaquerrero punched some dude from Alpha, got his rank taken away, and was tasked to DIVARTY. Bullwinkle crashed a hemmet into the compound’s main gate, tearing open a fuel tank and spilling gas everywhere. Lieutenant Krauss had started talking to himself” (106). What initially seems like an isolated event of someone not being able to hack it, becomes an encompassing situation, one that totalizes the soldiers’ experience post-trauma.

One thing that characterizes Wilson’s wartime experience is a sense of loss—not in the tragic sense, but that of *being* lost. Many scenes show Wilson driving around at the behest of superior officers, almost aimlessly, reminiscent of O’Brien’s “Speaking of Courage” in which Norman Bowker drives in circles around the lake, trapped in thoughts of his war past. But for Wilson, war is the present, and the seemingly-destination-less driving adds to the void of trauma.

After “the fall,” the reader returns to the first-person perspective of Wilson returned home. Here, we find all the markers of trauma, of the difficulty of homecoming in the “berms, palm trees, and sand” that surround him. The setting seems “not just familiar but comforting. Normal.” However, that familiarity and comfort in shared images dissolves, into the need for the stress that has become graven

on the mind: “I wanted to scan rooftops. I wanted shots fired. I wanted ninja women in abayas, hadjis in man-dresses. I wanted to hear and talk salaam a-leykum, ishta, uskut. I wanted my rifle” (236).

This string of remembrances, each viewed with nostalgia no matter their content, begins as Wilson descends in a plane on the way back home. But home has become foreign, a place without the iron rules of war which become a sense of normality onto themselves. Driving home, he scans “overpasses for snipers and watched the shoulder for IEDs. I kept reaching back for my rifle, startled that I’d lost it, and eyeballed cars passing on 205, feeling spooked, thinking I need a drink, I need a smoke, how the fuck long do I have to do this alone?” (236). We see Wilson trapped in a routine that no longer exists for him, his brain unable to turn off the checklist of procedures one must tick off in order to survive. At the end of the description, we find the impetus for self-medication, the dulling and numbing agents of alcohol and the rush of nicotine, replacements for combat adrenaline and attempts to refuse engagement with his trauma.

When Wilson returns to his unit, he notes an outsider perspective gifted to him by his time away, seeing “our frustrated rage, our barely checked aggression, our loneliness, our desperation, and for the first time ever, I could see it without belonging to it. If I can just hang on to this, I thought, I’ll get through. Everything’ll be fine.” The brief outsider perspective turns out not to be unique, as Wilson brings it up to a fellow soldier: “Later I talked to Bullwinkle and he said yeah, that lasts about three days” (239). After feeling the deep absence of separation, Wilson returns as a momentary outsider, able to see the loss and pain etched into his fellow soldiers’ eyes.

But it is fleeting. Soon, he will return fully to the fold and see the trajectory of the combat soldier as normalized.

In one of the final sections of “your leader will control your fire,” the reader falls into an italicized reverie that can only be Wilson’s, the poet-turned-soldier. Chronologically, the section occurs before his deployment, but it reads as post-traumatic, as someone already traumatized and expressing symptoms of that traumatic experience. Wilson speaks to an aimlessness, which he calls “no point to [his] story” (276), and a circle of friends “shifting, turning seedier, more addiction-prone, less aware of their own lives as a series of choices they’d made” (277). These thoughts, coupled with a sense of existential futility (“What was the point of thinking things? Writing them down? Nobody read, nobody cared—no one needed the navel-gazing mystifications of yet another confused and sensitive young soul” [278]), marks Wilson’s path into the military.

What Scranton is pointing to in this section is the cycle that brings young people to war again and again, an absence that is felt as a loss that can only be filled in the “authenticity” that war brings. Of everything in the novel, this feels like the strongest anti-war appeal, an appeal that questions our motivations for entering a war rather than the effects of having gone to war. The distinction is none-too-subtle as Scranton himself discusses at length in his essay, where our reverence of the trauma hero is called into question for its privileging of that experience over others. As noted, these small moments of trauma and traumatic symptoms are markers for the novel’s acting-out—not on their own, but as an accumulation of knowing representations of trauma, its effects, and those who suffer from it. Wilson and the “your leader will

control your fire” sections constitute our most straight-forward and easily-accessible (for American readers of war writing) announcements of trauma, they fit the traditional narrative, but Scranton is writing to subvert that standard story arc. While he gives us the relatively uncomplicated trauma hero (minus recovery) in Wilson, he further complicates our relationship to that age-old war story with “the fall” and final “strange hells.”

“the fall” and War’s Consequences:

Scranton’s section, “the fall,” can be read as a novella on its own, but its story of Qasim, the PhD candidate in Mathematics, and those around him in Baghdad, humanize the people of Iraq in a way that is almost entirely absent from American war writing. It is also another dagger in the heart of the novel’s climax as we learn that Qasim has been tortured—likely to death—in the presence and also at the hands of Aaron for no reason other than his (mistaken) suspicion as an informer for the insurgency. “the fall” becomes integral to *War Porn* as a whole, not only for its connection to Aaron and his own trauma (both received and perpetrated) that ultimately proves Scranton’s work to be a dedicated acting-out that ends in erasure, but for its attempt to move outside the bounds of traditional plot in the genre of war writing.⁴⁸ The story of “the fall” and Qasim operates as a counter to the solipsism of the Wilson sections in “your leader will control your fire.” Where Wilson is rigidly

⁴⁸ Recently, there have been many further examples of war literature going to the Other, from Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya’s *The Watch* to Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen*. Such novels should be valued for their attempts to incorporate perspectives outside the hegemonic West, for their inclusion (that does not amount to mere tokenism) of voices of the people whose country is suddenly awash with American military might.

internal (very little of his commentary about his experience is externalized—he is a man of few, brief words but oftentimes a wealth of thought), and where his positioning as a trauma hero in the making allows an immediate recognition in the reader of war writing, the plight of Qasim and “the fall” is focused on community and communal trials. Qasim’s indecision of returning home to his wife amidst the onrushing American invasion is not a problem that rests within Qasim alone. He struggles through his decision with the people who surround him, just as the trauma of war pervades him and his fellow countrymen. Qasim’s position as not a soldier but an academic further intimates the departure from the standard, specifically-American war story where wars are being contended with by more than just soldiers—for one of the first times, we are asked to see outside the “traditional” confines of war.

Qasim’s Struggle:

Immediately within “the fall,” Qasim is confronted by an ultimatum; like Agamemnon in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, he becomes a tragic hero rather than a traumatic one. The mathematics candidate is caught between staying in order to retain his post—and ultimately finish his education—and returning home to Baqubah, where his wife and mother wait for him amidst the impending American invasion.

Scranton employs free indirect discourse within the third-person perspective of “the fall,” closing the gap between the reader and protagonist, Qasim, in order to reveal the central issue in the character’s life. Most often, this free indirect discourse occurs when Qasim is forced to consider the impossible problem between the wills of different elements of his family: “And now? Give up everything after working so

hard...or stay here, cut off from Lateefah and mother, while..." (136). Qasim works himself into a defense of staying, but only a paragraph later, he flips to a justification of returning home: "Maybe going back would give us another chance. You don't have to be a mathematician. Take some job in the Ministry of Water, teach high school geometry. It won't make up for . . . but maybe Lateefah—maybe she and I . . ." (136). Both passages humanize Qasim to the reader, the automatic Other given interiority through irregular third-person and free indirect discourse, but it is only through continued acknowledgement of Qasim's plight specifically, and his country's plight more generally, that the reader can come to fully understand his humanity.⁴⁹ Not only does it make good dramatic sense for the protagonist to experience obstacles in their story, but the realistic representation of a man struggling through an impending war creates a connection to the reader—though many of us have never had to deal with situations similar to the one Qasim finds himself in, we empathize with seemingly-intractable problems, the difference in scale mattering less to identification than understanding.

It is a little later that readers are given to understand why Qasim's predicament is that of a tragic hero's. We learn that Qasim's father, Faruq, wanted him to become a mathematician, his resolve for that future for his son clarified in the sacrifice made for that dream. "Money was put aside, crucial favors were done for certain well-placed officials" (143). However, war makes an appearance here, as well: "Then came the war with Kuwait. Faruq got Qasim a draft deferment . . . The peace, though, turned out

⁴⁹ "Is that what you're doing now, Qasim, going home? Yes. No. Yes. Maybe" (140).

to be almost as bad as the war” (143). Not only has Qasim’s father made sacrifices under ordinary circumstances, his effort becomes monumental in the advent of war. And yet, “Faruq found a way, somehow, scraping together enough hard cash and finessing enough shady deals to send Qasim to Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh” (144). Faruq persist through it all—up until he wasted away from cancer. Qasim returns home, unable to return to school because “there was no money left for anything” (145). Despite that, Faruq begs a promise from his son: “finish your schooling. The machines beeped and hissed. Faruq’s dry, fleshless fingers burned in Qasim’s palm. I promise, Father. I promise” (145). Qasim’s current struggle, to stay or return, is now not as simple as filial duty, it is locked between a duty to protect his wife and mother as the deadline for the American invasion approaches and the final promise he made to his father—a promise that would be impossible to keep if he chose to leave after so many strings had been pulled for him up to this point.

Opposing the promise to his dead father (and all the resources that had been committed to that promise), are the basic dangers implicit to the civilian population in war. At every turn, Qasim is berated by his aunt, shamed by his uncle, met with silence by his wife, and ridiculed by his mother: “Ridiculous boy who thinks he can tell his mother about his great responsibilities. Little boy who can’t even take care of his wife, who isn’t even a father, who leaves his family to be murdered by the infidel” (145). Placed under an impossible burden, he cannot fail to disappoint.

Later, Salman, a man with his own traumatic past, informs on Qasim out of fear (which ultimately turns out to be unnecessary, something that Salman notes and

feels little about),⁵⁰ and it is this act that finally forces Qasim's decision to leave Baghdad and return home—it is also what eventually lands him in the hands of Aaron as Qasim is picked-up by American forces and interrogated for the dubious connection Salman labeled him with.

The direct conflict of “the fall” is Qasim's indecision about his future—something he, of course, can't be blamed for—while the American invasion commences. The effect of Scranton's empathetic rendition of a civilian caught in a burgeoning war is the closest to approaching the Other that we have seen yet, but the ultimate dissolution of Qasim is just another incredible prong of the novel's forceful and deliberate acting-out.

As Qasim struggles to begin a nearly-empty class, he experiences a moment of intrusion after a student asks a question: “He stopped, watching Amr's face twitch, his shoulder's shudder, and his chest explode, spewing bits of bone and gore all over his classmates” (149). The intrusion, a vision of the violence of the war to come is born of Qasim's own past experience as he “remembered the last war, the trucks and tanks full of smoking corpses” (150). We can see this as true traumatization; unlike American civilians, who have never known war on their shores, Qasim, and his fellow people of Iraq, have experienced repeated war. The unknown that is a part of every expectation of war is undercut by past experience: “It felt as if the city had curled in on itself, waiting, afraid . . . It was as if the calendar went up to the deadline and stopped: everything after, blank” (158). Qasim's thought continues, however, “Except it won't

⁵⁰ “He'd needlessly used up his ‘suspicions’ about that weed al-Zabadi, but that was fine. There would always be another Qasim” (168).

be blank. It'll be terror and death and fire from the sky. It'll be like before, with power outages and burst water mains and no food and police crackdowns" (158). Despite Qasim's status as a tragic hero (something we tend to think of as exceptional), he stands in as a typical civilian; one who has intractable or impossible struggles in the face of war. His experience with war as one who does not fight it is to be taken as more or less similar to others. What this means is that much of the civilian population is traumatized, that there is no escape from the fallout of war that is fought on your doorstep—a far cry from American experience and another moment of recognition in the plight of the Other.

In this light, "the fall" can be seen as instrumental to American trauma—as being defined by its opposition to the Self—but it can be more than that: Scranton speaks of Qasim's part as attempting to participate in the "tradition of the postcolonial novel, world novel, or novel in translation" (Plum), and here Scranton is imagining an approach to the Other, a going-to that seeks to represent rather than exclude or minimize—the fact that Qasim is minimized by the novel's end can be not an indictment of *War Porn* but of war porn, of American spectacle of war that seeks authenticity in those like the self and in the deadly knowledge of combat and war.

Repeated War, Repeated Trauma:

In moments in which Scranton imagines the trauma of the Other, he allows for a modicum of empathy that may itself be a path forward in trauma recovery—not a self-centered focus on what one did, or what was done, but an accounting of the suffering of others in a perspective-shifting approach. While Qasim's arc ends

ultimately in the narrator's acting-out, the glimpses into the lives of others often reveals empathic acknowledgement, something that humanizes America's enemies and provides a path for mutual understanding and atonement.

Another perspective in "the fall" belongs to a blind old man whose name we never learn and whose story we only catch glimpses of. The man is "very old and very frail, and where his eyes should have been were two pale and clotted scars" (140) and catalogues life in his journal, writing "with great care words he would never see and only briefly know, the same words or different, the one song in many verses" (141). The character refers to this song throughout the section that first introduces him, but the reader is blind to its contents as he is. However, we do learn that the old man has also lost the ability to speak when he remembers "how many years ago, in a dark and stinking hole he could only barely now envision, a cold blade had been forced between his teeth and his mouth had filled with blood" (141). That damage, alongside his missing eyes, intimates trauma and that trauma almost certainly stems from war. Whether it is from the previous American war or the war with Iran, the reader never learns, but it is the old man's experience with war and trauma that gives a hint to his fleeting song that is written again and again in the journal, overlapping.

A thought of the man's is revealed to the reader, again in that free indirect discourse that Scranton makes much use of: "When a wound is tired of crying, it will begin to sing" (140). That thought, and its reference to song, connects his trauma (and a version of Caruth's speaking wound) to the words he continually writes in his journal. There is optimism to be found in the line, but it comes at the end of horrible suffering and the distance that time often brings. It also speaks to cycles, cycles of war

with the reoccurrence of American military intervention and the cycles of trauma that follow along with that, but it also speaks to the cycle of the song itself, infinitely repeated and rewritten, overlapping on itself, and only readable by the fleeting impression it makes on the page. To a sighted reader, the journal of the song would appear to be a mass of black writing, illegible and unintelligible. This realization gives the old man's situation a note of pointlessness and pessimism. If this old man writes of his pain—tries to convert it into song, something creative—only to have it seen by others as insanity, what hope do contemporary sufferers of trauma have?

It is in the second section in which the blind, old man appears, that cycles are clarified for the reader: "Trouble had come again, as it had before and before and before" (222). We learn that the man was in fact a soldier, carrying with him all the memories and horror of that experience: "He remembered the British biplanes of his youth, when he'd first joined the army, the way you could hear the click of the bombs releasing—poisonous gray eggs tumbling into the Kurdish lines" (222). Scranton interjects in his own novel with this old man's narrative because it shows the blanketing of trauma in war, the indiscriminate meting out of suffering and death: "There was so much to remember, so much to recall. So much to see and know and feel, so many dead to hold on to. So many dead. Even one life was too full. Even one life was so long and bloody, he could hardly bear it" (222-223). The unknown man reminds the reader that death is always a tragedy and that it should never be collateral damage. All of this, the war, the cycles, the suffering, is what prompts the old man to write: "But that's what the poem was for" (223). "They would blind me," he continues

a little later, “but I see the truth. I see the truth and I write the truth, and our truth shall outlive theirs” (224).

The old man becomes a representative for both the repetition of war but also for the possibility for freedom after war’s grasp has been loosened. The old man illustrates the effects of war and the traumas it bears, the cycle of violence that it perpetuates, but also the capacity for humanity to survive and commit itself to making more of life than death. And while he appears only briefly at two points within “the fall,” the old man offers one of Scranton’s most beautiful and optimistic arguments: there can be life after war, no matter how crippled or blind, and this sentiment can be seen as an attempt to work-through.

Another refrain of “the fall” also comes in the form of soldiers recollecting their wars. Othman and Ratib, a relative of Qasim and his uncle’s friend, drink through the initial American bombings of Baghdad while Ratib relates the horrors of the past war: “I helped dig people out of the rubble. After every raid, as soon as the explosions finished, we went down to the mosque . . . Then we’d go dig. It was awful” (196-197). In another moment:

“I can’t believe it’s happening again.”

“I was in the south last time.”

“You could feel it. The air would hum and you could feel it in the back of your neck. You could feel them coming.”

“It was fast in the south. Everything was fast. You’d be sitting there for hours, bored out of your mind, and all at once the earth would explode.

There’d be a whistling, you wouldn’t hear it until later, after the explosion

you'd remember—I *heard whistling*. But before, nothing. They hit us with jets and artillery. Those rockets they shoot.” (196)⁵¹

It is in these moments that a reader is truly forced to confront spectacle and their part of the desirous cycle that demands violence in its media to satiate a kind of knowing that excludes the consequences regarding others. Descriptions like this chastise the reader for failing to think of the Other, to empathize.

Later, Othman alone imagines the trajectory of the Americans who will enact the bombing of his city from the Al Jazeera description of American B-52s taking off from Britain. Othman conjures images of “American pilots flying those enormous silver machines” (205) wearing “shiny helmets and black masks, like insectoid machine-men,” inside no more than “pale and blonde” pilots. In Othman’s imagination, they would spout action-movie lines like “Roger” and “I need a vector on that approach.” From there, he begins to build the world around these theoretical men on their mission: “They’d walk out to their planes and high-five each other, saying ‘Got one fer Saddam!’ and ‘Kiss my grits!’” (206). Finally, Othman focuses on the action of the bombing, to movement toward and away that emphasizes the bizarre distinction between their worlds:

Then they’d put on their helmets and masks and fly over the English Channel and Paris and the Alps and Bosnia and Turkey and push buttons on their control panels and hundreds of bombs would fall from their machines onto his city. The earth would shake, buildings crumble, men die engulfed in storms of

⁵¹ In yet another moment: “There wasn’t any rubble in the south. Just wrecked tracks and bodies. Men’s helmets burned onto their heads because of the webbing inside and the coating, the laminate on the inside of the helmet. It just melted onto their skin” (197).

white-hot metal, children and women screaming, blood bubbling on blistering lips, and the pilots would high-five, saying, “How do you like them apples?” Relaxing now, they’d turn their big silver planes and fly back over Turkey and Bosnia and the Alps and Paris and the English Channel, all the way back to their wives and girlfriends, who’d kiss them on the runway and say, “Bet you showed them what for!” Then they’d drive to fancy restaurants in sports cars, wearing tuxedos, and eat steak and drink Johnny Walker Black. (205-206)

The extended paragraph is one of conflicting realities: We begin with the certainties of war’s procedure, the dehumanizing machines and insect-like helmets that obscure identity. However, in-between the harsh reality of war is the imagined reality of these pilots’ lives with their wives and girlfriends, sports cars and tuxedos, and out-of-touch phrases. This reality is supplied by Hollywood. Throughout the night, while imagining the impending storm of destruction, Othman watches movies like *Air Force One*, thinking of Harrison Ford and other macho celebrities who stand in for unmet American soldiers. And even though Othman is largely wrong about how he imagines the Americans to be, he is making an attempt to understand the world that these people come from, even while they come to destroy his world.

And if Othman is mistaken about who the American soldiers are, he is not wrong about the chaos that they have caused and will soon again. These “storms of white-hot metal” are very real and they are something that Othman has had to face in the past. As he sits through the opening notes of another war, he no longer imagines the devastation and instead remembers it from his own past:

Great silver jets against the sky and the hundreds of bombs they carried, each one death for someone. He remembered the last war, the ground leaping beneath his feet, the dead. A child's arm poking from the rubble, smooth, purple-gray skin sticky with half-dried blood. The man with the shrapnel in his belly, howling all night—how could he have so much life left in him to keep screaming so loud for so long? (208-209)

The images related in the description are fragments, disconnected shards that recall trauma in their unbidden return and slideshow-like nature. These fragments, and how they appear as an invasion to Othman's conscious thought (the jets and their payloads), fit perfectly the description of traumatic intrusion. Othman does not mean to conjure up the images from the past war, they arrive as an echo to his deliberate thoughts. However, the inclusion of these intrusive images portend what will certainly happen again, and in this the reader finds yet another cycle of trauma perpetuated. Further descriptions follow these thoughts, but now they are mixed with the threat of prophecy for "the tanks will come too" (209).

Othman "remembers a tank clanking down a city street, its malevolent cannon swinging side to side . . . its gaping death-eye searching for something to annihilate" (209). The remembered tank finds its target in a "gang of children" but there the memory ends and Othman is forced to ask himself, "Was it even a memory, something he saw on Al Jazeera or in *Saving Private Ryan*, or was it something he just made up?" (209). Othman's line of questioning strikes home to the ways in which we don't feel that we have ownership of traumatic memories—they are intrusions and unbidden squatters. Othman's questioning also brings to mind the totalizing effect that violence

has on our world, how each war feels like another, how each war *is* in fact a remnant of another. A few pages later, when Othman remembers that the tank and the children were not part of a memory that he experienced but instead a news report on the Israeli-Palestinian War, the memory is no less real and forceful. In fact, the conflation of personal memory of one war with another, impersonal war illustrates just how imbricated we are in the violent goings-on of the world, a social condition of trauma.

Beginning with Othman, the reader sees through the eyes of each member of the household, watching sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, and friends contend with the bombings that have made their lives into nightmares.⁵² Though these people are largely to remain safe during the incessant raids (minus Qasim, who will leave and ultimately be captured and tortured), the reader is still shown the ruin that occurs outside: “Day and night, bombs crashed into Baghdad. You watched it on TV, you heard it on the radio, you saw it from the roof and when you ventured out into the street” (214). Out there, “soldiers and civilians, arms and legs roasting, broken by falling stone, intestines spilling onto concrete; homes and barracks, walls ripped open’ Baathists and Islamists, Communists and Social Democrats, grocers, tailors, construction workers, nurses, teachers” (214), the list affirming the uncaring nature of destruction. Othman’s shining American B-52s are placed against this list of victims, people “scurrying to hide in dim burrows, where they would wait to die” (214). And they do die, “some slowly from disease and infection, others quick in bursts of light, thickets of tumbling steel, halos of dust, crushed by the world’s greatest army” (214).

⁵² “Sleep was a fractured nightmare of the day before, cut short by another raid” (214).

Within “the fall,” death is kept on the doorstep while fear pervades all. Qasim’s relatives and their families live in uncertainty, surrounded by the eventual advent of death in what has become a warzone, but the focus remains on the state of fear and anxiety that only adds to their various personal struggles. In “the fall,” Scranton is not intent upon spectacle; passages, such as the one above, are meant to provide the necessary context for the terrible reality that lies in wait and to fully humanize the characters that we have followed throughout and have empathized with. Instead, “the fall” is intended as a powerful dissolution of the denigrating label of Other, something that on its own is a worthy effort, but in the context of *War Porn*, the section is just another world that has been—and will be again—destroyed by war. Just like the shattering of the uneasy peace of “strange hells,” Qasim’s ultimate fate at the hands of Aaron commits the novel to an overarching acting-out that seeks to damage its readers even as it tries to show them the dangers of trauma heroes and spectacle.

As the novel wends its way to its inexorable climax and conclusion, there is a brief moment of humanity when Qasim and Wilson meet in “your leader will control your fire.” The words the two speak to one another promise the possibility of healing a rift, of going to the Other that becomes the Self, a time when war does not dominate American-Iraqi relations: “You see, we can all speak together, Iraqi and American. Friends, yes?” (249). The brief moment is made more real and more poignant through the fact that we have inhabited each characters’ consciousness before now, have shared in their aspirations and fears, witnessed their pain, and most importantly, empathized with them.

This is what makes the conclusion of the novel so hard, so traumatic—the people we have come to care for will be used and discarded, Qasim in a house of torture, Dahlia in her own home, tied-up and raped by Aaron. In both cases, Aaron, the specter of trauma’s consequences and of trauma itself, is central. This is Scranton’s war porn, the spectacle of violence that looms large and unavoidable. It calls into question our very reasons for reading such a novel and it does its best to hurt us, to make us feel its hurt.

The Final “strange hells” and Transmission of Trauma:

The culmination of *War Porn* returns the reader to the civilian world of “strange hells,” however, as we have already seen at the start of the novel, that civilian world has already been infiltrated by the lingering trauma of the war that Aaron has returned from. “The thing with Aaron,” Wendy says, “I think he had a hard time in Iraq” (308). When asked what she means by that, Wendy says she doesn’t know. “He won’t talk about it. He says he just wants to put it behind him. But he’s really tense now, and I think . . . I think something happened.” Rachel asks if he has PTSD and Wendy’s response, “I don’t know how you know. He says he doesn’t” (308), is ominous.

The conversation between two of the women from the novel’s open illustrates the depth of Aaron’s wartime experience as trauma. His refusal to talk, his denial, and his state of readiness to the point of fraying, point to what he will come to know: that Aaron saw things in Iraq, participated in them, and that he was changed by them. Aaron’s expectations were shaped by a previous war, just like Wilson’s, just Platt’s

and Kyle's, and their expectations make them vulnerable to trauma's suddenness: "He thought the war would be over quick and he'd be sitting in the desert twiddling his thumbs the whole time like in that book *Jarhead*" (308). When the war turns out to be something else entirely than Aaron's imagining, that clash between expectation and experience threatens to capsize the mind.

One of the ways we know Aaron is spiraling down in his trauma is his own admission of his destruction. When Matt asks if Aaron plans to return to school in December, Aaron's response cements his dedication to inaction: "That's the story I tell people. The truth is, Matt, I'm gonna burrow like a tick in the skin of the grimeiest, nastiest Rust Belt shithole I can find and shoot heroin till I die" (296). Aaron is not looking for redemption, but the kind of self-medication that kills. This too stems from his experience, his feelings of helplessness within the military:

We didn't *decide* to do this shit. We didn't *ask* for the torture detail . . . The fact of the matter is, fucked up as it may be, most of these fucking hadjis didn't know shit. I'd say the majority of them were locked up by mistake, or at best they were grunts who didn't know their ass from al-Qaeda . . . the time for me to address that was before I fucking did it, before it got done, or at the very least while it was happening. Not afterwards. Not later. Not now . . . If it was wrong, it was wrong. But I did it. Nothing can change that. (314-315)

In what amounts to a monologue, Aaron explains to himself—through the guise of speaking to Matt—why he did what he did and what the value of his acts were.⁵³ He

⁵³ Of the torture detail itself, Aaron has a twisted view of his actions and that of his fellow soldiers:

"Did you kill him?"

"Fuck no. We just stressed him to the point where his body failed." (318)

alternates between extenuating factors and condemnations, explanations and defenses (“before I fucking did it,” compared to “before it got done” [315]⁵⁴). Aaron is pouring out his trauma, sorting through the mire of uncertainty, duty, responsibility, and exculpatory evidence.

He relates all this as he forces Matt to click through the photos Aaron took of the torture. For now, Aaron is on the periphery, but eventually, Matt comes across a photo in which Aaron is participating in the torture: “That’s the Professor. Puck named Qasim. He got picked up in a raid in Baqubah . . . We fucked that puck up” (320). The pictures continue by, fragments of trauma made manifest on the screen, and we see Aaron and Qasim, first Aaron is just standing by him, “One blue-gloved hand rest[ing] on Qasim’s shoulder and the other mak[ing] a peace sign” (321), but in another image, “Qasim’s face was pressed into the cell bars. Aaron grinned, standing behind him forcing his skull into the metal, one hand pulling the crossbar for leverage” (321). As Matt comes across the image, Aaron slips into a reverie about the power he held over our unfortunate Qasim: “It’s a weird thrill, having that much physical control over somebody, knowing what you’re doing” (322). His train of thought is disrupted when Dahlia enters, and the foreshadowing of her approaching rape at the hands of Aaron is made clear in his statements to Matt about control. And this control, it should be noted, is also an attempt to fight against the helplessness Aaron felt in his military service, a way to act-out an attempt at mastery on others.

Here, we see another excuse of responsibility, that on top of just following orders, it wasn’t the torture that killed the old man, it was his age and frailty of body.

⁵⁴ The sentence structure reveals much here. The aggressive, active tense of “before I fucking did it” is markedly different from the passive construction of later comments. Aaron oscillates between ownership and denial of responsibility.

What starts as consensual sex as Dahlia longs to break free from her torpor in her strange hell quickly becomes a rape. Dahlia consents to being tied up, and what can be an adventure in sexual intimacy and trust becomes a vehicle for Aaron's brutalization. He transgresses, touches her where she doesn't want to be touched, and the realization dawns on her that she is no longer in control of what will happen next:

"No. No. I said no"

"It's good."

"No wait a minute," she said, going cold inside. "Untie me."

His left hand slid along the line of her jaw, his finger brushing her lips. Then he clutched her face and pressed hard in her cheek where her jaw met her skull, cracking her mouth open. He swept her briefs up off the floor and crammed them in her mouth and held them there with one hand while she bucked and tried to scream. He grabbed her top with his other hand and looped it around her mouth, cinching it tight like a bit and double-knotting it at the back of her skull.

"Shush now. You know this is just what you wanted."

She felt him get up from behind her. She writhed, wailed muffled shouts, trying to get free. Over her shoulder she could see him digging in her dresser and she kicked and bounced until she was on her back facing him. He had a bunch of her tights in his hands. She tried to shout and curse through the gag—her taste—choking on spit and cotton. She tried to scream.

"Roll back over," he said, grinning, taking her by the ankles and flipping her smoothly. She kicked, shrieked into the gag, but his hands held her like

cuffs. He pulled her legs up in the air, forcing her weight onto her neck, and she howled in pain. She tried to kick back but had no leverage; he'd pinned her legs in his armpit. He secured her ankles together with a pair of tights, then dropped her to the mattress, her knees slamming to the floor, and climbed on top of her. He used another pair of tights to reinforce the gag.

He grabbed her hard by the back of the neck, forcing her nose into the comforter. She inhaled the gray fabric, trying to breathe, could feel him on her, his flesh dense and burning. "Shhhhh. It's okay now. It's okay. I saw you looking. I saw you and knew what you wanted. It's gonna be okay. Hush now," he whispered, "or I'll knock your fucking daylight out."

She was sobbing, trying to talk, trying to say no, don't, stop, please no. Trying to get free but feeling her will evacuate, weakening by the moment. He slapped her in the back of the head and told her to hush, then grabbed her neck and squeezed hard.

She went slack. Gray. Feeling herself rattle loose from herself, thinking: who's this happening to—the room going out of focus, the gray fabric blurring. Thinking: who decides things. Thinking: where's Matt, and what happened, and who is this? How? Who? What's happening and who to, yes, no. Whose body? No. Who makes choices? No. It's not me. Not mine. No. No. (332-333)

The horrific episode ends as Dahlia, now traumatized herself, dissociates and leaves her body in the wake of the rape. Aaron disappears, and judging by the grim efficiency of his rape, he has gone to do what he has done many times before. The reader has been subjected to trauma, as well—not as acute as Dahlia's or even Aaron's, but we

have become victims of a transmission of trauma that comes at Scranton's hands. It is intended to rip complacency from the reader and force them to burn whatever reverence they have left of the trauma here, but in the end, it is still trauma.

In his attempt to make a statement about the public's willingness to participate in war porn, Scranton has potentially subjected them to trauma. And what's more, Scranton would be well-aware of how this mechanism of spectacle works: war porn here becomes closer kin to porn itself, designed to attract the (heteronormative) male gaze. And while pornography as the subjection and normalization of violence against women is outside the purview of this chapter, it must be called attention to in order to reveal this scene as trading on sexual and violent power fantasy to add to its visibility. The trauma of the rape is magnified when the reader considers that it is also being used for shock value and to promote itself to the voyeuristic audiences.

In my own case, I have been traumatized by Scranton's final twist of the knife, the sharpness of it transmitted by the immolation of each character we have come to know and hope for. Qasim's end is unknown, he is dead or gone off to another torture facility; Dahlia opens her eyes to the new day, but her ability to survive her trauma is also an unknown; and Aaron, a traumatized soldier who has seen and done much, scatters to the wind without the potential for redemption or even punishment. A question remains as to the purpose of including the entirety of this section if it is indeed potential traumatizing: For the purposes of identifying acting-out in contemporary war writing, the passage needs to be fully recognized. Furthermore, its resonance as traumatizing largely depends on its context. Dahlia has been the audience surrogate throughout, her position affirmed by being the first voice and likely the most

sympathetic (until Qasim's introduction to the novel). Her end within the novel in honed to be damaging for all that it disrupts and robs her of her potential escape from the trajectory her life has taken—this is to say nothing against the brutal trauma of a rape, just to illustrate the pointedness of Scranton's conclusion.

The brutal scene of Dahlia's rape is not unknown to war writing. Decades prior, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* enacts a similar scene in order to burden the reader with the weight of the war and its many, many consequences:

And when everyone had had as many turns as he wanted (Paco fascinated by the huge red welt in the middle of her back), as many turns as he could stand, Gallagher took the girl out behind that bullshit brick-and-stucco hooch, yanking her this way and that by the whole head of her hair (later that afternoon we noticed black hairs on the back of his arm). He had a hold of her the way you'd grab some shrimpy little fucker by the throat—and he slammed her against the wall and hoisted her up until her gnarled toes barely touched the ground. But the girl didn't much fucking care, James. There was spit and snot, blood and drool and cum all over her, and she'd pissed herself. Her eyes had that dead, clammy glare to them, and she didn't seem to know what was happening anymore. Gallagher slipped his .357 Magnum out of its holster and leaned the barrel deftly against her breastbone . . . Then he put the muzzle of the pistol to her forehead, between her eyebrows. He held her up stiffly by the hair and worked his finger on it, to get a good grip . . . And in the middle of us jostling and grab-assing, Gallagher squeezed off a round. Boom. (182)

Scranton's emulation here serves the same function, but what amounts to a random act of violence in Heinemann becomes an even sharper blade in American guts in Scranton's hands. This is due to the spirals of trauma in Aaron's story: He photographs violent war crimes against Iraqi detainees, then becomes a perpetrator of that violence on Qasim; later, he transmits his trauma by showing Matt his photos, and again, after promising Dahlia a "private show" of his war porn, he rapes her. In one further ring of this trauma, the author, Roy Scranton, transmits trauma to the reader through that final, horrific scene, made much more impactful and devastating for how much these characters have been humanized throughout their narratives. Where the rape scene in *Paco's Story* is horrible, it is not necessarily positioned to be traumatic—we do not know the humanity of the victim; we, as readers, fail to empathize. This is not the case with Dahlia.

"*War Porn* isn't about harrowing the American soul as much as it is trying to understand something about what we did there" (Scranton "Poetry"). And here, Scranton and I disagree. While "the fall" certainly works to empathize with the Other, to make him identifiable as not othered, that intention dissolves when we return to "strange hells" and abandon thinking of Iraq in favor of the damage done domestically. In this sense, Scranton has fallen into the very trap that he has outlined, displacing the trauma of Iraq onto Dahlia, someone the reading public can already empathize with.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Scranton writes that, "*War Porn*'s narrative arc is really about Qasim, the Iraqi mathematician at the center of 'The Fall', which is the center of the novel" (Scranton "Poetry"), but Qasim vanishes from the novel after that mid-point, returning only as a prop to illustrate the depravity of Aaron—he becomes instrumental, which elucidates the use of the Other by the Self as much as it mimics the very actions of American Imperialism that Scranton seeks to work against.

Scranton himself speaks to the difficulty on the novel's climax in his conversation with Flynn:

The problem with 'anti-war' art is that violence is exciting. Violence is sexy. It's almost impossible to portray violence and not romanticize or aestheticize it. Even the most harrowing violence can still be cathartic: it's a release, it's a relief . . . The dramatic structure of *War Porn* . . . moves toward a moment of brutal violence, though not—I hope—a cathartic one. (Scranton "Poetry")

In achieving his mission, in portraying brutal violence as non-cathartic—but, notably, as an attempt at that very sexiness he disavows through the history of rape being used to accrue readers—Scranton potentially transmits trauma to the reader. And yet, this could be another way in which Scranton implicates his readers for their belief in the trauma hero narrative, that everyone will turn out in the end: "I wanted to fuse the generic expectations reader might have, given the dramatic structure, for some moment of redemption or truth or resolution, with a sudden, destabilizing act of violence that, in retrospect, appears totally inevitable" (Scranton "Poetry"). To put a finer point on it, Scranton writes, "We want healing and we want redemption, but sometimes they're just not possible. Sometimes the only choices you get are forgetting or understanding. I can't forget the American war in Iraq, and I don't believe we should, so the best I can do is try to understand, try to help us understand" (Scranton "Poetry"). And in this final word, Scranton illustrates the intractability of trauma and his resolution to depict that in his fiction. As far as representation goes, *War Porn* embodies trauma perfectly at times, but the cost of that is a verisimilitude that

portends transmission. The brand of understanding that Scranton offers includes trauma, to potentially *be* traumatized.

And so, the question still remains as to whether this is necessary: do we need to be traumatized in order to understand the problem of valorizing our trauma heroes; must we participate in the same kind of suffering in order to properly bear witness and work-through our trauma collectively? In short, no. Though Caruth understands all of history to be a history of trauma, and that the ways we understand history is only through an interaction with others' trauma, we do not need to willingly go into the fires of the crucible in order to burn away the caul that covers our eyes. There exist methods of working-through on the page that respects both reader and writer—these approaches will be discussed in the final chapters.

CHAPTER IV: WORKING-THROUGH IN ELLIOT ACKERMAN'S *GREEN ON BLUE* AND *FIRE AND FORGET*

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, acting-out—and its effects—can vary greatly in writerly responses to trauma. Not all acting-out is harmful, but even if it does wound the reader, sometimes that pain is the point. The difference between acting-out as a response to trauma and working-through can make all the difference in the writer's processing of their trauma. This is something noted by both Herman and LaCapra, albeit Herman's mode is resigned to a traditional therapeutic relationship. For LaCapra, we have seen the distinction between acting-out and working-through (and where that line blurs in transitional expression), but LaCapra's full definition of working-through is instructive for this chapter and my argument about the necessity of working-through as a writerly response to trauma: "Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma (as well as transferential relations in general), one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (22) The purpose of this "articulatory" practice is to allow the possibility of a future. Trauma is a trap of one's past, and working-through offers not an escape, but a path forward in life.

However optimistic it may seem, we must still understand working-through to be somewhat limited. As LaCapra puts it, "These processes of working through, including mourning and modes of critical thought and practice, involve the possibility of making distinctions or developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability,

particularly when the latter is tantamount to confusion and the obliteration or blurring of all distinctions” (22). Creating or installing limits, closing down undecidability, these allow for progress, but they do not summon forth total healing, nor do they guarantee success. Instead, they offer relief from traumatic symptoms, and perhaps, the road to recovery.

Herman also acknowledges the difficulty of working-through (and the propensity for the sufferer to engage in bad faith telling),⁵⁶ but her recovery method is steeped in truth-telling: “From the outset, the therapist should place great emphasis on the importance of truth-telling and full disclosure, since the patient is likely to have many secrets, including secrets from herself. The therapist should make clear that the truth is a goal constantly to be striven for” (148). Yet with a focus on public writing (fiction), LaCapra discards this imperative for factual truth. For him, “Truth claims are neither the only nor always the most important consideration in art and its analysis” (15). Emotional honesty, the writing’s resonance with one’s lived experience, *as it seemed*, becomes the operative register and truth-telling acts as entrance into honest engagement.

Despite differences in theory, a larger question has yet to be asked: what if the author does not intend a working-through for their own benefit? In other words, what if the author intends the working-through for their reader? This is something that one cannot avoid in a discussion of contemporary war writing, the flip side to the coin that

⁵⁶ “Patients at times insist upon plunging into graphic, detailed descriptions of their traumatic experiences, in the belief that simply pouring out the story will solve all their problems. At the root of this belief is the fantasy of a violent cathartic cure which will get rid of the trauma once and for all” (172).

presents readers with unabashed violence and cruelty. The purpose is much the same: to allow the reader to act as witness for something that will catalyze a change within themselves as a consequence of truth-telling. Not everyone has been traumatized by war; we may all be imbricated in a history of trauma,⁵⁷ but the acuteness of that resonance certainly differs. Instead of solely providing an avenue for readers to express, cope with, and encounter their own trauma, these contemporary authors also create the conditions for empathetic identification—with the author, with their characters, with the Other. Through an analysis of Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* and the short story collection, *Fire and Forget*, the potential for readerly trauma response—in addition to a writerly one—will be both forwarded and encouraged as a means to combat the trauma wrought by the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars.

Together, both of these works have something in common: the need for witnessing. As Felman, Laub, Herman, and LaCapra all argue, the role of the witness in trauma recovery is paramount: In LaCapra, this witness develops as the empathetic listener, for, “As a counterforce to numbing, empathy may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possible split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (40). It is “important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic

⁵⁷ In addition to Caruth, Herman speaks to this, as well: “Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma . . . The knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for long. Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social level as well as an individual level” (Herman 2). Though it is sublimated, the symptoms of trauma pervade the social level. And for LaCapra: “Everyone is subject to structural trauma” (79), or the ways in which society is built to exclude and privilege, oftentimes to horrible results.

effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems” (78).⁵⁸ For LaCapra, traumatic (or post-traumatic) writing has the distinct ability to generate the witness: “even in its riskier and less predictable forms, it is a *relatively* safe haven compared with actual traumatization. It may even be a means of bearing witness to, enacting, and, to some extent, working over and through trauma whether personally experienced, transmitted from intimates, or sensed in one’s larger social and cultural setting” (105). For Felman and Laub, “the emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the even comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57).⁵⁹

Historically, this witness has been positioned as a traditional therapist figure, but the opportunity of contemporary war writing is the ability for the witness to become the reader, real or imagined. In order to work-through the obstacles of trauma, one must have a witness, but not only that, one must *reach* that witness. These works do, not through the spectacle of violence, the glamour of war porn, but earnest engagement with uncertainty, pain, and sometimes, beauty.

⁵⁸ Paul Petrovic’s “Beyond Appropriation: Arab, Coptic American, and Persian Subjectivities...” will discuss the ways in which authors such as Ackerman navigate this “stylistic effect” that LaCapra speaks to.

⁵⁹ The implications for what it would mean for a listener to actually be a blank screen, and not imbued with their own thoughts, prejudices, and experiences, is somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter, but it must be acknowledged that this inscription sounds very close to a transmission of trauma.

Empathetic Witnessing in *Green on Blue*:

Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue* is a dedicated attempt to approach the Other, to empathize, even while the title itself promises a story that few Americans would want to bear witness to. Petrovic's "Beyond Appropriation" points out Ackerman's novel as one of the few that seeks to explore the Othered subjectivity of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Writers like Ackerman, he argues, "have deepened their engagement with the colonized subject, utilizing transgressive narrative strategies by placing Arab, Coptic American, and Persian narration at the forefront of their texts" and that, "This engagement with the subject position of the Other has become a fundamental aspect of US literature written by recent war veterans." It is also a fundamental necessity of working-through in both the need for witnessing and the valuation of empathy.

In the novel, the reader is asked to consider the Other, to become an empathetic witness to the war's victims in a way that has been previously closed-down.⁶⁰ The purpose does not appear to be to allow Ackerman himself to process his trauma but to create the possibility for a reader to understand—to know. This knowing, though it sounds so familiar, so close to what Scranton argues against in the perpetuation of the trauma hero, is not rooted in spectacle or privileged position but in the basic human consideration for others—for Others—for those who we do not know and would so readily slip from our minds.

⁶⁰ According to LaCapra, empathy is an important feature of working-through and will be addressed later in the chapter.

“Green on blue” itself is a phrase that denotes armed violence against American or other NATO forces perpetrated by Afghan security forces, and Ackerman’s novel depicts precisely that in its climax. Our protagonist, Aziz, murders Atal, Gazan, and the American intelligence officer, Mr. Jack, as a means of achieving *badal* (revenge in Ackerman’s text, though it is also to be understood as exchange) for his maimed brother, Ali, but also as a way for the author to express a cycle of violence propped up by the economy of war, particularly foreign-interventionist war. In the words of Petrovic, “Ackerman’s novel is the clearest endeavor yet to showcase how American soldiers have come away from the experience of the US occupation yearning to highlight both the ordinary Afghani and Iraqi people sacrificed in the wake of radical insurgent militancy and the manner in which financial capital taints and erodes justice.” In this way, Ackerman’s novel can be seen as a literal acting-out: the main character experiences trauma on the periphery of war (in that he and his family are not direct combatants, not that their deaths are any less meaningful or real than a soldier’s) in the death, disappearance, and wounding of family members (recalling LaCapra’s terms of loss and an inability to mourn for the small-scale absence of his missing family), then once again as a part of the war where Aziz has to both inflict and receive pain in order to keep his brother safe and under medical care rather than languishing in a triage tent, waiting to die. Aziz’s trajectory becomes that of Scranton’s trauma hero.

However, *Green on Blue* constitutes a working-through both *despite* and *because of* Aziz’s physical and emotional journey through the text. The reader watches Aziz become subsumed into the machine of violence, but as he does so the reader

empathizes more and more with him. At the end of the novel, when Aziz is seen to have a realization about his actions, about the path that has slowly led him to replace Gazan and continue the violence, the reader is forced to recognize the futile expression of his trauma (his acting-out) and hope for something beyond it.

Aziz knows that Ali “didn’t want to hear of badal” (236) and instead offers a lie about his life to make his brother believe that he has led a meaningful, productive life rather than a senseless destructive one, but at the close, Aziz returns to the world that he has inherited: “And with the Americans’ help, I’ll get rid of Sabir. I’ll replace him. With his position, I’ll prosper in the war and succeed where Gazan and Atal failed. I’ll take enough to someday leave it, and bring with me those I love” (242). Aziz’s blindness is willed; he forcefully rejects all evidence to the contrary of his statements—evidence presented by his own actions and experience—and continues a traumatic cycle that begets only further trauma.⁶¹

⁶¹ Brian Turner too speaks to generational trauma and the unending cycle in his *Here, Bullet*. In “Trowel,” Turner appears to speak to the generational trauma of war and its effects on those who fall in front of devastation’s path: “Because Hussein’s arm is scarred / elbow to wrist from the long war with Iran, / he holds the trowel in his left hand, pushing / mud against a bullet-pocked wall, the cement / an appeasement which Hussein pauses over, / waiting out his hand’s familiar tremor / then burying the lead, its signatures / like dirt-filled sockets of bone / which he smoothes over and over” (24). In the poem, Hussein’s wounding is identified as a part of war, though not the war that currently ravages Iraq. In the previous war, Hussein gained his “familiar tremor” and inability to use his right hand, but in the current war he attempts to cover the damage done to a cement wall. The wounded wall is a comparison to Hussein himself and is described as a body with its “dirt-filled sockets of bone” into which lead has been buried. The smoothing-over that concludes the poem might be seen as a working-through, a commitment to moving on and continuing life, but it is that final three words, “over and over,” that give it the tone of despair. The repetition of the event is a marker of unaddressed trauma just as much as the buried lead is. The buried lead’s significance relates to a literary convention of trauma representation, namely Freud’s view of trauma as something buried within the subconscious, bypassing consciousness. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud develops his theory on trauma (that he later retreats from after realizing the extent of sexual abuse in his time) and that idea of trauma as a buried thing persists even well after Freud’s original theory of trauma has largely been discarded. For these reasons we can see Turner’s wall of buried lead that is smoothed over and over as a marker of trauma rendered aesthetically without full announcement of itself, much how trauma in reality lurks without identification.

This theme of trauma internalized continues in “Dreams from the Malaria Pills (Barefoot),” where the final stanza describes that, “You carry the earls of war within you, bombs / swallowed whole

Taken as a whole, the novel illustrates the fundamental incoherency of a system of war and its resulting (and oftentimes, preceding) trauma while also empathizing with the Other of America's wars despite deliberately stacking the deck against such an empathy. The result is a transitional expression that is also a working-through. And while there are reasons to believe that the novel could constitute a personal working-through for Ackerman himself, the author intended the text as a working-through for civilians and soldiers alike, to convey the nuance of the Afghan people that has been erased in most other accounts of the Afghanistan War. The purpose in looking deeply at Ackerman's novel is then to recognize the text's conversation with trauma *and* argue for some of the strategies it makes use of to empathize with an otherwise Othered identity. A working-through for the reader then is comprised of these goals, it is to reintroduce empathy in our lives and see beyond the Self.

Aziz, Trauma Hero:

Aziz, Ackerman's protagonist and trauma hero, is used throughout the novel simultaneously as an illustration of seemingly-inescapable violence and war *and* as a means to deconstruct the problematic nature of the trauma hero itself. Ackerman manages to instill empathy for the Othered while also refuting the mystique the trauma hero is often afforded.

and saved for later. / Give them to your children. Give them to your love" (31; italics removed throughout). The poem begins with shrapnel being removed from an injured person, each piece of metal to "be made into daggers, / precious gifts, the souvenirs of death" (31) and the two points illustrate the prolonged nature of trauma and how it can be passed from generation to generation. Wars often precipitate the next wars and the trauma incurred in one resonates in the next.

The reader is first introduced to Aziz as already a part of the machine of war, as already interpolated into a system of trauma: “The militants fought to protect us from the Americans and the Americans fought to protect us from the militants, and being so protected, life was very dangerous” (12). In the early goings of Ackerman’s novel, the reader is confronted with a new reality of war. Aziz lives in a world not of traditional attackers and defenders in regard to his village, but of competing factions, squeezing innocents between one another. Aziz’s statement sets up the novel’s recurring violence, the revolving door of figureheads and resistance leaders that Aziz will become a part of at the novel’s end in a continuation of trauma both acute and generational.

Aziz’s life, and the life of his family and those around them, are bounded by war, and the war feeds on itself, civilians becoming the fuel for the engines. When Ali loses his leg after a bombing that again punishes the villagers—the supposedly-protected—Ackerman enters into a pointed description of the consequences: “His waist was wet and red. A sheet covered an emptiness where his left leg would have been. He grasped a slick trash bag, his knuckles white with effort. In it was the leg. His cheeks looked like green ash and his eyes swam about his face. Tears poured over his temples” (17). At first glance, a reader would be tempted to call this spectacle, war porn, but in addition to Ackerman’s refusal to focus on the gory details—he notes the leg in the bag but does not describe it, shows the emptiness but does not draw the eye to the destruction—he adds to the scene the concepts of zakat and algebra, themes that will illustrate just as much as they argue for Ackerman’s nuanced attempt at provoking readerly response to trauma in working-through. Where someone like Chris Kyle

would take the scene as an opportunity to reinforce traditional values and war itself, Ackerman uses it to disavow automatic responses and entertain uncertainty.

Before the maiming, Ali and Aziz begged for money in the wake of their parents' disappearance by asking zakat (a kind of charity) for Aziz who pretended to be unable to walk. Now, after Ali's severe wounding, he whispers, "Zakat for my poor brother the cripple . . . Zakat, zakat, zakat" (17). The moment can be seen to be illustrating an echo of trauma, the eternal return twisted into something close to prophecy. From begging on the streets to begging for life in a corrupt hospital that recruits vulnerable boys like Aziz to fight for their families' health, trauma continues unabated. Aziz, as narrator, later confesses the next day, "The night before felt like a tear in my memory" (18). The trauma of the event, his brother's wounding, has been pushed at arm's length,⁶² the burying being a standard (and dangerous) response to trauma.

In addition to zakat, Ackerman incorporates algebra, the subject Aziz had been learning from the imam before the bombing. "It comes from the ancient Arabs" he says, "In their language it means to make whole from parts" (17). Aziz speaks this to his brother as the other lies sweating and wounded and the implication is clear. Here, Aziz offers the possibility of healing, to make Ali whole from his parts, but he does not yet know what that healing will cost. In this way, Ali's wounding, the trauma of the event, is opened up to possibility. Aziz is afforded the opportunity for an escape from the cycle of violence through education, to make he and his brother's lives whole

⁶² Aziz also notes that he "could only identify Ali by his loss" (21), a statement further clarifying the sudden violence of the event and the trauma it holds within it.

from parts, but the undertow of trauma is too great. In this regard, we can see Ackerman offering the reader alternatives to violence while condemning Aziz to a life of trauma that will ultimately prove instructive to the reader as a response against trauma. These moments of zakat and algebra inform Ackerman's description of the war's effects on Aziz's family. Such a description, imbricated in more than just the spectacle of violence, places it above what we find in books like *American Sniper*.

And while it is true that Ali will never walk again, that under the "care" of the hospital he will never live the life he once had, Aziz's quest for badal does not feel wholly invested in spilling blood. In fact, badal is thrust upon him, used as a tool to recruit him to a deeply confused war, another weapon of control. Taqbir, the recruiter who stalks the hospital, is the one who wields this new weapon: "You are lucky for a chance to strike back at Gazan . . . In badal there is nang [honor] for you, and for what has been taken from your brother. As long as you fight, Ali will be cared for" (25). Adding to the already-pressured situation, Aziz has learned that his brother has lost more than his leg, that he has also lost his genitals, something that only deepens his "need" to fight, to restore *something* to his brother who can now never create (in the strict biological sense). At a crucial juncture in his life, Aziz is led to war—to destruction—rather than to healing and restoration. The algebraic equation takes on a different color with Taqbir, and Aziz's trajectory is all but decided.

This is where Aziz ruminates on the logic of war, and here the voice of Ackerman shows through: "I had no one but Ali. To care for him was my single alternative. And single alternatives have a logic all their own. Men go to war with such a logic, and my thinking was that of a young man, clear and unclouded by experience

and doubt” (25). The thoughts are almost a syllogism, leading Aziz down to the conclusion that he must go to war. The logic of war, the old lie that continues to convince young men and women to go, know, and die, appears iron-clad to the vulnerable populations it preys upon. Here, Aziz is none-too-dissimilar from the American soldiers we know from both fiction and non-fiction.⁶³ Here, Ackerman instills empathy against Otherness. By allowing the reader to identify with the damage done to Aziz before he must put that empathy to the test, he is presaging Aziz’s inevitable destruction (though not death) at the hands of life’s circumstances.

But in his dedicated plea for empathy, it can be argued that Ackerman is also making use of the trauma hero that Scranton argues so desperately against. *Green on Blue* is structured to endear the reader *with* trauma, commiserating with Aziz’s hardship. However, this hero-ing should be seen as using the label against itself. No longer is the protagonist an emblem of the Self waging war against the Other; the positions have been flipped, and it is the Other that we come to identify with *in spite of* the Self. Whether the critic finds the usage of the trauma hero in this way as bad as in other texts, it is certainly effective. For my own part, Ackerman’s development of Aziz as a trauma hero—minus the promise of redemption that Scranton rails against—has a deconstructionist bent to it, undercutting the project of bad faith war writing (that which glorifies the traumatized and erases their struggle with unabashed redemption) with its own blade. As LaCapra writes, “Seen in a certain light, deconstruction is itself

⁶³ Herman describes this sort of vulnerability in the “resistance” to trauma in better-off individuals: “Not surprisingly, those who had the greatest advantages in maturity, education, and social support proved the most resilient. Conversely, the men whose early lives had been scarred by adversity also showed the most enduring psychological scars of combat. Histories of abuse in childhood rendered men particularly vulnerable to developing chronic PTSD” (251).

a way of working through and playing (at times acting) out absence in its complex, mutually implicated relations to nonfull presence” (67).

Like many war novels before it, and certainly the untold number that will continue after, *Green on Blue* devotes a scene to its protagonist’s first real experience of combat. This is a trauma hero trope that elicits awe and wonder from the reader, but as is Ackerman’s intention throughout *Green on Blue*, that response (often a part of acting-out by the author) will be undermined and complicated. As Aziz’s convoy drives from Gomal, the character gets his first taste of war as an active participant:

the air cut in half and shook. The rocket. A thunderclap so loud it seemed sound and time tried to divorce one another. Just in front of us, its explosion fountained pebbles from the ravine floor. They sprayed wetly across the hood of our HiLux. Fear’s knife slid into my chest. *The unknown promise of violence had become known. It was painless.* (72-73; italics added)

The italicized section of the quote draws our attention away from the spectacle of rockets and explosions and to the transition between civilian and soldier, between sufferer and he who inflicts suffering as reprisal, revenge, or by pure accident.

Ackerman, through Aziz, marks just how easy it is to slip into that role, how fluid the boundary is. The transition from civilian, to conscript, to soldier needs to be seamless because the reader’s identification (and empathy) with Aziz depends on a frictionless shift. It is so much harder to identify with someone who has willfully taken a cruel or unjust action; it is much easier to view an agent as a victim of circumstance, a person swept up in the tumult that is war. The real danger of the trauma hero is here, where a redemptive arc is established after a character has been subsumed by a system of

violence. By illustrating that shift, Ackerman draws attention to it and refutes it in the long run.

It is only slightly later that Ackerman begins to allow readers a taste of doubt. After stopping a group of men on motorbikes at their checkpoint, Aziz is forced to confront the rightness of his actions. The men are interrogated right there on the road, Yar applying violence when he feels the answers are insufficient. Aziz watches, thinking, “Their presence on the trail was difficult to explain, but this seemed too much” (95). The thought leads to a revelation that he is not distinct from Yar in the eyes of their captives: “Our prisoners sat on their haunches stupid with fear, fear of Yar, and, I realized, fear of me” (95). Aziz has slid into perpetration of violence through his association with Yar, a fellow comrade, and the realization momentarily disrupts Aziz’s surety of his place in the war.

These thoughts and this realization quickly form into a feedback loop after Aziz and Mortaza are called to take the men away after the violence done to them: “Mortaza and I marched our silent group in a single file. No one spoke. The shame of being beaten like an animal, the shame of watching a friend suffer, the shame of abusing helpless men. Silence brought us shame and the shame brought us silence” (97). Again, we see how those who suffer and those who inflict suffering—the traumatized and the traumatizers—feed into one another. This silence dissolves any chance of communication and empathy between the factions, it reinforces distance. Here, Othering is further complicated for the American reader. Where war novels have traditionally taught us to view war as Us versus Them, Ackerman refuses an American protagonist (a stand-in for the Self) and illustrates difference in a once-monolithic

Other. The dissolution of staunch Othering in this way constitutes a working-through *despite* Aziz's instances of acting-out due to consequences of his traumatic symptoms.

The feedback loop of silence that was created in the void of Yar's violence forces Aziz to think, to question why the men had no instruments, something that helps reinforce the narrative of the misdeeds: "I took comfort in this and imagined Gazan and his fighters searching for their missing comrades and finding only two destroyed motorbikes" (97). Aziz shores up his mental defenses against doubt and doubles-down on his actions, his own traumatic life creating a fallacy of sunk cost: "Whatever sympathy they wanted us to feel for them was a deceit. If we let them prey on our sympathies, later they would find us, or our comrades, and we would be the victims as their real nature was known" (97). Ultimately, Aziz's questions create their own answers, reaffirming the position Aziz has been placed in, and here the reader sees how this cycle of violence and war has taken a boy, fitted him into the machine, and created the conditions for him to regurgitate the "truths" of the system: everyone is an enemy; sympathy for the enemy can only lead to death. And yet, Ackerman, and *Green on Blue* more broadly, is clearly critical of this process. Aziz's final thoughts in his silence elucidate this: "I made a loop of this in my mind, layering it into the truth I thought it should be. And maybe it was" (97). In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes that, "The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness" (1). Aziz's internal loop is an impulse to bury, however, as Herman also notes, "Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work" (1), something that bears out over the course of Ackerman's novel.

Aziz rewrites the situation so as to prevent doubt from entering into his badal for Ali—he suppresses the trauma he has become a part of. And as the convey returns to base with the supposed musicians, Aziz grants them small comfort of freeing their hands from flex-cuffs. In doing so, he is treated to a humble song, one man humming while the other taps “out a beat against the aluminum bed” (98) of the truck, asking the reader to question Aziz’s conclusions about the men being part of Gazan’s fights, about them being his enemies. After returning to base, Aziz again reinforces his truths about the men: “I reminded myself I was a soldier and forgot them” (99), despite the general confusion to their identities that surrounds him. Here again, Ackerman asks a lot of his reader: He asks them to empathize with a traumatized Aziz but also respect the way in which he allows events to continue to unfold. We feel for Aziz, but we cannot fail to understand the destructive fate he is building for himself and others.

Uncertainty and Doubt:

Entertaining uncertainty is an important step in dealing with trauma. Uncertainty, as opposed to undecidability, is an acknowledgment of reality as freed from dogma (think Chris Kyle’s entrenched sense of Justice) and the false invincibility sufferers sometimes feel in pursuit of stimulus. For Aziz, uncertainty in mission, what it means to take badal for Ali, gives rise to doubt. And though he will eventually sublimate that doubt and embrace the cycle of trauma he has become imbricated in, Ackerman uses this uncertainty and doubt to illustrate both Aziz’s spiral into trauma as well as potential escapes from their fate—escapes he will be unable to make.

Early on in Aziz's conscription, the views of his comrades are presented in contrast to one another, almost as if Aziz is being given a show of differing philosophies to latch onto as he might. After Tawas offers two boys of the village Gomal sticks of gum, a conversation about charity ensues:

Mortaza snorted at Tawas: why should you feel pity for them?

Because they are like me, he said.

They are not like you. You've done something to lift yourself up. These people do nothing.

Who are you to make that judgment? asked Tawas.

Judgment? This is no judgment. Open your eyes. Their indifference stares back at you. It is in their mud houses, overfilled sewers, and dirt-faced children who are stupid and unknowing.

It is only right to help them escape that, I said. (61)

The conversation illustrates an Othering within the culture that American readers have unified and Othered as one. Implicit in this is also the social damage that violence and trauma do. Mortaza perpetuates a cycle of poverty that is as much caused by death as it leads to it. At the end of this conversation, Mortaza responds to Tawas' earlier observation that, "These people have nothing . . . They are ignorant even of their suffering. That is the worst poverty" (61): "I have known death and loss just as you, Mortaza said. I have suffered. Those boys need an example of strength. The promise of charity has paralyzed them. Our charity, the Americans' charity—I pray God delivers them from charity" (61). Suffering, or what we often call suffering—what is in fact the widespread consequence of trauma—is remedied in Mortaza's mind by

example. Self-achievement is apparently the way to end the cycle, but the critical and glaring oversight that Mortaza makes in his defense of abolishing charity (which he later makes good on by pouring the remainder of his milk tea into the dirt rather than give it to the ragged boys) is that his position, and the position of the other men in the conversation with him, is only such through the cycle of violence that creates starving children and urchins. Aziz, Mortaza, Tawas, each are soldiers, fed into a system of violence *because* of violence, a system that feeds on it and perpetuates it—the self-propagating cycle creating by-products in the suffering of others.

In another explosion of certainty about the way the world works, Aziz and Fareeda—the ward of Atal whose medical condition makes her dependent on the American, Mr. Jack, and his pain-relieving medicines—speak of war:

but you are young and a woman. This is not how you should speak.

How do I speak? she asked.

Of killing and of death, I said.

When those things are my life, I speak of my life.

I smiled. If those things are your life, then you are like a soldier.

She smiled back, but her face quickly flattened. To survive in a soldier's world, all must be like soldiers.

Yes, but to fight is what only the soldier does.

You think it is only the soldier who fights? (113)

In a back-and-forth that verges on the philosophical, Aziz and Fareeda realize their positions as similar, if not identical. Aziz is a soldier in name, a man who does what soldiers do in the “killing and death” that they have identified. But Fareeda's

precarious position within the war, being supported by Atal who is in league with Gazan who is also supported by Sabir and Mr. Jack, makes her as much a soldier as it does Aziz. One of the fundamental truths about war that is often sublimated is that it is not only the soldiers who take part. Civilians, willingly or not, are drawn into the orbit of war, and it is America's position of exceptionalism—not traditional American exceptionalism but the fact that foreign wars have almost never been fought on its soil (with the exceptions of the War of 1812 and maybe the Civil War; recalling that the American Revolution was not, in fact, an American war, yet)—that allows this view of soldier versus *only* soldier to take root in the mind of the reader. And that's why *Green on Blue* is valuable to American war writing: it expresses the realities of war that civilians cannot know—not the war porn and spectacle of trauma heroes glorified and made deific, but the common suffering of innocent people.

In another moment, this one with Commander Sabir, Aziz is confronted with the reality of *badal* and war as a perpetuating cycle: “We do anything for *badal* because to do nothing is shameful, and shame is feared more than anything” (123). Commander Sabir reveals that *badal* is a kind of momentum, something to sustain a person who has been lost in the swirl of suffering. He continues: “There are many in the Special Lashkar [the security forces Aziz is a part of] who've taken *badal* . . . Ask Issaq or Yar whether it undoes the pain that has been. Ask them why they're still here, fighting. The war sustains us. It can be a life” (123).⁶⁴ Aziz entered the Special Lashkar thinking that achieving *badal* would restore him and mitigate the pain for his

⁶⁴ “The story of my loss would do nothing to lessen his. Tawas, Qiam, Yar, even Commander Sabir, the burdens of our past led us here, and, alike as we were, we carried those burdens alone” (119).

brother. As he has continued in it, however, it has become instrumental, a way to feed and provide care for his brother. In his drunken state, Commander Sabir at once objects to the value of the force and provides a new avenue for its meaning: no, it will not give you satisfaction in your revenge, but it will give you a life. That life, however, is one at war, something that Aziz notes shortly after the conversation: “Badal was a clear action, but was it worth my life? It could not change what had happened to my brother, and when I took it, afterward, I would still know only war” (125). Aziz has begun to see the cycle that he continues to slip into.

Echoes of Trauma:

Having set up the cycle of trauma and the potential to escape from it, Ackerman reinforces the dangers of Aziz’s path by layering the novel with traumas of repetition, the Freud-Caruth double inscription of the wound. One of these events comes in the death of one of a pair of brothers caused by Aziz: “There was a great love between the two. It came from lives spent suffering together. And for me, it was a sad thing to think that but for their suffering, they would not have been so close” (131). As Aziz thinks on the relationship between the brothers, Tawas and Qiam, he cannot know that before the night’s end, he will have accidentally killed Tawas. His reflection on their life of suffering seems to present a benefit to trauma, but the way in which it strikes him as a sad thing, and the way that relationship ultimately dissolves through their suffering (that caused them to take badal), denies the potential for a positive outcome through trauma.

After Tawas' death, Part III of the novel opens with Aziz numb. "Toward the brothers I once called friends," he writes, "I felt a strange emptiness" (143). The numbness and emptiness both constitute a constriction, a symptom that has been caused by the reinscription of the wound and an attempt to avoid the trauma. Initially, Aziz's trauma had been the maiming of his brother, but when he unintentionally kills the brother of another, the weight of the two events crash into one:

Should I feel pity for Qiam, even though his badal now threatened my life?

Had I lost all compassion? I fought to avenge my brother, but I'd just killed the brother of another man, a friend. I'd taken him just what Gazan had taken from me. Had I become the very thing I despised, that which I wished to destroy?

(143)

The line of thought is telling for Aziz's trauma and the trauma he has now inflicted upon others. The fact that he has taken from Qiam just as Gazan has taken from him is the clearest indictment of the war he has been forced into because of badal. In the most literal sense, he has become a part of the very system of traumatization that wounded him.

Finally, Aziz writes, "I didn't want to feel anything. Then I fell asleep" (143). This too is a marker for trauma, the catatonic state that is a response to fear, terror, or simple inability to deal with the situation, a dissociation from events. Ackerman presents these traumatic markers deliberately; he scaffolds Aziz's trauma as a recursive wound in brother maiming or death to make abundantly clear to the reader that he is aware of trauma theory and using it to shape his narrative. Returning to the end of the novel once more, it would be surprising to see Aziz's choice to become the

new Gazan and eventually supplant Sabir in light of all that he has been through before, during, and after his time in the security forces he was more or less coerced into. However, when we recognize that Aziz has been traumatized, the scope of his available choices, or solutions to problems he is presented with, narrows. There is little hope for him to work outside the cycle of violence he has been inducted into. As van der Kolk writes, “Many of my patients have survived trauma through tremendous courage and persistence, only to get into the same kinds of trouble over and over again. Trauma has shut down their inner compass and robbed them of the imagination they need to create something better” (98). Viewed through the lens of Ackerman’s novel, Aziz is railroaded by his traumatic experience, he is incapable of making plans for escaping the cycle that placed him in his situation to begin with.

After Tawas’ death, Aziz is sent away on a new assignment. The purpose of this is two-fold: it will keep Aziz away from the inevitable badal that Qiam will seek, and it will allow him to work more clandestinely for Commander Sabir in a quest—Aziz will soon learn—only for the continuation of war. Shortly after his departure, he falls upon the kindness of the old man, Mumtaz. With very little pretension, the two fall into a friendship. For Aziz, this is a relationship of necessity—he is alone and without resources—but for Mumtaz it is an opportunity for passing on wisdom, wisdom gained at the feet of perpetual badal and war: “After each story Mumtaz would make an appeal: Aziz, you’re still a young man. Know these stories so we can remember a way that is different than now. The future is in the remembering” (160). After sharing meals and a room with a kindly old man that comes across him on the road, Aziz listens to Mumtaz’s stories of the fruitlessness of badal. Despite everything,

Aziz wishes to heed the old man's warning (a warning that has been repeated throughout the novel through various characters), but he will ultimately fail in that endeavor and engender forgetting—forgetting that quiets the consequences of their fighting, forgetting that elides the fates of Atal, Gazan, Mr. Jack, and Commander Sabir, a forgetting that is a symptom of trauma. Aziz is again shown to see other choices outside of war's cycle of suffering, trauma, and violence as infeasible. And in this, Ackerman again shows the path that trauma carves, the ruts it continues to leave in the earth. For the reader, the downward trajectory that Aziz clings to is more than dramatic tragedy, it is yet another warning sign to be observed. The nature of the novel, as a piece of art, is that which is observed, and Ackerman intends the reader to recognize the copious warning signs as instructive in reality.

Mumtaz's own story of loss and destruction, in which he and his brother bury a mine that immolates a civilian lumber truck rather than a Russian military vehicle (163), is another reoccurring wound that resonates into both the past and the future. The inadvertent destruction of the innocent is a story Aziz can relate to, but it is also a buried mine that kills Qiam and ends the cycle of *badal* for Aziz's accidental killing of Tawas. The three events become bound together by theme and implement and again act as another deterrent for Aziz's own *badal* and the life he will be forced to live after taking that revenge.

Mumtaz's departure from the cycle of *badal* is not owed to the randomness of violence.⁶⁵ His brother, before his death, forces a promise from Mumtaz: "Your *badal*

⁶⁵ Petrovic discusses an earlier scene in which a villager refuses to be used by any of the involved sides and cites the man as the sole escapee of this cycle. Of course, Mumtaz is perhaps the more important figure escaping the violence, namely because he develops a close relationship with Aziz over the course

is to take none. Break that chain. Leave the war. Care for father” (165). And Mumtaz does just that, he leaves the war. His brother dies from another seeking badal and Mumtaz is left a humble life:

So when I tell you my brother was killed in the war, you understand me. He was killed in the war this is always among us and sustains so many with its profits. His last wish for me was to escape that war and I have. There may be little to admire in my life. I am a poor man without a family, but the war has no hold on me. (166)

In a world where war *is* the economy, escaping the war is resigning oneself to poverty and hardship. However, the consequences of escaping the war are still less severe than continuing to be a part of it. And these stories by Mumtaz illustrate to both Aziz and the reader the all-consuming nature of war. That Aziz, at the novel’s end, intends to escape the war by pushing through it—plunging himself into it until he has accumulated enough wealth to escape it—ultimately reveals itself as an impossibility, one that Ackerman reveals as such throughout the novel leading to that decision. The fact that Aziz cannot see his course of action as his own path of destruction again falls back to trauma’s pull and the impetus to continue one’s momentum, no matter its lasting cost. This closing down of options is an effect of trauma, making the sufferer think they have no choice in the events of their own life. Put another way, “When

of the younger man’s staying with him: “This villager has extracted himself from the wasteland of the occupation wounded but not broken. If Aziz is willing to acknowledge the fundamental injustice that was waged against his brother, and then to swallow that rage, then he too can escape the cycle . . . The concept of peace, which began the novel as a vague notion, recedes into an impossibility as the crisis of sustained warfare becomes more pragmatic for more and more people, except for the one lone villager who breaks from the cycle.” Mumtaz is free of this cycle, though his arguments to Aziz ultimately amount to nothing as Aziz becomes reliant on pragmatic violence and the system of injustice that placed him in that situation initially.

people are compulsively and constantly pulled back into the past” through recurring traumatic memory or the burden of experience, “they suffer from a failure of imagination.” This incapacity for imagination, van der Kolk finishes, results in “no hope, no chance to envision a better future, not place to go, no goal to reach” (17). As Aziz later writes, “It is more difficult to unlearn than learn” (184). Aziz’s life has become an echo of its own trauma, cascading through time and amplifying its effects. However, Aziz’s trauma is not dissimilar from the trauma of others, echoes of echoes wrought by the unerring consequences of war.

Disillusionment and the Lack of Choice:

Aziz’s disillusionment of his “honorable” badal does not prevent his taking it. Upon learning the lie that is his war, Aziz continues it with fervor. While it may seem to fly in the face of reason, Aziz’s decision stems from a lack of choice wrought by trauma—the non-traumatized would certainly turn away from the path Aziz continues down, but Ackerman’s depiction of this traumatic reality is intended as a mirror held to the reader struggling to effect working-through.

Aziz’s disillusionment begins with a realization of language: “In Pashto, Commander Sabir’s type of war is called ghabban: this is when someone demands money for protection against a threat they create. For this type of war, the Americans don’t have a word. The only one that comes near is *racket*. Our war was a racket” (100). Though Aziz gives name to the war-as-racket early in the text, he is doing so ostensibly from a later perspective of bitter acceptance, a position of jaded realization where he has become the new Gazan and sees the war as an inevitable machine that

perpetuates itself. It is not until later, when Aziz meets with a dejected Commander Sabir after the death of his fish, Omar, that Aziz begins to see the situation as it is: “Mr. Jack’s been bust elsewhere, neglecting to visit, so I ran out of fish food. Omar didn’t eat for many days. When he began to starve, I fed him rice. It made him very sick” (200). The death of Sabir’s fish, Omar, is a clear allegory for American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr. Jack, the intelligence officer of some three-letter organization, is the one who supplies the food for the fish he has given; he has created a dependency that the other cannot sate on their own, for “Americans believe that if they give you something they can take everything. That makes them dangerous friends” (210). This is the setting of Aziz and Sabir’s discussion of the war, the clear moment in which Aziz begins to question his place within the fighting and where the seed of Aziz’s fateful decision is planted:

A thing such as this never ends.

Are you fighting this war to end it? he spoke through a smirk.

I shook my head, ashamed that I no longer knew how to answer.

You fight for badal, to avenge Ali, and to support him in the hospital, said Commander Sabir. What happens if our war ends?

He drank from his cup and sat on the edge of his bed.

I’m just a soldier caught up in this, I replied.

All are caught up in this, he said. The question is whether you’ll be a victim or prosper in it. What justice is there for you if Gazan, who crippled your brother, prospers in peace with the Americans? What justice is there if we lose control of him and never build an outpost? Yes, there will be peace for

Gomal and Gazan, but us, what of us? The Americans will no longer need us.

How do we survive then? (202)

The conversation with Sabir reveals much in the way of Aziz's uncertainty and unwillingness to take responsibility for what his actions accomplish (or destroy) in regard to the war. Commander Sabir's certainty of his actions, in light of the American dependence that he knows so well, acts as a dangerous force on Aziz and that promise of parasitism plants its seeds within him. Pragmatism and self-interest dominate Aziz's thoughts, things initially instilled by trauma through a country ravaged by war on several fronts. Once the reader considers all the traumas of Aziz's childhood, he realizes his response would be unlikely to be anything else.

Another indication that Aziz will ultimately be subsumed by the machine of war that crippled his brother and robbed him of his family is given in the conversations between Aziz and Mumtaz. The two develop a bond that is both friend and father. As previously mentioned, Mumtaz' trauma is quite similar to Aziz's, but it is their responses to that trauma—the processing of it or its erasure—that differentiates the two, that allows Mumtaz to grow into an old man where Aziz will almost certainly die young:

The peace of these last few weeks, it feels like living in a new memory.

Yes, I said, new memories to replace the old ones.

I don't think they'll replace the old ones, he replied. (214)

Aziz hopes to bury his trauma with new memories to replace the old whereas Mumtaz only looks to use them to balance the pain he has suffered. Aziz's desire to erase is

consistent with the traumatized individual and that desire informs his decision to kill all those who sat in the truck with him that night.

However, Aziz's climactic act is still something to be seen as a manifestation of powerlessness rather than a willed action. This is made clear just before the fateful scene, when Aziz casts away his smuggled weapon, flinging "the Makarov into the night. End over end, it tumbled down the mountainside" (219). Though he abandons immediate gratification of *badal*, he allows for it in the future: "If the chance for *badal* came again, maybe I'd take it. If the chance to earn money for a new life came, maybe I'd take that. But nothing was clear to me now, and I didn't want to act under the old certainties" (219). The importance of Aziz's indecision is that this state has been created by trauma and suffering, a resignation to the operation of the world around the sufferer rather than their active choices. Ackerman reiterates Aziz's powerlessness to us, his lack of choices despite the violent act that he will take only a few pages later:

The restraint I'd felt toward Gazan left me. If the war was for him, he was for the war. If peace was for him, he was for peace. There could be nothing larger in him, and I felt the fool for hoping there could be, in him, in any of us. What moments before what seemed unclear was now obvious. There was no cause in this war, at least none larger than oneself. And what I did next was natural, and yes, easy. (224)

Aziz's disillusionment with Gazan's escape from the war impels his action, an ultimate act of paradoxical resignation—Aziz takes action out of inaction.

In the end, Aziz ignores the wisdom of his one-time comrades, that "[s]ome wars only feed themselves. They cannot be won, only starved" (223); he becomes a

piece of the never-ending machine, deluded into thinking that it can be escaped, that trauma can be erased (at least consciously) or sublimated rather than dealt with. As van der Kolk writes, those suffering from trauma are “on constant sensory overload.” As a result, they attempt to shut themselves down, or “develop tunnel vision and hyperfocus” (70). Aziz’s quest to get outside the war by going through it is an example of this tunnel vision—despite his plan lacking coherence, he clings to it as a potential coping mechanism for the trauma his life has known.

Aziz’s lie to his brother at the end of the novel is an echo of an earlier one where Aziz tries to force his trauma (and that of his brother) to fit the paradigm of *badal*: “If I could stand over Ali and whisper that those who had taken everything from him now suffered as he did, maybe that could make some part of him whole, maybe that could kill the ghost” (104). In his most explicit admission of revenge as healing, Aziz also calls into being the idea of one being haunted by experience. This thinking is consistent with trauma theory, for as LaCapra writes, “In acting out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed” (70). However, Aziz’s “solution” to the trauma that he and his brother have suffered from (both in different ways) is the antithesis of healing, it is a cycle of violence that can only beget further trauma.⁶⁶

All of this is addressed by Ackerman in the brief interview following the novel, courtesy of Phil Klay and *The Rumpus*:

⁶⁶ “I send him my wage, and that is adequate for survival, but it does nothing for his dead spirit” (118). Here too Aziz speaks to the necessity of violence to “cure.”

I came home and I saw the way Afghans are portrayed: they're corrupt, they steal money, they'll stab you in the back, they're all high on opium all the time.

None of the nuance ever gets conveyed. So I wanted to take an action which, when you first hear about it, sounds completely reprehensible—a 'green on blue' attack, an Afghan soldier trained by Americans shoots him in the back. You see it in the media all the time. I wanted to roll that back and take the reader on a journey such that, by the time that action is happening at the end of the book, not only will you see why he does that at the end, but you will actually see why he couldn't do anything else. (Klay)

Ackerman explicitly offers the purpose of his novel as reader-centric, creating the conditions for a recognition of the Other as well as what Petrovic writes that, "Aziz's narrative, and by extension Ackerman's whole project with *Green on Blue*, articulates how the smallness of a transgression can spiral outward and exhaust any sense of resolution, perpetuating its own vicious cycle into infinity." Texts such as Ackerman's, "refuse to make an exception out of American suffering" (Petrovic) and open-up readership to the empathetic witnessing of those who have been Othered.

Ackerman's choice to privilege the reader over his character is an explicit note on the importance of fiction as instrumental to trauma recovery. Aziz's destruction through the cycle of trauma is necessary for a reader to recognize the symptoms and consequences of trauma. Indeed, Ackerman's novel is only understood through a recognition of trauma, though not necessarily its formalized theory. A reader who is known to trauma, who has been affected by it in some way, is offered a cypher to its

resistance in antithesis to Aziz. To show Aziz's recovery from trauma, in fact, would fall afoul of the trauma hero—just a trauma hero from an Othered land. Aziz's failure becomes a warning, and through that warning, a chance for readerly response to trauma that is rooted in observation and differentiation: observation of Aziz's failures in working-through trauma and differentiation in one's own responses to trauma. And while there will rarely, if ever, be a narrative that conforms to one's specific trauma in all its nuance and pain, what Ackerman does in *Green on Blue* serves as a more general map; and meager though that may seem, it is far beyond what traditionally has been offered to the reader of war writing.

Working-Through in *Fire and Forget*:

In the short story collection, *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, an unprecedented collection dedication to working-through, the editors ask a witnessing of the reader. In the Preface, the editors give voice to the difficulty of using fiction as a means for truth-telling *a la* Herman: "We each knew the problem we altogether struggled with, which was how to say something true about an experience unreal" (xiii). However, truthfulness is not arbitrary, it is rooted in perception and experience—a "seeming" to make use of Tim O'Brien's term—that conveys itself to a reader: "Truth, *truthiness*, in this mass media cacophony we live in, comes up something for grabs. Well, here's some. Grab it. We were there. This is what we saw. This is *how it felt*. And we're here to say, it's not like you heard in the stories" (xv). Truth, or truthiness, as the editors put it, is not totalizing, it is not definitive; truth is multiple and oftentimes, contradictory.

What then is the point of giving voice to these truths, why should a reader invest in fragments? The answer lies in another question posed by the editors of the collection, a question that asks, “how do you make something whole from just fragments?” (xiv). It is the drive to make something whole, the truth of experience built from its fragments, that makes valuable collections such as this. Empathizing with fabricated people in real situations of deployment is part of it, but these stories, more importantly, ask us to bear witness to reality and its contradictions and confluences:

On the one hand, we want to remind you, dear reader, of what happened. Some new danger is already arcing the horizon, but we tug at your sleeve to hold you fast, make you pause, and insist you recollect those men and women who fought, bled, and died in dangerous and far-away places. On the other hand, there’s nothing most of us would rather do than leave these wars behind. No matter what we do next, the soft tension of the trigger pull is something we’ll carry with us forever. We’ve assembled *Fire and Forget* to tell you, because we had to—*remember*. (xvi-xvii)

The editors’ reminder can be seen as anti-war, it can be seen as hero worship, but what it *should* be seen as is an attempt by writers to pull together the shards of their experience and tell a story that catalyzes healing, be it healing for themselves or those who read. In a distinction from Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*, *Fire and Forget* allows for a writerly response to trauma as well as a readerly one.

Dissolution of Certainty:

The collection's opening story, "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," operates as a story about a trauma hero only to refute that mode of storytelling by the end. In this way, Jacob Siegel's story is an illustration of the dangers in acting-out while simultaneously forwarding working-through. Placing the reader in the perspective of the trauma hero is similar to Ackerman's intent in *Green on Blue*, but Siegel's story focuses specifically on writing as a response and resistance to trauma, making it potentially useful to writerly and readerly responses to trauma.

Three men join back up in New York after the Army only to find that their well-laid plans during deployment haven't quite worked out. Cole, the first companion the narrator encounters upon arriving, speaks to the irresistible pull of the war: "Like if I do it one more time then I'll be able to work things out, and when I get back then I'll be back for good" (2). The feeling, Cole explains, passed, but the experience that "the world was slowing to a crawl" (2) that prompts the urge to re-enlist is consistent with the symptoms of those who have suffered from trauma. As van der Kolk writes of many sufferers, a stimulus that cannot be attained in many other ways has been found empty.⁶⁷ Quickly, we learn that the narrator still harbors deep feeling for his deployment:

I was talking about *over there*, how it felt when you got everything right. You could make the guns talk. Your words hardened into instruments controlling the machine, everything moving like you told it to. When you got it right there was a pure flow, thoughtless and unfeeling, unlike anything else. (2-3)

⁶⁷ "Self—regulation depends on having a friendly relationship with your body. Without it you have to rely on external regulation—from medication, drugs like alcohol, constant reassurance, or a compulsive compliance with the wishes of others" (99).

The flow the narrator describes is the illusion of control that we impress upon our past, the idea that everything was better before. And in some ways, perhaps the narrator is right. While deployed, life's complexities are boiled down and stripped away, decisions become simultaneously more and less important. Lives hang in the balance, but pleasantries and niceties are largely forgotten. In combat, objectives can be made to be simple and mechanics—the operation of firearms, calling in an airstrike on a precise location—override in-the-moment fear and uncertainty. What the narrator points to with hardened words and talking guns is a unity of action, a clarity effected by training and institutional knowledge: “Over there things were clear . . . and they were always on the line” (4). However, what is orchestrated on deployment is cacophonous at home, for immediately after the above quote, the narrator writes, “How could anything compare to that?” (4). The thrill of combat, the perfect cohesion of elements in battle, all of that is gone in the civilian world. As Cole knows from his frenzied travels after returning home, nothing quite compares. Jacob Siegel, the author of “Smile,” writes in his brief article, “Theater of War,” that “[f]or the first few years after I got back, everything rhymed with war.” His narrator is experiencing something similar when we are first introduced to him. This experience is dangerous, however; it portends forbidden knowledge that entices those who have not been to war—the narrator's comments become a misleading advertisement for combat experience.

The narrator pauses in his reminiscence only long enough to see if Cole wants him to stop, he “looked at Cole for a sign to stop, but he gave none” (4), and that tacit consent is all the narrator needs to continue this verbal masturbation:

And after the bomb goes off and you make it out okay, what about the silence after than when it's still ringing in your ears like a bell from somewhere else? How are you going to hear your old self through that, whatever you thought you wanted? All that fear and heat, satisfaction and lust, that's what your dreams are made of. Look around you, man, this is not what I was coming back to. This is just dirt and steel and other people. (4)

The narrator's monologue depicts perfectly the seduction of war porn, the dream-like quality of combat and how it is both wish fulfillment and crucible, as well as portraying the obstacles to returning to one's self prior to the war. Yet, Cole does not let him off the hook here, he does not become glassy-eyed upon thinking about the war, and here the reader begins to recognize Cole as the sympathetic character, someone who is not interested in languishing in the past—in acting-out:

I bet you still got a working bullshit detector somewhere in there, but I'm sure that speech gets more convincing every time. Is that what you want to be good at? Making speeches about the war? Look what kind of company that puts you in. Try another line of work, man. Even if you're a failure, which I'm not ruling out, it's gotta beat this crooning about the war racket. (4)

What the reader gets here is a metacommentary about not only the war but war writing, as well. Siegel, through Cole, stabs at the war porn that has crept into so many narratives about the war, the poisonous knowing that affects so many to go and see for themselves. In short order, Cole tells the narrator to find another line of work, something that doesn't put him in the company of spectacle writers, that puts his

cyclical and circuitous thinking to better—more productive—use. This is only furthered when the reader is introduced to the other companion, Jimmy.

Immediately after the monologue—and a stern warning by Cole: “Don’t mention any of that reenlisting and going back over stuff . . . Last thing I want to do is put ideas in the kid’s head” (4)—the two reunite with the tall, seemingly-frail (5) security guard. Cole’s warning to the narrator acts as critical insight into Jimmy and its importance right before we meet the character cannot be understated. Jimmy is vulnerable: he is susceptible, the “kid” that can easily be lured into (and in his particular case, *back* into) a life of war.

This vulnerability is noted by the narrator as well, but in a way crucially different from Cole’s: Jimmy would “act out his pain without masking it as rage or contempt. It felt needy, sometimes, even weak, but it was more honest than the subterfuge I went through with Annie. Being angry with her in just the right way never seemed to make her understand” (5). Here Siegel employs the missteps of the narrator to make a comment on the reality of veteran pain and recovery while also expressing the precarity of someone like Jimmy. And yet it is this precarity that also places Jimmy in a position to bear the most fruit of trauma recovery. He “just needed people to hear him and was willing to talk frankly, if sometimes mawkishly, about his troubles. We tried not to hold it against him” (9). Throughout, Jimmy has been depicted as soft, weak, vulnerable, but what the narrator fails to realize (and what Siegel intends for the story), is that Jimmy is engaged in a working-through that the narrator is barred from in his actions. Of the three, Jimmy has transitioned between war and home the best, settling down and getting a job, talking about his experience,

and effecting moving-on. The fact that readers are introduced to the narrator's troubles with his partner, Annie, immediately after being introduced to Jimmy makes that abundantly clear.

The flashes of the narrator's relationship that the reader gets between the larger reunion scenes even further reinforce the error of his ways versus the "weak" and "soft" Jimmy. The narrator has closed down into silence, and we see clearly that it hurts both him and his partner: "What's it gonna be like when Jimmy and Cole get here? You gonna tell them everything you won't tell me and pretend one year is all there is to you? Then you'll come home, this, here, your home, and be mad at me for now knowing what they know" (6). Annie's outburst is damning. She has the narrator dead to rights about his poisonous cycle of anger, one that withholds and then grows contempt for her not knowing. The narrator gives a feeble defense, arguing that he does talk, but Annie has him on that too:

No, you don't talk to me, you lecture. You spend an hour telling me how many frequencies your different radios can hold and which one's better in your car and which one's better on foot. And if I ask one wrong question, if I stray the tiniest bit outside these rules I don't even know, that you won't tell me, then you shut down again and punish me for not understanding. (6)

The narrator is accused of quibbling over details. However, these details kept people alive on deployment, intimate understanding of field equipment and tactics preventing a roadside IED from claiming friends. But this sticking to the details rather than speaking to the larger emotional impact of his experience is skirting around his trauma rather than speaking it to the uninitiated, even if it is his partner. Annie is attempting

to be a good witness for her partner, but the narrator's inability to move beyond the barest definition of a dialogue prevents him from working-through.

Back in the bar, this silence our narrator has shown with Annie continues with friends, albeit in another form:

"You gonna tell our story?" asked Cole, dryly, so I wasn't sure if he was serious.

"Never!" I shouted, slamming the bar. My hand came up ringing and the bartender came over. "I'd rather write blasphemies and technical manuals." (9) Cole's question is a complicated one; he questions the narrator's intent (or lack of intent) to tell their story because he has already seen the flashy words and spectacle the narrator goes in for. To tell their story would be to coat it in the glossy sheen of war porn, the seductive telling becoming a motivator for vulnerable kids like Jimmy. However, if the narrator *actually* tells their story, if he works to engage with their experience in an open and honest way, that insight may yield progress for him.⁶⁸ The question amounts to moot though as he takes it as a threat and responds in the same, over-exaggerated bluster that he did when he first met up with Cole:

"I'd rather write on a chalkboard with a steak knife." I stabbed my hand at the air between us. "I'd rather write lullabies for pedophiles. I will not pimp myself out. I will never, by everything that's holy, never feed a hungry mob

⁶⁸ As Siegel himself writes, "Back here, your grip loosens and war becomes unpersonified. You lose the clenched antagonist and find a subject. The 'no bullshit' mode of storytelling, natural in the desert, is irretrievable, and you start to labor under the idea of truth-telling. And that labor shuts a lot of us up and convinces us that you wouldn't understand anyway. So, we secretly nurse our wounds and curse you for your inattention . . . What could be more dangerous than that—us veterans, appointed bearers of the national honor and folly, hiding what we know about the uses and costs of power, willing to let the same fatal mistakes happen again out of spite?" He ends this section with a demand worth acting upon: "So, whatever it takes, get us talking" ("Theater").

the red meat off my brother's bones." . . . Suddenly ashamed, I changed tack.

"The hell with the war, anyway, you think anybody's actually interested in that bullshit? It's old news. It was all ash before the bombs dropped." (9-10)

Cole sees through the façade, but Jimmy reveals that he too has begun to write about their experience: "I write about the war. Am I pimping myself out?" (10). Again, Siegel uses another character to undermine the narrator's position, to force introspection in the reader. The narrator quickly denies the question and the group continues drinking, but underneath, in the interiority of the narrator, the reader gets his true answer:

I had not finished so much as a story since I'd gotten home . . . It wasn't for lack of trying. I got up every day after Annie went to work and tried to make sense of what happened over there, how it all fit together, why it counted for so much if I wasn't even sure how to add it up . . . I couldn't write the things that haunted me for fear of dishonesty and cheapo manipulation, which I blamed on not being haunted enough. How much blood did I need to justify spilling it on the page? I felt this incredible urge, heat on every inch of skin. I needed something cold to press to my face. (10)

Siegel gives us the truth here; he strips away the defense mechanisms of the narrator and forces him to reveal to us his inability to engage with his trauma, something Siegel himself writes of in his comment on narrativizing: "If you do get to forget, it doesn't come all at once in a flash of forgiving amnesia. The first instinct after you come home is to play it all back, editing as you go for character development and narrative continuity" ("Theater"). The fear the narrator expresses to his friends, that

he'd either "tell people what they wanted to hear or just give them what [he] wanted them to think" (10) stems from the critical importance of the story he wants to tell:

For us, there had been no fields of battle to frame the enemy. There was no chance to throw yourself against another man and fight for life. Our shocks of battle came on the road, brief, dark, and anonymous. We were always on the road and it could always explode. There was no enemy: we had only each other to hate. (11)

The constant state of readiness and anxiety that the narrator expresses in his deployment plays further into the idea that our narrator has been deeply traumatized and stuck in a loop of acting-out, while those around him have effected moving-on by working-through their trauma. The quote also brings into contrast the friendship that the three comrades share in their New York reunion when during deployment they "only had each other to hate." This could be an explanation of the isolation that the narrator feels even when surrounded by loved ones, why he returns to the quiet agony of deployment while amidst friends.

The short aside about deployment is immediately followed by the statement: "War stories are almost never about *war* unless they're told by someone who was never there" (11). And true to this statement, Siegel's story is about the aftermath, the fallout of war rather than the action of the war itself. To linger on the events of war can be a sign of acting-out, a bare description that folds into spectacle or war porn. The resistance to this further illustrates that Siegel is interested in working-through,

not a reviewer's terrible god to be worshipped (McGregor).⁶⁹ The few lines that hint at the narrator's war-time experience comprise the entirety of what is said about war itself. The meta-commentary that Siegel places here is critical to the understanding of the story as uninterested in spectacle, even though its narrator is uncomfortable (and perhaps unable to) speak of war's effects.

At the end of the story, overlooking the city at dawn, the three slowly sober to daylight. While Jimmy dozes off in a corner, the narrator and Cole share an important conversation. The narrator complains about the lack of solidity in the life they have returned to, and the words make Cole sit up: "How does anything get solid? You make it that way" (16). His words speak to the impossibility to creating one's surroundings, of firming up one's life but also the hopefulness that is implicit in that endeavor. Of course, it's difficult to make things solid, to get a life back on track, but it also has to be done. One cannot come home from war and stay lost forever. The narrator's response is another resistance, another obstacle to take refuge behind rather than confronting: "There was a whole country around us . . . I don't know what goes on here. I have no idea what these people are thinking. They sure as hell don't know anything about me" (18). This response is couched in his nostalgia for deployment and what Jimmy has to say right before. The construction site that they find themselves in reminds Jimmy of "over there . . . Like this is the road" (18). He attempts to map the world outside the warzone onto the war, replacing his life with his war year, something that Cole opposes:

⁶⁹ In his discussion of *Philoctetes*, Siegel writes, "We risk deceiving ourselves by reading this ancient play only as a meditation on combat trauma that promises redemption. But then, promises of redemption are always risky."

Cole spun around. “Like the road?” His voice clear and contemptuous, he lunged at Jimmy. “How the hell is this like the road? There aren’t any fucking IEDs here. Nobody telling you what to do. You can leave any time you want.” Then he turned on me. “And you. You should know better.” He moved closer and my hands coiled in my pockets. “Nobody knows you? They’re not trying to kill you, that’s all. But you’re afraid of ending up like them.”

Jimmy looked down and Cole rounded on him again. “Look at me,” he barked. Jimmy’s eyes went sideways. “Look at me!” Cole said again, but his voice carried the evenness and authority of an old note, and I heard it as “look at me, Specialist.”

Jimmy looked up.

“You can’t stay here. There’s nothing for you here.” . . .

My eyes, squinting, adjusted to the light. I was about to say something to Cole when he cut me off. “You, both of you, whatever’s out there, I’m taking it. You don’t want it, that’s your business, but don’t lie to yourselves and pretend it’s not there for the taking.” (19)

In short order, Cole disabuses his friends of their illusions about the connection between the war and home. In a startling display, he calls his comrades on their bullshit and makes them face the reality that that chapter of their life is over and the next one waits to be written.⁷⁰ Cole refuses to accept their bitter nostalgia and forces them to confront the lame-sounding excuses they make for not making an effort. It is

⁷⁰ “Not that it ever really leaves me, those fourteen months in Iraq, the five in Afghanistan. These were the defining events of my life, I told myself, even before I left on my first deployment” (Siegel).

here that we see that though we inhabit the mind of the narrator, Cole is the hero. He is the hero because he works to re-enter life where the narrator wants to make that year of his deployment the entirety of his own. This is the final beauty of Siegel's story, a final push toward working-through that—while it could still be personal (and judging by some of his comments, may very well be)—argues for the recovery of others.

Inhabiting the mind of the resistant traumatized individual lands squarely in the realm of the trauma hero, but the revelation of Cole's rightness in what he says disabuses the fraught label. And even though the narrator is left with a critical question, "What do I say to [Annie]?" (20), the importance of asking that question cannot be overlooked—Cole has forced the narrator to begin thinking about his experience, not in the narrow way of describing radio frequencies, but in the broad accounting of experience that he needs to convey to his partner in order to reach reconciliation. This question, prompted by Cole, is the potential start of trauma processing, narrativizing wartime experience in order to create a witness.

Working-Through in Depictions of Acting-Out:

Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train" is a perfect example of a story that is dedicated to working-through but that illustrates acting-out throughout. It is not that "The Train" is a story of acting-out—though we see our protagonist experience crippling cycles and recurring flashbacks, the end is ultimately hopeful and does not languish in the idea of the trauma hero unable to escape the tide of their own past in witnessing the death of a close friend and comrade, a death she felt she could have prevented.

“On bad days she rides the subway” (59). Our narrator begins on the wending ways of the underground of New York City, riding the cyclical route to the “narrative of her memories” (59). Immediately, the reader is confronted by the traumatic cycle. The narrator writes of “the tightness that inches slowly across her skin” that forces her onto the subway, a feeling of anxiety and displacement that stimulates circuitous flight. This is accompanied by “constriction and headaches” and “the flood . . . images and emotions lurking beneath the surface of everyday life, the soft buzz from a mistuned radio” (59). We learn that, “on one of her worst days yet, she rode back and forth thirteen times, before the claustrophobic press of rush hour forced her off” (59). We are not witnessing isolated events, mercurial moods that vent easily in motion, instead, the reader is viewing a complete system of symptoms outlined by Herman, a simulated escape from trauma that is doomed to fail, because the method lacks engagement—one cannot escape trauma.

The circuit of trauma is made complete by a predomination of death, death that hews close to the narrator and pervades the story as an obsession:

So often she’s thought about it: death. So often the idea fills her head while she’s ake that she hardly remembers anything else. Expansion of that single thought until there is no room for others and she is fastened onto the idea of being down, *beneath*. To be underground. To be where Kavanagh was. (62)

Not only does death consume her, it implores her underground, making the New York subway a dual metaphor both for the cycle of trauma and Freud’s death drive.

In this death spiral, the narrator impresses upon the reader two moments of her life that feel real: her first experience of death in the body of a small bird, and the

suicide bomb that killed her friend and comrade. Both moments are explicitly traumatic, however, we can view the second moment as the recurrence of that sudden death of the bird, the Freudian (and Caruthian) retraumatization that is simultaneously the first traumatization.⁷¹ These two moments are further linked by the narrator herself. As she writes, the bird was the “last solid part of her before the edges of her experience faded into that questionable foggy of memory, that state in which a person could no longer be sure that what they recalled was true, or even their own” (63). The narrator questions the contents of her memory throughout, the disorganization leading to depersonalization: “she wondered what she was feeling was even her own, as though she were living someone else’s memories, transforming into another person” and “Too much of what she recalls feels false somehow, fabricated or drawn from some other part of her mind” (63). This disorientation of trauma dissociates the self from the self.

Fog surrounds the narrator’s life, everything except the bird and the death of Kavanaugh, the disorientation a part of a suite of traumatic symptoms. She writes that “she fought hard to pick out something from the persistent forward blur of days, the memory of anything that stood out from the routine of her life” (64) during the monotony of deployment, but to no avail. This is where we learn of the greater extent of the narrator’s trauma; no longer relegated to general symptoms, the reader receives the specificity of suffering that haunts her and surrounds her waking moments:

⁷¹ “[T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4).

She grew stagnant, numb against this fear until this worm grew and grew and dug into her and finally she felt compressed, constrained. She felt squeezed between the past and the present. She could feel Iraq everywhere, feel the dusty film of the desert covering every object and surface, her skin. (66)

At any given moment she exists in the very same place that she existed in Iraq, the exact same instant that she stood over Kavanagh bleeding out, or the moment she snatched her weapon up, or the instant before that when she should've already been snatching her weapon up. (69)

And:

the dusty memory of Iraq a movie in her head, rolling, rolling like the earth spinning constantly into, out of the sunlight. A single scene with the girl's kicking leg and Kavanagh's blank stare and the pathetic urge to get drunk. (72)

Each moment, each feeling, each shard of pain, builds into an impulse toward death, a survivor's guilt of a crippling weight:

She should've died with Kavanagh. She shouldn't be walking across the platform trying to reach the escalator. She shouldn't be in the city at all. She had tried to forget everything; had tried to sink into drunkenness, into meds, tried to stay awake in fear of the dreams, burrow into some dark place that would give her a break from the memoires, from the ECP that would come when she inevitably fell asleep. The pain of self-abuse still felt better than the guilt. Guilt drove it all. Anger that things had gone so wrong. (75)

This culminates in one of her cyclical train trips, standing on the platform, waiting for another train to encase her and move her without actual progress:

All she had to do was pitch forward, lie across the tracks, and wait. The train would probably hurt less than the fall. All she would have to do was let her knees go slack and let her shoulders slump under the compulsion of gravity—the single most powerful law of the universe, pulling always down, down across the tracks and beneath the mass of the train. Down beneath the sweet, loamy surface of the soil, where her body could finally rot where it belonged. Rot, just like Kavanagh's. She felt the gentle tug of gravity, of downward force on her body, and she almost believed that she wanted to give in to this desire and be below, beneath where she belongs. (68)

The guilt of the event drives the narrator's impulse to death, a release from the randomness that spared her and claimed Kavanagh. The impulse is spread across several, powerful bodies of text that are as much meant to inspire a stream of consciousness as the close press of traumatic memory.

As the train comes to the end of the line, the narrator makes her way above ground thinking, taking "her time now" so "that there would be more time in the future" is a viable option. She imagines the future meetings with her mother after breaking off this engagement, she imagines tranquility in the face of understanding. As she reaches the surface, "fresh air breath[ing] along her skin" (77), she sees herself in a mirror. The reflection shows a "smokey shape" in "loose jeans" with "greasy hair," but in this reflection is a recognition, that she "use to want more for herself" (77). Immediately after the thought, she finds another reflection—this one symbolic. Another woman, wearing big sunglasses and a low-cut blouse that shows she "wants to be looked at," captures our narrator's attention. The woman is on the phone with her

own mom, and during their conversation, the narrator notices her cute shoes and we get the thought that, “She could see herself wearing those shoes with a light sundress” (77). Already, the narrator has begun to open herself to the world of possibilities, to the world itself as an active participant in it—someone who is happy and wants to be more than that smokey figure that hangs around, riding the cyclical train as a sort of specter.

The woman gives her love to her mom and hangs up the phone. Though it’s clear they were in an argument, she made room for acknowledging their relationship. While a simple thing, the narrator experiences a grand revelation here: “Just that simple,” she thinks and immediately imagines the future meeting with her mom, this time a promise, where “[t]hey will talk. Maybe Iraq will come up, but she won’t talk about it. Not until she’s ready” (78). And that self-understanding admits to an eventual future, it acknowledges that there is room for progress and growth, for sundresses and the possibility of witnessing. However, it doesn’t all have to come now, it doesn’t have to emerge suddenly (and cheaply) because extricating oneself from trauma is no mean feat. The work portion of working-through first requires a willingness to commit to change. Unlike starting a diet or making good on a New Year’s resolution, one can’t always take substantive action immediately. In the case of our narrator, the willingness to see a future above ground (both physically, in the sense that the narrator is no longer on the train that wends its way in circles, and metaphorically, in the sense that it will be a future she is *living* and not deceased) and the imagination to acknowledge a reconnection with her mother, auger progress. And so the narrator does not give into death. Though she cancels the meeting with her mother and returns home, she has

resolved herself to progress. Nowhere is this more clear than the final line where, “She walks in a calm way, a certain way, one foot in front of the other” (78). This is motion off the subway, off the titular train. Slow though it may be, the calm and certitude that she wills offers a reprieve from the trauma, a way forward that is not also in circles.

Emulation:

In Roman Skaskiw’s “Television,” the reader is treated to a contemporary version of O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” in which Lieutenant Sugar sorts through the chaos after an IED explosion and subsequent shooting of an Iraqi boy. This emulation is part of a tradition of working-through in a writerly response to trauma, to shine a light on the difference between stories we tell ourselves (typically self-illusions as acting-out) and those we tell others to effect working-through.

The beats of the story are entirely different from O’Brien’s famous story, save the brief mentions of Sugar’s distractions in the form of letters from his girlfriend back home, but it is this set of letters that best exemplify traumatic acting-out and working-through. The language of these asides is not only reminiscent of “Things,” but they are sometimes complete echoes: “No more distractions, Sugar thought” (125) as compared to O’Brien’s, “No more fantasies, he [Jimmy Cross] told himself” (23). The internal struggle in “Television” is the weight of being present in a warzone when the temptation is to slip into a reverie of home and the loved ones who are waiting there. Like Martha for Lieutenant Cross in “Things,” Sugar’s girlfriend represents that dangerous act of slipping into another world, one distant from the stressors of combat. In the end, both resolve to leave their nostalgic memories—despite the temptation—

and live through the war first. Where Cross burns his letters from Martha, Sugar places them in reserve, to wait until it's safe to hope:

He thought about his girlfriend. It'd be nice to sit down with her and hear her voice for a little while. She was very beautiful, and he wanted to look at her and spend a little time with her before the big mission. It'd be nice to go for a slow walk on that sandy trail beneath the pines, as they have in North Carolina before he left. He decided that as soon as he got back inside the wire, he'd re-read the last letter from her (124-125)

Where O'Brien's narrator severs himself from a dangerous illusion that threatens the safety of him and his men, Skaskiw's narrator resolves to put his memories in their place, to be kept safe until the danger of war has passed. He does not harbor an illusion (as far as the reader knows) of his life back home, and so he dares to hope. The crucial difference between Skaskiw's story and the one he emulates is that O'Brien's story ends with an emotional maiming. Cross is forced to confront reality—a good thing—but he is also forced to close a part of himself off in order to survive the war. Sugar compartmentalizes, and if war strips away, Sugar at least retains the optimistic capacity for each thing in their own time.

Brian Van Reet's "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" is structured as a tragic echo of Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" in order to further depict the consequences of trauma. In an effort of emulation on Van Reet's part, both protagonists enter the story as relics of war, fragmented men who return to worlds that

marginalize them.⁷² And though the stories have little in common in the unfolding of their plots (Hemingway's is famously absent of plot whereas Van Reet's story is a pointed one of loss and the bitterness of returning to the world), nature—and its rejuvenating effects—carries throughout both: "He stepped into the stream. It was a shock. His trousers clung tight to his legs. His shoes felt the gravel. The water was a rising cold shock" (Hemingway 175). In Van Reet: "After practicing for a while, I reeled in the fly, set down the rod, pried off my shoes, peeled off my socks, rolled up my jeans, took the rod, and waded into the creek to fish for real. The shallow water was ice cold. It rushed up my shins and around my calves with surprising force" (Reet 180). The significance of the emulation is not altogether obvious, at first. Van Reet latches onto the language of Hemingway in this quote because the shock of feeling—the cold, the force—is emblematic of a return to the world; not the world that has rejected the narrator,⁷³ Rooster, not the world of people with their stares and their pity,⁷⁴ but the vibrant natural world that while sometimes is as uncompromising as the battlefield offers boundless beauty, as well: "My mammalian brain translated the

⁷² "We all looked the same; being around one another was like looking into a mirror. None of us wanted that. We wanted to forget" (173).

⁷³ McGregor argues that Rooster "blames [his parents] for his wounds" and uses Van Reet's line, "How could they have known their values would lead me to this? That all that safety would push me into the fire?" (178), as justification. This is also picked-up by Peter C. Molin in his "A 'Phrase Too Cute to do Our Ugliness Justice'": "Rooster lashes out against his parents and is prone to fits of rage-induced impulsive behavior, such as biting the head off a rainbow trout he cannot properly fillet" (14). What both of these critics miss is the more overarching condemnation that Rooster points to, the "need" for young men and women to go to war to prove themselves, to know of combat. Both writers get lost in the weeds here, erroneously choosing to focus on Rooster's faults at the start of the story rather than his growth at the end—this mistake causes a deep misreading of the text that will be explored later.

⁷⁴ "'wounded warriors'—the term the Army used to refer to us in official memoranda. I guess it's what we were, but the phrase was too cute to do our ugliness justice" (Van Reet 173).

white noise of running water into feelings of rejuvenation, nourishment, safety—a comfortable place to stay” (179).⁷⁵

Contesting that nature is also something that both authors write to in their respective stories. In Hemingway, Nick is in tune with the pulse of his fishing line: “There was a long tug. Nick struck and the rod came alive and dangerous, bent double, the line tightening, coming out of the water, tightening, all in a heavy, dangerous, steady pull” (176). In Van Reet, that same pulse is noted,⁷⁶ but the focus is on regeneration and even recovery:

On my third try, the rod came alive in my hand. For the first time in a long time I felt a welcome burst of adrenaline, a better drug than booze or pills. The hair on my neck stood on end and my breath quickened. As it fought against a shadow much larger than itself, the fish’s every burst of life was transmitted to me through the fly line via the tippet, a thread of nylon, microns thick, the whole process a kind of naturalistic Morse code. For such a small creature it was surprisingly strong, bending the rod in half. (181-182)

The narrator, locked in contest with nature, experiences the burst of adrenaline that is so alike to combat, but this adrenaline is not artificial, it is not simulated or dampened by “booze or pills” but delivered by the world itself. Shortly before this episode, the narrator notes that, “Compared to Baghdad, everything looked so green. The vividness of it was like being on a mild dose of psychedelics, all the time” (176). The

⁷⁵ And while Nick too looks for a comfortable place to stay, Rooster uses this comfort as a launching point for recovery, something that is made clear by the story’s end, whereas Nick—it can be argued—seeks to avoid engaging with the world and his own trauma.

⁷⁶ “There was something comforting in the rhythm of it” (180).

comparison simultaneously distances the locations and privileges the hyperreality that the fly-fishing excursion induces, but the fact that there is a comparison at all is telling, too. The “naturalistic Morse code” that the narrator feels while engaged with the fish offers another point of connection, a combat to be fought on a battlefield far less fraught with the dangers of Baghdad. And though Rooster fails to experience the quiet satisfaction of the camp that Nick receives in Hemingway’s story,⁷⁷ his outburst after catching the fish “was gone as soon as it had arrived” (183). The experience is an overwhelming positive one rather than a microcosm of war, despite eruptions of his trauma.

The end of “Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek” is what confirms Van Reet’s story as one of working-through rather than acting-out. Where Nick believes that, “There were plenty of days coming where he could fish the swamp” (180), and in effect, avoid his own troubled waters, Rooster steps in to put an end to Sled’s corrosive display of acting-out, a performance designed to traumatize two girls innocent of the world of war.⁷⁸

Molin glosses the end differently: “Spoiling for vengeance, Sled stalks two teenage girls playing hooky from school. He’s thwarted by Rooster, and the tale ends with the two erstwhile friends wrestling each other to the ground; the trip has been a waste and their futures even bleaker than they supposed. At the tale’s conclusion,

⁷⁷ “It had been years since I had eaten trout of any kind, but suddenly found I really wanted to . . . When I hit the spine, I couldn’t generate enough force between my three fingers to keep the knife from slipping as I tried to sever bone and the sinewy spine . . . I let out a primal yell, grabbed the fish, brought it to my mouth, and wrenched its head the rest of the way off with one powerful chomp” (182-183).

⁷⁸ Sled, maimed by the war, attempts to show the girls the damage to his body and genitalia: “You should see what they did to me” (189). It is unclear what Sled plans to do after this moment, but it’s clear to the narrator that it would be nothing good: “This was not right. This had gone too far” (189).

Rooster walks away from Sled, back to the trailhead and ‘whatever waited’” (14). Though akin to Sled in his experience of the war, Rooster refuses to become mired in its aftershocks. Where Sled looks to damage others with his damage—traumatize with his trauma—Rooster effects moving-on. This does not mean forgetting. The continual remainders of his deployment pepper the story and even the final lines confirm for the reader that Rooster has not forgotten: “Hailstones began to fall. They hit Big Hunting Creek like bullets ricocheting off depleted uranium armor” (190). The final line, though recalling war, does not auger pessimism, though for both McGregor and Molin, it does: “Thus when ‘Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek’ finishes, we are unable to grasp Rooster himself or the final image” (McGregor), and “[t]he harsh sounds and figures of speech do not bode well for Rooster and Sled. The grim and fatalistic conclusion suggests that ‘whatever waited’ will just have to be lived through, as best anybody can, which will probably not be nearly enough” (14). Rooster has intervened in traumatic action; he has stopped one instance of that terrible cycle. Though the outing lacked the simple perfection that Hemingway’s Nick enjoyed, at every turn the narrator resists wallowing in anger and avoidance.

What Van Reet has done with his story is rewrite the narrative of a return to the natural world—nature does not have to be the silent refuge that keeps the war at arm’s length, it can be symbolic of war; it can be a place to encounter one’s trauma, a place to heal. Molin’s closing comments on Van Reet’s story, that “[o]ne hopes that Van Reet really is trying to work the same comic grotesque vein for which O’Connor is lauded, because if his rendering of the despair and self-loathing of disabled veterans is true and representative then our national predicament in regard to them is dire

almost beyond repair” (14), is as ludicrous as it is a dangerously mistaken reading of the text. Neither McGregor nor Molin delve into the obvious trauma cycles at play in the story, nor do they seriously engage with why Van Reet would choose to construct his story in the shadow of Hemingway’s. The failure of these things illustrates the need for proper accounting of contemporary war writing. A story as nuanced and important as Van Reet’s would otherwise be discarded, or worse, unfairly maligned.

In the cases of *Green on Blue* and *Fire and Forget*, authors depict end states of acting-out in order to show its failure as a response to one’s trauma, or they effect working-through—for themselves or for others—through stories of writerly responses to trauma. In *Fire and Forget* specifically, authors engage in a metafictionality that has their protagonists confronting their trauma in writing, what the authors themselves are simultaneously doing vicariously. This confrontation with trauma is not limited only to the authors whose stories are collected in *Fire and Forget*, they—alongside Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*—allow for the reader to participate in a response to trauma, as well. This readerly response is born of the reader’s evaluation of the fallout of trauma presented in the stories. For *Green on Blue* and “Smile, There are IEDs Everywhere,” the reader is shown the futility of war porn and acting-out; in the emulative stories of “Television” and “Big, Two-Hearted Hunting Creek,” they are shown how writers have taken up the mantle of previous generations and progressed thought on trauma’s consequences and the traumatized’s response to their situation.

CHAPTER V: VICARIOUS WORKING-THROUGH IN BEN FOUNTAIN'S *BILLY LYNN'S LONG HALFTIME WALK*

Throughout, we have seen the importance of mapping the cycle of trauma—and more importantly, the potential escape from that trauma—to the writing that has emerged, and is still emerging, from America's longest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the active acting-out of *American Sniper*, to the troubled response of Scranton's *War Porn*, and to the varied attempts at working-through in the prominent collections of *Fire and Forget*, as well as Ackerman's novel, *Green on Blue*, trauma is writ large across the genre of contemporary war writing. Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is no different. However, what distinguishes Fountain's novel from its predecessors is its being written by a civilian removed from primary trauma and its focus on civilian responses to veteran trauma.

There is an emerging trend of war writing being written by those other than veterans, by people whose trauma (if present) is like an echo, a reverberation of world events and felt through proximity or after-effect. Other novels, such as Helen Benedict's *Wolf Season* and *Sand Queen*, in addition to Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition*, emerge as powerful narratives about the costs of war and the trauma it brings to soldiers and civilians alike, but Fountain's novel is unique in its enunciation of a fictional veteran's trauma *and* its scathing condemnation of the American public's attitude toward the war—the combination within the novel identifying and castigating the feedback loop that results in the cycle of sending the young off to fight and die in war and/or return home with the unendurable weight of unprocessed trauma.

Halftime Walk is arguably the pinnacle of war writing as written by someone traditionally outside war, it is a prime example of what I have been calling transitional expression for its acknowledgement of trauma and its intent to alter the course of the system of traumatization that occurs both particularly in the lives of combat soldiers and generally in the unthinking responses of American civilians. Fountain is on-record as having written the novel as “an attempt to make some kind of sense of the [United States], or at least to put a frame around [his] fundamental confusion” (Wayne) about it. If *Halftime Walk* is an attempt to make sense of the United States, the assessment is not an optimistic one. However, through the text itself, we might access a solution to our ever-deepening problem of trauma. Fountain’s theory-reinforced articulation of the titular Billy Lynn’s trauma, his declaration of what he terms the Fantasy Industrial Complex as a motivating—and specifically American—force, and his depiction of civilians slavishly ingesting the war as spectacle together render the novel particularly powerful and positions it as a work of vicarious working-through that surpasses many. Fountain positions veteran trauma as the responsibility of the civilian; it is incumbent upon them to act as witness and provide the possibility for recovery to those soldiers who find the value of working-through.

Lest it be claimed that my privileging of Fountain’s work as the pinnacle of vicarious working-through (and by its position as the final chapter of my dissertation, the pinnacle of *all* working-through) minimizes the work from sufferers of more acute, primary trauma, I want to be clear that *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* is a stunning achievement of war writing *only because of* the works of veteran writing and trauma theory that preceded it.

Fountain's novel is built on the triumphs of works like *The Things They Carried*, *One Bullet Away*, *War*, and in a negative sense, the failures of *American Sniper* and other deliberate propagations of one's trauma, as well as theoretical texts like Caruth and Herman's. Fountain's novel is in this way a synthesis of the writings of civilians and veterans alike, something that can act as conduit for testimony and witnessing, for the speaking of trauma and its mitigation. Rather than focus on the oft-written methods for veterans to engage with their trauma, Fountain elects to elucidate what is lacking from civilian responsibility to war, and this shift in approach augers to give sufferers the best chance to engage in recovery from trauma.

Trauma:

As with each text that has precipitated Fountain's, trauma looms large. For *Halftime Walk*, trauma is both a force of motivation and suppression: suppression in the sense that the events of Billy's (and Bravo's) trauma are never completely expressed on the page,⁷⁹ and a force of motivation for Billy's desire to escape the orbit of his life as a combat infantryman—it is what shapes his desire for a future with Faison, the Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, as well as his desire for a “normal” life with his family.

⁷⁹ When asked about the relative lack of Iraq within the novel (at least the actual experience of it as a combat zone), Fountain answers that at some point in the creation of *Halftime Walk* there was more of the Bravos in Iraq (even after their Thanksgiving experience), but that “to do long, involved flashbacks to Iraq—that just felt kind of corny and predictable to me” (Wayne). And while it does not seem that Fountain had the strictest of outlines for which scenes would appear in the novel, there is an effort to avoid the established pattern of war story, which also brings with it the threat of war porn through the prevalence of combat in the text. It should be noted that all Trauma Hero narratives in the dissertation have relied upon that established pattern.

Fountain's novel, while not expressly about trauma (at least not in the ways that several novels use trauma as the focal point for their narratives about trauma heroes, such as *The Yellow Birds*), devotes most of its pages to an identification or explanation of trauma, a cataloging of symptoms and consequences that is itself critical of that trauma identified largely in its eponymous protagonist. The author does this for two reasons: First, to illustrate his indebtedness to the theoretical and veteran texts that preceded his own, to represent the reality of the effects of combat in a way that does not succumb to platitudes or cliché and that respects the combatant's reality without privileging it over the conflicting realities of those outside the war. Second, to use trauma as a foundation for his arguments about the American public and what he terms the Fantasy Industrial Complex. The reason why so much of the novel is concerned with trauma's effects is that Billy and his fellow Bravos are supposed to be on a home victory tour that assuages and heals, but instead the tour reveals just how ill-equipped America is for the homecoming of its veterans and how badly a job we do at *actually* supporting the troops and allowing them to heal.

Precarity:

Precarity is the catalyst to trauma, one of the factors that causes some to suffer beneath trauma and its symptoms and others to come out without significant lasting damage. Fountain employs precarity throughout his text as a reminder to the reader that it is often our most disadvantaged and underprivileged that enter into war, the very people who are most susceptible to war's psychological wounds. In many ways, precarity is foundational to trauma; it is one of the things that determines to what

degree one will be affected by trauma, sometimes, even determining what events will be understood as traumatic or merely stressors. Fountain's painstaking portrayal of precarity is crucial to understanding *Billy Lynn* as a response to trauma because it offers readers a depiction of trauma and its causes outside of the spectacle-rendered battlefield—precarity dissolves trauma as springing simple from the blood-soaked earth of the war zone, subject to all the dangerous portrayals of acting-out that readers have now become accustomed to.

In a moment revealing Fountain's indebtedness to trauma theorists, the novel reveals inciting traumas. For Billy, his familial trauma is revealed early in the text when his sister, Kathryn, is in a life-altering wreck: "she's T-boned on Camp Bowie Boulevard by a hydroplaning Mercedes in a flat spin, this enormous dark object windmilling her way and it's the sound she remembers more than anything, the *whoof whoof whoof* of its rotary vortex like the flapping wings of the angel of death" (17). Kathryn recovers, due in part to kindly bystanders who watch over her until medical attention arrives, but her "pussy boy" (17) boyfriend leaves her in the wake of her accident and long recovery, leaving her scarred physically as well as mentally.

The episode recalls the suddenness of the accident that Freud (and later Caruth) write to as a part of the traumatic process, but Fountain takes the connection even further with Billy's response to his sister's traumatic event. After her boyfriend leaves a now-broken Kathryn, Billy takes a True Value crowbar to the ex's Saab, stripping it down in a violent act of destruction. This act brings criminal charges—charges that are only dropped after Billy agrees to enlist in the Army—and once again, Herman's words of vulnerable populations crop up in the mind. It is this standard

example of the accident that is used to describe trauma and its aftermath that lands Billy in the military, and it is a part of the major tension of the novel. Kathryn's perceived indebtedness to Billy, the issue having taken on the weight of Billy's proximity to death in a combat zone, drives the question of whether or not Billy will return to the war or escape with the aid of well-meaning lawyers that Kathryn has gotten in touch with.

The rest of Bravo have their inciting traumas, too, their own versions of the Caruthian wound that cries out at its recurrence. In another moment that illustrates the precarity—and precarity being a kind of predestiny—of those who end up entering the military as combat infantryman,⁸⁰ Fountain has Billy recollect all he knows about his fellow Bravos' past and upbringing. There's Holliday, whose brother hopes he "fuckin' die[s] in Iraq," Mango, whose father "cracked his skull with a monkey wrench," Dime's family history of suicides, Lake, whose "mother was an OxyCotin addict who'd done time, his father a dealer who ditto," Crack, whose "mother ran off with the assistant pastor of their church," Shroom, who "barely *had* a family," A-bort,

⁸⁰ "Okay, so I get out when my time's up, what the fuck's waiting for me gonna be any better? Like, fuck, workin' at Burger King? Then I remember why I signed up in the first place."

Hector is nodding. "That's sort of my whole point. What I got out there sucks, so I might as well join."

"What else is there," Mango says.

"What else is there," Hector agrees.

"What else is there," Billy echoes, but he's thinking of home. (72-73)

The scene between Billy, Mango, and the stadium worker, Hector, comprises the end of the "By Virtue of Which the Many Become One" chapter, and the statement (no longer a question for these young men who see the military as their only option) that acts as a refrain points to the vulnerability implicit in the under-privileged and the misguided. Military service itself might be a career path in its own right, but life as an Army grunt, as fodder for war, is not. That is what is seemingly available to the characters huddled around their joint, what Mango speaks to when he searches for what might be out there after he's done his time.

whose “father had been the deadbeat poster dead for the state of Louisiana,” and Sykes, whose “father and brothers blew up their house cooking meth” (100-101).

The long list of familial offenses catalogues each of the Bravos’ experience to underscore the point that these young men come from broken, fragmented, or dematerialized homes. Their stories vary in extremity, but ultimately their “choice” to enter military service was a foregone conclusion forged from the lack of options that education and opportunity often brings (recall Platt’s brief discussion of being able to join the military as an officer). When they are traumatized on the battlefield—almost inevitably as we again consider the fact that individuals from these dysfunctional and damaged upbringings are far more likely to be traumatized in war—they are fulfilling the theoretical double inscription of the wound, the echo of trauma that Freud and Caruth wrote of and that Herman tapped into with her discussion of precarity. It is unlikely that Fountain failed to notice these theoretical thrusts of trauma, and his inclusion of precarity in the novel—as opposed to something like *American Sniper*, which seeks to normalize going to war with a “traditional” upbringing—makes concrete his intentions to address the sympathetic cycles that conflate war, the underprivileged, and trauma.

When reflecting on the tanned, well-groomed, and incredibly wealthy people surrounding him and the other Bravos during their Dallas Cowboys Stadium PR stunt, Billy thinks, “Mortal fear is the ghetto of the human soul, to be free of it something like the psychic equivalent of inheriting a hundred million dollars. This is what he truly envies of these people, the luxury of terror as a talking point, and at this moment he feels so sorry for himself that he could break right down and cry” (114). The

comparison between monetary security and safety from terror and war is an extended one in this section. Billy feels “like a shabby homeless kid suddenly thrust into the company of millionaires” (114), “profoundly terrified” of returning to Iraq that “equals the direst poverty” (114). The special attendants of the Dallas Cowboys games, the people who get to shake hands with the heroes of Bravo and that get to be as far from war as possible, both physically and psychologically, are the antithesis of the soldiers who fight in modern war. These soldiers are the precarious youth who come from fragmented families and who saw military enlistment as an escape—in many cases they *are* the shabby homeless kids in the company of millionaires, not just “like” them. The inequality of the situation is what hammers the self-pity into Billy, forcing him to ask himself, “what does it mean when a good soldier feels this bad?” (114). The question is asked by Billy, but it is clearly a question by the author. Fountain again forces the reader to confront the imbalance of power between the well-fed civilian and the precarious soldier, the contradiction of a pinnacle soldier and his lowest society rung of status. These soldiers and their sacrifice makes them a blip on the radar of the truly powerful for a moment only; they will be forgotten and discarded, and the civilian who supports the troops will be free to continue their life, without guilt or second thought.

Inexpressibility:

Trauma’s inexpressibility runs throughout Fountain’s novel. At multiple points in the text, Billy is asked to describe his feelings or reactions to a given event (most often, combat), however, the answer he gives is *always* insufficient to the thoughts the

reader is privileged to. We can see this when Billy talks to a reporter about combat: “‘You can dodge an RPG,’ he said to a reporter . . . What he’d meant to say, been trying to say, is that it’s not a life, sometimes it really happens in slow-motion time, his ultimate point being just how strange and surreal your own life can be” (53). This is another moment in which what Billy says, what comes out of his mouth, does not match the more important thought he is trying to express. Claiming that one can dodge a rocket-propelled grenade sounds like fodder for war porn, a cinematic moment in the next Call of Duty video game trailer; however, the idea as to “how strange and surreal your own life can be” is significant, a sober reflection on one’s experience and war, an observation that becomes inexpressible in the situation of reporters looking to hear about the war and not its effects. Fountain institutes this structure in order to force the reader to consider the unspoken depth of veterans, to acknowledge interiority without having access to it in reality. This move is fundamental to Fountain’s mission in allowing the American civilian public to properly address veteran homecoming and healing.

Throughout the novel, Billy is on a mission for someone to acknowledge and address his trauma.⁸¹ After frequently reliving Shroom’s death, he thinks that “sooner or later he’ll meet someone who can explain his experience, or at least break it down and properly frame the issue” (47). What follows in the text is a mental checklist of those who might fill that role, starting first with Pastor Rick, who “turned out to be an

⁸¹ Billy is “very conflicted about being honored and being considered a hero. . . . He’s been hoping and expecting and waiting to come across the person who’s really going to listen to him and help him try to make sense of what he’s been through. And he never finds that person” (“All Things”).

egotistical pain in the ass” (47);⁸² Dime, who “is too close to it” (47), a fellow sufferer from the same trauma; and Albert, “a man of wide experience and impressive education who seems to know so much about so many things and can talk the sun down and up again” (47-48), whose “ingrown worldliness” prevents an honest engagement with Billy’s experience.

Billy finally settles on Major Mac, the deaf officer who moves through the civilian world the Bravos find themselves in like a somnambulant. The Major is experienced in both the world of war and home, but Billy will never gain a chance to approach him in the course of the novel.⁸³ The fact that the Major is all but deaf should not escape the attention of the reader, either: the best chance Billy has to be *heard* is a deaf man—there are few more incisive condemnations of the American public’s ability to act as witness for the soldiers it sends to war to bleed and die.

While it’s true that Billy fixates on Shroom’s death, if he “thinks about this for more than a couple of seconds a synthesized hum starts up in his head like a

⁸² Billy meets with Pastor Rick upon returning home and tries to pin down his feelings of the event: “‘When he died, it’s like I wanted to die too.’ But this wasn’t quite right. ‘When he died, I felt like I died too.’ But that wasn’t it either. ‘In a way was like the whole world died.’ Even harder was describing his sense that Shroom’s death might have ruined him for anything else, because when he died? when I felt his soul pass through me? I loved him so much right then, I don’t think I can ever have that kind of love for anybody again. 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). Billy’s conversation with Pastor Rick is another attempt to communicate his experience, to make another into a true witness who can experience empathy in the telling and understand what Billy and his fellow Bravos have gone through on their deployment. Pastor Rick, of course, misunderstands (at best) and (at worst) appropriates Billy for his own cause of reaching more people with his religion. The inexpressibility of Billy’s trauma here is due to *both* a failure of language and a failure of witnessing—already the “well-meaning” civilian is implicated in the text.

⁸³ “Standing one deferential step behind the major, Billy decides it’s hopeless. He lacks the nerve and he lacks the bullshit, plus there’s the major’s disability and the corresponding sense that certain subjects should not be discussed at roadhouse volume. Death, grief, the fate of the soul, these beg congress in tones of sober thoughtfulness, you can’t scream back and forth about such matters and hope to get anywhere” (48).

tremendous swell of organ music, not the sickly calf bleatings they played at Shroom's funeral but a thunderous massing of mighty chords, the subsurface rumble of a tidal wave as it rolls unseen through the ocean depths" (42). And that "subsurface rumble," "unseen," is the essence of Billy's trauma—hidden, undisclosed, and roiling.

Paradoxically, the Bravos are known for their heroism at the Al-Ansakar Canal, which involves Shroom's death and Billy's attempts to save him while under fire (and while firing back, evidently), but the weight of that death, the death of their friend and comrade, goes by without much comment by the thralls of civilians that question them about the war. Insofar as they care about spectacle, they ask the question about death and killing, but Billy's attempts to reach out about his friend's death are halted, disregarded, or made plain impossible.

In a rare moment where Billy is asked if he thinks about Shroom, his answer is a brief echo of the question, "'Yes', Billy said, 'I think about him a lot'" (42), but internally, his response is much more pronounced, emphatic: "Like, every day. Every hour. No, every couple of minutes. About once every ten seconds, actually. No, it's more like an imprint on his retina that's always there, Shroom alive and alert, then dead, alive, dead, alive, dead, his face eternally flipping back and forth" (42). That "imprint on his retina" is the lasting effect of trauma and the haunting ghost of extraordinary experience that refuses to subside.

The alternation between alive and dead in Billy's mind is an unmooring of reality, perhaps not in the literal sense, but a psychological distress that augers ill for Billy's continued experience of war after the PR campaign ends. The thought of that life–death binary continues: "the visualization [was] so intense that it shook loose a

kind of double consciousness that lingers to this day” (42-43). Here, the savvy reader sees an implicit reference to Caruth’s “impossible history” (*Explorations* 5) of trauma and its lasting impact as truth “bound up with its crisis of truth” (8), or the schism of consciousness created by dealing with life after having been subjected to death. This schism is clear when Billy is asked about what he was thinking during the momentous firefight, something he struggles to answer, being unable to pin down exactly *what* he was thinking about: “God knows he tried, he never *stops* trying, but it keeps slipping and sliding, corkscrewing away, the *thing* of it, the *it*, the ineffable whatever” (3). There are notes of O’Brien’s “Things” here, but there is also a clear echo of Matthew J. Hefti’s “Something on Something That’s Something like Disillusionment” in *Retire the Colors*. The line points to the difficulty of comprehension in the chaos of combat—both in the moment and well-after—in addition to Fountain’s indebtedness to veteran work preceding his novel.

Billy, as the point of view character, the narrator, the close-third that almost becomes first, never really sorts out his thoughts and actions of that moment though he tries repeatedly throughout the novel. Importantly, Fountain never takes the reader to that famous combat, never transports us to the Al-Ansakar Canal where Shroom dies and Bravo is sent into the confusion of the home front with their trauma in-tow. This inability of expressing trauma can also come out as violence from the speaker, a potential transmission of trauma that further illustrates Billy’s traumatized state, as well as the importance of asking the sufferer the right questions, becoming an appropriate witness—one who is not bent on the spectacle that the American public often craves:

Several days ago he was doing local TV and the blithering twit-savant of a TV newscaster just came out and asked: What was it like? Being shot at, shooting back. Killing people, almost getting killed yourself. Having friends and comrades die right before your eyes. Billy coughed up clots of nonsequential mumblings, but as he talked a second line dialed up in his head and a stranger started talking, whispering the truer words that Billy couldn't speak. *It was raw. It was some fucked-up shit. It was the blood and breath of the world's worst abortion, baby Jesus shat out in squishy little turds.* (40)

Trauma is written in-between the lines and thoughts of Billy as he again struggles to respond. As when Billy chooses saying nothing as short of saying everything about the war,⁸⁴ his “nonsequential mumblings” point both to the disorientation of war and its trauma in addition to its limitations of coherence and expressibility. Furthermore, Billy's experience of a “stranger,” a whisperer with “truer words that Billy couldn't speak” reveals the dissociation of the self that van der Kolk writes of in traumatized subjectivity.⁸⁵ The violence and vehemence of that “second line” indicates an unspeakability, a gross rendition of experience that is, for all intents and purposes, incommunicable.

⁸⁴ “Billy realizes that Mango hasn't spoken for the past five minutes, so he knows his friend is also thinking about the war. He's tempted to raise the subject, but really, what can you say short of everything?” (27). The silence that persists between the members of Bravo is not one of masculine shutdown but an inability to communicate all that needs to be said about their experience, their loss, and their trepidation for returning to the war that they were ripped away from just as quickly as violently as they were entered into it.

⁸⁵ As mentioned in chapter IV, traumatized persons attempt a shut-down to avoid the constant sensory overload they are subjected to. As a result, they may experience depersonalization, or the “biological freeze reaction” van der Kolk 72) that comes at the time of stimulus. Sufferers recount their experience without any emotion and become incapable of engaging with the emotional value of their experience.

However, there is no war porn in the jagged thoughts of this second voice, no creeping allure for the reader, just abject horror and the grotesque. The “blithering twit-savant” intends spectacle in their question, hoping to sate the deadly curiosity of the American public, but the italicized thought eludes expression, and what comes out instead are the broken thoughts of the traumatized individual.⁸⁶ Despite that, despite the nonsequential mumblings, Billy’s words will still be taken as gospel for his involvement in the war. Here, Fountain unearths the seemingly-intractable issue of the unavailable witness and the silenced sufferer: without a good-faith witness present to listen, the speaker can never get the words out, but even if a witness is present, ready to listen, and prepared to hear what is to be said about the experience and event, the words might still come out as spectacle, or (arguably) worse, as damage to the listener. And though Fountain presents no solution in this moment, the scene should be taken as a cry for recognition, as a wake-up call for the public to be aware of these issues and at least make the attempt to confront them rather than be blissfully unaware or bought into the spectacle that is war porn.

As Fountain states in an NPR interview, “I wanted to try to capture the intense experience that Billy and the other Bravos are having, this very vivid, almost overwhelming sensory experience. I wanted to try to capture that, not just the images that the language is evoking, but in the sound of the language itself. I didn’t want to give the reader a rest” (“All Things”). Fountain’s language becomes a kind of war

⁸⁶ Of course, the italicized *is* expressed to the reader of the novel; however, my argument against this being a kind of war porn is that by this point in the text Fountain has already been deliberate in his intent (be it through the satire of civilians or even his essay preceding the novel) to disabuse the reader of the notion that extreme violence can be cathartic and that spectacle can be satiating.

porn, an overwhelming force but one turned in on itself. The language is not meant to entice the reader, to draw them closer to the *need* of combat; instead, it aims to disorient and make the reader feel in over their head—the way that Billy and the other Bravos feel on Thanksgiving and almost certainly while in Iraq.

Later, when prompted by Dime to answer yet another reporter's questions, Billy struggles to capture his answer: "he's anxious to answer properly, to correctly or even approximately describe the experience of battle, which was, in short, everything" (136). The struggle to express is a common theme in trauma literature, no less present in war writing, and the inability to express the "everything" that is war—the excitement, horror, fear, loathing, and everything else—too often leads to a closing down of that expression. As an answer, Billy says, "to tell you the honest truth, I don't remember all that much about it" (136). When in fact, Billy's honest, collected thought in that moment is far removed from an ignorance of events and feeling: "The world happened that day, and he's beginning to understand he will spend the rest of his life trying to figure it out" (136). This sequence simultaneously communicates to the reader the difficulty of articulating one's experience to those outside and off the battlefield as well as the toll such an experience takes. While there is nothing new necessarily in this double-edge of trauma—countless theorists and authors have written about it in one form or another—Fountain's rendition contains independent merit if only for the novel having been written by a civilian, by one who is ostensibly foreign to war. It may seem a mere fact, but the relatively unique situation of the novel at the very least addresses that dual edge of trauma. Having access to Billy's

interiority allows the inexpressible to become voiced while the hidden cost incurred by experience is made visible through the civilian author-witness.

In the same question-and-answer interview Billy is put on the spot for, Billy receives thunderous applause for seeming to answer in the affirmative to killing insurgents that were attacking Bravos position at the Al-Ansakar Canal. The truth, as it always is in war, is more complicated. He doesn't know if he killed those men at the canal, how could he? But he affirms that, "it's fine with [him] if [he] did shoot them" (137), only the applause at that statement seems to miss the point of what he's trying to say: "he's sure they've missed the point but is too unconfident of his communication skills to try to force a clarification down their throats. They're happy, so he will leave it at that" (137). The subterranean point being made here is that though Billy is obviously equipped for combat (though not its effects, its costs), he is not quite so equipped for communicating what happens during combat. Furthermore, any attempt at clarifying his experience is stymied by audience expectation. Those in attendance for the interview have in their minds a particular narrative about the Bravos' experience and their steadfastness in that narrative is partly what prevents the true experience's enunciation. Amidst all this discussion of experience, validity, and the telling, what is sidestepped is the issue of what I am calling vicarious working-through, a working-through positioned by those who are not direct recipients of the traumatic event. By engaging in this story, by writing within the confines of the contemporary war novel, Fountain has stepped into the apparent possibility of telling another's experience. However, the move is only made possible by Fountain's indebtedness to other veteran writers.

In previous chapters, we have seen the stories that Fountain has encapsulated in order to tell his own, we have seen the ways he has taken pre-existing work to fashion another story to further the need of acting as witness to the traumatized. Ultimately, what makes Fountain's novel ring out as authentic is his ability to turn a critical eye to himself, to the public to which he belongs. Though *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is a war novel, it is not a veteran novel. Instead, it is a novel of introspection that is intended to stimulate change. By giving voice to Billy as a young, traumatized soldier, Fountain allows himself to populate the periphery with the (well-meaning) idiotic masses of civilians who are truly the ones who "just don't get it," for whom "no amount of lecturing will enlighten them as to the state of pure sin toward which war inclines" (45-46).

Billy views his "fellow Americans" (a phrase oft-repeated throughout the novel to intimate the vast chasm of difference that separates the two parties as well as to lampoon the former President George W. Bush) as children, innocent and at an unfathomable remove from the trials of combat. The line expresses incommunicability of a sort, a bridge that cannot be crossed, but it is Fountain's diction here that warrants further attention: "lecturing" is of no use, but nowhere does literature nor trauma theory advocate lecturing as a possible means of getting through to the soldier or the civilian. To lecture is to repeat the truisms of war, its depravity as well as its heroics, but it is far from a dialogue.

Billy knows that lecturing is useless, but he does not try to share his experience as it seemed to him—he can't, his trauma prevents him, silences him. The kind of working-through that Billy needs requires a sympathetic listener, but he is unable to

find one outside of the war, and while he is within it, he is too busy trying to stay alive—there is no distance from the experience. However, Fountain is not interested in elucidating Billy's survival (literal, emotional, psychological). If he were, we would know of Billy's return to war and his final departure from that war, alive or dead. Fountain is concerned with the inability of the American public to not only see the need for soldier recovery but also their incapacity for choosing against war. Billy's story becomes a tragic one, he is ultimately doomed to bear his trauma in silence, a casualty of trauma as illustrated in stories from *Fire in Forget*, or Ackerman's *Green on Blue*, or Scranton's *War Porn*. The shift in focus away from the soldier and their recovery may initially seem like a disservice, but Fountain is preempting the consequences of trauma by attempting to address it *before* it transpires.

Symptoms:

Symptoms in war writing are the announcement of trauma. As we have seen throughout the dissertation, this announcement can be detrimental (in the case of texts that act-out knowingly or unknowingly, or that privilege the narrative of the trauma hero), or it can be an acknowledgement of the costs of sending people to war. For Fountain, symptoms both invoke trauma as indebted to past war writing and trauma theory and presage the deep-rooted inconsistency between veteran homecoming and healing. Billy has returned home (albeit briefly), but he is traumatized by the war—perhaps too by his experience at home—and nothing he encounters while on the Bravo victory tour mitigates or even addresses that fact.

Throughout Fountain's novel, there are small moments of traumatic symptoms, little, brief glimpses into Billy's rattled subjectivity. These are as simple as the injunction to never allow one's self to relax,⁸⁷ to the startle-reflex that is awoken while Billy is napping,⁸⁸ to the gaps of time that act as scene transitions.⁸⁹ However, each moment is a reminder that the war has not left Billy simply because Billy has (briefly) left the war. Even in the relative safety of the Dallas Cowboys Stadium, smoking a joint with a comrade and a new friend, Billy feels the weight of his experience: "For several moments Billy imagines the stadium as an extension of himself, as if he's wearing it, strapped into the most awesome set of body armor ever known to man. It's a fine, secure feeling until his chest starts to labor under the weight of all that steel, but the joint coming around helps with that" (69). In this moment, we find many familiar objects of trauma and its symptoms. First, the craving for safety, which, for Billy, is military-issue body armor. Billy imagines the Dallas Cowboys stadium as that body armor and that insulation gives him security. However, almost immediately after that, the crushing weight of the colossal structure enters his mind. This can be seen as yet another traumatic symptom, an unease, a pervasive discomfort that encroaches seemingly at random. Finally, the idea of marijuana alleviating that internal pressure is consistent with the drive toward self-medication.

⁸⁷ "If you relax even for a second, it will take you, thus a strategy is revealed: Don't relax" (43). This strategy is also a symptom of trauma, Herman's hyperarousal that wears down the sufferer after interminable times of vigilance and preparedness coupled with paranoia.

⁸⁸ After electric wheelchair-bound Ray slams through the door and wakes Billy from a sleepy afternoon on the lawn, Billy thinks: "Is that any way to wake a combat soldier? The startle reflex triggering a highly refined set of quick-response skills, i.e., had Billy happened to have his M4 handy, Ray would be a steaming pile of hamburger right about now" (99).

⁸⁹ "Billy has no idea how they got here. That part is blank, like a concussion knocked him clean out of time's flow into the next half hour, for he finds himself deposited on the playing field" (157). The missing time, the blank space, is potentially due to trauma's symptom of constriction.

Less straight-forward but equally present is the talismanic thinking that the Bravos engage in both on the battlefield and off.⁹⁰ Ritual acts as protection against the unforeseen, but with even his slight distance from the war, Billy begins to question its efficacy: “he’s adhered to all such ties and talismans on the day of the canal so maybe it doesn’t matter a damn that they stayed at the W Hotel in Dallas last night, or that said hotel featured an upscale club called, how fucking weird, the Ghost Bar” (53). Immediately after, Billy lists off the “many omens . . . signs and portents to read” alongside the randomness of their occurrence, forcing he and his fellow soldiers to live the “Russian-roulette lifestyle every minute of the day.” Billy describes “[m]ortars falling out of the sky,” rockets, lob bombs, and IEDs. And the clincher, the “sick little pop just off the bridge of his nose, which was, he realized as he tumbled backward, the snap of a bullet breaking the sound barrier as it passed. Inches. Not even that” (53). The experiences drive a fear of the world of possible outcomes, and it is no wonder why signs are read, portents consulted: “Fractions, atoms, and it was all this random, whether you stopped at the piss tube this minute or the next, or skipped seconds at chow, or were curled to the left in your bunk instead of the right, or where you line up in column, that was a big one” (53).

Billy settles into the thought of randomness, the incalculable process of talismans and superstitions. Of course, there are some small ways to live longer on a battlefield, but Billy is focused on the several ways in which you simply can’t ensure safety, the ways you could end up dead for a seemingly-unrelated decision or advent

⁹⁰ “Never cross a threshold with your left foot leading. And others: Fasten body armor from the bottom up, do not start sentences with the letter W, don’t masturbate within six hours of a mission” (52-53).

of time. Randomness itself becomes a point of fixation for Billy in the novel, a refrain for the unpredictability and unfairness of combat and who lives and who dies: “The freaking *randomness* is what wears on you, the difference between life, death, and horrible injury sometimes as slight as stooping to tie your bootlace on the way to chow, choosing the third shitter in line instead of the fourth, turning your head to the left instead of the right. Random” (27).

Randomness in war drives the talismanic impulse that the soldiers engage in, but randomness also points to the propensity for trauma. The inability to prepare for violence—for horrific, life altering violence—creates the conditions for lasting trauma more than just operating in a warzone. The inability to seek safety is a constant stressor. In his *War*, Sebastian Junger describes a study in which Vietnam War soldiers were tested daily for cortisol levels in preparation of a large, upcoming combat. While some men’s stress levels climbed as the expected combat neared and diminished as it failed to take place, others stayed low in expectation of combat and rose only after the anticipated time passed without incident. Of this, Junger writes, “the only explanation the researchers could come up with was that the soldiers had such strong psychological defenses that the attack created a sense of ‘euphoric expectancy’ among them . . . In a way that few civilians could understand, they were more at ease facing a known threat than languishing in the tropical heat facing an unknown one” (35).

It is this randomness that leads to the death of comrades, Billy’s friends like Lake and Shroom. These moments of loss are never given to the reader as the events themselves (or at least the narrative accounting of them), they are instead presented as

symptoms of trauma. Billy relives the death of Lake through the intrusion of the event, brought forth through the word itself. “Lake,” that’s all it takes to get this bleak little movie going, a night shot of, say, the berm road in pale moonlight, crickets cheeping, dogs barking faintly in the distance, the slow suck and gurgle of the nearby canal” (54). In the extended scene in which Billy imagines two Disney-esque legs lost and in search of their body, Billy’s thoughts drift—rather, are triggered by—the word association of “lake,” a deceased comrade who evidently met his grisly end one moonlit night. The “little movie” that Fountain depicts for the reader is a clash of tranquility and horrific violence, an ill-fitting conglomeration meant to juxtapose the war with the media-mediated world it is couched in. However, it is more than just that, it is also the mechanism of trauma, intrusion writ-large in the mind of Billy, who, while seated to eat, disappears into the theater of the mind that recalls loss and terror: “You had to be inside it to understand the pure human misery of that day, the desolation, for instance, one among many, of seeing Lake up on the table fighting off the docs, howling and flailing and slinging blood like he wasn’t being saved but skinned alive” (67). Though the horror of the moment intrudes upon Billy in the present, intermixed is the recognition of having crossed a traumatic threshold: “Billy has come to see that as the breaking point, the bend in his personal arc that day. There was before and there was after, and whatever of his shit he still had together he lost it then, broke down sobbing right there on the aid station ramp” (67). This recognition of trauma is of vast importance as Billy intends to address what he has seen and what has happened to him, but he is met with shallow sycophants or silence whenever he attempts to communicate his experience—though he recognizes his situation and his

need to engage with his trauma, little hope for progress presents itself. Interestingly, Billy's recognition of trauma is simultaneously the very opportunity for recovery he has been searching for in vain in the present.

After he breaks down, Billy thinks, "Surely his mind would have cracked from shock and grief had not Dime shoved him into a supply pantry, slammed him up against the wall and pinned him there as if bent on bodily harm" (67). Within the chaos of the moment, the trauma and its realization, Billy is met with an experience he is wholly unprepared for: the empathy and unabashed intimacy of a fellow soldier. Billy recalls "Dime was weeping too, both of them hacking, gagging on snot, covered in mud and blood and sweat as if they'd just that moment climbed gasping and wrenching from some elemental pit of primordial sludge." (67). The two men embody the chaos of their situation, but the reader can also recognize Dime's own desperation within Billy's memory. Like Billy questing for a witness in the present day, Dime too has reached out for empathy and recognition only to be met with nothing—his incredible appeal to Billy brings the depth of Dime's isolation into sharp relief.

Billy's recollection of the event ends with Dime hissing "I knew it would be you" into Billy's ear, a cry of desperation answered, Dime having finally found someone who chooses grief over callous silence in the face of shared trauma: "*I knew it I knew it I so fucking knew it I am so fucking goddamn proud of you*, then he grabbed Billy's face in both his hands and kissed him full on the lips like a stomp, a whack with a rubber mallet" (67). Billy is left baffled by the experience, but it is this primal craving for understanding that underwrites Billy's own search for recognition in the present day.

The scene, beautifully and horrifically written, is a testament to the amount of juggling Fountain can do in any given moment. The horror of the trauma that unfolds at Billy watching the maimed Lake wage a bloody war against the people trying to save his life, and the subsequent collapse that Billy experiences both internally and externally, is masterfully positioned against the beautiful confusion of the intimacy (that does not seem to be sexual) between Billy and Dime. The two men, both broken-down—but importantly—*alive* to their loss and grief, clawing their way from the “primordial pit” is a devastating rendition of a will to survive, a refusal of numbness amidst institutionalized silence and bravado. Here, we must acknowledge Fountain’s deft manipulation of the scene. The horror of Lake’s death, the chaos of Billy’s interaction with Dime, each could easily constitute war porn if positioned only slightly differently. Instead, the author uses the potential for spectacle to stage the importance of acting as witness for another’s trauma, something he will accuse the civilian as failing to do throughout the novel.

With Shroom’s death, Billy retreats inside his own mind. The impossibility of escape from memory makes Billy’s experience a movie he is coerced into seeing: “Like a slide show, alive, dead, alive, dead, alive, dead. Billy was doing about ten different things at once, unpacking his medical kit, jamming a fresh magazine into his rifle, talking to Shroom, slapping his face, yelling at him to stay awake, trying to track the direction of the incoming rounds and crouching low with absolute fuck-all for cover” (61). The ways in which Billy is not prepared for the death of Shroom is

explicated in his incessant return to the event throughout the novel but also in the impossibility of grasping it in the moment of its occurrence.⁹¹

Doing “ten different things at once” pulls Billy’s focus out from the Hollywood-esque, close-cropped, headshot of death, to just another item on a list of things that Billy cannot contend with at the time. The chaos and confusion that surrounds Shroom’s death fits in to Caruth’s explication of the double inscription of trauma,⁹² further cementing Billy as a figure traumatized by loss and war and further clarifying Fountain as someone who recognizes the importance of trauma within literature—however, the trauma of the individual is not used as Scranton’s trauma hero but as the setting for the American public’s failure of recognition and appropriate action. Trauma lingers throughout *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* in order to reveal civilian inability to contend with it.

These terrible experiences with death, these moments of trauma, prompt a particular thinking within Billy, further explicating the effects of trauma on combat soldiers: “Without ever exactly putting his mind to it, he’s come to believe that loss is the standard trajectory. Something new appears in the world—a baby, say, or a car or a house, or an individual shows some special talent—with luck and huge expenditures

⁹¹ “He felt Shroom’s soul leave his body at the moment of his death, a blinding *whom!* like a high-voltage line blowing out, leaving Billy with all circuits fried and a lingering haze like he’d been whacked by a heavyweight who knows how to hit. A kind of concussion, is what it was. Sometimes he thinks his ears are ringing still” (47). The description, a deeply unfamiliar rendition of loss and tragedy, may yet be understood by those who have experienced what Billy has. However, amidst the almost talismanic thinking in the certainty of Shroom’s departure from the mortal plane, the reader can find purchase in the monumental shift of perspective and psyche upon losing someone close to them. Shroom’s death is pivotal for Billy because it disabuses notions of war-time immortality, and it becomes the nexus for the young soldier’s trauma, the image on repeat inside his own head.

⁹² “[T]he way that the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknown acts of the survivor and against his very will” (*Unclaimed* 2).

of soul and effort you might keep the project stoked for a while, but eventually, ultimately, it's going down" (11). The sentiment is one of a traumatized mind. Like Chris Kyle's resignation toward death that disturbed his wife while he was alive, Billy's "standard trajectory" illustrates, if not a nihilism, a willed ignorance of all that comes between the new and death—an ignorance of love, joy, and the experience of life. It must be said that Billy's thought is not untrue in the strictest sense, whatever comes into this world must surely depart it, and no amount of labor of love will keep it here, but the failure to consider the stuff in-between is revealing to his condition.

In another instance, Billy devotes his thoughts to the workings of fear and how it is the base of human emotion: "Fear is the mother of all emotion. Before love, hate, spite, grief, rage, and all the rest, there was fear, and fear gave birth to them all, and as every combat soldier there are as many incarnations and species of fear as the Eskimo language has words for snow" (114-115). Immediately following his fish-out-of-water moment with the Viagra advertisement-like vitality millionaires (114), Billy ruminates on fear. Not only does Billy enumerate trauma in the following lines, his traumatized mentality rewires his consciousness to put fear at the front of everything, preceding even love—fear becomes the center of the soldier's existence, a kind of constriction in its own right. The list ranges from "[l]oss of sphincter or bladder control . . . [g]iggling, weeping, trembling, numbing out" (115) to more involved responses: "One day he saw an officer roll under his Humvee during a rocket attack, then flatly refuse to come out when it was over. Or Captain Tripp, a pretty good man in the clutch, but when they're really getting whacked his brow flaps up and down like a loose tarp in a high wind" (115). Combat, an experience truly outside the normal range of human

experience, causes varying and wide-reaching responses, the ones Billy has listed only covering those where “the body rebels” (115).

In high-stress situations, in the onslaught of traumatic violence, the body betrays. Billy ticks-off the kinds of bodily betrayals he has been witness to, detailing to the reader further effects of stress and trauma as well as illustrating just how mired in trauma Billy and the Bravos have been, but he is also quick to show that these corporeal rebellions are a part of the randomness he has previously described. While “[c]ertain combat-stress reactions are coded in the genes just as surely as cowlicks or flat feet,” a soldier can be “fearless one day and freak the next, as fickle and spooky as that, as pointless, as dumb” (115). Each of these, he thinks, work on the mind, and indeed they do, they are further stressors to an already-stressful situation. Rather than simply worrying about the hazards of combat, soldiers are also pushed to think about their *response* to those horrors in addition to war itself.

Billy continues to point out the effects of stress and fear on soldiers in combat situations, but he is also registering the consequences of trauma, consequences that are often seemingly-random: “The randomness. He gets so tired of living with the daily beat-down of it, not just the normal animal fear of pain and death but the uniquely human fear of fear itself like a CD stuck on skip-repeat, an ever-narrowing self-referential loop that way well be a form of madness” (115). This “madness” Billy thinks off, the “skip-repeat, an ever-narrowing self-referential loop” is the activity of trauma, the seemingly-incomprehensible that lies outside the normal bounds of reality. The intrusion of trauma cannot always be accounted for as set effects and

consequences⁹³—it is what makes diagnosis often so difficult—but Fountain picking up his thread of randomness in the effects of trauma is an important step in dismantling the trope-laden operation of trauma in trauma hero narratives. It is not always self-medication and violence directed both inward and out, it can be the form of madness that defies logic, it can be nearly anything—we do not yet (nor might we ever) have a complete understanding of what trauma does to individuals in particular situations.

Each of these experiences shapes Billy’s mentality: “I am a changed man, Billy solemnly told himself. The person you see before you is not the person you were” (86). This is after Billy returns to his family home, where his parents and sisters muddle through a fleeting day with the son who must return to war. The quiet inactivity of the day is pleasing to Billy, but he thinks about how this would be impossible before he joined the military, as if he had grown up exponentially during deployment: “Iraq aged you in dog years” (86). This day turns out to be one of reflection for Billy, and he considers the sliver of silver lining that war brings: “Perhaps this was what came of being a soldier in Iraq, and the farther perspective war brought to things” (86). And only a little later: “Billy felt so much older than nineteen, as if blessed with wisdom beyond his years. Had the war done this? All that ever got talked about was how war was supposed to fuck you up, true enough but maybe not the whole truth” (103).⁹⁴

⁹³ “there may not be one simple, generalizable set of rules that can determine in advance the truth of any particular case” (*Explorations* ix).

⁹⁴ “Billy had to tackle him from time to time, wrestle him squealing to the ground just to get that little rascal in his hands, just your basic adorable thirty-month-old with big blue eyes clear as chlorine pools and Huggies poking out of his stretchy-waist jeans. So is that what they meant by *the sanctity of life*? A

Throughout the novel, people have commented on how Billy seems much older than he is. In his home-time reflection, he recognizes that fact and attributes it to the war, and in this ambivalence of that which war gives, the reader finds another glimmer of truth in Fountain's work. The trauma of the war is apparent in this novel—in each novel that this dissertation has covered or alluded too—but seldom do we see a moment like this where a character is also given perspective or insight that is also not deliberately deluding. The real value of Fountain's novel from a civilian perspective is its ability to speak *all* the truths of war. It would be so incredibly easy for a civilian writer to linger on the trauma inflicted by war, to bemoan the trauma hero, and to languish in the easy truths of combat spectacle and war porn, but Fountain resists and uses his novel to express varied and sometimes conflicting truths about war while also reproaching the public attitude to the wars.

And with the recognition of war as a complicated and multi-faceted reality, so too comes the realization that war is also terrible, that it dictates one's actions and normalizes that which would never occur to a civilian. For instance, when thinking about *not* killing, Billy thinks, "Mercy was not a selection, period. Only later did the concept of mercy even occur to Billy, and only in the context of its absence in that

soft groan escaped Billy when he thought about that, the war revealed in this fresh and gruesome light. Oh. Ugh. Divine spark, image of God, suffer the little children and all that—there's real power when words attach to actual things. Made him want to sit right down and weep, as powerful as that. He got it, yes he did, and when he came home for good he'd have to meditate on this, but for now it was best to *compartmentalize*, as they said, or even better not to mentalize at all" (83).

The scene here, with Billy chasing his nephew around his family home, constitutes a realization for our protagonist, not exactly the costs of war but what is at stake. For Billy, nineteen and unused to thinking outside of himself, the moment is powerful and totalizing. His emotion is raw and complete, but almost as soon as it comes, he bottles it. It is no accident that Fountain uses compartmentalization here; he is identifying Billy as having to close down emotional fronts in order to be able to return to the war and also have a chance at surviving it. This is not a choice that Billy is making, it is a survival technique. Though Billy is momentarily home, we cannot think of him as post-traumatic—his trauma is on-going and will not be addressed unless he first survives his deployment.

place, a foreclosing of options that reached so far back in history that quite possibly mercy had not been an option there since before all those on the battlefield were born” (125). Billy reflects on his lack of mercy after the fact and his assessment is one that echoes the consequences of Othering. The rules of ‘No Mercy’ predate these soldiers on this particular battlefield, is imbricated in decades upon decades of political strife and the perceived danger of the unknown, those who do not look like us and who do not speak the same language. The importance of Billy recognizing the fact of Othering our enemies is that it illustrates the inability of escaping a system you have been interpolated into.

The “foreclosing of options” that Billy cites is owed to military hegemony and psychological imperative. Moral injury crops up in situations like these, where soldiers have been conditioned to act antithetical to their beliefs, however, Billy does not appear to suffer from moral injury. The ease in the destruction of his enemies is born from his own foreclosing of options that led him to the military and to war—moral injury is a condition for those with strong convictions. And while it is possible that Billy will suffer from moral injury upon returning to the war after learning of the sanctity of life through his nephew, in the first part of his deployment, he is the amanuensis for American military might.

Fountain’s careful addition of traumatic symptoms throughout his novel culminate in the titular halftime. As pointed out by Brian Williams in his “The Soldier-Celebrity in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*,” the chapter in which the halftime show occurs is titled, “Raped by Angels,” a phrase used earlier in the novel to describe combat. In this way, we can see Billy’s experience on the battlefield (and the

trauma that has scarred him there) as analogous to the traumatic symptoms—and perhaps a new instance of trauma itself—experienced during the show. Fountain’s purpose in detailing this is to illustrate just how untenable America’s support the troops rhetoric is in the face the real problem of veteran trauma and healing.

Previously in the text, Billy thinks about his distance from the war, something that is not simply spatial but mental, as well:

The war is out there somewhere but Billy can’t feel it, like his sole experience with morphine when he could not feel pain. At one point he even tried as an experiment, stared at his cut-up arms and legs thinking *hurt*, but the notion simply gassed into thin air. That’s how the war feels now, it is at most a presence or pressure on his mind, awareness without content, an experiential doughnut hole. (71)

The extended image is a useful tool for the reader to understand Billy’s accounting of his experience. By this point in the novel, the reader already know that the war crops up at random intervals, memories set in motion by words or images, but until this point we have had little idea of Bravo’s moment-to-moment engagement with the war that is still waiting for them. The “presence or pressure on his mind” indicates that Billy is never quite free of the specter of war, but the “experiential doughnut hole,” that “awareness without content” points to a willed forgetting. Simply put, there is no way Billy and the Bravos could return to the site of their loss, grief, and trauma while in the safety and relative comfort provided by civilian life without first compartmentalizing the war. Soldiers returning from deployments only to reenter the battlefield on a second or third deployment are forced to put the war at arm’s length,

otherwise, a return would be impossible. And yet, the halftime show in which Billy is forced to participate allows the war to come screaming back, not just in the ways it triggers symptoms of trauma but the gross misguided nature of the event as something attempting to show support or respect.

As Billy and his fellow Bravos are about to be marched out onto the field at halftime, a cacophony of light and sound awakens all the warning sensors military life has trained into them. Explosions cause the Bravos to flinch, some laugh (Lodis), some close down (Crack), and Billy thinks, “If there ever was a prime-time trigger for PTSD you couldn’t do much better than this . . . Pupils dilated, pulse and blood pressure through the roof, limbs trembling with stress-reflex cortisol rush” (230-231). If Al-Ankasar Canal is the heart of the Bravos trauma in war, the halftime show at the Dallas Cowboys football game is its companion on the home front with its overwhelm of sensory information and its acute stress reminiscent of combat situations: “Such an unholy barrage of noise pours forth that Billy thinks he might be lifted off his feet. It is a dam bursting, bridges collapsing at rush hour, tsunamis of killer froth and boulder-sized debris revising the contours of the known world” (232). The cacophony prompts Billy to think of what was said to him before being deployed to Iraq: “*Just assume you’re going to die*” (232).

What ensues is a litany of spectacle to rival the warzones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Destiny’s Child strut out on stage, moving through the chaos like divine forces; fireworks and pyrotechnics spew forth from the stage; “stage dancers go right on humping like the nastiest video on MTV” (233); an orgy of people, rivaling that of

Conan the Barbarian (1982), passes for choreography;⁹⁵ and Billy thinks, “Fine, be happy, is Billy’s attitude. They can cheer and scream and holler all they want, but it’s nothing, their show, just fluff, filler, it’s got nothing to do with Billy or going back to the war” (234). What Billy is witnessing—what he has unwillingly become a part of—is distilled spectacle, war porn without the actual war. Billy thinks of “all those busy little biochemical devils of sex and death and war that simmer at the base of the skull” that stimulate the crowd. “Maybe they don’t know what they know,” he thinks, the scene before him “so random, so perfect, so porn-lite out of its mind on martial dope” (235). The spectacle is engineered to whip the audience into a frenzy, a fervor that has almost nothing to do with the war but is conflated with it through the tantalization of the forbidden knowledge and experience combat has been mystified with: “Short of blood sacrifice or actual sex on the field, you couldn’t devise a better spectacle” (235).

In possibly the most explicit reference to war porn in the novel, Fountain has Billy question the knowing of the civilians, their desire for the “porn-lite” and “martial dope” that the show personifies. The façade of “God and country” that obfuscates the truth of the show—its purpose—for the civilian voyeur is the same force that empties Bravo of their identities and places them in an even more precarious position after their traumatization in war.

Further evidence that the halftime show is as much a form of trauma as the canal comes in the form of Sykes’s behavior during their part in the show. Sykes

⁹⁵ “How many dozens of times has Bravo watched Crack’s Conan DVDs, many dozens, they know every line by heart, and out of all the streamings and veerings of his over-amped brain Billy flashes on the palace orgy scene, James Earl Jones as the snake king sitting on his throne while his stoned minions sprawl about the floor, slurping and licking and humping in glassy-eyed bliss” (234).

weeps and Billy is unsurprised, hoping it will end before they all lose their minds (239). The significance of the expectation of appearance cannot be overlooked in this scene. Billy, and presumably the other Bravos, are proud of their comrade from “keeping it together”—at least apparently. The truth, and we know this from Billy’s thoughts at the beginning of this chapter, is that chaos roils within each of them and it is only the coincidence of their reactions to trauma and re-traumatization that prevents some from breaking down right there on the field.⁹⁶

After the show, Billy confesses to Dime that he feels sick, “‘Not like sick sick. More like bent. Baked.’ He taps his head. ‘Halftime sort of skitzed me out’” (242). The event is one that may even rank with the canal—ranks perhaps *because* of the canal. Either way, Dime’s response to Billy is telling: “Son, try to look at it this way. It’s just another normal day in America” (242). The level of spectacle that the typical American consumer is subjected to is so much that a hardened combat soldier succumbs to it. Whether the experience was as harrowing because of their recent trauma, or in spite of it, the reader can easily see the halftime show as its own brand of trauma, one made possible by what Fountain calls the Fantasy Industrial Complex.

Spectacle:

The spectacle that has been present in other trauma novels arises in *Halftime Walk* as a result of Billy and his fellow Bravos emptying of identity, their trauma is

⁹⁶ Unless, of course, we fully recognize the halftime performance as analogous to Bravo’s battlefield experience. If we see these events as such, then the soldiers’ lack of widespread implosion during the show is due to the suppression of traumatic symptoms during the event—the consequences will only develop later on.

overshadowed by the competing reality of consumer America and the Fantasy Industrial Complex, or the “avalanche of electronica, entertainment, and media” (xii) that Fountain refers to in his essay, “Soldier’s on the Fault Line: War, Rhetoric, and Reality.”⁹⁷ In that essay, Fountain argues that “our culture is stupid” and that stupidity makes us numb to the consequences of war (xi), namely the trauma of those who we send to fight them. The danger of being numb is that when the “hard stuff of life” (xii) crops up, we lack the ability to deal with and survive it. What Fountain is arguing without putting theory terms to it is that pre-traumatic numbing manufactures a vulnerability to trauma itself and that contemporary American culture engineers susceptibility. The collective trauma of 9/11 is made more potent by our lack “of emotional and intellectual tools” (xii). We know from Herman and others that populations can be vulnerable to trauma, precarious peoples can be affected more heavily by the hammer of a traumatic event. However, those factors that contribute to threatened populations are not the same as those that Fountain writes of. Instead, how Fountain’s argument here should be understood is as a blindsiding.

If we look all the way back to Freud’s story of an accident in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Caruth’s gloss in *Unclaimed Experience*, Fountain’s numbed America as ill-equipped for trauma (and therefore susceptible to that trauma) becomes clear. The “shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident” (Caruth 6), or the “lack of preparedness for anxiety” (Freud 36) that precedes stimuli, illustrates the

⁹⁷ Williams argues that the celebrity-like status of combat soldiers threatens civilian identity and masculinity—soldiers are admired for things that civilians simply cannot achieve—as well as engenders a sense of guilt about “potential mistreatment of returning soldiers. Supporting the troops resolves these doubts through the ways it empties actual veterans of their identities, transforming them into a mass of uniforms” (526).

“traumatizing shock of a commonly occurring violence” (Caruth 6). In other words, to be blindsided by an even mundane act of violence (a train accident for Freud and Caruth) creates the conditions for trauma precisely because of how an individual experiencing the event fails to fully comprehend it. “What returns to haunt the victim,” Caruth writes, “is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). And it is this not-yet-known quality of trauma that informs Fountain’s discussion of numbed America.

Where other novels have used spectacle as a way to entice readers, Fountain utilizes spectacle in the novel to reveal it as a consequence of being numb to the conditions of war and the effects it has on our soldiers. The result is a fractured veteran population and a glassy-eyed blindness in the civilian population. In a direct comparison to his own trauma and the vacancy of civilians unknown to combat, Billy meditates on the effects of death: “Having served on their behalf as a frontline soldier, Billy finds himself constantly wondering about them. What are they thinking? What do they want? Do they know they’re alive? As if prolonged and intimate exposure to death is what’s required to fully inhabit one’s present life” (22). In a mentality bent by war, Billy thinks that it is lingering death that gives life meaning. And certainly, the *presence* of death is what gives life its weight and heft, but that phrase, “prolonged and intimate exposure,” implies a contamination, an indelible mark that forever warps perception.

A few lines later, Billy again considers the fat and happy civilians at the Dallas Cowboys Stadium and realizes, “the war makes him wish for a little more than the loose jaw and dull stare of the well-fed ruminant” (22-23). It is a classic representation

of the jaded soldier, the trauma hero who *knows* more than the home-rooted civilian ever could. However, Fountain is not pushing the trauma hero narrative for identification with Billy, he is highlighting this aspect of the well-worn and fraught narrative in order to draw the reader's attention to the portrayal of themselves, the war-hungry and fat-fed civilian who is so far removed from the war and its immediate effects.

This marks one of Fountain's primary purposes within the novel, the incessant condemnation of the American public and the reality they have fabricated, the Fantasy Industrial Complex, in the face of a collective trauma and external threat. This too is what separates Fountain's novel from many others within war writing; it does not seek to substantially add to the veteran experience of war or its aftermath, but instead turn a critical eye on the American public and their singular response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Billy is unable to find someone to listen because the American public has been educated in ignorance. And if someone like Billy, who *wants* to encounter his experience and work-through his trauma, appears doomed to fail due to a lack of interest on the parts of civilians, there can be no more forceful argument for a change in the way we handle war and its aftermath.

Williams argues that, "*Halftime Walk* emphasizes the civilian investment in support-the-troops rhetoric and considers its logic. As a result of the heavily scripted cultural memory surrounding Vietnam, one of the most important connotations of supporting the troops involves acceptance back into the homeland" (528). Williams cites Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and even the film, *First Blood* as examples of homecomings gone wrong. All of these, the

author argues, bubble up from a sense of civilian guilt about the “American ‘myth’ surrounding Vietnam.” The perception of mistreatment motivates the attitude toward our current wars: “The myth of the spat-upon veteran captures this absence [the idea that some amount of veteran suffering stems from never truly returning home], as it represents direct civilian rejection. This legacy has haunted American, underlying much of the contemporary support-the-troops rhetoric” (530). Ultimately, “support-the-troops rhetoric regulates the wartime populace, that this rhetoric is a political tactic used to either justify or rescript conversations about more contemporary wars” (527-528). This rescripting is necessitated by civilian guilt: “Fountain shows how this massive outpouring of support is meant to heal the *civilian* populace, who through historical rewriting have been figured culturally as *perpetrators* in the historical trauma of Vietnam” (532). Support for the troops becomes a Nietzschean unburdening for the self—the antithesis of supporting veterans.

Fountain demonstrates this idea explicitly when he has Billy think, “No one spits, no one calls him baby-killer. On the contrary, people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed, yet Billy finds these encounters weird and frightening all the same” (38). The fawning that the star-struck civilians impose upon Bravo becomes unsettling in its lack of circumspection. Billy himself notes this immediately after being assailed: “There’s something harsh in his fellow Americans, avid, ecstatic, a burning that comes of the deepest need. That’s his sense of it, they all need something from him, this pack of half-rich lawyers, dentists, soccer moms, and corporate VPs, they’re all gnashing for a piece of a barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year” (38-39). Billy and the Bravos have become scapegoats of a kind,

opposite in reception—deified rather than denigrated—but akin in positioning. Williams points out that, “By celebrating Bravo, the supportive Americans in *Halftime Walk* mitigate and ignore the complexities of war, terrorism, and global politics, transforming these emblematic figures into something much more straightforward and nonthreatening” (533).⁹⁸ This emptying of veterans is entirely in service of the civilian, making them comfortable in their numb ignorance. However, Fountain’s focus on the civilian through the novel is a realignment, it forces us to consider again the soldier’s situation through the tragedy of Billy’s experience and subsequent homecoming and pull ourselves from our obliviousness. Though Fountain’s novel ultimately forsakes Billy, Fountain himself is arguing for attention to be paid to our veterans, to supply them with the witness that working-through requires.

In the novel, the Bravos become singular touchstones for the war. For the simplification to work, Billy and his comrades need to be immaculate in the eyes of the public, the defenders of faith and country, opposers of terror—white knights of modern war. And throughout the book, no matter what they say, the Bravos are seen as fulfilling that role, playing into preconceived ideas of the exemplary soldier, the ideal of the American combat infantryman. Billy sees this in their reactions: “They breathe the moment, because here, finally, up close and personal, is the war made flesh, an actual point of contact after all the months and years of reading about the war, watching the war on TV, hearing the war flogged and flacked on talk radio” (39).

⁹⁸ And while it may be outside the purview of this particular chapter, Williams raises an important point about the privileging of intact heroes: “By celebrating physically intact heroes, the halftime show allows audiences to ignore any wounded or disabled veterans, those returning home in need of more than a yellow ribbon and a free football ticket” (533).

Fountain develops the passage as an echo of his condemnation of the American Fantasy Industrial Complex and as a consequence of the glorification of the war and its soldiers. The pervasive mass media has made gods out of men—soldiers as stand-ins for the war for America and freedom—and it has made a spectacle out of those who know.

In addition to the argument for the modern media saturation that brings the lie of the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, Fountain is also pointing to an aspect of the trauma hero and war porn. Billy and the Bravos are those who *know*, who have experienced the war in a terrible and real way that 99 percent of Americans never can, and what's more, they are put on display for it. The civilian reaction to their presence is that of film stars at movie premieres, icons of entertainment rather than soldiers home from war. This is due to the fact that the Bravos *are* stars in this situation, “the war made flesh,” a media war outfitted and weighed-down with the ideals of the modern American.

This kind of recognition makes witnessing impossible. As we see with Billy throughout, no one is willing to listen to the reality of the war and its experience because they are too enamored of the image of the wars that has been presented to them. Once again, Fountain criticizes the public, the civilian who refuses to see through the PR campaign, and it is the soldier who pays the price.

In another of the now-familiar accostings, Billy sees further into the fervor of the war-hungry civilian, the elated and sated recipient of war porn: “I couldn’t stop watching! . . . It was just like nina leven [9/11]” (44). Fountain entwines the spectacles of war with 9/11 and boils them down to the same experience for the viewer. The

proud woman experiences the same emotions about both events, and that singularity of reaction reveals the shallowness of that state. Rather than examine the implications of either, she watches the replayed footage “for hours,” reveling in the spectacle and eschewing meaning. This is further revealed in the next paragraph, when the people the woman is with enter the one-sided conversation: “‘It was like a movie,’ chimes her daughter-in-law, getting into the spirit . . . ‘It *was*. I had to keep telling myself *this is real*, these are *real* American soldiers fighting for our freedom, this is *not* a movie. Oh *God* I was just so happy that day, I was *relieved* more than anything, like we were finally paying them back for nina leven” (44).⁹⁹ The nature of the spectacle is drawn out to its mass media equivalent and largest informer, the movie. The pride that the woman espouses is replaced with relief, a catharsis of violence at the entangled spectacles of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—relief to know that blood is being shed on her behalf thousands of miles away, where her freedom is supposedly being protected. This is yet another indictment of the war machine and the process by which the young are sent out to die on foreign soil so that the happy public, growing fat on excess, can find relief in their lives.¹⁰⁰

Billy is told by another of the civilians that watching their footage was “cathartic . . . Just a huge morale boost for everybody” (193). What is (at least one of)

⁹⁹ “[T]hat was one of the biggest thrills of my life, no lie. It’s hard to put into words just what I was feeling, but it was, I don’t know, just a beautiful moment” (192). Another civilian is caught up in the spectacle of Bravos heroics, the satiation of war porn is inexpressible as the trauma wrought in that same experience.

¹⁰⁰ Even during Billy’s day of rest at his family home in small-town Texas, he runs into various townspeople that knew him before war. Now that he’s a war hero, it’s nothing but kind words and spectacle-hungry grotesques: “Nice people but they did go on, and so *fierce* about the war. They were transformed at such moments, talking about war—their eyes bugged out, their necks bulged, their voices grew husky with bloodlust” (86-87). The ordinary people that Billy encounters at home morph into carnal beasts that revel in blood and flesh.

Billy's foundational trauma(s) is a relief to the American public, something that further elucidates the uneven relationship between soldiers and civilians. Little to no care is given to Billy and his fellow Bravos, no accounting for their experience of being under fire and losing friends and comrades. Instead, the effect it has on civilians is what is privileged, and in this way we can see the soldier acting again as instrument for the public—the soldier exists only as a tool to alter the state of the civilian; the soldiers themselves are ignored.

When Billy is subjected to a gaggle of wealthy civilians asking him the typical questions they ask of combat soldiers, Billy unintentionally draws their laughter. He's asked if he was scared during his experience, and he answers in the affirmative, but adds, "I guess it's like my sergeant says, as long as you've got plenty of ammo, you'll probably be okay" (194). However, Billy's internal response to the laughter at that statement is what interests a reader: "Sometimes he has to remind himself there's no dishonor in it. He hasn't told any lies, he doesn't exaggerate, yet so often he comes away from these encounters with the sleazy, gamey aftertaste of having lied" (194). What is compelling about this passage is that no reason is given as to Billy's negative feeling, Fountain leaves that open to the reader. However, taken in a trauma context, Billy's reaction is entirely coherent. Having relayed something true, a message of Dime's meant to calm his men (and, more importantly) keep them alive, those outside the experience view it as comedy—they misapprehend the message. In other words, Billy's truth-telling is taken as a joke and the audience becomes a failed witness for its gross misunderstanding of the situation. "This epiphany reveals how Billy and the Bravos ultimately have been rendered outsiders to the home they defend. The

experience of war has disconnected him from his home, and the adulation has further exiled him to the puppet role revealed in the halftime show, empty of agency and potential participation” (Williams 540). The dearth of true support mars Billy’s interactions as a young soldier trying to find purchase in the world as an adult, as not solely defined by his role as an American infantryman. From this, Williams argues that “[t]rue support . . . would involve a negotiation of conflicting realities, rather than simple reintegration” (541). Instead of reintegration, Williams argues that we need “a reconfiguration of individual experience instead of blanket collectivity” and an acceptance of “the potential damage to the home front” (541). A collision of these two separated worlds would not be painless, but it would ease the burden of the veteran and force civilians to take responsibility for the wars they claim to support.

Even Billy’s “relationship” with Faison can be seen as an extension of the victory spectacle has won against truth and witnessing. As Billy listens to the woman sing the national anthem at halftime, he reflects on the effects on war: “This lady can really belt it out. Tears the size of lug nuts are tumbling down their cheeks but that’s the kind of thing war does to you. Sensations are heightened, time compressed, passions aroused, and while a single dry-hump might seem a slender reed on which to build a lifetime relationship, Billy would like to think this is where the logic leads” (206). Billy’s thoughts of war swivel suddenly to his budding (and probably, ultimately doomed) relationship with Faison, the Dallas Cowboys cheerleader who believes God brought the two together for the “single dry-hump” that still left Billy sexually unfulfilled. The mental association is rendered because it is war that is at the heart of Billy’s experience today, the fervor he witnesses and the spectacle he is

subjected to—made to be a part of, in fact. Faison is the example of the “passions aroused,” while time is compressed for Billy as he is paraded through the countless hordes of those who feel an almost-religious elation and adoration at the sight of the Bravos. Williams again is helpful here: “The ease with which they touch his body demonstrates his value as a product, a commodity, as if their own self-affirmation depends on his objectification” (538), which aligns with Fountain’s text in that, “Part of being a soldier is accepted that your body does not belong to you” (Fountain 206). The well-wishers push and prod him, grab at him and claim ownership of his body. Even Faison, the Dallas Cowboys cheerleader who believes she and Billy were fated to meet and will live a lifelong relationship together, gets off on him moments after they meet. In a way, she too is making use of his body, fully accepting the narrative that soldiers are the tools of democracy, free for all.¹⁰¹

As the novel comes to a close, Billy thinks about the pointlessness of making a movie, and these thoughts come as a direct result of the victory of spectacle that is precipitated by our American failure to contend properly with trauma. Of the “three minutes and forty-three seconds of high-intensity warfare as seen through a stumbling you-are-there point of view, the battle sounds backgrounded by a slur of heavy breathing and the bleeped expletives of the daring camera crew” (288) that comprises the actual footage of his experience, he thinks “It’s so real it looks fake—too showy, too hyped up and cinematic, a B-movie’s defiant or defensive flirtation with the

¹⁰¹ Billy’s “presence as a war celebrity reaffirms her faith in God and country, while also providing an illicit titillation, desiring his body for the different abstractions it represents. While her motives might be genuine, they nonetheless mark their relationship as one focused on the multiple desires she feels, to which Billy’s individuality takes a secondary role” (Williams 532).

referential limits of kitsch” (288). Our society has been inundated with fakeness, with unreality, to the point that the real comes off as trying too hard, too cinematic. That reality is that, “Nothing looks so real as a fake . . . though ever since seeing the footage for himself Billy has puzzled over the fact that it doesn’t look like any battle he was ever in. Therefore you have the real that looks fake twice over, the real that looks so real it looks fake and the real that looks nothing like the real and thus fake, so maybe you do need all of Hollywood’s craft and guile to bring it back to the real” (289). The twisted situation that Billy describes illustrates just how removed American culture is from the reality of war, particularly its consequences. A movie such as Billy describes would only reinforce the Image that is war, but a novel like Fountain’s would serve to undercut that image.

The idea that, “Nothing looks so real as a fake,” is both a condemnation of our media-saturated culture and a meta-commentary about Fountain’s own project. The artifice of Hollywood is in the same family as the artifice of the writer, and what Fountain has done with *Halftime Walk* is analogous to the critiques that Billy levies here. The reason that we should value Fountain’s novel—and not take him at Billy’s words here—is that the author is correct about our American failure, our inability to handle the conflicting truth of trauma and its sufferers. Fountain’s answer is to use art as a form of mediation, to deliver the urgency and need to dismantle the false reality of war that we have wrapped in the guise of patriotism, justice, and support-the-troops language, and embrace the impossibility of trauma in an effort to enable veterans and civilians alike to heal.

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