

Dialectics of Humanism:
Thematic Readings of the Literature of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars

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Abstract

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Since ultimate military failure in the Vietnam War (1964–75), the United States has changed its management of wars, making full use of advanced military technology to carry out small-scale wars and continue imposing its global dominance without risking involvement in military and political quagmires. Shedding the spectre of the Vietnam War, however, proved particularly elusive at the onset of the Iraq War (2003-11) and cultural commentators have questioned if Iraq War has become another Vietnam in terms of a seismic culture change. While ample research has studied the changes in military engagement and the emergence of “postmodern combat” after the Vietnam War, scant discussion has been offered on the role of the two wars in recontextualizing the human discourse.

This thesis steers away from the rigid analysis which defines the contemporary scholarly approach to both wars and instead pays special attention to the insider perspectives of veterans to better understand the changing conception of “the human” through the prism of war. Taking into consideration the central role that Vietnam War played in creating postmodern confusion and disillusionment, the main objective of the thesis is to thoroughly examine Iraq War narratives to develop a discussion concerning the ways in which veterans extend, subvert or transcend the postmodern politics that informed Vietnam War narratives.

The thesis adopts a thematic-based analysis of cultural texts from both wars in order to identify veterans’ contrasting responses to the militarization of the body (chapter 2), the mental and physical trauma that ensues from war disabling injuries (chapter 3), the hyper-masculine military culture (chapter 4), and the long-held strategy to dehumanize the enemy (chapter 5). It argues that war narratives depart from traditional war templates, beginning in Vietnam and then more fully in Iraq, by presenting emerging posthuman concepts such as relational embodiments, psychological resilience, gender fluidity and worldly encounters. In spite of the similarities between the Vietnam and Iraq wars that this thesis documents, it also identifies and explores notable differences relating to social and historical particularities that shaped each war and each era.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my one and only daughter, Maysa, whose birth made completing this thesis first impossible, and then urgent.

Table of Contents

Introduction: U.S. Warfare in Transition from Vietnam to Iraq	1
Chapter 1: Contested Boundaries between History, Theory and Literature	22
The Cold War Era: The Vietnam War	22
The Post-Cold War Era: The Iraq War	38
Conclusion	52
Chapter 2: Militarization of Bodies and the Question of Technology	54
Bodies at Wars: The Making of Soldiers	57
The Mechanization of Body and Mind in Philip Caputo's <i>A Rumor of War</i>	63
Seeking Danger in Kathryn Bigelow's <i>The Hurt Locker</i>	71
Playing Army in Colby Buzzell's <i>My War</i>	78
"The Predator will Fight for You:" Matt Martin's <i>Predator</i>	85
Conclusion	92
Chapter 3: Veterans' Disabilities, Trauma, and the Road to Recovery	94
Trauma between Then and Now	98
The Living Dead Man: Ron Kovic's <i>Born on the Fourth of July</i>	105
Seeing the Pain up Close in Mark Wilkerson's <i>Tomas Young's War</i>	113
There is Always a Way out: Kayla Williams' <i>Plenty of Time</i>	119
Universal Humanism in James Cameron's <i>Avatar</i>	126
Conclusion	133
Chapter 4: The Construction of Gender between Stasis and Fluidity	136
Masculinities in Transition	141
"A Double Loser:" Robert Mason's <i>Chickenhawk</i>	147
"I Am Not This Man," Joshua Key's <i>The Deserter's Tale</i>	153
"The Marine is just a Human in a Uniform:" Jane Blair's <i>Hesitation Kills</i>	159
The Soul has no Gender: Kristen Beck's <i>Warrior Princess</i>	166
Conclusion	173
Chapter 5: Dehumanization of War and Emerging Self/Other Dynamics	176
The Limits of Dehumanization and the Lessons of Vietnam	180
The Paradox of Dehumanization in Michael Herr's <i>Dispatches</i>	185
Moral Injury in Phil Klay's <i>Redeployment</i>	192
One War and Two Perspectives: Helen Benedict's <i>Sand Queen</i>	199
Coming to Know Iraqis: Brian Turner's <i>My Life as a Foreign Country</i>	205
Conclusion	208
Conclusion: Towards Posthuman Narratives and Politics	211
Bibliography	222

Introduction

U.S Warfare in Transition from Vietnam to Iraq

“It’s coming. Imagine a warrior—with the intellect of a human and the immortality of a machine—controlled by our thoughts.”

—Tony Tether, (2002)¹

War was undoubtedly on the top of many Americans’ minds when Tony Tether, Director of Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), commenced the 2002 DARPATech symposium. Barely a year removed from the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” was already underway. One year later, U.S. Coalition forces would launch an invasion of Iraq under the supposition that Saddam Hussein was harbouring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Still, even on the brink of war a DARPA symposium themed “Transforming Fantasy” explored the likelihood that rapidly developing technologies would re-define warfare for future soldiers, offering a real-world scenario that had only previously been imagined in science fiction. “Who are these future warfighters?” Dr. Tether asked his audience: “They are our children ... Our fantasies today will be their reality in the future.”² If Tether’s pronouncements were considered a portent of things to come, then there was hope in the air that soldiers’ bodies might be replaced by cyborg warriors. War, it was imagined, might become less a death-driven enterprise and more a matter of technological and economic superiority.³

As this thesis sets out to explore the intersection of technology and the human condition in the context of the Iraq War, it is vital to consider that DARPA’s commitment to transform revolutionary technological concepts to practical capabilities is not only specific to the twentieth-first century wars. The US-led Manhattan Project, which developed nuclear bombs during the Second World War, brought about the most

¹ Tony Tether, “DARPATech 2002 Welcoming Speech,” *Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency Archive*, accessed September 30, 2018, http://archive.darpa.mil/DARPATech2002/presentations/diro_pdf/speeches/TETHER.pdf, 5.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ A survey of DARPA’s projects—at least those that remain unclassified—draw from a diverse array of fields including neuroscience, biology, genetics, pharmacology, nanotechnology and robotics. For further readings, look at Jai Galliot and Mianna Lotz, *Super Soldiers* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Armin Krishnan, *Killer Robots* (London: Routledge, 2016).

advanced revolution in the history of the military.⁴ The nuclear revolution fundamentally changed relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of the Cold War.⁵ The interest of the Soviet Union to conduct research in the field of nuclear weapons, and the eventual nuclear arms race that ensued between the two nations made the U.S. prepare for a conventional large-scale warfare, with a combat-ready fighting force capable of responding to traditional as well as nuclear threats. U.S. victories in Europe and the Pacific during World War II embedded in the American psyche that conventional methods of war are the only way to guarantee military success.⁶

While the strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction helped the two countries avoid attacking each other, the fear of communist influence over war-torn countries in Eastern Europe and South Asia paved the way for the U.S. to form a national policy to contain its geopolitical expansion. The strategy of containment, otherwise known as the Truman Doctrine, was a 1940s initiative proposed by George Kennan to enforce a zero-tolerance policy for the spread of communism outside of countries already part of the communist bloc.⁷ The wars in both Korea and Vietnam were primarily fought based on the Truman Doctrine. Although war in Korea (1950-53) ended in a stalemate, the Truman Doctrine held sway over the U.S. foreign policy, such that when the communists in South Vietnam formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960—otherwise known as the Viet Cong—to fight against the anti-communist regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. began preparation for a war to block Communist North Vietnam taking over the South.⁸ Prepared to fight only a conventional war, military planners envisioned the war to unfold like the recent conflict the U.S. fought in Europe.

However, fighting a limited war against NLF and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) wore down American resources over an extended period, costing thousands of American and Vietnamese lives. The chaotic nature of the war, eventually, was a catalyst for change—a change that restructured the U.S. military approach to wars and foreign

⁴ James R. Fitzsimonds and Jan M. Van Tol, “Revolutions in Military Affairs,” *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 4, (Spring 1994): 24-31, 25.

⁵ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 372.

⁶ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 164.

⁷ Thomas G. Paterson, *Meeting the Communist Threat: Truman to Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131.

⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 456.

policy.⁹ Determined not to mimic the extended fiasco in Vietnam, the Office of Net Assessment was created in 1973 as a think tank headed by Andrew Marshall to strengthen the military, and to focus innovations toward the particular threats that America may face in the future.¹⁰ The office stimulated a discussion of a possible emergence of revolution in military affairs, leading eventually to “postmodern” ways of conducting wars.

A decade and a half after the formal end of the Vietnam War, the year 1991 saw radical changes, first with the abrupt end to the first Gulf War in February, and second with the final dissolution of the Soviet Union in December. These successive events created a diplomatic need to restructure international politics in the post-Cold War Era.¹¹ The swift victory of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf War through precision attacks emphasized the U.S. technological capabilities to render the power of the Iraqi forces ineffective. Most importantly, the Gulf War restored America’s belief in itself when President George H. W. Bush proclaimed that “the specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”¹² The war, in short, helped shape the future of warfare with the effectiveness of superior airpower and information technology to secure victory and reduce casualties.¹³

But nothing else changed the U.S. national policy more than the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Starting with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall at the close of 1980s, there was a collective belief that the world order had changed since then. As the Soviet bloc lost its stranglehold on Eastern European countries and democratic elections spread across communist Europe—signalling the end of the Cold War—the balance of power began shifting solely to the U.S.¹⁴ The end of the Cold War was a turning point in human history, indicating the death of traditional warfare and heralding a future whereby wars would either no longer be fought, or that conflicts would occur in nonconventional ways. Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* (1992), for instance, envisions a future

⁹ Keith L. Shimko, *The Iraq Wars and America’s Military Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich and Barry Watts, *The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American Defense Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 95.

¹¹ Philip Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity* (Oxen: Routledge, 2007), 7.

¹² George H. W. Bush, “Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region” (*National Archives* March 2, 1991), accessed March 20, 2017, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2758>.

¹³ Fitzsimonds and Van Tol, “Revolutions in Military Affairs,” 27.

¹⁴ Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity*, 16.

without conflicts, marked by the triumph and spread of western-styled democracies around the world.¹⁵ Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilization* (1996), however, argued the global politics of the post-Cold War era would involve less a conflict of interests and would instead give rise to a scenario in which civilizations would affirm their identities in contrast to other encroaching cultures.¹⁶

The new international scene opened a pathway for the Americans to depart from post-Vietnam liberal sentiments and return to traditional conservative values to assert dominance over world affairs.¹⁷ Inspired by conservative idealism under the neo-conservative administration of President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the Project of the New American Century was established as a think tank in mid-1990s to provide "a blueprint for American domination of the world" to ensure that the U.S. remains the world's sole leader.¹⁸ The increases in defence spending and the development of innovative technologies provided the U.S. with "full spectrum dominance" over the globe.¹⁹ Reagan's right-wing politics continued to hold the American people in its sway until the election of George W. Bush in 2001, following the two-term democratic President Bill Clinton, marking a sharp swing back to neoconservatism.²⁰

The "Global War on Terror," advanced by George W. Bush in response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, gave the U.S. a chance to untangle itself from the memory of Vietnam and showcase its latest technological arsenal. But terrorists are not communists, and President Bush observed that the war on terror "will be a different kind of conflict against a different kind of enemy."²¹ While the Cold War evoked a terror in the American consciousness over the prospect of nuclear conflict, it was much clearer who was friend or foe, and the potential threat was identifiable. In the war on terror, however, not only was it difficult to identify an enemy, the enemy was not constrained by traditional

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), xi.

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 21.

¹⁷ Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹ Arun Kundnani, "Wired for War: Military Technology and the Politics of Fear," *Race & Class* 46, no. 1 (July 2004): 116-125, 117.

²⁰ Hammond, *Media, War and Postmodernity*, 4.

²¹ George W. Bush, "Radio Address of the President to the Nation" (*The White House*, September 15, 2001), accessed July 19, 2018, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010915.html>.

weaponry, making the ability to gather intelligence and thwart an attack infinitely more complex than during the Cold War.

But it was hardly only the enemy who was different; U.S. citizens since the Vietnam War had grown suspicious of military involvements overseas. The public's response to the intense presentation of casualties necessitated a shift in the general management of warfare.²² Inspired by the Kosovo War in 1997, the use of precision weapons—without ground troops—was believed to remove horrific imagery from consideration, proposing instead a war waged from a distance without incurring casualties.²³

The subsequent association of Saddam Hussein with terrorists and the prospect of war in Iraq meant that the U.S. government needed to construct its official narrative carefully. The Bush Administration took great pains to distinguish the Iraq War from the unpopular engagement in Vietnam and to align it with good wars. Recognized widely as the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Bush Administration portrayed the Iraq War as necessary to prevent a global disaster like that of Nazi Germany, implying the long-standing historical analogy that Saddam Hussein was another Hitler whose regime was not only a threat to his own people, but to “the free world,” and to Americans in particular.²⁴

The Iraq War officially began on March 20, 2003 as a pre-emptive strike against Saddam Hussein's regime for harbouring WMDs.²⁵ A stated goal from the start, therefore, was to overthrow Saddam Hussein's rule and establish democracy in Iraq, converting the nation from a despotic regime to a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed by April 9, 2003, and on May 1, President Bush stated that the invasion phase was complete, while standing under a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.” Saddam Hussein eventually was captured on December 13, 2003, while suicide bombings against the U.S. had already begun by this time. By 2004, coalition forces were engaged with insurgent forces until their complete withdrawal in December 2011.

²² Kundnani, “Wired for War,” 124.

²³ Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (New York: Picador, 2000), 5.

²⁴ Scot Macdonald, “Hitler's Shadow: Historical Analogies and the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 13, no. 4 (September 2002): 29-59, 29.

²⁵ Catherine Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2009), accessed February 20, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL34387.pdf>, 18.

Shedding the spectre of Vietnam, however, proved elusive at the onset of the Iraq War (2003-11). Despite the changed approach to war, the Iraq War proved bloody, nonetheless. The American military ventures in both Vietnam and Iraq—intended to be quick—developed into protracted campaigns against a counterinsurgency that left many dead, and many more injured, resulting in widespread public opposition and an increasing perception of the U.S. as an imperial power seeking to dominate world affairs. The Iraq War has shown that Vietnam still has a lasting impact, functioning as what Philip Beidler calls a “Freudian primal scene” from which the nation has never recovered.²⁶ The most common metaphor associated with Vietnam is as a disease or a syndrome or, better still, in the words of Emily Russell, “a replicable virus” that can multiply anytime.²⁷ Vietnam War disabled veteran Ron Kovic in the introduction to the 40th anniversary edition of his book *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), writes: “I have watched in horror the mirror image of another Vietnam unfolding. So many similarities, so many things said that remind me of that war thirty years ago.”²⁸ On this basis, it becomes clear that the fears the nation previously had concerning Vietnam were reawakened once American body counts started to amass.

The approaches which have dominated the analysis of the Vietnam and Iraq wars have provided important insights into the historical and social aspects of the two conflicts within the greater scope of multiple disciplines. Andrew Preston, in his 2018 essay “The Irony of Protest: Vietnam and the Path to Permanent War,” notes that the U.S. ironically finds itself in a state of permanent warfare since Vietnam despite its initial plan to avoid military actions that lack public support or might end in a stalemate.²⁹ From a broader historical perspective, Douglas Kellner in his 2013 essay “Postmodern Military and Permanent War” reveals the influence of the Cold War policies on the administration of George W. Bush following 9/11.³⁰ He argues that the sharp increase in defence spending, particularly on military-industrial complex projects, is reminiscent of President Reagan’s

²⁶ Philip D. Beidler, “The Last Huey,” in *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*, ed. Michael Bibby (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 3-16, 3.

²⁷ Emily Russell, *Reading Embodied Citizenship: Disability, Narrative, and the Body Politic* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 130.

²⁸ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 3rd ed. (New York: Akashic Books, 2016), 22.

²⁹ Andrew Preston, “The Irony of Protest: Vietnam and the Path to Permanent War,” in *Reframing 1968: American Politics, Protest and Identity*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Nick Witham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 59-80, 74-75.

³⁰ Douglas Kellner, “Postmodern Military and Permanent War,” in *Masters of War*, ed. Carl Boggs (New York: Routledge, 2013), 229-244, 236.

“Star Wars” projects.³¹ Similarly, President Bush’s eventual engagement in a full-scale war, despite the multilateral efforts of the international community to combat terrorism, is a reminder of “the Cold War paranoid universe of” communism.³²

Another considerable amount of literature has been published on the similarities between the outcomes of the two wars. The journalist Thomas Rick in his 2007 book *Fiasco* explains how U.S. military plans during the Vietnam and Iraq wars put more emphasis on operational tactics than strategic plans.³³ The lack of clear objectives and the inability to provide sufficient troops to fight the insurgents and secure Iraq after toppling Saddam Hussein resembled the ineffective counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam against the Viet Cong three decades prior. In the same vein, Ty Hawkins’ *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror* (2012) compares President Nixon’s policy of “Vietnamization” with that of “Iraqification” in 2006 which in both cases led to the defeat of the U.S. in South Vietnam and the lack of proper exit strategy in Iraq.³⁴ In his own words, Iraq is nothing but “a modern-day Vietnam.”³⁵

While these analyses are valuable for the manner in which they dismantle the official narratives of the war, their inherent limitations do not allow for the development of an understanding of war on a level that pays close attention to the particularities of individuals’ experience of warfare. This is not to say that these studies are without merits. However, without considering the impact of these wars on soldiers, they are reductive exercises, resulting only in half-truths. As my analysis of Iraq War literature will show, the contrast between soldiers’ real experiences and official narratives was mostly felt by the soldiers themselves. The importance of this thesis lies in its aim to conduct a literary and cultural analysis of the two wars to account for the soldiers’ experiences of the wars in which they fought. As such, the literary perspective is indispensable. Wars should not be limited to foreign policies and military tactics; wars are about human beings standing against each other. It is through memoirs and representations in fiction and films that wars can be understood in their human complexities. My readings of the two wars, therefore,

³¹ Ibid., 236.

³² Ibid., 238.

³³ Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 132.

³⁴ Ty Hawkins, *Reading Vietnam amid the War on Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 81.

³⁵ Ibid., 84.

will contribute to addressing subjective responses that stand in contrast to the rigid analysis which defines the ideology of some contemporary approaches to warfare.

That is not to say that there have been no attempts to approach the two wars from a literary perspective. However, these studies remain limited in scope and methodology. In “Generation Apocalypse Now” (2013) Matthew Ross examines the experiences of Iraq War soldiers in the light of their exposure to the Vietnam War films, arguing that the soldiers and their wartime experiences remain celebrated even if the films were intended to convey anti-war messages.³⁶ Vietnam-era films, Ross concludes, become pieces of unintended propaganda that set up an experience of soldiering that Iraq War soldiers never lived up to. David Kieran’s 2012 essay “‘It’s a different time. It’s a different era. It’s a different place’” takes a different approach, arguing that Iraq War memoirs fail to embrace the same discourse that emerged from the memoirs recounting combat in Vietnam. The recent memoirs, Kieran argues, undermine comparisons to Vietnam as “they celebrate the soldier, justify his violence, define the loss of American lives as the war’s only significant tragedy, and refuse to critique the war or the policies that enable it.”³⁷

In *Reading Vietnam* (2012), Ty Hawkins observes that memoirs of both wars serve to unravel the myth of American superiority both in terms of might and morals. It is a myth, Hawkins argues, that had the seeds of its unravelling sown in Hiroshima and has been continually problematized in every conflict ever since.³⁸ Along the same line, Brenda Boyle in “America Totem Society in the Twenty-First Century” (2015) takes a gender-based approach in exploring how the literature of both wars undermine the mythmaking efforts of propaganda experts in the military who wish to preserve a certain conception of warfare. But Boyle, interestingly, notices a difference between Vietnam War texts written before and after the Iraq War. While the earlier accounts represent soldiers in a traumatized state of defeat or despondency as a result of the failure of

³⁶ Matthew Ross, “Generation Apocalypse Now: The Vietnam War’s Cultural Legacy in the Global War on Terror,” *The Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 4 (December 2013): 342-352, 342.

³⁷ David Kieran, “‘It’s a different time. It’s a different era. It’s a different place’: The Legacy of Vietnam and Contemporary Memoirs of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *War & Society* 31, no. 1 (November 2012): 64-83, 64.

³⁸ Hawkins, *Reading Vietnam*, 8.

traditional masculine myths of war, the latter ones focus on redemption and recovery.³⁹ The reason behind this, Boyle argues, is the growing public understanding of treating war trauma victims independently of their traumatic experiences. The stereotypical characterization of returning Vietnam veterans as baby killers by the anti-war activists was replaced by patriotic “Support the Troops” sentiments after 9/11.⁴⁰ The idea behind the slogan is to treat returning veterans as heroes who put their lives at risk and focus criticism on the government that sent them.

As has been shown here, substantial literary comparisons between the Vietnam and Iraq wars are still lacking. This thesis differs from previous studies in its attempt to bring these two wars together to identify points of continuity and discontinuity in respect to the relevance of Enlightenment human discourse in war writings. While the loss of appeal of humanism developed gradually, well before the Vietnam War, this thesis does not offer a literary history of how each war broke down social categories and occupied a unique cultural space. Instead, this thesis sheds light on how “failure” in Vietnam continued forcefully to undermine the remaining traditional values and sentiments perhaps engendered by U.S. successes in the World Wars. The Great War profoundly shook the western nations’ confidence in the Enlightenment humanist ideals, and the literary responses began to discard the idealistic and romantic view of the war in favour of the interior monologue of the characters—sentiments that turned even more ironical, bleaker and pessimistic by the end of the Second World War.⁴¹ However, it was only the war in Vietnam, according to Ty Hawkins, that “a semi-realized postmodern condition” is widely felt in society, culture and literature, marking an abrupt slide from the perceptions of the Cold War era, culminating in what can be characterized as a nihilistic antihuman condition that later defined the post-Cold War years.⁴² The polarizing effect that the Vietnam War had on the culture in the 1960s made the previous war in Korea in the 1950s almost insignificant in comparison.⁴³

³⁹ Brenda M. Boyle, “America Totem Society in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Vietnam War: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, ed. Brenda M. Boyle (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 159-182, 161.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴¹ Peter Kemp, “The Literature of World War I and the Interwar Period,” (February 4, 2019), *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed December 9, 2019.

⁴² Ty Hawkins, “Vietnam and Verisimilitude: Rethinking the Relationship between “Postmodern War” and Naturalism,” *War, Literature & the Arts* 24, no.1-2 (2012): 1-20, 5.

⁴³ Steven Belletto, “The Korean War, the Cold War, and the American Novel,” *American Literature* 87, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 51-77, 64.

The Iraq War emerged after three decades of introspection that persistently challenged the nation's lingering confidence in humanism and the meta-narratives of past wars. The extensive use of innovative weapons such as the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and Global Positioning System (GPS) only exacerbates the tensions that have been building in society concerning the intersection of human life and technology, particularly when it comes to postmodern war. The context of the Iraq War cultivates an urgent need to reimagine creatively Vietnam War era ideas. While other conflicts following Vietnam (i.e. Kosovo, Libya, and most importantly the Gulf War) are worthy of study for the way they started to problematize the relation of the soldiers to high-tech machines, these conflicts were of short duration, and did not elicit the same kind of cultural reactions that Iraq War caused. After all, not all wars demarcate a critical epoch in American culture. American involvements in small wars have hardly been recognized, let alone remembered by the Americans.

Insights from the Afghanistan War might have proven significant for this study. However, the conflict continues to endure and, further, the mission in Afghanistan was more successful (in public perception) than Iraq. The Afghanistan conflict, further, initially enjoyed much more public support than the Iraq War.⁴⁴ The ongoing presence in Afghanistan, of course, is another matter. Nonetheless, this means that Iraq serves as a better "foil" to Vietnam since both conflicts were controversial in American society. Since Iraq War was more "controversial" it naturally elicits more critical responses from soldiers themselves in their memoirs and narratives. Controversy naturally engenders introspection. As fewer soldiers questioned the validity of their mission in Afghanistan, critical reactions appear to be fewer in number. Many Afghanistan narratives, therefore, are more patriotic in tone and traditional in the motifs embraced. This does not mean, however, that posthuman sentiments are not identifiable from soldiers in Afghanistan. Some of the texts used in this thesis, for instance Matt Martin's *Predator* and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, included soldiers who at various times were deployed in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Sometimes, their insights overlap. Nonetheless, critical narratives herein engage the Iraq War more regularly and thoroughly than those that address Afghanistan. In short, Vietnam and Iraq significantly challenged the war motifs of the day in ways that other conflicts did not.

⁴⁴ Gary C. Jacobson, "A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the U.S. Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (May 2010): 585-610, 591.

With that being said, this thesis only uses the Vietnam War as a point of departure to offer a detailed discussion of Iraq War literature and the ways in which soldiers extend, subvert or transcend the postmodern politics that informed Vietnam veterans' narratives. Most importantly, this thesis explores the hypothesis that postmodern tradition of war writing since Vietnam has gradually shifted in a new direction, in large part because of recent historical and technological developments which, in turn, re-contextualize the human experience, and what it means to be human.

There are two reasons for proposing this hypothesis. First, wars are "secret engines" of history, as Adam Piette observes, and play generative roles in shaping social and cultural attitudes.⁴⁵ The availability of specific forms of technology in each war and the socio-historical climate has traditionally informed the prevalence of certain forms of literary styles. The Great War and the French Revolution, for example, brought forward respectively era-defining movements: modernism and romanticism.⁴⁶ As such, it would be an expectation that, in spite of the many similarities between the Vietnam and Iraq wars that many historians document, there are also notable differences that reflect the rapidly changing world, spurred on primarily by technological and informational revolution. Second, and on a more general level, that history, based on Hegelian dialectics, always moves forward by contradictory forces, and eventually resolves itself by means of reconciliatory synthesis. On this Hegelian model, the long-standing opposition of humanism and antihumanism will be replaced by a more affirmative framework to better understand the contemporary human condition.⁴⁷

In order to examine the changing perceptions of U.S. soldiers as they adapt to the Iraq War in contrast with Vietnam, a single Vietnam War narrative will be read against three from the Iraq War in each of the four main chapters of the thesis. So much has already been published on the literature of the Vietnam War that this thesis is necessarily selective and limited to texts that shaped the public understanding of the war. Through the four chapters, I discuss respectively Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Ron

⁴⁵ Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, "The Wars of the Twentieth Century," introduction, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1-10, 2-3.

⁴⁶ Catherine MacLoughlin, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Catherine MacLoughlin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-3, 1.

⁴⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 37.

Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (1983) and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977).

The Iraq War has produced a large number of literary works expressed through different genres such as blogs, memoirs, fictional accounts and films which stand as relevant statements on different aspects of postmodern warfare. My analysis of the Iraq War will be drawn from a number of memoirs: Matt Martin's *Predator* (2010), Colby Buzzell's *My War* (2005), Kayla Williams' *Plenty of Time* (2014), Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills* (2011), Kristin Beck's *Warrior Princess* (2013), Joshua Key's *The Deserter Tale* (2007) and Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014); two fictional accounts: Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011) and Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014); two films: Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009); and a 2016 biography: *Tomas Young's War* by Mark Wilkerson.

The group of texts selected for Iraq War analysis are not chosen according to a specific year of publication, but represent the duration of the Iraq conflict, from 2003 to 2011, although it is important to note that most of these narratives were published between 2012 through to five years of the war's end after U.S. troops had returned home.⁴⁸ This panoramic view of the three phases of the war (invasion, counterinsurgency operations, and withdrawal/aftermath) allows us to see the complexity of the Iraq War as a combination of technologically mediated war and straightforward face to face combat.

The process of selecting the texts requires a balanced and fertile harmony of different genres to allow for the possibility of transgressing the boundary between fact and fiction, which in turn makes it ideal to shed light simultaneously on the real lived experiences of the soldiers and the process of sense-making practices of that history through fiction. While war narratives are derived from real wartime experiences of soldiers, one of the distinctive aspects of these is the blending of fact and fiction which becomes pronounced after the Vietnam War when the techniques of "new journalism" were incorporated into more searching imaginative accounts of conflict.⁴⁹ This combined approach is not altogether new and, in fact, Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) notes the impossibility of distinguishing a first-person war novel from a war memoir, emphasising "the necessity of fiction in any memorable testimony about

⁴⁸ Roger Luckhurst, "Not Now, Not Yet: Polytemporality and Fictions of the Iraq War," in *Trauma in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Marita Nadal and Calvo Mónica (New York: Routledge, 2014), 51-72, 58.

⁴⁹ Philip G. Dwyer, "Making Sense of the Muddle: War Memoirs and the Culture of Remembering," in *War Stories*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 1-26, 2.

fact.”⁵⁰ Equally important is the fact that these narratives are mainly written years after the war ended and the vividness of the real memory of soldiers is altered with the passage of time, cultivating instead a tendency towards mythmaking in which the soldier’s emotional state influences the perception of the past.⁵¹ For the sake of this study, it is not important whether the texts are accurate depictions of the war experience or not; what is more significant is the fact that they reflect the emotional condition of those who faced the terror of contemporary combat head-on. James Gibson’s *The Perfect War* (1986) argues, in the light of this fact, that regardless of whether a soldier’s account is fictional or non-fictional, it can still represent truths that challenge the government official narratives.⁵²

War memoirs provide the best platform for intimate expression of the most pertinent concepts in the genre of wartime literature.⁵³ Although critics have made attempts to discredit the memoir as an unreliable source, there has been a shift in the level of credibility afforded to the memoir as a result of the rising popularity of life-writing and alternative historical approaches.⁵⁴ The first point which must be addressed in relation to the justification of the utilization of memoirs is the revelation of truth through the lens of the genre. War memoirs cut through the meta-narratives of the existing power structures. Thomas Myers states that many soldiers construct memoirs as means of addressing inaccuracies in the official narrative by working through “historical-mythical barter and exchange” in the marketplace of ideas.⁵⁵ This allows the soldier to present a moral account of wartime events that contradict the account presented by military leadership, even as they question the morality of war. That does not mean that the soldier is only interested in presenting a purely historical account. Rather, soldiers are afforded “a privileged point of view” to account for an accurate description of conditions required for personal survival in battlefield.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 311.

⁵¹ Dwyer, “Making Sense of the Muddle,” 2.

⁵² James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 462, 467.

⁵³ Synne L. Dyvik, “Of Bats and Bodies: Methods for Reading and Writing Embodiment,” *Critical Military Studies* 2, no. 1-2 (June 2016): 56-69, 57.

⁵⁴ Dwyer, “Making Sense of the Muddle,” 5.

⁵⁵ Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 72.

⁵⁶ Dwyer, “Making Sense of the Muddle,” 4.

The war memoir often confronts the reader with an emotional content that is both confusing and enlightening. The digital memoirs or the blogs—as an example of what Thomas Larson called the “sudden memoir” written and published online in the midst of the conflict “before memory can edit it”—are written with spontaneity and immediacy that go beyond post-war accounts.⁵⁷ By confronting the reader in a digital space, the soldier attempts to provide them with “a second witness position” to elicit ethical responses to war ambiguities and atrocities.⁵⁸

Since war often defies the capacities of language, one of the main aspects of the war memoir is its ability to help soldiers in their healing process through the written word. In “Wars and Words” (2010), Catherine MacLoughlin explains that soldiers go through unimaginable horror during war, leaving them with a condition of psycho-physiological silence.⁵⁹ As this was the case with many returning Vietnam veterans, the memoir affords soldiers a textual space to deal with their war-related trauma, constructing narratives that create a pathway towards healing—or at least away from silence.

It is worth noting that variations upon this genre may also provide valuable insight into the wartime experience. Although war memoirs are mainly penned by soldiers themselves, some of the texts herein are co-written by the soldier and a chosen professional writer. Such co-authoring in no way detracts from the power of the memoir. The memoir must not be understood as only a personal writing, but rather as a collaborative project that has the potential to bridge the gap between the civilian and the military personnel. These co-written accounts are still emotional, subjective, and personal.

In addition to the genre of the memoir, it is important to recognize the value of purely fictional accounts. The development of a fictional war narrative allows for a summation of multiple sources of experiences within an account that encapsulates the whole dimension of war on multiple fronts. Phil Klay, an Iraq Veteran himself, chooses fiction because it enables him to weave his own autobiographical account with the experiences of others, providing a platform for a wider description of war.⁶⁰ Fictional

⁵⁷ Thomas Larson, *Memoir and the Memoirist* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 1.

⁵⁸ Sidonie Smith, “Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 126, no. 3 (May 2011): 564-574, 569.

⁵⁹ Catherine MacLoughlin, “War and Words,” in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Catherine MacLoughlin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15-24, 17.

⁶⁰ Phil Klay, “An Interview with Phil Klay,” interview by Drew Pham, (*The Brooklyn Review*, April 9, 2018), accessed March 14, 2018, <http://www.bkreview.org/spring-2018/an-interview-with-phil-klay/>

accounts, also, give a voice to those who have been silenced by repressive social structures. Helen Benedict, a civilian journalist who interviewed sexually assaulted female soldiers, notices that silence looms large in the oral stories of such marginalized people. It is only through fiction, Benedict believes, would she be able to imagine and fill those silences.⁶¹

One final statement must be made regarding the selection of the films presented within the thesis. War films are situated in the heart of the cultural sphere, drawing from circulating narratives to either reveal a collective cultural imagination through fictionalizing scenarios of possible survival or to contextualize the reality of the war through traditional conventions of realism. A case in point is *Avatar* which as a science-fiction movie is not an out-of-place post-war fantasy film. Rather, it is an attempt to represent cultural concepts that are always shifting their meanings: namely, raising global consciousness and attending to those normally excluded from the social sphere. Conversely, *The Hurt Locker* depoliticizes the war in Iraq, showing instead “a gradual “zooming in” on the experience of the soldier.”⁶² The film reflects disruptive themes (brutal soldiers as well as unromantic portrayals of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD) and traditional war themes (heroism and comradeship) in a way which makes no clear political statement, but still engages with the complex encounter with contemporary warfare. What both films have in common is that they are devoid of propaganda and do not play with “the patriotic game.”⁶³ This is as an aesthetic move which allows filmmakers to “undermine presumed ways of understanding the war.”⁶⁴ The two films, therefore, will allow me to record the responsiveness of cultural narratives to the social changes taking place in the post-Cold War era.

The narratives chosen for discussion in this thesis are limited to perspectives given by American soldiers, both males and females. The inclusion of female soldiers’ voices grants alternatives to the master and masculine narrative of war. While male voices are admittedly still dominant, more female writers, either civilians or combatants, are fighting textually to retain authority to write about the wars that they are increasingly part of.

⁶¹ Helen Benedict, “Secrecy and Sexual Assault in the Military,” interview by Richard Wolinsky, (*Guernica*, November 15, 2012), accessed March 3, 2018, <https://www.guernicamag.com/secrecy-and-sexual-assault-in-the-military/>.

⁶² Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 79.

⁶³ Martin Barker, *A ‘Toxic Genre’ The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

Along similar lines, the selection of the texts draw on multifarious soldiers' perspectives. The account of a drone pilot will read differently than one from an infantryman. As each war story is necessarily limited in scope to a particular soldier's rank and background, having multiple perspectives then maximizes the advantage of a more rounded understanding of the war. There is no one war story that has a greater claim to truth, but that each one contributes to the larger narrative of war. As Tim O'Brien aptly describes in his 1978 novel *Going After Cacciato*:

In battle, in a war, a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen. The soldier is not a photographic machine. He is not a camera ... after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell ... that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.⁶⁵

The analysis, therefore, will approach these accounts taking a bottom-up perspective, allowing each soldier to speak for himself/herself in relation to the humanist discourse.

Most importantly, the approach adopted in selecting the texts lends itself to unveiling points of differences rather than similarities between the literatures of the two wars. Thus, choices were made to select texts that tend to reflect more discontinuity than continuity with Vietnam War texts, while other texts that reflected similar or parallel ideas were excluded. The thesis does not depend, however, on the notion that similar texts to Vietnam do not exist or that humanism has fully given way to posthumanism between the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Rather, the thesis argues that narratives that have emerged during the Iraq War challenge official narratives through posthuman sentiments that were unlike narratives and memoirs produced in the Vietnam era. As such, Kevin Powers' *Yellow Birds* (2012) was excluded because it reflects traditional features of trauma narratives. Similarly, Amber Smith's *Danger Close: One Woman's Epic Journey as a Combat Helicopter Pilot* (2016) was excluded because it is deeply rooted in popular discourses and representations, fitting traditional heroic and masculine motifs of war. It does not confound this thesis, however, to recognize that some Iraq War narratives are more similar than different when compared to Vietnam era narratives. The emphasis here, rather, is on the fact that new typologies have emerged that reflect posthuman sentiments that were not present during or immediately after Vietnam.

Against the postmodern reading of Vietnam War texts, this thesis will examine Iraq War texts in the light of critical posthuman theory which emerged as a response to

⁶⁵ Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), 189.

the complex concerns of social, technological and political shifts following the Cold War.⁶⁶ As perspectives on the human experience always change and evolve, using old theoretical frameworks only contribute to abstracting the contemporary human from his specific historical embodiment and isolating him from “a sense of situation, context and locality.”⁶⁷ Posthuman theory is deeply invested in the tumult of the contemporary times; it recognizes that former frameworks have been unsatisfactory in understanding the current human condition.

The earlier conceptual re-evaluation of historical ideas about humanity has been accompanied by references to a physical and corporeal human altered by technology, namely the cyborg. This technologically-enhanced human was introduced initially in the 1940s and 1950s, and subsequently has become a sensational figure in the popular culture in the 1960s.⁶⁸ The cyborg becomes the ideal human for transhumanists who believe that technology is increasingly allowing people to escape from the confines of biology.⁶⁹ Transhumanism is a theory that works in tandem with humanism, advocating for the full mastery of the human and the natural world.⁷⁰ Technology ties into transhumanism precisely because transhumanists believe that technology represents the next-stage in the evolution of the human species.

Yet apparent alongside transhumanism has been a more subtle theorization of the general impact of technology on the contemporary human. Mainly informed by the rise of cybernetics in the 1960s, many critics, most prominent of which is N. Katherine Hayles, began to think of how machines and systems change the way humans think of themselves.⁷¹ Unlike the transhumanists who are interested in the merging of the human body with the technics, these critics suggest the posthuman is still human in the traditional sense. Crucially, the focus of this thesis goes beyond transhumanism and uses critical posthumanism as its theoretical framework.

⁶⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 148.

⁶⁷ Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 9.

⁶⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 85.

⁶⁹ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷¹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 4.

Posthumanism both emerges from humanism while also being critical of the assumptions birthed by humanism itself, thus complicating the simple Hegelian dialectic that would pit humanism against its antihuman antithesis. The concept of the human that originated during the Enlightenment is conceived of as male, as existing at the centre of his world, as supremely rational and intelligent, unconcerned with superstition, able to manipulate the world to his own wishes, and a creator of history rather than a subject of it.⁷² This long-lived Enlightenment conception of humanity was itself a radical rebuke of the medieval conception of the human as a non-physical spirit housed within a mortal body.⁷³

This conception of the human has been rejected in favour of new ideas uncomplicated by anthropocentric politics, paving the way for a more recent, and up-to-date understanding of the human condition. What emerges, in the end, is termed posthumanism because it emerges from the heritage of humanism, but has nonetheless become something new. One framework for the interpretation of posthumanism is of the decentring—not the abolition or the subordination—of a particular aspect of the human experience, that of entitlement.⁷⁴ Posthumanism is *post*-humanistic because it rejects the central premise of humanism that human beings hold a central role in history, represent the final chapter in the evolution of species, or enjoy a favoured status before God.

While posthumanism seems to depart from humanism, it can be characterized as an extension of postmodernism in that it continues decentring many hierarchical aspects of the human discourse. It emerges from a postmodern worldview that relies less on objective definitions, and more on subjective experiences as the path toward understanding the world.⁷⁵ However, posthumanism retains its distinctiveness from postmodernism as much as it undoes some of the nihilistic and ambivalent aspects inherent to its discourse, a point that I will return to in the next chapter.⁷⁶

⁷² Myra J. Seaman, “Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 246-275, 246.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁷⁴ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 188.

⁷⁵ Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 22.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

Posthumanism, therefore, occupies a middle ground between the two extremes. On one hand, it rejects understanding humanity as either “innate or constructed.”⁷⁷ In other words, it does not return humans to their place of natural primacy or social contexts. Rather, it amalgamates both human and antihuman components which Donna Haraway conceptualizes as a consciousness that “changes the geography of all previous categories.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, the posthuman is simultaneously a “postmodern collective and personal self” in various constructs, including political, social, and environmental.⁷⁹

Posthumanism is a means of looking at and interacting with the world on the basis of a particular kind of insight: “the world and humans themselves are not dualistic entities structured according to dialectical principles of ... opposition, but rather materially embedded subjects-in-process circulating within webs of relation with forces, entities and encounters.”⁸⁰ This insight offers freedom from restrictive humanist binary oppositions and immerses the human in a web of social relations. Opposed to any coherent understanding of the human self, the posthuman, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone argue, overlooks the differences between the self and other because the core of his being is evenly redistributed, always emerging from multiple patterns of “resonance and interference between the two.”⁸¹ This conceptualization of the human leads to a reimagining of politics and ethics, once codified in humanistic categories and in terms of human rights. Critical posthumanism, as introduced above, will undergird the analysis of the Iraq War texts chosen for this study and analysed in chapters 2 to 5.

The first chapter will review three major aspects pertinent to this thesis. First, it traces the historical context of the two wars to examine the shifts in the U.S. foreign policy and the changing role of the military during the three decades separating the two wars. Second, it identifies the ways in which the two wars play important roles in restructuring the human discourse. Third, the chapter explores how these historical and attitudinal shifts

⁷⁷ Joanna Bourke, “Killing in a Posthuman World: The Philosophy and Practice of Critical Military History,” in *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti Politics and Concepts*, ed. Bolette Blaagaard and Iris van der Tuin (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 29-37, 35.

⁷⁸ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 157.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸⁰ Maria Hlavajova and Rosi Braidotti, “Introduction,” in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 1-14, 8.

⁸¹ Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, “Posthuman Bodies,” in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1-22, 10.

manifest themselves in the literature of the two wars. This broad background is necessary to understand the influence of war on the wider social and cultural context, so the readings in the four chapters can be properly contextualized.

The second chapter examines the impact of each war on soldiers' sense of identity, with a particular emphasis on soldiers' responses to the militarization of their bodies. A single Vietnam-era memoir, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), will be considered as a horizon for analysing three Iraq War texts. Taking into consideration the introduction of virtual reality to enhance training and the wider use of unmanned drones, this chapter is an exploration of how technologies extend or limit the soldier's reach whilst also redefining battlefields. Texts by Colby Buzzell, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005), and Matt Martin, *Predator* (2010), are considered for analysis. The chapter also looks at Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker* (2009) to explore the impact of urban warfare and the bomb suit on the soldier's sense of his body.

The third chapter discusses the impact of disabling injury on soldiers' sense of self. Reading Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) as a trauma narrative of his war experience helps me form a paradigm against which similar Iraq War narratives are analysed. This chapter touches upon the progress made towards a holistic awareness of trauma and disability since its medical recognition post-Vietnam. My textual reading includes Mark Wilkerson's *Tomas Young's War* (2016) and Kayla Williams' *Plenty of Time* (2014). It uncovers the manner in which new conceptualization of disabling trauma encourages soldiers to come to terms with their injuries whether physical or psychological. The chapter then moves towards an analysis of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) to identify how cultural texts also promote life-affirming responses to the trauma of oneself and the other.

The fourth chapter considers the soldiers' responses to the masculine culture of the military. Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk* (1983) from the Vietnam War will be analysed alongside three texts from the Iraq War. Joshua Key's *The Deserter Tale* (2007) examines the complex relationship between the changed nature of military operations and the soldier's understanding of his gendered identity. Considering the military transition to an all-volunteer force, the chapter discusses an account of a female marine, Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills* (2011), and a transgender SEAL, Kristen Beck's *Warrior Princess* (2013), to cast light on the diversity of gendered identities that postmodern war allows.

The fifth chapter engages with the soldiers' perception of themselves and the "Other", particularly how they challenge the military strategy toward dehumanizing

others. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) creates a foundation for comparisons with Iraq War texts. Taking into account various factors such as globalization, culture sensitivity training, the growing racial integrated armed forces, this chapter reveals how stable self/other dynamics are subverted in Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011), Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014). This focus on self/other dynamics provides rich ground for additional analysis of an important aspect of soldiers' experiences in Iraq, and how they differ from yet remain similar to the experiences of soldiers in Vietnam.

Across the five chapters of the thesis, I investigate the changing attitudes to warfare and the notion of "the human" between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, enabling me to develop a broad sociohistorical and theoretical framework that is necessary to analyse a wide range of soldiers' experiences. Without referencing the representations of wars in soldiers' accounts and cultural narratives, we are left with nothing but dry language that ignores the intersection between postmodern wars, and the human-centred discourse. It is this intersection that this thesis addresses by conducting an extended analysis of various subjective war experiences drawn from multiple genres in order to address the effects and affects of postmodern war. The main focus of this thesis is an extended analysis of Iraq War narratives through the framework of posthuman theory in order to reveal how soldiers negotiate and engage a vast array of diverse positions in light of recent developments in warfare whilst returning to Vietnam War as a historical frame of reference. This approach allows me to register points of (mis)identification among war narratives between the 1960s and the 2000s, arguing that while these war narratives share similarities, they also show differences shaped by the social and historical particularities of each war and each era.

Chapter 1

Contested Boundaries between History, Theory and Literature

A Review of Vietnam and Iraq Wars

The fall of Saigon in 1975, which marked the end of the Vietnam War, signified the ineffectiveness of U.S. military tactics and their adherence to traditional Cold War modes of operation, implying that previous ways of enacting foreign policy were no longer appropriate. The first part of this chapter examines the Vietnam War's conventional strategies that turned the war into a prolonged and a seemingly meaningless fight. It then proceeds to explore the cultural context of the war, particularly the rise of antihumanism in the wake of the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, and the ways in which it translated itself into a postmodern aesthetic in the literature recounting the Vietnam War.

The second part of the chapter shifts its focus towards the Iraq War to identify the changing role of the U.S. military since its defeat in Vietnam as well as the social and political changes that have called for a new posthuman discourse to overcome the limitations of antihuman postmodernism. The chapter finally reviews Iraq War literature to identify the way in which war themes have been expressed outside the realm of postmodern aesthetics. The chapter aims to set the stage for a more in-depth analysis of soldiers' memoirs and other cultural texts in subsequent chapters, as the trend from humanism toward posthumanism is reflected in these accounts.

The Cold War Era: The Vietnam War

History

The bipolar and protracted confrontation between the Soviet Union and the U.S. in the wake of the Second World War and at the onset of the Cold War forced American leaders to establish a formal national policy. While the U.S. tended to hold other nation's affairs at arm's length, avoiding international conflict and refusing to deploy American forces to intervene in the world's affairs, the post-war era forced the U.S. to re-examine its place in the world.¹ Preventing the rise of fascist regimes and averting the kind of travesties that occurred during the war was a moral interest the Americans were, amongst the Allied nations, the best equipped to ensure. As one of the world's two remaining superpowers,

¹ Weigley, *The American Way of War*, xix.

the U.S. believed it had a moral responsibility to the world that rendered prior *laissez-faire* attitudes untenable.²

While the U.S. Cold War national policy was inclusive, incorporating both military and non-military strategies to stall the spread of communism throughout the world, it was, nonetheless, dependent on conventional means of using combat theorized by Carl von Clausewitz.³ Conventional combat is one that takes full advantage of a nation's technological superiority, relies heavily on a conscripted fighting force, dominated by masculine motifs of soldiering, and oriented towards face-to-face battlefield confrontations.

The Vietnam War was situated on a border between conventional and unconventional modes of warfare. President John F. Kennedy limited the U.S. strategy to an advisory role, in support of the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem, to contain the threat of communist North Vietnam.⁴ Recognizing that a major military presence in Vietnam would not likely be successful, Kennedy's strategy was limited in scope, with minimal use of force, intended to carefully counteract North guerrilla fighters. With only limited American support, however, Ngo Diem could not fend off the threat of the 1960 formed NLF—a pro-communist movement in the South—which enacted a military coup, overthrowing his regime in 1963.

When Kennedy was assassinated that same year, Vice President Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency. Recognizing that prior strategies had not succeeded, President Johnson, in a major reversal, abandoned Kennedy's limited and unconventional strategy, and replaced it with a conventional air and ground campaign, much more like the one America had employed during World War II, to counteract North Vietnam's guerrilla fighters.⁵ According to Russell Weigley's analysis of U.S. wartime strategies, American leaders tend to prefer active military campaigns, resorting to static defence only when no viable means for an active campaign exists.⁶ Ty Hawkins has taken Weigley's observation a step further, noting that it is American exceptionalism embodied in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny that governed the U.S. policy in Vietnam, one which closely

² Ibid., xix.

³ Ibid., xix.

⁴ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 29-31.

⁵ Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 467.

⁶ Ibid., 464.

resembled the nation's original colonial policy contra the Native Americans during the nation's earlier history.⁷

Determined to take bolder actions to deter the spread of communism, President Johnson implemented a three-pronged strategy: intense aerial bombings over North Vietnam, a commitment of U.S. troops in South Vietnam, and a face-to-face combat with pro-communist Vietnamese.⁸ Operation Rolling Thunder, from 1965 to 1968, involved massive aerial bombing over Vietnam using tons of bombs, triple the number of all bombs dropped, by both sides, during World War II.⁹ The helicopter in Vietnam, pervasive in nearly all U.S. operations during the war, allowed the leaders to pursue their strategy of "attrition" and destruction.¹⁰ For instance, in addition to offering troops greater mobility and transport, helicopters were also used to spray twenty million gallons of defoliants—intended as a part of Operation Ranch Hand in 1964—to eliminate thick forests and expose enemy routes and hiding places.¹¹

General William Westmoreland, the military command in Vietnam, expanded the ground presence in South Vietnam, requiring more conscripted forces from the Homefront.¹² He intended, through a superiorly trained ground force, to take the war to the enemies through "search and destroy" operations in an attempt to incite them to engage in battles.¹³ The measure of success in these operations was the body counts, presuming that the side which suffered the most casualties would be more likely to retreat and surrender.¹⁴

The idea that massive loss of life would dissuade the enemy's resolve was a calculation that, while perhaps viable in past wars, did not have the expected impact in Vietnam. The Vietnam War became the most controversial war in which the U.S. ever participated. Despite its initial objective to combat communism, the U.S. was later forced

⁷ Hawkins, "Vietnam and Verisimilitude," 4.

⁸ Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 462.

⁹ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁰ Herbert P. Lepore, "The Coming of Age: The Role of the Helicopter in the Vietnam War," *Army History* no. 29 (Winter 1994): 29-36, 31.

¹¹ David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 85.

¹² Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁴ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 153.

to engage in peace negotiations and sign The Paris Peace Accords in 1973. The last U.S. troops left Vietnam in 1975, soon after the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong invaded Saigon and united the country under a socialist republic.

President Johnson's use of force and General Westmorland's strategy of attrition largely overlooked the capabilities of the Vietnamese skills for guerrilla warfare. After many years resisting the Chinese and the French, the Vietnamese were motivated by a nationalist zeal that lessened their likelihood to suffer moral defeat despite the technological superiority of the U.S. military. The initial strategy of massive air assaults did not lead to victory, and technology alone was not enough to secure victory.¹⁵ According to Howard Zinn, the Vietnam conflict pitted "organized modern technology versus organized human beings, and the human beings [the Vietnamese] won."¹⁶ Elsewhere, one U.S. advisor underscored that air-superiority was not likely to be a decisive advantage, explaining that helicopters "are not substitutes for first-class infantrymen willing to fight ... it's control of the ground that wins or loses wars."¹⁷ Certainly, helicopters saved wounded soldiers at unprecedented rates. However, they proved ineffectual in the jungle, signifying the U.S. military impotence in the war effort with its multiple crashes, leading to heavy losses in front of a more patient enemy who relied on lethal booby traps and punji sticks.¹⁸ Motivated by resolve, the Viet Cong often resorted to less technologically-dependent, but nonetheless effective tactics like human excrement as weapons.¹⁹ This came as a shock for U.S. soldiers whose resilient bodies are rendered threatened and invaded by non-technological tactics.

The North Vietnamese had a definite sense of what they were fighting to defend in contrast to the U.S. troops, many of whom resented their participation as the war extended, and did not believe that a victory in Vietnam was worth the sacrifice.²⁰ Moreover, many U.S. troops were inadequately prepared for the unique challenges the

¹⁵ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 104.

¹⁶ Howard Zinn, "The Impossible Victory: Vietnam," in *Against the Vietnam War: Writings by Activists*, ed. Mary Susannah Robbins (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 4-40, 4.

¹⁷ Vicente F. Gotera, *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 68.

¹⁸ Henry Palmer Hall, "The Helicopter and the Punji Stick: Central Symbols of the Vietnam War," in *America Rediscovered*, ed. Owen W. Gilman and Lorrie Smith (New York: Garland, 1990), 150-160, 159.

¹⁹ Paloma McMullan, "Corporeal Territories: The Body in American Narratives of the Vietnam War" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2004), 89.

²⁰ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 7.

terrain presented. The nature of the jungle did not allow for a regular fighting to take place. In fact, it is the state of lacking “geographical specificity” that the jungle made traditional war impossible as soldiers struggled to discern north from south, and even day from night.²¹

The over-dependence on body counts as a measurement of success created a delusional reality of winning an unwinnable war. Philip Caputo observed in *A Rumor of War* (1977) that the war became a statistical analysis and “a matter of arithmetic.”²² The problem with the body counts is that soldiers were prone to overestimating their own kill numbers in a competition among themselves to legitimize their identities as soldiers.²³ As such, the statistics analysed in Washington, D.C., were likely inaccurate, leading to a pseudo-analysis of the war’s progression.

The war created dissent among a large portion of the American public in the late 1960s and early 1970s who witnessed a protracted rather than a limited war. The official narrative, promulgated through government pronouncements, that the war was proceeding toward victory was particularly challenged following the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre in 1968.²⁴ Shocked by intensity of the war, anti-war sentiments on the home front grew to a swell as many Americans felt deceived by the government’s claims of controlling the ground war.²⁵

The Vietnam War was the first widely televised American conflict, and reporters were granted virtually limitless access to the battlefield.²⁶ Photographs of dead and injured civilians and soldiers, published mainly by Associated Press and in *Life* magazine, confronted the American public with the moment of death at war without the filters of whitewashed propaganda. *Saigon Execution* (1968) by Eddie Adams, for example, captures the execution of a Viet Cong by a South Vietnamese General. The shocking photograph of a Vietnamese pulling a pistol out to blow off the head of another

²¹ Jinim Park, *Narratives of the Vietnam War by Korean and American Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 9.

²² Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 3rd ed. (London: Pimlico, 1999), xix.

²³ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 126.

²⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 6.

Vietnamese was an intimate depiction of a “man against man.”²⁷ While the image did not include America soldiers, it nonetheless captured the brute reality of the war.

President Nixon’s supposed exit strategy, known as de-Americanization and Vietnamization, intended to train the allied South Vietnamese forces and relocate them to central combat positions, ideally reducing the number of deployed U.S. combat troops, never came to fruition.²⁸ He instead launched a secret bombing campaign and ordered ground troops to invade Cambodia and Laos between 1970 and 1973.²⁹ In response to the expansion of the bombing after promises of bringing the war to an end, the anti-war movement responded with proportional opposition to the escalation inciting campus protests around the country. The protest that generated most publicity was the 1970 mass protest of unarmed college students at Kent State University in Ohio during which four students were killed by the National Guard.³⁰ Such massive waves of anti-war protests across the country eventually hastened the end of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

The repercussions of new chemical technologies, such as Agent Orange in its military application as a defoliation agent, demonstrated that the concept of science advancing human society was not wholly positive. Agent Orange in particular brought about horrific potential for damaging environmental habitats and creating a new horror in the shape of the chemical warfare, provoking fears amongst soldiers and citizens.³¹ According to Sara Bridger in her book *Scientists at War* (2015), much of the scientific research and technological developments conducted in the Vietnam era were “problematic research in the service of a problematic end.”³² The widespread use of napalm—an incendiary gel that causes asphyxiation and severe burns—ushered in a nation-wide “ethical whirlwind” surrounding its use during the war.³³ Troubled by an alliance between universities and their research in support of the “military industrial complex” (as President Eisenhower called it in his Farewell Speech of January 1961), further anti-war demonstration erupted in universities, the most prominent of which is the

²⁷ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 93.

²⁸ David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 56.

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 39.

³¹ Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide*, 2.

³² Sarah Bridger, *Scientists at War* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

³³ Ibid., 7.

Columbia University protests of 1968, after students realized their roles in aiding the war efforts.³⁴

All of this fear came to the forefront when a photograph of a Vietnamese girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, by Nick Ut in 1972 was published globally in newspapers, showing the girl fleeing in distress from a napalm attack.³⁵ According to Kevin McSorley, this image cemented in American minds that air-power was not a humane approach to war. Instead, it only amplified its ability to afflict more barbaric forms of pain on bodies.³⁶ War photography has been the subject of considerable research and is often credited with helping turn public opinion against the war in late 1960s and early 70s.³⁷

With a general decline in public support for military involvement in Vietnam after the mid-1960s, veterans had to deal with a strong disconnect with the general public they were presumably fighting to protect. The soldiers carried, as Christian Appy puts it, “the heaviest sense of responsibility for the conduct and outcome of the war.”³⁸ For soldiers who did not support the war, there was the agony of being forced to participate in combat. For those who did serve willingly, often the return home was not a friendly one. All at once, sentiment against the war bred disciplinary problems amongst soldiers as many of them turned to drugs, alcohol and other recreational pursuits to cope with the fact that their lives were sacrificed without a good cause.³⁹ These were some of the factors that forced President Richard Nixon to end the draft and convert the military to an all-voluntary force in 1973.⁴⁰

By the end of the Vietnam War, there was no victory to assuage the pangs of the nightmares of war and the death knells of humanism were heralded as the meaningless

³⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People” (January 17, 1961), *The American Presidency Project*, accessed May 18, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-radio-and-television-address-the-american-people>.

³⁵ Nick Ut, “The Terror of War,” (*Time Magazine*, 1972), accessed April 29, 2019 <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nick-ut-terror-war#photograph>.

³⁶ Kevin McSorley, “War and the Body,” introduction, in *War and the Body*, ed. Kevin McSorley (London: Routledge, 2013), 1-32, 4.

³⁷ Michael Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 157-169, 157.

³⁸ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 8.

³⁹ Brummond Ayres, “Army is Shaken by Crisis in Morale and Discipline” (*The New York Times*, September 5, 1971), accessed June 8, 2017.

⁴⁰ Melissa T. Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in US Military Recruiting Advertising During the All-Volunteer Force* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35, 21.

deaths of American and Vietnamese amassed.⁴¹ The war, therefore, revealed the fact that advancements in technology and science alone were not necessarily representative of human progress. Rather than improving the human condition, such technologies seemed only to enhance human barbarism and brutality. In the following section, it will be shown how the Vietnam War forced a revaluation of many philosophical assumptions, previously embraced without serious challenge in America's legacy and prior history of war.

Theory

The Vietnam War was a major contributor to the rise of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s, compounded with domestic race riots and overseas independence movements. According to Lucas Carpenter, the political upheaval of the 1960s gave rise to "polysemic, protean cultural phenomenon now known as postmodernism."⁴² Although Enlightenment humanism emerged with an anti-authoritarian streak, advancing the right of a person to question religious authorities through objective rational reasoning to discern objective truths, it only bred utopian ideologies that were subsequently attacked by various critics and thinkers. The scientific revolution definitely has led to many positive changes in the world, yet it tended to limit reality to purely empirical terms, failing to consider the experienced reality of individuals in the world.⁴³

Romanticism emerged, in part, as a reaction against the Enlightenment. The massive changes that occurred after the industrial revolution and the ascendancy of the bourgeois life produced conformity and oppression, rendering romantic thinkers critical of social orthodoxies that obliged people to behave in accord with prevailing social standards.⁴⁴ Most importantly, romanticists disapproved of how the industrial revolution commoditized nature. Rather than evoking awe, nature ceased to be a source of wonder, becoming instead an object for human exploitation. Romantic critics believed that a return to "self" meant recovery of the reverence for nature itself and recognition that humans, while a part of nature, are hardly above it. Modernists, likewise, rejected the certainty of

⁴¹ Michael Bibby, "The Post-Vietnam Condition," in *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity*, ed. Michael Bibby (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 143-172, 151.

⁴² Lucas Carpenter, "'It Don't Mean Nothin,'" Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism," *College Literature* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 30-50, 32.

⁴³ Tim McNeese, *The Industrial Revolution* (Ohio: Lorenz Educational Press, 2000), 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

the Enlightenment and sought to produce anti-establishment theories such as that of Karl Marx's economics, Charles Darwin's evolutionary biology and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.⁴⁵ These modern thinkers came to grips with the idea that humans are controlled by different aspects of their beings—class, unconscious mind, genes—and not intrinsically autonomous or entirely the masters of their own destinies.

While the two world wars posed a challenge to humanism, particularly in reference to the use of atomic bombs in the closure of the Second World War, the challenge then was counter-balanced by victory. It is particularly the Vietnam War that exposed the flaws of the time-honoured ideals of the Enlightenment humanism as it came under heavy scrutiny by European antihumanist postmodern critics such as Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman, and Jean Baudrillard, who, as Carpenter observes, worked in the shadow of the Vietnam War.⁴⁶ While it is unfitting to refer to postmodernists and antihumanists interchangeably, a great number of postmodernists resolutely chose an antihuman stance to attack the claims of the human discourse. As such, antihumanism became the defining paradigm of postmodernism.

Although “antihumanism” took hold amongst intellectuals due to revulsion against America's role in the war, Vietnam was only one factor—though it was a major one—in a string of events that have caused widespread cynicism regarding the Enlightenment ideals.⁴⁷ Racial tensions during the Civil Rights Movement, the independence movements from colonies, anti-war protests, the free love movement, were signs of individuals' rights to discern their truths rather than relying on authorities to define them. Antihumanists began a scholarly project of challenging the autonomous liberal subject, displacing and deconstructing long-held humanist-defined concepts. Critical disciplines like gender and postcolonial studies emerged reacting to the perceived failure of the Enlightenment project.⁴⁸

The idea that the human fails to assert any sense of autonomous control over himself is evident in Michel Foucault's book *The Order of Things* (1966, translated in 1970). Foucault argues that the idea of man as the epistemic source of knowledge is only an

⁴⁵ Jay David Bolter, “Posthumanism,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, 4 Volume, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Robert T. Craig (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 1556-1563, 1556-57.

⁴⁶ Carpenter, ““It Don't Mean Nothin,”” 32.

⁴⁷ Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 13.

⁴⁸ Bolter, “Posthumanism,” 1556.

invention of history itself.⁴⁹ For Foucault, “man” is merely an “effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.”⁵⁰ The revelation that *man* in the classical sense is merely an invention of historical arrangements illustrates that certain understandings about the human and his position to surroundings are always subjected to various discourses of power. The metaphor of “a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea” near the end of the book implies that a specific conceptualization of the human ended as suddenly as that of religious orthodoxy at the end of the eighteenth century.⁵¹ Foucault argues that humans and human existence are tenuous entities regardless of the time or circumstances, therefore the status of the human is not free or autonomous but rather controlled and estranged—themes that are particularly resonant with the experience of American troops in Vietnam and public dissenters at home.

Foucault’s attempt towards “de-linking the human from his universalistic position as an agent of historical progress” is verified by his subsequent writings on madness, prison, and sexuality.⁵² What Foucault succeeded in doing is revealing the danger of “old historiographical assumptions,” and destabilizing the anachronistic traditional analysis of history which tended to give a one-dimensional—often obtuse—narrative about historical periods in a linear manner as if it has a plan that disguises the reality of history.⁵³ The mode of constructing historical facts inevitably relates to man’s self-construction to popularize certain ideas over others such as entering into unnecessary wars. There is an inescapable conclusion, for postmodernists, that absolute truth or reality is no longer tenable. The growing suspicion towards stable frameworks of historical reality resulted in the disavowal of truth and reality in favour of multiple truths and multiple representations of realities.

In a later book, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault goes further to examine the structures of disciplinary power, arguing that the body is subjected to techniques of social regulation and control aimed to increase its productivity and to render it both useful and docile: “the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Anon, 3rd ed., (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 442.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 442.

⁵¹ Ibid., 422.

⁵² Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 23.

⁵³ Richard Rorty, “Foucault and Epistemology,” in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 41-50, 47.

down and rearranges it ... Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.”⁵⁴ The important part about understanding the body, after Foucault, is not the body’s relationship to the mind, but how the body relates to society and the ways in which it is controlled by mechanisms of power in capitalist societies.

Within this outward and inward collapse of truth, other humanist constructs have also changed. Traditional humanism was structured around a binary gender relation which positions the male as representative of humankind, an assumption that was challenged by decades of feminist theorists.⁵⁵ Feminist writers emerged with the goal of changing perspectives about gender disparities, establishing a postmodern framework to destabilize the perceived phallogentric norms. In this vein, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) criticizes traditional phallogentrism arguing that the true essence of gender is only determined socially and culturally rather than biologically through “a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.”⁵⁶ While Butler is a pioneering advocate, she is joined by other feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous who have taken the gender debate to intellectual heights. Luce Irigaray, for example, subverts the paradigm of human logics relating to gender through the development of “a theory of fluid selves,” discarding any traditional attitudes that view gendered situations as oppositional, and insisting on gender dynamics in which the male and female observe the gendered self as “constitutive of the other.”⁵⁷

Hélène Cixous, also, directs her criticism towards the ways in which the West embraced a system of language that functioned to relegate women to secondary positions. She rejects traditional rhetoric and logic, or scientific writing, as a mere “phallic model,” limiting the essence of female identity to rules and structures governed by male-oriented expectations.⁵⁸ Cixous’ brand of feminist writing is one in which women reflect a primal form of femininity, embracing their “less controllable selves as a site of identity.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 138.

⁵⁵ Bolter, “Posthumanism,” 1559.

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), xv.

⁵⁷ Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 17,18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

In these ways, postmodern discourse destabilizes many of the accepted, pre-Vietnam norms, and racial perceptions are not excluded. Distinct racial categories are largely recognized by postcolonial critics as artificial divisions created to categorize individuals by physical traits to construct superior and inferior groupings which then allow for marginalization and exploitation of those groups labelled inferior. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) posits that racial otherness is only understood through the lens of nineteenth-century colonial values and in contrast to whiteness. He argues that the continued racial divide between the Orient and the Occident is nothing but a “European invention,” created to continue justify colonial traditions against the non-white “other.”⁶⁰ Orientalism, as such, is a western construct for controlling and subjugating the Orient to the will of the Occident. The postmodern discourse uncovers the fact that conceptualization of race and otherness in the received humanist sense is unjustifiable and independence and freedom belongs to everyone and that it is a human right, not a white right.

While concepts such as history, truth and language changed perceptively over the decades since Vietnam, human discourse relating to ethics have also seen a transformation. Unlike the humanists who base their ethical principles on moral absolutes, postmodern critics, in contrast, contest the existence of universal ethical codes. Postmodern times, Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), do not give humans any degree of assurance and the postmodern subject depends on “strongly felt moral ambiguity.”⁶¹ Bauman here does not reject ethics, entirely, however. Rather, he proposes novel ways to approach moral problems that do not depend upon objective presuppositions. A part of the solution comes in recognizing that human life, itself, owes no allegiance to an objective morality that transcends individuals’ experiences of the world. If a human being desires to live ethically, he or she must begin by recognizing that humanity, and therefore, human morality is ambivalent in nature. Ethics depend upon human choice, in the moment, and are guided by an innate sense of morality possessed by every person. This, of course, in no way guarantees that individuals will pursue this innate morality consistently, and one might posit the notion that such innate moralities lead them, inevitably, back to the premises of modernity, as ideas coalesce into consistent norms, embraced socially, and eventually universalized and codified into objective

⁶⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1994), 1.

⁶¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 10th ed. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 21.

norms. At the very least, however, Bauman supposes that the centrepiece of morality is in the individual, not in social, religious institutions.

The postmodern discourse also destabilizes established hierarchies of power by challenging the veracity of their ideological origins and foundations. Louis Althusser in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (1995) notes that ideology is a motor of generating bureaucracy and hierarchal thinking, resulting in creating “silence of consciousness” among the people.⁶² Arguing that individuals could not escape ideology, Althusser urges people to pay attention to “the inner voice” of their consciousness suggesting that the man, if nothing else, is sovereign within himself.⁶³ On this basis, the postmodern subject falls victim to conflicting political stances that do not necessarily cohere, allowing the rising discourse of identity politics among certain social groups to raise collective consciousness.⁶⁴

Postmodern critics destabilize many concepts implied in classical humanist thought, making clear that such ideals are by no means intrinsically valuable or historically static. As I will show, the patterns of the Vietnam War of uncertain progress verging on chaos and irrational objectives without a clear frontline or an easily identifiable enemy transferred themselves into an embodied postmodern thematics in the literature of the war. Traumatized by a war that “went terribly wrong by all traditional American standards” and compounded with the public turning against them, Vietnam veterans struggled to return to the foundational categories that shaped their pre-Vietnam identities, and turned to writing to express textually the disruption that the war experience caused to their identities.⁶⁵

Literature

The literature of the Vietnam War departed from the traditions of modern war writing, illustrating instead a distinctly postmodern impetus that has only intensified in literature in the decades since the war’s conclusion. Rather than representing the Vietnam War from the aesthetic standpoint of realism which could not speak to the peculiar experiences faced

⁶² Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2014), 263.

⁶³ Ibid., xxvi.

⁶⁴ Carpenter, ““It Don’t Mean Nothin,”” 33.

⁶⁵ Walter W. Hölbling, “The Vietnam War: (Post-)Colonial Fictional Discourses and (Hi-)Stories,” in *The United States and the Legacy of the Vietnam War*, ed. Jon Roper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 89-120, 114.

in Vietnam, most of the literary texts that emerged from the war continued “the experience of the war on its own diverse and relativistic terms” with postmodern themes that exhibit antagonism toward the pre-war ideals of heroism through parody, alterity and irony.⁶⁶ It is within this pervading tone of postmodern discourse that veterans found a new literary voice.

As the war lacked a stable historical reference regarding its causes, results and duration, Katherine Kinney in her book *Friendly Fire* (2000) argues that the veterans became the “real” authors of the war, gaining a more authoritative perspective over the official narrative.⁶⁷ Few Americans knew much, if anything, about the country of Vietnam and struggled to find a cohesive narrative beyond the doctrine that opposed communism that made enough sense to justify U.S. involvement. As such, soldier memoirs provide a voice that made sense—even if the narrative is one that told of a senseless war—more so than the official narrative put forth by the government.

Many Vietnam veterans, in their writings, embark on what Philip Beidler called a “self-conscious exploration of relationships between experiential and aesthetic ... possibilities of truth-telling, in the realization that far from being incompatible or opposite, they would often imply and even entail each other.”⁶⁸ Earlier accounts of the war tend to show a balance between soldiers’ imaginative assumptions about the war and their real felt experiences. Given the unbelievable horror the soldiers witnessed, this blending of fact and fiction became one of the most viable literary styles to represent a more truthful account of the war.

One feature of Vietnam War literature is the striking absence of a well-defined hero. The order of modern heroes and villains appeared inadequate and outdated.⁶⁹ That is not to say that individual soldiers never acted heroically, but such acts of heroism remained “isolated instances.”⁷⁰ Postmodern accounts of the war, after Vietnam, are full of anti-heroes who “behave antisocially, on a serial basis.”⁷¹ As many veterans were treated with

⁶⁶ Carpenter, “‘It Don’t Mean Nothin,’” 36.

⁶⁷ Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-8.

⁶⁸ Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 34.

⁶⁹ Wallis R. Sanborn, *The American Novel of War: A Critical Analysis and Classification System* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012), 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

disdain and often marginalized from a society that regarded the war as a political quagmire, the veteran became the “Other,” an individual “far removed from the true meaning of the event. At best he was misunderstood, at worst, ignored ... everyone seemed on the margins and no one on the center.”⁷² With no cohesive, virtuous, way of identifying with traditional heroic tropes, many soldiers resorted to unheroic behaviour typified by expressions that reflect a search for meaning but finding few results.

Another recurring theme that permeates Vietnam War memoir is the disintegration of the soldier’s body. Many veteran narratives depict soldiers’ bodies as breakable objects rather than the knightly image of heroism that transcended from the Middle Ages through the mid-twentieth century. The training the soldiers received before deployment for war inculcated a “utilitarian attitude towards embodiment,” meaning that the soldier’s body was only valued based on its utility to repress fear and overcome the enemy bodies with which it found itself entangled.⁷³ Accordingly, soldiers, as depicted in narratives of the war, tended to downplay their weaknesses and inflate their strengths, maintaining the illusion that they were unbreakable hunters of the enemy prey. However, during the height of the war, soldiers discovered to their dismay that their bodies are not immune to death and maiming. The body became a site of vulnerability, subjected to “expansion, reduction, wounding and deterioration [which] suggests a lack of bodily coherence and the unreliability of the body as a signifying system.”⁷⁴ The horror of disintegrating bodies, John Armstrong argues, explains some writers’ tendency to resort to the Gothic genre, employing hyperbole and exaggeration, to infuse the bare words of the page with the emotion that, in the moment, defied words. The genre enabled the soldiers to express revulsion and disgust with the bodies of the dead and wounded, revealing the abject truth of the horror that the war became.⁷⁵

Soldiers’ narratives of disability typically depict a tremendous sense of alienation of the self from its pre-war able-bodied identity. The focus on physical and psychological wounds, in these narratives, challenge the ability of the soldier while challenging the entire nation’s sense of ability, making soldiers “the primary symbols of [the Vietnam

⁷² June Dwyer, “New Roles, New History and New Patriotism: Bobbie Ann Mason’s ‘In Country,’” *Modern Language Studies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 72-78, 72.

⁷³ McMullan, “Corporeal Territories,” iii.

⁷⁴ Russell, *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, 99.

⁷⁵ John Armstrong, “Haunted Jungles of Horror and Trauma,” in *War Gothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39-58, 49.

War's] devastating effect on the nation's conception of itself."⁷⁶ Disabled accounts of the war, such as Ron Kovic's narratives, frequently touch on the insufficient medical services within Veteran Affairs or lack of financial relief which left many disabled veterans filled with shame and anger rather than honour and pride of military service.

Gender is one of the main constructs that have been disrupted by the war in Vietnam. The literature of the war depicts the rage following the soldiers' sense of emasculation as they failed to live up to the hero-soldier motif. Brenda Boyle in *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009) notes that the war disrupted any normative association existing between the traditional picture of the male body and the manner in which masculine identities are formed.⁷⁷ Experiencing failure in war, the rite of passage left the soldier not emerging from boy to man but lost as a "boy" wandering the jungle forever. War itself, then, became as Boyle aptly describes a "measure of gender."⁷⁸ According to Keith Beattie, the primary wound that America suffered in Vietnam was one of impotence as "a lack of power."⁷⁹ The metaphorical impotence suggested by Beattie was felt by both the government and the veterans. The U.S. continued fight against Vietnam knowing that the chances of winning were predictably non-existent indicates the government's inclination to equate defeat with weakness. This also explains, in Thomas Hawley's view, the staggering numbers of Vietnam veterans who either went to prisons or psychiatric wards in Veteran Affairs (VA) hospitals in the years following the end of the war.⁸⁰ If the narrative of soldier as a male hero failed to coalesce in the soldier's experience and, in turn, nothing emerged to replace this motif, the soldier's search for meaning was in vain—a postmodern experience where narrative was displaced by a vacuum.

Earlier narratives of the war predominantly accentuate an obvious lack of compassion towards the enemy. Most of the narratives reveal an exclusion of the Vietnamese people either through dehumanizing them or projecting American-centrism

⁷⁶ Thomas Jordan, "Disability, Vietnam, and the Discourse of American Exceptionalism," in *Emerging Perspectives on Disability Studies*, ed. Matthew Wappett and Katrina Arndt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41-66, 42.

⁷⁷ Brenda M. Boyle, *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives: A Critical Study of Fiction, Films and Nonfiction Writings* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2009), 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁹ Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 20-21.

⁸⁰ Thomas M. Hawley, *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 177.

onto them.⁸¹ The exclusion of the Other's perspective in narratives is "a necessary condition of its narratability."⁸² As such, the Vietnamese people remain largely underrepresented and if the narratives depict them, they are considered "feminized victims of the masculinized war."⁸³ Such frequent stereotypical depictions is suggestive of the soldiers' uneasiness with viewing the Vietnamese as human beings, complex, and individually as diverse as Americans, reflecting a psychological barrier between the self and the other that made it possible to commit atrocities against them, without questioning their own humanity for doing so.⁸⁴

As has been shown from the previous discussion, the Vietnam War is one of the most divisive wars the U.S. fought, with long-lasting consequences for its foreign policy. The political metaphor of the "Vietnam syndrome" indicates the U.S. reluctance to commit troops in overseas military interventions, particularly ones without clear objectives or public support.⁸⁵ But things have changed for the U.S. since Vietnam. It is widely believed that the U.S. recovered from the syndrome after the decisive victory in the Gulf War and George H. W. Bush's declaration that it was "buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula."⁸⁶ The eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 provided a perfect chance for the U.S. to move away from the memories of Vietnam and replace Cold War policies altogether with new ones.

The Post-Cold War Era: The Iraq War

History

The Cold War presented security challenges never before faced. However, it was the aftermath of the Cold War that brought about dramatic changes in world political thoughts concerning international relations. While President Ronald Reagan had done most of the legwork that dismantled the Soviet Union, it was President George H. W. Bush who declared that the post-Soviet world could birth a "new world order," a world finally free

⁸¹ Michael Spindler, "Michael Herr's "Dispatches" and The Cataclysmic View of War," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 1 (July 1991): 25-30, 25.

⁸² Kinney, *Friendly Fire*, 160.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁸⁴ Renny Christopher, *The Viet Nam War/the American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 172.

⁸⁵ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 143.

⁸⁶ George H. Bush, "Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region."

from the threat of possible nuclear annihilation.⁸⁷ Certainly, following the crisis of nuclear threats, there was a shift towards an international cooperation between “peace-loving nations ... determined to accelerate the process of healing” problems inherent to the Cold-War bipolar world.⁸⁸ Through the early twenty-first century, the U.S. has been working in concert with its allies to stabilize emerging conflicts and help nations transition into liberal democratic regimes with capitalist economies while it protects its own economic and political interests.

Soon after the spectre of communism began to fade, the threat of global-scale terrorism emerged. The Middle East had been mostly destabilised since the fall of the Ottomans, but it is particularly the foundation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine that fostered anti-western sentiments in the region.⁸⁹ As resentments continued to grow, a number of extremist Muslims were unsatisfied with the foreign policy that the West sought to impose in the region and began to deploy unconventional suicide bombings and terrorist attacks in retaliation. Despite the spread of terrorist activities, it was only after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 that the U.S. could no longer treat terror attacks as if they were isolated actions of individual extremists. A new foreign policy had to respond to the new chaos represented by the terror threat.

Thus, in the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush declared a “War on Terror” that targets nations deemed to be harbouring or promoting terrorism within. Due to the unknown nature of the enemy in the war in terror and the instability of regions which accommodated terrorist cells, conventional rules of war did not apply. Officials in the Bush administration thought that the U.S. should not wait for terrorists to strike in order to retaliate. Instead, the military must eliminate terrorists before they act. As a result, the U.S. approach to war became more pre-emptive and interventionist.⁹⁰

Moreover, the U.S. transitioned its military from one built to dissuade a large-mass Cold War-era enemy “to a leaner, and more agile force” to face multiple threats.⁹¹ This

⁸⁷ Roy Joseph, “The New World Order: President Bush and the Post-Cold War Era,” in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 81-101, 81.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁸⁹ Alan R. Taylor, *The Superpowers and the Middle East* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 65-66.

⁹⁰ Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 8.

⁹¹ Ibid., 11.

meant a “capabilities-based” approach that allows the U.S. to fight wars in many different regions at once.⁹² This, in turn, required the U.S. to justify its interference in the affairs of other countries. The U.S. began branding its military interventions as humanitarian, a narrative that was used in NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. Humanitarian justifications helped bridge the strained relationship between the politics of the nation state and its commitment to universal human rights, particularly in relation to use of force.⁹³ The U.S. military leaders, therefore, had to give up narratives that dehumanize other people groups and to instruct its military personnel in the culture of the enemy to ensure the continuity of the public and civilian support.

From a U.S. perspective, the war on terror took full advantage of technology to lift the fog of war through the use of satellites and the replacement of boots on the ground with unmanned planes in the sky. The precision of modern weaponry, satellite-driven intelligence, the ability to communicate in real time, and advanced battlefield gear all set the stage for a transformation of war itself and the introduction of what Chris Gray called “posthuman soldiers in a postmodern war.”⁹⁴ The key military units in such a war are no longer tanks, aircraft carriers, or strategic bombers, but the information network.⁹⁵ The information age provides a “new metaphysic of power” that has changed not only the approach to war, but the stakes involved.⁹⁶ The revolution in information increased the military’s capacity, and its complexity.⁹⁷ Wars are no longer primarily fought on traditional battlefields, but “battlespaces” wherein military systems adapt and evolve like biological organisms interacting with an ecosystem.⁹⁸ Soldiers in these wars fight “in a four-dimensional battle arena” in which everything is connected to a military internet known as the Global Information Grid (GIG).⁹⁹

⁹² Kundnani, “Wired for War,” 120.

⁹³ Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Military Intervention and the “Force Multiplier,”” *Global Governance* 13, no. 1 (January-March 2007): 99-118, 99-100.

⁹⁴ Chris Gray, “Posthuman Soldiers in Postmodern War,” *Body & Society* 9, no. 4 (December 2003): 215-226, 215.

⁹⁵ Michael Dillon, “Network Society, Network-Centric Warfare and the State of Emergency,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 19, no. 4 (August 2002): 71-79, 72.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁷ Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 235.

⁹⁸ Tim Blackmore, *War X: Human Extensions in Battlespace* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Space is no longer the primary strategic dimension of postmodern warfare. According to Paul Virilio in *Speed and Politics* (1986), military tactics shifted from a space-oriented strategy to one based on time and speed: “the strategic value of the non-place of speed has definitively supplanted that of space.”¹⁰⁰ The introduction of precision warfare allows targets to be quickly identified through satellite imagery and attacked. If a target, anywhere in the world, could be struck by missiles or smart bombs, the question is not how to tactically manoeuvre military assets on the ground, but when they should be deployed and how quickly target objectives can be achieved.

The power of drones relies on their ability to stay airborne for long hours, and maintain greater heights without being detected by radars. Most importantly, they keep the soldiers at distance from harm, enabling them to strategically strike defined targets and reduce casualties before the infantries move in.¹⁰¹ Old assumptions—that the power that piles up more enemy bodies will win—are questioned and in some cases, reversed, reinforcing the ideological shift in military objectives on military success since Vietnam.

By comparison to Vietnam, the Iraq War was very much a postmodern war. It was a pre-emptive war, based on the claim that Saddam Hussein was developing WMDs and harbouring terrorists, and thus was complicit in the 9/11 attacks. The humanitarian narrative was immediately put forward by the U.S., envisioning the war as a mission by coalition forces to liberate Iraqi civilians from a tyrannical regime. That this narrative device played a central role is evident from the official name for the war itself, “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” Despite the United Nations’ initial plan to take a more cautious approach to WMDs inspection, the U.S. decision of invasion was supported by other UN member states and carried out as a joint coalition until the UN’s eventual active support.¹⁰²

The first phase of the Iraq War began with the “shock and awe” campaign inaugurated by an aerial bombardment of a small number of targets in an attempt to kill Saddam Hussein. The invasion appeared initially to be widely successful, leading to the fall of his regime in April 9, 2003, ending the twenty-four years of his rule. This, already, seemed to signify that America’s technological superiority, unlike that demonstrated in Vietnam, had sufficiently risen to a level that allowed a war to be won before boots hit

¹⁰⁰ Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. Marc Polizzotti (California: Semiotext, 2006), 149.

¹⁰¹ Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 86.

¹⁰² Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 18.

the ground.¹⁰³ The video footage when Saddam Hussein's regime fell seemed to suggest that the Iraqis were grateful for the U.S. invasion, as they destroyed Saddam Hussein's statues and carried American flags. However, this was before the insurgency gained a foothold, and proved to be much more difficult for the U.S. to control.

The postmodern war as fought in Iraq soon revealed its limitations and inherent problems. The notion that technological advancement would save lives in war, rather than make war deadlier, is a proposition that runs counter to the tide of history that had until this point testified to the opposite. Even when life-saving technologies emerge to help wounded soldiers, new killing-machines do not necessarily save soldiers from death or protect them from injuries.¹⁰⁴ According to a report conducted by *Physicians for Social Responsibility*, the data reveals that the ratio of the wounded to killed in the Iraq War was 8 to 1, illustrating the vulnerability of the body in contrast to the technological advances that promote a clean war through advances in body armor and better medical treatments.¹⁰⁵ By contrast to the Vietnam War, the ratio of wounded to killed was 2.6 to 1.¹⁰⁶ As it becomes clear, casualty rates were significantly lower in Iraq than Vietnam, with 90.4 percent of all wounded soldiers surviving their wounds, compared to 86.5 percent in Vietnam.¹⁰⁷

The war in Iraq also led to massive loss of civilian lives despite the military's initial plan to only target those who are enemies. *Iraq Body Count* reports account for 13,807 civilian deaths compared to 28,736 enemy-combatant deaths following the initial invasion.¹⁰⁸ Although the civilian to combatant death ratio was approximately 1 to 2, more recent data from 2014 suggests that roughly 75 percent of all deaths in Iraq were civilians, resulting from combat-related violence and doubling nearly every year since the invasion phase of the war.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 95.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War* (New York: Presidio, 2008), 252.

¹⁰⁵ Evan Kanter, "Shock and Awe Hits Home" (*Physicians for Social Responsibility*, November 2007), accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.psr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/shock-and-awe.pdf>, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Eduardo Casais, "Principal Wars in Which the US Participated: Casualty Ratios" (*Areppim*, 2008), accessed October 13, 2018, http://stats.areppim.com/stats/stats_afghanxdeadxwound.htm.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew S. Goldberg, "Death and Injury Rates of U.S. Military Personnel in Iraq," *Military Medicine* 175, no. 4 (April 2010): 220-226, 220.

¹⁰⁸ "Iraq 2014: Civilian Deaths Almost Doubling Year on Year" (*Iraq Body Count*, 2015), accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2014/>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

By way of comparison, approximately 2 million civilians were killed in Vietnam compared to 1.1 million Viet Cong.¹¹⁰ If the Vietnamese reports are accurate, these rates would make a civilian-combatant death ratio of 2 to 1, with nearly twice as many civilian casualties compared to Viet Cong body counts. While civilian losses reported by the Vietnamese might have been inflated for propagandistic purposes, the number of civilian deaths in war either approximated or far exceeded the number of combatant fatalities.¹¹¹

On this basis, in the long-run, Iraq was even worse than Vietnam (in ratios, though not sheer numbers), seemingly justifying Martin Shaw's observation that technologically-enhanced warfare has simply transferred the risk from soldiers to civilians.¹¹² In fact, compared to the data from the other wars during the twentieth century, including both world wars, it appears that civilians are just as likely as soldiers—and in some cases, more likely—to die as a result of war, which demolishes the myth that war has become more humane with better technology.¹¹³

The idea that Paul Virilio proposed between space versus speed was not as effective a paradigm to explain the tactics in Iraq. Certainly, overwhelming speed-driven technological assaults overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein quickly, but they did not end the war. In fact, the end of Saddam Hussein's regime only marked the beginning of the deadliest period of the war. Although a dictator and one who led invasions on neighboring countries, Saddam Hussein had his supporters who resented the U.S. presence in their country. Even after the Iraqis elected a new government, violent factions between Sunnis and Shi'as spiralled into ineffective leadership, chaos, and continued sectarian violence.

The lack of a proper plan to stabilize the country from chaos opened what Douglas Kellner has called "a Pandora's Box of horrors."¹¹⁴ Even after the U.S. army had updated its cultural approach which dominated the first three years of conflict in Iraq, and replaced it with training programs infused with sociological and anthropological research to create sensitive soldiers who could appropriately respond to cross-cultural dynamics in the field,

¹¹⁰ Ronald H. Spector, "Vietnam War: 1954–1975" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 11, 2019), accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>.

¹¹¹ Rudy J. Rummel, *Statistics of Vietnamese Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder since 1900* (Virginia: University of Virginia, 1997), 102.

¹¹² Shaw, *The New Western Way of War*, 1.

¹¹³ William Eckhardt, "Civilian Deaths in Wartime," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals* 20, no. 1 (January 1989): 89-98, 89.

¹¹⁴ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, 77.

the attempts were largely unsuccessful.¹¹⁵ Violence on the ground limited opportunities for American troops to engage the civilians or build social capital through cultural sensitivity.

While the war was controversial on the home front, with most Americans indicating that they did not support the war, it persisted for ten years without any significant opposition—certainly without the kind of protests that occurred during Vietnam. According to Olivia Lanaras, the shift from a conscripted service to a volunteer-based military plays a major role in how long the war continued. With news broadcasts rarely reporting on the conflict, the war itself faded into the background of the nation's consciousness.¹¹⁶

The U.S. failed to establish a politically viable state in Iraq, as it did in South Vietnam two decades earlier. Despite the new approach to conflicts in recent years, both wars turned into protracted battles against insurgents with massive loss of human life and infrastructure. The hope that the postmodern form of war would minimize death, trauma and civilian casualties proved to be an illusion that never materialized. While the postmodern war did little to minimize body counts, it nonetheless changed the posture of the soldier, redefined the battlespace and created new post-conflict conditions, necessitating a change in how to better understand armed conflicts.

Theory

The Iraq War began at a time when thinkers were challenging frameworks of both humanism and antihumanism. As technologies foster globalization and as globalization leads to a proliferation of technologies throughout the world, formerly insurmountable barriers between people and cultures are (in theory) transcended. Interpreting contemporary culture requires theorists to “think again and to think harder” to adequately explain the unforeseeable impact of recent political and social changes on the human condition since the Vietnam War.¹¹⁷

While the question of technology is arguably one of the main drivers for the need of a new theoretical construct for contemporary culture, the urge to understand

¹¹⁵ Christopher Sims, *The Human's Terrain System: Operationally Relevant Social Science Research in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 205.

¹¹⁶ Olivia Lanaras, “The Negative Effects of an All-Volunteer Force on Individualistic Societies,” *The Claremont Journal of Law and Public Policy*, (January 29, 2016), accessed July 19, 2019, <https://5clpp.com/2016/01/29/the-negative-effects-of-an-all-volunteer-force-on-individualistic-societies/>.

¹¹⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 150.

postmodern war and its impact on humans becomes equally a central concern for posthuman critics. Recent shifts to disembodied methods of fighting contribute to “the inhuman character of contemporary warfare.”¹¹⁸ The destruction of lives and infrastructure causes massive numbers of refugees to be always “on the move,” forced to relocate to other parts of the world.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the socio-political deterritorialization resulting from postmodern warfare through the use of robot machines violates human rights as they do not show regard for borders, civilians or infrastructure, revealing the lethal tenant of war where those who conduct detached destruction are often untraceable.¹²⁰

While postmodernism laid the groundwork for a more nuanced understanding of the human condition, its advocates were later accused of “lucid quietism” and withdrawal from the rising challenges of the early twentieth-first century.¹²¹ Eric Gans argues that postmodernism declined, and a new era that might be deemed post-postmodern or, in his language, post-millennial, rejects both the utopianism of modernity and the “victimary thinking” of postmodernity.¹²² While postmodernism led to a broad rejection of humanist utopianism after the rise of Nazism and Stalinist Communism, it assumed dystopian perspectives defined by the politics of “victims” and “victimizers.”¹²³ If everyone has a legitimate claim on being the “victim,” then the whole victim/oppressors politics cannot survive, forcing the postmodern world into a conflict that will inevitably self-destruct.¹²⁴

As irrelevant as it may seem to be, postmodernism works as “a pre-requisites or co-requisite” to a more effective posthuman theory.¹²⁵ Unshackled by postmodern moral paralysis and nihilism, posthumanism theorizes a vision of the human as a transformative agent capable of replacing destructive negativity with positive energies and passions,

¹¹⁸ Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (India: Springer, 2016), 13-32, 20.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁰ Bourke, “Killing in a Posthuman World,” 4.

¹²¹ Collin Gifford Brooke, “Forgetting to Be (Post)Human: Media and Memory in a Kairotic Age,” *A Journal of Composition Theory* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 775-795, 775.

¹²² Eric Gans, “Victimary Thinking Forever?” *Anthropoetics* 230, (March 2001), accessed December 22, 2018, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw230/>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Bolter, “Posthumanism,” 1560.

leading to “an ethics of joy and affirmation.”¹²⁶ The negativity created by social and cultural limitations are rejected and replaced with “emphasis on the collective; acceptance of relationality and of viral contaminations; concerted efforts at experimenting with and actualizing virtual options.”¹²⁷ It is the determination to go beyond anything negative that provides a firm basis for the posthuman theory. Unlike postmodernists who tend to consider forces of power dynamics as profoundly limiting, existing to support social systems already extant, serving the interest of the elite, posthuman critics view power as simultaneously restrictive and productive, trying to transcend boundaries that defined the socio-political dynamics in the prior era.¹²⁸

The human, in posthuman understanding, is not a self-contained individual wholly responsible for his/her development, but instead the posthuman is part of the amalgamated whole that comprises earth and all that live on it, whether human or otherwise. On this theory, the posthuman enjoys multiple levels and contexts of belongings through “the transformation of one’s sensorial and perceptual coordinates” to unfold himself/herself onto the world.¹²⁹ With the distinction between subject and object becoming blurred, the posthuman encounters the world from various points of view, preserving his/her sense of self-value while also recognizing an ethical commitment towards both self and others. A posthuman existence is predicated upon the notion of becoming rather than being, for the posthuman does not reach a destiny but continuously evolves, encompassing new forms of existence.

In posthuman theory the body could be best understood in conceptual terms. Unlike historical and psychoanalytic understandings of the body as only a shell of the mind or the postmodern perspective of it as a mere cultural text, Rosi Braidotti proposes that “we can think of the body as an entity that inhabits different time-zones simultaneously, and is animated by different speeds and a variety of internal and external clocks which do not necessarily coincide.”¹³⁰ This dichotomy can be difficult to conceptualize at first, with a seeming loss of both bodily sensuality and integrity as a defining experience of the self. This is because the posthuman body does not derive its meaning from its relation to its

¹²⁶ Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” 26.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

¹³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 21.

biology, but is defined as a part of a grander whole, a network uniting self and others. Katherine Hayles describes this reality as a “feedback loop” between the body and its environment, where the posthuman is materially constructed, always appearing and reappearing through new patterns of interactions.¹³¹ Posthuman bodies, on this understanding, regenerate themselves, and “stubbornly and relentlessly reproduce themselves” as they self-regulate and integrate into different social, political, and environmental constructs, much like any organism integrates into new geographies.¹³²

Posthumanism rejects traditional gender binaries based on physical reproductive organs, with humans categorized as either males or females, as well as postmodern gender understanding. While postmodernism rescued the notion of gender from a purely biological foundation, recognizing the ways that gender is culturally constructed, postmodernity could never fully transcend gender, since individuals are situated within culture according to certain biological determinants.¹³³ Posthuman theory bypasses biological determinism as the final arbiter of one’s gender in favour of more fluidity that leads to a post-gendered reality, where one’s gendered identity is derived from personality rather than chromosomes.¹³⁴ Posthuman gender, in other words, is presented as materially grounded, yet not dually limited. In Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone’s terms, gender “is not an indefinite number awaiting a more accurate measurement, but a rigorous theoretical mandate whose specifications ... is neither numerable nor, in the common sense, innumerable.”¹³⁵ Gender, thus, is a sub-category in that it does not relate to one performance or one sex, but a male-female continuous functioning within the self.

Similar to its rejection of binary gender categorization, posthumanism recognizes the impact of the historical categorization of racial groups on both integration and marginalization of individuals within societies. Therefore, posthuman theory avoids the excessive interest in oneself in favour of “a group-oriented agency” which allows fluid

¹³¹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 27.

¹³² Rosi Braidotti, “Meta(I)Flesh,” in *Future of Flesh: A Cultural Survey of the Body*, ed. K. Kitsi-Mitakou and Z. Detsi-Diamanti (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 241-262, 252.

¹³³ Helen K. Gediman, “Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives on Sex and Gender Mixes,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 53, no. 4 (December 2005): 1059-1078, 1074.

¹³⁴ Benjamin Abbott, “Posthuman Gender: A Non-Binary Future” (*Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*, October 12, 2013), accessed September 15, 2017, <https://ieet.org/index.php/IEET2/more/abbott201312>.

¹³⁵ Halberstam and Livingstone, “Posthuman Bodies,” 9.

self-other-identifications.¹³⁶ It advocates for a continuity between self and others, recognizing differences but devaluing its significance. Such devaluation of differences, however, does not lead to indifference. On the contrary, the posthuman embraces “the well-being of an enlarged sense of community” which defies historic, ethnic, cultural and racial constructs.¹³⁷

Posthuman theory makes sense of the new world, where social realities and ethical values are changing, in ways that humanism and antihumanism could not. While humanism birthed the industrial and eventually the technological revolutions, it posits an inordinately abstract concept of humanity, which eventually functioned as a reason for exclusionary practices and dominating ambitions. Similarly, postmodernism resisted all humanist metanarratives, yet it failed to see the broader picture as it focused on individualized perspectives. The posthuman appears as “a redemptive figure for a wounded and struggling humanity.”¹³⁸ Posthumanism, literally meaning “after humanism,” has been a powerful response to the deep-entrenched discriminatory practices that exist as a legacy of Enlightenment discourse, providing rich possibilities to transcend division and barriers. The next section will examine how these trends, over the last half-century, have been manifesting themselves in the literature of the Iraq War.

Literature

Set against these historical and theoretical contexts, Iraq War literature escapes the boundaries of national, sexual, cultural, racial categories, and occupies a more unique cultural space. In *Welcome to the Suck* (2011) Stacey Peebles attempts to illustrate that factors like media, technology, and a growing acceptance of the counter-culture have shaped the Iraq War into one of these unique moments in American history.¹³⁹ As war itself becomes more technological, the ways of telling war stories become likewise digitized in a way that no soldier in the past was able to find. Soldiers’ identities are empowered, as Gillian Whitlock suggests, by these technological possibilities opened up by the vast frontier of cyberspace.¹⁴⁰ The emergence of such communication technologies

¹³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions on Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 41.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³⁸ Halliwell and Mousley, *Critical Humanisms*, 174.

¹³⁹ Stacey L. Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 25.

contributes to narrowing the gap between soldiers and civilians, removing much of the distance between the home front and the front lines.¹⁴¹

Iraq War stories, attempting to navigate the changing terrains outlined above, have relied on a variety of genres, breaking from traditional accounts of wars and embracing, instead, cross-temporal narratives. In “In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq,” Roger Luckhurst evaluates war fiction, observing that while none of the texts in his study directly mentions the war in Iraq, they “all variously stretch to evoke the historical authenticity of prior epochs. At the same time, they seem to speak of little else but our contemporaneous war.”¹⁴² This implicit representation of Iraq War serves as a challenge to the notion of time itself, or a “self-identical present” in which we all live.¹⁴³ That is not to say that Iraq War fiction does not seek to advance a political perspective or to inculcate transcendent truths that the soldier comes to realize as a result of being at war. Rather, it means that war fiction attempts a transgressive approach to the war.

Iraq War narratives can be said to be post-heroic in different ways and for different reasons. In Vietnam, the “hero” trope was challenged by the soldier’s own inability to live up to the mythic image. In Iraq War, however, defining a hero becomes much more difficult without a clearly defined villain who is on the battlefield and able to be countered. The use of armed drones and technology that removed the soldier from a face-to-face combat where traditional heroism is demonstrated tends to counter the soldier-hero trope in different ways.¹⁴⁴ Death and injury were reduced from the unfortunate yet noble results of heroic war to mere consequences of technology-enabled attacks, where the attacked rarely has an opportunity to fight back. This removes the comforting ethical underpinning of wartime heroism and masculine conquest in which the strength of the attacker is pitted against the attacked. Fighting a distant war, without the immediate risk of flying bullets intended to thwart his rescue, simply is not as compelling as a “hero” narrative evidenced in previous wars. There are, of course, soldiers who engaged in real stories of heroism in Iraq—and many of them have been celebrated for risking their lives to save others. Still, the usual Iraq War experience did not provide as many opportunities for heroism as in prior wars.

¹⁴¹ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 9.

¹⁴² Roger Luckhurst, “In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq,” *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 713-737, 724.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 715.

¹⁴⁴ Christian Enemark, *Armed Drones and the Ethics of War* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 10.

Iraq War narratives also tend to approach the question of ability versus disability differently. Injured soldiers in Iraq are not reduced to non-functioning and useless bodies, but are celebrated for overcoming their injuries, and turning their disabilities to opportunities that bring advantages to their lives.¹⁴⁵ Disability has swung back to the badge of honour experience from the disgrace and neglect afforded to disabled veterans in Vietnam. The growing visibility of the disabled soldier since Vietnam, particularly in films, allows a “360-degree gaze” of the cost of war, a reminder that “we are not whole, individually or collectively.”¹⁴⁶ Such representations assist society in confronting the illusion of the normal body and changing views of identity in significant ways.

Narratives written by soldiers involved in active combat in the Iraq War similarly provide insights into the gendering of the military. The nature of contemporary war and the increased number of women in the military challenge ideas of the soldier as an emblem of masculinity.¹⁴⁷ Jenna Pitchford contends that the nature of the war remasculinizes soldiers in a manner prior to the Gulf War, yet the narratives surrounding contemporary soldiers tend to depict them assuming “a philosophical and sensitive outlook.”¹⁴⁸

Additional studies reinforce this perspective. For example, Sara Schotland’s *Soldiers of Conscience* examines the internal conflict experienced by male soldiers required to act in a manner contrary to their moral principles. Rather than presenting the band-of-brothers bonding that occurs within a typical military unit, a growing number of soldiers are able to stand alone apart from their units, accepting “the stigma that one is a coward and a traitor,” than to continue compromising their moral stance.¹⁴⁹ Soldiers who take on traditionally feminine characteristics, rejecting violent masculine traits are increasingly considered heroes, a striking alternative to the stereotypical portrayals of soldiers as hyper-masculine focused on winning aggressive encounters.

The female soldier’s voice, as much as it is new to war literature, presents a similarly atypical narrative of gender in war. Female soldiers have written books

¹⁴⁵ Joanna Tidy, “Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity and the Contemporary Military Peace Movement in *Body of War*,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (December 2015): 454-472, 461.

¹⁴⁶ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 144, 138.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁴⁸ Jenna Pitchford, “From One Gulf to Another: Reading Masculinity in American Narratives of the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars,” *Literature Compass* 9, no. 5 (May 2012): 357-370, 368.

¹⁴⁹ Sara D. Schotland, “Soldiers of Conscience: The Conscientious Objector as (Anti) War Hero,” *War, Literature & The Arts* 26 (2014): 1-12, 9.

following Iraq more than any war in history.¹⁵⁰ Although prevented from being involved in dangerous combat missions, female soldiers nonetheless did encounter both combat and danger in Iraq by repressing their hegemonic female identify markers and assuming traits associated with males, such as endurance, courage, and physical toughness.¹⁵¹ While female soldiers must meet similar physical criteria to male soldiers, I will show in chapter four how a female soldier recognizes the assets of femininity to compensate for deficits in the overtly masculine military.

Cultural shifts and globalization have also impacted soldier narratives, moving them beyond the traditional self/other construct to a more nuanced presentation of the similarities and differences between the American soldier and the native local. In “Refiguring Difference” (2015), Daniel O’Gorman contends that the best literary treatments of the war are the ones which combat desensitization to violence through “imaginative geographies.”¹⁵² Iraq war narratives tend to forge empathetic ties with the Iraqis by linking American loss to Iraqi loss and demonstrating how people of different ethnic backgrounds are much more alike than they are different, even those within well-defined groups such as “white Americans” or “Baathist Iraqis.” The struggle of characters, Iraqis and Americans, to make sense of their own place in the war is never resolved in these books, leading the reader to realize that they are perpetually ill-defined in much the same ways as everyone else on the planet. In this sense, the “disruptive” influence of Iraq War novels is precisely their ability to foster empathy and connection between vastly different individuals.

In addition, the global marketplace, as B. J. Williams’ “The Desert of Anatopism” (2015) indicates, causes soldiers to experience commonalities with their enemies which were uncommon in previous wars.¹⁵³ The proliferation of consumer products made in America and sold in Iraqi stores makes soldiers experience “the conditions of home” on the foreign battlefield. Williams’ use of the Greek word *anatopism* in the title illustrates the out-of-place feeling the soldiers felt, which somehow helps narrowing down the

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey Wright, “‘I’m a Soldier, not a Gender’: Iraq War Literature and the Double Bind of Being a Woman in Combat,” *Women’s Studies* 47 no. 6 (August 2018): 657-672, 658.

¹⁵¹ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 116.

¹⁵² Daniel O’Gorman, “Refiguring Difference: Imaginative Geographies and ‘Connective Dissonance’” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no. 5 (October 2015): 545–559, 546.

¹⁵³ Brian J. Williams, “The Desert of Anatopism: War in the Age of Globalization,” *American Literature* 87, no. 2 (June 2015): 359–85, 362.

division between allies and enemies, and ultimately preventing the Americans from denying the Iraqis their humanity.¹⁵⁴

As the previous discussion makes clear, Vietnam War narratives depict traumatized veterans lamenting the collapse of old structures, and always looking back to hero-masculine tropes that celebrated veterans of past wars. In contrast, Iraq War narratives look forward to the collapse of such boundaries, embracing upheavals in social, political, and nationalistic definitions of meanings. This shift in and intensification of expression could be attributed to the effect of time and memory. But there is evidence to show that Iraq War veterans, while occupied with human concerns, are determined to write against their own selves and against the deep-seated understanding of their inherited heritage. They lament the costs of war but reconstruct their experiences in ways that assuage the trauma of war by transcending it creatively.

Conclusion

This chapter explores how the war in Vietnam and the experience of defeat impacted U.S. wartime policy. Since the war's end, there has been a belief among military leaders that postmodern combat mode—attacks from a distance—could allow the U.S. to accomplish its goals without significant losses of life. The Iraq War and the eventual counterinsurgency operations, however, pushed U.S. strategists to a more conventional approach that, nonetheless, struggles to account for the nonconventional approach of insurgents. While the Iraq War did not end with a clear defeat as was the case in Vietnam, it remained unclear if the U.S. had truly accomplished a victory at all.

Perhaps more importantly, the three decades separating the Iraq War from Vietnam War, as this chapter reveals, witnessed the waning of the postmodern discourse in terms of its validity to address the new century challenges and the emergence of posthuman theory as a force that has to be reckoned with even while vestiges of humanism and antihumanism continue to be felt. As warfare has changed significantly between Vietnam and Iraq, examining how soldiers experience postmodern warfare presents an opportunity to evaluate the impact of posthuman theory. Do postmodern politics remain relevant and potent, or has the posthuman age already dawned while postmodernism wanes?

This thesis explores the influence of posthumanism in detail through a thematic analysis of veterans' responses to both wars, addressing the ways in which recent

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 361.

technologies and changes in military culture impact upon Iraq War soldiers' perceptions towards militarization of the body (chapter 2), the trauma of disability (chapter 3), the masculine dynamics that characterize U.S. military culture (chapter 4), and its strategy to dehumanize the enemy (chapter 5). To this end, in the next chapter, I will look specifically at how postmodern war impacts soldiers' bodies and how soldiers, in turn, transcend the limitations the war imposes on them.

Chapter 2

Militarization of Bodies and the Question of Technology

“Mankind was entering a new era of warfare for which neither history nor philosophy completely prepared us.”

—Matt Martin, (2010)¹

Matt Martin, a U.S. pilot in the Iraq War of a new class of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), provides a unique insight into this new military technology, its use in the field, and most importantly, its impact on his war experience. Unlike previous wars, the introduction of drone warfare and the additional remote means of attack cause many to question how the tenets of warfare change soldiers' experiences. One of the many debates surrounding the use of autonomous machines in the conduct of war relate to their ability to lower the barrier to killings due to the increasing distance and detachment caused by such advancing weaponry.² The moral and ethical dilemmas of disembodied drone warfare make pilots relate differently to their participation in combat and therefore experience less accountability for the injury and death they inflict.

Central to developing an understanding of soldiers' bodies in the context of wars is recognizing the ways in which official narratives always seek to displace the bodies by focusing on common purposes of war or emphasizing the technological advances which allegedly could minimize bodily suffering.³ In order to develop a better understanding as to how the perception of the body in regard to warfare has progressed since the Vietnam War, comparing the official narrative between the two wars reveals a clear shift in vocabulary and framing which seeks to present the experiences of technology-assisted war as surgical and clean. In *The New Western Way of War* (2008), Martin Shaw points out that the language of warfare since the end of the Cold War has been largely replaced

¹ Matt J. Martin and Charles W. Sasser, *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War over Iraq and Afghanistan: A Pilot's Story* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2010), 46.

² Jamie Allinson, “The Necropolitics of Drones,” *International Political Sociology* 9, no. 2 (June 2015): 113-127, 116.

³ Petra Rau, “Between Absence and Ambiguity: On the Meanings of the Body-at-War,” introduction in *Conflict, Nationhood and Corporeality in Modern Literature*, ed. Petra Rau (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-25, 1.

by technical jargon that subsumes the violence associated with wars.⁴ The resulting shift in language speaks to the memories of the Vietnam War when massive opposition to the loss of American lives threatened the perception of the nation's military strength. In order to continue asserting and maintaining its power, the U.S. military recognized the need to shift its way of managing both soldiers and wars.

While proponents of postmodern war imagined a day when the U.S. soldier's body is wholly replaced by cyborgs, or other digitized forms of attack, there is no war until now that has not hinged on bodies, whether that of soldiers or civilians. Bodies remain inherent components of warfare. This chapter aims to return the body to the forefront of discussion regarding war through an analysis of soldiers' accounts of their experiences in Vietnam and Iraq wars. This "analytic recognition" of bodies in soldiers' narratives allows the reader to bypass the misleadingly palatable justifications of war found in the official narrative and reveal the embodiment dynamics resulting from the war.⁵ Treating the body as only a "material" or "apolitical object" runs the risk of underestimating the implications of postmodern war on soldiers.⁶ The overlap between the individual soldier at war and the perception of his body cannot be discounted if one wishes to understand the implications of postmodern warfare. Is the soldier more a human or a machine? Does he operate through normal human emotions or have those been suppressed through training, forcing him to simply respond to the demands of the program? Is the soldier an ethical being or only a code carrying out senselessly a series of commands like a computer?

While the concept of embodiment in the postmodern military has been challenged by new technologies (such as fighting autonomous machines and virtual training) creating soldiers who are dispersed and alienated from themselves and others, I argue against the conception that technologies place the Iraqi War soldier in a compromising position with a greater risk of disconnection from those essential human elements that preserve the ethical core of his being. Iraq War soldiers are not necessarily able to adapt to the new technologies as the military has wished and "the soldier's senses remain his property even if his body does not."⁷ The very act of separation from traditional combat and the

⁴ Shaw, *The New Western Way of War*, 88.

⁵ McSorley, "War and the Body," 1.

⁶ Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

⁷ Kenneth T. MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 65.

immersion in technology only enhances soldiers' sense of bodies. They cannot easily discard the fact that they are part of a war machine that spreads death and destruction. Most importantly, I argue that U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War are more able to transcend the entrapment of their bodies and steer clear from the dehumanizing effect of technology than soldiers of the Vietnam War.

Central to this chapter is a recognition of the shift from the psychoanalytic conceptions of the body in Vietnam as manifested through semiotic inscriptions and cultural codes to an embodied understanding of the self, based on a situated interplay between physical and mental processes.⁸ The divide between the mind and the body, during the Vietnam War era, makes soldiers unresisting receivers of external forces, acting like machines that submissively follow orders without thinking. Conversely, recent trends towards technological war help bridge the divide between the mind and the body, making soldiers continuously perceive the changes in mental and physical state in relation to the external environment, adapting or resisting, always moving forward towards altered states of embodiments to enable survival. As Katherine Hayles indicates, technology is already intertwined in the production of subjects, informing the soldier's understanding of himself and his body.⁹

The perception of body manifested in Vietnam is expertly recounted by Philip Caputo in *A Rumor of War* (1977). The experience of training serves as a traumatic point of transition between two fundamentally different states of Caputo's being; training prepares his body and mind for war, and the experience of war reinforces the changes that have been wrought in his mind and body. War is described as being transformational not only for the mind but also for the body, allowing Caputo to submit totally to the military and become not much more than a tool himself and part of a body-machine complex.

As a point of contrast to Caputo's text, then I will proceed to analyse the 2008 film, *The Hurt Locker*, which depicts the Iraq War from the perspective of a member of a U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Unit who struggles to embrace what the military has trained him to be, finding there is something more about his humanity that he cannot escape. The film offers a depiction of asymmetrical warfare and a constant threat of danger in a fully embodied combat system, reminiscent of Vietnam.

⁸ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 21.

⁹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

My third text is Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) which swings between the illusory perception of disembodied warfare and the reality of an embodied experience. Buzzell has already been exposed, by simulation, to the kinds of settings in which he will operate. As the reality of the war sinks in, he resorts to blogging in order to extend his reach and to tell the truth of his war. The blog provided an outlet, whereby Buzzell could exert his independence, preserve his pre-war sense of self, and maintain a sense of humanity by telling things as they really were. By remaining anonymous, at least for a time, he was empowered to remain an individual, unsilenced by the military machine.

The final text of this chapter is *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War over Iraq and Afghanistan* (2010) which recounts Matt Martin's service as a drone pilot in the Iraq War as he wrestles with an initial disembodiment and separation from combat, moving eventually towards an embodiment and engagement with bodies of friends and foes. Each of these four works provides a platform for the discussion of the embodied experiences of the two wars, revealing a consistent theme of bodily vulnerability that suggests the protection assumed from technology is only cosmetic despite shifts in military approaches between the historically disparate experiences in Vietnam and Iraq. While the best technologies do not necessarily protect the soldiers from the harsh realities of war, the very evolution into technological war brings these soldiers back into touch with an unavoidable sense of humanity.

Bodies at War: The Making of Soldiers

In order to understand the context of the textual analysis conducted in this chapter, it is necessary to recognize the changes between the body-based system of the Cold War and the technology-based war that defines the post-Cold War era.¹⁰ U.S. military training during the Vietnam War claimed full ownership over the bodies of the recruits to reconstruct them as bodily members of one fighting unit.¹¹ A combination of physical and psychological conditioning reduced new recruits to a state similar to that of young children.¹² The drill instructor could wake the recruits at any time, require them to do many types of physical activity regardless of their fatigue or desire, and force them to

¹⁰ Ian G. R. Shaw, *Predator Empire: Drone Warfare and Full Spectrum Dominance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 248.

¹¹ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

engage in activities without their consent. This behavioural conditioning prepared the new recruits to function effectively within the military units and have their personal embodiment replaced by a collective embodiment. The abandonment of personal identity in favour of one collective identity became valuable because, as Jinim Park indicates, “the former is mortal where the latter is not.”¹³

Military training typically seeks to retrain the recruit’s mind, making him more receptive to commands and less likely to think independently. Surviving the military training required soldiers “to give up the things of the mind for the sake of bodily survival.”¹⁴ Psychological attempts to suppress recruits’ excessive thoughts were used to prevent disruption of the highly organized military structure. While numbing is typically of concern when it comes to repressed emotions on a psychological level, it is deemed an asset in the military as it becomes emblematic of how a real soldier handles the horrors of wars.¹⁵ Similarly, the systematic emphasis on the physical aspects of training made recruits typically adopt hyper-masculine identities.¹⁶ Other standard regulations, true to all wars, were also followed to codify recruits’ development. The removal of excess hair and the issuing of standard military uniforms rendered the recruit physically not so different in appearance from the rest of his unit, thereby alienating him from his prior civilian self.¹⁷

The training, then, reconditioned recruits to enable them to hurt and kill instinctively. David Grossman’s *On Killing* (1996) explains that the military used “conditioning techniques to develop a reflective ‘quick shoot’ ability[which] resulted in violent ideation outside the typical thought pattern of the individual soldier.”¹⁸ As many soldiers from World War II failed to fire upon enemies when called to do so because of their innate reluctance to inflict harm on others, Vietnam training, in response, conditioned soldiers to pride themselves on being killers and eliminated unconscious aversion to causing physical harm to better prepare them to kill in combat.¹⁹ Racial

¹³ Park, *Narratives of the Vietnam*, 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 109.

¹⁶ Park, *Narratives of the Vietnam*, 40.

¹⁷ McMullan, “Corporeal Territories,” 6.

¹⁸ David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Georgia: Back Bay Books, 1998), 253.

¹⁹ Ibid., xiii, xv.

superiority and other separating perceptions aided in the development of this ability to harm—and also a lack of remorse for doing so—thereby increasing the willingness to kill among American soldiers.²⁰

Although the war saw technological advances, most notably the helicopter, the Vietnam War relied primarily on human bodies and the sky remained largely “devoid of planes.”²¹ The rhythm of the fighting in the Vietnam jungle—becoming now iconic scenes from the war’s films—are described by Christian Appy: “a column of men spaced about five yards apart; ... and patrolling on foot through jungles, mountains, or rice paddies.”²² Such physical exertion often left soldiers ready to attack any Vietnamese in an act of revenge as they felt their bodies were used as “sitting ducks” to draw out enemy guerrillas.²³ The constant emphasis on the body counts resulted in bodily destruction on a mass scale, including the widespread killing of civilians, who were sometimes described by the “military statistics generation machine” as guerrillas even if they were only children.²⁴ In such body-dependent fighting, injured and dead bodies lost their value and became “machines out of order.”²⁵

The media reporting of the Vietnam War added another layer of complexity to the embodied aspect of the war. Daniel Hallin explains how the media reporting fixated on the body, with a daily presentation of the number of Americans killed on the nightly news, a reminder of the price of the conflict and a direct contributor to public opinion turning against the war.²⁶ In a similar vein, Kevin McSorley contends that the images of American soldiers in body bags “cemented a verdict of the war as illegitimate and inhuman.”²⁷ The defeat in Vietnam makes crystal clear that traditional treatment of bodies only impedes the war efforts of the U.S. military. Therefore, the military needed to shift the ways it trains and manages both its soldiers and its wars, to keep troop casualties to acceptable

²⁰ Ibid., 160.

²¹ Tom Engelhardt, *The United States of Fear* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 91.

²² Appy, *Working-Class War*, 176.

²³ Ibid., 187.

²⁴ Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 46.

²⁵ Park, *Narratives of the Vietnam War*, 33.

²⁶ Hallin, *The “Uncensored War,”* 15.

²⁷ McSorley, “War and the Body,” 4.

levels and to preserve the machinery of war in the face of public opinion that had grown less and less supportive of U.S. overseas military interventions.

The architects of the Iraq War, Martin Shaw argues, operated in direct response to Vietnam and made a concerted effort to minimize or remove the body from the engagement in Iraq.²⁸ The Iraq War depended on an all-volunteer force, unlike the drafted soldiers of Vietnam, and was heavily impacted by technology. As Kevic McSorley states, “militaries became much more capital rather than labour intensive,” operating in an almost business-like fashion.²⁹ In other words, as conscription has declined, the all-volunteer military service attracts recruits who demand protection from death and injury. Technology-enabled war appears to offer soldiers safety and distance from harm’s way.

Although not relinquishing the basic training of boot camp, early twenty-first century recruits were trained not only with physical drills, but with virtual reality and other technologies which sought to disembody them from killing. Instead of becoming instinctive killers through the harshness of the drill instructors abuse, the military exposes soldiers to killing through simulated environments until their responses become automatic. These simulations deconstructed and re-conditioned the soldiers’ bodies to eliminate fear, reduce hesitation, and make them less affected by pain. Chris Gray asserts that virtual training creates soldiers unable to resist operating at maximum effectiveness and reliability, a process that “produces ‘a kind of isolation’ from the violence of war” and allows soldiers to function “removed from the bloody results of their decisions.”³⁰

The introduction of drone and remote fighting integrated the operators into complex data systems designed specifically to strip the embodied elements from the war, alienating the recruit from his body and leaving the individual soldier as a cog in a machine.³¹ Arun Kundnani explains that recruits are issued “high-tech body suits which use chemicals, sensors and digital information to cocoon the soldiers in a ‘virtual war’ experience, even in the midst of battle.”³² This indicates the military’s inclination to track every soldier and connect every piece of equipment and its user to headquarters.³³ Technology, thus, shifts war from viewing individual bodies as either operating independently or forged into a

²⁸ Shaw, *The New Western Way of War*, 7.

²⁹ McSorley, “War and the Body,” 6.

³⁰ Chris Gray, *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 200.

³¹ Bourke, “Killing in a Posthuman World,” 31.

³² Kundnani, “Wired for War,” 122.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

fighting unit of corporate bodies to components of the military system dependent on “radical relationality” in a changing battlespaces.³⁴ The individual soldier establishes a measure of worth based on his personal relationship to the machinery that he uses to fight. Taken together, these advances reflect the maximum benefit gained not by the individual parts of the system but by the coordinations of these parts where the soldier body is reconfigured in a loop, not entirely independent but strategically functioning as a cog in a machine.

The official narratives presented during the Iraq War portrayed the war as survivable and humane, while injured soldiers were framed as opportunities for technical experiments. Jennifer Terry notes that “postmodern prosthetics science maintains an emphasis on individual achievement and overcoming bodily limitations while also incorporating chimerical aspects drawn from science fiction.”³⁵ Prosthetics reflects the posthumanist vision whereby technology and biology merge, resulting not only in replacements of limbs but, potentially, the enhancement of a person’s entire experience of embodiment. This presents bodily destruction almost favourably as if the body could not only be restored to its previous condition but also that it is “imagined as a superior transmogrification.”³⁶ In fact, the visible presence of disabled soldiers on television and in public, driven by recent and accelerating advances in prosthetics, have led to a new level of public acceptance of the possibility that technologically robotic limbs might outperform their biological counterparts. A particularly instructive example is that of Iraq War veteran and double amputee, Christian Bagge, who famously jogged with President George W. Bush around the White House in the midst of heavy criticism regarding the Iraq War quagmire in 2006.³⁷ For many Americans who were unfamiliar with the new generation of prosthetics, seeing Christian Bagge running fast “was to witness the capacity of modern technology to replace what war had taken away. Or so it would seem.”³⁸

³⁴ Dillon, “Network Society,” 72.

³⁵ Jennifer Terry, *Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷ John M. Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

The media-management of the Iraq War was sanitized compared to Vietnam, focusing on mission rather than body counts to avoid “the body bag syndrome” that came about after the war.³⁹ Journalist Elisabeth Bumiller explains the significance of banning photographs of soldiers’ coffins, which was initiated before the Gulf War under President George H. W. Bush, and applied mainly to Dover Air Force Base, where the majority of fallen soldiers arrive back in the U.S.⁴⁰ The Bush administration did not do any public appearances at Dover Air Force Base where U.S. dead coffins arrived from overseas.⁴¹ The ban is widely held to be an attempt to preserve public support of the war and to prevent the general public from becoming disenchanted by its human consequences.

Similar to the reframing of injury, death rates during wartime are widely considered “a potential minefield,” leading consequentially to waning of support for continued involvement.⁴² A powerful example is the initial refusal of the Bush administration to release enemy body counts during the early phase of the Iraq War, until it changed its public relations strategy to frame mounting American deaths in terms of ally/enemy ratios.⁴³ As the public became increasingly alarmed by the duration of the conflict and the number of U.S. casualties, the Bush administration in 2005 sought to assuage the discontent by showing that enemy insurgents were killing thousands of Iraqi civilians, implying that the U.S. cared about the loss of Iraqi life, thus justifying the ongoing combat operations.⁴⁴ Casualties were therefore framed as a reason to stay, not to leave as they were in Vietnam.

As this discussion demonstrates, there is a remarkable shift regarding the representations of the embodied aspects of each war. Observing the war from this historical perspective allows one to develop a clear understanding as to how every aspect of the Vietnam War, from training to war fighting, is driven by the body. The historical context also reveals the sustained efforts of the military after Vietnam to disembody the war and make it look as if it is bloodless and surgical. Technological superiority proved

³⁹ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁰ Elisabeth Bumiller, “U.S. Lifts Photo Ban on Military Coffins” (*The New York Times*, December 7, 2009), accessed December 15, 2018.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Engelhardt, *The United States of Fear*, 85.

⁴³ William A. Boettcher, and Michael D. Cobb, ““Don’t Let Them Die in Vain,”” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 5 (July 2009): 677–697, 677.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 678.

to be of little advantage in Vietnam and while it did give the U.S. military a distinct advantage in Iraq, it hardly spared the American soldiers from dangerous combat, IED attacks, or the psychological horrors and traumas associated with war. Thus, this chapter will show both continuity and discontinuity between Vietnam and Iraq regarding the soldier's sense of his body as represented in war narratives.

The Mechanization of Body and Mind in Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*

In *A Rumor of War* (1977), Philip Caputo provides a direct look into his physical and psychological condition which developed throughout the progression of the war. Caputo served as an infantry lieutenant platoon commander for the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam for sixteen-month tour between 1965 and 1966. A central theme of the book is Caputo's transformation from an average recruit to a marine whose identity is an expression of the machinery of war. In order to expand upon this theme, this reading references Klaus Theweleit's analysis of the militarization of bodies in his book *Male Fantasies* (1987) to better understand the significance of Caputo's experiences. Theweleit's description of the militarization of the body, ultimately linking soldiering as the pinnacle of pseudo-masculinity, does more than explain how soldiers are conditioned. Rather, it frames an entire generation's perspective on war, what it means to win, and whether a soldier can deem his own endeavours a success.

The process by which a soldier is initiated into the Marine Corps is highly formalized and systematic. Caputo describes the Marine Corps as a system that transforms him through a series of trials that are designed to break down established platforms of his self-perception in order to allow for a recreation of the mind and body in accordance with the standards established by the marines. The popular slogan of "The Marine Corps Builds Men" carries with it a certain connotation regarding the self-image that the marines should preserve as a way of developing a useful identity.⁴⁵ By submitting his body to the marine culture and "becom[ing] one of its construction projects," Caputo begins to establish a position within the military hierarchy that allows for the sanctioning of all manner of activity that may otherwise be deemed immoral.⁴⁶ It is this conditioning of the body to become an extension of a higher cause that prepares soldiers to commit their being to the will of the marine culture. Reflecting upon his initial exposure to Marine

⁴⁵ Caputo, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

Corps propaganda, he references “the steely-eyed figure in the recruiting poster.”⁴⁷ Klaus Theweleit notes that the steeling of the body and the mind through a system of discipline and obedience forms the basis for a process of militarization of the individual through conformity.⁴⁸ The culture of conformity is an essential element of Caputo’s reconstruction that prepares him for wartime experiences.

The training that is experienced by Caputo takes on a religious character as the conformist demands become increasingly extreme. The “ordeal of initiation” requires shedding of Caputo’s civilian identity in favour of a new one that is reflective of the standard established by the Marine Corps.⁴⁹ In fact, Caputo considers his training experiences at Camp Upshur as “quasi-religious” requiring total dedication.⁵⁰ He likens the mentality of Camp Upshur to that of the Teutonic Knights where recruits submit their being fully to the task at hand.⁵¹ With no room for the development of his individualistic identity, Caputo is rendered a prisoner of the system, barred from performing non-military tasks. The “monastic isolation” at Camp Upshur forces Caputo to dedicate his entire being to the culture that he subscribed to.⁵² This quasi-religious aspect of his training necessitates a punishment if recruits fail to conform to the religious dedication to the marine culture that is expected of them. The physical punishment of the Chinese push-up is used to inspire the embrace of the military culture through invoking a physical reaction.⁵³ Pain, Theweleit argues, is the primary force for personal motivation in the process of militarizing the body.⁵⁴

Advancing from the monastic description of the militarization of the bodies, the Marine Corps borrows from Communist regimes in the formulation of brainwashing techniques which were designed to inspire a strong transformative effect within the mind of the recruit.⁵⁵ In fact, many of the tactics used by the communists against American

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Volume 2 Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 144.

⁴⁹ Caputo, 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., 8.

⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵³ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁴ Theweleit, 150.

⁵⁵ Caputo, 12.

prisoners of war during the Korean War do not seem different from the techniques the Americans used to condition their own soldiers. The voice of the drill instructor is slowly embedded into Caputo's mind until he no longer could reflect on his own thought process without hearing that same voice constantly flowing into his inner monologue. The collective recitations of slogans induced a homogenized existence that targeted those elements of Caputo's mind which the drill instructors had deemed to be non-essential for the purposes of combat. The recruits' voices in unison have a "hypnotic effect" on Caputo's mind, shifting his mindset away from his individual thought patterns towards a collectivist mentality that elevates the war machine above anything else.⁵⁶ It is the collective nature of this brainwashing process which lends power to the militarization of the mind.

Essential to the process of mechanization of Caputo's body is the rejection of the feminine and the embrace of the masculine. Caputo recounts his experiences in the drill training as a major ordeal that continuously presents a challenge to his masculinity. It is what he refers to as the "virus of weakness" that must be destroyed to allow for a strengthening of the male elements of his body.⁵⁷ The fear of emasculation drives Caputo to achieve the able-bodiedness demanded by the marines. The elimination of the weaker elements of his physical body enables him "to be freed from all that can be identified with the female body: with liquidity, with warmth, and above all with a sensuality that is responsive to other human beings."⁵⁸ Once the soldier is sufficiently masculinized, the expression of mechanization may be understood as the ultimate success of the militarization of the body.

The end result of this masculinization is the active transformation of the mind-body connection which leads to the suppression of those thoughts and feelings which may be perceived as threats to the male being from the position of the militarized individual. Violence, as the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton argues, becomes "important in itself as a way of ordering one's immediate psychological universe. ... one must kill or maim in order to experience a sense of purpose, in order to feel alive."⁵⁹ The training thus reduces

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸ Theweleit, xix.

⁵⁹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Broken Connection; On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1979), 148.

the individual's purpose to a single function, and forces one's sense of being masculine into a context defined, solely, by the act of killing.

Under this process of training, Caputo becomes part of a machine that is designed with the sole purpose of carrying out the demands of superiors. Rather than existing as a free individual, he is drawn into a mechanical force that is above his former autonomy making his identity "inextricably bound up with its [military] identity; they were it, it was them."⁶⁰ The machinery of war as, Caputo makes clear, possesses an elemental quality that drives the individual forward against his will and with the purpose of destruction. To be a component of this machinery is to understand a power beyond the individual body that commands movement that Theweleit describes as the stripping of the flesh and its replacement with leather.⁶¹ The end of this process is the recruit born as "a true child of the drill-machine, created without the help of a woman, parentless."⁶² This new mechanized body is not regarded as an unwelcomed state but is in fact regarded as the acknowledged "utopia."⁶³

Upon his arrival in Vietnam, Caputo shows an excitement regarding the prospect of combat regardless of the warning issued to him by those who had experienced the pain and destruction of the war before him. War appears to him as a testing ground for the utility of his body. This becomes even clearer when Caputo unconsciously develops his "lasting fear of criticism and, conversely, a hunger for praise."⁶⁴ This hunger for praise is a common reaction of militarized bodies because the soldier is assured by higher ups that his performance meets the military standards.⁶⁵ It was not too long, however, before Caputo starts to contemplate on the loss of his individuality as his value is only physical and stripped of any individual relevancy.⁶⁶

It is through the harsh realities of the war that Caputo calls into question the concept of his militarized embodiment. He comes to the full realization that the training process "bore about as much similarity to the real thing as shadowboxing does to street-

⁶⁰ Caputo, 32.

⁶¹ Theweleit, 84.

⁶² Ibid., 160.

⁶³ Ibid., 159.

⁶⁴ Caputo, 35.

⁶⁵ Theweleit, 168.

⁶⁶ Caputo, 10.

fighting.”⁶⁷ The mechanization of his body soon is shattered and the war that he was trained for is more akin to “forced labor” than war.⁶⁸ The lack of strategic plans to the missions and the slow rhythm of the jungle fight against “a formless enemy” work fully against his body.⁶⁹ The Vietnamese bush as described in the training manuals offers no serious threat. In reality, however, the jungle offered one of the greatest challenges, something to be conquered in the same way that the soldier must conquer his human adversary. The continuous exposure to deadly insects and poisonous foliage places the body in a constant state of compromise. As the war continues, Caputo’s platoon lost many of its well-trained and strong-bodied soldiers not the enemy but to their other enemy, the sun.⁷⁰

Upon experiencing the death of his comrades, Caputo begins to understand more clearly the vulnerability of the body and its impact on his state of mind. In *Death in Life* (1991), Robert Lifton argues that the randomness of death in the battlefield poses a serious threat to the fulfilment of life and acts as a catalyst for the reassessment of the positioning of the individual in relation to death.⁷¹ The frequency of death in Caputo’s company as the soldiers die “in twos and threes” haunts him.⁷² It is not only death in itself that awakens him to the serious danger of war but also the chaotic and revolting nature of death which often leaves parts of the body unrecognizable. Caputo is led to question the dignity of the human body as he had been taught in his youth. If the body was indeed a “Temple of the Holy Spirit” made in the “image and likeness of God,” then he finds the disgusting mangled corpses he is in charge of unholy.⁷³ In more secular terms, Michael Bibby in his book *Hearts and Minds* (1996) sheds light on the soldier’s existence being reduced to a combination of “an I/eye, recording images of death and mutilation.”⁷⁴ The personal recording of death breaks whatever reservations Caputo still has about the illusion of heroism in warfare.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁷¹ Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 487.

⁷² Caputo, 64.

⁷³ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁴ Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 154.

The continuous accumulation of dead bodies has unforeseen consequences for Caputo. Working as an officer in charge of the dead is a pivotal moment in the personal development of his understanding of bodies, marking the point at which militarization ceases and the remaining elements of the civilized existence rise to the surface. Guilt becomes the foundation on which Caputo's conscience functions that may be perceived as an attempt by the body to preserve a stable state of being in the face of chaotic adaptation.

The shock of the experiences in the battlefield is sufficient to unlock Caputo's moral foundation that had yet to be destabilized. His guilt develops further when he recognizes his fellow soldiers' treatment of enemies' dead bodies as trophies.⁷⁵ Most of the soldiers in his platoon maintain a semblance of humanity, but savagery does not escape them all. They collectively experience a dulled sense of virtue and deadened sensibilities in the war. Later when Caputo stumbles across a cache of Viet Cong letters and photographs, he becomes startlingly aware that the enemy is not purely evil. The material traces of the enemies "gave to the enemy the humanity I wished to deny him."⁷⁶ It is the remnants of the civilian mentality manifested in an expression of guilt that laid the seed for the erosion of his militarized body. Caputo confesses that "marine training had not completely erased the years we spent at home, at school, in church learning that human life was precious and the taking of it was wrong."⁷⁷ This reclamation of the conscience in the face of the breaking of the body represents the limitations of the training process.

Caputo is also caught between treating the American dead bodies as bodies of individuals or mere statistics, leading to further expressions of guilt.⁷⁸ Required to report deaths and utilizing language that softened the impact of the mutilations, Caputo begins to develop a counter opinion that places his perception outside of the accepted line of thought instilled by training. The conscience as it is understood in relation to the body is of critical importance in the context of the present analysis. Without a recognition of the physical sensations which propel Caputo towards a path of moral direction, the stripping of humanity may have achieved permanence.

⁷⁵ Caputo, 125.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 179.

However, the invasive nature of the war engulfs Caputo's very existence, leading him to note that "our humanity rubbed off of us as the protective bluing rubbed off the barrels of our rifles."⁷⁹ Although reflecting upon the loss of his humanity and the damage that has been inflicted upon his personal identity, Caputo regains his awareness of the absence of ethical direction in warfare when he asks: "so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none?"⁸⁰ This is challenging because it leads him to question his own role in the abandonment of those ethical systems that he once held in high regard. The loss of one's personal ethics is also an important point to consider when examining the source of the guilt expressed by Caputo. This experience creates a numbness that, as Robert Jay Lifton notes, has "blocked and undermined the kind of meaningful survivor formulation and mission that could animate the guilt and initiate a reordering process."⁸¹ It is due to this numbness that indifference arises in Caputo's psyche.

Although Caputo reveals his conscience about his role in the war, his guilt eventually advances to indifference and lack of sympathy. The reawakening of his conscience does nothing to halt the process of numbing which further alienates him from his own fellow soldiers. His initial disgust about the military's treatment of dead bodies as mere statistics is replaced by carelessness, noting that the names of the dead soldiers on the scoreboard "meant no more to me than the names in a phone book."⁸² This type of alienation is described by Chaim Shatan as "psychic numbing and alienation from others."⁸³ The alienation from himself advances to a point at which he could not actively question his mental state or rationalize his actions in his missions. He comes to just accept the insanity of the military culture to which he subscribes. In order to steel himself against this ongoing struggle to separate the civilian existence from the life of war, Caputo begins to reflect on the concept of non-thought. He makes references to multiple instances in which his indifference determines his personal stance towards the events which he experiences, as well as towards potential events which he recognizes as common in the context of warfare. For example, death is too common in war that he starts to realize that everyone is basically a corpse-in-waiting.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 230.

⁸¹ Lifton, *Death in Life*, 167.

⁸² Caputo, 218.

⁸³ Chiam F. Shatan, "The Grief of Soldiers: Vietnam Combat Veterans' Self-Help Movement," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 43, no. 4 (July 1973): 640-653, 645.

The extreme nature of Caputo's indifference is expressed in his personal reflection on his own death, stating that "I not only saw my own corpse, but other people looking at it."⁸⁴ He no longer fears death because he resigns himself to the fact that death is no longer something in his distant future. The severity of Caputo's indifference may be understood through Theweleit's description of "muscle physis," which is a way of controlling one's emotions and thoughts that originates as a consequence of an unwavering fear of external stimuli that endanger one's sense of security.⁸⁵ Philip Beidler argues that Caputo "claimed the insanity that has been waiting for him. In body and mind alike, he has become the war."⁸⁶

Although Caputo expresses guilt regarding the mistreatment of the enemy, he later expresses his indifference to the death and suffering of enemy combatants and civilians alike. The stripping of his humanity and the replacement of those compassionate elements of his being with an urge to commit brutish violence against the enemy becomes crystal clear towards the end of the book. Caputo begins to envision a violent fantasy of a torturous interrogation of the Vietnamese.⁸⁷ Although the fantasy is entertained by Caputo and never materializes, it indicates his growing detachment from himself, the final result of which is the gradual loss of any dimension of compassion.

In conclusion, an analysis of Caputo's experiences as documented in *A Rumor of War* reveals the dehumanizing aspects of the mechanization of body. The embrace of mechanistic conformity creates the basis for the stripping of Caputo's ethical centre and his embrace of indifference. It could be argued that once the process of militarization has been instilled in soldiers, the attempt to switch off the machinery is a seemingly impossible task.⁸⁸ As stated by Caputo, "I already regarded myself as a casualty of the war, a moral casualty, and like all serious casualties, I felt detached from everything."⁸⁹ Caputo's inability to escape the war machine drives him to comply with the standards established by the military. This is significant because the recognition of the detachment from the essentially human aspects of his identity culminates in the final result of Caputo's body as a mere component of the machinery of war. As the following discussion

⁸⁴ Caputo, 230.

⁸⁵ Theweleit, xvii.

⁸⁶ Beidler, *American Literature*, 156.

⁸⁷ Caputo, 316.

⁸⁸ Theweleit, 153.

⁸⁹ Caputo, 332.

shows, however, this trajectory shifts between the experiences of the Vietnam and Iraq wars. While the Iraq War imagined that soldiers would be removed from the battle by advanced technological means, the following film is about an American soldier who has to confront the enemy through a relatively crude, but nonetheless effective and deadly, form of technology.

Seeking Danger in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*

Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2009) is a film about an Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit's tour in Iraq. Departing from "the epic spectacle of a horizon-to-horizon and ocean-to-sky investment of men and materiel," the film deviates from traditional war narratives and instead magnifies the physical and psychological tensions of Bravo Company Unit.⁹⁰ Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), the technician who is closest to the bombs the unit disarms, becomes the film's central figure as he exemplifies the liminality of life and death, trauma and freedom, humanity and inhumanity within himself. The following analysis will reveal how the nature of his mission to dismantle explosives, peculiar to the Iraq War, enables him to gain a sense of objective reality, a feeling he acquires to stay in touch with his body. I will argue that James' recklessness—implied by his addictive tendencies, whether for cigarettes or the thrill of war—is his way to break free from the military by repressing his natural instinct, that of self-preservation, to gain psychological awareness and personal independence.

The militarization of the body in the film can be seen in the uniforms that the soldiers wear and the standards that they have to adhere to which are indications of the control that the U. S. military has over their bodies.⁹¹ The military culture serves as a cohesive force and is as physically confining to each soldier as the inside of a bomb suit. This aspect of militarization becomes salient to the viewer when the film displays a countdown marker stating: "Days Left in the Bravo Company's Rotation: 38."⁹² Instead of counting down sequentially, day by day, the clock jumps to each major instance of Bravo's bomb disposal duties.

⁹⁰ Alex Vernon, "Spectator-Citizen-Soldier: History, Genre, and Gender in *The Hurt Locker*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 373-396, 375.

⁹¹ Florentina C. Andreescu, "War, Trauma and the Militarized Body," *Subjectivity* 9, no. 2 (July 2016): 205-223, 207.

⁹² *The Hurt Locker*, dir. Kathryn Bigelow (United States: Summit Entertainment, 2009).

The opening scene of *The Hurt Locker* shows a pixilated camera footage soon revealed to be the screen of a wheelbarrow robot. This is when the Bravo Company of bomb disposal specialists are introduced, already in the middle of a job where they could be killed at any time. Such initial introduction—without a build-up of tension—exemplifies the new predicament of the twentieth-first-century war and the main theme of the body inherently “at risk.”⁹³ When the robot, on its way to uncover an IED, loses a wheel and falls apart, the positive mood of Bravo Company who had been making jokes about using the robot’s apparatus like their own phallus has changed. There is a Freudian connection between the sexual remarks of the soldiers who joke about using their phallus to activate a control panel and the danger they face when Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson, the EOD Unit leader, must recover the out-of-action wheelbarrow robot himself. Assessing the connection, David Denny states:

The sexual innuendo brings to mind Freud’s fort/da game, in which the anxiety of castration (the forced choice of having assumed the law of language) is mastered by way of a substitute ... In the film the robot malfunctions, bringing an end to the game. Now man himself must stick his own phallus into danger.⁹⁴

The soldiers soon shift from their exchange of sexualized light-hearted locker room talk to a heightened awareness of their surroundings. As they stand security so Thompson could retrieve and repair the robotic device, an Iraqi civilian confronts Sergeant J. T. Sandborn and attempts to initiate a conversation. The encounter juxtaposes the heavily shielded body of Sandborn with the lightly clothed body of the civilian, who is wearing nothing more than an olive-coloured button-down shirt and khaki pants. Sandborn’s attempts to thrust his M4 rifle to intimidate the civilian, the viewer recognizes that his protective gear and the rifle would provide inadequate protection if the civilian were wearing an explosive device.

The rapid pace of the camera footage used in the scene implies that part of this risk is the speed inherent to the team mission which overloads senses and leads to the compromise of safety. Such an overload leads to paranoia as the soldiers struggle to secure the area without harming innocent civilians whilst simultaneously remaining focused so as to limit the time they spend exposed to a hazardous environment. Even though the technical role of the EODs does not require the same physical bravado as in

⁹³ Robert Burgoyne, “Embodiment in the War Film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 5, no. 1 (September 2012): 7-19, 15.

⁹⁴ David Denny, “On the Politics of Enjoyment: A Reading of *The Hurt Locker*,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 1 (2011), accessed July 20, 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/423101/>

previous wars, Robert Burgoyne addresses the socially isolating nature of disposal missions.⁹⁵

The protective heavy bomb suit creates a barrier between Thompson and his environment, yet his body is present and vulnerable in this scene. His shallow breathing as he approaches the bomb indicates the tension and the physical discomfort of being confined in a hot protective suit. Thompson ironically said that it is “nice and hot in here” as he paces towards the “kill zone.”⁹⁶ Emphasis is placed on the physical activity of walking as the camera focuses on his armoured legs, exaggerating the sounds of rocks crunching under his feet. Once he reaches the robot, the camera zooms in on his thinly gloved hands and then cuts to a back profile of his armoured suit as he stands up after repairing the robot. When he is eventually killed in the explosion, his body stumbles forward at a slower, exaggerated speed, making a final statement on the vulnerability of the body, despite the facade of protection.

With that being said, the representation of Thompson’s death is devoid of blood or mutilation, making the film, as Alex Vernon comments, “strangely sterile and abstract in an objective correlative.”⁹⁷ The scene transition between fast-paced and slow-paced timing further serves to emphasize the contrast experienced by the soldiers as the bomb explodes. On the one hand, there is the awe and confusion caused by the bomb leading to a suspension of thought and apparent pausing of time. Once the bomb is registered, however, the scene is nearly over as soon as it begins, emphasizing the desolation of the experience and the impossibility of ever completely reconciling with what occurred.

The Hurt Locker then introduces Sergeant First Class William James. Like a machine, the military is run so that if one body or piece of equipment dies or breaks, a new one is instantly supplied. Such an assembly line mentality is one of the foremost elements that desensitize soldiers to the value of life, their own and that of others. Not trying to replace or fill the shoes of Thompson, as he told Sandborn, James may be more than he first appears. Indeed, given that his first appearance starts with him smoking a cigarette and listening to heavy metal music in the dark, he is distinguished by his behaviours and later by his handling of the missions.

⁹⁵ Burgoyne, “Embodiment in the War Film,” 9.

⁹⁶ *The Hurt Locker*.

⁹⁷ Vernon, “Spectator-Citizen-Soldier,” 374.

When Bravo Company drives through Iraq to answer a bomb threat, the team drives by many American tanks, which provokes Private Eldridge to comment: “Aren’t you glad the army has all these tanks parked here. Yeah, but they don’t do anything. ... Pretty much the bottom life is if you’re in Iraq, you’re dead. How’s a fucking tank supposed to stop that?”⁹⁸ In this statement, Eldridge temporarily distorts the optical illusion of security that is created through the saturation of armoured vehicles surrounding the base. As they drive away, the viewer is reminded that the soldiers are part of a larger organization that has direct control over their physical bodies.

On his first mission, James breaks the unit’s protocol and rejects the use of the robot despite the objection of Sanborn, throwing instead a canister, “creating a decoy” to handle the IED.⁹⁹ The use of his own body when it would be safer to use a robot indicates he is reckless, a charge that Sandborn brings to him after the mission. Indeed, it is possible to argue that James resists the dehumanization of the military by creating his own exclusive approach to the war. Risking his life is perhaps because he needs the fear and the risk in order to make things real.¹⁰⁰ Unlike Caputo’s training in Vietnam which effectively turned him into a machine, and his military identity was inseparable from that machine’s program—to kill, James needs to make things real to avoid the sense of dispossession of his body which occurs as a consequence of his military training. By entering into battle, he temporarily gives himself something to focus on, a necessary target if he is to overcome the fragmentation and disorientation of his psyche caused by the war experience.

James once again behaves courageously and independently on Bravo’s third mission, outside the UN building. Although the bomb suit offers protection against the IED, James demonstrates the pinnacle of self-mastery when he removes it to dismantle the Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED). He realizes that his bomb suit is a hindrance rather than help and opts to dismantle the VBIED without it. The act of throwing his headset onto the ground contrasts with Thompson’s overreliance on communication from his team members, a behaviour that arguably contributes to false confidence leading to his death. This scene embodies the film’s message on the relationship between technology and bodies in postmodern warfare that psychological

⁹⁸ *The Hurt Locker*.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Andreescu, “War, Trauma and the Militarized Body,” 218.

mastery rather than technology is the true attribute that can save soldiers from being part of the military machine.

Initially presented as a superhuman hero unfazed by the dangers of his job, James' fragility is demonstrated when his teammates imagine what it would be like to kill him by accidentally detonating explosives:

Eldridge: He'd be obliterated to nothing.

Sandborn: His helmet would be left. You could have that. Little specs of hair charred on the inside.

Eldridge: Yeah, there'd be half a helmet somewhere, with bits of hair.¹⁰¹

This conversation between Eldridge and Sandborn temporarily suspends James' superhuman qualities. Further, it indicates the interdependence of the team, revealing the fact that James' physical survival hinges upon the integrity and stability of other members of his unit. The image of reducing the fearless EOD leader into a spec of hair momentarily suspends the physical dominance and power that he projects.

When Sandborn inquires about James' background early in the film, it is revealed that the new EOD leader is an Army Ranger. This designation indicates that he has undergone rigorous training in preparation for elite military operations. In a previous scene, he admits he has disarmed over 800 bombs and thus is very experienced in zones of conflict. The influence of James' elite training is evidenced in the desert ambush scene where he exhibits superior regulation of his physical needs to remain vigilant.¹⁰² The camera focuses on the eyes of the insurgents and the EOD team members as they look through the scopes of their rifles from a fortified position. The motif of unprotected eyes is repeatedly presented in the film to convey the physical vulnerability of characters.

In one scene, upon returning to base camp, the soldiers have a heavy drinking physical fight that quickly turns serious and ends with Sandborn drawing a knife on James who dominated him in a submission hold. In this instance, one can see how being habitually exposed to war has seeped into the personal lives of the soldiers. Even when they are trying to relax, they involve themselves in acts of violence and domination over one another.

James is portrayed as a reckless thrill seeker, yet the film demonstrates that he is also psychologically distraught by the events he encounters. Although Eldridge seeks psychological counselling and visibly expresses his distress, the film suggests James is

¹⁰¹ *The Hurt Locker*.

¹⁰² *Ibid*.

suppressing similar levels of distress. On one of his missions to a warehouse, James believes that the Iraqi boy, Beckham—with whom James develops a relationship—is the same child cut open and loaded with bombs found inside the warehouse.¹⁰³ By showing a child mutilated and turned into a bomb, *The Hurt Locker* not only indicates the loss of innocence in war, but also how the body itself becomes weaponized. The quick cuts of camera between various body parts of James' and Beckham's prefigure the fragmentation of bodies when the ordnance explodes, and indirectly rewrite the Iraq War as “a nostalgic and paternalistic salvation operation by technicians who prevent death, not warriors who dispense it.”¹⁰⁴

In a scene where a truck bomb detonates at night, James calls his unit out on a reconnaissance mission to find the insurgent who set it off. Considered the most reckless move in the film, James makes a poor judgment call and has the team split up, a decision that leads to Eldridge getting shot in the ankle and almost to be taken a prisoner of war. His recklessness, driven by the mounting psychological pressure brings into question his status as a hero. Although Eldridge is recovered, James remains traumatised. His collapse in the shower, still wearing his uniform and all of his gear, is suggestive of James' attempt to wash away the military traces off his body.

Somewhere else, where an apparently innocent man has been strapped with several bombs and is seeking help to have it disarmed, we see James chooses to risk his life and disarm the bomb, even though the team could just let the man die. As the man's bombs are too well concealed by locks, the bombs eventually go off while James is running away, the suit protecting him from flying concrete that would have killed him. This dramatic scene has been called a powerful expression of “dualism,” as “the body of the human bomb represents the dark dream of an imagined nation formed only in the act of sacrifice, conjured into existence only through an act of violent and spectacular death.”¹⁰⁵ But America has lost, by this time, the glory it gained from early wars as James, fully armoured, stands in for a nation already traumatized by war, while immobilized by the ongoing obsession to wage another one without casualties.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Vernon, “Spectator-Citizen-Soldier,” 378.

¹⁰⁵ Burgoyne, “Embodiment in the War Film,” 8.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 8-9.

The efficacy of the military as a physically regulating force is emphasized through James' inability to attend to basic tasks involving his body outside of the confinement of the military. In contrast to his expertise in executing his training in dismantling explosives, his ignorance as a civilian back in America is displayed when he is daunted by the task of choosing from a wide selection of breakfast cereals at the grocery store. The pacing between the two worlds of military and domestic life is too extreme of a difference for James to grasp.

In the final scene of the movie, James disembarks from a helicopter and is welcomed to Delta Company and the scene shifts to him in the bomb suit. Alex Vernon considers his choice to go back to Iraq "as surrender to objecthood. He has surrendered to the very reduction of himself to his symbolic function, the epitome of the single-minded soldier: all suit—all butte—and no man."¹⁰⁷ That James is inhumane, as Vernon describes, however, is debatable. The film presents mastery of the body through psychological discipline as the path to rising above the entrapment of the body in war. In fact, it can also be suggested that the different fates of the two EOD Unit leaders can be partially explained by James' ability to adapt to alienation and embrace psychological independence in order to transcend the dangers of the environment.

As is revealed in my analysis of *The Hurt Locker*, to walk in the shadow of death as James does requires immense psychological fortitude and physical control. For as much as the suit protects him in the final scene, throughout the film he tries not to identify with it or trapped by it. James seems to both draw support from the suit he wears, yet also resists it. His resistance to traditional disciplinary measures reveals he still retains the ability to own his body and think critically for himself, a factor that contributes to his decision to come back to Iraq. There is a psychological turmoil here, reminiscent of Caputo's experience, so as to leave James embracing his identity as a soldier while resenting the experience at the same time. He realizes that there is something more about his humanity than what he has been trained to do. This disjunction between one's humanity, what the soldier knows he is doing and how he has been trained, is amplified even more in Colby Buzzell's work, but in this case, the soldier is immersed in virtual training and shielded from the embodied elements of war.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 380.

Playing Army in Colby Buzzell's *My War*

In order to further develop how postmodern warfare challenges soldiers' embodiment, this section examines Colby Buzzell's *My War* (2005), a first-person account of a U.S. infantryman's year in the Iraq War as a bravo machine gunner in Stryker Brigade Combat Team. Buzzell, enlisted at age 26, served in Mosul between 2003 and 2004. Buzzell's narrative is a vital exploration of how the experience of his embodiment is fundamentally transformed by virtuality—whether parsed in terms of video games, simulated firefights, or fake Iraqi cities erected in close proximity to army bases.

The book is based largely on Buzzell's blog entries during his service in Iraq. Having already had a habit of journaling before he enlisted, blogging becomes a natural outlet for Buzzell to express his war experience. His blog, entitled CBFTW, secretly standing for "Coby Buzzell Fuck the War," was originally a collection of posts by an anonymous soldier. The description of the war, however, garnered significant attention and the blog surged in popularity. Unlike Vietnam veterans, like Caputo, who could only find a voice after the war, Buzzell was able to speak while narratives were forming, impacting public consciousness, and ultimately playing a part in challenging prevailing official narratives. Not only could Buzzell counter the official war narratives, but he could do so in a way that provided lucid imagery and contained a powerful and enthralling perspective that only a soldier could tell.

By the time Buzzell enters combat on 13 November 2003, he has already been exposed, by simulation, to the kinds of settings in which he will operate. His descriptions of both training and warfare are different from discussions of embodiment in narratives about the Vietnam War, mainly because of his experience of virtual training. In *A Rumor of War*, for example, Philip Caputo experiences the jarring nature of the transition from his civilian life to combat training and then from combat training to actual combat. As soon as he arrives in Vietnam, Caputo undergoes a period of shock related to the nature of the fighting and other aspects of the physical environment. Unlike the soldiers of the Vietnam, U.S. soldiers of the Iraq War are put into simulated combat situations so many times that they respond automatically under real conditions. This simulation has an obvious purpose, one that becomes clearer on a close inspection of Buzzell's experiences.

One example of simulation in Buzzell's book is his experience at the Joint Readiness Training Centre (JRTC). In this environment, Buzzell participates in this virtual war exercise as a node in a complex system, one in which he is not a contingent, threatened body but, rather, one in which he plays the role of a sensor or a conduit that

serves the larger system of simulation. Buzzell's experience of dying over and over again in the JRTC firefight exercises appears to have inured him to the concept of death. Death has been simulated to the point of bureaucratic boredom, as Buzzell writes: "When you get killed they send you there [causality collection point], where you hang out for a day or so before they reactivate you and you can go back in."¹⁰⁸ The language of Buzzell's description of the JRTC firefight exercise is unmistakably that of a video game. The idea of dying and passing a period of waiting before re-entering the fight is known as *spawning* or *respawning* in video game parlance. In a video game based on warfare, the dead virtual soldier is merely respawned in the sense that he is resurrected on the virtual battlefield. Here, death is not feared—in some ways, it affords the soldier a break. Moreover, there is no objective relationship between soldiers and enemies. When soldiers die and find themselves waiting the chance to respawn in the game, they joke amongst themselves. The soldier's objective is changed—he is not conditioned to defeat the enemy, but simply to beat the game. His task is to survive, above all else—but even then, if he crashes, it is inconsequential. He simply gets rebooted. The term of the game, rather than a real-world battle, become the milieu in which the soldier discovers himself, even while he loses himself. Buzzell is aware of and determined to enjoy the fun as well as the absurd elements of this situation, suggesting that he is bemused by the unexpected fact of becoming disembodied and placed into virtual spaces in which his body is exposed to simulated threat without ever being under real threat.

Buzzell's simulation does not only consist of JRTC firefight exercises. The army creates a real village, complete with livestock and individuals playing the roles of Iraqi civilians and combatants in order to better prepare Buzzell and the other soldiers for the experiences of actual urban guerrilla warfare that they will shortly encounter. Buzzell's description of his training at the faked Iraqi city brims with adventure and recklessness admitting that "it was pure chaos, but at the same time, a whole lot of fun."¹⁰⁹ At this point in the narrative, Buzzell describes himself as "playing soldier."¹¹⁰ Virtuality and simulation are so widespread and engrossing that, in important ways, they change the experience of war itself, removing certain shocks and anxieties for Buzzell.

¹⁰⁸ Colby Buzzell, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2005), 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

The experience of watching movies and playing war-oriented games dehumanizes Buzzell as it numbs him into the potential horrors of war. Such virtuality begins long before Buzzell joined the army. Early on in *My Way*, Buzzell describes the footage of the early invasion of Iraq on television interspersed with Britney Spears' Pepsi commercial.¹¹¹ The military training employs videos clips and photographs to introduce Buzzell and his friends to the effects of IEDs on soldiers' bodies along with other aspects of military operations carried out by terrorists.¹¹² This heavy exposure to war through video recordings has the potential to present war as an experience to be consumed and watched, almost like a movie. The lifelong addiction of watching films among soldiers, similarly, constitutes a virtual and precursory space to warfare itself. As Buzzell writes: "most of us were probably here in the Army because we watched movies one too many times."¹¹³ The entrenched habit of watching films among soldiers instils a romantic ideation of war or what Peebles aptly describes as a "voyeuristic delight."¹¹⁴ It turns war into a place where heroes are born, and where death is rendered of little consequence. It, ultimately, however, separates the soldier from the brute reality of death in war, which can only contribute to the soldier's dehumanization.

This becomes more obvious in the narrative when Buzzell and the other soldiers in his unit borrow from one of the films they are watching the theme of "We're All Gonna Die" for their party before heading to Iraq.¹¹⁵ Although the films that Buzzell and his friends watch carry anti-war messages, they remain only a form of entertainment for them, providing them with disembodied power as "they watch raucously, confident in their own agency as military men who will soon wield power and violence the same way they wield the gaze."¹¹⁶

Describing his arrival to Baghdad in terms of a "kinda like a parade" in which all Iraqis look like terrorists indicates that the military training succeeded in automating Buzzell's ability to judge independently.¹¹⁷ Thus far, Buzzell is a dehumanized node in the cybernetic logic of war. When he becomes part of an attack on a mosque, he is just as

¹¹¹ Ibid., 74.

¹¹² Ibid., 78.

¹¹³ Ibid., 89.

¹¹⁴ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Buzzell, 89.

¹¹⁶ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 24.

¹¹⁷ Buzzell, 107.

enthusiastic about shooting out its windows with a machine gun as any other soldier in the battalion. Buzzell's description of the scene is notable for its imbrication of simulation, automaticity, and disembodiment: "I would fire a good three-to-four-second burst into a window, and then I would go to the next window and fire a burst, then the next window ... yelling, "Get some!" ... (like they do in the movies)."¹¹⁸ This enthusiasm is somewhat lost on Buzzell himself, missing an important inference about the nature of his training. He automatically fires so many rounds at fake targets in simulated trainings that when the situation before him is real, he reacts in the manner that has become familiar to him. Another possible reason for Buzzell's enthusiasm is that he has been conditioned by another virtual experience, that of movies, wondering how a TOW missile "didn't take down the tower like it does in the movies."¹¹⁹ Buzzell himself reports feeling both a physical and moral revulsion at the idea of attacking a mosque. However, this awareness does not necessarily inform his actual actions as he speaks and acts as movies have taught him to do. This action on Buzzell's part is a testament to the success of the use of virtuality in military training as a means of creating disembodiment in the soldier—a separation between soldiers' feelings and actions, and mind and body.

Buzzell presents his war as the most "anti-climactic experience," dominated by routine, inaction, and futility.¹²⁰ But his claim is not merely a reflection of the combat intensity but also a refraction of his simulated experiences in training. Indeed, the Iraq War is so well-simulated that "the only thing I was really combating in Iraq was boredom."¹²¹ Bewildered by his friend, Horrock, who played video games about the Iraq War while he is an actual soldier in the war, Buzzell asks: "isn't this war in Iraq enough war for you as it is? Like, why would you want to play a stupid video game about combat when you're actually out doing it? Like, isn't that overkill?"¹²² While this question demonstrates that he is able to reclaim some agency by questioning the absurdity of the war, he still does not show full control over his role as he continues to experience his war in a disembodied manner. Video games do not immerse the player in vast periods of boredom, interrupted occasionally by intense actions. Instead, the game conditions the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 161.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹²¹ Ibid., 125.

¹²² Ibid., 206.

virtual soldiers for one battle after another, one mission followed by the next. There is no sitting around, no boredom, and no time to reflect.

Watching a heavy bombardment over Tall Afar, Buzzell describes the explosions as if a scene from a movie with special effects:

From where we were, the explosions coming from the city looked like they were happening in slow motion, they gave off these beautiful flashes of light, magentas and reds and violets. The bombing looked extremely peaceful to me from where I was sitting. Like something out of the movie *Fantasia*. In fact in my head I had classical music going as I sat there on my ass watching all this go on. I had to remind myself that each one of those beautiful explosions that I was witnessing probably took somebody's life.¹²³

This is the first time that Buzzell comes to a realization that real people die in a real war and not in a simulated one, beginning slowly to embrace a real version of the war and the role of his body in it. In some respects, it seems that the only way for Buzzell to escape the bodily entrapment of the actual war when he is finally thrust into it is to connect himself again to some form of virtuality in order to have control over his own war and to reclaim his agency. Thus, Buzzell's creation of the blog and his participation in cybernetics relationships are means of maximizing his embodiment. Sara Brady in *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror* (2012) eloquently explains how American veterans of the Iraq War "experience war in a video game *before* experiencing the 'real thing,' causing reality to be always compared to the virtual and the real is so secured that their only way out of it is through the virtual."¹²⁴ Using virtuality as an escape is a form of posthumanism in that the embodiment of soldiers can be transcended by the use of blogging and other media to digitize, project, and reclaim their bodies.

Through his blog, Buzzell is able to reclaim a language for himself, thus contesting the military's attempt to represent wars outside the linguistic or physical realm. Buzzell is intelligent and self-aware, two qualities that allow him to both see through and actively ridicule the manner in which the military uses language to sanitize the brutal nature of warfare.¹²⁵ Writing about their new battalion motto "Punish the Deserving," Buzzell comments that it "is just a politically correct way of saying "Kill the Enemy."¹²⁶ It

¹²³ Ibid., 350.

¹²⁴ Sara Brady, *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 99.

¹²⁵ Buzzell, 199.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 79.

appears, therefore, that the politically correct language used by the military contributes to an antiseptic and bureaucratic atmosphere in which violence is easier to perpetrate. Jenna Pitchford in her 2011 doctoral thesis on the Iraq War comments that “Buzzell’s self-aware commentary is able to come into being because he positions himself outside the military and occasionally, it appears that he speaks from an omniscient position outside his perceived self.”¹²⁷ In other words, Buzzell’s role as a “blogger” affords him this opportunity. His own existence, writing through a computer, creates a paradoxical existence in which a digital space offers the civilians an access to his reactions of war in real-time even while accentuating his sense of separating from the military. He is, in some sense, an outsider looking in.

It is only death that appears to be capable of piercing the surface of unreality created by simulation. Buzzell’s honest writing about the increased demand on tombstones in Iraq comes as a shock to the American public who remain ignorant about the U.S. handling of the war. In a blog entry on the injury that his friend Lieutenant Armeni sustained, Buzzell shared publicly the paradoxical nature of their war. Injury does not escape even Armeni whose skills in hitting targets and firing TOW missiles in the JTRC give the higher-ups “a hard on.”¹²⁸ The illusion of safety that Buzzell takes for granted is shattered because the real war, in Peebles’ words, “admits no avatar.”¹²⁹ The blog becomes a sort of refuge, a guardian of his humanity while also perhaps a threat to it—he could only feel human by putting his voice into a machine. To Buzzell, this unembodied virtuality offers him an unrestricted space to transcend his frustration with embodiment in a theatre of war—a place of great moral and bodily compromise.

The blog serves as a means of making Buzzell a posthuman subject by virtually allowing him to multiply himself and becoming part of what Hayles described as a “splice” with the outside world.¹³⁰ As his blog continues to expose the reality of the war, it does more than inform the public, it becomes a thorn in the side of the Department of Defence. Buzzell’s work has a corrosive or subversive aspect in that it undermines at least some aspects of the management program in which the Department of Defence and other media establishments are engaged. After the military confines him in his barrack and

¹²⁷ Jenna Pitchford, “Writing US Identities in the Wars without Frontlines: Literary Perspectives on the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars” (PhD diss., University of Nottingham Trent, 2011), 79.

¹²⁸ Buzzell, 307.

¹²⁹ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 25.

¹³⁰ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 121.

prevents him from going out on missions, he becomes fully aware that his blog “would soon be the next casualty of war.”¹³¹ The attempts of the military to situate him as a node in a circuit of war can be observed not merely through the virtual training but also in the nature of the way they encourage him to shut down his blog and to conform to the military’s security standards.

Buzzell’s experience is of interest not only because it is a reflection of his training but, more intriguingly, a deliberate by-product of the kind of training to which he is exposed but also that he as a human being can take control over his own fate. His pre-war experiences do not prepare him for combat. He is a self-confessed slacker, passing a meaningless, underemployed life. Reaching out to people through the virtual space enables him to develop an unusually thoughtful and sensitive outlook. Buzzell’s body starts sensing and storing trauma as he develops subsequently PTSD. This is reminiscent of James’ experience in *The Hurt Locker*. While Buzzell does not recklessly put his life on the line in the way James does, he nonetheless tries to resolve this tension by mastering a posthuman condition, a soldier’s reality embodied in a technological medium, where the boundary that defines where his body begins or ends is no-existent, or at least irrelevant.

Buzzell’s sense that the war he fights in is real becomes obvious when he points his weapons to civilian crowd saying: “I got no pleasure whatsoever doing this. ... in fact I felt like a Nazi, and for the first time ever, I felt like I was the bad guy.”¹³² The reality finally exceeds the virtuality even further when he returns home and the boundaries between the two start to blur: “now that I’d been in Iraq for the last eleven months, New York just looked completely unreal to me. ... and the billboards and cars and buildings; it all felt like sensory overload to me.”¹³³

Buzzell enters his training with ordinary human instincts of pain, fear, and trepidation. These instincts are transformed into automatic reactions of lethality. However, counterbalancing this militarization is Buzzell’s ability to deploy technology to become master of his own posthuman condition through virtual spaces and textual embodiment in which he is a subject of his own war rather than a mere object of it. While the human-as-machine—that is, the disembodied human—will be the template towards

¹³¹ Buzzell, 316.

¹³² Ibid., 354.

¹³³ Ibid., 366.

which the U.S army will push their military personnel, Buzzell's discursive response highlights the ability of technology-aided extended embodiment to combat this disembodiment.

“The Predator will Fight for You:” Matt Martin’s *Predator*

Matt Martin’s *Predator* (2010) reveals how, from a base in Nevada, 7,500 miles away from Baghdad, a member of the so-called “Nintendo generation” could go “to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, where Remoted Piloted Aircraft (RPA) like the Predator were hindering America’s enemies and saving American lives.”¹³⁴ While he could fly such missions, safely from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, where he was stationed from 2003 to 2008, Martin nonetheless did serve in Iraq—at both Ali Air Base and Balad Air base from 2005 to 2008. The book is divided into four parts, based on Martin’s location. The first and final part take place at Nellis Air Force Base. The two middle sections of the book detail events that occurred at each of these two Iraqi air bases. Martin’s narrative presents a loosely chronological albeit somewhat disjointed account of his journey to becoming a pilot of the Predator drone in Iraq and later a commander of a drone squadron and a pilot trainer. Charles Sasser, a combat veteran himself of both the Navy and the Army, aided Martin in composing his memoir. The story itself, however, belongs solely to Martin. The lack of a clear plot at first suggests that Martin perhaps experiences a disembodiment, as he frequently jumps from his chronological trajectory to personal backstory, history of events or explanations of weaponry.

Martin’s memoir portrays a pilot who becomes intertwined with the drone he operates and becomes deeply troubled by some of the deaths he causes. *The Predator* reveals Martin’s growing embodiment in his combat role and provides an important perspective on the conceptualization and experience of the body that occurs for remotely-enabled pilots. In this respect, his experience as a drone pilot indicates he is neither disembodied nor dehumanized but instead enmeshed with the technology he controls, experiencing a significant connection with the humans on the ground in his missions and empathy for many who become his victims.

Drone weapons blur the boundaries between digital and physical bodies. On one hand, the Predator has a physical body, as it is a real, remotely piloted, aircraft flying in real skies, targeting the real physical bodies of human beings. On the other hand, the

¹³⁴ Martin, *Predator*, 2.

digital interface connecting Predator to the body of its pilot does remove at least some sense of boundary between the pilot and drone, regulating the pilot to a strange, somewhat disembodied place between his aircraft and its activities and his physical presence. The connection between the pilot's actual body, the digital interface, and the Predator itself points towards a future where reconstituting one's actual body in digital form is not altogether unthinkable.

As one of the first of such pilots, he initially relates to his training exercises as though he was playing a video game. However, his lieutenant colonel trainer assures him that while the Predator looks like "a big, super-fancy, remote-controlled model airplane," it is not actually anything like a toy but instead "the future of modern warfare."¹³⁵ The colonel urges his trainees to imagine themselves in the Predator, and "feel it" as they fly, but as Martin compares his training with his experiences as a commercial pilot, he clearly feels disembodied, which negatively impacts his capabilities as a drone pilot. What he initially considers to be something from the realm of science fiction has ceased to be fiction; it is purely a product of science.

Martin is disturbed by the lack of connection to his plane compared to manned flight, and struggles to rectify the feeling of separation between his physical body and the Predator he operates. He recounts how difficult it is to land when he has the limited visibility inherent to the drone and cannot physically experience the various cues such as the sound of engine changes and the feeling of ground rush that pilots of manned aircraft use when nearing the ground. Troubled by his disconnect between his flying and the actual combat, Martin recalls, "I often felt more like a spectator at the singular event of my military generation than an actual participant."¹³⁶ The separation caused by remote flying, where he performs his mission from a keyboard, coffee-cup nearby, clearly separates Martin from his predecessors in Vietnam who dodged enemy gunfire and physically inhabited their planes. In his prologue, Martin recalls, "Sometimes I felt like God hurling thunderbolts from afar."¹³⁷ Lauren Wilcox draws upon Donna Haraway's research to relate this experience of drone pilots as something of a "god-trick" where the pilot is at once everywhere, seeing all, yet nowhere, as he is not physically present.¹³⁸ The

¹³⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹³⁸ Lauren Wilcox, "Embodying Algorithmic War: Gender, Race, and the Posthuman in Drone Warfare," *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 1 (February 2017): 11-28, 13.

“death-dealing capacities of the drone” appear as omniscient and sovereign, “able to see the entire world and into the past and future as well.”¹³⁹ However, although algorithms and technology seem to be the aggressors against the human bodies of the enemy, human sovereign decision-makers remain responsible for their attacks against enemies (and sometimes civilians) from an epistemological perspective. Comparing the theoretical epistemology of Wilcox and the recounts of Martin, the latter clearly experiences this feeling of god-like power in his early work piloting missions.

As Martin moves from his training to actual combat operations, he begins to experience combat but remains surreally detached from its full ramifications. When he detects machine gun fire on his first mission, for example, Martin recounts he simply locates the target in the top window of a technical college, “sparkled” it with an infrared laser, and the target is shortly destroyed by an AC-130 dispatched to take it out.¹⁴⁰ Likening the experience to playing the computer game Civilization, originally launched in 1991, where the player has the power to direct armies and units in battle, but in his case “with real consequences,” Martin feels at once stunned, but also “electrified” and “adrenalized” that his team won.¹⁴¹ Using his Predator to strike a college whilst unable to confirm the numbers of people killed, Martin reflects “it would take some time for the reality of what happened so far away to sink in, for ‘real’ to become real. I had yet to realize the horror.”¹⁴² With his screen masking the humanity of the people, turning them into what Wilcox describes as “corporealized as processors of information and also *as* information bundle,” Martin has not realized the effect his task has on him personally or the other people involved.¹⁴³ While he recognizes that he is taking part in a new era of warfare for which old theories about ethics of engagement are no longer applicable, his initial experience seems like he is able to embody two worlds simultaneously. This gives him a sense that he is protected from the misery of war and able to retain his civilian life.

Once deployed and operating the Predator on regular missions, Martin’s experiences become more embodied, as he wrestles with both the feelings of conquest over the enemy and the beginnings of concern over the blood he is shedding. He organizes

¹³⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴⁰ Martin, 1-2.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁴² Ibid., 31.

¹⁴³ Wilcox, “Embodying Algorithmic War,” 18.

this section of his memoir around consecutive missions, beginning with his stalking of insurgents in a green Toyota car. Seeing the car only as a flat image on the screen, the man inside “wasn’t *really* a human being. He was so far away and only a high-tech image on a computer screen.”¹⁴⁴ It does not occur to him that he “was about to assassinate a fellow human.”¹⁴⁵ Until this moment, the moral aspects of his mission “didn’t factor in. Not at the moment. Not yet.”¹⁴⁶ As Martin continues to fly, he becomes connected with his aircraft in a manner similar to that experienced by pilots of manned aircraft, sometimes by instinct. However, he also starts to realize how the program creates a disorienting effect as the disembodiment of flying a drone also carries into his overall experience of being at war in a civilian community. Pondering on this disconnect: Martin writes: “I lived in two worlds, one at war, the other relatively untouched by it.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, he experiences disembodiment on multiple levels as predicted for remote combat, both from his physical distance from his aircraft and through the geographic disconnect which causes him to shift between his role as a soldier and a civilian on a daily basis.

Martin becomes more connected with the drone as he physically reacts to malfunctions and near misses with other aircraft, which require him to employ his prior manned flight experience to safely manoeuvre and land the Predator. For example, in describing a near-miss with an F-18, Martin reports, “I was so into the moment that every muscle in my body tensed for the impact. I leaned into the turn with adrenaline pumping. I couldn’t have been more involved had I actually been inside the plane.”¹⁴⁸ He even finds himself preparing to eject as if his real body is at stake in the potential collision. Midway through the memoir, Martin implicitly acknowledges his connection with the Predator, stating “Did we do that? ... By we, I meant Predator.”¹⁴⁹ As Martin experiences such a connection with this remote aircraft, he takes on an embodiment of the drone in a way a pilot of a manned aircraft typically does, where the plane becomes an extension of the body and expands the pilot’s embodiment position in his or her environment. Thus, as Martin’s hours of piloting a Predator and number of missions increase, he begins to move from disembodiment to embodiment, experiencing the ethical and moral ramifications of

¹⁴⁴ Martin, 44.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 119.

the embodied experience of war. What his Predator does, Martin begins to realize, he is doing himself, taking him a moment to realize that he is safe in a pseudo-cockpit in Nevada. Unlike James in *The Hurt Locker* whose body is constantly in danger, Martin is not threatened. He is the sole threat, sitting in relative comfort, while haunting his enemies from afar. Like James, however, death is happening and encountered, even when far removed from the actual corpses. Death looms as a spectre, he is a killer and just as responsible for lost lives as a soldier with boots on the ground.

Martin experiences his first killing of a civilian in the third mission. The thirty-second delay between his launching the Predator's missiles and the actual time of impact allows an old man to wander into the strike zone. Martin realizes: "The thought of living in the aftermath of having harmed or killed innocent people chilled the marrow of my being ... uncertainty crawled in my stomach like a bed of worms."¹⁵⁰ This experience aligns Martin with what Lorraine de Volo describes as the awareness that suddenly grows among Predator pilots upon realizing that they are "omnipotent killers who cannot be killed," an experience causing drone pilots psychological scars.¹⁵¹ Jean Otto and Bryant Webber note that the frequency of PTSD among drone operators is equal to that of pilots of manned aircraft.¹⁵² Martin continues to fly missions, justifying his duty as a soldier through recognizing the evil behaviour of many of those he is tasked with eliminating from the battleground, noting that a better understanding of such evil made it easier to kill the various targets assigned to him. Killing and maiming of American soldiers enrages him, as does having to witness all forms of violence and brutality, often with no way to stop it.

Drone pilots are forced to view all types of behaviour which they cannot unsee. They are unable to look elsewhere if an image lies within their surveillance area, requiring them to watch rape, assault, and a number of violent or disturbing incidents. For Martin, being angered by the violence he witnesses drives him to order his strikes more responsibly. Martin's narrative reveals a man viewing the world from a posthuman perspective that causes him to maintain connections with others, even if they are not

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁵¹ Lorraine Bayard De Volo, "Unmanned? Gender Recalibrations and the Rise of Drone Warfare," *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 1 (March 2016): 50-77, 52.

¹⁵² Jean L. Otto and B. J. Webber, "Mental Health Diagnoses and Counseling among Pilots of Remotely Piloted Aircraft in the United States Air Force," *The Medical Surveillance Monthly Report* 20, no. 3 (March 2013): 3-8, 3.

associated with his own cultural or national group. Part of this is likely caused by the empathy and connection with unintended victims he encounters. The mundane lifestyle such as a traditional Iraqi dance or Iraqis smoking give him a chance to recognize “all the various behaviour, emotions, and ways of mankind at its best and at its worst, I truly felt a bit like an omnipotent god with a god’s seat above it all.”¹⁵³ These omniscient capabilities raise the question of what else drone pilots are forced to watch, and how this affects their psychological and emotional states.

Martin is then deployed to Balad Air Base and his war becomes with “capital W,” implying that it becomes more personal and embodied. In one particularly gripping event, Martin releases a targeted missile only to have two young boys on a bicycle ride into the strike zone. Unable to retract the missile, Martin and the rest of his team must watch the children become unintended casualties of war. The event challenges Martin’s previous justifications for his war actions, and he attempts, “to share my revulsion and self-loathing at what we had done because of war.”¹⁵⁴ This causes Martin to flashback to a similar childhood memory with his sister, a day that Martin reports “has plagued me ever since.”¹⁵⁵ The vividness of his description and the immediate connection to his own childhood clearly indicate empathy for the children. It creates what Volo calls “guilt by association logic.”¹⁵⁶ Because he connects with the boys through experiences in his own past, Martin is burdened by increased guilt for their injuries and probable deaths. Martin illustrates the emotional toll of drone work through not only his own experience but also that of Captain Brent, a fellow pilot, whose children are the same ages as the boys on the bicycle. Brent struggles emotionally on a daily basis for an extended period of time before landing his drone without clearance, walking off his post, and eventually being relegated to a desk job until retirement. Both Martin’s and Brent’s responses to the incident are clearly not disembodied responses. Martin, for example, reports he realized that “death observed was still *death*.”¹⁵⁷

The distance and technological barrier between the drone pilot and his victims does not change the fact that the victims are dead, and that the drone pilot causes their deaths.

¹⁵³ Martin, *Predator*, 121.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁵⁶ de Volo, “Unmanned?,” 54.

¹⁵⁷ Martin, 212.

Martin notes that “all soldiers must justify themselves if they wished to call themselves honest warriors rather than mercenaries,” and so continues to assert that the violence of his enemies justifies their deaths.¹⁵⁸ However, Martin finds his “lust for enemy blood dissipated,” although he continues to innovate and develop systems to make the Predator more effective.¹⁵⁹ As the drone itself encourages “a predatory masculine” gaze that looks at the enemy as feminized and incapable, Martin consciously evokes compassion to remind himself of the value of human life and how such value should cause him a healthy hesitation before taking life.¹⁶⁰

Martin eventually returns to Nellis to pilot the Predator drones from there, reuniting with his wife, increasing the dichotomy of war and civilian life. Forced to shift to civilian life after an eight-hour drone mission, Martin is torn between two locations and two roles, experiencing the “strange juxtaposition” of the remote warrior living “alternate lives in two vastly different worlds.”¹⁶¹ Martin’s memoir contradicts the idea often presented regarding drones and other forms of remote war machinery that these technological weapons demobilize and desensitize their operators.

The use of a drone does not, in Martin’s experience, lead to disembodiment. While initially feeling like a video game, over time the physical separation between Martin and his Predator lessens, subjecting him to the moral and ethical experiences of most soldiers. As he grows in this connection with the Predator, he begins to question the ethical foundations of war, and to be fully embodied in his role in combat, with all its subsequent emotional trauma. One cannot help but see parallels between Martin’s experience, removed from the conflict but still an agent of war, and the experiences of Buzzell in *My War*. Like Buzzell, he reflects on the strange sensation of being at war while feeling removed from it. Unlike Buzzell, however, Martin knew that his war is real as he is killing the enemy all the while, and has to reconcile this revelation with his experience in the moment, rather than in an end-story revelation.

In the end, Martin attempts to resolve his experiences by viewing himself as a pilot who has served and completed his job. He is both proud of his accomplishments and troubled by his role in taking the lives of others, particularly the civilians hurt or killed

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 240.

¹⁶⁰ de Volo, “Unmanned?,” 51.

¹⁶¹ Martin, 275.

by Predator strikes. Importantly, the embodiment that comes through Martin's recollections and reactions runs counter to common ideas held about drones and drone pilots. The theoretical supposition that drones "lower the barrier both to the individual acts of killing," does not align with Martin's personal experiences nor with his descriptions of growing embodiment through his piloting of the Predator.¹⁶² Instead, Martin tries to present both the pros and cons of his combat experience, noting how flying Predator keeps him physically safe but also recounting the tremendous emotional toll and ethical dilemmas he faces as a drone pilot. Finally, Martin's memoir is also important to the consideration of soldier embodiment and its alignment or lack thereof with the official military narrative. *Predator* does not support the exaggerated narrative of everything as terror threats to be eliminated. Martin never refers to himself as a hero, but he clearly experiences his tours as a pilot who performs his duties well. Thus, he presents an important perspective in the consideration of the body at war in Iraq.

Conclusion

The transition from a body-based war to a technology-based war is not one that leaves the body entirely behind. As has been noted above, the notion that soldiers are removed from battlefield and engaged in a new kind of war proved to be a myth. While technology has changed how wars are fought, it neither removes the soldier from the war experience nor insulates him from its brutality. Reactions of confusion, trauma, and hesitation are natural responses for soldiers when confronted with the threat of death or the possibility of killing another human being even by technological means.

The tradition of sharply separating mind and body that informed the Vietnam War era pushed the soldier to forego his individual body and to substitute it with a corporate military body, forcing young recruits to embrace systematic killing on a very visceral level. The essential humanity which once defined Philip Caputo's stance has been killed and replaced with a cold shell that is alien and intrusive. The training that Caputo received was effective in the stifling of many of his natural instincts regarding the proper methods of personal conduct in times of war. The soldier's understanding of his body in Vietnam is one that is hidden under military culture ideals. Although Caputo recognizes the decline in those characteristics of his being which constitute his humanity, he finds himself reduced to a single cog in a killing machine, easily disposable and replaceable.

¹⁶² Allinson, "The Necropolitics of Drones," 116.

By way of contrast, the postmodern war forces Iraq War soldiers to encounter their humanity in ways never before experienced or predicted. The analysis of the chapter reveals that soldiers are able to preserve their bodily integrity in different ways. While drone pilots represent a future state of warfare where the techno body shields combatants from bodily harm, not all available technologies remove the soldier from battle after all. The soldier in *The Hurt Locker*, even with a prosthetic suit, cannot escape the reality of death as it stares him in the face, time and time again. While James is enthralled with the rush of war and is likely addicted to it, he is able to have a greater control over his own body by empowering his psychological defence to carry out his missions successfully. Similarly, the virtual training Colby Buzzell undertook before deployment does not immunize him from war trauma. However, he resists the military control through his online blog to preserve a real version of himself and his war. The notion that something like a Predator could, in fact, lead to a devaluing of life and a calloused approach to killing haunts Matt Martin in equal terms. The technology he wielded has not eliminated ethical responsibility: in fact, deaths of civilians and enemies haunt him, even if he encounters it only through a screen.

Disconnecting warfare from physical bodies leads to a deceptive perception of armed conflicts, allowing those who favour military engagement to use the concept of physical distance from war as a justification for further wars. It is necessary to counteract these attempts by exploring the narratives of soldiers who experienced bodily and psychological trauma at war firsthand. While the removal of the corporeal body from conflict turns out to be a myth, the myth of a bloodless war still persisted. Many soldiers enlisted with the deceptive pretence that war was different now, with little chance of incurring long-lasting harm. Still, many soldiers in the Iraq War lost their lives or were injured and maimed. While the numbers of those who died in Iraq or who suffered debilitating injuries were less than the numbers of those in Vietnam, as I showed in the first chapter, the voices of these wounded soldiers still deserve to be heard. The next chapter explores the shift in responses of Vietnam War and Iraq War soldiers' regarding their bodily injuries and the military attempts to alter attitudes towards impaired bodies.

Chapter 3

Veterans' Disabilities, Trauma and the Road to Recovery

I speak for a man who gave for this land
Took a bullet in the back for his pay
Spilled his blood in the dirt and the dust
...
He asks of us to stand
And we must end this war today

—Eddie Vedder, (2007)¹

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder composed the lyrics above as a part of a song intended to accompany Ellen Spiro and Phil Donahue's film *Body of War* (2007), which details the psychological effects of the life-changing disabling injury U.S. Specialist Tomas Young sustained in Iraq. The simple recognition, "I speak for a man ..." begs the question—how do traumatized bodies speak? Many veterans who suffer from trauma are marginalized and in desperate need for others to represent their unrecognized suffering. It is precisely the incomprehensibility of the war experience—that the veteran cannot reduce it to a narrative and summarize how and why it happened—that makes it particularly traumatic. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) observes that what haunts the traumatized individuals is not merely the reality of a traumatizing event, but also the reality of how that violence remains unknown, and potentially unknowable.² Trauma, in this sense, is an intangible phenomenon that remains imperceptible to the public because those who suffer from it lack the appropriate tools to express their trauma.

A disjunction between the veteran's trauma and the media narratives produces a gulf that leaves the veteran isolated from society at large. The problem is not that traumatized veterans find it difficult to find a voice but that their stories are quickly drowned out by a cacophony of competing voices. Paul Achter in his article "Unruly Bodies" (2010) provides a summary of the main categories of juxtaposition used by disseminators of the official narrative to disrupt the conceptual link between the actions of the state and the consequences of war. He asserts that veterans with injuries such as

¹ *Body of War*, dir. Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro (United States: The Film Sales Company, 2007).

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 4.

amputated limbs are represented in an everyday context and pictured running or exercising to create an impression that technologically enhanced robotic limbs might outperform their biological counterparts.³ This strategy implicitly presents injuries as neither permanent (when high-tech prosthetics are displayed) nor irreparable. Another dominant representation of injured soldiers, Achter argues, shows the injury as inspirational for the achievement of higher spiritual goals.⁴ These mechanisms functionally pre-empt the challenges to official war narratives that the accounts of traumatized veterans might represent.

While the countless successful stories of soldiers in newspapers appear to have the potential to alter attitudes toward disabled bodies, the experience of a veteran losing a bodily function is universally traumatic. A strong correlation between physical disabilities and mental trauma has been established, proving that injured veterans are more likely to have a co-occurring PTSD diagnosis. Studies of PTSD among Vietnam veterans report that injured veterans are more than twice as likely (31%) to be diagnosed with PTSD in comparison to uninjured veterans (11 to 14%).⁵ A recent study in 2005 similarly reveals an eight-fold increased risk of PTSD among injured veterans (16%) than those uninjured (2%).⁶ These statistics, if anything, not only indicate that physical injury is a major predictor of PTSD among veterans, but also suggest that medical science and especially battlefield care has advanced far beyond the medical capabilities available during Vietnam, playing a role in higher numbers of survivors and low numbers of fatalities. When the Iraq War began, advances in the Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TCCC) and Forward Surgical Teams (FST) prioritized the reduction of casualties by delivering hospital quality care in the field.⁷ However, the frequent deployments to war zones and the continuous threat of unsophisticated weapons such as IEDs in urban counterinsurgency operations not only did body counts pile up, but maimed and injured bodies also amassed in record-high numbers.

³ Paul Achter, "Unruly Bodies: The Rhetorical Domestication of Twenty-First-Century Veterans of War," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96, no. 1 (February 2010): 46-68, 63.

⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁵ Richard A. Kulka et al., *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 274.

⁶ Danny Koren et al., "Increased PTSD Risk with Combat-Related Injury," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 162, no. 2 (February 2005): 276-82, 276.

⁷ Brian J. Eastridge et al., "Forward Surgical Teams Provide Comparable Outcomes to Combat Support Hospitals," *The Journal of Trauma: Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 66, no. 4 (April 2009): 48-50, 48.

The aim of this chapter is to humanize the statistics mentioned above and present an analysis of the shift in veterans' responses to life-changing injuries. A veteran's disability is an experience that he or she owns and cannot be relegated to a footnote in historical narratives of wars. Central to this chapter is to develop an understanding as to how a holistic understanding of PTSD has progressed since the Vietnam War. I argue that the value of individuality and independence, promulgated in humanist thought and informing Vietnam narratives, leaves the disabled Vietnam veteran isolated, feeling like he must face it on his own and find his own salvation. The "dis" of disability entails a backward-looking definition of what ability itself means. The Iraq War narratives, conversely, seem to hold on to a shred of hope—their traumatic revelations, while troubling, still seem to be revelations of a higher order, or better truth, that clings to hope in spite of one's wartime traumas.

My discussion makes use of Rosi Braidotti's posthuman ethics which "is not about the avoidance of pain, rather it is about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed."⁸ From this perspective, the posthuman has a forward-looking ethics that entails transforming the negative feelings of disability, trauma and pain into diverse forms of belongings and loyalties. Instead of evoking nostalgic longings for a pain-free past, posthuman ethics considers traumatic experiences to have the potential to enforce ethical relations by recognizing one's place in new connections established in spite of and often because of one's trauma. This is exactly a posthuman move because the critical moral valuation of a human being is not one's identity with humanity *per se*, but one has a vested interest in reducing suffering and maximizing the enjoyment of one's existence. It is suffering that provides one of the most important trajectories for ethics and morality.

Disabilities—as I use the term in this chapter—include a variety of forces which meet in the soldier body as a profound and jarring experience, potentially having a devastating impact upon veterans' psyches. In this context and for the sake of the analysis, trauma cannot be comprehended only in psychological terms. Similarly, treating disability as solely a physical impairment denies its psychological disruptiveness to the life of the veteran. To take an either/or approach to trauma and disability is ultimately

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, "Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 235-254, 242.

reductive, unhelpful and inaccurate.⁹ Therefore, the inclusive analysis of disability in this chapter is an attempt to bridge the problematic gap between disability and trauma. In his article, “Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma” (2004), James Berger points out the “problematics of representation” inherent in each discipline. Trauma is seen as a sign of a mental disorder that destroys the traumatized sense of coherence but does not necessarily disable the person, while disability studies scholars have attempted to counteract the hierarchy of bodies ranging from “normal” to “disabled” as an unethical and problematic social construction.¹⁰ As Berger sums up: “disability studies is marked by an inability to mourn, and trauma studies by an inability to *stop* mourning.”¹¹

Even if wartime physical injuries are healed in the body, veterans are left to cope with the psychological trauma. Due to the varieties of physical disabilities in this chapter, the historical background will focus on war trauma and how it assumes different meanings at different times relating to available psychiatric categories and social attitudes. Following a section setting out the historical background, this chapter will examine a number of narratives which illustrate how the landscape of traumatized soldier narratives has evolved between the two wars. I have chosen Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) as an example of one of the early voices that personalizes and politicizes narratives surrounding disability and trauma, establishing a counter-narrative that relies on oppositional politics by using his disabled body as a dramatic device to bring the suffering of disabled veterans into public view.

Mark Wilkerson’s *Tomas Young’s War* (2016) is my first text that illustrates how an Iraq War veteran whose injuries closely resembled Kovic’s was able to come to terms with his own injury through posthuman ethics in which the body becomes the agent of its healing via “convivial” relationships. Tomas’ activism at Camp Casey, collaboration with film directors, attendance with Pearl Jam on stage, and his relationship with his wife are examples of politics of inclusion, using his injured body as a place for people to “meet” in order to enable connection and healing.

Kayla Williams’ *Plenty of Time When We Got Home* (2014) engages disabilities from the perspective of two Iraq War veterans in a relationship—Williams herself and Brian McGough—the latter of whom also suffered from a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

⁹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 1.

¹⁰ James Berger, “Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 24, no. 3 (2004): 563-582, 569.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 577.

What this account represents is that investments in daily life routines, with a clear vision and a sense of purpose, lead the couple towards a re-encounter with a healthier life. Their story of joint healing forged through love and advocacy is the key to overcoming the effects of physiological and physical disability.

Finally, the chapter complements veterans' personal written narratives by examining the cultural representation of disability in James Cameron's feature film *Avatar* (2008). While a memoir can be more powerful in that it offers a direct commentary on wars, war films convey the same message—albeit less poignantly—in exchange for securing a broader overall appeal, allowing more artistic expressions to engage with a variety of themes, not necessarily constrained by a single soldier's perspective of real-world events. Addressing trauma through fantasy and science fiction, I read *Avatar* as a film about how future technologies might alter human experiences like suffering.

Taken together, the four texts provide a platform for the discussion of the physical and psychological effects of the two wars on veterans, revealing similar reflections on the senselessness of wars and the futility of sacrifices. The analysis, however, also reveals shifts in social attitudes towards PTSD and mental trauma since Vietnam. Holistic understanding shifted trauma from its medical origin to a wider paradigm of social concern where veterans and members of society are active collaborators in the healing process. Uniting oneself to a cause greater than oneself, whether it be anti-war peace activism or advocacy for veterans give the disabled a new meaning and a sense of purpose. This re-contextualization offers veterans new horizons of experience which are unlimited in their potential to enable encounters, lead dialogues, and engage transformations.

Trauma between Then and Now

The Vietnam War was the most significant event for the medical recognition of war trauma. However, society has gone through several stages in its understanding well before then.¹² In World War I, the U.S. Armed Forces evidenced some understanding of how trauma may arise within recruits with extensive screening programs which scanned soldiers for vulnerability to “nervous breakdown.”¹³ The general opinion of the

¹² Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists, 1914-1994* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 355.

¹³ Hans Pols and Stephanie Oak, “War & Military Mental Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 12 (December 2007): 2132-2142, 2133.

psychiatric professionals back then was that too many soldiers had a mental breakdown due to insufficient screening procedures. Thomas W. Salmon, chief consultant in military psychiatry, developed a treatment for the “shell shocked” soldiers which consisted of psychiatric support delivered to the soldiers at the front line of service.¹⁴ While Salmon’s plan was taken in part to help prevent the long-term psychiatric problems associated with war neurosis by giving immediate encouragement, it nevertheless was largely seen as a barrier to prevent an easy route for soldiers to return home.¹⁵

Due to the growing number of war neuroses among soldiers in World War II, American military leaders found it important to appoint psychiatrists to study soldiers’ reactions to war-related stressors. It is due to this recognition that psychiatrists like Abram Kardiner pushed for the formulation of the diagnostic category of “gross stress reaction,” which officially appeared in the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I) in 1952.¹⁶ In short, failures to adequately screen for “war neuroses” in WWI led to the beginning of PTSD’s earliest intervention efforts.

By the start of the Vietnam War, the principles of treating traumatized soldiers in the forward base were successfully followed, with an estimation of less than five out of every thousand soldiers showed trauma.¹⁷ These initial estimations made the authors of the second edition of DSM, published in 1968 during the Vietnam War, take a step backward when it revoked the “gross-stress reaction” diagnosis published in the earlier version.¹⁸ While exact reasons for the revocation are perplexing, it is a step largely taken as a result of the early slow combat rhythm and the lower rate of veterans returning home with psychological conditions. It was not, however, long before a higher number of veterans coming from the war began exhibiting many psychological symptoms that became difficult to ignore. Nevertheless, the psychological nature of the stress made identifying, accepting, and treating trauma difficult. Not only is trauma comparatively invisible to traditional wounds but its symptoms often unfold over long periods of time.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 2133.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2135.

¹⁶ Joe L. Stein, “Examining Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Plight of Vietnam Veterans,” *The Iowa Historical Review* 5, no. 1 (May 2015): 7-22, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Marc-Antoine Crocq, “From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 2, no. 1 (March 2000): 47-55, 53.

¹⁹ Martin Halliwell, *Voices of Mental Health: Medicine, Politics, and American Culture, 1970-2000* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 54.

Widespread disillusionment among veterans led to the formation of the Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW) in 1967 in which therapists like New York psychiatrists Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim F. Shatan started informal rap groups to stimulate a non-traditional therapeutic culture for the returning veterans to reorient their demands into political and ethical actions.²⁰ Due to the lack of VA resources dedicated toward addressing trauma, these ad-hoc groups spread through major cities. Although these early groups were directed mainly by the veterans themselves to enable healing, its fundamental mission was oriented towards scrutinizing the destructive role of the U.S. military in Vietnam for eventual dissemination to the public.²¹ The cooperation between the veterans and the psychiatrists was fruitful that in 1970 Lifton urged Congress, with his witness testimony of veterans in trauma, that political actions were required.²²

The Veterans' Administration Medical School Assistance and Health Manpower Training Acts, signed by President Nixon in 1972, addressed the shortage of mental health care providers in the VA.²³ As recognition of veterans' needs improved, psychiatric departments moved up in both "location and prestige."²⁴ Though soldiers have always been facing trauma, it was only in 1980 that it was formally defined, diagnosed, and given possible treatment solutions when the American Psychiatric Association added PTSD to the third edition of DSM.²⁵ The medical recognition emphasized that the disorder has psychodynamic roots that could be measured in empirical terms. The organic language favoured by the authors of DSM-III in contrast to the psychoanalytic categories of DSM-II made it more accessible for psychiatrists in practice and researchers as well.²⁶ The newly recognized condition led to the National Vietnam Veterans' Readjustment Study, a congressional study started in 1983 and published in the early 1990s. It revealed that 15.2% of the veterans studied exhibited problems stemming from PTSD including marital

²⁰ Lifton, *Home from the War*, 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 176.

²³ Richard Nixon, "The Veterans' Administration Medical School Assistance and Health Manpower Training Acts" (*Richard Nixon Foundation*, October 24, 1972), accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-86/pdf/STATUTE-86-Pg1100.pdf>.

²⁴ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), xxx.

²⁵ Hannah S. Decker, *The Making of DSM-III* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 274.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

problems, work difficulties, depression, and alcohol or drug abuse and that the veterans with disabilities are more likely to have PTSD.²⁷

The Vietnam Memorial, erected in 1982, signified the national trend in separating the “war from the warrior.”²⁸ This cultural movement helped to unite the nation and erase the memory of the scars provoked by the divisiveness of the Vietnam War. Correspondingly, Christian Appy in *American Reckoning* (2015) contends that media representations concerning Vietnam veterans improved significantly since the 1980s, increasing not only the frequency of their portrayal but also the sympathetic roles veterans depict to convey the depth of their trauma.²⁹ Indeed, the struggle of Vietnam veterans has eclipsed the conflict within American memory.

Though significant improvements have been made to the understanding of the PTSD since it was medically recognized, labelling it a “disorder” conveys that the trauma is merely an individual’s misfortune which must be fixed by the state and medical experts.³⁰ PTSD was widely viewed in the psychological community as a cognitive injury to the mind. This suggests that what needs to be corrected must be located within the psyche of the veteran himself. As a medical condition, it was presumed, that treatment should be “standardized,” rather than individualized.³¹

Another accepted understanding of trauma post-Vietnam is as a chemical imbalance in the brain that required pharmacological interventions. But even though a drug such as Prozac, released in 1988, was helpful for many civilians, it also left many veterans unchanged.³² Walter Alexander explores scientifically grounded explanations for the mystery surrounding Prozac. The success of drugs like Prozac for treating trauma tends to be better suited for acute PTSD than chronic disease.³³ This was on account of the fact

²⁷ Kulka, *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation Report*, xxvii.

²⁸ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 234.

²⁹ Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 241.

³⁰ Derek Summerfield, “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Medicalization of Human Suffering,” in *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues and Controversies*, ed. Gerald M. Rosen (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2004), 233-245, 233.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³² van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, xxx.

³³ Walter Alexander, “Pharmacotherapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Combat Veterans Focus on Antidepressants and Atypical Antipsychotic Agents,” *Pharmacy and Therapeutics* 37, no. 1 (January 2012): 32-38, 32.

that soldiers developed PTSD over a long period of time, due to multiple exposures to trauma, and that the symptoms often did not manifest until sometime later, most soldiers who experienced PTSD did so chronically, rather than acutely.³⁴ Thus, pharmacological treatments were almost ineffective, results that did not become clear until long term effects of traumatic memories surfaced or in instances of relapse when veterans stopped taking prescribed drugs. Certainly, there is a chemical neuro-pharmacological component of trauma, which can be treated accordingly, but it is not sufficient on its own, particularly with respect to long-term or chronic symptoms. The medical understanding of trauma denies the fact that human consciousness acts in response to the environment, and thus places little emphasis on the context of upbringing, one's particular wartime experiences, and even the significance of particular trauma-induced symptoms or events.

The understanding of PTSD since the 1990s has become more holistically orientated, dissolving the barriers between mind and body, the individual and their environment, and disciplines of study. The advancement of neuroscience, which revealed the complexities of human emotions with brain imaging helped to breach the divide between biological, psychological, and sociological studies.³⁵ One significant insight that emerged from this interdisciplinary research is that individuals' autonomic and affective processes happen fast and beneath the threshold of cognitive awareness.³⁶ Studies further found a significant relationship between the intensity of effect and the severity of the subject's PTSD symptoms.³⁷ Such revelations were particularly important for dispelling the limited understanding of cognitive-based PTSD described earlier. The interconnectedness of the body and mind, as well as the individual and their environment, is recognized as a fundamental force contributing to the way PTSD is experienced and felt.

Emphasis on holistic awareness did not just increase in medicine since the 1990s. One of the foremost driving factors in the shift seen since the new millennium was 9/11, the terrorist attacks that collectively traumatized the nation. E. Ann Kaplan writes, in reference to the event, that it viscerally rendered the trauma of previous wars more

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Ibid., xx.

³⁶ Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 434-472, 443.

³⁷ Anka A. Vujanovic et al., "Main and Interactive Effects of Distress Tolerance and Negative Affect Intensity in Relation to PTSD Symptoms among Trauma-Exposed Adults," *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* 35, no. 2 (June 2013): 235-243, 243.

accessible to the public.³⁸ Not only did the public experience first-hand a traumatic experience of a war-scale terror themselves, but with the return of veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, they were sensitized to the complexity of new conflict driven-trauma, such as traumatic brain injury and sexual trauma. The increased forms of trauma play a dramatic role in giving the public renewed appreciation for the (in)visibility and corrosive nature of traumatic injuries which transcend the distinction between self and other.

The collective capability to recognize trauma offers a context for intimacy amongst individuals for mutual prosperity.³⁹ The “immanence of trauma,” Laura S. Brown argues, entails that trauma is an aspect of everyone’s lives, actually or potentially, and therefore everyone is capable of contributing to the compassionate reconstruction of trauma.⁴⁰ Such collaborative social action serves to heighten sensitivity amongst the community as the pathological and biological vulnerabilities of trauma are decontextualized within the social context.

Although PTSD remains pathological in that it causes pain and discomfort, its expression is greater than this dimension alone as the imageries that accompany it have a character all their own. Pharmacological solutions for PTSD are increasingly considered controversial because they dissolve the lines between the biological and cognitive systems of the individual and their environment. Paul Outka suggests that Propranolol, albeit promising for overcoming trauma, may fundamentally alter the individual’s identity.⁴¹

The era of a purely clinical diagnosis and treatment for PTSD is giving way to a more holistic view that not only erases barriers between body and mind, but between the body and its natural environments. Previous understanding of trauma as “a relatively static, circumscribable entity to be located and addressed within the individual psychology of those affected,” has changed, allowing for new perceptions to comprehend

³⁸ E. Ann. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1.

³⁹ Kai H. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 183-199, 187.

⁴⁰ Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: Our Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 100-112, 110.

⁴¹ Paul Outka, “History, the Posthuman, and the End of Trauma: Propranolol and beyond,” *Traumatology* 15, no. 4 (December 2009): 76-81, 76.

it as “a dynamic, two-way interaction between the victimized individual and the surrounding society, evolving over time.”⁴² In other words, trauma is more than a mental condition; it has components that extend beyond the mind, into the domain of social and experiential dynamics. This means that trauma cannot be treated with universal prescriptions, like a common and bodily injury. The traumatizing event, the person’s experience before and after, the strength of one’s support system and other relationships, and one’s general psychological makeup all play a role in how one responds to trauma. Psychiatrists and psychologists are just beginning to realize the potential of social interactions for the wellbeing of the individual and their community. On this model, a fluidity between mind, body and environment is characteristic of a healthy individual.⁴³ Treatments for PTSD, thus, must thoroughly address and integrate instinct, emotion, and rational thought.⁴⁴

Such a re-evaluation helps to expand society’s understanding of trauma not just as a part of mental health vocabulary but an experience unto itself with its own language. This shift is example of an emergent dialogue for until the notion of PTSD is dispelled, the engagement between the individual and their society will be skewed. A prime example of the public’s renewed respect for apparently visible and invisible injuries is the recent creation of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington D.C. It is the first memorial of its kind in the history of the U.S. to honour the sacrifices of disabled, rather than deceased, veterans.⁴⁵ Interestingly, nowhere on the new American Veterans Disabled for Life memorial does one find reference to the “disorder” of veterans. Such terminology is unbecoming for a public desiring to do honour to disabled veterans. Society as a whole, likewise, recognizes that the “disorder” status of post-traumatic stress is outdated and in need of revision.

This review has clarified that medical understanding of PTSD has evolved considerably over the past century and a half, and now it is time to realize that it is, as

⁴² Derek Summerfield, “Addressing Human Response to War and Atrocity,” in *Beyond Trauma: Cultural and Societal Dynamics*, ed. Charles R. Figley and Rolf J. Kleber (New York: Springer, 1995), 17-30, 19.

⁴³ Peter A. Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 193.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁵ “American Veterans Disabled for Life” (*National Parks Service: U.S. Department of the Interior*, February 4, 2014), accessed December 18, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/nama/planyourvisit/american-veterans-disabled-for-life.htm>.

President George W. Bush describes, not a disorder but an injury.⁴⁶ The trends now towards holistic understanding of trauma, which aims to integrate and improve the individual's relationship with himself and society, since Vietnam is indicative of the ways in which medical diagnoses are only a "way of seeing, a style of reasoning, a means of persuasion."⁴⁷ In order to illustrate these changing understandings, the shift from disability as a private suffering to a public shared experience is examined in the following four texts, the first of which relates to the Vietnam War while the remaining three pertain to the Iraq War.

The Living Dead Man: Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*

Born on the Fourth of July (1976) autobiographically presents the experience of Ron Kovic, a disabled soldier, beginning with his wound, his rehabilitation in hospitals, rehearsing the "lost" life he had lived from his childhood onwards, his enlistment in the Marine Corps, and his eventual emergence as an anti-war protestor and activist. As can be seen from Kovic's ordering of the chapters, the chronology of events is interrupted by his birth and childhood as he rehearses his childhood goals and dreams leading up to the day when he joined the Marine Corps. The central place Kovic's age of innocence takes in the book, along with its title, places what was lost at the heart of his narrative. I will argue that although Kovic employs direct action as a means of bringing about significant change in regards to the sociopolitical climate surrounding the Vietnam War, he remains nostalgic for a past in which the damage he experienced is not present.

While Kovic's wounded body is prominent throughout the book, understanding his relationship to his wounded body depends, in part, on his relationship to his intact body and youthful vigour before enlisting in the military. Athletics defined much of Kovic's childhood and adolescence. He muses, on a number of occasions, how he was a natural athlete, "there wasn't much of anything I wasn't able to do with my body back then."⁴⁸ Being able-bodied is not only a significant component of Kovic's childhood identity but also informs his training experience in the Marine Corps. He recalls the impact that several Marine Corps recruiters had upon him when they visited his High School. There is

⁴⁶ George W. Bush, *Portraits of Courage: A Commander in Chief's Tribute to America's Warriors* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2017), 15.

⁴⁷ Derek Summerfield, "The Invention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Usefulness of a Psychiatric Category," *The British Medical Journal* 322, no. 7278 (January 2001): 95-98, 97.

⁴⁸ Kovic, 82.

something awe-inspiring about their appearance, they seem “almost like statues and not like real men at all.”⁴⁹ Their speech had quite an impact on the impressionable Kovic: “They told us that day that the Marine Corps built men—body, mind, and spirit.”⁵⁰ If being a soldier is what it takes to become a real man, Kovic is sold.

While still able-bodied after enlistment, there seems to be a jarring shock about how his body ceased to be his own body once he belonged to the military. He recalls how the drill-sergeant forced him and his fellow recruits to take a shower, a gesture to “wash all that scum off!”⁵¹ There is something almost baptismal about his account—the water represents a significant change in identity and, particularly, embodiment. His childhood dreams of becoming a New York Yankee, the next-generation’s Micky Mantle, died as he washed his past away and assumed the marine’s uniform. It takes more than a uniform, however, to change a civilian into a marine. They have to be broken and reborn as soldiers. They are treated just as babies—and the drill sergeant makes sure they know it. Kovic finds the heroic notion of the soldier’s body that had been pressed into his minds during basic training is fundamentally challenging.

The description of his injury offers an interesting self-examination of the internal developments which occurred in the mind of Kovic. The gunshot wound that he sustained led to a spinal cord injury which rendered him paralyzed from the chest down. Upon describing the gunshot wound and struggling for his life in a field in Vietnam, Kovic states, “My rifle is gone and I don’t feel like finding it or picking it up ever again. The only thing I can think of, the only thing that crosses my mind, is living.”⁵² Kovic expresses the immediate reversion towards an instinct of self-preservation once his injury has been inflicted. This moment is the exact time at which the disillusionment with war is indirectly formulated within his mind.

After enduring the initial shock of the injury, Kovic spent a week in an intensive care unit before being transferred for his first hospitalization post-injury. The account of his rescue reflects what is generally known about evacuation of the wounded in Vietnam. The medevac helicopter was typically deployed to save a wounded soldier within the golden hours, a window of approximately six hours, enabling veterans to be treated within

⁴⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁵¹ Ibid., 96.

⁵² Ibid., 33.

forty minutes of injury before either going into shock or having a cardiac arrest.⁵³ A preliminary diagnosis was radioed ahead so that a team of doctors could be assembled to operate on the wounded.⁵⁴ Thus, Kovic represents the account of the traumatized veteran who both benefits from improved medical care in modern warfare while also representing trauma that a great number of Vietnam veterans had.

The hospitalization of Kovic at St. Albans is significant because it provides the first example of an extended period of non-combat conditions in which he is able to reflect upon the nature of his injury and the progression of disillusionment with warfare. Although war usually begins in the recruit's life at enlistments or deployment or when the soldier goes on his first mission, Kovic's war that will dominate the greater part of his life is at the hospital where the experience of war is relieved: "the hospital is like the whole war all over again."⁵⁵ The first chapter, as he tells the story of his own injury, is narrated in the first person. There is an "I" struggling to survive. However, the narrative surrounding his hospitalization shifts to the third person. The struggle to know oneself, and what one has become—someone inhabiting a broken, paralyzed body—is powerfully recounted through this pronoun shift. There is a distinct separation of his "self" from his body—he depersonalizes himself, just as he depersonalizes the wounded in the hospital with him. Struggling with his new identity, Kovic recounts: "with despair and frustration he watched his once strong twenty-one-year-old body become crippled and disfigured."⁵⁶ Kovic refers to the wounded as mere "bodies," their souls are off in a dream land. Their wounds and their humiliations somehow severed their persons from the bodily existence they have always known. Their bodies are there, receiving enemas, but each man retreats into a dreamland.⁵⁷

The self-description provided by Kovic is of great importance because of the internal conflict between what is once considered to be the ultimate ideal of patriotic manhood and the stark reality of this failed ideal. Insofar as utility describes the body's value, the lack of utility leaves the veteran feeling useless, even less than human. The anguish Kovic experiences is not primarily a result of being unable to perform certain

⁵³ John A. Feagin, *Orthopedic Surgery in Vietnam* (Office of Medical History, 1994), accessed November 15, 2018, <https://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/vietnam/OrthoVietnam/Ch01.html>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kovic, 57.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 45.

things, rather it is his experience of living in a paralyzed body, seeing how others dehumanize him and mistreat him through poor quality of treatment. Kovic's disillusionment with the life of the soldier is encapsulated when he states: "this isn't like the poster down by the post office where the guy stood with the shiny shoes; this is a concentration camp."⁵⁸

For Kovic, the loss of a functional body is the loss of a life he never had a chance to live, and a life he struggled to mourn losing: "My wounding in Vietnam both physically and emotionally haunted me, pursued me, and threatened to overwhelm me."⁵⁹ His encounter with machines, early in rehabilitation, is less than encouraging. The machines and prosthetics, while they give an appearance of mobility and bodily utility, are only illusory. They do not restore the body, or even enhance it. They deceive onlookers into thinking that the injured is overcoming his injuries, but it is only the onlookers who are deceived.⁶⁰ What the Vietnam War did to American masculinity conceptually—emasculating the notion of the invulnerable American Hero—is experienced by Kovic more literally. Kovic finds his injuries emasculating. Not only can he no longer perform as a soldier, but he cannot perform as a man whose fantasies of women will likely remain only that—fantasies for the mind, inaccessible to his broken body. Kovic's literal emasculation becomes, in a sense, iconic for a collective sense of emasculation that settled into the American consciousness as the Vietnam War effort failed.

The Ron Kovic that enters the Marine Corps is much different than the man who leaves St. Albans. It is his experiences during this initial hospitalization that inform much of his later efforts regarding the development of new standards of care for veterans. Still, Kovic finds that while he can do little with his body, others were still intent on using it for other ends—particularly political ones. An event of central importance to the narrative is the parade that he participated in within his hometown with other local veterans. This parade marks the point at which Kovic directly confronted the civilian environment and the manifestation of patriotism that he considered to be misinformed and unrepresentative of his personal wartime experiences. He describes the sickness that he felt when members of the community would refer to him as a hero. In fact, Kovic goes so far as to describe

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 59.

he feels like an “animal in a zoo,” indicative of the ceremony as an odd juxtaposition of community optimism and personal tragedy.⁶¹

The difficulties of coping with the internal and external manifestation of pain are central to the narrative. His pain is personal, but it also leads to conflation with the public environment. As stated by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985), pain

brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience. In this case, the objectification of pain often concentrates on this combination of isolation and exposure, an ugly inverting of the two.⁶²

The quotation provides a framework from which one may begin to understand why Kovic becomes interested in activism. His disability is public in the sense that it is apparent to all those around him, yet his psychological trauma remains a highly private matter. Bringing the veteran into the public sphere, hailing the veteran as a hero, does not necessarily assuage the sense of loneliness. It may alienate the soldier even further. The idea of a noble sacrifice becomes illusory. Though others are exposed to his injury, he is the only one who truly understands the extent of his pain. It is the need to achieve outward expression of the personal and physical experience that leads Kovic to involve himself with the anti-war movement.

The injury itself is only eclipsed by the trauma of alienation and dehumanization experienced post-injury. After being released from hospital but confined to a wheelchair, the rest of the time he was ignored, met with gazes that communicate pity rather than honour. In one incident, after a night of heavy drinking and fighting at a local bar, Kovic is left feeling emasculated and without hope when a girl refuses to kiss him.⁶³ The girl’s refusal is symbolic of the American public unwillingness to understand the devastating effects of war on veterans. Robert Lifton in his book *The Broken Connection* (1979) elaborates on the anger-rage-violence that many Vietnam veterans tended to show; this emerged not only because of the veterans long exposure to violence or as the only way to assert control over their social environment, but also because they could not escape the sense of betrayal and the failed attempt at integration with others upon returning home.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 117.

⁶² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 53.

⁶³ Kovic, 127.

⁶⁴ Lifton, *Broken Connection*, 148.

Kovic's fears concerning the potential for injury resulting from a lack of oversight in his everyday life would ring true when he injured his leg while at home alone. He eventually spent a total of six months in a VA hospital.⁶⁵ The negative experiences that Kovic had endured during his two hospitalizations are the catalyst for a growing interest in the socio-political conditions that drove the protest movement in the U.S.⁶⁶ After his poor experiences in the VA system, he reassesses his initial rejection of the anti-war movement and comes to realize that the veterans' health care system is broken and in need of direct confrontation and the anti-war movement may be considered a positive development towards better treatment for veterans.

The event that serves as the ultimate transition point in the context of Kovic's activism is the Kent State shootings. While being there, Kovic witnesses police brutality against peaceful protestors, and he also is perplexed by the inaccessible nature of government officials.⁶⁷ The death of Kent State protestors enrages Kovic, marking the point at which he makes the decision to become actively involved in the anti-war movement. He is no longer a soldier fighting for his country. Rather he is fighting against his country, at least that part of his nation represented by the politicians and war mongers, albeit being labelled a traitor or being arrested. The only way to escape isolation is to rally himself around veterans like himself. The solidarity of protesting provides Kovic with a way to "worldly self-extension," counteracting the feeling of being "swallowed alive by the body."⁶⁸ In other words, protesting gets him out of himself, makes him a participant in more than the horrors that he relieves in his mind and consumes him with positive, meaningful purpose. Through activism, the very thing that isolated him before—his trauma—becomes his redemption. Re-enacting outrages in public view to rally against injustices by using his body as a device to "shock" others help evoke anti-war sentiments in those whom he encounters.

It is through the process of public confrontation that Kovic begins to cope with his injury and develop a new perception of his body. He does not verbally critique his body, rather he allows his body to stand as a visual representation of the horrors of war. His body is the catalyst for the conversations that he engages in as a means of ensuring that

⁶⁵ Kovic, 141.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁶⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 236.

future generations will not fall into the patriotic traps that he himself fell into. By participating in a greater number of speaking engagements at high schools and speaking to students, Kovic feels like he can present war as it is. His goal is not to dissuade high schools from enlisting, rather, to ensure that those who do understand what they are getting into. He said: "I think I honestly believed that if only I could speak out to engage people I could stop the war myself. I honestly believed people would listen to me because of who I was, a wounded American veteran."⁶⁹ Here is an epiphany occurs. Because Kovic assumes the role of "storyteller," his story becomes a "re-constitutive act" designed to affect change and, if possible, to prevent similar occurrences in the future.⁷⁰ As stated by Scarry, "physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story."⁷¹ Kovic is able to express his pain through the presentation of his physical state in the context of his speeches. Following the line of thought espoused by Scarry, the struggles of Kovic may be interpreted as an awakening of political consciousness through pain. Kovic recognizes that the pain he experienced is important for teaching others. Rather than attempting to live a life of the greatest possible personal comfort, Kovic determines it is necessary to confront the system that injured him by exploring his pain in a public sense.

When Kovic participates in a march that interrupted the Republican National Convention of 1972, he does so to "reclaim America and a bit of ourselves."⁷² His reclamation of self correlates to reclaiming the nation he initially volunteered for; he is figuratively standing up, even though he cannot actually stand up at all. This does not only give him a powerful voice, but it also threatens the powers that be. According to Kali Tal, speaking of traumatized veterans whose experiences speak loudly to the public is often perceived as an "aggressive act" with sociopolitical consequences. She contends: "it is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression."⁷³ Kovic's activism

⁶⁹ Kovic, 162.

⁷⁰ Kali Tal, "Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), 217-248, 231.

⁷¹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 3.

⁷² Kovic, 181.

⁷³ Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

is further expressed in a variety of ways, perhaps most significantly the recounting of his story in writing. Both *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Hurricane Street* have become iconic pieces of anti-war literature. When reading *Hurricane Street* (2016) as a supplement to *Born*, one begins to understand the internal thought processes which drive the activism that Kovic dedicated himself to throughout late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

In *Hurricane Street*, Kovic recounts the seventeen-day hunger strike that he was a part of in 1974.⁷⁴ The hunger strike represents perhaps the most radical tactic utilized by Kovic throughout his work as an activist, using his body as a platform for the discussion of politically significant issues. Kovic also provides a deeper discussion of his experiences within the VA hospital system, employing a language that is revolting and shocking. This is intentional as it allows for a description of the negative emotional state that Kovic found himself in post-injury. As a veteran, Kovic expects a certain degree of treatment and dignity but what he finds was an alienating environment.

Kovic's real war is not as a soldier deployed in Vietnam, it is as an American veteran post-Vietnam. As stated by Martin Norden, "Ron Kovic and his country, coincidentally "born" on the same day, undergo a similar maturation; his evolution from a war supporter crippled by his belief to an anti-war activist parallels the country's own development from the 1950s to the 1970s."⁷⁵ Kovic's narrative is thoroughly humanist. Throughout his memoir he clearly longs for the days of his childhood. It is during his childhood that Kovic was not only without physical injury but without emotional injury as well. This is a period of time before disillusionment and before the destruction of Kovic's faith in his American ideals which experiences a concurrent degeneration with his physical state. No prosthetic, no technology, can replace flesh and blood. Kovic only finds meaning in his struggle by embracing whatever of his mangled body remains. The wounded body is emasculated—it stands to represent the emasculation of America itself in the wake of an unwinnable war, against an inferior foe. The Vietnam-era narratives lead to self-discovery, but it is ultimately a re-discovery of a new self through the destruction of the old.

⁷⁴ Ron Kovic, *Hurricane Street* (New York: Akashic Books, 2016), 1-15.

⁷⁵ Martin F. Norden, "Bitterness, Rage, and Redemption: Hollywood Constructs the Disabled Vietnam Veteran," in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012), 96-116, 101.

Seeing the Pain up Close in Mark Wilkerson's *Tomas Young's War*

Turning by contrast from Kovic's post-Vietnam narrative of the 1970s to the Iraq War of the 2000s, Mark Wilkerson's 2016 *Tomas Young's War* details the post-war experiences of a paralyzed Iraq War veteran, Tomas Young. Unlike the bodily violence of Ron Kovic, Young does not reinforce the military masculinity inherent in many portrayals of the wounded veteran, but instead in a most posthuman fashion uses his body as a place of connection. In accepting and learning to live with his physical and emotional disability while standing against the social systems that caused it, Young promotes peace rather than resistance and experiences the multiple levels of connectedness and belonging consistent with posthuman understanding.

In contrast to the autobiographical account of Kovic where he controls and interprets all the events of his experience in Vietnam, lending itself to a humanist perspective on storytelling, the genre of *Tomas Young's War* as a biography transcends a single narrator's perspective as much as it depends on it. Young is only a character in his biography, together with the perspectives and experiences of others. As a character rather than a writer, the perspectives of others about his war experience interspaced with Young's own views present readers with multiple lenses from which to view and engage with Young and his injuries.

Tomas Young enlisted in the military shortly after 9/11, inspired by the desire to defend the country against those who carried the attack on the World Trade Centres. Young struggles with the moral and ethical justification of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the retribution for 9/11 that caused him to enlist even before his injury.⁷⁶ Because of his conscientious objection to the Iraq War, Young feels traumatized from the start and begins self-medicating.⁷⁷

Young was not on the ground long enough to kill a single Iraqi. Only five days after arriving in Iraq in March 2004 as a private in Cavalry Regiment in Sadr City, he was sent out on a mission in an unarmoured truck without safety gear and was shot during an ambush, permanently paralyzing him from the chest down.⁷⁸ Young was sent home only 103 days after he was shot and wounded, in contrast to statistics emerging out of the Vietnam War in which 61.1% of patients who suffered spinal cord injuries required under

⁷⁶ Mark Wilkerson, *Tomas Young's War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 26-27.

six months of care at a spinal cord injury centre.⁷⁹ That Young's injuries were amongst the more serious and complicated, but he was released from the hospital just over a hundred days, speaks to the significant progress that had been made in treating spinal injuries between the wars. A study by James Blair et al. demonstrates that approximately 5.45% of all evacuated combat soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan involved spinal injuries.⁸⁰

Young's betrayal by the military in terms of his care further separates him from embracing the traditional wounded warrior role. He suffers from a series of additional medical issues as a result of his care or lack thereof from the VA. A fall from his wheelchair resulted in a head injury, only to increase Young's suffering and impact his functioning.⁸¹ He is later taken off blood thinners without monitoring a clot in his arm; the clot eventually reforms and shifts to his lung, causing a severe embolism that renders him functionally quadriplegic for the last few years of his life.⁸² Even at the very end, Young must fight the VA for the painkillers he needs. Throughout the book, Young constantly struggles with pain and depression, taking dozens of medications to remain functional and having to externally support such basic bodily functions as digestion and temperature regulation.

Young, like Kovic, moves through publicly repetitive acts where he exposes his body to public scrutiny and discourse. He creates new witnesses to the pain of war and the destruction of body through his public activism, opening his pain to share with others and by so doing engaging them in the far away war, often out-of-sight, out-of-mind to the American public. In addition, he is able to reiterate the importance of deployment in his condition and treatment. Young states had the same injury occurred while he was fighting in Afghanistan for the cause he enlisted to advance, he would not have protested the war.⁸³ However, he does not willingly sacrifice his body for what he views as the oil interests of the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Thus, Young reinforces the concept that the government that is supposed to be fighting to protect is actually destructive, both bodily for him and through its foreign interventions.

⁷⁹ SA Jacobson and E. Bors, "Spinal Cord Injury in Vietnamese Combat," *Spinal Cord* 7, no. 4 (February 1970): 263-281, 280.

⁸⁰ James A. Blair et al., "Spinal Column Injuries among Americans in the Global War on Terrorism," *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* 94, no. 18 (September 2012): 1-9, 2.

⁸¹ Wilkerson, 131.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 85, 140, 183.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 177.

At Camp Casey in Crawford, Texas, founded by a mother of a deceased veteran, Young comes to realize that he has “a powerful voice,” facilitated by his unabashed criticism of the war with a political stance, authenticated by the injury he sustained.⁸⁴ Within this approach, making his injury more visible leads to both a personal and political healing. The staging of his bodily injury and suffering functions to turn a dense population of onlookers and passers-by into fellow activists. One particularly poignant moment in Camp Casey is when Young attends a demonstration against the war and a string of photographs of fallen soldiers is paraded around him. The juxtaposition of photographs of dead veterans with Young’s body offers grieving mothers a chance to touch him: “A touch that was alive, not the touch of the photograph.”⁸⁵ This scene indicates the value of bodies “to be affected or affecting, its capacity for change, evolution, transformation, and movement.”⁸⁶ His alive body, albeit injured, becomes a site of shared remembering and ownership. Young’s mother, Cathy Smith, has a particularly difficult time recognizing that it could have easily been Tomas whose life might have been reduced to a photograph on a string, one more among many who had fallen, who to the politicians is but a face, but to a mother was a beloved son.⁸⁷

An important revelation from Wilkerson’s biography is how Young and others use his disabled body to interpret its value, particularly in the face of what he perceives as the betrayals of the government and military. Initially, the treatment from his mother and wife, Brie Townsweed, in the early stages of Young’s recovery presents him as a baby. The overwhelming sense provided earlier in the text is one of infantilizing Young. As Joanna Tidy notes, Cathy introduces herself as “Tomas’ mom,” subverting her own identity into a caretaker role established through Tomas’ lack of adult masculinity.⁸⁸ Brie similarly supports Young’s infantilism through contrast with his role as an able-bodied soldier, a role requiring strength and power that he no longer possesses. In addition to submersing herself in her caretaking role, she displays Young’s military pictures, medal, flag, and other memorabilia in their living room, celebrating and memorializing the now-lost functional body of Young before his injury. Young struggles to react against this. He

⁸⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁶ Jasbir K. Puar, “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (October 2009): 161-172, 161-162.

⁸⁷ Wilkerson, 74.

⁸⁸ Tidy, “Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity,” 459.

does not like his wife's decisions but also fears his own lack of ability to care for himself so he erects barriers of magazines between them in bed until he finally asks for a separation.⁸⁹ The fact that he closets his wedding photograph, after his divorce, along with other tokens of appreciation from the government, suggests that he sees the two things in a similar light—his wife and the government—as they try to make him into a hero.⁹⁰ The hero-makers are, in Tomas' view, traumatizers in their own way.

Young rejects this interpretation of himself and his body. He is determined to regenerate his body and self not through private healing and nurturing that disables him but through integration into an altered social context. In this sense, the body's value does not stem from its ability *per se* to move but from "the linkages it establishes, the transformations and becomings it undergoes."⁹¹ Young embarks on his public and active journey, not as the passive and privately cared for man trapped in what he no longer is, but over time becoming an empowered member of the community. Meeting fellow paralytic Vietnam veteran, Bobby Muller, inspires Young to begin his journey to independence, allowing him to detach from his wife and mother, embrace his new context, and find a purpose and voice in the anti-war movement. It is only through Muller that Young becomes aware of the lack of care and support he has received from the government in the face of his injuries. Muller also encourages Young to speak out against the war and to find purpose in his life.⁹²

Phil Danhaue and Ellen Spiro's *Body of War* (2007) becomes pivotal to Young's journey of healing, as Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) did for Kovic. Young willingly allows the filmmakers to capture his very private and often potentially embarrassing experiences, using the disability of his body to underscore the cost of war and engage viewers in a collective understanding of its cost. Young is given a platform and purpose that allows him to overcome his disability, a dysfunctional marriage, and a wife and mother who position him as a disabled veteran rather than a man capable of promoting meaningful societal change.

The American myth of the soldier as one who suffers privately and stoically, proudly bearing his wounds for the protection of his nation is shattered in the two films.

⁸⁹ Wilkerson, 79.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁹¹ Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 165.

⁹² Wilkerson, 75.

However, the two films diverge. Kovic's political activism is rooted in the exposure of his body and the violence associated with it to drive horror and guilt in those he encountered. Thus, while Kovic fights against the war, he does so while reaffirming many of the tenets of warfare that drive the modern military machine. As David Gerber explains, survivor heroes often unwittingly reinforce the values of the traditional warrior, even as they engage in anti-war activism, as they conform to societal norms relating to expression of emotion, valuing of physical strength, and promotion of grit and toughness in the face of difficulty.⁹³ In other words, the soldier-activist remains, in many respects, a soldier, embodying all the tropes of soldiering that society has embraced. Through activism, it is not soldiering itself that is abandoned; rather, the battle-lines are re-drawn. Instead of facing an enemy abroad, the enemy or the other becomes one's own government that sent the soldier to war. This reality is recognized, for instance, in the title, *Tomas Young's War*. The war referenced in the title is not Iraq—though that is where Tomas served. It is rather his war with the government, and the sentiments that inaugurated the Iraq War to begin with.

Unlike Kovic, however, Young demythologizes some of this tendency, undercutting the concept of the warrior impenetrability often associated with veterans where even those with highly traumatic injuries are still publicly presented as rising above their injuries with warrior-like determination. He presents his vulnerabilities and what are often labelled by society as female emotions in order to integrate with others.⁹⁴ Young affirms:

the day-to-day workings of my life—talking to my ex-wife about my erectile issues and my blood thinner—that's very personal, heady stuff; having my mom stick the catheter in inside the van. These are all very intense things to watch, I'm sure, but the more people saw about my daily life the more they'd know, one, not to make impetuous decisions, and two, this war has personal consequences and ramifications that aren't shown on the nightly news.⁹⁵

His activism is eventually limited by his reduced bodily functioning. Part of his suffering is an aspect of his PTSD, however there is some difficulty in diagnosing him with PTSD definitively. A study by Amy Adler and colleagues has shown that a combination of

⁹³ David Gerber, "Post-Modern American Heroes: Anti-War War Heroes, Survivor Heroes and the Eclipse of Traditional Warriors Values," in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 347-374, 353.

⁹⁴ Tidy, "Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity," 457.

⁹⁵ Wilkerson, 69.

evolving diagnostic criteria from DSM-III (1980) to DSM-IV (1994) have made diagnosing soldiers, in particular, difficult. In other words, since military personnel are prepared to encounter traumatic scenarios, they may not readily exhibit the symptoms outwardly that the DSM-IV indicates and may not be diagnosed even though their suffering remains real.⁹⁶ This shows that, in spite of the fact that between Vietnam and Iraq that trauma studies are still dominated by clinical perspectives, they often fail to adequately account for soldiers' experiences.

Claudia Cuellar, his eventual second wife, reaches out to Young after having seen *Body of War* and is invested in the anti-war movement as a single person, not in the role of a wife or mother of the wounded. In this position, she is free to connect with Young personally while supporting his manhood, even in his more limited physical condition. It is Tomas' relationship with Claudia that buoys him to choose against his decision to end his life. The connection benefits both Claudia and Tomas. Tomas finds a new sense of meaning with Claudia while she, following Buddhist teachings, finds her relationship with Tomas as he progressed toward death an immense honour.⁹⁷

Young publicly presents himself by choice to musicians, offering his body to advance the cause of peace by standing against aggressing and violence. The non-veterans' activists, in turn, embrace him as a valued member to discourage future conflicts. This mutual cooperation revives the injured veteran, pushing back against the rhetoric of soldiers' always necessarily, whole, healthy, and masculine or perfect reflections of a wholesome America. Jasbir Puar provides valuable insights about the attitudinal paradigm shift, of civilians toward injured veterans, which helps to reintroduce them to society, rather than objectifying and stigmatizing them based on their disability. This negotiation of identity politics—regimes that render gender, sexuality, nationality, and disability as immutable and essential components of the subject—is key to unlocking the potential of what Puar calls "conviviality." She states:

in its conventional usage, conviviality means ... to be merry, festive, together at a table, with companions and guests, and hence, to live with. ... However, conviviality does not lead to a politics of the universal or inclusive common, not an ethics of individuatedness, rather the futurity enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Amy B. Adler et al., "A2 Diagnostic Criterion for Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 21, no. 3 (June 2008): 301-308, 301.

⁹⁷ Wilkerson, 171.

⁹⁸ Puar, "Prognosis Time," 168.

In this regard, Young's body serves as an interface, a place, space, or surface that purports to enforce the separation of subjects (through the policing of borders) but in actuality encourages connection. Different from Kovic whose friends eventually left him to continue his activism on his own, there is a shift in the way people relate to Young. It is an attitude towards living with and dying with the disabled to help counteract violent forces, as well as attitudes of otherness toward those whose bodies have been damaged. It is an act of a re-embrace of the wounded, focusing less on their distinguishing marks, scars, and impediments.

Young's approach is amendable to some of the key features of posthumanism. He is able to transcend his injury and integrate himself into the collective whole of humanity, advocating for a broader peace in a strong posthuman sense. Young died in 2014 on account of deteriorating health-related issues. He comprehends both life and death in a posthumanist integrative whole. Rosi Braidotti argues that "the proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of 'just a life,' here and now, for as long as we can and as much as we can take."⁹⁹ Young grasps the here and now, the immanence of his existence, and the value he achieves for himself from engaging in peace, relationships and activism. His body becomes a tool for his purpose, and while it regularly betrays him and leaves him in constant pain, it also serves to protect others from the destruction caused by the government/military through war. This allows Young to become the soldier-protector that he always intended through his military service, and as an advocate for peace. While Young's life is tragic, he finds connection in the end that allows him to accept death in unconventional, though, profound ways.

There is Always a Way out: Kayla Williams' *Plenty of Time When We Get Home*

Plenty of Time When We Get Home (2014) is a narrative of the experiences and relationship of Kayla Williams and her husband, Brian McGough, both of whom were soldiers in Mosul, Iraq, in 2003. After a brief meeting and flirtation while they were both enlisted, McGough experienced TBI as a result of shrapnel that lodged in his brain after an IED exploded beneath his armoured transport vehicle in October 2003.¹⁰⁰ The memoir starts with the story of McGough returning to the U.S. after his discharge, soon after

⁹⁹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ Kayla Williams, *Plenty of Time When We Get Home: Love and Recovery in the Aftermath of War* (New York: Norton, 2014), 6.

which Williams is also discharged and the two reconnect, get married, and jointly manage McGough's TBI in conjunction with Williams' own psychological traumas.

Plenty of Time chronicles this relationship by focusing on the words, thoughts, and emotions of Williams and McGough who are able to manage their trauma, both individually and as a married couple, becoming successful advocates for other current and former veterans. The text can be read in the context of posthuman politics, as the couple tries to transcend the egotistical, individualistic, and destructive reaction to trauma and replacing it with a posthuman understanding that displays the growing knowledge of, and respect for, co-dependency and interdependence.

As Williams writes, McGough is taken to a neurosurgeon on the front lines and to two hospitals in Germany afterword before he finally returns to Walter Reed Hospital near Washington D.C. The neurosurgeon who initially operated on McGough believes that he will experience significant mental and physical impairment as a result of his TBI.¹⁰¹ However, McGough is able to walk and appears to be physically recovered. That the doctors would miss the impact of TBI is not wholly surprising. According to Daniel Morrison and Monica Casper, because TBIs are invisible to the naked eye, the symptoms often appear more like mental illness rather than an acute bodily injury.¹⁰² TBI is identified as the signature wound that emerged from Iraq War with 17.3% incidence rate among all possible disabilities incurred in this war.¹⁰³ Even though soldiers wore protective body armour and helmets, reducing the number of head-penetrating injuries, IEDs can result in projectiles with unique trajectories that strike the soldiers in ways not always sufficiently guarded by their armour.¹⁰⁴

During the course of the narrative, McGough exhibits nearly all of TBI symptoms, including somatic, emotional and cognitive symptoms such as headaches, memory loss,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰² Daniel R. Morrison and Monica J. Casper, "Intersections of Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: A Provocation," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2012), accessed April 16, 2019, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3189/3073>

¹⁰³ Lisa K. Lindquist et al., "Traumatic Brain Injury in Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans: New Results from a National Random Sample Study," *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 254-259, 254.

¹⁰⁴ Elisabeth Moy Martin et al., "Traumatic Brain Injuries Sustained in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars," *A Journal of Trauma Nursing* 15, no. 3 (July-September 2008): 94-99, 94.

lack of attention, depression, anxiety, and outbursts of anger.¹⁰⁵ Soon after he meets the demobilized Williams and rekindles a relationship with her, McGough reports

I can't even read this book. I read *War and Peace* before we deployed. Because I got blown up, I can't even watch a fucking movie and follow what's going on. I can't pay my bills. I can't do my job. I was going to make a career of the Army, I'm almost at the halfway mark—now what? I'm broken. I'm fucked up.¹⁰⁶

McGough's frame of reference is an idealized, bygone version of himself—the version that existed before the IED explosion and his TBI. He processes his current damaged condition in light of this previous self because there is a discrepancy between who he remembers himself to be and who he is now. When he first gets angry about his injury—an event that takes place just after he and Williams have watched the French movie *Amelie*, whose subtitles McGough struggles to follow—he is no longer humble or able to appreciate the larger picture.¹⁰⁷ In fact, after his initial outburst, McGough punches the wall and tells Williams to ““Get the fuck out.””¹⁰⁸ At this point, Williams describes him as being “lost in his own rage and suffering.”¹⁰⁹ Of course, McGough's anger is interesting because of its reductive and atomistic thinking. He places his own pain and anger at the centre of his experience, his understanding of the world, and his relationship with Williams. To McGough, there is only one possible reading of his experience: that he is deficient and has no future and also, as a corollary, that Williams has to accommodate him.

Unemployed for a while, McGough gets into a fight during one of his drunken blackouts and takes a gun to Williams' head, an incident he does not recall the next day.¹¹⁰ It becomes difficult to delineate whether McGough's symptoms could be ascribed to TBI or to PTSD. In fact, the boundary between PTSD and TBI is often blurred, with patients who have TBI often meeting the criteria for PTSD on screening instruments and vice versa.¹¹¹ Effectively, McGough is lost in his own suffering, in the VA system that never

¹⁰⁵ Elmina Lanier Summerall, “Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD: Focus on Veterans” (*PTSD: National Center for PTSD*, September 28, 2018), accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/traumatic-brain-injury-ptsd.asp>.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, 48.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹¹ Richard Bryant, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder vs Traumatic Brain Injury,” *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13, no. 3 (September 2011): 251-262, 251.

gives him sufficient care, and his symptoms are only getting worse. As one doctor told McGough “it’s all in your head,” to which McGough angrily replies, “There is shrapnel. In. My. Head. There are fucking pieces of fucking metal in my fucking brain.”¹¹²

McGough’s character strengths and defects and the pressures imposed on the couple by renewed exposure to the unaccustomed civilian world play roles in increasing their trauma. It was not long after Williams returns home that she confesses: “the memories forced their way, unbidden and unwelcome, into my mind.”¹¹³ The disjuncture between the military zone she just returns from and the safety of home is too much of a psychological burden to bear. American consumer culture and the surplus of the options at the shampoo aisle at the supermarket—a theme that is also apparent in *The Hurt Locker*—set Kyla off: “the number of choices was overwhelming, and made me worry I was picking the wrong thing.”¹¹⁴ As McGough’s problems worsen and Williams is forced to bear additional responsibilities to help him, she feels “alone, struggling to meet his needs—caregiver, housekeeper, lover, life manager—but without any training or support, and without the access a wife would have had.”¹¹⁵ Since Williams cannot fully relate to McGough’s impairments, it drives a wedge between them, even as their common experience as soldiers draws them together. Like the doctors who show limited understanding of McGough’s injury, Williams also lacks the appropriate knowledge about the TBI, believing that “cognitive deficits he had from the brain injury were temporary, and would heal the way a broken bone would, knitting together over time.”¹¹⁶

For Williams fighting on two fronts—on account of her own struggle with PTSD and her role with McGough—seems almost unbearable at first because she harbours some suicidal thoughts: “the thought of nothingness descending upon my consciousness seemed like it would be a relief—all the stress and fear and anger and confusion gone, replaced by blessed nothingness.”¹¹⁷ According to *Healing Suicidal Veterans* (2009), a book by an expert in Crisis Intervention, Suicide Rescue and Combat Trauma, Victor Montgomery III, the mental breakdowns experienced by PTSD sufferers and those who have TBIs are often expressed through similar behaviours like drug or alcohol abuse,

¹¹² Williams, 58.

¹¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

financial and family trouble, fragmented supports systems, domestic stress, and depression and suicidal ideation.¹¹⁸ Williams feels isolated both at home, while also struggling to find a place to belong to outside the home.

Much of the first half of *Plenty of Time* can be described as the clash between the human reaction of McGough to his TBI and Williams' lingering posthuman frame of reference. She sympathizes with McGough's outburst which she ascribes to TBI and assumes to be fleeting but she is able to push back against his hurtful treatment of her. Even at the micro-level of a personal relationship, Williams is apparent in her refusal to centre either her own position or that of McGough's. Rather, she seems keenly aware that she and McGough are circulating within webs of forces, memories and encounters. For example, reflecting on McGough's initial outburst after *Amelie*, Williams acknowledges the possible roles played by McGough's TBI, the frustration of many Americans with subtitles, and her own presumption in believing that he would be able to enjoy a subtitled movie, none of which she considers as a permanent or comprehensive answer.¹¹⁹ Rather, when confronted with a problem or a question, Williams is often inclined to allow her field of consciousness to reflect many points of view.

This multiplicity of perspectives is an important component of what might be described as her posthuman thinking. Williams is too epistemically open and humble to allow any one particular human perspective, even her own, to dominate. Had Williams reacted to McGough as he reacts to her, she would have left him. Indeed, as Williams observes at one point, "If any of my friends had told me that a man was treating her like this, I would have told her to run, not walk, away."¹²⁰ However, Williams does not leave McGough precisely because of her posthuman perspective, in which McGough is neither conclusively to blame—in which case she would have left him—nor conclusively innocent—otherwise she would not necessarily have made further efforts to improve their relationship. Williams possesses both the gift and the curse of seeing the complexity of McGough's injury, and of her relationship with him, in a manner that does not support a single, easy narrative and therefore a single and easy course of action.

What appears to take place in the second half of *Plenty of Time* is an evolution in Williams' and McGough's relationship, one in which they achieve a state of being "both

¹¹⁸ Victor Montgomery III, *Healing Suicidal Veterans* (New Jersey: New Horizon Press, 2009), 6.

¹¹⁹ Williams, 49.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

separate and together.”¹²¹ McGough comes to decentre his own selfish, aggressive, and sorrowful self-vision and accept more input from Williams and from the other people—including the employees of the company for which he works and the fellow soldiers he meets as part of his volunteering commitment.

Williams is able to keep her own stake in the relationship while coming to understand the domains in which McGough needs to make progress on his own or with the assistance of a mental health professional. The following quotation is of particular interest in considering what might be described as the posthuman resolution to their relationship: “it isn’t about being happy every day. There may be months or even years that are a hard slog. But with a solid foundation of love and respect, with shared values and goals, the investment of sticking together through those tough times pays off in the long run.”¹²² Of course, one way to read this resolution is as an example of compromise in the context of a marriage in which both partners have a shared experience of a particular kind of trauma. However, as argued in this chapter, the arc of Williams’ and McGough’s relationship can also be read as an example of transition from humanist to posthuman thinking. In other words, egotistical concepts of blame and responsibility have given way to mutual respect and support.

Although the marriage is arguably the centre of this narrative, it is equally important to shed light on the role of volunteering which highlights the pivotal role of systems, more so than individual humans, in resolving trauma. Although the couple could have gone through their marriage, as well as through their individual trajectories of healing or suffering, on their own, they both acknowledge the importance of advocating for other veterans. They become involved with two communities, VoteVets and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), that play significant roles to further contest the selfish aspects that might arise had they only depend on the marriage itself. It is more likely that self-blame or spousal blame would place one of them as the source of the problem. This is clear earlier in the text when they initially try to solve their problems. Had Williams chosen not to commit herself to such collective experiences, she could have continued to blame herself and McGough for PTSD/TBI.

Williams exercises her human agency in choosing the posthuman perspective, as she describes in the context of seeking out and participating in collective experiences

¹²¹ Ibid., 205.

¹²² Ibid., 237.

“rather than just accepting the feelings of isolation and accepting my status as an oddity (a relatively rare woman in the veterans’ community, an extremely rare veteran in groups of women), I needed to find—or make—a community of my peers, other women veterans.”¹²³ She begins to participate in collective organizations so she does not lose her individual voice. Rather, her individual voice and experience are tempered by the knowledge of the larger systems through which she is passing. In a previous memoir, *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005), Williams describes the dehumanizing experience of being a female soldier, in which she is sexualized and otherwise mistreated within an extremely patriarchal military structure.¹²⁴ What collective experiences appear to foster in both Williams and McGough is a decentring of their exercised human agency, in which they alone are responsible for enduring, resolving, or living with their trauma. VoteVets, IAVA, and other collectives enable posthuman connections insofar as they relieve them of the unbearable individual human flaws that drive Williams to be too controlling and McGough to be too volatile.

The experience of becoming parents is a further means to access a healing modality in which their pain and trauma are no longer at the centre of the experience. In recollecting the early days of their son’s life, Duncan, Williams writes: “the responsibility of caring for a newborn drew him [McGough]—drew both of us—out, prevented the tendency toward self-absorption and introspection.”¹²⁵ In the period before they become parents, it is easier for them to operate on the basis of what they want, need, or fear at any given time. After Duncan’s birth, it is far more difficult to be selfish when faced by a newborn baby whose needs have become the centre of his parents’ lives. Thus, McGough is aware both of a diminution in his own selfishness and a decentring of his experience in favour of that of Duncan, and Williams experiences precisely the same transformation at the same time, in the context of parenthood.

Plenty of Time is about the formation of a relationship that appears to progress organically towards a posthuman structure combining a shifting web of inputs from personal perspectives, shared values, chance, and science (particularly in terms of the role of the TBI as a determinant of McGough’s post-Iraq personality). Throughout the narrative, the dynamics of healing come from within. Rather than falling victims to the

¹²³ Ibid., 204.

¹²⁴ Kayla Williams, *Love My Rifle More than You* (New York: Norton, 2006), 19.

¹²⁵ Williams, *Plenty of Time*, 221-22.

VA and the medical insufficient knowledge about TBI, Williams attests to all the realities of the effect TBI had on McGough while also telling her story of how they have been able to achieve much more than doctors have imagined after McGough's injury. Interestingly, both McGough and Williams are able to think and act from a perspective of continuous exchange that de-centres their own experience and applies the kind of complex relational thinking that is one of the main characteristics of posthumanism.

The previous accounts depict Young, McGough and Williams trying to find ways to reject the forces that aggravate their trauma or impede their potential recovery. Instead, each finds ways to participate in causes beyond themselves, and to re-constitute de-traumatised possibilities. What if, however, the traumatized body could be transcended more literally, not by reconstituting oneself purely in terms of human relationships, but by simply shedding one's traumatised flesh and replacing it with something new, full of possibility? In the following section I examine the ways in which the film *Avatar* discusses one of the most common posthuman notions about the transference of the consciousness through technology. The genre re-contextualizes veterans' experiences in fantastical worlds wherein the epistemological and cultural barriers that can sometimes prevent greater understanding in the actual world are removed.

Universal Humanism in James Cameron's *Avatar*

In the movie *Avatar*, released in 2009, director James Cameron shows how a scruffy paralyzed marine, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), incarnates as a Na'vi, a gigantic blue alien on the world of Pandora after he had fought in a prior war in Venezuela where he incurred a spinal injury resulting in a waist-down paralysis. In spite of being set in the distant future, the film was released during the middle of the Iraq War. According to James Cameron, "this movie reflects that we are living through war ... There are boots on the ground, troops who I personally believe were sent there under false pretenses, so I hope this will be part of opening our eyes."¹²⁶ The film, therefore, speaks volumes about contemporary issues surrounding war, trauma and disability.

The medium through which *Avatar* is presented, 3D, gives audiences a chance to experience the story with greater visceral potential than in literature or even a standard film. The emotional nature of such exposure allows them new ways to see themselves and

¹²⁶ "James Cameron: 'Avatar' is Political But It's Not Un-American" (*HuffPost*, March 18, 2010), accessed August 7, 2017.

the difficulties disabled people have. Thus, audiences, like Sully, immerse themselves in another world where they too are encouraged to examine their moral presumptions, disposition, and take the perspective of “the Other.” Film theorist Dan Flory affirms that *Avatar*’s imaginative environment is useful for expanding the conceptual abilities of the audience and enhancing their sensitivity to the nuances of trauma and race relation.¹²⁷ While technology in the film certainly has the potential to help the damaged body by reconstituting its environment and transcend its afflictions, I argue it is only when Sully’s approach to becoming one of the Na’vi tribe, culturally, romantically, mystically, and finally bodily that his healing is complete. Sully’s process of healing, through a science-fiction fantasy, is a gradual immersion and eventually a complete incarnation in a new environment.

Jake Sully’s disability initially, at least before the avatar programme, reveals typical symptoms associated with traumatized veterans. While his trauma is most evidently physical, the film offers several clues that his experiences in Venezuela impacted him psychologically. Unlike Tomas Young, and to a certain degree Williams and Kovic, there are several mentions of Sully’s former heroism in Venezuela. However, Sully’s loss of his abled identity, associated with his injury, is a source of deep and emotional distress. His voiceover, intermittently narrating events, mentions excessive nightmares, having dreams about flying and references to the insufficient care of VA. All these things reflect a veteran’s inability to effectively cope with civilian life, one that lacks definition and purpose. He has difficulty putting on his trousers, and sees his legs become thinner even while feeling heavier. In this respect, Sully’s experience is not unlike Kovic’s and Young’s—all were paralyzed as a result of war, struggling to understand their own identity as soldiers without working legs.

Avatar begins with a voice-over from Sully who states that “when I was lying there in the VA hospital, with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying.”¹²⁸ From the beginning, Sully’s description of the injury he sustained indicates how intimately his identity, his life, is tied to his body. The body is not just a tool or a means to an end but an expression of himself. Thus, when Sully reveals “they can fix a spinal, if you’ve got the money. But not on the vet benefits, not in this

¹²⁷ Dan Flory, “Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron’s *Avatar*,” *Projections* 7, no. 2 (December 2013): 41-63, 41.

¹²⁸ *Avatar*, dir. James Cameron (United States: 20th Century Fox, 2009).

economy,” the tragedy of his situation hits home, literally.¹²⁹ Just like the present world, the one inhabited by Sully operates with a capitalistic healthcare system in which the rich can afford healthcare but those most in need, veterans like Sully, are left to their own devices. The lamentable fact that veterans who sacrifice their bodies for the sake of the nation are unable to receive quality care when injured at war is an experience detailed quite clearly by Kovic and Young. *Avatar* presents the tragedy in economic terms—it is not the science that is lacking, it is the system itself which fails to provide veterans with quality care.

John Kinder writes in *Paying with Their Bodies* (2015) that the reality of injured veterans is all too serious, stigmatized, and concealed. He describes how veterans shortly after being given medals for the service they incurred injuries in the line of duty for, are quickly dismissed, forgotten, and ostracized.¹³⁰ Ever since World War I, he writes, the problem of veterans has grown with the increasing numbers of mutilated veterans made possible by the scale of twentieth century wars and weaponry. According to Kinder, the disfiguration, post-traumatic stress, and disability of these former heroes are too uncomfortable to a country that glorifies war, masculinity, and individualism.¹³¹ While the public may be able to put up with veterans at the time of or shortly after their injuries, the pervasive nature of the wound may turn them into spectres who haunt their comfortable lives as reminders of a more violent world than they want to believe.

Sully’s life begins to change when he is taken by the Resources Development Administration (RDA). He is selected by the “dumb luck” of happening to have a genetic makeup compatible with that of his deceased brother, Tommy, which had been used to construct the avatar body he eventually inhabits. Sully is selected, primarily, because of the financial interest already invested in the avatar body to mine unobtainium from the planet Pandora. Once again, a subtle critique of the capitalist system is evident here. The system prevented Sully from being able to get his spinal injury fixed, but out of dumb luck, it becomes a financial interest for the government.

Sully’s experience of marginalization is indicated from the time when he arrives at Pandora and exits the transport shuttle with various able-bodied soldiers laughing at him,

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Kinder, *Paying with Their Bodies*, 10.

¹³¹ Ibid., 25.

calling him “meat on wheels,” while another states “that’s just wrong.”¹³² The featuring of a disabled soldier being unwelcomed among his own people has significance for dispelling criticisms that *Avatar* is little more than racist propaganda.¹³³ While the theme of racism has strong overtones in the film, the disability of Sully is more fundamental than the distinctions of race, culture, or even species. At the most basic level, Sully, as a disabled veteran, is a “rejected body,” and therefore is an outsider amongst the humans, who eventually will become an asset among the Na’vi.¹³⁴

However, the film departs from previous depictions of injured veterans, showing instead the world from the perspective of Sully as a veteran not demoralized by his wound. Camera angles used throughout the film consistently are presented from Sully’s perspective, placing him on a level with characters like Colonel Miles Quaritch. Indeed, in several scenes Quaritch addresses Sully while sitting so that they can be at eye level. Very rarely is Sully’s position shot from an elevated angle, casting him as an inferior. Even when he is mocked by the other soldiers, the perspective that the film grants the audience is that of a following third-person over the shoulder shot. Such a position reflects the perspective Sully would have if he were still able to stand upright, thus suggesting that, at some level, he still retains his former identity as an able-bodied person and is more than his injury.

Once Sully is launched into the Avatar Program, he is too immersed in his avatar body with an “expression ... child-like with wonder,” which soon translates to unbridled ecstasy as he runs through the open door, out into the Pandora compound.¹³⁵ Though directed to “take it slow” so that the scientists can conduct the necessary motor control experiments, Sully does not listen.¹³⁶ For him, the protocols of the established authority, the medical examiners, could not hold him back from the raw experience instantly delivered by his avatar body. Having been injured for some time, Sully needs no time to adjust to the fully functioning new body. His “body-image” from his human body before

¹³² *Avatar*.

¹³³ Sara Palmer, “Old, New, Borrowed and Blue: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Whiteness in *Avatar*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2011), accessed March 29, 2019, <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1353/1473>.

¹³⁴ Ryan Smock, “‘I Got This’: Disability, Stigma and Jake Sully’s Rejected Body,” in *Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See*, ed. George A. Dunn (Malden: Wiley Blackwell & Son, 2014), 139-150, 141.

¹³⁵ *Avatar*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

his injury instantly pervades the avatar body, giving him total control and command of himself.¹³⁷

The portrayal of Sully gradually siding with the Na'vi is an affirmative one. Leigha McReynolds describes how the definition of the prosthesis may be wider than it is traditionally considered if they are thought of any technology which “allows a body to function in an environment for which it is otherwise unequipped.”¹³⁸ Hence, not only is Sully's avatar body considered as a prosthesis, but so too the Pandora animals with which he interconnects through a nerve network in the back of his avatar head. Such a portrayal intimately reveals how Sully's wholeness, “defined by mutual interdependence (over the power of the autonomous self),” occurs as he deepens his connection to the environment through the use of various prostheses.¹³⁹

The tension in the film arises when Sully is presented with an option for resolving his physical trauma. General Quaritch's promises to “give him his real leg” in exchange of relocating the Na'vi from the Home Tree to mine the most expensive mineral.¹⁴⁰ Being one with the Na'vi is clearly the broader theme of the film that Sully must grapple with as he weighs the risk, benefits, and moral implications of his infiltration of the Na'vi people. Though he eventually chooses to break his ties with command and join the Na'vi, such an outcome is predicted from the first moment he enters his Na'vi body. This marks the first step in the scales of power's balance towards Sully's inevitable demarcation from the human military.

If *Avatar* were a depiction of compulsory able-bodiedness which frames disability as a problem to be overcome by heroic effort rather than embraced, Sully would have followed through with the Colonel's orders as a far surer way to regain the ability to walk. Through the course of the film, however, it becomes clear that Sully's trauma is not merely physical. The resolution to his trauma comes, not solely by being able to walk, but by finding new meaning and connection in the world of the Na'vi, which offers him a sympathetic rather than a competitive existence. While he can walk through the aid of the capsule that communicates his consciousness to the avatar body, regaining his ability

¹³⁷ Kevin S. Decker, “The Identity of Avatars and Na'vi Wisdom,” in *Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See*, ed. George A. Dunn (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 127-138, 132.

¹³⁸ Leigha McReynolds, “Animal and Alien Bodies as Prostheses Reframing Disability in *Avatar* and How to Train Your Dragon,” in *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, ed. Kathryn Allan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 115-130, 115.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ *Avatar*.

to walk in this form is limited. As he understands it, at least at first, he can never be fully integrated into the new avatar body. He remains dependent upon the technologies which make his connection to the body possible, thus he remains dependent upon the government agencies which make the entire experience feasible. Yet he does not miss the opportunity presented to him. His disability has sensitized him to the world, making him aware of just how valuable the world of Pandora is.

The Na'vi, later, are collectively traumatized through the destruction of their home at the hands of the humans. Sully, likewise, understands what it means to be traumatized on account of his human disability and therefore preconditioned to empathize with the Na'vi who are about to suffer by earthling invaders and assumes the identity of a prophetic figure, rallies the natives to oppose the humans. The connections he finds in the new environment are so alluring that he readily discards the Colonel's offer. For Sully, recovering his legs in exchange for betraying the Na'vi would amount to a greater loss than the loss of the new connection and meaning he finds in his reconstituted form of self.

Resolving trauma for the Na'vi is not a matter of recovering one's sense of will or rights of self-determination, but by recovering one's connection with Eywa, or the force that unites all living things. To be as they are meant to be one with the nature. Perhaps *Avatar's* most compelling scenes are the one in which the prayer circle ceremony takes place. In the Omatikaya Tribe, when members are injured or near death, they are offered to Eywa, the Pandoran world-spirit, in a powerful ritual with clasped arms. Sitting cross-legged with their queues plugged into Pandora's neural network at the Tree of Souls, the Na'vi people devote themselves to the healing of the wounded other in sacred communitarianism expressed in rhythmic prayer. As each member of the tribe grasps the other, they create a giant oscillating network of interconnecting bodies, at the centre of which is the injured person who is immanently embraced by all in the tribe as they commune with Eywa. Already, this scene suggests the integrative bio-holistic approach the Na'vi take to healing without the means of technology. The power of the ceremony is evident in that none of the Na'vi, despite living on the harsh Pandoran planet, have any disabilities themselves. Indeed, as the "Tree of Souls" location suggests, the Na'vi still retain the knowledge and access to their own "Tree of Life" which grants them perfect health.

What makes this ritual fascinating, however, is how the Na'vi engage in their efforts for the two outsiders, the scientist Grace Augustine and Sully. After the two tried to save the Na'vi, Grace is injured and taken to the home tree. It is interesting to ask why Grace

is not given a new Na'vi body or not able to connect with the Na'vi, after all she has been with them longer than Sully and never betrayed them to the military. The distinction is a critical one as it is probable that Grace suffered injuries that were too severe for her to pass from her human incarnation to her Na'vi one. However, it is more likely she is not psychologically prepared for incarnation in the Pandora world. This is evidenced in at least two ways. The first, and most dramatic, is Grace's own admission that "she is a scientist who does not believe in fairy tales."¹⁴¹ The second occurs as she is on the altar of healing and comes to meet Eywa, the world-spirit she had already had cause to believe in with scientific data. Nevertheless, when actually in the presence of Eywa through the power of the ceremony, she says "I'm with Her, Sully. She's real!"¹⁴² Grace's description of Eywa's reality shows that, until actually meeting her, she did not truly believe in her. Thus, she has doubts about the world that arguably serves as a limitation even more severe than the injury she sustained through combat and therefore is the underlying factor that prevents her from incarnating with the Na'vi. Grace's scientism creates distance between her and the world since science is not concerned with experience but rather the principles about it. This is a controlled approach to the world which actually limits Grace's ability to perceive it as open and free as it truly is.

The difference between the pair's approaches to Pandora is that Sully recognizes he has much to learn *from* Pandora while Grace believes she has much to learn *about* it. This distinction parallels different modes of treating trauma, addressed above. Sully finds meaning by forging relationships in the social sphere with the Na'vi. He transcends his trauma not solely because avatar again gives him legs, but because he finds a people and a cause he can support. His protest, not unlike Kovic's or Young's, comes at a great personal risk. Sully is willing to forgo the opportunity to get his legs back, in spite of the fact that he believes he cannot survive indefinitely as a Na'vi. This is because the cure of trauma is not purely physical but social, and comes as he discovers a new people with whom he belongs and a new cause for which to fight.

The final cut of *Avatar* reveals with the glimpse of Sully's awakened gaze in the Na'vi body, healed and transformed. The positioning of this shot suggests that he has become identified with the Na'vi people who have come to fully embrace him as an equal as well as a leader. Through the agency of Eywa, Sully is able to actually *become* one of

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

the Na'vi as his consciousness takes a permanent seat in his avatar body. Effectively, this act, alone, becomes a sort of reconstitution of his person as he lets go of his human body and die to his former self and wilfully sacrifices it for the sake of the Na'vi. He has, in some sense, resolved his trauma cognitively already. Sully embraces posthuman values—the respect of life, and the equality of persons—and ends up assuming a future through technology that re-connects him to a new reality, in nature, on Pandora.

A driving factor in his ability to embrace the Na'vi body is the fact that he has been rejected from his own society due to his disability. As a veteran who has known the limitation of disability, his need and therefore ability to believe in the miraculous is greater. The opening scene of the movie indicates Sully has visions of the impossible through flying. These fantasies become reality as he learns to merge and fly the Ikran, Pandora's flying creature. Sully's trauma is eventually transcended through an interactive and spiritual, rather than analytic, approach to life that is advocated as much by religion and indigenous cultures.

By transcending his body—through technology, initially, and eventually through the Pandora nature-deity's intervention—Jake Sully takes on new embodied experiences and realities. Neither Sully's former paralysis, nor his traumatized mind, persist when he assumes a new life in an entirely new world. The viewer is left with a sense that little has been lost, but infinitely more has been gained as Sully assumes a new form of humanity. Although it is working in a science-fiction realm, *Avatar* reveals how healing could occur through total immersion in the world at the bodily, communal, ecological, and spiritual levels. This film succeeds because it invites viewers, just as it invited Sully, to communicate with a deeper level of themselves, a place where it is possible to connect with others, and nature to realize radical healing.

Conclusion

Since it was codified in psychiatric terminology in 1980, trauma has increasingly moved beyond the private realm and into the public arena, consequentially reframing the limited understanding of trauma as a clinical condition. As I have shown in this chapter through the analysis of Iraq War narratives, a broader understanding of trauma engages the veteran in a holistic way and removes the stigma attached to it, offering hope, continuity and renewal. The move from purely humanistic values such as individualism and self-sufficiency toward a posthuman world wherein narratives can be re-framed beyond the

confines of individual experience has gradually moved trauma out of the dark and into the light.

The textual analysis in this chapter reveals how disabled U.S. veterans deployed in the Iraq War are not trapped by pathology and each one offers his own account of healing and acceptance. On this level, the traumatized disabled veteran is no longer living in a mystery. He/she has emerged from the horrors of isolation and, through peace activism and advocacy, has found a voice, legitimizing his or her experience. In this respect, biographies, films and memoirs are helpful for charting this cultural shift from the 1970s to the 2000s. It is only through re-contextualized understanding of able-bodiedness that Tomas, Williams and McGough find new avenues whereby what was otherwise unspeakable could become known.

While Ron Kovic unsettles the war from its mythology and forces a new understanding based on his different—disabled—body through his anti-war endeavours, Tomas Young shows the capacity of the disabled body to reproduce itself in varied contexts, and by so doing, repurpose that same body for peaceful rather than aggressive encounters. The story of *Plenty of Time* offers a posthuman model of a relationship in which neither McGough nor Williams are able to remain committed to their human self-interests as it applies to their pain, pleasure, trauma, healing, and relationship dynamics. They, instead, forge individual and collective practical solutions to their struggle with disability and trauma.

The film *Avatar* represents a shift in Iraq War trauma narratives that, rather than leaving the viewer caught in the perplexities of unsolvable and incurable trauma, offers a way out through innovations in technology. Although technological enhancements employed in *Avatar* are not necessarily those that will resolve trauma in the future, the willingness of viewers to empathize with such narratives speaks volumes about the readiness of society to embrace the moral lesson that such films implicitly suggest. Sully finds liberation in an alien culture which prizes collective relationality and the connection between persons rather than an autonomous pursuit of individualistic goals.

What is revealed here is a gradual shift in the overall recognition that trauma must be engaged socially and ethically. The move beyond clinical understanding of trauma toward social frameworks does not mean excluding psychological and medical treatment for traumatized disabled veterans. But a medical frame of reference is not the only way to assuage the effect of trauma. It is equally important, however, to note that the progress since the Vietnam era has been slow and, in some cases, veterans of the Iraq War had

fewer resources and received a poorer quality of care than did Vietnam veterans. While peace activism and advocacy groups continue to make progress and effect change, rehabilitation resources for veterans remain lacking, as Dana Priest's and Ann Hull's series articles in *the Washington Post* (2007) exposed the degrading conditions of the Walter Reed Army Medical Centre in the outpatients of the Iraq War soldiers.¹⁴³ While the posthuman vision for transcending trauma is promising, what is evident from the analysis in this chapter is that there is still a long way to go toward understanding and aiding disabled soldiers.

Unlike the Vietnam War when many were drafted into service, the soldiers in Iraq and those currently serving joined as volunteers. This contributes to the privatization of trauma precisely because there is a general perception that soldiers volunteered knowing the risks, and were not forced into service by the government. When McGough drove his car with Purple Hearts Plates in *Plenty of Time*, it came as a surprise how people in the street thought that it is not for him but for his father, meaning that to be a recipient of a purple heart necessitates being visibly injured. This is not the case with McGough's TBI where the wounds are hidden. The mere note goes against the idea that the Americans are actually at war. The notion that seeking help for trauma signifies a weakness, and the pressure to keep one's psychological angst under wraps lest the soldier experience negative career outcomes, further perpetuates the problem of privatizing trauma and continues to leave many soldiers who suffer isolated. The relationship between a soldier and his body was explored in the previous chapter of this thesis, but the question remains to what extent the soldier's gendered identity is constrained by military defined gender roles, a topic to which the next chapter turns.

¹⁴³ Dana Priest and Anne Hull, "The Other Walter Reed" (*Washington Post*, February 18, 2007), accessed March 2, 2019.

Chapter 4

The Construction of Gender between Stasis and Fluidity

Make no mistake:
Your weapon might be female,
but you are not.
You are Candidate.

—Lisa Tourtelot, (2009)¹

Lisa Tourtelot, a female U.S. Marine who served as a Combat Correspondent for five years including a tour in Iraq, reflects in her 2009 poem “I Bleed Green” upon a marine identity forged deep in her soul that ultimately transcends her self-awareness as female. She calls her weapon—something that many soldiers view as an extension of their bodies—a “female” just as male soldiers often do, but she herself assumes that she possesses no gender. The soldier is neither “he” nor “she” but is simply “Candidate.” That Tourtelot declares she is a marine more than she is a female suggests that soldiering in some sense has come to transcend gender boundaries in the minds of those women, at least, who serve in the military.

Tourtelot’s poem negates the gender characterizations that have dominated war narratives in the past, which often value the machismo or masculine dimension of warfare over and against soft and submissive femininity. The roots of this new gender dynamics have their origin in the Vietnam War which undermined the traditional gender motifs of war and soldiering—particularly those relating to masculinity. In her book *Masculinities in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), Brenda Boyle argues that the Vietnam War era was a time of individual and social crisis because the war paradoxically did not confirm or bolster traditional performances of masculinity; instead it became a site of demasculinization of the American male as a paragon of strength and honour.² The war made sustaining the soldier as a masculine hero less attainable than in previous wars; as the 1960s progressed it became obvious to many soldiers in Vietnam that they were not saving their country or winning the war and therefore found it much harder to appropriate

¹ Lisa Tourtelot, “War Poetry” (*The War Poetry Website*, 2009), accessed July 19, 2019, https://www.warpoetry.co.uk/2009_warpoems.html.

² Boyle, *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives*, 1.

and sustain the masculine hero position. The war, as Boyle concludes, produced different masculinities since one “monolithic” conceptualizing of it was likely never conceivable in the late phase and aftermath of the war.³

Clearly, masculinity remains a basic component of understanding gender and war. While the war in Vietnam generated a blending of sharply defined binary oppositions such as fact/fiction, war/peace and friend/enemy, gender is the only binary opposition that presumably remains unchanged and unaffected.⁴ For the most part, the masculine motif reappeared, largely unscathed in post-Vietnam revisionist representations despite earlier narratives’ attempt to feminize the veterans, depicting their weakness as a ploy for social empathy in veteran’s causes. Certainly, some Vietnam War films like *Coming Home* in the 1970s challenge the hero-soldier tropes. It did not take long, however, before the masculine reappeared, dominating box offices. For instance, the Rambo Trilogy (1982-85-88) depict a seeming invisible heroic soldier who, while he sometimes depends upon others, acts mostly alone—defeating entire armies, at times, representing the prototypical male, and ideal soldier. Restoring masculinity post-Vietnam is indicative of the reticence to let go of the historic view of rugged masculinity that embodies much of the military culture. Whilst Vietnam is widely understood as a feminized war, the subsequent war in Iraq provides a saving soil to reclaim masculinity and restore the national belief in military service.⁵

While pressures still exist to form soldier gender identities in alignment with the expectations of the military culture, the tension of masculinizing the service after Vietnam is challenged on different accounts as masculinity slowly “emancipated itself from the warrior ideal.”⁶ Literary responses to the Iraq War, as the analysis in this chapter will demonstrate, challenge the narrative of a restored and reinvigorated masculinity that has successfully countered the tests of Vietnam. Military gender performances are rather more complex than they first appear because a result of historical, social and technological transformations have combined to create a new understanding of the gendered soldier in the context of postmodern war. Warfare itself across the timeline of this thesis has evolved from brute masculinity and close combat to technology-enabled

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xii-xiii.

⁵ Pitchford, “From One Gulf to Another,” 367.

⁶ Ignatieff, *Virtual War*, 189.

peacebuilding operations, causing a shift to new soldier constructs in which gendered distinctions are less relevant than the roles and positions the individual soldier occupies.⁷ It also moves from conscription to an all-volunteer force with greater inclusion of women and minority groups, further challenging the importance of masculinity as an essential trait of fighting.⁸ The acceptance of gendered identities in the military as either masculine or feminine is reflective of gender dynamics in the society at large. Militaries, after all, are part of societies, and militarized masculinities have always been impacted by and in turn feed back into civilian culture.⁹

What these developments indicate is that arguably masculine motifs have become increasingly peripheral rather than central to war metaphors. Gender distinctions continue to be blurred, allowing for a space for soldiers to move beyond hegemonic gender roles, meaning that a soldier needs not be exclusively male in order to embody masculine virtues. In order to explore this terrain, this chapter examines the changing concept of gender in Iraq War which leads to untapped identities that seem unique compared to the Vietnam War. The linkage between gender stereotyping and war becomes multifaceted and demands particular deconstruction to comprehend the influence of gender on the experience of soldiers. As Jennifer Lobasz puts it, if “societies are in some measure the sum of their war stories, then it behooves us to pay attention to the gendered material from which these stories are constructed.”¹⁰ If these stories speak on this level, then they may shed light on different expressions of gendered soldiering in the context of the Iraq War and enable us to continue to reflect upon gendered assumptions and the complexity of gendered identities.

I argue that the Iraq War becomes less affiliated with particular gender hegemony than previous wars and more aligned with a nuanced understanding in which various gender expressions and interpretations are leveraged when it is expedient to do so. While the Vietnam War reinforced stereotypical masculine roles and the defeat led to a loss of masculinity, by the time of the Iraq War, soldiers reflect a more sense of fluid identity whereby cultural constraints defined with respect to traditional military culture do not

⁷ Gray, “Posthuman Soldiers in Postmodern War,” 223.

⁸ Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity*, 36.

⁹ Claire Duncanson, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations,” *Men and Masculinities* 18, no. 2 (May 2015): 231-248, 236.

¹⁰ Jennifer K. Lobasz, “The Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman: Representations of Female Soldiers in the Iraq War,” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 29, no. 3 (October 2008): 305-334, 330.

necessarily apply. The result has been the emergence of soldiers' identities with greater inclusivity, allowing traditionally male and female gender components to merge in individual compositions. To examine this, a posthuman theoretical frame allows for the examination of the shift between the Vietnam and Iraq wars with respect to soldiers' gendered identities.

Posthuman theory creates new conceptual tools to provide an explanation for the multiplicity of gendered identities in order to avoid the illusion that there is a single all-inclusive identity to soldiers' subjectivities. In posthuman thought, gender is not only fluid but also individualized, and can be changed at the decision of the individual, allowing each person to construct and express his/her own complex but tailored self.¹¹ In other words, a posthuman concept of gender facilitates a range of potential identities which are dependent upon individual perception and definition rather than fixed by external definition. Donna Haraway argues that it is not naturally right to bind gendered identities into unified groups even though modern societies typically do so, nor are there unifying traits that classify humans as males or females.¹² One does not go through life "being female" or "being male" as neither of these states actually exist: instead, gender is constructed through the relationship of "contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices."¹³ Posthuman theory reframes the emphasis on social constructions in postmodern thought, revealing gender not as a distinction between male and female rendered biologically at birth, but instead a complex and fluid identification constructed by the individual and society. This is true regardless of the context in which the human is located; a human in civilian society or a human in the military will perform gendered roles in terms of their own gender understandings.

This chapter will examine first the historical context of the Vietnam War which began as a traditionally gendered conflict but emerged as a challenge to masculinity, both in terms of the role of the soldier and in the feminization of both the anti-war movement and the military through its eventual defeat. Comparing this war perspective to that of the U.S. combat experience during the Iraq War where women served alongside men and technology heavily modified gendered roles supports a posthuman perspective as the most effective means to analyse and create meaning in postmodern warfare.

¹¹ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 96.

¹² Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 155.

For the Vietnam War text I have selected Robert Mason's memoir *Chickenhawk* (1983) which, from a male perspective, connects some of the war's more advanced technology, the Huey helicopter, with the individual soldiering experience, allowing investigation of the relationship between gender and power, and most notably the soldier's compulsion to assert power in a situation where he is otherwise disempowered and rendered feminine through the loss of the masculine trope.

The first of the three Iraq War texts is Joshua Key's *The Deserter's Tale* (2007) which presents the story of a young American who served in Iraq but eventually deserted the army. Key details his experience of trauma and violence in the early days of the Iraq War, including numerous crimes against civilians perpetrated by American soldiers. The book reveals an exceedingly troubled young man, greatly impacted by the traumatic events of his wartime experiences which cause him to defect from the army, take his wife and four children, and flee to Canada. Throughout Key's narrative, traditional masculine motifs are both presented and challenged, underscoring the posthuman interpretation of postmodern warfare.

By way of contrast, Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills: A Female Marine Officer's Combat Experience in Iraq* (2011) offers a unique position in war narratives which challenges the masculine/feminine dichotomy with respect to being a soldier. Blair's relationship with technology, other commanding officers, and the male soldiers in her company provide a helpful context to examine how posthuman constructs of gender are represented in the Iraq War and provide evidence of how a female's presence in combat actually balances and enhances the performance of a predominantly male unit.

Finally, Kristen Beck's *Warrior Princess: A U.S. Navy SEAL's Journey to Coming out Transgender* (2013) presents a unique perspective of a transgender woman, who at the time of service was gendered a male and mistakenly believed that the hyper-masculinity of SEAL could help resolve his life-long gender confusion and make him more at home in his male body. He eventually transitioned to female and, perhaps more than any of the memoirs considered, Beck's awareness of gendered-related issues in war makes this a particularly valuable text to consider.

These four texts will be connected through their shared themes of gender, power, and war, each of them presenting a different perspective on similar war experiences within the military organization, with the aim of using the Vietnam War as a horizon for understanding the Iraq War experience. In this shared context, my analysis will examine

those traditional gender roles in warfare, how these roles are being renegotiated, and the ways they are becoming irrelevant in postmodern warfare.

Masculinities in Transition

War has traditionally been a masculine enterprise—not only because the majority of soldiers have been male—but because the motifs governing militaries tend to cohere with social expressions of masculinity. According to Peebles, masculinity within the military is a “kind of performance rather than an essential quality.”¹⁴ What defines a soldier has less to do with how one feels internally—bravery is not a feeling or attitude but is manifest only through brave *acts*—and more a matter of demonstration. Such demonstrations tend to correspond with ideals socially construed as masculine, including during the Vietnam War which, from a U.S. perspective, reinforced the male gender dominance inherent in an ethnocentric construct.¹⁵ As the protectors and promulgators of democracy, only masculine soldiers were tasked with subduing other cultures. The American soldier knows best—and even if the infantilized or sometimes feminized enemy resists, the soldier persists all the more, assured that he is doing what is best, even for the sake of his enemy.¹⁶

On this model, to become a soldier, only a male gender presentation was acceptable. The recruit had to shed any feminine aspects of his personality, including empathy, emotional expression, and weakness. The all-male basic training served to pound the feminine away while elevating the masculine, breaking down the new soldier’s body and mind so it could be rebuilt into a hyper-masculine, aggressive vehicle for advancing military objectives.¹⁷ Even the sexual desires of the soldier are refocused into military usefulness, where “the gun metonymically replaces the penis, the rifle becomes an extension of the human body,” and “each grunt’s body is a hybrid display of weapons and erotic masculinity.”¹⁸ As an extension of the body, the gun speaks to the masculine gendering of the soldier that dominates his identity as a symbol of dominance and power.

Women in the Vietnam War era tended to take traditional feminine roles, restricted to being wives and girlfriends on the home front, or nurses in military field hospitals. Of

¹⁴ Peebles, *Welcome to the Suck*, 50.

¹⁵ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, 23.

¹⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, xii.

¹⁷ Park, *Narratives of the Vietnam War*, 16.

¹⁸ Russell, *Reading Embodied Citizenship*, 113.

the 11,000 women who served in the U.S. military in Vietnam, the majority of them served as nurses and the rest in clerical or similar supporting roles.¹⁹ Heather Stur in her book *Beyond Combat* (2011) contends that women during the war were symbolically important to confirm the masculinity of the soldiers and build troops' morale.²⁰ Masculinity is a trope that can only be understood in contrast to binary opposite, thus maintaining tropes of femininity becomes just as essential, though for the sake of reinforcing cultural constructs of masculinity. Women were stereotyped into distinct female images that reinforce the masculine narrative and promote the soldier as protector yet virile man. The image of the wholesome girl next door, for example, is a reminder of why the soldier needed to defeat communism and protect his women back home.²¹ Nurses represented maternal careers, willing to sacrifice their own fulfilment and happiness in order to ensure the needs of the male, more valuable than they, were met.²²

The stereotyping of women was mild compared to the military's view of homosexuals. Not only was homosexuality illegal in the U.S. military, but any hint of homosexual desire was considered sinful and inconsistent with the highly regulated military culture.²³ To be homosexual, thus, was to be undisciplined, subordinate and cowardly, of no value, the polar opposite of the expectations and virility of a masculine soldier.²⁴ Male sexuality reinforced by the military is linked to aggression, and any soldier discovered transgressing into homosexual expression was severely punished not only by the military but often by his peers as well.²⁵

Soldiers psychologically assumed a heterosexual and hegemonic masculinity to ensure the continuation of their dominance over subordinate men and enemies.²⁶ The gendered representation of enemies as effeminate reinforces the dominant male stereotype enshrined in the soldier's psyche in basic training. The American soldier

¹⁹ Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

²¹ Ibid., 3.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Jeh Charles Johnson, ed., *Report of the Comprehensive Review of the Issues Associated with a Repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing, 2011), 134.

²⁴ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 101.

²⁵ Ibid., 101.

²⁶ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 356.

should dominate the Vietnamese soldier even if for no other reason than that the American soldier is more manly. The Viet Cong was often viewed as frail, thin, and weak—more feminine than masculine in appearance. True to form, or not, the vision of the Viet Cong soldier was quite different than the ideal manly American with his towering height and muscular physique.²⁷ If the male soldier realizes his identity by dominating the other, by emasculating the enemy, then dominating the effeminate Vietnamese was essential. Even Vietnamese civilian women were either subordinate servants, who tended their own families in a mindless existence that required a foreign force for deliverance, or dragon ladies, metaphorical sexual beings who were at once the enemy but also provision of sexual conquest for the American soldier.²⁸

Although the Vietnam War was traditionally gendered from the military perspective, the defeat suffered at the hands of the Vietnamese communists “functioned very much as castration anxiety for an emasculated American manhood.”²⁹ This “castration anxiety” symbolizes a crisis in masculinity at both the individual and collective levels. Individually, the loss of respect for the military service means that it was more difficult for the soldier to view his fight in Vietnam as an expression of masculine virtues, while the loss collectively undermined the military and government’s patriarchal authority: one of the factors that helped bring the compulsory conscription to an end in 1973.³⁰ Moreover, the anti-Vietnam War movement, led mainly by veterans, publicly denounced the war, thereby complicating the ideal of the masculine hero in relation to the national discourse.³¹ This shift in gender understanding coincided with a broader change in the American society as a whole. Over the period of military action in Vietnam, the country experienced profound social and cultural changes with the increased momentum of the women’s movement in the late 1960s and 1970s providing many American women the chance for greater participation in society.³²

²⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 12.

²⁸ Ibid., 18.

²⁹ Abouali Farmanfarmian, “Did You Measure Up? The Role of Race and Sexuality in the Gulf War,” in *Collateral Damage*, ed. Cynthia Peters (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 111-138, 112.

³⁰ Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity*, 36.

³¹ Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler, “Unmaking Militarized Masculinity,” *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 2017): 161-181, 170.

³² Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 192.

By the 1990s, the push to overcome “the Vietnam syndrome” was as closely linked to restoring American patriarchal authority as it was to reinstating the national belief in military service as appropriate and respectable. If the U.S. defeat in Vietnam was perceived as a failure to perform masculinity effectively, then for the George H. W. Bush administration the necessary response is an open and overwhelming display of military strength and prowess. The Gulf War, which lasted only a few weeks, reintroduced a new hegemonic masculinity, one that is best described by Simon Niva as “hybrid,” combining both aggression and compassion to replace the emasculating effect in the wake of the Vietnam War.³³ The assaults of 9/11 a decade later, however, marked a return of traditional militarized masculinities characterised by confrontational combat style, toughness, and aggression.³⁴ As this thesis discusses, technologies and new approaches to combat missions provide a vehicle for a non-specific gender understanding of the Iraq War, one quite different from the gendered experiences of the Vietnam and the Gulf Wars.

New weapons afforded military leaders the concept of the “techno-warrior,” an advanced warrior not bound by gender but who can yet reinforce the concept of American patriarchy and domination over other countries.³⁵ While technology has been placed *alongside* masculinity in the dominant position of its binary opposition to femininity, the failures of the masculine body in Vietnam have necessitated a shift, locating the technologized body in a dominant position over the masculine form. According to Chris Gray, “it is not that the soldier is influenced by the weapons used; now he or she is (re)constructed and (re)programmed to fit integrally into the weapon systems.”³⁶ In other words, technologies encourage all soldiers, regardless of their biological gender, to conform and comply with the system. Cara Daggett contends that militarized masculinities are increasingly marginalized by technology such as drones, leading to gender disorientations: “Drones are ‘genderqueer bodies,’ human-machine assemblages that do not track onto male-female, human-machine binaries.”³⁷ As

³³ Steve Niva, “Tough and Tender: New World Order Masculinity and the Gulf War,” in *The Man Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane L. Parpart (London: Routledge, 2019), 109-128, 118.

³⁴ Kathy J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 191.

³⁵ Gray, “Posthuman Soldiers in Postmodern War,” 223.

³⁶ Gray, *Postmodern War*, 195.

³⁷ Cara Daggett, “Drone Disorientations,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (August 2015): 361-379, 362.

technology itself does not have gender, it removes the binary gender dimension from warfare, and allows fluid gender constructions that include whatever traditionally masculine and feminine elements are most desired and beneficial to the soldier. This fragmented gender complicates the ontology of human relationships in the military.³⁸

These developments increased the number of women recruits as they perceived increased opportunities for careers in a technology-enabled military, further increasing their percentage throughout the armed services, and thereby weakening the predominant masculinity of the military central to previous wars.³⁹ Military positions once closed to women become available in the Iraq War with more than 191,500 female combatants engaged in military actions since 2003.⁴⁰ Due to the unpredictable nature of the urban war, female troops found themselves assisting in different roles including combat and searching for anti-American terrorist cells within Iraq. The likening of a rifle to something like a penis, in fact, makes the role of soldier open to women. Heather Höpfl argues that women who join the military receive a gun, a “metaphorical penis” and effectively cancel out their femininity by default.⁴¹ Because soldiers’ gendered identities are expressed through technological extensions, women are fully capable of performing the same duties as men, thereby challenging the myth of the masculine warrior.

While technological development is considered a major reason behind allowing different gendered identities to serve, the official inauguration of all-volunteer force in the wake of the Vietnam War, in July 1973, dismantled the long-established hegemonic masculinities that only masculine men are obliged to serve their country.⁴² In her book *Enlisting Masculinity* (2012), Melissa Brown argues that the recruiting materials, in the age of the all-volunteer force, deploy gender in significantly new ways to appeal to potential recruits. The recruiting materials draw from civilian styles to resonate with the public preconceptions of the military and gender roles.⁴³ While the military still retains its strong hegemonic masculinity, it reassures women and people of colour that they have

³⁸ Gray, *Postmodern War*, 251.

³⁹ Bourke, “Killing in a Posthuman World,” 35.

⁴⁰ Helen Benedict, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2009), 4.

⁴¹ Heather J. Höpfl, “Becoming a (Virile) Member: Women and the Military Body,” *Body & Society* 9, no. 4 (December 2003): 13-30, 13.

⁴² Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

an equal right to join as men without feeling alienated from the service. This reflects the military adaptation of civilian ethos of gender equality.

It is evident that there has been a dramatic change in terms of gender relations in the military since 1990s. The policy of Don't Ask Don't Tell, initiated by President Clinton in 1993, mandated the service of gay personnel in exchange of their silence about their sexual orientations.⁴⁴ However, such a position, Bérubé Allan argues, seems inappropriate to “a baby boom generation of gay activists” who, as the Vietnam War escalated, started to appeal their unfair discharges from the military in courts, leading to the rise of gays' right movements.⁴⁵ From Don't Ask Don't Tell in place at the beginning of the Iraq War until its repeal in 2012, under President Barack Obama, the inclusion of gay people serving openly indicates the military's tolerance for sexual diversity in its military ranks.⁴⁶ While women achieved several “firsts,” over the last few years, by earning a place on the front-lines of war, the battle for homosexual and transgender inclusion in the military still remains controversial. Yet, everyone in the military is required to abide by a congressional act. Classic examples include former U.S. soldiers Bradley Manning and Christopher Beck who came out after the war as Chelsea Manning and Kristin Beck, and attracted much attention from the public.⁴⁷

Another major shift in the military, which brings forward a new conceptualization of masculine identity, is the nature of the military missions which tend to focus on peacebuilding operations and humanitarian interventions. The military has sought to humanize its actions in Iraq, presenting the war as one of counterterrorism and peacekeeping to move Iraq towards democracy.⁴⁸ This empathetic justification necessitates the emergence of “sensitive masculinity of the humanitarian soldier-scholar,” who unselfishly feels responsible for protecting and defending vulnerable citizens, freeing them from a dictator, rather than defending their interests on a foreign land.⁴⁹ As

⁴⁴ “Department of Defense Directive Number 1304.26” (*Medical and Public Health Law Site*, December 21, 1993), accessed December 24, 2018, <https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/blaw/dodd/corres/html2/d130426x.htm>.

⁴⁵ Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 274.

⁴⁶ Duncanson, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 238.

⁴⁷ Monica Hesse, “Chelsea Manning Puts Transgender Issues in the Spotlight” (*Washington Post*, August 22, 2013), accessed August 18, 2018.

⁴⁸ Duncanson, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 238.

⁴⁹ Laleh Khalili, “Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency,” *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (November 2010): 1471-1491, 1475.

such, this new version of masculinity is more dynamic, balancing the traditional masculine expression required by the military with aspects of femininity previously not allowed to them.

As addressed above, the received understanding of militarized hegemonic masculinity is not equally adequate to different historical periods and types of wars. In fact, Kimberly Hutchings argues that the relationship between war and masculinity is not entirely constitutive; rather, war is usually associated with masculinity just because of the latter functional characteristics to render war “intelligible and acceptable as a social practice and institution.”⁵⁰ The way that postmodern war is fought is reframed in non-gender specific terms. Openness to gender fluidity beginning to take hold by the advent of the Iraq War is a major factor separating gender roles in this early twenty-first century war from those expressed in Vietnam several decades earlier, as the following discussion will show.

“A Double Loser:” Robert Mason’s *Chickenhawk*

Chickenhawk is Robert Mason’s memoir of his one-year long deployment as an Air Cavalry pilot in Vietnam from 1965 to 1966. During his tour of duty, Mason flew in during well-known battles such as the Battle of Ia Drang, Happy Valley, and the Battle of Bong Son. He entered the war mostly ignorant of the history and politics undergirding the conflict; all he knew was that he wanted to fly—“And there was nothing I wanted to fly more than helicopters.”⁵¹ Only 23 years of age when he went to war, he waited more than a decade, until 1979, to begin writing about the conditions he experienced during his deployment, which was eventually published in 1983.

The first two major sections of the book, as titled, evoke sexualized imagery from the start. Part I is entitled “Virgins” and Part II is entitled “Swave and Deboner.” The juxtaposition of these two major sections of the book employs the metaphor of a young male, first experimenting with sexuality and then progressing into a womanizer. The misspellings of the title of the second part of the book, however, strike the reader as undoubtedly intentional and ironical—“suave” is spelled correctly in the first page of the second section. The use of irony here suggests that much of what Mason thought of himself as he went to the war was soon exposed. He was sent to the war with glorified

⁵⁰ Kimberly Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 4 (June 2008): 389-404, 389.

⁵¹ Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (London: Gorgi, 1984), 13.

images about himself as part of a sophisticated, advanced, fighting force that would exert technological superiority over the primitive enemy. However, as the text reveals, there is very little in that section that is “suave” at all, instead references to masturbation and crude jokes about women often dominate soldiers’ conversations. This begs the question: if war is going to make him into a man, what sort of a man would he become?

In his “virginal” introduction into becoming a war pilot, Mason refers several times to the training which emphasizes “soldier first, pilot second.”⁵² He spends several chapters detailing the fine-tuned control he had to practice to master: one has to have a full awareness—almost a connection with—of the particular model of helicopter he is assigned to pilot. This finesse, however, is necessarily juxtaposed by the brute and gritty character of soldiering. A pilot must be a soldier first, and by implication an embodiment of masculinity.

Describing his training, Mason indicates that the “cyclic control stick rises vertically from the cockpit floor between the pilot’s legs.”⁵³ The phallic association is not missed on the reader as Mason describes how “along with my left hand moving up and down and twiggging, my right hand moved in small circles above my knees as, in my mind, I flew.”⁵⁴ While subtle, the sexualization of the control stick reflects a general idea that even those operating some of the most advanced technology within the war, technomascularity is the prevailing motif through which a pilot’s missions are understood. No female pilot, for example, could sexualize the pilot’s experience in precisely this way. The helicopter could not be gender-neutral for the Vietnam War veteran. According to Stephen Herbrechter, for the humanist subject even mechanized embodiment is still “‘embodied’ and hence necessarily ‘gendered.’”⁵⁵ If the helicopter is a machine of war, in a humanistic sense, it must be masculine.

The first firefight Mason is involved in, even from the cockpit of his Huey, gives Mason a sense of detachment—a theme that re-emerges in some Iraq War narratives as discussed in chapter two of this thesis. He recounts: “My adrenaline kicked in and the world got quieter. I felt strangely detached from the scene.”⁵⁶ Of course, Mason makes

⁵² Ibid., 45.

⁵³ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁵ Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, 93.

⁵⁶ Mason, 85.

no mention of gender here. Being a male, engaging in a discipline wedded to masculine motifs, would not have made gender-awareness something that would immediately come to mind. Still, Mason's experience of detachment in combat is not uncommon and is not necessarily experienced as emasculation, at least until this point in the narrative.

In truth, there is very little reflection on the masculinities of soldiers in Mason's memoir. The machismo of the soldiers themselves is under-emphasized and only evident in several interactions between soldiers. When one soldier is reading something in French, another soldier kids him: "Only pansies speak French, you faggot."⁵⁷ Elsewhere, when some of the soldiers are skinny dipping, and a Vietnamese woman appears attempting to sell them a "Coke," one soldier makes fun of the other soldier's genital size.⁵⁸ Whether the relative absence of women or at least the absence of many who could speak their language might have contributed to the soldiers' crudity, Mason makes no such observation at this point. Only later, when he finds himself surrounded at a table by Western women when removed from the battlefield does Mason revel in "so much feminine attention" while marveling at the fact that these respectable women did not grab his crotch.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the frequency and crudity of this sort of banter accelerates throughout *Chickenhawk*, seemingly in proportion with the degree of psychological shock the soldiers have experienced. While masturbatory imagery is used earlier, in a sort of romanticized manner related to a pilot's training at the control stick, by the middle of the book masturbation becomes a way of dealing with soldier's anxiety and finding a way to be able to sleep at night.

Discovering the castrated and nearly decapitated body of Richards—a fellow pilot who used to brag "about how he knew he'd survive in the jungle if he got shot down"—is a particularly poignant moment in Mason's reflection.⁶⁰ Richards earns a special military award for his jungle survival skills, as Mason recalls: "If anybody'd be able to get away, it'd be Richards."⁶¹ All his training, however, proves to be for nothing. The waste of it brings Mason to tears. This is, perhaps, the first anecdote in Mason's memoir that touches upon the sense of emasculation that soldiers felt in Vietnam. Mason speaks

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 183.

⁶¹ Ibid., 183.

of grunts yelling and psyching themselves up to run into battle and their over confidence in their masculine prowess before first encountering the enemy that they would be victorious. Then, he contrasts all of this with troubling and sometimes grotesque imagery of these same soldiers' bodies mangled and dismembered or even castrated at the hands of the Vietcong. Shortly after the death of Richards, Mason recounts that a group of grunts "growling and yelling behind me" are quickly gunned down by an enemy gunner when emerging from a tree-line. Their masculine roars are silenced forever.⁶² After a moment, during which a strange silence seems to overtake him, Mason launches his Huey off the ground, fleeing a scene of bodies littering the ground.

Part II, "Swave and Deboner," begins by reflecting on the depravity that had fallen upon the surviving soldiers in Mason's company. Officers are drinking and driving recklessly and "involved in unnatural sex acts in local bars" with a VD epidemic having fallen upon the company.⁶³ The problem becomes so widespread that a Colonel addresses the company: "Men, severe situations require unusual solutions. I know you may think of it as self-abuse, but I, and the commanders above me, think that m-masturbation is now justifiable."⁶⁴ This, however, is only a temporary solution. The Colonel proposes building an "officer's club" which would provide conditions satisfactory for enlisted American personnel.⁶⁵ The Colonel's exhortations, however, mostly fall on deaf ears. It is not long before men in the company are falling in love in one night with one Vietnamese woman at a time. Fear of castration—literal or metaphorical—due to combat failures needed to be compensated for. Soldiers in Vietnam combatted this castration anxiety by becoming sexually promiscuous with Vietnamese women. If they could not, effectively, dominate the effeminate enemy, they could claim their women. The battlefield became, psychologically, the back-alley and the bedroom. It was a last-ditch effort to reinforce the soldier's sense of masculinity—only in these instances, it was not a trope that would rend the soldier a hero in the end. It is, therefore, unsurprising that soldiers would use that very organ they fear to lose as promiscuously as possible.

In spite of having a wife at home, Mason and other men find a way of escape the war by meeting Vietnamese women at a friendly bar. Even as these women speak no

⁶² Ibid., 185.

⁶³ Ibid., 195.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 196.

English, the meetings are almost paradisiacal from his perspective: “the dark-eyed lady smiled and talked in a magic way. The magic was that she spoke almost no English, but I understood her anyway. That she truly loved me was not to be doubted.”⁶⁶ That he and other soldiers viewed these temporary liaisons in terms of love rather than lust, however, is significant. The Vietnamese women, with whom they imagine themselves falling in love, provide a fantasy or illusion whereby they might still believe themselves to be, genuinely, masculine.

The soldiers are clearly seeking something more than sexual release through their sexual escapades amongst Vietnamese women. Mason unshyly speaks about how common self-gratification had become amongst the soldiers. Vietnamese women are depicted as sex-crazed harlots throughout the book. It is not completely clear whether the text seeks to confirm this view or to establish it as the product of the soldiers’ imaginations who sexualized the only women with whom they had contact, aside from nurses (whom they sexualized, on occasion as well). For these purposes, fact is ultimately less relevant than perception. How these soldiers relate to these women informs, in part, how they view their own role as soldiers. Conquering is more than killing enemies and body counts take various forms—the number of Vietcong killed, and the number of Vietnamese women slept with. The perception of Vietnamese women as sex-objects, however, is an insufficient concept to describe the soldiers’ perspective on these women. They speak of being “in love” with them, and perceive that the women love them in return, even detailing that they cry when departing company from the soldiers after having only known them for five days.⁶⁷ Quantifiably, Mason spends at least as much time describing the escapades of soldiers in his company with Vietnamese women as he spends detailing combat scenarios. Few of the combat scenarios depict the soldiers as paragons of masculinity. Mason’s view of combat appears to be one that emphasizes their failures more than their successes. It is only when it comes to encountering Vietnamese women, however, the men are depicted as kings or conquerors.

Identity loss, particularly as soldiers attempted to struggle with their sense of a masculine self now changed by war, left many feeling isolated, as the most basic components of identity—previously taken for granted—were put under stress. Having perceived failures in their war, the soldiers are turning to another masculine motif

⁶⁶ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 273.

common at the time: that of the family man. According to Tracy Karner, the sense of identity loss amongst Vietnam veterans can be tied particularly to a loss of one's sense of masculinity at war, and the American society's inability to provide "supportive cultural resources for a more progressive masculine ideal."⁶⁸ Karner elaborates that for the soldier who looked at images of World War II as an attendant component of male adulthood, he saw a conflation of ideals tying manhood to identity as "soldier, breadwinner, and family man."⁶⁹ Failing as soldiers, many turned to adultery and fleeting liaisons thus violating their commitment to being a "family man;" often linked to their complications with PTSD, many failed to achieve the ideal of breadwinner as well. Masculinity ceased to be a symbol of virtuous endeavour and instead came to describe a sort of perpetual adolescence typified by cowardice rather than bravery, the pursuit of leisure than breadwinning, promiscuity than marital fidelity. At the same time during which veterans struggled to hold on to traditional masculine tropes, feminists began claiming many traditional masculine traits linked to occupation and breadwinning.⁷⁰ Thus, hegemonic masculinity became eclipsed by what can be called "toxic masculinity" and, at the same time, what was previously deemed masculine shifted toward feminine or blurred gender tropes.⁷¹

In the third and final part of the book, "Short-Timer's Blues," Mason and another soldier began reflecting on whether or not they had experienced victory or defeat in their short time at war: "We won the battle. More of them got killed than us. It's that simple."⁷² This reflects a paradigm shift, beginning already in Vietnam, in terms of the commodities of war. America won the "body count," but still lost the war. The U.S. military ultimately failed to defeat or repel communism very far, even though the Vietnamese suffered higher death tolls. Indeed, Mason reveals in his afterword that he struggled to sleep for more than a decade, and his experimentation with drugs eventually earned him a three-year stint in prison in the early 1990s. That Mason turned to recreational drugs and alcohol to cope with his experiences, however, was hardly atypical. Philip Caputo also self-medicated by "knocking back straight scotches" or by smoking some "pure Colombian

⁶⁸ Tracy Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam: Masculinity and Betrayal in the Life Narratives of Vietnam Veterans," *American Studies* 37, no. 1 (March 1996): 63-94, 64.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁰ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 234.

⁷¹ Karner, "Fathers, Sons, and Vietnam," 66.

⁷² Mason, 373.

gold.”⁷³ Caputo attributed the drug use to his guilt towards his unmerited success after publishing his memoir *A Rumor of War* which, he thinks, only takes an advantage of the suffering of his brothers in arms and innocent civilians.⁷⁴

From a sociocultural perspective, it seems that the military itself is the sole institution capable of recovering a respectable, rather than destructive, view of masculinity for American men. Another war—hopefully more successful than Vietnam—becomes necessary. In order to recover masculinity as a trope, however, it is also important to reinforce the advantage of technological superiority in another conflict. Certainly, recovering gendered ideas of soldiering is not the sole reason why the U.S. entered the Gulf War—U.S. oil interests were paramount—but the Gulf War nonetheless provides the opportunity to recover masculinity as an admirable trope. However, the conflict was too short-lived to have had an enduring impact. Technological superiority was evident and advantageous. Few soldiers, however, experienced the conflict themselves, and only a select few were permitted to launch long-range missiles and strategize the enemy’s submission. The war in Iraq, post 9/11, provided a more enduring opportunity for American men to come to grips, again, with their own masculinity. For a variety of reasons mentioned earlier, however, the Iraq War would ultimately not succeed fully to restore the post-World War II virtues of the American male warrior. The initial shock-and-awe campaign, indeed, embraced many of the supposed masculine tropes intended—technological superiority was undoubtedly a factor in America’s initial success. This advantage, however, quickly waned once the insurgency began. At this juncture, the soldier’s experience in Iraq more closely paralleled that of the Vietnam soldier.

“I Am Not This Man,” Joshua Key’s *The Deserter’s Tale*

The Deserter’s Tale (2007) by Joshua Key—as told to Lawrence Hill (a Canadian novelist and memoirist)—exemplifies a tension between masculinities and war in a postmodern warfare context. Key was assigned to a Combat Engineer Company that deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, in the spring of 2003. Reading Keys’ text in comparison to Robert Mason’s pilot narrative is an attempt to do justice to the war as it was actually fought. Although the war in Iraq provides a preview of a distance-enabled war that eclipsed the masculine

⁷³ Caputo, 352.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 352.

prowess of prior wars, it remains in Key's text a traditional war, signalling a return to Vietnam-era warfighting styles.⁷⁵ The war Key experienced is not against the terrorists he initially enlisted to fight but mainly against civilians and he was a witness to multiple brutal war crimes in addition to the tragedies common in wars. Returning home on leave after seven months of such trauma, Key decided he could not return to Iraq and he went AWOL. During this time, he hid near Philadelphia for over a year before finally taking his wife and four children to Canada, where he applied for asylum.

The official response to a memoir such as *The Deserter's Tale* is to reject Key and position him as other in the military narrative. After all, he deserted his position and his company, reneging on his commitment to his country and running from a fight. From a traditionally masculine standpoint, Key presents a personally dysfunctional soldier unfit for service. However, when one considers the trauma he experiences and the moral foundation of his opposition to the war acts he is expected to commit, his recollection of his war experience must be re-evaluated and examined.

Key's gendered identity cannot be understood based on his personal flaws such as reluctance to seek help for his PTSD, nor can it be adequately explained through only his dysfunctional upbringing, family and financial stressors, or negative experience in military training. I argue instead that Key challenges the concept of war as a test of manhood because after considerable inner turmoil he chooses to save his humanity over adherence to rugged masculinity. Key could not distance himself, psychologically and physically, from the atrocities that happened in front of him. From the beginning, the military Key experiences is both broken and fixated on masculine dominance. His recruiter lies to him about potential deployment to coerce him into enlisting, which he does as much to provide for his family as it is a display of patriotism, thus taking the role of the oppressed subordinate who is motivated by his poverty and the failure of the greater cultural system to provide other better opportunities.⁷⁶ However, the enthusiasm that characterizes Robert Mason's account is largely absent from Key's text.

During his deployment which mainly involved raiding houses and detaining suspects, Key experiences horrific atrocities that gradually lead to a moral recognition that military involvement in Iraq—of which he is a part—is morally wrong. As Key

⁷⁵ Pitchford, "From One Gulf to Another," 363.

⁷⁶ Joshua Key and Lawrence Hill, *The Deserter's Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier Who Walked Away from the War in Iraq* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 40.

relates, “with hardly one foot into the war in Iraq, I was also uneasy about what we were doing there. Something was amiss.”⁷⁷ Unable to locate the enemy, he and his fellow soldiers start to take out their frustration on Iraqi civilians. As Key recalls beating two civilians, he reports rationalizing his behaviour on the grounds that they have grenades in the car, even though “grenades were everyday items in Iraq.”⁷⁸ His ability to judge ethically crumbles under the pressure of being a soldier, feeling powerless with no clear front-lines or visible enemies to fight.⁷⁹ Without a face-to-face confrontation with the enemy, the masculine coded invasion of Iraq loses its moral footing, plunging soldiers into confusion. The heroic gendered narrative disintegrates through the crushing list of horrific scenes, one following another, that Key experiences.

During one of his patrols, four Iraqis, beheaded by massive gunfire, are further devalued by American troops who use their decapitated heads as soccer balls.⁸⁰ As Key relates, “the very fact I saw the results and was part of the machine that committed the act weighed on my soul and weighs on it still.”⁸¹ Key’s response is juxtaposed with the masculine pattern of aggression and violence, as he intuitively reacts with horror at what he sees. His understanding of his part in the military’s crimes is evidenced when he writes “sometimes, in my dreams, disembodied heads plagued me with accusations We had become a force for evil, and I could not escape the fact that I was part of the machine.”⁸² Key inadvertently positions the Iraq invasion as a force of evil, a reminiscent of the early days of the New World. It is hard to miss the imperial gesture in his narrative, two disparate historical experiences that are tied by one thing—violence. The prevalence of aggression and violence within Key’s unit mirrors the U.S. approach to international problems, which tends to adhere to “confrontational and combative approaches” in which constructs of masculinities are more linked to traditional “warfighting ethos.”⁸³ The inappropriate use of force in Iraq is strikingly similar to the U.S. killing machine in Vietnam, even though the nature of military operations since the end of the Cold War has

⁷⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 99.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 105-106.

⁸¹ Ibid., 214.

⁸² Ibid., 110.

⁸³ Claire Duncanson, *Forces for Good? Military Masculinities and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 5.

changed and become closely associated with counterinsurgency and cooperative approaches between the civilians and the counterinsurgents.

It is not only Iraqi men who are victimized by American forces. Key recounts gang rape of Iraqi women by unnamed officers, not realizing what he is guarding until it is too late.⁸⁴ This again elevates his complicity in morally suspect military digressions. What he only experiences as a witness he now encounters as a participant, albeit an unaware and unwilling one. While the official narrative lauded justification of the intervention as a war to protect the rights of Iraqi women, the military resorts to “a bombing strategy” that actually only increases the violation of women’s human rights.⁸⁵ Sexual abuse and exploitations of women in wartime is an evidence of the enduring version of militarized/sexualized masculinities.

In fact, Key writes mainly about the civilians and particularly women, leaving the insurgents on the margin of his war story. Being a father of four children himself, Key is emotionally devastated by his friendship with an Iraqi girl whom he is unable to protect from the violence of war. The young girl who lives near Key’s post begins to visit him, reminding him of his own children at home in Oklahoma. He encourages her visits, as “she was the only person in Iraq—officer, civilian, or fellow soldier—whose smile I enjoyed.”⁸⁶ One day, as she crosses the street to greet him, she is caught in crossfire and killed.⁸⁷ Stunned and traumatized, Key realizes that the Americans “were the only ones with guns in the area, and it was the sound of my own people’s guns that I had heard blazing before the little sister was stopped in her tracks.”⁸⁸ He feels overwhelmed by guilt for her death, even though he does not kill her. Similarly, he feels guilty for a young girl raped at the Iraqi-Syrian border whose assault he does not prevent. Key in this regard presents the military in the same way it was presented in 1960s and 1970s, during the Vietnam War, when soldiers considered responsible for human rights’ offences and brutal massacres on innocent civilians—particularly children.

These incidents turned Key’s view of the war further against the narrative of the American liberators. He no longer frames American aggression as a noble cause to free

⁸⁴ Key, 138.

⁸⁵ Duncanson, *Forces for Good*, 9.

⁸⁶ Key, 121.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

the Iraqi people or protect the world from terrorism. He realizes that the Americans, through their killing of Iraqis, looting of homes, and raping of women, have become “the terrorists” in Iraq. The masculine aggression that enables some soldiers to terrorize the Iraqis strikes Key as less masculine.⁸⁹ While the official narratives frame the Iraq War as benefitting the Iraqi people, as they are being freed from a dictator and heartless terrorists, Key’s experiential narrative tells the story of a force itself heartless and relentlessly violent. The masculine code for fighting terrorists proves to be false, a tragic attempt to facilitate American dominance and maintain Iraqi submission and subservience. While the intent of positioning the Iraqis as others is to brand them as evil and therefore the Americans as good, Key realizes that the roles are actually reversed, undermining his masculine justification as a soldier and creating his moral dilemma regarding his willingness to continue to serve.

Key’s realization presents a role reversal, both in moral grounding and in gender. Throughout the text and in the countless missions of raiding civilian houses, Key consciously demonstrates self-control and constraint over his fellow soldiers’ frequent unnecessarily use of force. While restraint and rational reaction is a masculine trope in Western society, generally, it is not the one that typically defines the soldier’s type of masculinity. The soldier, while certainly expected to exhibit emotional restraint, is meant to follow orders rather than respond rationally. Thus, Key’s account represents less a *recovery* of traditional soldier tropes and a reframing of masculinity in a way that, while still defining the soldier in male-dominated tropes, embraces other dimensions of masculinity previously not associated with soldiering.

Convicted of the damage the military aggression is doing against the Iraqis and the trauma caused to the soldiers themselves, Key realizes “I had no more heart in the work and believed that it did nothing except intimidate the Iraqis, destroy their few belongings, and inspire them to hate us.”⁹⁰ After his return from Iraq, Key refuses to start his second tour of duty. It is Key’s sense of ethical responsibility that informs his judgment and eventually his decision to desert the military. Although his ethical position is presented in the text as innate—mainly via his childhood recollections—his witness to acts of terror in Iraq indicates his posthuman capacity to sensitively respond to the suffering of others around him. Moral agency, for Key, is not gender-specific. The act of desertion—albeit

⁸⁹ Ibid., 139.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 135.

disruptive to his masculine identity and existing civilian ethos—is evidence of his ability to adapt to attributes often considered as feminine, such as compassion and empathy, without necessarily feeling that his masculine identity is threatened or compromised. This coheres with Claire Duncanson’s model of “positive hegemonic masculinity” which remains “hegemonic” only as long as soldiers assert hegemony amongst themselves, and “positive” in terms of their relation to others around them.⁹¹ Key’s text neither valorises violence nor justify it, discarding the hierarchal thinking that pits the masculine American versus the feminized other.

What makes Key’s account stand out is how fluidly he constructs his gendered identity in relation to the Iraqis. Rather than evoking the other as inherently inhuman or evil that does not abide by the international conventions, he reverses this deeply-entrenched dynamic by contemplating a series of “what ifs”—*what if my children were attacked, what if my country was invaded, and what if my house was raided?* What is usually conferred upon the enemy is instead conferred upon himself: they are just equal. Key does not view the war as an exercise against a lower category of human beings, as was the case in many narratives from the Vietnam War. This perspective negates the American military masculinity and the feminine Iraqi subordination, presented as people who cannot even save themselves if a foreign army does not come and fight their battles for them. Instead, he understands both the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and his participation in it as part of a holistic collective, where one part fighting against another only causes damage to both. Key explains: “I had to give up my innocent and unexamined belief that my country and my army were a force only for good in the world” as “I was able to slowly awaken to the humanity of the very people I was told to despise.”⁹² Through this realization, Key rises above the binary gendering of the military system to reveal what is morally wrong when he witnesses atrocities.

Just because Key deserts the army and discards his uniform does not necessarily mean that he is emasculated as Robert Mason was. In fact, the first part of his account is replete with examples in which he is in no way less capable of violence as other soldiers in his company. Key associates himself with his fellow soldiers and simultaneously differentiates himself from them. Even after his desertion and his difficult journey of hiding, poverty and insecurity, he deals with it in a masculine and soldierly manner. Key’s

⁹¹ Duncanson, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 240-241.

⁹² Key, 223.

resistance to the process of militarization, with its masculine subtext, is an indication of resisting the military's dehumanization of himself. In other words, de-militarization of hegemonic masculinity is a re-encounter with one's humanity, or in Simona Sharoni's words a "re-humanization" of the self.⁹³ While the action of one soldier turning his back to atrocities—and by implication shows empathy towards the other—is too small to change the course of military actions, it is a beginning of a step to bring to light the possibility of change on a micro-level. Robert Fantina's book on *Desertion and the American Soldier* (2006) specifies that the 6000 reported cases of desertion among male servicemen in 2005 were attributed mainly to the war's unjustifiable atrocities against women and children and the moral confusion relating to the continued U.S. involvement in Iraq.⁹⁴ Too many deserting the war does not look good for the military. Key dispels the entrenched idea that it is impossible for soldiers to challenge the military.⁹⁵ His story of desertion, thus, is a discourse of liberation from the military dominant culture of masculinity.

"The Marine is just a Human in a Uniform:" Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills*

Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills* (2011) is a memoir detailing her experience as a Marine Second Lieutenant in Iraq in 2003. As a woman in the Marine Corps, her memoir focuses on issues relating to her gender and gender roles of others. Even in an era when technology has removed many soldiers from close proximity to the enemy in the combat zone, the marines are likely to see the enemy in the flesh and take bullets and bombs. Routine convoys through Iraqi cities and towns led to encounters with enemies—often unexpectedly through IED and sniper attacks. Blair's unit was deployed as a ground manoeuvre force, performing a variety of combat missions to assist the marines, providing tactical reconnaissance and ordering strikes from an unmanned "Bird," similar to the aircraft Matt Martin piloted in *Predator*, as I discussed in chapter two. While she was not piloting the craft, *per se*, she was responsible to make the "kill" call.

Although masculinity may not have been an important virtue for a Predator pilot, it remains the dominant motif through which marines understood their approach towards

⁹³ Simona Sharoni, "De-Militarizing Masculinities in the Age of Empire," *Austrian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 2 (January 2008): 147-164, 154.

⁹⁴ Robert Fantina, *Desertion and the American Soldier 1776-2006* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006), 188.

⁹⁵ Duncanson, *Forces for Good*, 8.

combat. It is understood, even before deployment, that embracing masculinity is a prerequisite for a successful deployment. There is a visible difference, whilst on base in the United States, between marines who were about to deploy to Iraq and those who had no such orders. Blair recalls, “marines getting deployed walked around like they had won a trophy for manliness. It was a dress rehearsal for the actual fight that lay ahead.”⁹⁶ This description indirectly implies that only masculine marines return alive. Blair, as a female marine, seems oxymoronic—insofar as one’s fellow soldiers expect female soldiers to fall short of the traditionally masculine roles. I argue that the very presence of an authoritative female officer amongst a company of marines surprisingly enhances the effectiveness of the unit in ways that politicians debating the virtues of women in the military in the U.S. have hardly considered.

Blair and her husband, Peter, an artillery officer, were deployed separately but saw each other briefly on one occasion while deployed. When her husband is deployed, she watches him leave, “as a disciplined Marine would, outwardly stoic, inwardly crumbling.”⁹⁷ The disjunction between a marine’s stoicism and her inner turmoil as a wife is evident as she recalls: “It was a strange dichotomy ... being a wife and a Marine.”⁹⁸ Yet, the representation of herself as a wife first indicates that her traditional gendered identity is not at odds with her marine identity. Blair’s identity as marine seemingly allows her to embrace her womanhood, uniquely, in her relationship to her husband because he, also, is a marine. Her anxieties, however, are compounded by the fact that, any day, she is likely to be leading marines on combat missions.

Shortly before being deployed herself, a fellow female officer told Blair that “women just don’t get treated the same.”⁹⁹ Unlike some of the females in her company, she rejects the notion of a “weak female” entirely and is determined to be treated the same as men “as long as they were Marines before they were anything else.”¹⁰⁰ For Blair, she becomes a marine not because she likes the career path, and certainly not for “machismo,” but because of the “core values” of the marines who strive to be “unsurpassed, to be the

⁹⁶ Jane Blair, *Hesitation Kills: A Female Marine Officer’s Combat Experience in Iraq* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

world's finest," always motivated by challenge.¹⁰¹ There is nothing about rising to meet a challenge that is distinctly male or female. Machismo, if it is a part of marine culture, is incidental rather than essential to what being a fine marine entails—at least in Blair's view. She writes:

I joined the Corps because I recognized that I was weak and that my life to date had consisted of nothing more than an effort to make myself as comfortable and as safe as possible. I wanted to become unsafe, and I wanted to be uncomfortable ... burn the weakness from my body and from my soul.¹⁰²

This "weakness" Blair speaks of has nothing to do with being female—it is a part of being securely human in a world that only rarely challenges one's ability to stay alive. Her quest for strength as a marine comes, therefore, not by attempting to be more like male marines; strength in both body and mind regardless of gender is something Blair prizes. In his book *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (2013), Stephen Herbrechter suggests that posthumanism cannot wholly divorce itself from humanistic notions of strength and weakness: "Human lack and weakness ... are figured as strengths in those moments where the human is most at crisis and most precarious, particularly when they are mobilized in the name of values like love, loyalty, free will and sacrifice."¹⁰³ Often, as Herbrechter points out, what is necessary for what he refers to as posthumanization is "a very human ingredient" which in the case of some narratives is represented by "self-effacing femininity."¹⁰⁴ By embracing such humanistic elements, physical and mental enhancements to human weakness, through posthuman integration, become possible. Blair's quest, then, to resolve her weakness and to become stronger through the Marine Corps is a quest that she can fulfill through her military service. It is one, likewise, that points forward to a posthuman vision that redefines not only military service, but human strength and weakness entirely.

For the most part, Blair receives support and respect from most of her superiors as well as from the marines under her command. She is widely accepted that she has not even thought about being female at all for some time until one marine refuses to "salute female officers."¹⁰⁵ Her Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Scott Mykleby, is

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰² Ibid., 18.

¹⁰³ Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*, 129.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰⁵ Blair, 16.

fairly supportive of his fellow female marines and advocates for their full integration in combat missions which by order of Congress remained taboo.¹⁰⁶ His approach to combat is gender blind, believing that marines coming from different backgrounds, whether male or female, help the unit to get the missions done more humanly. Believing that “without the females in the unit, the squadron couldn’t function,” the CO knows that Blair once lived in the Middle East region, and wants her to help other marines to get in touch with the culture of Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Her sensitivity to the people, in this regard, is an asset to the marines who would inevitably have to engage civilians and enemies in the region during their missions. Surely though, Blair experiences her share of misogyny.

The primary source of Blair’s frustrations is a fellow Lieutenant, Tony Debucher, whose authority over their unit comes ahead of Blair’s. Upon receiving Blair’s first pre-mission report, he rebukes her to “just stay in [her] box.”¹⁰⁸ Debucher re-emerges throughout the book as the primary antagonist for Blair’s efforts. However, that Debucher is the only recurrent source of her frustrations, while inexcusable, is surprising considering how ingrained the conflation of masculinity with a marine’s performance is commonly understood. Ironically, it is particularly Blair’s ability to perform in a traditionally masculine domain with efficiency that frustrates Debucher. Judith Butler’s insights on gender performance speak to this dynamic:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, ... in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.¹⁰⁹

Put in this way, someone like Blair is threatening to Debucher, not merely because she is a female but because she is a female who performs on par with greater efficiency than some of her male counterparts. Thus, Blair’s performance threatens the gendered motif of war that unwittingly grants masculine marines a privileged position by default.

The problem when it comes to women in the military is not that women cannot be strong, but that many Americans believe that they should not be. Ranting about the U.S. Congress’ rules against women participating in combat military occupational specialties,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519-531, 520.

Blair emphasizes that it is not a physical inferiority that has justified their position but instead women's mental fitness.¹¹⁰ She points out that the American culture has historically valued passive women, while men are valued in proportion to their physical fitness and prowess. Susan Bordo, a cultural studies critic, argues in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (2003) that women are always encouraged to take care of their physical bodies, but the emphasis, in general, is not on how fitness contributes to women's ability to function or perform but on how they appear.¹¹¹ Gym memberships, for example, are marketed to women not with the motto "be healthy" but "look better naked."¹¹² Blair's mental clarity of such gendered cultural trends indicates her awareness of oppressive cultural practices against women, which then explains the contradistinctions inherent in males' responses to female service in the military.

In one of her combat missions and after ordering a strike from a "kill box," resulting in several enemy kills, Blair reveals a disjunction between how easy killing an enemy seems to be when sitting in front of an interface and the loss-of-life as a corresponding consequence of such a strike. While no enemies have seen the barrel of her gun, her order of distant airstrikes wipes them down. She reflects, "I kept seeing flashes of those bodies in my mind. I know it meant something, but I didn't know what."¹¹³ Her experience resonates with those of other soldiers who experience killing from a distance, like Matt Martin as discussed in the second chapter of the thesis. Remote killing leaves soldiers with a sense of inner-turmoil—they know they have blood on their hands but lack the visceral experience of doing it, and because their lives are not at risk, the killing feels more like a slaughter than a battle. Without the emotional toll, soldiers might find it too easy to kill again. There is a concern, reflected in Blair's text as in Martin's, that removing oneself from the face-to-face context of battle is, in some way, less human and less civilized.

Women might have been spared the risk of physical injury in battle, to an extent, but when engaged in remote combat they suffer the same as men. When a doctor tells Blair that he is unsure whether female marines have the emotional fortitude to do what

¹¹⁰ Blair, 20.

¹¹¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 245.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xxiii.

¹¹³ Blair, 151.

they are doing there, having witnessed several of them break down in tears, Blair rebukes him that “women are a lot more vocal in their feelings than men are; that’s all. Men express anger, women cry. Same emotion. You think the men are conditioned for this? Wait until the bullets start flying and see how many of your fearless boys wet themselves.”¹¹⁴ This is not uncommon, as many male marines also have their moments of breakdown. Being a woman no more shields her and nor does it make her more susceptible to PTSD than any other soldier. This exchange with the doctor makes clear that Blair has little tolerance for disrespect or misunderstanding levied against her on account of her gender.

In truth, not all of the females deployed in Blair’s unit are comfortable with their combat roles. Often, she recalls, they speak of their insecurities amongst themselves. Still, Blair seems to understand her fellow female marines’ inhibitions. This does not necessarily imply that the women are insufficient for their assignments. Rather, it is likely that they succumbed to what Laura Mulvey once termed the “male gaze,” viewing themselves through the lens of masculine expectations that is thoroughly inculcated in marine culture.¹¹⁵ Portrayed and valued according to the heterosexual male’s gaze, women betray themselves under the “gaze,” as they impose upon themselves standards of worth that do not enhance their own wellbeing but merely enhance their worth in the eyes of men. Gender stereotypes regarding feminine weakness are so pervasive that women often struggle to see themselves beyond the cultural norms.

Blair’s understanding is not only limited to the marines in her unit, it also extends to the people of Iraq. In one scene where Blair and other male marines see the city of Al Kut through the eyes of the Bird, the camera reveals large groups of civilians out in the streets, listening to public speakers and engaging in a “bizarre group-fighting rituals.”¹¹⁶ Unable to decide whether the Iraqis are celebrating their freedom or plotting a violent attack against the American forces, male marines express concerns and consider attacking the groups. Blair is the only one, amongst them, to notice that there are families and children dancing and celebrating, and eventually assessing the level of danger as insignificant. She recounts: “I didn’t see anything violent, just a culture finally able to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1989), 25.

¹¹⁶ Blair, 196.

practice their Shi'a rituals."¹¹⁷ In moments like these of life-and-death decisions, it is often the traditionally feminine rather than the masculine virtues that provide a better judgment or a way forward. Real combat has benefited from feminine motifs that help navigate missions in ways that transcend the previously traditionally masculine traits of brute force or technological superiority. Precisely because culturally-constructed concepts of the feminine become a strength in moments of crisis, soldiering can no longer be viewed as a distinctly masculine enterprise.

After a month without showers, Blair and her fellow female marines finally have an opportunity. Several infantrymen, seeing them move toward the showers, stare openly. When Blair mentions to her CO that some of the flirting men, en route to the showers, could be "pretty disrespectful," he exhorts her to not judge them severely.¹¹⁸ These men have taken casualties and killed up close and in a state of hyper-aggression. Insofar as their flirting remained harmless, the CO encourages her to be patient, while also granting her permission to do what is necessary if things turn to be bad. Blair does not indicate whether she agrees or disagrees with the CO's take on the situation. She seems, at least, to have some empathy for the situation. While she has not experienced combat up close like an infantryman, she is responsible for the loss of some Iraqi lives and understands how it affects someone's behaviour. As long as gawking can be polite, Blair expresses no discomfort from these stares even though she clearly does not appreciate them. She seems to understand it and, for the most part, such stares rarely progressed to what she feels is a harassment. Nothing Blair witnesses amongst her marines come close to approximating the sort of sexual debauchery that Robert Mason recalled from Vietnam in *Chickenhawk*.

One of the more insightful reflections in the book, regarding women at war, come from Sergeant Major Rew who approaches Blair after her company finished its missions:

I had this impression that female Marines were going to be all jacked up ... I had my worries, trust me. You know, when we had our anthrax shots, things changed—my perspective changed. In the grunt unit I was in before, a lot of the men refused to get their shot. Many of them made a lot of fuss. It's strange, but when we got our shots—with the females there right beside the males in line—not a single one of the men complained. It was as if they knew their manhood was at stake, as though the females made them braver. And then out here, I've noticed no difference with the females. There hasn't been a problem. In fact, the females

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 197.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 206.

seem to give the men no excuse for backing out or being afraid. They make everything work better; they just balance things out.¹¹⁹

Rew's comment, that the mere presence of an authoritative female, like Blair, actually makes things "work better" and "balance things out" falls under the veil of reflections about how, in some respects, the presence of women preserves the best masculine virtues amongst the troops while supplementing it with virtues, typically associated with femininity, that broaden the scope of what units can accomplish at war. Blair's presence does not challenge or overturn masculine traits of soldiering, but it does re-contextualize and refine those traits in what Rew believes to be a positive development.

Being a marine—still more, being a combat-tested marine—is more central to her sense of identity after the war than being a woman. The previous discussion suggests that her military experience allows her to, in a sense, transcend her bodily identity. Thus, soldiering is not merely disembodiment but it is re-embodiment. According to Rosi Braidotti, "embodiment means that we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter)actions which are discontinuous in space and time."¹²⁰ The posthuman woman, both disembodied from her womanly body yet still at home in it, should, in Braidotti's view, live by embracing this paradox. She should go on living as if she is woman, while still deconstructing what society believes being a woman entails.

To extend this discussion in the following section, I will be looking at a male-to-female transgender SEAL who sees her masculine body as a "trap," a severe restriction on her full expression of self. Certainly, the experience of a SEAL is not identical to a marine's. In truth, the SEAL is expected to be the perfect embodiment of the masculine soldier and the most refined of America's fighting force, deemed a man amongst men.

The Soul has no Gender: Kristen Beck's *Warrior Princess*

Warrior Princess (2013) is a memoir of a retired Navy SEAL who served his country for twenty years and was deployed to different combat zones. What makes Chris Beck's memoir intriguing is how effectively he manages to perform as a SEAL—respected by all his colleagues—even while he feels, inwardly, like he should have been born a woman. I argue that gender boundaries are important in the text as Beck is not home in his male

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 216.

¹²⁰ Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism with a Difference," in *Futures of Critical Theory: Dreams of Difference*, ed. Colin Lankshear, Mark Olssen, and Michael Peters (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 239-260, 242.

body, yet war provides an escape from his male body into something more ethereal, and gender-transcendent. Beck's experience, feeling alienated from his male body, as a female within, makes the notion of disembodied warfare and digital media something he is readily open to embracing. Working at the Pentagon on innovative technologies of war gives Beck another outlet for escape. After retiring from the Navy SEALs, Chris Beck finally resolved a lifelong struggle with his gender identity and became Kristen Beck.

Working with Dr. Anne Speckhard—who was well-known for her research into PTSD—the two wrote Beck's memoir. While the writing is mostly Speckard's, she refers to "Chris" and "Kristen" in the third person throughout the book. The book follows the convention of employing male pronouns (*i.e.*, he, him, his, etc.) when speaking about Beck's life as a boy, or as a soldier, when Beck assumed a male persona. At times when either cross-dressing early on or after reassignment surgery the corresponding female pronouns are used. Out of respect for Beck's own story, this analysis will follow suit with the same conventions. The book is divided into what Beck views as three separate lives. Beck's "first life" is from birth (before birth, in truth) through enlistment. Beck's "second life" details Chris' life as a Navy SEAL in war. Kristen's "third life" is her experience post-retirement and her decision to pursue gender-reassignment surgery and the emergence of the "warrior princess."

The issue of transgender military service was hardly discussed during the Iraq War. Few understand how gender-identity exists as a distinct phenomenon, independent of one's sexuality. It is popularly and inaccurately assumed that transgenderism or transsexualism is simply a "fetish" within the homosexual community.¹²¹ Even in the psychological community transgender diagnoses are often understood pathologically rather than socially.¹²² Individuals struggling with gender dysphoria, in turn, have fewer resources to leverage for coping with and understanding their own experiences. Accordingly, examining a transgender perspective on soldiering during the Iraq War will inevitably involve an intersection of struggles involving both gender identity and also sexuality.

Beck begins her "first life" by going back two generations, when her 13-year old father, Luther, welcomed his grandfather back from World War II. To begin her story so

¹²¹ Carla Moleiro and Nuno Pinto, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. 1511 (October 2015), accessed October 10, 2018, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/omc/articles/PMC489638/>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

early emphasizes Beck's insistence that the gender-identity issues she experiences as a soldier are not merely symptomatic of PTSD. Though, of course, having served as a SEAL and suffering from PTSD might have contributed to her gender dysphoria. The roots of Beck's gender-identity struggles go back to Chris' attempt to earn his father's acceptance as a young boy. At least from Chris' perspective, his father showed definite preference for his sisters and athlete brother while he was on the receiving end of his father's verbal and physical abuse. Chris recalls he would sneak some of his sister's clothes and wear them to sleep, feeling an overwhelming sense of comfort as a result.¹²³ Later, he enrolled at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) to win his father's approval and hopefully "would keep his 'female' self at bay."¹²⁴ He had his first sexual encounter there which, according to the memoir, is a dismal failure when he requested that he wore the girl's pantyhose and she rode on top of him each time.¹²⁵

Beck's "second life" as a Navy SEAL spanned 1991 through to 2011. Even more than his decision to enrol at VMI, the decision to become a SEAL which seems to him to be the pinnacle of manliness, would allow him to push the "inner female down into the depths of his being."¹²⁶ He thinks, likewise, that becoming a SEAL would allow him to earn his father's love. Despising his own body, in fact, allows him to punish his body beyond normal human limitations, earning him a reputation amongst other SEALs as a man of men. While Chris believes becoming a SEAL would resolve his gender issues, by steeping himself in what is arguably the pinnacle of masculine expression, he finds instead that, while on mission, his identity of SEAL transcends his identity as either male or female. Chris learns to enter what he called "combat mode" in which he detaches himself from his body, "watching everything—even himself—from a removed place in his mind, a place where hardly any emotional signals could break into consciousness: no fear, no anger, nothing but complete and total resolve."¹²⁷ The sense of detachment is, in effect, therapeutic, albeit temporally. Detached from the physical means liberation from any gendered biological constraints. In moments like these, Beck feels like his struggles with gender does not matter.

¹²³ Kristin Beck, *Warrior Princess: A U.S. Navy Seal's Journey to Coming out Transgender* (McLean: Advances Press, 2013), 33.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

In the heat of battle, the brotherhood overtakes Chris' reservations, making gender distinctions seem irrelevant: "Chris found this sense of detachment with his mind and body deepening even more ... This detachment from the physical self sometimes even made Chris feel like they were all disembodied—just spirits fighting side by side against other spirits."¹²⁸ Gender, here, becomes immaterial. This notion of being a "spirit" in battle is common and, in different ways, similar sensations are expressed in some memoirs—Matt Martin's *Predator*, for example—examined in this thesis. For Beck, however, already uncomfortable in his own body, this form of disembodiment through combat feels somehow liberating. He hates his body and does not care, in fact, if his body would die at war.¹²⁹

It turns out what looks like excessive masculinity on the outside is, in fact, indicative of Chris' struggle with feeling like a woman within. Chris finds solace and retreat in his technological expertise toward the development of UAV systems designed and tested for navigating unmanned aircraft, much like those piloted by Matt Martin and directed by Jane Blair. It gives him the ability to transcend his body once more and to relish being in a technological world. If he could not be a woman, at least he could be something not yet gender defined. His experience pressed by his gender dysphoria puts him in touch with a posthumanist world that would, even after his retirement, absorbs much of his career. Through technology, Beck finds an outlet where he could be "nothing" at all, or also everything he hopes to be at once. It is a blank slate, yet to be defined by social or cultural norms, a *tabula rasa*, capable of fulfilling any gender-role he seeks to explore within.

Beck also finds another sense of meaning as a SEAL that allows him, on account of his gender confusion, to wage war against the enemy more effectively. Disgusted by the way that Taliban treated women, Beck told Speckhard: "In a way it's pretty ironic that I was fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan ... they are the worst women haters in the world and I was a woman the whole time!"¹³⁰ At the same time, Beck has a hard time relating to some of the conversations that go on amongst his fellow SEALs regarding other women. When they speak disrespectfully about women, or mistreat a waitress when they are out together, he often chastises them, or pulls the waitress aside to apologize for

¹²⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 176.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 155-156.

their behaviour. Unlike Blair, who only has the rare occasion of hearing male soldiers speak about women when they think she is not listening, the other SEALs believe Beck is male, so he hears their misogyny up-close and personally. If there is one thing that makes it difficult for Chris to relate to his fellow SEALs, then it is this.

According to Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), the process of disorientation of queer subjects brings to light contacts with new orientations to break the order and establish new affects: “disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects ‘point’ somewhere else of they make what is ‘here’ become strange.”¹³¹ Of course, Beck insists, even while living a “male” life, he never thinks of himself as queer, or homosexual, but identified as a “straight girl.”¹³² Nonetheless, what Ahmed calls “disorientation” seems to adequately explain Beck’s sense of self in different ways, depending on which of his/her lives (s)he is living at the time.

The most profound disorientation, of course, occurs in the disjunction between soldiering and being on leave. The willingness and even hope to die while at war are especially pronounced in Chris’ mind as his first marriage is failing. As the only time he feels like he could “escape” his gender issue is while on mission as a SEAL, his discomfort in his male body immediately returns as soon as he is back home. Beck struggles to be a husband and a father. Being a SEAL is a way to earn his father’s approval, and now he is the neglectful father who has almost no relationship with his sons. Navigating something like fatherhood with his male body and female soul is too difficult. Accordingly, he takes as many deployments as he could get and requests redeployment again. The only way he could be a father, at all, is to die and at least leave his children some money.¹³³

Beck’s “third life” is when she fully becomes the “warrior princess.” The time Kristen embraces a transgendered identity publicly is frightening. Her whole experience with gender has been one to come to grips with the disjunction between an inner and outer self. Beck, later in the memoir, considers her body as a shell and nothing more, declaring that “‘I hate me! I hate this shell,’ ‘I can’t wait to be at the end of life—to no longer be

¹³¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

¹³² Beck, 152.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 176.

male or female. My shell doesn't match my soul! I think I will be a better person if I can match up, relax and start liking myself outside and in.'"¹³⁴ Kristen comes to believe that her soul—the unseen essence of her being—is nothing but a form of energy that continuously strives to evolve to a higher state of being, not bound by gender constraints.

Kristen reveals herself to family at first who in turn discount her post-deployment behaviour of “cross-dressing” as symptomatic of PTSD, in fact a particularly acute case of it. Still she insists that is not the case. Beck remains “Chris” by day and “Kristen” by night. Although Kristen officially retired from the SEALs, she continued working for the Pentagon developing weapons systems. She has to go to work each day, still “fitting in” with a military world where being transgendered is not acceptable. As the pressures from Beck’s family persists, he succumbs to the pressure and tries his hand at a second marriage, which fails in a matter of months.¹³⁵

The pressure mounts when he finds he has to continue taking hormones and live as a woman for at least a year in public before the approval for reassignment surgery. This response leads Chris to harbour suicidal thoughts: “To enter back into the SEALs community as a transgender individual would take all his courage and Chris didn’t feel strong enough or ready yet to face that. But Chris also knew if he didn’t do something soon he was going to die—or kill himself.”¹³⁶ To her own surprise and relief, when Kristen “comes out” at the Pentagon, she not only has the full support of her supervisor, William Shep, but with very few exceptions, once the news becomes public, even her former soldiers are supportive. Though his years of service, she ultimately finds a community that embraces and respects her for loyalty and bravery. The memoir includes a number of excerpts from e-mails and letters received from fellow soldiers expressing their support. The overarching theme of these letters—based on the ways Beck sacrificed for the country—is that (s)he could do whatever (s)he wanted and (s)he would have their full support.

While gender transitioning is, in some respects, a superficial surgery that only addresses the hormonal and chromosomal aspects of gender, it nonetheless provides Beck with a way of living a female life. The transformation from male to female is not represented as a dramatic one. Rather, it seems natural and well-deserved. It is ironical

¹³⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 116.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 136-137.

that the only place Chris resorts to in order to escape himself most is the only place that enables him to bring forward his inner and true self.

One of the mottos that Chris' division at the Pentagon embraces, particularly since they are developing technologies which remove soldiers from the battlefield but would still wage war, is "humans are more important than hardware."¹³⁷ Therefore, the acceptance of Kristen is an example of the way the Pentagon lives up to this motto when finding out about her, without devaluing her contributions to the team in the least. According to Rosi Braidotti, "capital value" within the social system is shifting with the rise of posthumanism: "Because advanced capitalism reduces bodies to their informational substrate in terms of energy resources, it levels out other categorical differences."¹³⁸ Unshackled by humanist limitations—notably in this context, essentialist categories regarding gender—human capital is valued not by the intangible qualities of an individual but based purely on one's capacity to contribute information to the public exchange. Braidotti explains:

Post-anthropocentric practices blur the qualitative lines of demarcation not only among categories (male/female, black/white, human/animal, dead/alive, centre/margin, etc.) but also within each one of them, the human becomes subsumed into global networks of control and commodification which have taken 'Life' as the main target.¹³⁹

It is expected, then, that transgenderism will not only be more accepted as the posthuman vision arises, but it may be viewed as an ideal representation of what gender means in a posthuman existence. What is viewed as an aberration or a "disorder" under humanism (gender dysphoria) is completely natural in a posthuman world. Thus, the transgender person is not disparaged but celebrated.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that Kristen experiences widespread acceptance within the military world after her transition—the military represents, in some respects, an institution that has lent itself toward posthuman sentiments as the attempt to transcend male/female categories has inevitably led to a broader acceptance of fluidity in gender. This is not to suggest, of course, that a transgendered soldier will no longer face challenges (Kristen does, too). The policies of the Trump administration regarding the issue notwithstanding, the trajectory toward acceptance rather than alienation of the

¹³⁷ Ibid., 171.

¹³⁸ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 62.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 64.

transgender person is a virtual inevitability as posthuman sentiments continue to advance in militaristic contexts.

For many, the disjunction between being a hyper-masculine SEAL and struggling with gender dysphoria seems incoherent. Being a SEAL is not tied to one's gender identity. In the same way Jane Blair insists on the value of the mindset for being a marine, Kristen, a pre-male or a current female, remains the same SEAL with the same capabilities and experiences: the same battle-tested SEAL does not go away. In spite of the culture ascribing SEAL to masculinity, it is not about being one gender or the other, SEAL is about attitude, courage, dependability, and resilience. Kristen performs the male-dominated motif ascribed to this career, and demonstrates that one's capacity to serve has less to do with gender and more to learn to be authentic to oneself in mind and body.

Conclusion

Masculinity, insofar as it has historically provided a cultural impetus for war (i.e. as a rite of passage), seems to lose its previously held advantage. While masculinity may have served World War II veterans well, the illusions of the masculine soldier turned toward a form of "toxic masculinity" birthed in Vietnam. There is a sense of emasculation that many Vietnam War soldiers experienced, as was discerned in Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk*. The rigid gender structure available to the Vietnam War era and the overemphasis on the lost masculine identity oversimplify the realities of veterans' lives and the complexities of their experiences. In contrast, the Iraq War presents the relationship between masculinity and war as an embodied experience that goes beyond simple assumptions, suggesting that masculinity, as it is historically understood, is not sustainable anymore.

In a new era of war where technology is rapidly overtaking "boots on the ground" warfare, and men and women are serving side-by-side in peacebuilding and combat operations, masculinity is challenged and ultimately more adaptable to the evolving role of the military, opening up the occasion for other traits previously assumed as feminine or even neuter to redefine the war. This unsettles the old economies of war—the masculine soldier becomes less valuable and other un-gendered and even trans-gendered models take its place. Joshua Key's text allows for a new soldiering motif which embraces masculine virtue, without tying it to the notion that a soldier must be an aggressive man in order to serve his country honourably. Likewise, Jane Blair finds out, through the

reflections of some of her fellow officers, that her presence has an impact on the unit that not only balanced out masculinity with feminine virtue, but actually refined the soldiers' masculine virtues in way that is more civilized and humane. In many respects, Kristen Beck is the closest of all the subjects whose memoirs are examined above to realizing a fluid gender posthuman ideal. His actions bear heroic masculinity; it turns out, eventually, that it is thinly constructed—only performed to disguise who he really is. Beck finds strength as a soldier in her own inner battles, suggesting that an individual who transcends gender boundaries might actually be the ideal soldier, rather than one who coheres solely to socially construed masculinity. In other words, a soldier's biological body needs not constrain his/her gender identity.

It is clear from the contrasts exemplified between the four memoirs above that gender-specific soldiers' identities began to be challenged and exposed in Vietnam and started to find new and more developed expressions in Iraq in ways that, while not erasing masculine military motifs, soften the boundaries between male and female virtues on the battlefield. Gender boundaries have become more like borders and less like barriers. They are blurred effectively enough that traversing between the boundaries which previously separated gender ideals is possible.

Posthumanism offers a new form of re-embodiment that needs not necessarily be gender exclusive, but it can be gender-tailored in a way that conforms to the individual expression in order to perform the tasks more responsibly. It also offers transgender soldiers a way of embodiment that is consistent with one's inner-self. Most importantly, the posthuman conceptualization of gender is particularly valuable for female soldiers to reverse the negative stereotypes about their service.

With that being said, the military continues to push against the notion that war can be exorcised from masculinity. Masculinity was and still is a basic component of the current understanding of gender and certainly is advocated by the military. As a result, representations of the peaceful female (epitomized by Jessica Lynch) and the heroic male (for example, Chris Kyle) still persist. Sexual harassment is not unheard of. In fact, as the number of combatant females increases in the ranks, so does male hostility. Yet, on the evidence of my discussion here the proper motif for soldiering is the one that embraces an entire gender expression—male, female, and transgendered—without erecting barriers between the virtues that accord with each.

The idea that fluid identities always result in positive hybrid qualities does not always hold true. The now notorious case of Lynndie England, who tortured detainees in

Abu Ghraib in 2005 with the same zeal as her male counterparts, is one example of many others in which a female soldier, with an equal access to violence as men, deviate from socialized gender differences, undermining the belief in women's inherent pacificism and non-violence and reinforcing aspects of violent masculinity. The fact that many of the images show a female soldier harassing the prisoners, leading some of them around naked on a leash, is no mistake. The following chapter will build on this theme—namely the dehumanization of the enemy—to examine how that nature of the war in Iraq and the frequent face-to-face interactions with the Iraqis prompt a shift in the way soldiers perceive themselves in relation to “the Other.”

Chapter 5

Dehumanization of Warfare and Emerging Self/Other Dynamics

“So now the pictures will continue to ‘assault’ us—as many Americans are bound to feel.”

—Susan Sontag, (2004)¹

Famed activist and war critic, Susan Sontag, penned these words only months before her death in 2004 after the release of photographs showing U.S. soldiers torturing and harassing Iraqi war prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The notorious pictures sparked a national public sentiment that this incident was unacceptable, even outrageous, intensifying the public opposition to the intervention of Iraq in 2003 in the same way the 1968 massacre at My Lai reversed public opinion against the war in Vietnam. Despite the fact that some of the soldiers appearing in these photographs were quick to defend themselves as carrying out the orders of superiors, the Abu Ghraib atrocity revealed the enduring nature of the deep-rooted strategy of dehumanizing the “Other” and the willingness of some soldiers to unhesitatingly engage in inhuman violence.² The outrage produced by the release of the photos, however, reveals that not everyone—soldiers or civilians—had bought into the dehumanization of the Other, which allowed this abuse to begin with. Moreover, Abu Ghraib is only an isolated case that does not take into account the recent shifts in opinion during the period between the Vietnam and Iraq wars which blur the defining boundaries between one’s relationships to the Other.

While military leaders regularly turn to dehumanizing strategies to persuade new recruits that they are facing less-than-human rivals who are pure evil only worthy of elimination, direct enemies to be eliminated, recent shifts in military approach to wars, along with social developments, demonstrate a less racist or otherwise ethnically biased worldviews in comparison to the Cold War era and earlier. Racist and ethnocentric justifications which pit one group as superior against another inferior group, whether to

¹ Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” (*New York Times*, May 23, 2004), accessed June 17, 2019.

² John Pettegrew, *Light It Up: The Marine Eye for Battle in the War for Iraq* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 52.

justify killing the inferior or the superior taking power over the Other, have become less tenable, mandating an altered understanding of self/other dynamics.

The military's adaption of cultural training, since Vietnam, to connect meaningfully with civilian people of other cultures in order to achieve mission objectives give soldiers more leeway to embrace understandings of the Iraqi people.³ The nature of the Iraq War as a largely urban conflict and the troops' continuous interaction with the Iraqi people, both as friends and as enemies, entail a friendlier encounter where the Iraqis are frequently seen as humans, not figurative representatives of a distinct and foreign culture.⁴ Thus, the Iraq War presents a conflict unable to be rationally understood from the ethnocentric perspective of Vietnam.

On a social level, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s contributed to more racial tolerance and respect for group rights in the U.S., while global flows of markets and media images in the 1990s transformed how many Americans view those from other cultures and countries.⁵ These factors combined mean that the perceptions of Iraq War soldiers were different from that of their predecessors in Vietnam. The soldier more often than not embarks on a process of reflection against military supported definitions of good/evil, right/wrong and ally/enemy to re-evaluate the purposes of war, and one's moral responsibility during wartime.

This chapter aims to consider the shift in soldiers' responses to the dehumanization inherent in military training and culture. I argue that the model of binary differentiation between self and the Other that dominates Vietnam War literature becomes more nuanced in texts from the Iraq War. While Vietnam War memoirs demonstrate the concept of Other more closely aligned with the official military avocation, Iraq War texts tend to move beyond the self/other distinction, showing soldiers experiencing greater "ideological traumas" as they sought to reconcile similarities between the Iraqis and themselves with the distinction of the Iraqis as enemies.⁶ The varied terrains of human interactions between the Americans and the Iraqis reveal a complicated, connected

³ Rochelle Davis, "Culture as a Weapon," *Middle East Report* 255 (2010), accessed July 16, 2019, <https://merip.org/2010/05/culture-as-a-weapon/>.

⁴ Pitchford, "Writing US Identities," 216.

⁵ Steve Spence, "Cultural Globalization and the US Civil Rights Movement," *Public Culture* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 551-572, 552.

⁶ Williams, "The Desert of Anatopism," 381.

relationship better described from a posthuman perspective that locates soldiers and civilians within a greater scope of humanity, integrating them into a larger whole.

On this view, posthumanism blurs the exclusive definition of the self and the historic distinction between different races, presenting instead a less antagonistic framing of the Other as an enemy. Rather than creating distinctions between the self and the Other, the posthuman viewpoint removes the “self-centred individualism,” inherent in humanism by proposing an affirmative “non-unitary” relationality between different categories of people.⁷ The concept of the human, as Donna Haraway explains, is not “given by definition, but only by relation, by engagement in situated, worldly encounters, where boundaries take shape and categories sediment.”⁸ Put another way, what seems to be at stake is not defining the self or the Other, but relating different categories of persons in complex and relational dynamics, recognizing the humanity of both. This lack of a hierarchal autonomous self in relation to the Other impacts the internalization of individual’s identity and his/her ethical perspective towards those who are different. In this way, a posthumanist stance enables the cultivation of ethics rooted in “vulnerability and passivity” rather than disdain and aggression.⁹ As I will show, this shift from a self-centred conceptualization to a more integrated understanding is evident in comparisons between narratives from the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977) is the representative Vietnam era text in this chapter that creates a benchmark against which Iraq War texts can be compared and contrasted. The war on which Herr reports is told as if it is America’s war, experienced, almost solely, by U.S. military personnel with little concern for how the war is changing Vietnam, or the lives of Vietnamese people. The Other is exorcised from the narrative entirely, at least in any meaningful way and remains Other, and nothing more. The brutality of the Vietnam War dehumanized the American soldiers themselves, reducing them to machines incapable of self-control.

Iraq War texts, on the other hand, are not constrained by the soldiers’ experiences and, in fact, are only partially soldiers’ narratives. While war still pits the self against the Other and racist terms (for example, ‘*hajji*’) are affixed to the enemy in an attempt to dehumanize him, soldiers often experience a psychological tension between the binary

⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 190.

⁸ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 62.

⁹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 141.

dichotomies that are frequent features of traditional war writing. The focus on the male American soldier's experience, particularly the infantryman and the marine, while not entirely gone, has been reduced to provide textual space for more complex perspectives and varied points of view. The first of the Iraq War texts in this chapter, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), a collection of short stories, features non-traditional American protagonists, including a foreign service relation officer, a chaplain, and a specialist in psychological operations, who can see the humanity of the Iraqis and struggle to deal with the moral consequences of what they saw and did to them.

The fact that everybody, regardless of gender and race, is equally susceptible to war and violence is found in *Sand Queen* (2011). In this text, Helen Benedict employs a dual-narrative approach, detailing the experiences of two women, an American female soldier and an Iraqi girl, to show the moral complexity of the war and its consequences on both sides of the same conflict. No text shows a deep concern for what the war is doing to the Iraqi people and how they are experiencing it as Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014). Written mainly in the form of vignettes, *My Life* affords Turner a textual space to assume many different perspectives, Americans and Iraqis alike, civilians or enemies, as all collateral victims of violence.

All three texts employ fiction as the basis of their commentary, yet based on the stories and recollections of soldiers present in the conflicts, enhancing a blend of fact and fiction and presenting a creative genre that spans the memoir and the novel. These hybrid accounts broaden the lenses available to the readers, inviting them to imagine the possibilities and potential failures of cross-cultural encounters in war contexts. On this front, fiction is a rehearsal of imagining oneself in the experiences of others, to ponder the feelings of all human beings, challenging in turn readers to re-examine their own biases towards people most would consider wholly Other.

Reading three texts from Iraq alongside *Dispatches* will reveal how the dehumanizing construction of the Other common to humanist frameworks gradually lost its force, presenting instead rich possibilities of posthuman encounters.¹⁰ While the Iraqi people are still often seen and portrayed as others in soldiers' narratives, recent shifts in military and social views in the West make dehumanizing the enemy not entirely justifiable, inducing a responsibility in soldiers to seek new ways to represent the conflict from a wide range of perspectives than one-sided memoirs of Vietnam War.

¹⁰ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

The Limits of Dehumanization and the Lessons of Vietnam

Wars pit one country or group against another by definition, creating the need to frame conflict in terms of self versus Other. Historically, the more the enemy can be viewed and/or presented as different the easier it is to dehumanize them, which in turn allows soldiers to kill more freely and the public at home to more palatably support the war effort.¹¹ Not being able to kill an enemy is detrimental to military goals and dangerous for the soldier's life in a battlefield. Dehumanization, therefore, plays a vital role in framing the Other as a potential enemy to motivate the soldiers to kill without hesitation.

The creation of the Other in military training in the Vietnam era required the construction of a new identity of soldier, through which he could distinguish himself from the Other to justify harming him. This aspect of training entails self-dehumanization so the soldier can be refashioned in the image of being a man that the military finds advantageous, facilitating clean lines between soldiers and enemies.¹² The training the recruits went through before going to Vietnam was not systematic. Even during training for counterinsurgency operations, recruits never received training on how to reduce civilian deaths or to protect them in villages.¹³ Thus, soldiers were sent to Vietnam unprepared to interact with the Vietnamese they may encounter in nonviolent ways. Moreover, neither basic training nor advanced training designed to ready troops for deployment provided anything close to the cultural sensitivity or casualty prevention instruction now common in military readiness.¹⁴ The training about Vietnamese culture was largely provided through a package and multimedia materials that did not require an instructor, further preventing the soldiers from raising questions or concerns.¹⁵

Referring frequently to the enemy as a "gook" during training rather than a Vietcong soldier, becomes a way to isolate the Other from his own culture and background. While it is unclear whether the military oversimplified the training materials to improve comprehension for the soldiers or intentionally produced stereotypical descriptions of Vietnamese culture, training materials did not provide balanced or

¹¹ Grossman, *On Killing*, 17.

¹² Sanborn, *The American Novel of War*, 220.

¹³ Appy, *Working-Class War*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁵ Allison Abbe and Melissa Gouge, "Cultural Training for Military Personnel: Revisiting the Vietnam Era," *Military Review* (July-August 2012): 9-17, 11.

culturally appropriate representations of the Vietnamese, not even of the South Vietnamese people who were U.S. allies. The stark differences in American and Vietnamese cultures, combined with this lack of preparedness and training, resulted in a strong categorization of the Vietnamese as Other.

It is not only training that created a narrow-minded understanding of the Vietnamese. The prevalent ideologies, attributed to humanism, have bred prejudices and divisive discriminations in the West and fuelled many of the violence and destruction wrought during times of conflict.¹⁶ Humanism is built upon exclusion and not inclusion—or at least a Euro-American world view—dividing people on a scale where the white race is at the top of other races.¹⁷ In this way, humanism facilitates an exclusionary construction of the Other who is subjected to be reformed or delivered from their ignorance and inadequate cultural practices by their colonizers. By thinking of the Other as less than human, ultimately, the humanist values undergirding the soldiers' worldview are preserved.

Humanism has particular implications for racism, which is basically a reduction of the value of one human being in comparison to another on account of race, thereby disengaging them from any moral responsibilities towards others whom they reduce to “a subhuman ontological status.”¹⁸ In the Vietnam War era racism functioned not to justify an ancient “right to kill” *per se*, nor did it function within any kind of just war theory. Instead, it was an exercise of power at the level of species. It was not only the Vietnamese who were dehumanized, but Vietnam itself was presented as a barbaric, exotic sort of place that starkly contrasts with the civilized West.¹⁹ The narrative of the differences between the United States and Vietnam was presented as a conflict of an advanced world versus a primitive one. The presumption, of course, is that the modern world is superior to the primitive Vietnam. Most soldiers in Vietnam readily accepted the presentation of Vietnam as a country that required American assistance to survive but remained inferior to it.

As 88% of the soldiers deployed in Vietnam were Caucasian, many likely brought into their military service already racist views of people of colour, whether unconsciously

¹⁶ Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹⁸ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 47.

¹⁹ Feagin, *Orthopedic Surgery in Vietnam*.

through their portrayal in American society or unconsciously among young recruits from being brought up in highly segregated areas.²⁰ As the number of deployed soldiers of colour was lower than the white (10 percent were black and 1 per cent belonged to other races), stereotypical racial distinctions of others in both training and while deployed is further preserved.²¹

The result of these factors was a dehumanization of the Vietnamese, whether enemies or allies, soldiers or civilians. While in Korea and the two world wars the American public aligned with media-controlled official narrative which encouraged dehumanization of the Other and framing of those on the enemy side as justifiable to kill, changing media technology during the Vietnam War prevented this tightly-regulated presentation, changing as a result the public sentiment regarding the war from the mid-1960s onward. On this level, Vietnam marked a shift to a consideration of the Vietnamese, particularly civilians, as innocents trapped in the machinery of war.²² Also, as many soldiers returned to the U.S. damaged psychologically, suffering from combat trauma, there was an emerging understanding that traumatic events are powerful to draw people closer to each other, leading many veterans to recognize the suffering of their prior enemies. This trend of recognizing the Vietnamese suffering is best represented in Oliver Stone's 1993 Vietnam War film, *Heaven and Earth*, which puts the trauma of an American soldier side by side with that of a female Vietnamese refugee.

Since the defeat in Vietnam, the U.S. needed a different official justification from previous wars that painted entire people groups as inferior and Americans as superior. The U.S. government sought to frame the Iraq War as a humanitarian intervention to protect the innocent and to rescue the Iraqi people from dictatorship while still obliterating the insurgents in their midst.²³ From a humanitarian perspective, the superior power does not have an inherent right to conquer, but a responsibility to defend the vulnerable, therefore undermining the construction of dehumanized Other. The military becomes more than just a looming violent force in the region, but a power player enmeshed in the life of the community.

²⁰ "Vietnam Statistics" (*US War Dog Association*), accessed June 19, 2019, <http://www.uswardogs.org/vietnam-statistics/>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hallin, *The "Uncensored War,"* 196.

²³ Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 46.

This altered justification requires changes in military training. No longer was killing as many enemies as possible the foundation of training for soldiers headed for war. It becomes strategically important to understand the culture of the enemy to out-think them and to enable U.S. troops to garner the assistance of Iraqis for both intelligence and public relations. In 2004, Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, released an official statement emphasizing this perspective, stating “regional and cultural expertise are essential enabling capabilities for DOD activities in the transition to and from hostilities.”²⁴ Foreign language skills were presented as potentially necessary for survival as well as for achieving military objectives. Therefore, cultural sensitivity training became a required component for those to be deployed, during which soldiers received instruction in interaction with Iraqis and even “smart cards” which provided basic dos and don’ts and could be carried easily.²⁵ That is not to say that dehumanization dynamic ceases entirely to exist but the differences seem to matter less when the goals of war are only achieved through joint efforts.

Another major factor that significantly challenges many dehumanizing aspects of training is the increased numbers of recruits from ethnic minorities as the military transitioned to a volunteer service.²⁶ In the Iraq War, 77% of all soldiers were Caucasian, 17% were black, 4% were Asian and 2% belong to other races.²⁷ The percentage of Caucasians soldiers declined significantly between the Vietnam and Iraq wars, with all other minorities being represented in greater proportions. The military, accordingly, needed to modify its race-based culture to ensure that soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds continue their service.

But it was not the nature of the new wars that only changed the attitudes of people towards the Other, many of the social developments since World War II contributed significantly to the destabilization of ethnocentrism. The widespread fear of institutionalized racism, and particularly the systemic ethnic cleansing, akin to the crimes committed by the Nazi regime and other genocides elsewhere, brought about human

²⁴ Donald Rumsfeld, cited in William D. Wunderle, *A Manual for American Servicemen in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 3.

²⁵ Davis, “Culture as a Weapon.”

²⁶ Brown, *Enlisting Masculinity*, 43.

²⁷ Institute of Medicine, *Returning Home from Iraq and Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2013), 31.

rights revolutions.²⁸ Such large scale violence draws peoples' attention to the importance of preserving the humanity of the Other, particularly non-white Others, who are the victims of colonial and military aggression.

The Vietnam War itself occurred during a time of escalating racial tension nationwide, symbolized by the Civil Rights Movement's long struggle for equal treatment in the U.S., achieving a breakthrough in institutionalizing legal and social rights.²⁹ Building on the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of the mid-1960s, the shift from the social model of assimilation towards peoples' rights of self-determination supports the principle of multiculturalism in which no particular race is privileged over another.³⁰ From a liberal perspective, the co-existence of various races and cultures need not amount to conflict of interests, it only supports exchanges across culture lines, creating in turn a peaceful co-existence in a one shared social space.

This emerging trend of reconsidering the Other also manifests itself on an international level. After the Vietnam War and the end of the Cold War, there was a discussion of a cooperative approach towards international relations to face different levels of global threats. President Bill Clinton, after twenty years of strained relations with Vietnam, normalized the diplomatic relation between the two countries in 1995.³¹ The effects of globalization extend to war zones. The transformation of the battlefield between Vietnam and Iraq wars—from foreign jungle to shared commodities and lifestyles—has a direct impact on the level of empathy that the soldiers, and by extension, the public cultivate towards the Other.³² The Iraqi civilian, and to some extent even the enemy, seem much more like the American soldier than in Vietnam, making dehumanization more difficult.

In a global world, social media gave the American public a view of the ongoing conflict that was not possible during Vietnam. Cyberspace, more often than the past, could mediate a soldier's encounter with the Other, even while mediating the Iraqis' view

²⁸ Nancy Flowers, ed., "Human Rights Here and Now: Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Minneapolis: *Human Rights Resource Center*, 1998), accessed March 21, 2019, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/edumat/hreduseries/hereandnow/Part-1/short-history.htm>.

²⁹ James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 140.

³⁰ Michael Ezra, *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives* (California: Abc-Clio, 2009), 118.

³¹ Steven Greenhouse, "Senior Clinton Aides Urging Full Relations with Vietnam" (*The New York Times*, May 20, 1995), accessed July 18, 2019.

³² Williams, "The Desert of Anatopism," 360.

of the soldier.³³ These cyber narratives undermine the construction of the Other as inferior, as the perspectives of these groups become available and intertwined with the perspectives of the dehumanizing group. The ethnocentric notion that not all human races have an equal value appeared problematic and unrealistic by the end of the twentieth century. Even though views hardened again in the wake of the attacks on 9/11, the cumulative effect of these changes means that the U.S. military is no longer able to successfully dehumanize entire ethnic groups. This confounds racist patterns which dehumanize the enemy and fosters an empathetic tone, found prominently in the Iraq War narratives much more than in Vietnam era writing.

The Paradox of Dehumanization in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*

Dispatches is a journalistic report on the chaos of the war when confronted with unrealized military objectives and the growing disillusionment of U.S. soldiers. The book is the result of an assignment *Esquire* magazine gave to one of its reporters, Michael Herr, in 1967, to write a column on the Americanization of Saigon during the Vietnam War.³⁴ *Dispatches* emerged after the war, in 1977, almost a decade after Herr first received the assignment, at a time when war narratives were beginning to coalesce into general histories of the war that many were glad to forget, and others were content to relegate to the history books.

Later on, in the 1980s, Herr contributed to the scripts of Hollywood productions like *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, playing a major role in establishing the popular perception of the war in the decades which followed its end.³⁵ Receiving initially little support from the American people when they returned home, narratives like Herr's introduced to the American public the soldiers' perspectives, and contributed to changing public sentiment towards them. The Americans came to grips with the fact that, all at once, they could reject the legitimacy of the conflict, repenting of the nation's sins, while nonetheless embracing the soldiers who served, many who were unwillingly sent to the conflict in the draft.³⁶ The veterans were, as a result, seen less as the perpetrators of an

³³ Whitlock, *Soft Weapons*, 25.

³⁴ Spindler, "Michael Herr's '*Dispatches*,'" 25.

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

³⁶ David K. Shipler, "Another View of Vietnam Veterans" (*The New Yorker*, May 2, 2015), accessed July 21, 2019.

unjust U.S. foreign policy and more as victims of a larger, complex, and regrettable chapter of the nation's history.

Herr is a pioneer in what, at the time, was known as New Journalism. Unlike the detached voice of conventional reporting which isolates experiences for the purpose of a larger story, new journalism interleaves subjective and objective perspectives on the war.³⁷ Although bulk of the presentation of the war is soldiers in dialogue, Herr remains an active narrator, presenting pages of his own observations, feelings, and insights.³⁸ Yet the book retains what Meghan Lau calls "an external rather than internal orientation."³⁹

But even when Herr retains an objective approach towards the war, there is little room for political opinion in his reporting. There is nothing in *Dispatches* regarding the reason for the war, the political framework underlying the U.S. justification for a presence in South East Asia, or any judgments regarding whether the American presence there is justified or not. War becomes removed from the real world, the politics behind it. I argue that Herr's attempts to separate the soldiers' experiences from the politics, and all of that from the impact of the war on the Vietnamese people, speak to the humanist ideology which undergirds the era's writings on the war. While the Vietnamese are not completely erased from Herr's book, there is in large part a portrayal of stereotypical and ontological othering.

Vietnam, as a country, is presented as a dark place, haunted by ghosts, and full of dread of the unknown: "the Highlands of Vietnam is spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief."⁴⁰ The repetition of the word "spooky" here and in other parts of the text contributes to presenting Vietnam as an unsettling place with an otherworldly atmosphere. Herr, John Armstrong argues, projects a traditional form of gothic onto the Vietnamese landscape, which in itself representative of "the outright racism of America's belligerent, imperialistic foreign policies."⁴¹ It is for this reason—namely the chaotic, satanic and uncivilised aspect of Vietnam that makes the war possible in the first place. The war in Vietnam is a continuation of America's vision, one that is rooted in its colonial

³⁷ Spindler, "Michael Herr's '*Dispatches*,'" 26.

³⁸ Ibid., 26.

³⁹ Meghan Lau, "Subverting Autobiography: War, Narrative, and Ethics in Michael Herr's *Dispatches*," *Life Writing* 6, no. 2 (October 2009): 193-210, 197.

⁴⁰ Michael Herr, *Dispatches*, 2nd ed. (London: Picador, 1978), 94.

⁴¹ Armstrong, "Haunted Jungles of Horror and Trauma," 47.

history to eliminate chaos and to impose order, ironically carried out by carpet bombings and defoliating the jungle.⁴²

The theme of dehumanization of the Other is evident throughout *Dispatches*. Herr notes that a majority of the soldiers refer to the NVA soldiers as Charlie or the VC. By blanketing all Vietnamese soldiers with one general name, the American soldiers instantly peel human characteristics away from the enemy. Notably, this perspective spares the soldier of any ethical responsibility. In one scene, after overhearing a “soldier-poet” talks eloquently about his heroic purpose, another soldier responds: “all that’s just a load, man. We’re here to kill gooks. Period.”⁴³ The ethics of the war, its broader purpose, and even the soldier’s tasks are reduced to a single activity—killing “gooks.” These are not Vietnamese people, not even the Vietcong, but they are something other than human. The soldier here is reduced to a killing machine without any ethical commitments, only carrying out programmatic tasks.

On another occasion, a grunt tells Herr “We had this gook and we was gonna skin him” but a lieutenant interrupts and tells the soldier: “Hey asshole, there’s a reporter in the TOC, you want him to come out and see that? I mean, use your fucking heads, there’s a time and place for everything”⁴⁴ Here, there is a recognition that there is a disjunction between the soldier’s perception of the Vietnamese and what a reporter might think and, still more, the reporter’s domestic readers. The soldiers dehumanize the Other, but nonetheless recognize that there was something untenable about their illusion, something that someone unconditioned by the military training would not understand.

According to David Smith, dehumanization is “the belief that some beings only *appear* human, but beneath the surface, where it really counts, they aren’t human at all.”⁴⁵ Smith argues that dehumanization is a process that occurs in three distinct domains: biology, culture, and the architecture of the human mind.⁴⁶ These three domains work in tandem, as cultural forces intersect with psychological and social needs, requiring a biological basis for assertion. Thus, while early American slavery depended upon cultural needs—namely the cotton economy—the architecture of the mind would not allow whites

⁴² Don Ringnalda, *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1994), 29.

⁴³ Herr, 20.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵ David Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 4-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

to enslave other whites. Instead, a biological difference needed to be defined, so the black people who, while appearing human, were ultimately seen as something less than or other than human. Ultimately, “dehumanization feeds on racism; without racism, it probably couldn’t exist.”⁴⁷

In this respect, what American soldiers did with respect to their Vietnamese enemies was nothing new. However, such dehumanization impacts more than the Americans’ ability to engage the Viet Cong, with Herr recalling one soldier commenting, “Vietnam, man. Bomb ‘em and feed ‘em, bomb ‘em and feed ‘em.”⁴⁸ Here, the enemy soldier and the Vietnamese recipients of humanitarian aid are conflated as a single people group, perhaps distinguishable by politicians and generals who order the attacks and aid efforts, but indecipherable to the soldier.

This tendency towards dehumanizing the Vietnamese is also evident when an American soldier mentioned how they treat “dinks no different than that [animals].”⁴⁹ The image of “animal” here is important. As Paul Roscoe explains in the context of killing in war:

The most common way to overwhelm an aversion to killing ... is to combine dehumanization of the enemy, which denies him or her conspecific status, with an image that elicits killing responses appropriate toward nonhuman species. Frequently, war is depicted as hunting rather than murder, and the enemy as a game animal rather than a human.⁵⁰

While official narratives attempted to promote the opposite—namely that the soldiers were not hunters, but liberators to free the Vietnamese people from the perils of communism—the soldier became increasingly alienated—from himself, from his own culture, and from his humanity.

The nature of the fight in Vietnam, particularly as a majority of the fighting goes on at night, and the tension of being murdered in a remote, little known Asian country, pushed many soldiers toward developing a tribal logic which entails all gooks are enemies and therefore killable.⁵¹ This coheres with Robert Jay Lifton’s description of “The Gook

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸ Herr, 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁰ Paul Roscoe, “Intelligence, Coalitional Killing, and the Antecedents of War,” *American Anthropologist* 109, no. 3 (September 2007): 485-495, 490.

⁵¹ Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 142.

Syndrome” in his book *Home from the War* which functions as a defence mechanism that the soldiers develop to adapt to the harsh realities of Vietnam.⁵²

This self-dehumanization manifests itself further when Herr recalls that the Americans regularly disrespect their own dead, referring to them as “dumb dead fuckers,” and trampling across their bodies while moving about in air transports.⁵³ In one instance, after a supposed victory, Herr writes that “at the very least, 200 grunts had been blown away there and around 1,000 more were wounded.” An officer responded: “Oh two hundred isn’t anything. We lost more than that in an hour on Guadalcanal” (referencing a key battle in the Pacific during the Second World War); Herr recalls: “these were American dead they were talking about; you should have heard them when the dead were Vietnamese.”⁵⁴ Here, even American bodies are reduced to an economic scale, the relative cost of life compared to other tragedies, compared to the body-counts of the Vietnamese. When soldier deaths are devalued, it is not shocking that the soldiers themselves would begin to see themselves as commodities, expendable, and less than human. This occurs, especially, when power dynamics place an individual beneath the control of greater authority, who becomes the dehumanizing force. By hearing how American lives are reduced to mere body counts, with 200 lost lives considered “nothing,” how much less valuable is one’s own, single life, rendered by contrast? The result is that the soldier comes to see himself as something less-than-human, not as expendable as the enemy, but expendable nonetheless.

At one point, after hauling a corpse for two months so that it can be returned to the States, one of the soldiers opens the body bag and declares, “Shit, this is a *gook*! Wat’d they bring him *here* for?” After another soldier points out that he’s wearing an American uniform the first soldier responds again: “I don’t give a fuck, that ain’t no American, that’s a fucking *gook*!”⁵⁵ The observation that the corpse is from an Asian American who, apparently, was serving in the U.S. Army, leads one soldier to simply identify him with the enemy. He’s a “gook,” not an American. For American soldiers of Asian descent, the war was even harder, inducing them in a constant state of alertness and “a feeling of

⁵² Lifton, *Home from the War*, 204.

⁵³ Herr, 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

imminent danger,” even from their own troops who easily mistaken them for being the enemy.⁵⁶

As has been observed earlier, the dehumanization soldiers imposed upon the enemy was artificial, a defence mechanism, but one that they nonetheless had to cling to in order to perform their duty. The mind, however, cannot escape the psychological impact of such unjustified violence on a sub-conscious level. Since immoral behaviour leads to self-dehumanization, which in turn leads to unethical behaviour, it further exacerbates the problem. The pills given to soldiers, supposedly to supplement natural human capacities with an enhancement that gives them an advantage over the enemy, provided not only a means of escaping reality, but also served to relax the soldiers so that they can cope with the horrors of war.⁵⁷ Indeed, some have called Vietnam the “pharmacological war,” as soldiers were given amphetamines—which they called “pep pills”—intended to increase their endurance in battle.⁵⁸ While the government prescribed 20 milligrams of dextroamphetamine, to be taken beginning 48 hours before combat, reports from the field indicate that they were given out “like candies,” and the soldiers paid little attention to the suggested dosages.⁵⁹ In addition, psychotropic drugs were prescribed, presumably to lessen the shock of things soldiers witnessed while in combat. The military employed a number of psychiatrists, who typically prescribed chlorpromazine to soldiers, leading to what was, initially, a relatively low rate of combat trauma. However, the short-sighted outcome seemed to only delay the symptoms of trauma, taking their psychological toll on the soldiers later.⁶⁰

While Vietnam was largely a land battle, helicopters were used in an unprecedented way to move troops quickly in and out of combat zones. It was believed that this would give the Americans a decisive edge over the primitive enemy. Herr, however, recalls that being airlifted in a helicopter was often as perilous as the battle itself.⁶¹ The use of helicopters in Vietnam represents one way the U.S. had relied too heavily upon

⁵⁶ Man, *Soldiering through Empire*, 142.

⁵⁷ Herr, 6.

⁵⁸ Lukasz Kamienskik, “The Drugs That Built a Super Soldier” (*The Atlantic*, April 8, 2016), accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/04/the-drugs-that-built-a-super-soldier/477183/>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Herr, 13.

technological superiority as a guarantor of victory. Indeed, it is the reliance of the U.S. on technology, it seems, that has lulled many into a false sense of security, making war strategists unable and unwilling to adapt when the situations changed, and the unexpected occurred. Technology, interestingly, has made the American forces less agile, in many ways, making the U.S. troops more vulnerable even as it gives them certain advantages.⁶² The war in Vietnam is a chapter in history that does not seem to fit with the national narrative that Americans has fostered since the nation's founding, namely, that America represents the world's moral centre, and the Americans are exceptional people destined for greatness.⁶³

Herr opens his book as he stands in front of an old, weathered, map of Vietnam, reflecting on the ongoing war: "It was late '67 now, even the most detailed maps didn't reveal much anymore ... We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war."⁶⁴ The map represents an objective, and outsider perspective on the war. It reduces a nation to natural elements, like rivers, jungles or mountains with no traceable inhabitants. The map denotes very little. Herr's text, like the map, relegates the people of Vietnam to a footnote in the cultural narratives surrounding the war.

War in *Dispatches* is a profoundly human experience but it is one that belongs to the American kind of human. The speciesism of a humanist worldview is evident by the fact that the Other, the Vietnamese, is dehumanized or, at least, his humanity is ignored. There is nothing contained in *Dispatches* describing a Vietnamese experience, and how the presence of U.S. troops changed their lives. The history that is preserved through the journalism Herr engages in—even if it is "New Journalism"—is one that reports and retains only the war's impact on Americans, and mostly soldiers at that.

This form of reporting is effective in allowing readers to gain a sense of a soldier's boots-on-the-ground experience. Herr crafts the writing so that the soldiers not only seem more realistic to the reader but in a way that the reader becomes empathetic to their plights. The suggestive titles of two chapters, "Breathing in" and "Breathing out" emphasizes the fact that war is not merely a series of events, defined by orders given from government authorities; it is an experience defined by emotions, visceral experiences, anxiety, stress, tension, and moments of relief.

⁶² Gibson, *The Perfect War*, viii.

⁶³ Appy, *American Reckoning*, xii.

⁶⁴ Herr, 3.

Dispatches fits the typical American war story of a white male soldier who goes to war only to come traumatised by what he experiences.⁶⁵ Although the representation of white male soldiers relays to the readers something valuable about the war, it is not necessarily effective at presenting the conflict from a broader perspective, beyond what the soldiers themselves think, say and did. But, as the following sections discuss, a younger generation of American soldiers during the Iraq War were successfully breaking through this tradition, and introducing a more rounded representation of the war and the people involved in and affected by it.

Moral Injury in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014), named for the first of twelve Iraq War short stories, allows a number of narrators and perspectives to emerge from the observation of a single author who fought in the war. Klay served as an officer in the U.S. Marines between 2005 and 2009 during the U.S. troop surge in Iraq, in the Anbar province, from January 2007 through February 2008. After leaving the military, in 2009, he has authored dozens of articles regarding his views of the war.

Writing short stories instead of fiction allows Klay to navigate various war experiences that, in the final estimation, about much more than his own experience. The war—like most other events—is experienced by different people, in strikingly different ways.⁶⁶ Only through a harmony of perspectives, Klay's approach suggests, can a symphony emerge that allows the reader to get a rounded sense of what the war really was. Although all his twelve short stories are mainly narrated from American perspectives in the same way Herr wrote his war dispatches, to say they represent their American characters in the same way is rather a hasty judgment. *Redeployment* departs from the self-centred representation of U.S. soldiers noticeably found in *Dispatches*, favouring instead a more balanced dynamic between the American and the racial Other.⁶⁷ Through multiple non-traditional American protagonists—other than the infantryman and the marine—Klay represents his characters pushing against the national and military

⁶⁵ Jennifer Haytock, "Reframing War Stories: Multivoiced Novels," *Modern Fiction Studies* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 336-354, 336.

⁶⁶ Phil Klay, "Transcending the Archetypes of War," interview by Matt Ghallagher, (*The Paris Review*, March 4, 2014), accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/03/04/transcending-the-archetypes-of-war-an-interview-with-phil-klay/>.

⁶⁷ Haytock, "Reframing War Stories," 338.

definitions of themselves to establish an individualized self able to make decisions or take actions autonomous to that of the military.

The story “Money as a Weapon System” begins with a declaration that, to a degree, summarizes the entire point that *Redeployment* as a collection intends to make: “Success was a matter of perspective.”⁶⁸ Nathan—the protagonist of the story—is a Foreign Service Officer, tasked with overseeing projects to improve the welfare of Iraqis and help democracy gain a foothold in the region, struggles against a web of leucocratic and competing political interests. Several projects have been initiated which only benefit the Iraqis marginally, but are designed to send political messages back to Washington. For instance, a project to support five Iraqi widows in a beekeeping venture is justified accordingly: “Give someone a job. That’s economic improvement. Give women a job. That’s women’s empowerment. Give a widow a job. That’s aiding disenfranchised populations. we can say it’s an Iraqi-led project.”⁶⁹ The patronization of colonial powers is illustrated here through the indirect control of the government over the Iraqis and the irrelevance of the Americans’ efforts for real Iraqi needs. The tension between colonial ideas and post-colonial sentiments is evident in Nathan’s exchanges with his superiors and the politicians who are dictating policy in the U.S.

Nathan proposes, instead, to focus on getting a water plant operational. This, however, proves to be a nightmare. In spite of more than a million dollars that has been sunk into the plant already, it is not operational and the wrong pipes are installed, putting too much pressure on the villages and exploding people’s sinks and toilets. The Americans’ misunderstanding of the issue is amplified further when Nathan learns that the name the Americans give the place, “Istalquaal” (believing it meant independence) is misspelled. When Nathan asks one Iraqi manager about the significance of the name he replies: “Istalquaal? *Istiqal* means independence ... Istalquaal means nothing. It means Americans can’t speak Arabic.”⁷⁰ This exchange is representative of the failing and insensitive foreign policies that Nathan sees in action throughout the story.

A long episode, when an American congressperson, Representative Gene Goodwin, sends baseball uniforms with the expectation that teaching the Iraqi children baseball would help inculcate democratic values, leads to a heated exchange back-and-forth

⁶⁸ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), 77.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 86.

regarding the real agenda in the region. An e-mail from Goodwin justifies the idea accordingly: “you’ve got to change the CULTURE first. And what’s more AMERICAN than baseball.”⁷¹ Nathan’s rejection of Goodwin’s proposal led to a “CC” chain of e-mails, each to another bureaucrat, attempting to force the issue. Several important insights can be gleaned from Goodwin’s e-mail and Nathan’s subsequent response. It becomes clear to Nathan that, back home, the priority is not to offer basic needs to the Iraqis but to provide democracy, which in turn must be inculcated by a rejection of Iraqi culture and by importing institutions of Western culture into the region. This speaks to the fundamental question regarding the purpose of the United States in re-building Iraq post-Saddam Hussein. Is the goal an “Americanization” of the Iraqi people, or is it to offer the Iraqi people a better life consistent with their own culture and values? Undergirding Goodwin’s approach is a perspective of Western exceptionalism which, in turn, regards other cultures as inherently inferior. Klay juxtaposes the “baseball uniform” strategy against Nathan’s goal to provide good water and medical care for the Iraqis. Nathan thinks the way to a democracy is through real help for the people as opposed to a superficial token of democracy. The baseball uniforms in the story become a symbol of failed U.S. policies in the Middle East. By putting a sheen on the devastation and destruction and the loss the Iraqi people have suffered, the real steps that could lead to a more advanced and stable society are ignored. Basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare are necessary to meet before ideological visions for the future can be pursued. Even if one agrees with Western exceptionalism, for instance, the idea that democracy and freedom can be instituted in a country that lacks an adequate water supply and health care is tenuous, at best.

Klay’s depiction of Nathan, as he comes to this realization, is a powerful reminder that humanism—and the colonialism that goes with it—still remains a force in the Iraq War. The American philanthropist—hoping to spread democracy and a Westernized version of improvement for the sake of the Iraqi—is not altogether different to the soldier, who more blatantly, is trained to dehumanize the enemy. An enemy can be conquered in many ways—at the end of a gun, or under the guise of foreign benevolence. The fact that this narrative could be written, however, illustrates a posthuman sentiment that is more easily recognizable by someone on the scene than it is by bureaucrats half-way across the world.

⁷¹ Ibid., 100.

Nathan's character arc broadens from a position of self-interest, the position of "a fraud and a war tourist," to a place where he genuinely cares about the real needs of the Iraqi people.⁷² According to Hugo Slim, "humanitarian action is about respecting, protecting and saving human life ... it is a very practical affirmation of the value of human life and its unique character in each human person ... it also requires a counter-intuitive move towards cooperation rather than control."⁷³ Put another way, humanitarian ethics insist that the person remains the subject of his or her own life, not the object of other people's purposes and agendas. Good humanitarian efforts should increase people's autonomy and agency as human beings. The agendas of bureaucrats and politicians, therefore, often run counter to genuine humanitarianism. What Klay describes, through his story, is a dehumanizing form of pseudo-humanitarianism, an effort to impose new culture and new worldviews on people—albeit under the pretence that it is for their own good—rather than to help them in pursuing their own autonomous goals.

In another story entitled, "Prayer in the Furnace," Klay—through a chaplain's perspective on the Iraq War—intends to shed light on the blindness of soldiers to the plight of many Iraqi people and the prejudices the soldiers often hold against them. The story begins at a wake for a fallen soldier after which the chaplain begins a conversation with one of the traumatized survivors from the fallen soldier's unit, Rodriguez, to know who was shooting at them. Rodriguez responds with a shrug, "Insurgents, I guess. I don't know. Honestly, Chaps, I don't care. They're all the same to me. They're all the enemy."⁷⁴ Most of the stories the chaplain overhears involve marines justifying their killings based upon some perceived injustice, or because the hajji deserves it, indicating that they had dehumanized Iraqis generally to the role of insurgents and enemies. In the course of their conversations, however, the chaplain learns that some innocent civilians have been shot at in retaliation.

Concerned about the marines' inability to differentiate between civilians and combatants, the chaplain begins a sort of quasi-investigation, asking some higher ups how the issue should be addressed.⁷⁵ The consistent response he receives is that they do not want marines to hesitate. If not hesitating means some civilians will be killed in the

⁷² Ibid., 78.

⁷³ Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

⁷⁴ Klay, 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 144.

process, so be it. This leads to the climax of the story—a sermon during which the chaplain challenges these assumptions. He bids a congregation of marines to consider the suffering of an Iraqi man; one who lost a son and his livelihood as a cost of war and despite receiving a good medical treatment for his badly burned daughter, he ended up supporting the insurgency.⁷⁶ The chaplain challenges the marines who are listening to his homily even further, asking: “Who would trade their seven-month deployment to Ramadi for that mans’ life, living here?”⁷⁷ After no marines raise their hands, the chaplain emphasizes the point that one person’s suffering should not justify making the Other suffer: “Maybe you don’t think it’s worth trying to understand the suffering of that Iraqi father. But being Christian means, we can never look at another human being and say ‘he is not my brother.’”⁷⁸

Many of the marines appear upset by the message and abstain from communion following the homily. The message of this homily, however, raises above a lot of the other noise detailed in this story. *Prayer in the Furnace* examines the intersection of American and Christian identity in the experiences of soldiers who, both during and after the war in Iraq, struggle to reconcile the two. This interplay becomes particularly profound as the chaplain engages with the theme of suffering—a common theme in Christian theology and ethics—and how the suffering of an Iraqi man, even one who might be one’s enemy on the battlefield, ought to be the recipient of compassion rather than scorn and attack. Dehumanization of the enemy ultimately runs counter to the Christian ethics which maintains that all fall short of the glory of God. While it may be common, not only from the perspectives of Americans but even from the perspectives of Iraqis, to conflate Western ideals with Christian ideals, the chaplain makes clear in this story that the open prejudice and hate some of these soldiers embrace toward the Iraqi people cannot cohere with the faith that they espouse to believe.

Toward the end of the story, the chaplain is back home attending a funeral for a marine committed suicide for blaming himself for the death of the soldier whose funeral was observed at the start of the story. The suicide at the end is a tragic tale. It is one that, perhaps, if the soldiers had embraced the chaplain’s homily, it might have been avoidable. By focusing on how suffering unites people, regardless of their race or identity, Klay

⁷⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 158.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 159.

allows the chaplain to speak beyond the caricatures of war, to reject the dehumanization of the enemy, and to insist that the suffering inherent in war is always a tragedy. Suffering itself emerges here as a multicultural phenomenon. It is common to all human beings—even to the enemy—and in that sense it binds regardless of culture and ethnicity. The role of suffering in this story ultimately serves to break down many of the cultural barriers between the Americans and the Iraqis.

Posthumanism is not necessarily wholly secular or anti-religious. Insofar as religious traditions help humanity transcend the boundaries of socially-constructed categories of worth and embrace a future where boundaries like these are transcended in favour of the common good, these ideologies and worldviews are cooperative. Still, while it may not be Klay's intention to push Christian ethics here, he nonetheless uses religious categories to counteract the hegemony of American exceptionalism and the corresponding dehumanization of the Other.

Another story that challenges the logic of dehumanization is found in "Psychological Operations." The story depicts the post-war experience of Waguhih, a Coptic American Arab who served in Psychological Operations for the U.S. Military. Recruited precisely because he is a native speaker of Arabic, these psychological operations use language and psychology as a weapon.⁷⁹ Waguhih would accompany troops of marines in their armoured vehicles and shout out insults to insurgents until they come out from their hiding places. When they did, the marines would mow them down with their rifles.

The most important interactions in the story come between Waguhih and a recently converted to Islam classmate, Zara Davies. Assuming, since he is Arab, that he is also Muslim, Zara asks him accusatorily, "how could you kill your own people?"⁸⁰ Here, she errs by conflating race with culture assuming that Waguhih would identify those whom he plays a part in killing as his own people. He informs her otherwise and declares, "I can kill Muslims as much as I like ... Shit, in my religion, that's how you help an angel get its wings."⁸¹ This results in a confrontation, involving intervention by the school, and a later attempt at reconciliation when Waguhih tries to explain his war experience to Zara.

⁷⁹ Lucas Thompson, "'PsyOps Works Best When You Mean It': Literary Manipulation in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 2 (October 2018): 191-204, 201.

⁸⁰ Klay, 173.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

Waguih tells Zara how he is forced to shout obscenities regarding the wife and daughters of one of the insurgents, Laith al-Tawid, in order to lure him out to be killed. While he never killed the man himself, by firing a gun, he still feels responsible for his death. Clearly, Waguih struggles with the ethics of his own action not merely because it results in the elimination of an enemy combatant, but because Waguih could not separate himself from the other entirely or dehumanize him completely to justify what he does. His tactic involves doing just the opposite—he has to personalize and humanize the enemy in order to draw him out. As a representative of PsyOps, he speaks and exploits one's humanity, one's sense of honour, in order to lure a person to his death. While the reader finds the story horrific—as Waguih does—one must ask how it is fundamentally any different than tactics used in basic training to dehumanize the enemy in an effort to make killing easier, and less psychologically burdensome, for soldiers. Waguih recognizes that the dehumanizing tactics employed, ironically by using human language and human psychology, violated something fundamental about justice and war.

The story brings into focus the complex relationship between language and identity. It challenges the assumption that the American can embrace a simple “American” or “soldier” identity without accounting for how other components of one's background intersect with one's Americanism. What Waguih experiences, on account of his knowledge of Arabic, forces him to confront a component of his identity that makes the military's campaign to dehumanize the enemy untenable. Ignorance of foreign language can, in fact, help protect the myth that the enemy is less than human. Unlike the American soldiers in *Dispatches* who deny the dead Asian American soldier the American part of his identity, the deeply personal nature that underlies some of the guilt Waguih feels inside is because he shares the same culture and language with the enemy. Culture and language are less and less amenable to attempts to dehumanize the Other.

Throughout the collection Klay engages the war from multiple perspectives. Few characters fully fit any given stereotype and each attempts to navigate his or her unique experience through a variety of ethical, social, economic and political lenses. The values and myths, inculcated in the military culture regarding the Other, are tested and often betrayed by the soldier's own experience. It is hard to say that the American characters presented in this collection are self-centred or have an inflated sense of their own goodness or that they still uphold a misguided caricature of the Other. Klay's characters do not entirely align themselves with the military, showing instead an ability to judge themselves and the military that sends them to war.

One War and Two Perspectives: Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen*

The recognition of the material consequences of war for those other than the American soldiers comes from Helen Benedict's 2011 novel *Sand Queen*. Benedict is not herself a soldier, yet her novel is a conflation of first-hand accounts of forty American female soldiers served in Iraq, all woven into a single narrative.⁸² *Sand Queen* is Benedict's follow-up account of her previous oral history book, *The Lonely Soldier* (2009). The novel's protagonist, Army specialist Kate Brady, joins the armed forces as a member of a police military unit, responsible with guarding a detention centre in Iraq in 2003. There, she meets Naema Jassim, an Iraqi girl who pleads her case of missing male members of her family with Kate on a daily basis. Kate and Naema, although initially pledged to help each other, soon find out that war strains their best intentions.

The novel is a parallel first-person narration of the two women as they reflect on their encounters, albeit while suffering uniquely as women in their own contexts. Benedict expands the trope of the trauma hero even more than Phil Klay, juxtaposing a female American protagonist against the racial Other.⁸³ While an Iraqi woman's experience is certainly different from that of an American soldier, *Sand Queen* effectively reflects on the damaging effect that war has on both sides. The emphasis here, however, is not on gender, but rather a confrontation between the intersectional identities. Kate is not only a woman in a male-dominated institution, she is an American confronting an alien culture. Naema is a woman living in a culture with limited rights granted to her, confronting a westerner who appears, at least on the surface, to have more liberties than she does. *Sand Queen* challenges the assumption that Western feminism has altogether liberated women, while Islamic women remain wholly oppressed.

The first meeting between the two women is brief and stereotypical, during which the chaos overpowers the possibilities of a proper communication. Naema, on account of being able to speak fluent English, offers to serve as an interpreter for the Iraqis who come to Kate's camp seeking information on detained family relatives in exchange of Kate's promise to find her father and brother. Kate is first introduced as indifferent to the Iraqis' suffering. Complaining that the prisoners she guards are treated better than many of the soldiers, she says: "Some days it feels like they're [the Iraqis] hotel guests and

⁸² Benedict, *The Lonely Soldier*, 19.

⁸³ Haytock, "Reframing War Stories," 338.

we're their goddamn maids.”⁸⁴ Early in the book, a woman approaches her with a baby who clearly needs medical aid, Kate is repulsed by the baby, more concerned about the child's stench and appearance than its wellbeing.⁸⁵ Throughout the earlier part of the book, she resorts to labels like “hajji” to disparage them as something less than human. When the narrative turns to Naema, the soldiers appear inhuman.⁸⁶ If Kate has reduced the Iraqis to mere hajji, then to Naema the Americans are impersonal machines. What Naema has experienced is a foreign force that attacks the country for no convincing reasons, destroying their cities, and imprisoning innocent men—including members of her own family.

In the second meeting, an interesting self-other dynamic ensued between Kate and Naema. Naema is a fourth-year medical student in a society that generally affords women few professional opportunities. She reflects upon how she was able to go to medical school, walk the streets of Baghdad without fear of being assaulted, and even how her brother Zaki taught himself to play Beatles songs on his guitar.⁸⁷ The life she describes is the sort of life one might expect to live in the U.S.: it is this life she fears losing on account of the Americans' misguided attempt to liberate them from Saddam Hussein.

Not knowing it was possible for an Iraqi woman to go to college at all—much less to become a doctor—Kate explicitly mentions that she is impressed by Naema's history of medical school.⁸⁸ When Kate attempts to impress Naema that her mother also works in medicine, that her fiancé is also a guitarist, Naema is unaffected, insults her twice, and maintains a cool commanding demeanour. This revelation takes on additional significance in the context of their discussion. When Naema asks Kate “why, as a woman, did you choose such a path? Soldiers take life. Women give life,” Kate explains that she is serving to afford college.⁸⁹ This scene challenges stereotypes in many respects. While both women are pursuing careers that rub against the grain of their own society's expectations of what women ought to do, Naema pursues her medical degree without the need to sacrifice herself to her country and give up her role as a woman. Certainly, the notion that being a female soldier is something that liberates women is a foreign notion

⁸⁴ Helen Benedict, *Sand Queen* (New York: Soho Press, 2012), 122.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

to Naema. For her, this is unthinkable, a burden no woman should have to bear in order to pursue an education.

Later, when Naema tells Kate: “You will have another list soon?”⁹⁰ Although framed as a question, the words belie the intent. Naema does not say: ‘Can you have another list soon?’ or ‘Will you have another list soon?’ Instead, she says *you will* have another list as an order. Naema here appears more assertive and authoritative than Kate who remains ignorant of the overall military plans and of her contribution to it, and that the only thing she is capable of doing is asking her superiors. Being only a junior enlisted puts her in an inferior position.⁹¹

The mechanism at play here is intriguing. After all, if anything is exposed in the encounter between Kate and Naema, it is their differences. This interchange suggests that, at least in some respects, Naema is freer and more liberated than Kate. In fact, Naema, whose nation is under the attack, stands tall and proud, “her back straight, her gaze clear and hard,” while Kate feels “like a hunchback next to her, dirty and sandy, loaded down with my sixty pounds of soldier’s gear.”⁹² The second encounter between the two, however, has changed things, at least, for Kate. Certainly, Kate remains ignorant of much regarding Naema’s experiences, but with a few stereotypes dismantled and a face-to-face exchange, she encounters Naema’s humanity, in spite of the fact that each woman’s experience of war is very different than the other’s experience.

Kate’s repeated encounters with Naema force her to re-examine her own prejudices and perspectives, making it more difficult for Kate to relate to her fellow soldiers, who have not had the benefit of such an encounter. Kate tries to disassociate herself from the military which she is part of. When another soldier, named DJ, interrupts the exchange between the two telling Kate to get the “hajji” out of the area for security reasons, Kate says: “it’s not respectful.”⁹³ Before the meeting with Naema, she is completely oblivious to him using the word hajji. This objection, however, has a personal cost for her, it brings reproach, and accusations of disloyalty.

Naema, however, struggles to empathize with Kate. Of course, the point of the narrative—at least from Benedict’s perspective—is not to inculcate to an Iraqi audience

⁹⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁹¹ Ibid., 72.

⁹² Ibid., 73.

⁹³ Ibid., 75.

an understanding or empathy for the plight of an American female soldier. Rather, Benedict's purpose is to expose and challenge western stereotypes of Iraqis. Thus, it is not crucial for Benedict's purpose that Naema has any particularly eye-opening experience regarding Kate. Still more, how could one expect her to, when Kate represented an invading army who, in Naema's perspective, only imagined themselves, liberators, all the while making life worse for them? Naema has witnessed her country invaded by Americans. Kate, however, is there voluntarily, taking part in the military's efforts in an attempt to earn a college education. Naema has no choice but to endure the circumstances imposed upon her by the conflict between her own Saddam-led government and the Americans.

Kate's sense of powerlessness is emphasized when she is assaulted by two men in her company—Kornick and Boner. We are not told that she was raped as the initial account is ambiguous. After they throw her upon the table, choking her, she narrates the experience saying, "I'm not me anymore. I'm a wing. One ragged blue wing, zigzagging torn and crooked across the long, black sky."⁹⁴ The rape scene can be seen as a metaphor for the U.S. Army reasserting dominance over her, re-appropriating her identity. Kate, in many respects, is treated more poorly by men than Naema, and is made to feel dirty—she is called a "sand queen," a title reserved for loose women by her male soldiers—and becomes a victim for no other reason than that she is a woman at war.⁹⁵ Sexism is evident in Kate's case whether the men are Americans or Iraqis; there are those among them who harass Kate disrespecting her honourable soldierly position.⁹⁶

Later in the novel, the same two men who rape Kate rape another woman—a lesbian soldier who goes by the nickname "Third Eye."⁹⁷ Their initial attempt to rape Kate, and eventual rape of Third Eye, and Kate's unwillingness to report the incident is important for the purpose of this analysis. Ultimately, she fears that reporting the soldiers would not lead to justice but only to further abuse on the part of these men, and probably others. The more Kate experiences sexism within the military, the more she seems to empathize with Naema's situation, going to great lengths to see to it that she receives the information regarding her detained relatives. The two events seem unrelated. Kate, however, blames

⁹⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 97-98.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 139.

herself for Third Eye's rape. "I should have reported them," she confides to Jimmy, "I'm such a friggin' coward..."⁹⁸ Determined "to do something right for a change," Kate reflects upon why she becomes a soldier to begin with—to lay down her own life for the sake of others.⁹⁹ Clearly, she needs to reassess and reevaluate who she believes herself to be, reinterpret her own identity as a friend of Naema and thus enemy of the army.

This is evident when one of the prisoners who has been masturbating in front of Kate runs out of the camp and throws himself repeatedly against the razor wire. Kate tackles and subdues him, only to discover that the man she is secretly harbouring most of her resentment toward has a face that matches one of the photos Naema has given her earlier.¹⁰⁰ As soon as she recognizes that the man she has dehumanized is Naema's father, she is immediately remorseful.

Determined to do more good by turning in Kornick—the man who raped her—she finds that he had already filed a report against her, claiming that she "followed him into the shack, threw down [her] rifle in the sand and behaved, shall we say, in an indecent manner."¹⁰¹ The platoon sergeant to whom she attempts to report the incident only scolds her and sends her along with another female soldier, Yvette, on a dangerous convey in an act of revenge. When the convoy is attacked and Yvette is killed, Kate starts self-blaming.¹⁰² The reader wonders, at this point, if the enemy Kate faces is the Iraqi at all. Her real battle seems to be against the men in her own company. She fights viciously against it, but, ultimately, is overpowered. The identity she has just begun to reconstruct must be surrendered.

When one of the prisoners she is guarding begins masturbating in front of her, she shoots off his genitals: "I'm a real robot now."¹⁰³ The irony is that in spite of being discriminated against herself, she returns to look down upon Iraqis—men and women alike, pondering how she can take revenge—even wishing she could shoot off their fingers, and poison their cigarettes. One can empathize with the sexism she experiences, but she is reluctant to allow her own victimization to translate into empathy for the prisoners she is tasked to guard.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰² Ibid., 271.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 289.

The novel ends with Kate suffering from PTSD, lonely and broken at home surrounded by family members, while Naema is attending her grandmother's funeral not knowing that her brother and father are most likely dead. Kate refers to herself as a robot and she drowns her sorrows in alcohol. Naema retains a bit of her humanity, but little hope. Both ended up hating each other or, in the least, indifferent, to each other. There is a sense of antagonism visible at the end of the story as it is in the beginning. As each one's suffering increases, continued respect or recognition is difficult to maintain. In the end, the reader is left sympathizing with Naema and mourning what, for all intents and purposes, is the death of Kate's sanity.

The Iraqi woman is humanized, more and more, throughout the narrative while Kate—particularly as she experiences sexism within the military—is trapped in her limited perspective and bound to follow orders. Naema laments less the sexism of her own culture than she does the oppression of her people, at large. The ending indicates that the war effect is not equal between the two nations. The novel forces the reader to consider the consequences of wars on the Iraqis' civilians whose life had been significantly changed by U.S. invasion. It also reminds the reader that the American lives are not the only ones at stake. Those who do not lose their lives, amongst the Iraqis and the Americans, are having their lives changed. Change, however, is impacting the Iraqis as much—or more—than the American soldiers who are there only until the war's end.

These are insights that only become possible for Benedict by employing the dual-narrative approach, telling the story from two different points of view. This approach does not erase distinctions; it only “reveals dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point of view.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, it challenges assumptions by putting the dehumanizer into contact with the humanity of the Other, which he intends to deny. Benedict effectively challenges the notion that, for the Islamic woman, Islamic culture and belief is itself an oppressive agent. While sexism and women's rights are undoubtedly a serious concern in the Islamic world, Benedict bids the reader consider how the Americans can rightly judge inequalities in the Middle East when, in turn, the U.S. military is equally, and in some cases, more sexist. One must ask at the conclusion of the book whether it is more unfortunate to be a female American soldier or a female Iraqi.

¹⁰⁴ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 154.

Coming to Know Iraqis: Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country*

Brian Turner's desire to understand the Iraqi is a particularly striking departure from every Vietnam era narrative and even many other Iraq War narratives. *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014) is partially an autobiography of Turner's war experience in Baghdad as an infantrymen leader with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, and in part a work of his imagination to recognize the lives of the Other.¹⁰⁵ The fact that the Iraqi stories are pure fiction do not necessarily mean that they are not true in a sense. The text represents Turner's attempt to step outside his "white Western gaze."¹⁰⁶ Famous for his poem "The Hurt Locker" (2005) Turner is one of the most renowned authors and poet-soldiers emerging from the Iraq War.

Departing from the fairly traditional streamlined narratives of the war, the text is written as series of vignettes, akin to "the art of collage," enabling Turner to engage Iraqi characters and coalesce heterogeneous war experiences.¹⁰⁷ I argue that Turner transcends a number of borders and boundaries to grant empathy to the enemy and the Iraqi culture in ways that would have been unthinkable in Vietnam era narratives. Through his cosmopolitan approach, he demonstrates denaturalizing tendencies towards well-entrenched divisions, transcending racial and cultural barriers—and even more significantly, the barrier between good and evil and between soldier and enemy. His cosmopolitan approach is not merely because he gains a particular appreciation for the enemy, but because he finds himself detached, no longer capable of buying into the false-narrative inculcated through one-sided narrative.

Turner's narrative reflects a sense of detachment from his own life—one affected by war, but one that persists for the soldier, even after returning home. One need not read the entire book to discover the reality of Turner's detachment. The book begins with the declaration, "I am a drone aircraft plying the darkness above my body, flying over my wife as she sleeps beside me, over the curvature of the earth, over the glens of Antrim and the Dalmatian coastline, the shells of Dubrovnik and Brcko and Mosul arcing in the air

¹⁰⁵ Brian Turner, *My Life as a Foreign Country: A Memoir* (New York: Norton, 2014), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Samina Najmi, "The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 56-78, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Brian Turner, "A 21st Century Rain," interview by Kelle Groom, (*The Best American Poetry*, August 25, 2014), accessed July 18, 2019, https://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2014/08/a-21st-century-rain-interview-with-brian-turner-author-of-my-life-as-a-foreign-country-kelle-groom.html.

beside me, projectiles filled with poems and death and love.”¹⁰⁸ To understand these references, one must understand Turner’s own experience, one he cannot separate from the war-time experiences of his own ancestors. Throughout *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Turner as a first-person narrator of his own experience appears somehow aloof, as if he were being carried on unwittingly through a series of events.

While he is seemingly detached from his own experience, on account of the traumas of war, he remains attached to others. In one vignette, 20, Turner reflects on two Iraqi prisoners, staring at him from within their cells, they speak no common language yet they are able to recognize each other through the uniform: “I can feel their eyes through the darkness. Looking at me. Chiseling into memory the anonymity of the uniform. They can barely distinguish me as a man, either.”¹⁰⁹ It is the last comment that is most striking. For Turner, it is not skin colour that matters most in battle—it is the uniform. He is aware that in his uniform he is not a human being—not from these prisoners’ perspectives—he is a soldier, and therefore their Other. Here, Turner expresses an awareness that neither the Iraqis nor the Americans view each other as humans; dehumanization of the Other goes both ways.

The same uniform, however, has a whole different meaning when Turner and other soldiers stand alongside a Colonel who speaks while family and friends are gathered, welcoming the soldiers’ home. Even in this instance, however, as horns blare honouring the soldiers’ service, Turner reflects, “I did nothing to deserve the notes that rank from that horn.”¹¹⁰ It is not that the uniform ceases to communicate meaning or that the soldier lacks an identity—it simply means that the war, itself, has displaced the soldier. Turner finds little consolation when others deem him a hero or a patriot. On this level, old boundaries, borders and symbols crumble in the wake of the conflict, now divested of significance.

What is particularly striking about Turner’s episodic turns toward Iraqi individuals in the course of the book is that it is not only the innocent civilians whose lives are changed and become humanized. He looks deep into the hearts and minds of the very individuals who are attempting to kill American soldiers. In vignette 53, Turner depicts an Iraqi insurgent bomb-maker, drowning out the world around him as he assembles an

¹⁰⁸ Turner, xi.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

IED, singing along to the tune of “Crystal Blue Persuasion,” a Vietnam-era rock track by Tommy James and the Shondells: “The simple fact that this bomb maker can work on a bomb without realizing he’s humming along with Tommy James’ chorus, it’s something that slips between the surfaces of this world. Singing. A quiet, nearly inaudible chant, it’s true. But singing all the same.”¹¹¹ The sentiments Turner records here are not thoughts about killing Americans. It is something mundane that everyone experiences. Singing or humming a tune, stuck in one’s head, while performing a second-nature task is a wholly relatable human thing to do. Like the American soldier, who goes about his business distracted by music and culture, going to war when finding himself suddenly struck. Music, baseball and tragedy emerge across cultures, uniting peoples who share very different aims. Turner concludes the section with the bomb maker making a mistake that cost him his life, “The bomber is dead, it’s true, but others are waiting.”¹¹² All at once he has given the reader a reason to lament the bomb-maker’s death as a meaningless tragedy, while also recognizing, subtly, it is a mildly positive development. One bomb-maker is only one amongst many, death is meaningless—enemy deaths, soldier deaths, each amount to little gain, for either side of the war.

Elsewhere, in vignette 60, Turner imagines what might pass through the mind of a female suicide bomber: “She stares a moment into a handheld mirror ... Perhaps she does this because there is a deep and abiding human need to fully recognize all that the world will soon lose.”¹¹³ Fearing death, even when one is resolved due to a deeply held belief structure, is a normal, human, posture. Turner does attempt to elucidate the bomber’s experience from something he imagines they have in common, that is, a human psyche, an awareness of mortality, and an ongoing struggle between one’s own nationalistic zeal and doubt. If anything, Turner is testing the limits of empathy, here. To force empathy would undoubtedly betray his own skewed Western perspective. He has not lived this woman’s experience; he has only lived a human experience. Yet, he strives for something, anything, they have in common whereby the walls that divide them can be transcended. It is not as though he is exonerating the suicide bomber. Instead, he comes to recognize that the psychological experience of the suicide bomber is a legitimate experience of war.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 78.

¹¹² Ibid., 79.

¹¹³ Ibid., 86.

It is tragic, but no more nor less tragic than the experience of a soldier, like himself, commissioned to impose nationalist priorities upon others.

Unlike Herr's *Dispatches* which substantially registers only American identities, Turner erases his identity to take readers into the minds of both enemy combatants and ordinary civilians they find too easy to forget. For Turner, nationalism has been exchanged for cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan narratives tend to cultivate a distance or detachment from one's self, one's own community or culture, and maintain a similar distance while examining an object or people group foreign to one's own experience.¹¹⁴ As such, while it would be a mistake to suggest that Turner has transformed the enemy into the good, his text displays empathy with their position and a respect for their perspective in a way that does not presume paternal western superiority.¹¹⁵ There are no good or bad characters in Turner's book, but a host of characters with a little good and a little bad about each of them. Most importantly, he focuses on each individual's place in the war and reminds readers of their indifference.

Conclusion

As I have discussed in this chapter, human-centred discourse, which helps perpetuate the dehumanization of the enemy, as somehow other-than or less-than human during Vietnam, becomes less viable in an age when posthuman ethics encourage empathy for the Other. War in Michael Herr's *Dispatches* is a profoundly human experience—but it is one that belongs to an American kind of human. The racism and ethnocentrism of a humanist worldview is evident by the fact that the Vietnamese is dehumanized or, at least, his humanity is ignored. There is much that seems to be strikingly absent from *Dispatches* that makes it incomplete and one-sided. Conversely, Iraq War soldiers challenge human-inspired prejudices even while recognizing that they persist in the military culture at large. Soldiers narrate their experiences with a more nuanced and blurred concept of self/other, showing considerable concern for what the war is doing to the Iraqi people. War—not one's status as Other—is depicted as the force that dehumanizes all sides of the conflict. This is a posthuman move, ultimately, because it assigns what one might deem to be human less to something innate in the individual self, but more to the context in which different individuals interact.

¹¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 67.

¹¹⁵ Najmi, "The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker," 57.

Through different American characters, Klay's *Redeployment* breaks down the barriers between the Americans and the Iraqis in an attempt to suggest that both sides are not insulated from government manipulations or war suffering. The stories seem to indicate that the suffering of oneself is not an excuse to justify suffering against others. In the other two Iraq War narratives, the Iraqi Other is granted a voice. *Sand Queen* reveals that racism in war is not the cause of war *per se* but a symptom of it. War breeds racism and ethnocentrism precisely because it pits one culture or nation against another. Most importantly then, it is not the soldiers who are indicted as racist *per se*, but war is what becomes lamentable. In *My Life as Foreign Country* the Iraqi civilian and enemy are regularly humanized throughout the narrative in a way that brings human beings closer together, while also infusing a universal consciousness with an empathetic cosmopolitan awareness. Turner's memoir is told alongside the stories of the Other who is increasingly becoming something more than other, something more like oneself.

With that being said, the increase in globalization and a closer media proximity to other cultures does not necessarily create increased openness towards the Other. Even though people now have more knowledge about each other through the internet and digital images, there are limits to the empathy the soldiers could feel in the battlefield. Humanist constructions of race are evident in both wars, and soldiers more often than not tend to have—by default—disparaging and dehumanizing views of the Other, which allows them to justify their acts of violence against them, demonstrating that dehumanization and otherness continues, even as philosophical shifts from postmodernism to posthumanism occur. In *Sand Queen*, for example, it is precisely because Naema is more Western than other women in the region—she is independent, assertive, pursuing a medical degree—that Kate humanizes her. Without being explicitly stated, Kate's conflation of Western norms with what it means to be a human being allows her to accept Naema, even while the same dynamic causes her to dehumanize and disparage other Iraqis who are less Westernized than her.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, by comparing a Vietnam era text with three Iraq War narratives, understanding the Other does not mean erasing boundaries between self and Other, but simply requires removing the requirement of an adversarial relationship between one side of the border and the next. Posthumanism need not be post-racial, but it can enable a transracial understanding as a perspective that can help come to terms with one's own moral shortcomings, biases, and racisms. Even if racial encounters remain difficult to sustain in wars, in its imaginative dimension fiction at least becomes

a way to bridge the experience of self with Other. Iraq War narratives are posthuman precisely because they attempt to imagine how to rise above the exclusivity of “being American” and bid the soldiers and the consumer of war literature to include the Other within the scope of human worth.

Conclusion

Towards Posthuman War Narratives and Politics

This thesis opened with a discussion of the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and Tony Tether's 2001 reflection that military fantasies were rapidly becoming a reality.¹ Many Americans were hopeful through the 1980s and 1990s that prolonged wars like the one fought in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s were a thing of the past. The soldiers' narratives examined in this thesis, however, suggest that Tether's vision, spoken in the immediate wake of 9/11, was overstated. While he might have accurately noted a trajectory toward what might be deemed a "posthuman" war, at the dawn of President Bush's "Shock and Awe" campaign over Baghdad in March 2003, the U.S. military was not as far along this trajectory as Tether thought. After only a few short months of long-distance strikes and drone attacks, which successfully toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, the U.S. fight became one against an insurgency, dominated by urban tactics, where soldiers found their boots in the sand, and in face-to-face confrontation with the enemy. Vietnam's jungles had more in common with Iraq's deserts than most could have imagined.

The aim of this thesis has been to develop a discussion of Iraq War literature in comparison to similar narratives from the Vietnam War to discern how the military's adaptation to postmodern paradigms during the three decades separating the two wars has fostered a shift from wartime literature dominated by postmodern themes and towards posthuman ones. The thesis set out to determine these shifts by situating each war in its historical context to trace the broader role of warfare in changing conceptual frameworks pertaining to the human discourse. The thesis also aims to look beyond the historical background of the two wars to emphasize the importance of personal narratives as forms of cultural expressions that enable veterans a greater sense of self-reflection on their war experiences.

The practice of war is as old as humankind. However, this thesis has shown that the way in which warfare is perceived and conducted has varied significantly over time. While the tactical and operational aspects remain always a priority in the overall management of wars, it is primarily the scientific developments and technological

¹ Tether, "DARPA Tech 2002 Welcoming Speech," 5.

breakthroughs available in each era that have changed the nature of war more than any other variable. The wars since the Vietnam War have assumed more intricate forms, mostly as a result of emerging advanced machines that allow attacks without putting soldiers at physical risk and achieve mission objectives with minimal loss of life.

Despite the U.S. military's apparent shifts of approach between the two wars, the Iraq War remains destructive in much of the same way as Vietnam. The idea that superior technology could provide the military with an adequate opportunity to control the war and win battles proved elusive. Similarly, the idea that technology would save lives in war is an outlier in the historical relationship between technology and war. Regardless of the sanitised presentation of the official narratives to reduce the perceptions of human suffering involved in war, to date no war has been fought that did not hinge upon soldier and civilian bodies—living, mutilated, and deceased. Suffering remains a substantial reality of armed conflicts. Soldiers and civilians still die in wars, their bodies are sacrificed for the cause of one country over another, and their lives are disrupted either temporarily or permanently. The fundamental results of war remain immutable.

This thesis has also shown that wars provide ample opportunities to encourage the pursuits of different coping mechanisms. The progressive social changes brought about by the adverse public reaction to the Vietnam War altered perceptions of how Americans understood themselves and the justification of their country in overseas conflicts. Postmodernism, emerging in response to the war, fuelled a repositioning of humankind, replacing the Enlightenment universalism that existed for several hundred years with antihuman sentiments to expose the ill-conceived motivations behind historical injustices such as wars, colonialism and racism. However, Vietnam was not an end point of history and the postmodern framework, specific to the socio-political upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s, was also liable to change.

The post-Cold War era has not only witnessed an outbreak of terrorism and simultaneous small-scale wars to combat it, but also a rise of digital communication technologies and a flow of media feeds. Never before in the history of the world has it been possible to gather and disseminate information as fast as it is now. War related traumatic experiences awaken people to the fact that they could be potential victims, and that the boundaries between societies, racial and ethnic categories, genders, sides in a war, or even between victimizers and victims are less important than the unifying experience of trauma. The contemporary times are, at best, unpredictable and, at worst, dangerous. In a world of increasing challenges, the frameworks by which wars are understood need

to be updated to provide sensitive lens to the complexities of current issues. The emergence of posthumanism in the 1990s and 2000s is an attempt to cultivate a survival mindset for modern day threats that enables human bonding beyond dividing lines. The shift from antihumanism to posthumanism coheres with Robert Lifton's concept of "proteanism," one which entails the capacity of the human self to continuously change to adapt to specific historical challenges.²

The literature of the Iraq War, as the analyses of the chapters reveal, is an example of posthuman narratives, providing textual spaces for greater understanding of the costs of wars on both sides. It demonstrates that veterans depart from traditional war narratives beginning in Vietnam and then more fully in Iraq, presenting alternative and often conflicting narratives with those officially offered, particularly in relation to the veteran's conception of body, disability and trauma, gender, and his encounter with the enemy.

The second chapter of this thesis reveals the shift in soldiers' responses to the military tendency to mechanize and militarize bodies. The relationship between the military and the bodies it deployed in both wars is one of deconstruction and reconstruction of the physical, mental, and emotional personhood of the new recruit to rebuild him as a soldier, ready to kill, and capable of sustaining physical exertion, and suppressing emotions in the face of extreme trauma. In both wars, in fact, the fighting body is always in a mode of crisis once it is brought to the battlefield and becomes constantly vulnerable to the enemy's fire, environmental habitat, and the possibility of death, mutilation or injuries.

In Vietnam, the physical body of the soldier acquires its value through its ability to facilitate military objectives whilst the soldier's mind becomes secondary or even unnecessary except in terms of coordinating bodily movement. The trained soldier became a physical machine programmed to serve its commanders, dehumanized and unable to fully fathom the atrocities he was required to commit. Upon returning to civilian life, the soldier must undo the training forced upon him, and then reconcile the actions he has committed in his military role, often leading to severe trauma and struggles to reintegrate to civilian society. With their minds resuming control, their bodies became a place of violence or self-violence, often requiring justification.

By way of contrast, postmodern warfare shifts from forcing one's physical body into prime condition to serve as a weapon itself to learning to operate in accordance with

² Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.

other humans and machines. In many of the technical tasks required of Iraq War soldiers, they display dominance and function within military actions without subordinating the psychological to the physical. In other words, the psychological complexion is given equal weight to physical existence. The film *The Hurt Locker*, the most accurate depiction of asymmetrical war as that in Vietnam, features a soldier whose body is always at risk from IEDs, and yet he shows a considerable mental fortitude to manage his tasks, even if that entails discarding the suit supposed to protect his body.

The awareness of the body is also found among soldiers undertaking virtual training before deployment. Rather than being deceived by the spectacle of a virtual war, they dispel the idea of war as a video game or their roles as mere players in a disembodied fighting. While autonomous machines, in theory, help protect the pilot's body from physical injuries, they create a disjuncture that causes emotional and psychological distress. In Matt Martin's *Predator*, the ethics of the distant war takes centre stage in the text, reflective of the way Martin understands his bodily relation to the war and his responsibility for civilians injured or killed from faulty intelligence, technological failure, or human error. In sum, Iraq War veterans reveal a tendency towards transcending the entrapment of the body by resituating themselves in a posthuman manner that gives them some control over the mechanization of their bodies.

The third chapter deals with issues of disability and trauma as inescapable results of all wars. Soldiers of both wars are maimed and injured, and must reconcile both the horror they have experienced first-hand as well as their responsibility in such maiming and death. The Vietnam veteran's body commoditized by the military but then broken to no longer be of service was often devalued and emasculated, causing psychological trauma in addition to the physical pain. Vietnam-era literature largely isolates disability and trauma, presenting it as a personal challenge that must be overcome and reconciled by the individual soldier who had them, often through actions based on military masculinity and valour. The soldier, thus, reinforces the heroic narrative of the wounded warrior who fought against disability and trauma with the same courage and aggression that he once employed against the enemy.

Literature from Iraq echoes this dilemma despite the myth of a wholly technological war which in some ways led many soldiers to volunteer while believing their chances of injury were minimal. However, there is a greater recognition of the physical and non-physical traumas of war such as PTSD since Vietnam, because of shifts in official psychiatric terminology. The posthuman reframing of mental and physical disability has

rendered PTSD more like an injury than a disorder, something one can heal and overcome not merely through pharmacological interventions, but by re-contextualizing relationships and forging new meanings and connections, and devoting oneself to a cause greater than himself/herself. The expressions of PTSD in Iraq War literature encourage veterans to explore the complexities of his or her experiences rather than striving for wholeness or falling to stigma.

The shift of the masculine motif, as the fourth chapter uncovers, is striking when Iraq War literature is compared to that of Vietnam, and one of the most intriguing results of this thesis. The traditional post-World War II trope of the masculine soldier as a hero and a virtuous warrior fell by the wayside when the U.S. military lost the war in Vietnam. As a result, Vietnam War literature moves the soldier away from the virtuous and masculine hero of the modern era to the futility, doubt, and failure of postmodern perspective. The veteran's experience became one of frustration and loss as he grappled with his gendered identity, particularly when returning to a society that neither valued his sacrifice nor tried to meet him in his pain. In this conflictual environment, Vietnam War literature presents young men attempting to counteract the jeopardy that a meaningless war has upon their masculinity through drug and alcohol use and sexual promiscuity.

The literature from the Iraq War reveals that the war as a testing ground for masculinity, where soldiers are legitimized through their experiences on the ground of battle, is somehow abandoned and traits traditionally gendered as feminine are embraced. This derives in part from the Iraq War being the first in which women had active combat roles and from the nature of war operations and weaponry used. Gendered responses like that of Joshua Key in *The Deserter's Tale* oppose war and its violence, indicating that the masculine soldier is not necessarily the one who wreaks havoc and destruction. Key's texts thwarts the violent expressions of the masculinity that was evident from a prior generation's war. Jane Blair remains distinctly feminine even though she becomes professional and acts in a way traditional to male soldiers. One of the most powerful narratives of how gender becomes tangential rather than central to a soldier's identity during Iraq is evident in Chris Beck's *Warrior Princess*. Appreciated for her service and celebrated as a hero, Beck finds more acceptance amongst military and former military personnel than in her own family and in American society. This suggests that amongst Iraq War veterans, what one accomplishes as a soldier is not tied intrinsically to one's gender identity. Instead, soldiers value aspects of both genders, seeking fluid and posthuman gendered identities, not divided arbitrarily by cultural hegemonic gender

markers. All of the texts restructure the masculine soldier motif distinctly from the expression of the soldier in Vietnam.

The fifth chapter demonstrates the shift from postmodern to posthuman perspective in war narratives in relation to encountering the enemy, those unlike the soldier in background or stereotype. Traditional war propaganda and basic training dehumanize the enemy to justify killing him with minimal psychological impact. The horrors of conflict in Vietnam drew many soldiers to racially or ethnically differentiate the Vietnamese they encountered, even those who supported the U.S., as doing so allowed them to kill without conscience. Both the civilian casualties of the war and the enemy soldiers presented a moral conflict for those sent to injure and destroy them, as did the destruction of villages and other actions required of them. Vietnam War literature is heavy with the division between the Americans and the Vietnamese from the soldier's perspective.

Iraq War literature presents a much more posthuman view of the Iraqi people, including those fighting against them. The strategy of dehumanizing the other loses its force in the literature of the war precisely because the soldier's status as "human" ceases to be a site of privilege. Soldiers regularly reflect on the humanity of the enemy, lament their losses at war, and often present civilians innocently swept up in the war's destruction. The very fact that many of the literary texts feature Iraqi characters acts as an indication that there is a struggle and an attempt to overcome boundaries that lends itself toward posthuman ethics. A profound awareness that to the enemy the American is the Other occurs in Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country*. Turner is more cognizant of the fact that the enemy does not identify himself as the evil one in the war—for the enemy, the roles are reversed, and the American appears as evil. The war, in the end, becomes the enemy because it is seen as a behemoth against humans—the humans on both sides—rather than through the lens of Americans versus Iraqis.

The Iraq War does not restrain or limit soldiers' capacities towards self-realization as was the case in the Vietnam War. Iraq veterans show a considerable ability to cope with the danger of militarization, sexism and racism, departing from the passive postmodern mindset even if only by a matter of degree. This shift in war literature proves my hypothesis that antihuman sentiments move gradually towards posthuman ones, indicative of the ways in which soldiers' identities are shaped by digital and transcultural lifestyles, moving towards various kinds of cognitive and emotional capacities. Examining the shift in war narrative and veterans' responses provides a framework for a more robust and nuanced discussion of war, recognizing the need to overcome boundaries

that perpetuate injustices, whether they be in terms of soldier versus the enemy, male versus female, or between racial and ethnic populations.

The preceding analysis reveals the positive influence of posthuman theory to understanding the new wars that have occurred over the past fifty years. It offers alternative ways to understand the impact of war on people and societies, not aiming at mastery, but at transforming the negative into positive through connection, understanding, and calls for peace.³ Unlike previous constructs that ignore or support racism, sexism, and otherness, posthuman thought responds to these dividing ideological frameworks, potentially leading to more awareness of prejudice against societies and people. As wars will continue to be waged and the common goal of peace movements has done little to halt or stop wars, possible future military aggression can be more effectively understood from a posthuman perspective, allowing a greater recognition of the destruction inherent in wars.

While dualistic humanist thinking has been challenged as new developments in technology have emerged, it is unlikely that posthumanism will ever be able to leave humanism behind. One implication arising from this thesis is that posthumanism is carefully described as post-dualistic rather than non-dualistic. No matter how posthuman critics wish to evade the impact of “dualistic approaches in human thoughts and action,” it is not altogether easy to entirely dismiss the long-standing discourse of humanism.⁴ Relevant to this thesis, for example, is the fact that not all Iraq War literature is disruptive in terms of traditional notions of war, nationhood and masculinity. The soldiers in David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* (2009), for example, are enthusiastic about combat, recounting their first and second tours of duty as action-packed movies in which they are the heroes. In a similar vein, national ideologies are powerful and are still used to undergird the justifications for incredible violence affecting millions of people. Even the internet, which presumably allows for counter-narratives to appear quickly and publicly, can exacerbate divisions along ideological lines. Of course, it is natural for people online to gravitate towards like-minded sources, thus reinforcing their own one-sided perspectives.

³ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 134.

⁴ Francesca Ferrando, “Humans Have Always Been Posthuman,” in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (India: Springer, 2016), 143-256, 249.

It is clear from the examples above that to deny the full reach of humanism runs the costly risk of underestimating the power of one's own ideological heritage. Understood in a dialectical fashion, posthumanism can be considered as a critical theory that views itself in continuity, operating in concert with humanism that has informed Western thought from the time of the Enlightenment. The very fact that posthumanism retains *post-* suggests that it will inevitably carry with it some baggage of humanism. Therefore, glances forwards to posthuman aspirations and backwards to humanist ideals are necessary to record the multifarious ways of human transitioning.

While the trajectory toward posthuman politics emerges from the textual analysis pursued in the preceding chapters, this thesis demonstrates that the re-negotiation of old humanist ideas and posthuman ones is an ongoing dialectic relationship that does not easily resolve itself in a simple synthesis.⁵ Part of the difficulty to transition smoothly to a posthuman condition is because we are not humans in the same way to begin with. Hence, Rosi Braidotti proposes a posthuman methodology based on politics of location to reveal the imbrications of “the diametrically diverse power locations “we” are located in.”⁶ Even as Enlightenment humanism cannot be wholly escaped and the continuum towards posthumanism is navigated arbitrary and gradually, posthumanism is a viable theory that helps people to engage affirmatively with world problems rather than being paralyzed by them. Braidotti's poignant question is relevant here: “Are we going to be able to catch up with our posthuman selves, or shall we continue to linger in a theoretical and imaginative state of jet-lag in relation to our lived environment?”⁷

There remain limitations that a thesis like this one cannot wholly overcome. Writing about wars, in particular, is a thorny issue as Catherine McLoughlin argues: “writing about war, and writing about that writing, is fraught with possibilities of offending sensibilities, whether by omission or inclusion, and particularly by nomenclature.”⁸ The current thesis is no exception as it takes as its focus American literature engaging the Iraq War without drawing on the Iraqi perspectives. Of course, it is not with the intention to diminish the Other to the point of total invisibility. In fact, the last chapter of this thesis corrects the limited American perspectives and shows American writers imagining the

⁵ Halliwell and Mousley, *Critical Humanisms*, 16.

⁶ Braidotti, “Posthuman Critical Theory,” 20.

⁷ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 197.

⁸ MacLoughlin, “Introduction,” 3.

disjunction between the U.S. claims to justify the war and the material effects of such claims on the Iraqis. However, a comparative literary approach was not within the scope of this study. In fact, I argue that reading Iraq War literature from the both American's and the Iraqi's perspectives—despite having the advantage of understanding the war on a global scale—risks underestimating each culture's sensibilities, and historical, social and economic bases. Further, the thesis contends there is a shift from narratives dominated by humanist sentiments to those that embrace posthuman sentiments. Iraqi culture, however, has not been historically shaped by humanism and posthumanism in the same way that the Western cultures have. Therefore, a comparative approach would not have allowed for an adequate comparison to how American war literature has evolved over time.

With that being said, it would be intriguing to consider how Iraqi writers respond to the war as well. If all people have an equal voice in human rights discourse to address injustices, then excluding the Iraqi's perspective is ill-founded. As such, it is equally important to discern the implication of postmodern war on the Iraqis who, according to the 2015 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), long after the Iraq War officially ended are still displaced and continue living in conditions worse than under Saddam Hussein's despotic regime.⁹ For Iraqi writers and intellectuals, writing remains an act of resistance as it creates spaces beyond violence and contestation: "language becomes the only "home" left to inhabit and the only space that nobody can demolish with bombs or bulldozers."¹⁰ Texts, therefore, exist in a polysemic space where they cannot be subject to the same exercise of power that exists in the human world but where resistant narratives can also be located. Writing, in this sense, is imbued with the idea of responsibility as it enables writers to have "vigilance, responsibility and humility" in considering themselves, other people, and the world.¹¹ Iraqi writers abandon the discourse of victimhood as the only framework through which their experiences could be represented. Instead, they create challenging liminal spaces for the historical realities of

⁹ "UNHCR Position on Returns to Iraq" (*UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*, November 14, 2016), accessed May 12, 2019, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/58299e694.pdf>.

¹⁰ Louis Yako, "Post-War Language: Death and Exile in Iraqi Literature After 2003" (*Counterpunch*, October 7, 2017), accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/10/06/post-war-language-death-and-exile-in-iraqi-literature-after-2003/>.

¹¹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 47.

their characters in order to create affinities that come together and cohere among readers based on mutual understanding.

Donna Haraway aptly describes that “cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them [marginalized people] as other.”¹² On this view, writing enables Iraqi writers to talk back to dehumanization through the tools of language by having a global perspective while still managing to remain firmly rooted in their Iraqi voice. For example, the poetry of Dunya Mikhail, an Iraqi-American writer, reifies the war as an agent of various kinds of destruction.¹³ Her poetic voice is not that of an individual woman, but rather of an omniscient observer able to critique the war beyond the war itself and beyond the control of its human architects. The war as anthropomorphized in Mikhail’s poems can do many things, but it cannot undo or subsume.

Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) is a novel that is aligned with Haraway’s ideas about cyborg writing. In the novel, Saadawi tells the story of an itinerant Iraqi street peddler named Hadi who stitches together disparate body parts in order to create a single corpse that he believes will merit the kind of burial that the body parts will not receive. On completing his grisly task, however, Hadi finds that the corpse comes to life. At one point, the corpse grants an interview in which it says that “because I’m made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I’m the first true Iraqi citizen.”¹⁴ The animated corpse’s awareness of itself as an impossible mix is certainly accessible in the light of cyborg writing, both in the sense that the corpse is a physical cyborg and in the sense that Saadawi utilizes the act of writing to subvert and challenge the nation-building project of the U.S. in Iraq.

The theoretical concepts of posthumanism are broad enough to apply beyond the domain of the written text. The Iraq-born performance artist Wafaa Bilal took part in an installation in a Chicago art gallery in 2007 in which he allowed gallery visitors to shoot a paintball gun at him.¹⁵ In undertaking this performance, Bilal forced gallery visitors to engage in what Haraway describes as marking the world; visitors remote from the actual

¹² Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 175.

¹³ Dunya Mikhail, *The War Works Hard*, 4th ed. (New York: New Directions, 2005).

¹⁴ Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New York: Penguin, 2018), 147.

¹⁵ Wafaa Bilal, “Domestic Tension,” *Art Performance*, (Chicago: FlatFile Galleries, 2007).

experiences of being killed in Iraq, or being part of the American army in Iraq, were instead placed into a situation in which they were confronted provocatively. Visitors to Bilal's exhibition were, in this context, forced to become cyborg narrators in their own right, as their actions placed them in close (if ironic) and complicit contact with the reality of a war that most Americans could safely avoid. In another interactive work of Bilal, entitled "168: 01," about the looting of Baghdad Library after the city fell to coalition forces, Bilal was able to collect donations to rebuild the library, a positive posthuman move towards cooperation and international responsibility regardless of which side is held responsible.¹⁶ Critical posthuman theory provides an appropriate theoretical and methodological frame through which the literature of the Iraq War can be approached.

The proliferation of different perspectives—Americans' and Iraqis'—coalesce to create a dynamic and complex picture of the world that is truer to reality than one-sided humanistic narrativizing tendencies allow. As the thesis has attempted to show, posthuman ethics goes beyond local and national borders, and raises awareness concerning international rights to advance a representation of all identities in an equal rather a hierarchical manner through cross-cultural spaces of dialogue. Insofar as humans live in a connected, accessible and fluid world, and insofar as there is a continuous fear of wars and acts of terror, humans are looking for security and connection to shield themselves against the unknown. Posthuman ethics is useful to work towards actualizing universal humanity that sustains becoming-in-the-world together.

¹⁶ Wafaa Bilal, "168: 01," *Art Performance*, (Canada: The Art Gallery of Windsor, 2016).

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