

Kristen Rau

# From Frontline to Homefront

The Global Homeland in Contemporary  
U.S. War Fiction



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### **Abstract**

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Criticized for providing a simplified depiction of a post-9/11 United States, contemporary American “War on Terror” fiction has been largely neglected by critical discourse. In this dissertation, I argue that this fiction offers a vital engagement with how the War on Terror is waged, and how the fantasies and policies of the Global Homeland inform it. Most immediately, the texts I analyze undercut the sanitization of the war by including depictions of intense combat and the psychological fallout of derealized warfare. In these works, the public’s reluctance to acknowledge such concerns lays the foundation for a schism between American civilians and the military. I argue moreover that this fiction engages with the collapse of distinctions between foreign and domestic spheres through exploring both battlefields abroad and how a military logic is transposed onto American society.

In the first chapter, I analyze the way in which narratives by Kevin Powers, David Abrams, Phil Klay, and Dan Fesperman complicate sanitized images of the war by foregrounding its visceral qualities and representing the traumatic impact of mediated warfare. The second chapter focuses on Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, specifically its representation of the military characters’ frustration with the public’s failure to acknowledge the traumatic impact of the War on Terror, and its critique of melodramatic patriotic gestures that glorify the war but do not require actual social, financial, or affective investment in the military. The third chapter zeroes in on portrayals of returned veterans in texts by George Saunders, Atticus Lish, and Joyce Carol Oates, who react with increasing antagonism to civilian disinterest in their plight, which gives rise to acts of violence against civilians and a shift in societal attitudes toward the military. I conclude by examining Lish’s depiction of how the policies of the Global Homeland result in the deployment of a military logic within the domestic U.S. Through its engagement with American warfare and the Global Homeland, contemporary American war fiction offers a nuanced exploration of the conduct and ramifications of the War on Terror.

*Keywords:* Global Homeland, derealized warfare, direct warfare, military-civilian relations, sanitization of warfare, state fantasy, War on Terror, War on Terror fiction

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*Für meine Familie*



# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	7
Introduction.....	9
The State of Contemporary War Fiction in Criticism .....	11
The Global Homeland .....	22
Derealized Warfare .....	29
Chapter Outline .....	31
Chapter One	
“‘It was a shitty little war’”: Disillusionment, Sanitization, and Loss of Affect in the Writing of the War on Terror.....	33
Chapter Two	
“‘Extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence’”: Spectacular Militarization, Commodification, and Disenchantment.....	68
Chapter Three	
“‘But his mind did not have a safety and there was no way to shut it off’”: Returning Veterans, the Homeland, and Violent Frustration.....	97
Conclusion: The War Comes Home .....	134
Works Cited .....	141
Index .....	147



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# Introduction

“War reverberates through literature,” writes Kate McLoughlin (1). Although the War on Terror is no exception in that regard, this has not yet been adequately registered by literary criticism.<sup>1</sup> Assessing the state of war literature in early 2014 in an article for *The New Yorker*, George Packer indirectly attributes the dearth of critical engagement to a shortage of literary depictions of the war, claiming that not until the time of the publication of his article “[t]he first wave of literature by American combatants in these long, inconclusive wars has begun to appear” (70).<sup>2</sup> Packer predicts an upsurge in the literary engagement with the War on Terror by attributing the relative scarcity of what he regards as an emerging literary concern to largely practical obstacles causing a delay in the production of accounts of the war: “the minimum lag time between deployment and publication [of war literature penned by veterans] seems to be around five years” (70). A similar claim of a time delay between the unfolding of the war and a literary engagement with it may hold true also for civilian authors. But the present literary landscape, I argue, now offers a considerable number of literary depictions of the War on Terror, varying in form, tone, and genre and providing far more nuanced and provocative engagements with the war and its underlying policies than has actually been accounted for by literary critics.

Perhaps owing to external circumstances, most of all the general troop strength and intensity of combat, the literature of the War on Terror has strongly favored the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan as its setting.<sup>3</sup> And it

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<sup>1</sup> The term “War on Terror” is a rhetorical simplification that denotes a variety of military, political, and cultural domestic and foreign practices. In the context of my dissertation, I adopt the use of the Bush and Obama administrations of the term as it refers to the military campaigns especially in Iraq and Afghanistan if not specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Packer refers to the individual campaigns that comprise the War on Terror that, in addition to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, also included smaller-scale operations in, for instance, the Mediterranean Sea, the Horn of Africa, Somalia, and the Philippines.

<sup>3</sup> The deployment of U.S. combat troops in Afghanistan and Iraq are fundamentally different in terms of numbers and duration and have been the subject of extensive journalistic documentation. Relying on covert operations and air strikes, President Bush began the Afghanistan invasion with just over 1,000 U.S. soldiers in 2001. This number was only slowly expanded, reaching its peak at a still relatively low level of military commitment of about 30,000 U.S. soldiers in 2008 (Montopoli). Troop levels rose as President Obama took office, bolstering the U.S. military presence and peaking at around 88,000 U.S. soldiers in late 2012 (Shaughnessy “Allen: U.S. Troop Drawdown from Afghanistan to Begin ‘Very Shortly.’”) until, after a drawn out and embattled political back-and-forth process, a virtually complete withdrawal was scheduled by 2017 (Rosenberg, Shear). The war in Iraq, on the other hand, was begun with a numerically far

has produced, as Packer predicted, a number of critically lauded works: among the prizes awarded are the 2014 National Book Award for Fiction for Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, the 2013 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, and the 2015 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction for Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*. In my dissertation, I examine Klay's *Redeployment*, Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, and Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned* (Chapter One), Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (Chapter Two), and George Saunders' "Home," Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*, and Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* (Chapter Three). All of these texts were published between 2012 and late 2014 and were written by both military veterans (albeit not necessarily of the War on Terror) and civilians, some of whom are established writers while others are new on the literary scene. I offer in-depth analyses of central passages in the texts which I embed in an examination of the larger ideological, social, and political frameworks in which the respective texts are produced and to which they respond.

Instead of being a mere appendix to 9/11 literature, as some critics imply, I argue that contemporary U.S. war literature constitutes an indispensable object of study, offering an engagement with the War on Terror as it is fought on foreign battlefields as well as the domestic effects of the Global Homeland, a discursive and political concept detailed below, that informs the war. Such literature dispels the binary logic of strictly separated foreign and domestic spheres in the War on Terror and instead conceptualizes the two as interwoven. Most immediately, the texts I examine seek to reinstate an acknowledgment of the physical and psychological suffering of those involved in the war. They do so through intensely visceral combat scenes but also through the depiction of the effects of technologically mediated warfare, thus constituting a counternarrative to the publicly propagated depiction of the War on Terror as derealized and sanitized. However, the sanitization of warfare is depicted as altering a civilian audience's perception of the war, leaving the military characters with a sense of frustration and disenchantment in the face of what they believe to be civilian callousness. Such pervasive feelings of frustration coupled with processes of socioeconomic exclusion preclude veterans from an emotional return to civilian society and are frequently articulated through acts of erratic violence against civilians by returned veterans, turning the public perception of the military as the ostensible guardian of the Homeland into a threat in its own right, thus further widening the emotional military–civilian

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stronger commitment of U.S. ground forces already in its initial stages in 2003. Reuters locates the apex of the U.S. troop strength as following a surge in June 2007 that bolstered numbers up to 170,000 soldiers before 2011 saw a virtually complete troop withdrawal and a ceasing of U.S. military operations.

divide. Ultimately, some texts suggest that the militarized logic governing foreign battlefields is increasingly mapped onto the civilian U.S. society, leading the policies of the Global Homeland to result in a domestic warzone.

## The State of Contemporary War Fiction in Criticism

Despite a traditional ubiquity of fictional depictions of war, the critical reaction to war literature emerging from and engaging with the War on Terror has been meager. Except for reviews and a small number of academic articles that mostly focus on individual works, there has not been much examination of contemporary U.S. war literature. This muted response seems to be anchored in two sets of arguments, the first one seeing literature as an outmoded form of representing the experience of war. Literature, the argument goes, has been made obsolete by other, newer forms of media such as television, film, or internet blogs. Whatever intriguing engagement with war American literature once may have offered has shifted to other forms of media. The second set of arguments acknowledges a continued possible relevance of fiction, but claims that U.S. literature has largely failed to engage with the War on Terror in a way that could warrant much critical attention. Due to the lack of immersion in the complications of a post-9/11 world and the war, U.S. literature has thus far retreated into national navel gazing and the preoccupation with domestic trauma. While a nuanced literary engagement with the war is possible, it occurs in genres other than war literature. Neither argumentative strand, I argue, is fully convincing in today's literary landscape.

A particularly skeptical attitude toward not merely the capacity of war literature but of fiction in general to offer instructive engagement with contemporary warfare is taken by David Pascoe. He argues that “the only truly legitimate writing about the ‘war on terror’ [is] the military blog,” disseminated through “information networks” that ostensibly constitute the only refuge from official U.S. censorship of reports on the war (247). But Pascoe avoids the question why such networks should in fact be exempt from U.S. surveillance and potential censorship. Rather, his position is that “legitimate writing about the ‘war on terror’” has to circumvent a literary middleman and can only come directly from the soldiers witnessing the war as it unfolds on the battlefields (247).

However, the presumed authenticity of accounts of the war written by military veterans as opposed to other forms of rendition is actually not always borne out by reality. The arguably most popular factual account to come out of the War on Terror is Chris Kyle's 2012 *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*, a national bestseller turned into the 2014 film of the same title. Kyle, a highly-decorated veteran, ostensibly gives an accurate account of his four tours of duty in Iraq, but after his death at the hands of a traumatized veteran at a Texas shooting range in

2013, a defamation law suit called the veracity of the accounts into question. Following allegations of an inaccurate portrayal of the physical altercation between Kyle and James George Janos, better known as Jesse Ventura and with a colorful background as naval veteran, professional wrestler, actor, and Governor of Minnesota himself, Kyle's estate was sentenced to a total fine of about \$1.8 million ("Jury awards Jesse Ventura \$1.8 million in 'American Sniper' lawsuit"). Such instances of self-aggrandizement or false attribution of facts make Pascoe's notion of the supposed truthfulness of accounts by veterans difficult to maintain without qualification.

Claims that military blogs unfailingly offer unfiltered depictions of the war are also questionable. One particularly popular and critically acclaimed, albeit short-lived, military blog was written by Colby Buzzell, an infantryman in Iraq. Over the span of a mere two months in 2004, Buzzell anonymously provided what Brandon Griggs of CNN calls

visceral, first-hand accounts [that] were a bracing antidote to dry news reports and bloodless Pentagon news releases. In the first major war of the Internet age, Buzzell and other soldier bloggers in Iraq offered readers around the world unfiltered real-time glimpses of an ongoing conflict.

Buzzell's depiction of the war precisely as he experienced it is certainly enlightening, but it does lead him repeatedly to defy orders to conform to Army regulations or have his blog seized. When a blog post detailing a firefight attracted enormous media attention, Buzzell came under very strict scrutiny by Army officials. And after the publication of an email from Jello Biafra, singer of the legendary punk band Dead Kennedys and outspoken opponent of the war, in which he voiced support for Buzzell and outrage at the restrictions imposed on him, the blog was closed down.

The content of this blog, along with additional material, was, however, published in book form in *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* in 2005. The material includes information on Buzzell's background and his decision to the military but also various email exchanges between Buzzell and his superiors about the blog. Of particular interest is an email from Buzzell's CO (Commanding Officer) Robert A. Robinson II. On the one hand, Robinson sternly informs him of "a direct order from Lt. James and myself for you to cease writing," but he appears to be motivated by genuine concern and sympathy for Buzzell, advising him to "stop writing and just wait until you publish your book" (371). Publishing his experiences in book form rather than in a military blog, Robinson seems to suggest, would free Buzzell from the restrictions and censorship imposed on his military blog. It would seem that literature could enable a more liberal engagement with the war as it allows for a freedom of expression far exceeding writing produced within the confines of military guidelines. Again, the increasing restrictions imposed on this blog complicate Pascoe's claims about the unrestricted truthfulness of military blogs.

Moreover, identifying accounts of veterans as the sole source of “legitimate writing on the war on terror” runs the risk of reinforcing the division between the U.S. military and civilian spheres by relegating the impact of the war and the responsibility to bear witness to it exclusively to former soldiers (Pascoe 247). Doing so would threaten to largely externalize the impact of the War on Terror away from the domestic U.S. to the battlefields abroad and possibly disregard how the war and the policies informing it shape life in the domestic U.S. The various literary writing workshops for veterans offered at universities across the U.S. as well as independently run programs such as Voices from War in New York, Warrior Writers in Philadelphia, or Washington DC’s Veterans Writing Project, may be seen to underwrite the notion that writing on the War on Terror must be produced by veterans. But in an article for *The New York Times*, Matt Gallagher, a former Army captain who has been involved in writing workshops as both student and editor, dismisses this kind of division between military and civilian writing, calling it “an ugly undercurrent of thought in military writing – that one shouldn’t write about war unless one participated in it as a combatant or otherwise survived its destruction.”

As a way of facilitating critical engagement, Gallagher calls for the recognition of the, to borrow McLoughlin’s phrase, reverberations of the war on both the military and the civilian population. He specifically propagates the inclusion of civilian writers in war literature:

If we’re serious about these wars and their aftermaths belonging to the entire American citizenry, it’s our responsibility as vets not to harangue anyone who didn’t go abroad with us. We need to let them speak, too, and let them speak about what the wars looked like from a distance.

As Gallagher argues, literature that seeks to engage with the War on Terror cannot be restricted to either the domestic or battlefields abroad but must recognize and engage with the interplay between both spheres. And as he points out, writing workshops for veterans do aim for a nuanced depiction by encouraging an explicitly literary approach to the depiction of the War on Terror. “For veteran writing workshops to flourish, I found, they needed to stress the writing part over the veteran part,” he writes, concluding that “[e]ven nonfiction pieces more journalistic in nature than creative require strong writing and heavy reworking – ‘That’s the way it happened’ is best saved for the version told at bars.”

Stories produced in these workshops have found an audience through self-published anthologies such as the Veteran Writing Workshop’s *Afterwords* as well as through literary publishers and magazines. The perhaps most prominent work thus far to emerge from such workshops is Phil Klay’s 2014 short story anthology *Redeployment* for which he, as noted above, was awarded with the 2014 National Book Award in Fiction. Before the publication of the anthology, the eponymous title story had appeared in the literary magazine

*Granta* as well as in the anthology *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, co-edited by Matt Gallagher and including works by David Abrams and Colby Buzzell. While Klay's short stories certainly are informed by his own experience with the war as a U.S. Marines officer deployed in Iraq, they are not restricted to autobiographical details. Instead, he blends his experiences with fiction, assuming and moving between different points of view of diverse characters; in his review for *The Guardian*, Edward Docx praises Klay for "convincingly inhabit[ing] more than a dozen different voices" throughout the anthology. In an interview with National Public Radio, Klay describes a desire to account for the various ways in which the war crosses boundaries of gender, political allegiance, and social status and impacts soldiers and civilians alike: "I wanted to have very different viewpoints, very different experiences, just so the reader could kind of think about what they were trying to say and how they clash with each other. There's not a single narrative about this war." According to Klay, to move away from a literary engagement focused on the veteran perspective not only relieves veterans of the burden of having to narrate the war but suggests the shared responsibility for the war and its aftermath of both military and domestic U.S.: "The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are as much every U.S. citizen's wars as they are the veterans' wars." And if the responsibility for the effects of the war is a common one, it stands to reason that so, too, is the responsibility to engage with the War on Terror.

Complicating the endorsement of veterans' (auto-)biographies and military blogs as exclusive sources of legitimate writing on the war further is the fact that such texts derive their appeal from the presumed authenticity of the author's recollection of the experience in the War on Terror, an authenticity perhaps enticing, but also limiting. Shadowing the author and retracing a journey that can span from boot camp to war zone and back home may as close as non-participants can come to the minds of those who were engaged in the war. But even barring issues pertaining to fidelity to fact, the narrative scope of such texts is restricted to the author's intimate singular perspective on events recounted as they unfold along a chronological order. Writers of fiction, on the other hand, are not burdened by such restrictions and may draw on virtually unlimited narrative configurations. They may choose to recreate an intense singular fixation of ostensibly factual recollections, but also produce panoramic stories not tied to a single perspective: in the space of a single text, writers can move between a range of genres and tones that marry the realistic to the fantastic, incorporate characters with contradictory attitudes and perspectives, and draw on alternative or disjointed timelines. In drawing on these and other literary conventions, fiction writers are at liberty to purposefully craft rather than recollect their stories to intentionally combine and contrast different, potentially even diametrically opposed, perspectives. John Carlos Rowe discusses how this formal flexibility can be used to express various, potentially contradictory, ideological positions: "[L]iterature and other cultural

production may predict war, warn us away from it, prepare us emotionally for it, even help legitimate warfare” (813). Fiction can therefore be used for literary propaganda but also to stage a critical engagement with War on Terror by undercutting official rhetoric, giving voice to those who have been suppressed or neglected, and complicating the reader’s perception of the war by imagining the repercussion of the war abroad on life at home. Given the ability to incorporate different attitudes, themes, and perspectives, fiction is then free to combine such different concerns into a narrative more complex and panoramic in scope than a more restricted factual recording could.

The second general set of reservations against the involvement of U.S. literature with the War on Terror revolves around the claim that fiction has in fact failed to draw on precisely this potential. Instead of a restricted literary perspective on the war privileging the factual accounts of U.S. soldiers, the argument is that a multitude of perspectives blurring the clear distinction between national and foreign, military and civilian, is necessary for a nuanced literary depiction of a post-9/11 U.S. While this demand would seem to echo the very intention of authors like Phil Klay, the core of the argument is not that the problem lies with the general potential of literature to engage with the War on Terror in a nuanced way, but rather, that American writers have failed to convincingly do so. Instead of having engaged with or even staging an outright intervention against the War on Terror and the policies informing it, including the processes coopting the American cultural landscape to facilitate approval for the war, authors have been accused of regressing into a literary domesticity that limits the implications of the configuration of post-9/11 U.S. policies to a geographical area circumscribed by national borders. The charge is that fiction has succumbed to the relative comfort of a regressive stance, limiting the fraught complications of a globalized world to a purely American perspective. As a result, some critics argue that U.S. literature of the War on Terror is so out of touch with the global political reality that it no longer commands much political, social, or cultural relevance and has therefore simply not yet been deserving of any thorough critical reflection. Such views may have to do with the relative scarcity of war writing at the time of their publication or result from a critical perspective understanding war literature as little more than an appendix to writing on 9/11, therefore simply extending charges brought against the latter to the former. But while both perspectives have their merits, I contend that they do not fully do justice to contemporary war writing.

Among the voices claiming the thematic regression and isolationism of U.S. fiction is that of Bruce Robbins. In his 2011 interrogation of the state of the American post-9/11 novel, he concludes that U.S. fiction has become less “worldly,” using the term to suggest the potential of fiction to engage with and take part in global instead of merely local networks (1096). In the wake of the attacks, Robbins argues, “the post-9/11 novel is first of all disoriented”; it has retreated into “a restricted time / space that replaces and cancels out any abstract planetary coordinates” (1096). In his view, the failure of the novel has

been the inability—or unwillingness—to engage with a world perceived as increasingly hostile and confounding. Robbins finds that instead of producing “better maps, more complex and reliable global positioning systems” to navigate the new political landscape (1097), American authors turned away from the world by clinging to “[r]ituals of retreat to a private or familial zone” (1098). To avoid the pitfalls of regressing into the overly familial, he proposes that U.S. authors perform a literary “worlding” by moving their plots and characters away from the confines of the U.S. borders out into the world. Earlier, in 2009, Rory Stewart came to an even more damning assessment than Robbins, stating that “celebrated writers have been simply embarrassing on 9/11 [and the ensuing War on Terror]” (xii). Such contentions might have been debatable at the time that Robbins and Stewart originally made them, but as more literature on the war has entered the market, they are hard to accept without qualification.

In his 2011 study of post-9/11 literature, for him an umbrella term that includes novels about both the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror, Richard Gray arrives at a similar conclusion as Stewart and Robbins. Gray bases his investigation of U.S. literature on the by now familiar notion that the 9/11 attacks ruptured the fabric of the American life in a way that had previously been unthinkable, one that realized deeply rooted national fears, rendering the attacks a unique moment of crisis for the U.S. population (4–10). Gray argues that

[t]he unique paradox of 9/11, and its consequences, is caught in this tension between the strange and the familiar. It was a demolition of the fantasy life of the nation in that it punctured America’s belief in its inviolability and challenged its presumption of its innocence, the manifest rightness of its cause. It was also a dark realization of that fantasy life, in the sense that it turned the nightmare, of a ruthless other threatening the fabrics of buildings and of the nation, into a palpable reality. [...] The shock was all the greater, however, because, on [a fantastical] level, it *was* expected – or rather, dreaded. Americans woke up to the fact that their borders were not impregnable, that there was an enemy out there to kill and be killed. But it woke up, paradoxically, to the realization of one of its darkest dreams, complete with all the symbolic paraphernalia of such dreams [...]. (11)

The psychological effect of the 9/11 attacks was, in addition to the physical destruction, that the general public felt that “[t]he homeland was no longer secure and, to that extent, no longer home,” as Gray writes (5). The Bush administration’s response to this shock, he continues, was to cast these acts of terror as an attack on “the fantasy life of the nation,” that is, not merely an attack on American soil but an attack on constitutive American values (11).

The initial literary response to the crisis of 9/11, Gray claims, was that the shock of the attack “silenced” American writers altogether (14). And once they attempted to engage with 9/11 and the ensuing war, however, Gray finds



that “[i]n place of a necessary imaginative encounter with disaster, and the recalibration of feeling and belief that surely requires, most of the [established American authors] betrayed [...] a desperate retreat into old sureties” (16). His claim here would seem to mirror Robbins’s contentions. Rather than engage with the collapse of old ideologies and certainties, and what this might imply for America’s place in the world, American writers aimed to “dissolve public crisis in the comforts of the personal” (17). As they strove to “simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures” in which “cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists,” American literature in turn ostensibly withdrew into an intense preoccupation with domestic concerns (30).

Since the global effects of the War on Terror and its policies cannot be fully engaged with through a purely domestic perspective, critics frequently advocate a radical worlding of American literature in the way that Robbins proposes. Instead of being limited by ostensible national navel gazing, such literature would turn its focus outward toward an engagement with the effects of American politics experienced not purely in domestic terms, but also through the perspective of characters removed from a pure American situation and concerns. Richard Gray, for instance, argues that the unifying trait of “fictions that get it right,” as he puts it, is the deployment of “forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transnational, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary – us and them, West and East, Christian and Muslim” (17). By foregoing a focus on domestic matters, such writing could produce new hybrid perspectives on the U.S as well as the globe.

For some other critics, however, an engagement with hybrid perspectives is not sufficient. Robbins himself pays particular attention to novels of migration as facilitating literary worlding: the “‘coming-to-America’ narrative [...] offers readers some chance [...] to get inside foreign minds in the midst of foreign histories” (1100). A different, albeit no less important, form of worldiness is afforded by this perspective’s “symmetrically opposite genre that sends characters not toward America but away from it, or what might be called the expatriate novel” (1100). Robbins thus focuses equally on both a multi-faceted perspective on America and the experience of American subjects completely removed from their native domesticity. Suggesting a similar abandonment of American domesticity, Michael Rothberg writes that

an even more challenging agenda awaits those who want to grapple seriously with the contemporary context of war and terror. For, if among the effects of the nation’s response to attacks on “the homeland” has been the recasting of the domestic space of citizenship and civil rights [...], to dwell only on this dimension of the problem would risk reproducing American exceptionalism and ignoring the context out of which the terror attacks emerged in the first place. Once writers have acknowledged the shock and trauma of 9/11, an intellectually and politically mature literature must leave national–domestic space behind for riskier “foreign” encounters. (157)

The retreat of U.S. literature into the purely domestic, Rothberg suggests, can only be rectified by a radical thematic re-calibration, foregoing domestic concerns in favor of “the foreign”: an engagement with the aftermath of 9/11, including the War on Terror, as it impacts non-American characters in non-American territories. Such an argument does, however, run the risk of establishing a binary division between the domestic and the foreign that fails to recognize the interplay between the two spheres that, as I will claim, an engagement with the War on Terror demands and the literature examined in my dissertation seeks to do.

Caren Irr finally presents another and decidedly more optimistic perspective in her 2014 study of American literature. Her disagreement with critics like Gray, Robbins, and Stewart is not necessarily based on a fundamental rejection of the notion of U.S. literature’s purported regressive preoccupation with the domestic. But Irr finds such claims, while true for the respective narratives, unrepresentative and not comprehensive. Instead, for her reservations about American fiction’s retreat into domestic preoccupations are the result of ignoring the emergence of what she terms the “international novel.” Seeing it as set apart from the less progressive and formally less adventurous forms of “suburban realism and program fiction,” Irr characterizes this writing as international in form as well as function:

This writing engages with international literary scenes and traditions and revises the political novel in particular as a form, testing its capacity to express vital conflicts in the present. [...] The geopolitical novel draws on several alternative strains of writing in order to revive the problem of representing the world in a new, lively form [...]. (9)

Within this kind of writing, Irr particularly highlights the “migrant novel, the Peace Corps thriller, the national allegory, the revolutionary novel, and the expatriate satire” (10). What I propose in my dissertation is that the contemporary war novel must be counted among the genres best suited to portraying the many contemporary political, social, and military complexities of post-9/11 America.

But neither view of post-9/11 U.S. literature, be it optimistic or pessimistic in regard to the ability to engage with the reverberations of American politics, focuses on the contemporary war novel that engages with the War on Terror. To be sure, Robbins, Rothberg, and Gray articulated their arguments at a time when literature on the war was in shorter supply than is the case today. But their criticism appears to also be grounded in a thematic conflation. Critics concerned with the alleged failure of the American novel or calling for a critical reevaluation do not always differentiate between literature engaging with the attacks of September 11 and the ensuing War on Terror as two genres that while they may have some thematic overlap they nevertheless remain distinct. Instead, the literature of 9/11 and its aftermath, particularly the War on Terror,

is frequently grouped in one unified cluster in which the latter is little more than the former's appendix. Richard Gray, for instance, frequently combines 9/11 and its aftermath into one unified concern as "[t]he thing,' 'the event,' '9/11,' 'September 11:' [...] both the crisis and its aftermath" (2) or by examining novels depicting various aspects of "9/11 or the war on terror or both" (114). Such an approach tends to focus on texts primarily concerned with the moment of the September 11 attacks and its political aftermath. The War on Terror is thus more or less subsumed under the 9/11 rubric and regarded as little more than the practical execution of post-9/11 policies. While the literary engagement with 9/11 has therefore commanded the main share of the critical attention, a systematic examination of the literature about the war itself has attracted less interest.

This might be related to Packer's notion of the delay of a literary engagement or simply be a result of the increased competition between different forms of media. As Stacey Peebles writes, "digital technology has dramatically changed the way soldiers' stories about contemporary war are told" (4). Equipped with "media savvy and extensive knowledge of pop culture," Peebles points out, soldiers in the War on Terror tend to "revel in the availability of communications and media technology, ready to live virtually as the star of the ultimate war movie" (3). With high-end media technology, much of it visual, at their disposal, these soldiers simply share their experiences by way of film instead of literature or via the writing found in military blogs, a contention that would seem to hold equally true for the civilian depiction of the war. In the foreword to a collection of essays examining the impact of 9/11 and the ensuing war on American culture, Reza Aslan writes that "it was cinema, and popular culture in general" that helped make sense of the events, often in a discerningly simplified fashion (xii). And according to Aslan, popular culture continues to inform the public reception of the ensuing war (xii-xiii). Crucially, the forms of popular culture investigated are precisely cinematic forms: while literature is virtually absent, it is media forms like film, television, and video games that shape the depiction of the War on Terror for a broader audience and that therefore attract more critical attention.

While critical attention focuses on such diverse and competing forms of war depictions, the lack of interest in war literature remains surprising, especially given that the examination of earlier forms of war literature has been recognized as being of importance for literary studies. Charting the "recurrent tendency in American writing [...] to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience," Gray specifically identifies the moments of such national crises as moments of warfare, calling attention to the War of Independence, the First World War, the Second World War, and the Vietnam war (2-3). For the crisis of 9/11, however, the ensuing war plays a subordinate role as Gray points to "the events of September 11, 2001 and after" (4), effectively again relegating the War on Terror to an appendix to 9/11. In his 2008 examination of the diverse reception of 9/11 and the War on Terror in various forms

of media—with chapters devoted to mass media, cinema, literature, and photography and visual art—David Holloway’s argument is that “the 9/11 novel sometimes seemed more concerned with the responsibilities and limitations of writers, than with writing about 9/11 itself,” leading him to claim that “novelists’ relationships with 9/11 sounded a lot like ‘lost-generation’ responses to the First World War [...] but without the faith often displayed by lost-generation writers that art would see them through in the end” (108). But Holloway also condenses literary responses to 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror into a single literary field, a conflation which leads to the ironic situation of likening the literary response to 9/11 to earlier forms of war writing, without paying much attention to the writing actually emerging from the War on Terror.

However, the reluctance to engage critically and systematically with the literature of the War on Terror may also be rooted in a thematically restricted notion of the nature of the war novel. In 2012, literary scholar Wallis R. Sanborn III produced one of the few systematic approaches to war literature after the outbreak of the War on Terror. But his scope is rather narrow. In outlining the premise of his study, Sanborn contests that the

first defining characteristic of the American novel of war is that the war at hand is the central theme or defining action of the text. [...] One asks, would the novel exist sans the war at hand? If the answer is no, then the novel is not in this study. But, if the central thematic action of the text is war, if the locus of the guts of the work is the war zone, if the optic of the philosophy of the novel is the view of war, then, obviously, the work is a novel of war. (12)

Moreover, the “violence of the American novel of war is real [meaning actual acts of warfare], not symbolic, not metaphorical, not verbal, not imagined, not cold” (12); it “most often includes the deployment of American forces on foreign soils” (17). Conversely, Sanborn excludes novels “that take place primarily out of the war zone or have primary non-war thematic elements like ‘love in a time of war’ or ‘issues at home during a time of war’” (11). The effect of an examination of war literature based on such a rationale is an exclusion of, for instance, Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* from consideration. Sanborn’s argument thus threatens to reinstate a notion of war and war writing that is based on a clear division between domestic and foreign and, ultimately, between military and civilians.

Stacey Peebles’ 2011 *Welcome to the Suck*, an examination of the way in which American involvement in the Iraq wars is narrated in various media forms is one of the few systematic approaches to contemporary war literature, but is burdened by a similar strict division, although this could be attributed to the date of the study’s publication. Making various salient points about the depiction of the War on Terror across different forms of media, Peebles’ engagement with literature emerging from the war focuses on John Crawford’s 2005 account of his involvement in the Iraq campaign, *The Last True Story*

*I'll Ever Tell*, and on Brian Turner's 2005 collection of poetry, *Here, Bullet*. Another chapter examines Anthony Swofford's 2003 *Jarhead* as well as its 2005 movie adaptation, and Colby Buzzell's 2005 *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, the former a memoir about the First Gulf War, the latter a memoir about the Iraq campaign in the War on Terror. The focus of those sections, however, is primarily how the texts react to and rework cinematic depictions of war. As Peebles would have it, the focus of war writing is constituted by "the anticipation, experience, and aftermath of the lethal confrontation with the enemy, one who is defined by his oppositional politics, ideology, cultural practices, or simply by the direction his weapon is pointed" (101). Regarding the experience of war, "[a]t least initially, everything is Other" (102). This may certainly be true, but in focusing on war writing defined by the encounter with the enemy on battlefields abroad, Peebles omits engagements with the domestic effects of the war that equally impact the soldier characters. Moreover, that both texts are authored by war veterans would seem to imply that the writing on the War on Terror worth engaging with is veteran writing. With regard to the material available at the book's publication, the focus on veterans-turned-writers is understandable as these signed responsible for the vast majority of war narratives. However, such a selection is surely too narrow from the perspective of the present literary landscape offering a variety of depictions of the War on Terror and its effects not restricted to combat zones.

Recent years have seen the publication of fiction written by (ex-)military and civilian authors alike engaging with the War on Terror in ways that imagine the war as something in which the American civilian and military spheres are intimately intertwined instead of strictly separated. In his assessment of contemporary U.S. culture, Patrick Deer identifies two such processes and distinguishes between militarism on the one hand, a term that, "as historian John Gillis has observed, is an older concept typically 'defined as either the dominance of the military over civilian authority, or, more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in society,'" and militarization, which "has been influentially defined by Michael Geyer as 'the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence'" on the other (52). While Deer regards militarization as the more relevant notion for the examination of contemporary American culture, I would argue that the texts examined in my dissertation, and U.S. war literature in general, allow for, and in fact require, an examination of both of these processes as well as their interplay.

In examining literature that foregoes the dichotomy of relegating the war either to foreign battlefields or to the national-domestic arena but instead acknowledges the intrinsic ties between the two, my approach to contemporary war fiction resembles the stance that John Carlos Rowe has argued for. Contending that "US domestic policies and external warfare are inextricably linked" (829), he argues for the necessity of broadening the scope of the war novel to include "children and the elderly and other non-combatants" to avoid

the risk of “thinking conventionally about warfare in political and strategic ways,” something which tends to “ignore the consequences for non-combatants” in war zones (813). Whereas Rowe directs his gaze outward by calling for a reevaluation of American military expansionism and colonialism reminiscent of Robbins’ notion of worlding, my analysis also aims inward, taking into account both the depiction of the global conduct of the War on Terror and its domestic impact. My examination of the intrinsic ties between the conduct and policies of the War on Terror and the domestic civilian U.S. is thus intended to contribute to an engagement with U.S. literature on the War on Terror that offers a more fleshed-out depiction of the war than has been the case so far.

## The Global Homeland

The intention of my dissertation is not to historicize American war literature generally but to focus on the depiction of the characteristics particular to the War on Terror: first, I elaborate on the nature and impact of the Bush administration’s establishment of the post-9/11 Homeland. I argue that the post-9/11 Homeland is the political prism through which these texts have to be read and to which they react. While this political construct is rarely explicitly evoked in the narratives under examination, I nevertheless contend that the texts interrogate its ideologies, aims, and consequences. The notion of the Global Homeland will be indispensable for my concluding argument regarding the role of contemporary war writing in American literature at large. Following this section, I examine the unprecedented degree of technologically mediated warfare in the War on Terror, a concern that surfaces in highly more explicit manner and in different permutations in virtually all of the texts. While I provide an introduction to the overall concept in the introduction, an outline of the precise way in which the notion of derealized warfare applies to the individual texts is relegated to the respective chapters.

In his 2009 book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Donald Pease outlines the most significant critique of the Global post-9/11 American Homeland, its constitutive policies, and its employment in the justification of the War on Terror. Harking back to Carl Schmitt’s idea of the state of exception, Pease argues that the Bush administration’s political construct of the “Homeland Security State” ushered in an era of a permanent state of exception (4). In this era, the protection of American interests is no longer geographically circumscribed by the nation state, but becomes global in reach as “the Bush administration redefined sovereignty as predicated less upon national control over territorial borders than upon the state’s exercising control over global networks” (181).

A central prerequisite for the enforcement of U.S. interests within such “global networks” is the public support of the notion of the American Homeland. Donald Pease argues that the Homeland is rooted in the very foundational myths of the U.S. since “the Homeland represented a prehistoric pastness prior to the founding of the United States” (170). As such, the notion of the Homeland is imbued with metaphorical and emotional significance for the self-image of the U.S. as an object of simultaneous longing and belonging as “the site that the colonial settlers had abandoned in their quest for newly found land” as well as “the country to which the settlers might return” (170). Following the attacks of September 11, the idea of the Homeland gained particular significance as “the image of a vulnerable population that had become internally estranged from its ‘country of origin’ and dependent on the protection of the state” (170). With regards to the desire to control “global networks,” however, the post-9/11 Homeland, for all its implications of signifying an actual territory, is not geographically circumscribed, but rather intimately ties the domestic to the global. As the 2002 *U.S. National Security Strategy*, a document drawn up to outline the government’s response to the 9/11 attacks, argues, “[t]he United States of America is fighting a war against terrorists of global reach” (5) that legitimates “acting preemptively” (6); the paper goes so far as to count the protection of “critical U.S. infrastructure and assets in outer space” among the goals of the War on Terror (30). At the same time, the scope of the War on Terror is not exclusively outward oriented. As the authors of the paper note, “the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs is diminishing. In a globalized world, events beyond America’s borders have a greater impact inside them” (31). The scope of the War on Terror, this suggests, is not restricted by territorial limitations, but the war is waged on the domestic micro level as well as the global macro level, potentially extending to every individual and territory on the planet. And the war is not merely in the service of ensuring the integrity of the territorial borders of the U.S. nation state, but to defend and export the far less tangible and culturally-coded notion of the American “way of life” (7).

In keeping with the mythical nature of the Homeland, the official rhetoric employed by the Bush administration before and during the war was characterized by a remarkable turn to the emotive. A case in point is the “Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress,” delivered by President Bush on September 20, 2001, which effectively ushers in the War on Terror by announcing the beginning of military operations in Afghanistan. As it is intended to galvanize the U.S. population in support of the war efforts, the speech does not emphasize factual claims. Instead, it is brimming with expressions such as “the unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers” (65), “enemies of freedom,” and “night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack” (66). Instead of pursuing a legitimization for the war based purely on factual claims, the Bush administration

sought to ground its authority to go to war by appealing to the American public's emotional investment in the war.<sup>4</sup>

The turn to an official rhetoric laden with metaphors, verbal imagery, and allusions to American myths does not merely signify the difficulty to put the experience of terror into words. Pease claims the purpose of such rhetoric is also to establish and maintain a political rationale built on myths as much as facts. In his examination of the policies and their official justification following 9/11, Pease argues for the vital importance of national myths in producing public approval for political decision-making processes as “myths empower writers and policymakers to position historically contingent events within pre-constituted frames of reference that would control the public's understanding of their significance” (156). Other critics argue similarly in their examinations of the myth-inflected rhetoric of the Bush administration. Joanne Esch, for instance, sums up the political work performed by myth as “provid[ing] and reproduc[ing] significance that is shared by a group in a way that impacts the group's political conditions and experiences. Political myth is a self-reinforcing determination to act rather than merely a description, so it *shapes* political experience at least as much as it reflects it” (364; italics in original). Esch also posits an overt emotional appeal of such myths when she writes that “[by] influencing our perception, cognition, and emotions, linguistic recollection of political myth can deeply affect what we consider to be legitimate, making myth a pivotal intersection of discourse and political practice” (364). The political value of the invocation of myths, that is, lies in their ability to restore and maintain public control in the face of crisis as they not only provide a set of culturally established narratives through which better to process and make sense of traumatic events in the present but also to ensure the population's emotional investment in the ensuing policies. Pease argues that such an appeal to quintessential American national myths played a vital part in justifying the political reaction to 9/11. The Bush administration appealed to

master fictions [...] to authorize the state's actions. The mythological tropes—“Virgin Land,” “Redeemer Nation,” “American Adam,” “Nature's Nation,” “Errand into the Wilderness”—sedimented with the nation's master narratives supplied the transformational grammar through which state policymakers have shaped and reshaped the national peoples' understanding of political and historical events. The state's powers of governance have depended in part upon its recourse to these master fictions that transmit a normative system of values and beliefs from generation to generation. (157)

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that ostensibly factual claims were entirely absent in the rationale for war, perhaps most notably Colin Powell's presentation in the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003.



Two speeches are particularly illustrative of Pease's claims regarding the prominent use of national mythologies in the justification for the War on Terror: the "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks" and the already mentioned "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress." In the case of the latter speech, Pease draws particular attention to a rhetorical strategy in which

the state's symbolic response to 9/11 replaced Virgin Land ("Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years they have been wars on foreign soil") with Ground Zero ("Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning") and the Homeland ("Americans have known surprise attacks, but never before on thousands of civilians") as the governing metaphors through which to come to terms with the attacks. (158)

The "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks" is equally rich in national myths. The most prominent ones range from allusions to American exceptionalism—"America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" (57)—to framing the upcoming war as a conflict between good and evil—"Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America" (57)—and America as Redeemer Nation, inflected with Christian rhetoric—"None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. Thank you. Good night, and God bless America" (58). Again, the purpose of such rhetoric is to rally the American population under the banner of an ostensibly besieged American way of life that needs to be defended.

Pease makes use of the work of Jacqueline Rose to make sense of the political rationale behind these and similar appeals to the emotional investment of the U.S. population through the employment of figures of American exceptionalism. In particular, Pease investigates the way in which the Bush administration did not merely impose the governmental overreach of the Homeland Security State on an unwilling American population but succeeded in producing widespread public approval of such policies.<sup>5</sup> Examining the processes that lead to the establishment of the modern state's authority, Rose combines psychoanalytical and political theory to argue that the modern state depends on its subjects' public approval of and investment in state authority. Drawing on psychoanalysis, she argues that the tool producing this public approval is "fantasy [which]—far from being the antagonist of public, social, being—plays a central, constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations" (4). In lieu of other forms of intrinsic authority such as a divine right to rule, Rose points to a modern state's perpetual need to "make *sure* of itself"

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<sup>5</sup> This approval, however, was not universal as the preparations for the 2003 Iraq invasion sparked national and global protest.

(8; italics in original). As “the modern state’s authority passes straight off the edge of the graspable, immediately knowable world,” it is precisely this public fantasy of the state’s authority that asserts and secures its stability (8). In the case of the U.S., Pease finds a special relevance of state fantasies that have “incit[ed] within the citizens who take them up the desire to organize their identities out of the political antagonisms within U.S. national culture” which ultimately works to “obtain[...] U.S. citizens’ acquiescence to the processes whereby the state superimposes the legal identities through which it seeks to manage the everyday practices and the self-representation of its citizens” (4). The post-9/11 State of Exception thus “attributed the sovereign power through which it regulated them to the people so that the people would construe their authorization of the state’s actions as the precondition for the state’s enactments” (205).<sup>6</sup> This means not only that the state manufactured the necessary public consent for the enactment of the policies of the Homeland Security State, but that the state achieved unprecedented authority as the public investment in the state fantasy of the Homeland invited the American people to surrender authority over even minute details of their everyday lives to the state.

Pease thus argues that the Bush administration drew on the vocabulary of American exceptionalism to strengthen the public emotional investment in the post-9/11 policies. But he also finds a discrepancy between what this public rhetoric seems to suggest and the exact nature of the exceptionalism it actually produces. In fact, President Bush did not want to subjugate the U.S. to the very norms and regulations that it purportedly strove to enforce in its protection of the Homeland by declaring “[the U.S.] as The Exception to the rules that it enforced across the planet” (181). This exception from being bound by international treaties was accompanied by a similar shift in domestic policies that absolved the Bush administration from the democratic system of political checks and balances, since by

suspend[ing] the U.S. Constitution that had defined the terms of the state’s relationship with U.S. citizens in terms of shared sovereignty [...]. U.S. citizens were treated as denizens of a protectorate that the State of Exception defended rather than answered to. (181)

Examining the configuration of the Homeland Security State, albeit by the Obama administrations, Joseph Masco comes to a similar conclusion and argues that the “security state apparatus no longer recognizes national boundaries or citizenship as the defining coordinates of its governance” (1). Such a global framework, this is to say, erases traditional political categories such as citizen and non-citizen that divide the population based on the notion of a politically and spatially circumscribed nation.

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<sup>6</sup> Pease capitalizes to differentiate between the general principle of a state of exception and what he regards to be the principle’s permanent manifestation in post-9/11 America.

Resulting from such erasure of political categories, the same policies governing the global protection of U.S. interests through the War on Terror, Pease argues, equally apply to the domestic civilian population:

The Emergency State is marked by absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order. It is empowered to suspend the articles of the Constitution protective of personal liberty, freedom of speech and assembly, the inviolability of the home, and postal and telephone and Internet privacy. In designating Afghanistan and Iraq as endangering the Homeland, Operations Infinite Justice and Enduring Freedom [the former term was used to designate the military operations of the War on Terror before being replaced by the latter] simply extended the imperatives of the domestic emergency state across the globe. (168)

As the Global Homeland brings the principles of the military operations of the War on Terror to bear on the domestic U.S. itself, a strict functional division into military and civilian spheres of life becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Displaced from taking an active part in the politics of the Homeland, the U.S. population itself became a potential target for state violence as

the people were also the potential targets of the shows of force [of the U.S. military superiority in the War on Terror] they witnessed. [...] After this new settlement [of the global Homeland] induced the people to suspend their civil liberties in exchange for the enjoyment of the state's spectacular violations of the rights of its enemies, the Emergency State transposed the nation and the citizen into dispensable predicates of global rule. (173)

It is, then, Pease's contention that this State of Exception in which the state is liberated from international as well as domestic political and legal oversight, was not forcibly implemented on a reluctant U.S. population. Rather, an exceptionalist state fantasy was employed to make the population desire this very system.

But this process produces a crucial tension between what the state fantasy of the Homeland seems to signify and what the policies of the post-9/11 Homeland Security State actually bear out, particularly in the relationship between the U.S. military and civilian population. In an effort to establish and secure a global order, ultimately not only potential external threats to the U.S. became targets of state violence but the U.S. population itself was deemed a potentially legitimate target. The military and civilian spheres operate differently from each other in a myriad practical ways. The state fantasy can be seen to work to obfuscate a public understanding of the collapsing political categories, maintaining the notion of clearly demarcated military and civilian spheres. But the logic of the Global Homeland subsumes the global population at large into a single political entity that presents a homogenized potential ob-

ject for state-sanctioned violence. My engagement with the relationship between the U.S. military and the U.S. civilian population will therefore have to be read with this tension in mind: despite the policies of the Homeland Security State, the public perception of the military and civilian spheres produced by the state fantasy is determined by an understanding of these spheres as distinctly different from each other and the military acting as the guardian of American civilians.<sup>7</sup>

But as the Homeland Security state draws on the cultural dissemination of its state fantasy as an instrumental tool for the public legitimization of its policies, I would suggest that it simultaneously opens the state fantasy to interrogation and critical engagement, especially with regard to John Carlos Rowe's aforementioned argument about the ideological flexibility of literature and how this enables the expression of various, potentially conflicting, attitudes. While culture in general and literature in particular may certainly be utilized as propaganda tools for a legitimization of the post-9/11 state fantasy, they may also be used in the completely opposite ways: to question, undermine, and subvert such a fantasy and, by extension, the policies it enables.

It is my contention that the texts examined in my dissertation seek to intervene in the state fantasy of the Homeland and how it impacts both military and civilian spheres. The frustration of the soldier characters examined here is partly rooted in the fact that the rhetoric designed to produce public support for the War on Terror is imagined to preclude, intentionally or not, an appreciation of the soldiers' experience of the nature of the war. While the casting of American soldiers within a framework of national myths might result in wide-ranging public admiration of these soldiers, this admiration is restricted to precisely such a mythically distorted idea of soldiers that overrides the recognition of soldiers as individuals exposed to mental and physical hardship in the war and suffering from the fallout. Accordingly, the texts examined in my dissertation may be understood as in various ways engaging with, perhaps even attempting an intervention against a public mythologizing of soldiers and sanitization of the war in general. The literature discussed here produces a more unsettling perspective on the war that takes into account the way in which the war is waged as well as its public (civilian) reception, particularly

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<sup>7</sup> Pease ends his 2009 book on a hopeful note about the "audacious hope" for a shift in U.S. politics fostered by the campaign of Barack Obama (213). Writing during President Obama's second term, however, scholars such as Joseph Masco, Brad Evans, and Henry Giroux conclude that the Obama administration has largely taken over and occasionally even escalated objectionable post-9/11 U.S. policies. As Evans and Giroux observe: "In the United States, President Barack Obama has merely continued the violence initiated by the Bush administrations of the previous decade and even increased programs such as targeted assassinations and immigrant deportations as instruments of foreign policy. At the local level, police across the country have been expanding their powers by procuring and deploying the most advanced military technologies brought back from theaters of war [...]" (81–2). In regards to the Homeland Security State, the change in the White House has not, then, resulted in a significant change in policies.

how it corresponds to or departs from the soldiers' experience, while also engaging with the political purpose behind sanitizing the public depiction of the military and its role in the war.

## Derealized Warfare

Since the First Gulf War, the conduct of war, at least on the American side, has been described as increasingly derealized, meaning that direct engagement of the enemy on the battlefield has been substituted for an abstracted version of warfare in which the enemy is engaged from afar through such indirect means as drones, laser-guided missiles, and artillery. The aim of such an officially mandated depiction of U.S. warfare that intentionally omits the enormous psychological and physical impact on U.S. soldiers, in particular, and frequently even the enemy, I claim, is to help facilitate public investment in the War on Terror and the state fantasy of the Global Homeland. Michael J. Shapiro is one of the scholars who have examined examining derealized warfare, arguing that

[t]he earth and its inhabitants became a series of strategic coordinates and various symbolic entities within the coordinates. In the absence of direct vision, the targets had been derealized. 'Enemies' had become wholly and continuously invisible to those who, relying on electronic identification systems, had to strike at what can be seen only as symbols rather than as discernible bodies. (88-9)

Such claims evoke Jean Baudrillard's well-known assertion that already the First Gulf War marked the moment of full derealization of a war whose mediated depiction reduced warfare to a purely media event. Through technological mediation, Baudrillard writes, American warfare is stripped of any remnants of its tangible qualities and is reduced to sanitized "broadcast simulacra" instead (68). And following Baudrillard, the notion of war as a media, instead of an actual, event extends to both a civilian audience and "the combatants themselves" (68).

As virtually all of the texts examined in my dissertation contain portrayals of or allusions to combat, their depictions of the War on Terror includes the conduct of the war in its derealized, mediated, as well as immediate forms. I argue that various texts overtly refute the proclaimed dominance of derealized warfare by including passages containing immediate and violent combat. By depicting combat as an intensely visceral experience, narratives such as Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* undercut the notion that the War on Terror is devoid of instances of physical violence suffered by American and non-American participants.

In addition to such depictions of the War on Terror as a war conducted in a direct and "real" fashion, the horrific qualities of war are imagined to extend

also to elements that are in fact derealized. But even when the war is imagined as conducted through predominantly derealized means, the fictional texts nevertheless resist the equation of technologically mediated combat with sanitization. Instead of, as Shapiro and Baudrillard would have it, showing the soldiers engaging in indirect warfare as physically and emotionally removed from the war, these narratives depict a severe psychological impact inherent in even almost completely technologically mediated and derealized warfare. Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned* as well as Phil Klay's "Psychological Operations" revolve around the psychological impact of acts of indirect warfare. And while these texts focus on protagonists who participate in or are present when acts of derealized killing occur, the central character of David Abrams' *Fobbit* is physically removed from combat, exclusively tasked with mediating and sanitizing the war for civilian audiences. But even this form of extreme physical and technological remove is imagined to be sufficient for an eventual psychological breakdown. Even when no scenes of immediate combat are included, these narratives, as dissimilar as they are, refute the idea of the psychological sanitization of derealized warfare. They suggest instead that the traumatic impact of warfare is not purely determined by how the war is waged in physical terms.

Some texts do, however, imagine that the sanitization of the War on Terror, while starkly at odds with the experiences of their respective military characters, is successful for a civilian audience. Particularly Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* engages with the way in which a sanitized depiction of the war is turned into the basis for processes of public militarization, a process that Catherine Lutz specifies as the "intensification of the labor and resources allocated to military purposes, including the shaping of other institutions in synchrony with military goals" (723). While producing a rousing and melodramatic picture of the war and the military's involvement in it, the public militarization simultaneously prevents the soldiers in the novel from articulating their traumatic experiences, creating a distinct disconnect between military and civilian perspective.

The frustration of military characters with the American civilian population's preference for sanitized depictions of war is conceptualized as taking a decidedly threatening turn in texts that depict the transition of military characters to civilian life. The sanitization of the War on Terror no longer merely results in a public militarization and frequently jingoistic rhetoric, nor does the actual depiction of combat constitute the main focus of these texts. Rather, the sanitization of the war and public militarization translate into processes of social exclusion that preclude these characters from fully reentering civilian society. Instead, they find themselves assigned to the socioeconomic fringes of the American Homeland in spite of the public valorization of the military. Despite the rhetoric of the Homeland, these military characters then remain outside networks of social inclusion, kindness, and care. Coupled with an imagined civilian unwillingness to acknowledge and adequately address the

physical and mental impact of the war, this exclusion is imagined to result in the returned military characters enacting, or at the very least threatening to do so, their frustration through acts of violence against the American civilian population. In essence, the adherence to the rhetoric of Bush's Homeland and sanitization of the War on Terror is shown to potentially turn the Homeland's ostensible guardians, the American military, into a threat. Atticus Lish goes so far as to depict how an increased domestic application of the policies of the Global Homeland and logic of the War on Terror result in the expansion to other parts of the population of the processes of socioeconomic marginalization, exclusion, and desensitization to violence that military characters are exposed to.

## Chapter Outline

I begin my investigation by examining instances of direct warfare on foreign battlefields, then move on to a focus on the depiction of processes of mediation and sanitization of the War on Terror and the resulting psychological fallout for the characters involved. Drawing on the narrative of a machine gunner deployed in Iraq in Kevin Powers' 2012 *The Yellow Birds* and a marine in Phil Klay's "Redeployment," I examine how these texts undercut claims of the virtually complete derealization of U.S. warfare by including sections of intense close combat, resulting in the very real physical and psychological suffering of U.S. and non-U.S. combatants alike. I also examine the depiction of the trauma sustained by partially, and even fully, derealized warfare in Dan Fesperman's 2014 *Unmanned*, David Abrams' 2012 *Fobbit*, and Klay's "Psychological Operations." Although moments of direct combat, or, in the case of *Fobbit*'s central story, in fact, any kind of contact with enemy forces, are absent, the derealized warfare central to these texts still results in psychological trauma. Such a depiction contests the equation of technological mediation with emotional sanitization propagated by the military. This equation, however, is believed by the military characters to be taken at face value by domestic America, resulting in a sense of frustration with a civilian population that refuses to acknowledge the suffering of U.S. military personnel in the War on Terror.

Focusing on Ben Fountain's 2012 *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* in Chapter Two, I examine the representation of the spectacular glorification of a sanitized portrayal of the War on Terror that facilitates public militarization as well as the effects on the soldier characters who are part of such spectacles. This glorified depiction turns the war into a jingoistic simulacrum in the form of a football halftime show that involves a group of soldiers on temporary leave from Iraq. As the spectacle is intended to both secure civilian emotional investment and in turn monetize said investment, it is carefully emptied of any acknowledgements of the physical and psychological cost for those involved,

denying the soldiers the possibility of testifying to their experiences, thus reducing them to propaganda props. As these soldier characters interact with a civilian population that is ignorant of the enormity of the War on Terror, or even actively chooses to remain ignorant, the result is a sense of thorough frustration and the outbreak violence is only prevented by the soldiers' departure and, ultimately, return to Iraq.

The articulation of the frustrations of soldiers through actually realized acts of violence following their permanent discharge from the military and subsequent return to the U.S. is the focal point of Chapter Three. Examining George Saunders' "Home," first published in *The New Yorker* in 2011, Atticus Lish's 2014 *Preparation for the Next Life*, and Joyce Carol Oates' 2014 *Carthage*, I chart an escalation of the effects of the socioeconomic marginalization of veteran characters. From a barely averted mass shooting to a murder and the depiction of a societal climate in which violent crimes committed by returning veterans is no longer a shocking but rather expected occurrence, these narratives posit a profound schism in the relationship between the U.S. military and civilian spheres. While an abstracted and sanitized version of the U.S. military is revered as guardians of the Homeland, the impact of the war on actual veteran characters is suppressed, leading to acts of violence, and a gradual shift in the perception of these soldiers: they no longer unambiguously figure as guardians of and tools for the protection of the Global Homeland, but as threats to its security. Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*, however, also depicts how the security state enacts the military logic of the War on Terror on the civilian population in the United States. Contemporary U.S. war fiction, I argue, is therefore an indispensable object of study within the wider field of American literature, combining as it does the domestic and foreign repercussions of the Homeland Security State.

What my approach to contemporary U.S. war literature excludes is an examination of the changing field of military identity politics since I do not discuss questions of sexuality, gender, or race that have come to inform debates about the military. Texts that would be examined with such questions in mind certainly do exist: T. Geronimo Johnson's 2008 *Hold it 'til it Hurts*, for instance, combines concerns regarding the War on Terror with questions of black American masculine identity in the U.S. as it moves from the battlefields of Afghanistan to a New Orleans ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. Helen Benedict's 2012 *Sand Queen* complicates the stereotype of a male U.S. military by imagining female military characters as part of the troops and their exposure to sexual violence by their fellow soldiers. While not in focus in this dissertation, these and similar texts present a potential starting point for additional investigation.



## Chapter One

# “It was a shitty little war”: Disillusionment, Sanitization, and Loss of Affect in the Writing of the War on Terror

The notion that modern warfare is spun into a sanitized depiction that drains war of its horrors is rooted in the claim that modern warfare has been mediated to such a degree that it obscures any understanding of the war's actual physical impact for its audience. As touched upon in the introduction, this was famously articulated by Jean Baudrillard in his 1991 essay collection *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. For Western audiences, Baudrillard suggests, war takes place not as a physical but as a purely media event, drained of any recognition of its repercussions, a version that precludes the audience's affective investment in the war's participants and victims. Baudrillard explicitly refers to both “the combatants themselves” and “the global disillusion of everyone else” (68). Examining the effects of derealized warfare, Michael J. Shapiro comes to a similar conclusion: “[T]he technologies that permitted killing in the absence of seeing had removed specific, suffering bodies in a way similar to the way they are effaced in the theoretical language of war [...]” (75). The notion of what constitutes such a “theoretical language of war” is further examined by Andrew Hoskins:

During 1991 a number of euphemisms for death emerged in an ‘acceptable’ mediated language of war that has since become familiar to Western audiences through coverage of the War over Kosovo, Afghanistan, and the Iraq War. For example, the killing of innocent civilians is subsumed in the logistical expression ‘collateral damage’ and the accidental killing of one’s own men and women is routinely and absurdly described as an act of ‘friendly’ fire. (89)

The technological mediation of modern U.S. warfare, critics such as Baudrillard, Shapiro, and Hoskins suggest, directly translates into an emotional distancing in which the physical remove from the suffering caused by war and its reception through media images mute the psychological impact on the audience.

The production of a mediated and sanitized depiction of American warfare is crucial to the Global Homeland. As argued in the introduction, Donald Pease claims that the U.S. government has to produce a “fantasy” potent

enough to produce “its subjects’ affective investment” and ensure their acceptance of the state’s authority (2). “State fantasies,” Pease continues, “incite an operative imagination endowed with the power to solicit the citizens’ desire to believe in the reality of its productions” (4). In order to secure the Homeland, particularly in the absence of a general draft system that would supply the military with a steady stream of recruits, the Bush and eventually also the Obama administration present the conduct of the War on Terror in a way that secures broad public approval and masks the potentially unsettling realities of warfare.

However, the narratives examined here can be seen to decisively repudiate the notion of mediated warfare as drained of emotional and physical impact. These texts suggest the need for a recognition of and public investment in the very significant physical and mental costs of warfare, a recognition acknowledging the soldiers’ potentially traumatizing experiences instead of a depiction that frequently reduces the soldiers to mere projection spaces for patriotic fantasies.

Indicative of the soldiers’ growing discontentment with the war and its public reception is a diary entry by Charles Gooding Jr., the main character of David Abrams’ *Fobbit*: “2,000 is a number most Americans can hold in their minds and use it to remember the awful waste of this war,” Gooding writes in a private note about the rising death toll of U.S. soldiers during his deployment in Iraq (324; italics in original). This short passage illustrates the growing disillusionment of the military with not only the war itself but also with what I argue they perceive as the willful ignorance of the civilian population. This disillusionment is based on the soldiers’ experience of their role in the war but also on the way this experience is transmitted to the civilian U.S. audience. In the texts examined in Chapter One, the result of this depiction of the war is not a lack of investment in the military by the public, but rather an investment in a very particularly crafted mediated depiction of the military. This particular version, or at least so the soldiers in these works believe, allows the civilian audience to focus on a heroic narrative while discounting the actual effects of warfare, something which places it at severe odds with the actual experiences of the soldiers.

In his assessment of U.S. war fiction penned by veterans, George Packer writes that soldiers narrating the war have to “navigate a minefield of clichés: all of them more or less true but open to qualification” (69). Among these are notions that intuitively would seem crucial to the war writing of any period: “War is hell [...]. Soldiers go to war for their country’s cause and wind up fighting for each other. [...] No one returns from war the same person who went. War opens an unbridgeable gap between soldiers and civilians” (69–70). Written in a somber realistic style, both *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment* include military characters directly involved in combat and adapt the long-standing narrative concerns, or, in Packer’s less forgiving words, “clichés,” of war literature to the specific context of the War on Terror. In her

book on war narratives, Stacey Peebles echoes Packer's notions but adds that what sets the literary engagement with each war apart from its predecessors are shifts in the narrative mode: "these [similar] features of life as a soldier are experienced and expressed differently in different wars" (2). However, as mentioned in the introduction, an investigation of texts about the War on Terror that focuses on the depiction of combat alone does not provide a complete picture. In addition to how the experience of the war is narrated, this chapter therefore also includes an investigation of how the soldiers' experience of the war is officially mediated and how the soldier characters believe the civilian audience consume these depictions. Here I focus on the depiction of the experience of the War on Terror as well as its mediation, the political goal of such sanitization—the legitimization of the state fantasy of the Global Homeland—is explored in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Before moving to discussing the process of sanitizing warfare, I will first examine the experience of U.S. soldiers in combat zones. This experience is dominated by the sense of having been made redundant as individuals by the logic of an ostensibly derealized warfare. Reduced to mere accessories of the war machinery, the soldiers feel as if they are abstracted into generalized statistics whose euphemized language of surgical strikes, friendly fire, and collateral damage leaves no room for the recognition of the hardship and misery they suffer. This idea of derealized and sanitized combat is complicated by the frequent depiction of the War on Terror as fought through direct and visceral combat. And even when combat occurs in an indirect and technologically highly mediated way, it does not translate into the psychological disconnect proposed by Baudrillard but puts an enormous and potentially unbearable mental strain on those involved. I discuss the way in which the narratives depict their soldier characters' discontent with the war as well as how their physical and emotional suffering is sanitized for U.S. audiences. The soldiers' public visibility is determined by a public narrative whose frequently jingoistic overtones purposely obscures the actual practices of U.S. warfare. Resulting from this narrative is a diminishing investment of the American military in the War on Terror and its causes along with an antagonistic view of the domestic civilian population which the soldier characters consider not only misinformed but willfully oblivious to the actual impact of the war.

In terms of fiction that engages with the actual military conduct of the War on Terror, I analyze Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned*, and Phil Klay's *Redeployment*. All four texts, three novels and Klay's collection of short stories, include or focus on military characters struggling with a sense of severe disillusionment. These characters are not exclusively combat soldiers but also military personnel engaging in technologically mediated warfare. The diverse nature of these characters and their respective tasks allow for an investigation into the depiction of U.S. soldiers in combat as well as of the processes through which the experience of

warfare is turned into official narratives and the impact this sanitization has on these characters.

Focusing on U.S. troops in Iraq, Powers' 2012 *The Yellow Birds* builds on the author's own experience as a machine gunner in the Marines. The narrative revolves around Private John Bartle, a Marine in his early twenties, and alternates between stories about his deployment in Iraq in 2004 and his return to the U.S. followed by a prison sentence and eventual release in 2009. During boot camp, Bartle befriends a younger Marine by the name of Daniel Murphy. Over the course of their mission, both men suffer from the same increasing disillusionment with the war. But where Bartle retreats into silence, Murphy suffers a mental breakdown and goes on an unarmed suicide run into the city of Tal Afar, a city that, as Christina Hellmich notes, is "a fictionalized reference to Tal Afar, a city and district in northwestern Iraq, from where al-Qaeda linked insurgents were said to be fighting the US occupation since 2003" (473). Trying to cope with the loss of his friend, Bartle sends a letter to Murphy's mother in which he pretends to be her son. After being imprisoned for forgery upon his redeployment to the U.S., Bartle begins to settle into a life of silent solitude. Structurally, *The Yellow Birds* alternates between two time-lines: Bartle's experience in Iraq and his attempts to adjust to life in the U.S. While the novel's final chapter focuses on Bartle's life back home, the penultimate one portrays the traumatic events surrounding Murphy's death in Iraq, thereby formally underscoring the novel's concern with the way in which his war experiences continue to impact and haunt Bartle long after his return.

To further illuminate the traumatic experiences of combat troops, I examine Phil Klay's short story collection *Redeployment*. In what Packer calls "a masterly collection of short stories" (72), Klay portrays an extensive body of characters of different creeds, colors, and military functions who are nevertheless all united in their struggle with the physical and psychological fallout of their engagement in the War on Terror. For my purpose here, I focus on two stories, "Psychological Operations" and the eponymous "Redeployment," that complicate the notion of disengaged mediated warfare as it is understood by Baudrillard and Hoskins. In addition to these narratives of mediated combat experienced on the battlefield, I examine Dan Fesperman's 2014 *Unmanned* to further explore the depiction of the psychological impact of derealized warfare by way of the completely mediated and spatially removed practice of drone bombing.

Finally, David Abrams' 2012 *Fobbit* partially focuses on U.S. warfare but does so from a thus far largely unexplored perspective. At the center of the novel is not the warfare itself but the processes of mediating warfare for the sake of producing civilian domestic approval of the War on Terror. In *Fobbit*, Abrams ultimately pushes against the implications of such officially mandated mediation by offering an account of the traumatic effects of war not only on those directly impacted but also on those mediating it. Over a total of 34 in-

terconnected chapters, Abrams details a few short weeks on the Forward Operating Basis Freedom in Baghdad during the 2003 – 2011 Operation Iraqi Freedom. *Fobbit* contains a variety of stories set on and around FOB Freedom but Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr., the titular Fobbit, is the central character. His perspective is the most prominent in the novel: 13 of the 34 chapters are devoted to him. His introduction to the world of the Fobbits begins the narrative, and his probable death concludes it. And while *Fobbit* as a whole comes across as an acerbic war satire, Gooding's sections stand out stylistically as they are written in a rather emotive tone, possibly in a bid to the audience to not dismiss the novel as merely caustically humorous and to ensure an affective impact.

Through the character of Gooding, Abrams, a retired Public Affairs Army veteran, describes diverse efforts to obfuscate the grim reality of Operation Iraqi Freedom, ultimately in an illustration of the impossibility of fully dispersing its horrors. As a member of the Public Affairs corps, Gooding is tasked with producing a depiction of the Iraq war as devoid of potentially startling violence. But as control over how the war is depicted starts slipping away from Gooding, his initial ability to distance himself emotionally from the war is increasingly punctured and eventually ruptured by an unbearable sense of compassion for its victims. Crucially, Gooding's empathy does not follow the demarcation lines drawn by the war, American vs. non-American, civilian vs. combatant, ally vs. enemy, but his empathy also extends to Iraqis with whom he shares no affiliation or who might in fact fight the Americans. Abrams thus displays a considerable willingness to make his call for an affective reinvestment in the fates of all those involved in the war a universal one.

The depiction of the War on Terror on foreign battlefields throughout these narratives is dominated by a twofold concern: on the one hand, the moral legitimacy of the war itself is being increasingly questioned while on the other hand the way in which the war is waged is depicted to result in potential psychological and physical damage also for American soldiers, despite all claims to the contrary.

Such disenchantment with the notion of defending the Homeland through the War on Terror, especially when compared to a nostalgic view on the purpose of previous American wars, is expressed by *Fobbit's* Brock Lumley. Lumley, the novel's embodiment of patriotic fervor and the only character whom Abrams depicts as a competent and dedicated soldier, is severely frustrated by the apparent impossibility of measuring up to the military and moral heritage of past U.S. wars: “[Company Bravo] had a legacy stretching back to doughboys that needed to be preserved and upheld—their military ancestors had been at the fucking *Rhine* for God's sake and kicked Kraut ass all the way from hell to Hamburg” (140). Lumley's frustration stems from the feeling that his involvement in the current War on Terror cannot rival the exemplary status of the proverbial Golden Generation of World War II.

During a brief moment of downtime on a patrol, Kevin Powers' John Bartle reflects on the war in a similar manner. Compared to past wars, Bartle concludes, the War on Terror appears like a brutal grind devoid of purpose:

I thought of my grandfather's war. How they had destination and purpose. How the next day we'd march under a sun hanging low over the plain in the east. We'd go back into a city that had fought this battle yearly; a slow, bloody parade in fall to mark the change of season. We'd drive them out. We always had. We'd kill them. They'd shoot us and blow off our limbs and run into the hills and wadis, back into the alleys and dusty villages. Then they'd come back, and we'd start over by waving to them as they leaned against lampposts and unfurled green awnings while drinking tea in front of their shops. While we patrolled the streets, we'd throw candy to their children with whom we'd fight in the fall a few years from now. (91)

For Bartle, the experience of the war drains the official justifications for the War on Terror of their persuasiveness. Like Lumley's attitude, Bartle's opinion on the campaign in Iraq with its implied lack of "destination and purpose" stands in stark contrast to the supposedly justified U.S. campaigns of past wars, particularly World War II. Instead of serving a specific purpose, the Iraq campaign of the War on Terror appears as a cycle in which fighting an unknown enemy, a depersonalized "them" that remains indistinguishable from the general Iraqi population, only begets more enemies (91). Accounts such as Thomas Childers' 2009 *Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II* may complicate a nostalgic perspective on World War II: in his investigation of the troubles veterans faced upon reentering civilian society, Childers frequently examines the same obstacles and frustrations that would later be voiced by veterans of the War on Terror in David Finkel's 2013 *Thank You for your Service*. But nevertheless, several of Abrams' characters imagine World War II to inhabit an exemplary position in the history of U.S. wars. In comparison, the justification for and purpose of the War on Terror, the defense of the Global Homeland, cannot provide soldiers such as Bartle with a sufficient sense of purpose. Bartle aptly summarizes his opinion on the War on Terror through a formula that few, if any, characters of the literature examined in this chapter would object to: "It was a shitty little war" (122).

The tasks performed by Charles Gooding Jr. further call into question the supposedly moral superiority of World War II. On several occasions throughout the novel the character of Gooding is described as reading Joseph Heller's 1961 classic *Catch-22*. In doing so, Abrams prepares the ground for an adaptation of Heller's depiction of the inhumane nature of the bureaucratic military apparatus that undercuts not only the legitimacy of the War on Terror but also the glorified U.S. warfare of the past.

Most notably, this holds true for the depiction of a military apparatus that depersonalizes soldiers and ruthlessly subordinates them to bureaucratic

needs. In *Catch-22*, one of the many examples of this process is the fate of “the unfortunate second lieutenant who had been killed on the mission over Orvieto less than two hours after he arrived on Pianosa” (121). Unable to resolve the conundrum of having a soldier die before officially reporting for duty, the administrative staff decide to “report him as never having reported to the squadron at all, and the occasional documents relating to him dealt with the fact that he seemed to have vanished into thin air, which, in one way, was exactly what did happen to him” (121). Since military logic dictates that the death of the soldier cannot simply be acknowledged, the problem is circumvented by officially erasing his existence in order to make his death comply with Army regulations. What is important in the world of *Catch-22* is thus not the factual occurrences of the war, but to what degree they fit the bureaucratic apparatus, thereby illuminating the military’s glaring disregard for its soldiers.

This concern resurfaces in *Fobbit* through the reports of the death of SSG Harding, a soldier killed in a widely observed IED blast while on patrol. The death is immediately reported to the Fobbits in an internal report stating in no uncertain terms that “AS TEAM MOVED FORWARD, IED EXPLODED, CAUSING IMMEDIATE AMPUTATION OF SSG HARDING’S FOUR LIMBS. FRAGMENTS OF IED ALSO PENETRATED SSG HARDING’S HELMET, RESULTING IN MASSIVE HEAD INJURY AND SUBSEQUENT DEATH” (6; capitalization in original). But although no doubts remain about Harding’s factual death, it cannot be confirmed before it has been processed through a maze of regulations whose absurdity rivals the one of *Catch-22*. Growing increasingly frustrated with the imperative to subordinate facts to military regulations, Gooding incredulously asks his colleague if

“[...]even though you know he’s dead and you know he’s dead and by now his momma probably knows he’s dead, the dude’s not really dead, is that what you’re telling me?” Semple leveled a flat gaze at Gooding and clicked at his equally dead in-box. “He ain’t *officially* dead yet.” (13–4; italics in original)

Again, the military administration is depicted as performing absurd logical twists to stall the acknowledgement of facts, the death of a soldier, before they can be made to comply with official regulations. By alluding to *Catch-22* and transposing its concern with the system of military bureaucracy onto the War on Terror, Abrams depicts the official disregard for the fate of individual soldiers not as a sudden aberration endemic to the War on Terror. Rather, it appears as a longstanding concern which additionally undercuts the notion of an allegedly more noble conduct of past wars.

Abrams further hints at the disenchantment with the War on Terror as the war appears as a politically ineffective enterprise that fails to facilitate any meaningful change through the location of the military base on which *Fobbit* takes place. As Gooding notes in a diary entry, “*FOB Triumph has overtaken the grounds where Insane Hussein once treated his guests to weekend hunting*

*parties*” (54; italics in original). A poignant reminder of the lingering past is the office of Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret, the character in charge of Gooding’s battalion. Once belonging to “Saddam’s chief gamekeeper,” Duret’s office is still decorated with

a portrait of the old goat himself, beret jauntily cocked and His Dictatorship-ness, smiling like a loon beneath his thick, black porn mustache. Duret had tried to remove the portrait from the wall but the frame was securely screwed into the concrete and, in the end, it had been more trouble than it was worth, so he left Saddam alone. (124)

Immediately apparent is the irony of a perpetually disgruntled U.S. soldier toiling away under the unflinching stare of Saddam Hussein. But the less immediate implication of this description is that the portrait of Hussein functions as a symbol for a number of policies carrying over from the old regime into the U.S. occupation, most prominently among them the use of the Abu Ghraib prison. The prison, located in the city of Abu Ghraib close to Baghdad, had been used as a torture site under the Hussein regime and saw continued use as a prison during the U.S. occupation. In 2003, Abu Ghraib achieved global infamy when pictures of tortured inmates were published—chiefly among them an image that has become widely known as Hooded Man—and became an emblem of the misconduct of the U.S. military. In the aftermath of the scandal, the blame for what had happened was frequently relegated to the individual soldiers who could be seen on the images, but writers such as Mark Danner soon pushed against this notion. Drawing on the official reports conducted by Arthur Schlesinger and Major General George Fay, Danner concludes that most detainees at Abu Ghraib were held there without much reason or purpose (“Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story” 5). In what Danner calls “a besieged, sweltering, stinking hell-hole under daily mortar attack that lacked interpreters, interrogators, guards, detainee uniforms, and just about everything else, including edible food,” the miserable conditions for prisoners and guards alike eventually erupted into systematic abuse (6). Contrary to the strategy of passing this off as individual transgressions, Danner posits that the reports

put much of the blame for this not on the commanders on the ground but on the political leadership in Washington, who, rather than pay the political cost of admitting the need for more troops [...] decided to “tough it out,” at the expense of the men and women in the field and, ultimately, the Iraqis they had been sent to “liberate.” (6)

The Abu Ghraib prison has become a symbol of the failure of the rhetoric of liberation employed in the run up to the War on Terror as well as the way in which the U.S. military and administration failed to enact a complete break with the practices of the Hussein regime. In an article for *The New Yorker* detailing the history of the Guantanamo prison, “the scene of dubious, lengthy



detainments, force-feedings, sleep deprivations, stress positions, vicious beatings, and other forms of torture,” Connie Bruck further examines the political infights—between State Department and Defense Department, between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate—that have led to the Obama administration’s inability or political unwillingness to close the prison (34).

In addition to a dwindling investment in the moral legitimacy of the war and frequently also the military at large, the depiction of the conduct of the War on Terror itself challenges the notion of the war as virtually devoid of suffering. What emerges instead is a depiction of a war whose horror in no way is eliminated by technological progress.

In terms of the way in which it is waged, the War on Terror is determined by a steady sophistication of military technology that has rendered complete reliance on direct combat largely anachronistic. Instead, warfare is increasingly derealized, meaning that the battlefield is translated into a digitalized abstraction in which the enemy is engaged from afar and through indirect means, such as weaponized drones and laser-guided missiles. Exemplary of scholars engaging with warfare in its derealized form, Michael J. Shapiro argues that with the beginning of the First Gulf War

[t]he earth and its inhabitants became a series of strategic coordinates and various symbolic entities within the coordinates. In the absence of direct vision, the targets had been derealized. “Enemies” had become wholly and continuously invisible to those who, relying on electronic identification systems, had to strike at what can be seen only as symbols rather than as discernible bodies. (89)

The mode of reporting on warfare, then, shifted to praising the logistical superiority of the U.S. military:

In short, the war was described and shown by reference to the weapons rather than to the affected bodies. Accordingly, violence emerges as a kind of “disarming rather than injuring,” and the reading of its significance is abstracted to make it appear to be a technological contest, a series of exchanges whose outcomes amount to imbalances of logistical expertise. (102)

The switch from “injuring” to “disarming” hints at a sanitization when it comes to reporting on modern warfare. The shift towards an emphasis on logistical warfare not only carries significance for the military, but also for the civilian audience. Removing the objects of attack from a direct line of sight constitutes a challenge to the “audience/viewers of the attackers: those watching the war on television” (94). Shapiro concludes that “[a]t a minimum, modern warfare has moved alterity outside of the boundaries of vision, affect, and historical significance” (80). This suggests that the practices of modern mediated and derealized warfare preclude a civilian audience, and potentially even

soldiers engaging in these kinds of warfare, from recognizing and empathizing with forms of otherness.

In their writing, Abrams, Powers, and Klay refute this claim: for their soldier characters, engaging in derealized warfare and moving away from an exclusively direct engagement with the enemy does not place the actors of war—attackers and attacked—outside the “boundaries of [...] affect” (80). Their works may differ in how they imagine modern warfare and its effects on the actors but they both depict the horrors of war as in no way diminished. For these characters, experiencing war not as eye witnesses but in a mediated fashion alters but does not blunt the impact of the experience.

This does not mean, however, that such war fiction is entirely bereft of close combat situations. Although *Fobbit* is the novel that contains the perhaps least amount of combat out of the texts examined in this chapter, it nevertheless contains an instance where the fierce nature of war comes to the fore. When a string of comically inept attempts to try and stop a suicide bomber from attempting to blow up an Army tank fail, it is Brock Lumley, the most—and perhaps even only—proficient soldier character in *Fobbit* who ultimately stops the man by firing

a bullet cutting the day, splitting the air, hurtling from the barrel of an M4 and lodging just below the [bomber's] left ear, the pressure pushing upward, finally knocking loose whatever fibrous matter that had been holding the cleft halves of the man's head together, painting the interior of the Opel with blood-brain-skull. (38)

Witnessing the scene in all its gory detail through the scope of his gun, which may even bring the shooter's vision closer to the bomber than the human eye could, takes a significant mental toll on Lumley: “It would be a long time, years and years of therapy, before he could wipe from his mind the sight of that head erupting in a bloody geyser” (39). When warfare reverts back to a more direct form in *Fobbit*, it almost instantly acquires traumatic qualities.

In his story “Psychological Operations,” Phil Klay offers a similar scene. In his account, however, the narrator witnesses the death of another soldier through its digitalized representation. While according to the argument of Shapiro and others, digitalization should preclude the narrator from experiencing empathy, here it does not diminish the emotional impact but leaves the narrator traumatized. In a story that focuses on questions of religious and cultural identity and the social struggle of ethnic minorities in the U.S., the first-person narrator shares a short episode of his deployment in Iraq with a fellow student. While serving abroad, the narrator was not part of the regular combat troops. As a member of the Army's Psychological Operations force, his task was instead to accompany a regular patrol and continuously address the Iraqi population through loudspeakers to dissuade them from attacking: “I was supposed to tell the Iraqis how to not get themselves killed” (190). Despite his

relatively removed position, the narrator eventually witnesses the death of an Iraqi attacker: “I never killed anyone [...]. But I did see somebody die. Slowly” (181). When the time to tell his story comes, however, he prefaces it by a slight caveat: “You know, technically I didn’t even watch him die. It just felt that way” (183). The apparent confusion he feels about what exactly it was he witnessed—did he actually see or did he only feel that he saw somebody die—stems from an experience existing in a state of tension between a visual and a purely emotional register that he remains unable to resolve. Despite claims to the opposite throughout the story, the narrator does remain caught up in his memories.

The source of this confusion appears to be the mediated manner in which the narrator witnesses the enemy soldier’s death. Accompanying a squad of marines, he hears one of them firing his gun and is then asked to take a look at the man hit by the bullet. Crucially, the effects of the shots cannot be seen with the bare eye, but the narrator has to use the soldier’s thermal scope: “And once I was on the scope, the thin black corporal told me to watch for the heat signature dying, the hot spot fading to the ambient temperature” (187). What can be seen through the gun’s optics is not just an illuminated version of the surroundings, but a translation into a distorted and abstracted concert of heat signatures: “There’s no color in the scope, but it’s not like a black-and-white movie. The scope tracks heat, no light, so everything, the shadings, the contrasts, they’re off in this weird way. There are no shadows. It’s all clearly outlined, but wrong [...].” (188). The enemy combatant here is turned into the abstraction of a heat signature by the gun’s scope. Looking at the man only in this abstracted form without a direct line of sight causes the narrator to actually doubt having seen him. It does not, however, place the dying man outside the realms of affect, as Shapiro would have it. In fact, the perception of the mediated representation of the dying man has a comparable psychological impact on Klay’s narrator as the clear and unmediated view of the aspiring suicide bomber has on Powers’ Brock Lumley. These stories may posit different degrees of technological abstraction, but their psychological impact is identical. For these characters, this is to say, empathy is not contingent on an unmediated experience. Compared to Lumley, Klay’s narrator experiences the higher degree of mediation, but even merely seeing the digitalized representation of a man dying through the scope of a rifle is sufficient for an impactful understanding of the actual suffering the slowly fading heat signature represents.

David Abrams also imagines derealized warfare to potentially share the central characteristics of direct combat. The death of Abe Shrinkle, another one of *Fobbit*’s minor characters, posits the psychological impact not as disappearing but as shifting into the arsenal of derealized warfare. Shrinkle meets his end while floating in the pool of the Australian base when he is hit by a mortar grenade lobbed almost at random over the base’s defense perimeter by a group of Iraqi insurgents:

They cared only about firing blindly, then making a clean getaway, and if the end result was severed limbs in the market place, all the better, praise Allah. If they missed—and the mortar landed in a canal or a remote cow pasture—then, oh, well, there was always another day. (314)

The men firing the grenade, this suggests, do not actually care about the outcome of their attack. Firing “from the back of a Toyota pickup truck in some quiet out-of-the-way neighborhood” far away from the explosion site, the men have no vested interest in the actual result (314). Without the possibility to witness the havoc they wreak, their attack becomes almost entirely symbolic and more akin to a rote chore that needs to be performed. But the attack is not merely characterized by the men’s diminished investment. Instead of dissipating, their emotional investment is merely shifted to the actual logistical military apparatus, in this case the mortar itself:

But the mortar cared. It cared where it hit, who it struck, how it spent its final moments of life before the death that brought wholesale death to others. It cared about the final target, whether it was rock, soil, water, or flesh. This is all the mortar cared about on the upward flight, the peak of the arc, and the down tilt of its final descent. Sometimes, the very thought of opening its maw and gobbling a bellyful of human flesh filled it with such anticipation that it started to whistle a happy tune in its final moments, keening a kind of joy unknown to man. (315)

The men firing the mortar shell might not be invested in the result. But Abrams undercuts the notion of the war as a remote and detached exchange of military logistics. Short of being fully anthropomorphized, the mortar shell itself is depicted as having achieved a state of self-reflexive and murderous sentience that places it somewhere between a predatory animal and a miniature suicide bomber giddy with anticipation. Instead of the object of admiration whose deadly effectiveness is to be admired, modern logistical warfare may have made human input on the ground level virtually incidental, but in *Fobbit*, it has itself become a military actor infused with the bloodlust of immediate warfare.

In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers takes the loss of human agency American soldiers have to contend with in the War on Terror to the extreme. The novel begins on Bartle’s initial impression of his deployment in Iraq that echoes but surpasses the agency occasionally granted to military logistics in *Fobbit* as war itself “tried to kill [the soldiers] in the spring” (3). Bartle then goes on to imagine not only the means of modern derealized warfare, the mortar grenade, for instance, but war itself as a sentient predator essentially stripping the troops of agency and possibility to influence their fate in battle. His initial conviction is that the men constantly need to watch out for “the bullet with your name on it, the IED buried just for you” (12). With their fate supposedly preordained, the soldiers are reduced to mindless objects of warfare devoid of

any agency of their own. But eventually, Bartle dismisses this notion and turns to an even more dispiriting perspective on the role of the regular U.S. soldiers in war: instead of displacing agency, modern logistical warfare exterminates it entirely as he looks at a list with the names of recently fallen soldiers:

I know it isn't like that now. There were no bullets with my name on them, or with Murph's, for that matter. There were no bombs made just for us. Any of them would have killed us just as well as they'd killed the owners of those names. We didn't have a time laid out for us, or a place. (13–4)

According to Bartle, the truly horrific characteristic of the war is the soldiers' involvement in the kind of warfare that constantly exposes them to combat while obliterating any possibility of meaningful intervention. The individual soldier, that is to say, is incorporated into the war machinery to a degree that he is no longer able to autonomously and actively influence his own fate. Although they do so in different ways, these narratives all depict the conduct of the War on Terror with its focus on derealized and logistical warfare as no less physically and psychologically devastating, albeit in novel ways, than previous wars.

But as reliant on technological mediation as the warfare in these stories may be, it still carries a certain degree of tangible immediacy: following the mortar hit, the survivors are “drenched with the pink rain from the pool, yes, and suffering the unforgivable horror of a severed arm in one's lap” (316). Abrams' Brock Lumley sees his target's skull exploding through the magnification of his rifle's scope. And Klay's narrator may only see a digitized abstraction of the dying target, but as he experiences the corporeal impressions of the battlefield, the sound of the shot being fired, the heat and dust, and the general stress of the combat zone, he performs a cognitive and psychological leap that imbues the digitized image of the dying man with the tangible reality of these impressions and transcends its purely mediated nature (316).

In his 2014 novel *Unmanned*, Dan Fesperman fully de-couples the warfare from any remnant of physicality. The story follows Darwin Cole, a former jet fighter pilot turned Predator drone operator, and three reporters as they seek to uncover the shadowy figures—possibly rogue agents, possibly working for the government in an undisclosed capacity—pulling the strings in the global deployment of military drones and signing responsible for authorizing a disastrous drone strike on Afghan civilians. Barring a handful of glimpses into Afghanistan, Fesperman stages his story virtually entirely in the U.S. He thereby raises questions about the degree to which the practices of drone warfare in the War on Terror increasingly apply to the civilian U.S. population, the influx of privatized modern mercenaries in regular U.S. military operations, and to what degree such developments have undermined the accountability of the American administration to the population. But what is crucial for my discussion here is the initial disaster that sets the story in motion: following

his career as a fighter jet pilot, Darwin Cole serves as operator of a team targeting a supposedly military objective with a Predator drone, a highly sophisticated machine the Air Force describes as “an armed, multi-mission, medium-altitude, long-endurance remotely piloted aircraft” that “can employ two laser-guided missiles, Air-to-Ground Missile-114 Hellfire [...], and possesses [...] anti-armor, anti-personnel engagement capabilities” (“MQ-1B Predator”). But acting on what turns out to be faulty information, Cole fires a missile at a group of civilians, among them several children. Shaken by the experience, he deserts his post and retreats to the desert where he is approached by a group of journalists investigating the incident, setting the plot in motion.

Following the argument of Baudrillard and Shapiro, the depiction of Cole’s traumatic shock after the misguided drone strike stands in no relation to the actual effects of fully derealized warfare. And his role certainly is fully derealized: he disparagingly describes the control station from which he directed the strike as “[s]ome geek’s idea of a cockpit. Video monitors stacked up like junked TVs in the window of a pawnshop. Shit piled on shit” (30). From this workstation that seems more like the cubicle of an underachieving office drone than the commando station of a high-tech military operation, Cole controls his drone via

two keyboards—one for typing flight commands, the other for chat. [...] Apart from the screens for video and chat, four others display maps, flight telemetry, and masses of other information that change by the second—readouts for velocity, altitude, fuel levels, oil pressure, wind speed and direction, missile paths, air traffic, weather conditions, terrain. (7)

Initially, it appears as if Fesperman uses these scenes of sophisticated technological mediation and spatial remove to establish a narrative that echoes Shapiro’s claim of the removal of alterity in modern warfare: as the story begins in medias res with the mission underway, “Cole’s sense of detachment is so profound that he has to remind himself that this is not a game” (3). Cole claims that the Air Force deliberately targets “those video gamers” as new recruits since “they grew up with a joystick in their hands,” suggesting that he, and implicitly the Air Force, hold the opinion that piloting weaponized drones is more akin to playing video games than to warfare (30).

On the matter of equating piloting drones with video games, however, Scott Swanson is of a decidedly different opinion. The first Predator drone operator to fire a Hellfire missile and destroy a target, Swanson writes that “[f]lying a Predator drone in combat is nothing like playing a video game” (“War is no Video Game – Not even Remotely.”). Although a drone operator “can’t hear his plane’s engine, feel its motion, or smell that airplane smell” and is limited to the vision “a couple of TV screens in front of him provide,” Swanson claims that “[m]entally, the pilot is inside a Predator [...]. Emotionally, he is at war.” And he is not alone with this opinion. In a study published in 2013, Jean L.

Otto and Bryant J. Webber arrive at the conclusion that drone pilots suffer from mental-health problems to the same extent that do pilots of manned aircrafts: “[a]fter adjusting for the effects of several factors [such as age and number of deployments] that differed between the RPA [remotely piloted aircraft] and MA [manned aircraft] pilots, incidence rates among the cohorts did not significantly differ” (5). As Otto and Webber state, some of the factors impacting the drone pilots’ mental state may be exclusive to drone warfare, such as “austere geographic locations of military installations supporting RPA missions” and “lack of deployment rhythm and of combat compartmentalization (i.e., a clear demarcation between combat and personal/family life)” that do not exist for other military branches (3). But while these factors certainly contribute to a stressful environment for the pilots, the fact remains that other different factors do exist for these other branches and that the drones are piloted from thousands of miles away, displaying combat through a grainy video feed.

Grégoire Chamayou offers a perspective on drone warfare that aims to establish a more differentiated understanding of the psychological impact of derealized warfare on those in charge of it. Modern warfare, Chamayou argues, is commonly understood as little more than a click in an entirely virtual process in much the same way that scholars like Shapiro and Baudrillard would claim: “the act of killing is in effect reduced to positioning the pointer or arrow on little ‘actionable images,’ tiny figures that have taken the place of the old flesh-and-blood body of the enemy” or U.S. soldiers (114). As I have argued in the introduction, this mediation of both the combatants and the derealized means through which the enemy is engaged is widely believed to result in a sense of psychological distancing from the reality of warfare (115). But in the case of drone pilots, Chamayou argues that “cameras allow the operator to see the target as if it were very close. [...] So it is now possible to be both close and distant [...]. Physical distance no longer necessarily implies perceptual distance” (116). No matter how crude, the camera feed thus places the victims of drone attacks within a perceived intimate proximity into which the actual spatial distance and technological mediation do not enter. In extension, a drone strike may be a technologically mediated act of derealized warfare. But it carries with it the psychological impact of an act of killing a victim perceived to be within immediate distance, thus placing the way in which soldiers perceive drone warfare more in line with traditional forms of combat than with derealized and logistical ones.

Fesperman is remarkably close to Chamayou’s notion in his depiction of the psychological fallout of a drone strike gone wrong. He explicitly depicts the means through which Cole observes his targets over the course of their reconnaissance, and finally the strike as producing little more than a crude digitized representation: the electronic clutter of Cole’s command station produces a picture of one of the children “only three inches high” (3) that “is unaccompanied by smell or soundtrack” (5). To keep track of his targets, Cole

frequently has to switch “to infrared so they can lurk like an owl in a high pine” (5), thereby adding an additional level of mediation the already mediated video feed that, according to Baudrillard’s claims, should emotionally distance him even further from the proceedings. And yet, the technical mediation does not result in establishing a psychological remove but, echoing Chamayou’s theses, results in a perceived intimacy with the victims. Following the strike, Cole circles the bombed house. When his camera reveals “three small bodies,” his emotional response to them is not that of a distanced observer, but he “believes that he knows these children” (5). This might of course merely express a factual statement of recognition. But Cole’s observation of the bombing’s aftermath, depicted in free indirect discourse, is rendered with palpable details as he “spots arms and legs, bright clothing, smears of blood, the fleshy blur of faces with fixed and open eyes. In the calamitous jumble it is impossible to say whether the bodies are male or female, adult or child” (7). As he particularly focuses on a girl, Cole notes her injuries in vivid detail: “Her right arm is severed and lies a foot from her shoulder, with blood pooling in the gap. She struggles to rise, trying to prop herself on her left elbow” (9). Clearly, Cole’s experience is not depicted to suggest objectivity. Rather, the sight of the bomb’s effects produces a whirl of impressions described by adjectives such as “fleshy” and “calamitous” that are colored by emotions such as shock and consternation instead of a detached assessment of the situation. Moreover, Cole’s impressions forego any indication of technological mediation. Factually, he certainly sees the images on a screen. But Fesperman depicts Cole as observing the scene as if he was actually right there. In regard to his psychological perception of the bombing, this suggests, the technological remove does not register and is overridden by a perceptive and emotional immediacy in line with what Chamayou suggests. The result is a period of what appears to be PTSD, eventually leading to Cole trying to find those responsible for the strike:

After a few weeks he began jolting awake in the middle of the night with an eerie exactitude—always at or about 3:50 a.m., the very minute when Zach and he had fired their missile. He began checking his watch as soon as he would sit up in bed, and the news was always the same: 3:50, 3:50, 3:50, with the girl’s face flashing in his memory as she ran for her life, the boys right behind her. Three fifty. The hour of death, a wake-up call for the rest of his days. (18)

Fesperman thus suggests that the virtually absolute technological remove of drone warfare does not result in a corresponding psychological detachment. Rather, the sophisticated mediation appears to implode, triggering an emotional response that appears more in line with immediate combat.

In addition to the devastating psychological effects of derealized warfare, the texts examined in this chapter dismiss the possibility of escaping the logic of modern warfare, be it through an impulse to reclaim agency or a return to an immediate form of combat. It is this unfulfillable desire for individual



agency in the war that leads to the demise of Murphy's, Bartle's close friend in *The Yellow Birds*. Shortly before Murphy mentally breaks down and wanders naked into the streets of Al Tafari where he is tortured and killed, he makes one last desperate attempt to regain authority over himself: “

He wanted to choose. He wanted to want. He wanted to replace the dullness growing inside him with anything else. He wanted to decide what he would gather around his body, to refuse that which fell toward him by accident or chance and stayed in orbit like an accretion disk. (165)

To cope with the growing feeling of being a mere pawn in the war, Murphy attempts to cope with the situation by aspiring to a sense of self-determination that would render him more than an accessory to a depersonalized war machine. When even this modest desire turns out to be all but impossible, his thorough disenchantment leads him to walk towards his own death in a final act of defiance. Here, the act of refusing further allegiance is momentarily liberating, but it comes at a fatal cost. Murphy may have found a way to re-instate a sense of self-determination, but only for the briefest of moments.

While any removal, physical or mental, from the practices of the War on Terror is perceived to be unworkable, so is also a return to a re-realized form of warfare as psychologically less devastating. Particularly in *Fobbit* and Klay's "Redeployment," a return from logistical to immediate warfare is no ground for heroism, but a surrender to the basest impulses. After a fire exchange with a group of Iraqi insurgents, Sergeant Sterling, the commander of Murphy and Bartle, wanders off by himself. Concerned that "he's losing his shit" (94), Murphy uses his rifle's magnification scope to observe Sterling and is shocked by what he sees: "He lowered his rifle. His mouth wide open. He closed it, then spoke. 'I don't know, man. He's got a fucking body.' Murph looked at me, wide-eyed. 'And he's not smiling anymore'" (95).

A similar instance of immediate warfare that shocks even battle-hardened characters occurs in "Redeployment." Recounting a mission in Iraq, the narrator tells the story of how his unit

found this one insurgent doing the death rattle, foaming and shaking, fucked up, you know? He's hit with a 7.62 in the chest and pelvic girdle; he'll be gone in a second, but the company XO walks up, pulls out his KA-BAR, and slits his throat. Says, 'It's good to kill a man with a knife.' All the marines look at each other like, "What the fuck?" (3-4)

Where Murphy's withdrawal turned out to be an unsustainable response to the conduct of the War on Terror, the return to a more immediate form of warfare is not imagined to offer any respite either. The characters of both Powers and Klay dismiss the notion of hand-to-hand warfare as returning to a romanticized notion of combat, experiencing such combat, in fact, as a regression into

sadism. Taken as a whole, these passages clearly suggest that the War on Terror takes a mental and physical toll on the soldiers despite its ostensibly derealized nature.

While the narratives discussed in this chapter, with the exception of *Unmanned*, emphasize the conduct of the War on Terror on foreign soil, the novels and short stories examined in Chapters Two and Three use their respective characters' military experiences not as the narrative focus but as background material that informs these characters' behavior in different ways. Virtually all of these experiences, however, are depicted being dominated by warfare in its most visceral form: Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* contains a brief description in which enemy forces are mowed down and "blew apart, hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests" (125), while Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* has a group of U.S. soldiers "unintentionally put[ting] their hands inside the cavity in [the] skull" of their dead comrade (62). Even for texts like Fountain's and Lish's that devote very little space to descriptions of actual combat or stories like George Saunders' "Home" that merely allude to the protagonist's experience in combat, the war is characterized, explicitly or implicitly, as an intensely physical and immediate affair.

To complicate matters, the soldier characters are not merely shown to be disenfranchised objects of warfare but also as potentially implicated in the processes leading to their dilemma. Especially David Abrams illustrates this double bind through his main character, Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr. It falls to Gooding as a member of the press staff to handle the story of a specialist named Kyle Pilley who has distinguished himself through an extraordinary display of valor in combat. For Gooding, however, this actual feat is less interesting than the way it can be exploited to turn Pilley into a "money-maker":

These were the soldiers caught at the crossroads of luck and bravery, the door kickers who rose to the occasion and did something true and honorable in the eyes of the U.S. Army, who participated in moments of selfless action that could be packaged into a heart-stirring story and delivered to the media. (204)

This can serve as a further illustration of the insignificance of the individual soldier in the War on Terror: what is important is not the heroic action itself, but merely the degree to which the soldier can be turned into a commodity offering up a heroic and sympathetic face to the U.S. public.

To make Pilley's story appealing to a civilian audience, Gooding subjects him to the same processes that lie at the core of his own frustration. And despite his better judgement, his heart begins "pounding hard" with excitement about the impact Pilley's story is likely to have on a civilian audience (214). But disaster strikes while Pilley's patrol is ambushed before he can be flown

to American to go on a tour of public appearances, resulting in two dead soldiers and Pilley's "leg blown clean off below the knee" (216). Dismayed by the sudden turn of events, Gooding calls his superior officer to tell him about "Bad news, sir. Real bad news" (217). The bad news that Gooding refers to, however, is not the dead soldiers or the injured Pilley, but the fact that the injury no longer allows Pilley to be commodified into a heroic representative of the war. Gooding thus personifies a certain paradox. On the one hand, he actively contributes to a distorted narrative of the War on Terror that he not only knows to be false, but that numerous other soldier characters identify as one of the central causes of the increasing rift between the military and the civilian populace. Abrams here dismisses the notion of a purely disinterested U.S. public and a victimized U.S. military as he implies culpability on the part of the soldiers. On the other hand, Gooding is himself increasingly bereft of agency and subjected to the processes of distorting the experience of war. *Fobbit* thus allows for an engagement with the depiction of the War on Terror that moves away from anxiety about the way it is conducted, to anxiety about the way the soldier characters believe the war to be presented.

Sean Aday, Steven Livingston, and Maeve Hebert observe that "[f]or American viewers in particular, the portrait of [the Iraq War] offered by the networks was a sanitized one free of bloodshed, dissent, and diplomacy but full of exciting weaponry, splashy graphics, and heroic soldiers" (18). In the prevalent mode of reporting on the war, this suggests, the War on Terror is depicted as a just and smoothly executed operation remarkably devoid of human losses. At the core of *Fobbit* lies precisely such a depiction of the War on Terror for a civilian audience as a virtually bloodless operation devoid of human suffering.

Fobbits, a term actually colloquially used in the Army, frequently draw ire from the rest of the troops due to the somewhat paradoxical position they inhabit: "As a Fobbit, Chance Gooding Jr. saw the war through a telescope, the bloody snarl of combat remained at a safe, sanitized distance from his air-conditioned cubicle" (2). As a member of the Public Affairs staff, Gooding is nominally part of the active U.S. forces. But he and his fellow Fobbits remains strictly physically removed from the actual fighting and react with "white-knuckled" terror to the idea of combat (1). As the narrative voice of each chapter is modeled after its central character, it is Gooding himself who describes the Fobbits with caustic self-derision:

Crack open their chests and in the space where their hearts should be beating with a warrior's courage and selfless regard, you'd find a pale, gooeey center. They cowered like rabbits in their cubicles, busied themselves with PowerPoint briefings to avoid the hazard of Baghdad's bombs, and steadfastly clung white-knuckled to their desks at Forward Operating Base Triumph. (1)

As a character, Gooding is a military everyman without any unique characteristics: what is most remarkable about him is just how unremarkable he is. He is not part of an operation charged with particular military significance nor does he personally witness a special chain of events. And his rank does not suggest that he distinguished himself through any particular individual achievement prior to the narrative. As Staff Sergeant, Gooding remains at the lower end of the ranks for enlisted officers despite being “a career soldier with ten-plus years in Uncle Sam’s army” (3). What his time spent in the Army in relation to his rank suggests is that Gooding fulfills his role with a certain degree of competence but without much ambition.

The beginning of *Fobbit* marks the half-way point of his tour, when “Gooding’s deployment clock [is] at 183 days with another 182 to go” (3). This explicit reference to a chronological turning point might seem to also mark an occasion for self-reflection, but for Gooding it merely is the beginning of the “downhill slide” (3). By the end of the narrative, the notion of a downhill slide will have acquired a decidedly more foreboding tone as it will be understood to foreshadow Gooding’s psychological state. But initially, this mid-point simply marks yet another unremarkable step for Gooding while biding his time until returning to the U.S. This casual attitude is based on the fact that he is not overly troubled by the war. In fact, Gooding’s attitude to a potentially lasting impact the war might leave on him borders on being outright blasé: the potential threat of psychological trauma has such little relevance for him in the beginning of the narrative that he anticipates its fading from memory while still in Iraq. He therefore begins to keep a detailed account of life on FOB Freedom in order to “be able to remember the war years down the road when it started to fade from his head” (47). In keeping with this initial tone of mundaneness and a slow trudging through seemingly quotidian days blending into each other, Gooding’s crisis and eventual breakdown is not the product of epiphanies and sudden reconsiderations in the face of cataclysmic events. Rather, it is the outcome of a far less spectacular process of continued mental attrition, a slow draining of his mental tolerance. What happens to the utterly average Gooding cannot, then, be attributed to extraordinary circumstances but constitutes a problem for the conduct of the War on Terror at large and its official representation.

In order to examine Abrams’ depiction of Gooding and his tasks, it is instructive to return to Jean Baudrillard’s argument that the First Gulf War marks the moments in which the mediation of combat has become so complete that a reconstruction of the actual events is now all but impossible: “[t]he complement of the unconditional simulacrum in the field is to train everyone in the unconditional reception of broadcast simulacra. Abolish any intelligence of the event. The result is a suffocating atmosphere of deception and stupidity” (68). Essentially, the argument is that by producing images of the war purged of violence, those in charge ensured that nothing unsettling or otherwise undesirable would reach U.S. audiences. By incessant repetition, such officially

sanctioned images would eventually obliterate entirely the audience's ability to imagine that any suffering might have been obscured. Not only would this render any factual understanding of the war impossible, reducing the war to a pure media spectacle would also have the effect of eliminating empathy with the victims of war, whether domestic or foreign.

Waging the War on Terror, the Bush administration early on stated their intention to continue the practice of severely regulating the depiction of warfare. Mark Danner reports that famously, an aide generally believed to have been Karl Rove, then Senior Advisor to the President, outlines these plans by telling the reporter Ron Suskind in 2004 that

guys like [Suskind] were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. [...] That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continues. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors [...] and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (Danner, "Rumsfeld: Why We Live in His Ruins" 40)

What Rove states is that securing the interpretational sovereignty over the War on Terror—the way in which it is depicted and received—is imperative. This mediated version of the war in turn creates clear-cut boundaries for any potential demand for unfiltered information about the actual progress of the war. The U.S. administration thus pursues an understanding of the war that is subject to and circumscribed by the reality created by the officially sanctioned media depiction, thereby purging notions of empathy in the American audience.

It is this very obliteration of any notion of physical suffering during Operation Iraqi Freedom that lies at the core of Gooding's task in *Fobbitt*:

His job was to turn the bomb attacks, the sniper kills, the sucking chest wounds, and the dismemberments into something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs. (2)

Abrams here posits official reporting on the war as a grotesque enterprise that intentionally dilutes any trace of human suffering: as horrific wounds are turned into something that complements a domestic morning ritual, reports of the atrocities from a war zone are reduced to breakfast condiments.

Consequently, the protagonists of both *Fobbitt* and *The Yellow Birds* are depicted as frequently assuming a position vis-à-vis the American public that borders on outright hostility. It is a widely-held assumption that war opens up a rift between civilians and soldiers. Adam Piette, for instance, writes that for

those caught in them, war zones are imbued with “powers of menace capable of warping civilian space-time” (38). Mary L. Dudziak argues similarly, albeit with regard to time instead of space, stating that “[i]n war, regular time is thought to be interrupted, and time is out of order. [...] And so one meaning of ‘wartime’ is the idea that battle suspends time itself” (3). In essence, the experience of war creates a chronological and geographical space that adheres to its own rules and is distinctly set off from a civilian experience.

In Kevin Powers’ novel, the particular setting of the foreign battlefield results in a rift between even John Bartle and his fellow soldiers. Following the death of the squad’s Iraqi translator in battle, Bartle, narrating the events after his return home, considers the emotional dissociation from the soldiers surrounding him: “I couldn’t have articulated it then, but I’d been trained to think that war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit. War is the great maker of solipsists [...]” (12). The absolute nature of this statement is undercut to a degree as Bartle, despite his initial reluctance, does establish a personal bond with his squad mate, Daniel Murphy. But the war does prove prohibitive for Bartle’s relationship to other soldiers and particularly the relationship between soldiers and civilians.

Finding the mangled corpse of Murphy in the last Iraq section of the novel, Bartle and Sterling murder the old man who had led them there, possibly as retaliation, possibly as a way to get rid of a witness to the circumstances of Murphy’s death and his burial in a near-by river:

Sterling shot the cartwright once, in the face, and he crumpled to the ground. No time to even be surprised by it. The mule began to pull the cart, unbidden, as if by habit. The two dogs followed it into the coming night. We looked back toward the river. Murph was gone. (211)

What is remarkable about the killing of the Iraqi civilian here is perhaps not so much the murder itself, but that it carries no moral repercussions. While the memory of Murphy continues to haunt Bartle, the murdered Iraqi goes unmentioned. In fact, the murder itself happens as if in passing: mere seconds after the cartwright is shot, Bartle and Sterling’s attention immediately reverts back to the body of Murphy as it drifts out of sight. Illustrating the relationship of the soldiers to Iraqi civilians, the casual murder of the man is here a side note that is not worth a second thought to the soldiers, suggesting a severe desensitization to violence.

When it comes to Bartle’s relationship with U.S. civilians, tensions arise from what he perceives to be the willful ignorance to particular demands put on the soldiers by the military which make civilian ideas of care untenable. At the end of his combat training, Bartle is approached by Daniel Murphy’s mother who urges him to take care of her son while in Iraq. Even though Bartle does comply to get away from her, he resents her insistence that he should shoulder the additional responsibility: “How the hell should I know, lady? I

wanted to say. I barely knew the guy. Stop. Stop asking me questions. I don't want to be accountable. I don't know anything about this" (46). Bartle's reaction of anger and anxious defensiveness stems from Mrs. Murphy's lack of acknowledgment of the distortive elements of war. Due to her ignorance of or perhaps unwillingness to recognize that war makes assuming responsibility for somebody else's well-being an enormous imposition and rather impossible, Bartle is burdened with a responsibility that he initially resents and that will make the eventual death of his friend all the more devastating.

The strained relationship between the U.S. military and the civilian population becomes more pronounced in *Fobbit*. As mentioned, Abrams writes that Gooding's task is to sanitize the grisly reality of the war in Iraq and turn it into "something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs" (2). This suggests a twofold demand by the U.S. public: on the one hand, it implies the mentioned desire for sanitization, that is, the absence of startling images or descriptions that might upset the breakfast routine, or indeed public life in general, in favor of a state of ignorance about the realities of war. In this sense, the American public is not the victim of the administration's information policy. Rather, Abrams imagines an American public that craves the absence of disturbing in favor of ideally inspiring news; that morning routines should not be interrupted, but be complemented by "something patriotic" (2), implying that the news should not only give a sanitized portrayal of the war, but also an inspirational, exciting, or assuring one. Gooding's growing disenchantment is thus perhaps not only the result of the role he plays in mediating the war, but also of the assumption that no other form of reporting is actually desired by the public. In this scenario, the troops not only take part in war, but should ideally do so in a way that allows the civilian population to take pleasure in the fighting. This dynamic plays out most clearly in the case of Captain Abe Shrinkle.

Initially, Shrinkle is in charge of a combat unit, but after having displayed his military incompetence a number of times, on one occasion resulting in the death of an Iraqi civilian and the destruction of Army property, he is demoted to taking care of the on-base gym before being killed by a mortar hit. But prior to these events, Shrinkle figures as the recipient of care packages from a variety of civilian organizations eager to help the troops, earning himself the nickname "Care Package King": "mothers of deployed soldiers, mothers of dead soldiers, prayer circles at churches, Girl Scout troops, Harley-Davidson Vietnam Vet clubs, the Vermont Republican Purple Ladies, you name it" (163). Shrinkle, holed up in his container-within-a-container built from countless care packages, is portrayed as a deeply incompetent character used mostly for comic relief. But *Fobbit's* description of civilians eager to send parcels of trinkets results in an acerbic satire of self-indulgent civilian investment in the troops:

It gave these mothers and fathers, these teachers and students, these pastors and their flock, hot butterflies of happiness inside their chests and though they didn't truly understand what was going on over in Iraq and really had no idea what it was like to wear eighty pounds of body armor in the 120-degree heat, it helped salve their collective guilt over the way America had treated the boys returning from Vietnam. Along with the yellow-ribbon stickers on the backs of their cars, it was a way for them to show the rest of the world—Democrats especially—they really knew how to Support the Troops. It was incredible how the screech of pulling tape across the flaps of just one box could bring spiritual harmony to a person, make her feel like she was doing Something that Mattered. (164)

What the U.S. public would like to be understood as the ostensibly patriotic or philanthropic desire to support of the troops is here cast as a redemption of sorts for the lack of public support shown during past wars, especially the Vietnam War, as well as a form of self-aggrandizement. Abrams' explicit reference to the omnipresent car stickers, for instance, reads as an indication of the countless, purely rhetorical ways of publicly expressing support for the troops, but *Fobbit* undercuts any claims to selflessness inherent in such expressions. In tune with the preceding narrative, the nature of warfare remains impossible to fathom for a U.S. public that "didn't truly understand what was going on over in Iraq" (164). Nor do they, it would seem, much care. The capitalization of the desire to do "Something that Mattered" evokes the sloganeering in U.S. public and official discourse and implies that the motivation behind these actions is actually less helpful than a public declaration and self-validation of one's own patriotic integrity (164). The public support shown to the troops thus becomes a way of assuring oneself and others of one's unwavering support of the troops without actually devoting much thought or commitment to it.

And among the packages Shrinkle receives are not only trinkets but also letters that frequently cast him as the object of particularly female admiration. Chiefly among those is a note from a certain "Mrs. Norma Tingledecker" (168). In her letter, Mrs. Tingledecker paints a scene of American pastoral splendor starkly at odds with the sweltering Shrinkle caught in his desert container, which hints at the letter writer's actual ignorance, perhaps even disinterest, in Shrinkle as an individual as descriptions of marital woes take over the letter which ends on a sigh of desperation about Mrs. Tingledecker's husband Ray, "a stinking, no-good bastard who always finds it necessary to stop at the Rockin' R before he sloppy-stumbles his way home to an ice-cold dinner [...]" (169). Another letter brings Shrinkle's role as an accessory to fantasies of romantic or sexual escapism fully to the fore as he receives a "tuft of pubic hair tenderly sealed in a Ziploc baggie by a Ms. Wanda Showalter (recently divorced)" (171).

Again, the impulse to send these letters appears mostly self-serving. As Mitchell G. Reyes argues, the experience of the Vietnam war has complicated



the notion of a public sense of uninhibited admiration for the military as an institution. Instead of public admiration for the military in general, “narratives of Vietnam severed the warriors from the institutions for which they fought” and focused on the “veneration of individual soldiers” (579), thus shifting the public admiration from the institutional to the individual. Leo Brady echoes this notion, claiming that American popular culture continues to cherish the idea of the individual soldier. In Brady’s account, this soldier character is additionally coded as representative of stereotypical masculine virtues:

As so many action movies of the past two decades show, there is some nostalgic satisfaction in seeing a correlation between body and violence, action and personal will, where the hero [...] has access to both the most advanced technology and cuirasslike bare chest and muscled arms. [...] Many of these films are mythic efforts to synthesize technology and personal physical prowess in the same spirit as the army’s 2001 advertising campaign: ‘An Army of One.’ (550)

To point out the disconnect between the bumbling Shrinkle and a mythical Army of One, while true, would be beside the point. Neither Mrs. Tingledecker nor Ms. Showalter appear to have any personal knowledge of Shrinkle as a person or soldier; the letters that Shrinkle receive, for instance, are not addressed to him personally and appear to have ended up with him by chance. For at least part of the civilian population, Shrinkle is merely a projection space for their own desires and fantasies. For them, is entirely sufficient to understand Shrinkle as an abstracted soldier archetype, rife with allegedly heroic and hyper-masculine attributes while, as a person, Shrinkle is unimportant. What is crucial is that the public can relinquish whatever role he plays in their imagination. The archetype of spiritually rejuvenated and physically imposing soldiers thoroughly rejected in the portrayals of the soldier characters in novels such as *Fobbit* and *The Yellow Birds* does live on for a civilian audience that ignores the factual reality of war in favor of the culturally produced stereotype.

The feeling that public support if not for the War on Terror, then at least for the troops, exhausts itself in empty and self-serving gestures is a prominent in for these characters. And as David Finkel illustrates in his studies of American troops, in particular his 2013 *Thank You for Your Service*, the sense of disenchantment experienced by the U.S. troops frequently turns into a feeling of having been abandoned by both the U.S. public and the administration. Neither *Fobbit* nor *The Yellow Birds* depicts the troops’ perception of the widening rift between themselves and the domestic public as posing an immediate and direct threat to American civilians. The reactions of the novels’ soldier characters—a growing disenchantment with the U.S., self-imposed social reclusion, and a general feeling of bitterness—certainly constitute problems to the U.S. at large, but they do not constitute open threats. I argue, however, in

chapters two and three that this changes the closer these disillusioned characters come to American soil. The more permanent the return, too, the more the character of the returning veteran poses a danger.

But even the heavily regulated depiction of the war produced by the Army and, according to *Fobbit*, one desired by the public, cannot fully purge the war of its horrors. Even without ever personally experiencing combat, Gooding is eventually overwhelmed by even the mediated version of the war. And although he is tasked with a wide range of media forms—he produces images as well as written dispatches and reports—it is the visual material that has the greatest impact on him.

The first signs of an evolving crisis surface when Gooding sees the image of the remains of a suicide bomber. Even though he and the man stood on opposing sides in the war, the image has a profound effect:

Gooding started to zoom in on the ragged end of the shoulder. His cursor changed to a magnifying glass. The closer he got to the sheared-off torso, the less his stomach churned. Soon it started to look less like meat, less like the abrupt ripping away of life, and more like strawberry jam. That was okay, right? Strawberry jam was delicious under the right circumstances. He zoomed back out and—*damn!*—started gagging again. Saliva flooded his mouth and he prayed he didn't ralph all over his keyboard. (87)

This depiction of the effects of war is not yet a version that is drained of the horrors of war. In fact, it is a display of what Adriana Cavarero dubs the “Horrorism” of contemporary warfare; this neologism connotes “the peculiarly repugnant character of so many scenes of contemporary violence, which locates them in the realm of horror rather than that of terror” (29). The terror of contemporary warfare, Cavarero argues, lies not primarily in the killing of the opponent, but in the intention to cancel out the opponent’s inherent humanity through a “spectacle of disfigurement”:

As its corporeal symptoms testify, the physics of horror has nothing to do with the instinctive reaction to the threat of death. It has rather to do with the instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability. What is at stake is not the end of a human life but the human condition itself, as incarnated in the singularity of vulnerable bodies. (8)

The embodiment of this horrific warfare is precisely what Gooding sees on his screen: the figure of the suicide bomber who causes, in Cavarero’s words, “[r]epugnance [...] not so much because of the homicide in itself as because of the offense against vulnerable people who were also defenseless” (32). However, the distinction between repugnant perpetrator and defenseless victim that Cavarero draws is complicated in *Fobbit*. A brief mention is made of

the result of the attack—“twenty-three dead, thirty-six wounded” (85)—but they are not given any further consideration. Instead, Abrams depicts the remains of the bomber himself in a way that Cavarero would have reserved for the victims of the attack:

A head. Two legs that appeared to be sprouting from his neck. A hand, fingers twisted and broken, in the region where normally the right hip bone is located.

That was it. Nothing more. Everything else—skin, bone, muscle, organ—had vaporized in a red splash through the dust and rubble in the restaurant.

In the blackened head, the eyes were squeezed shut, as if in the final reflex before the bomber pulled the det [detonation] cord. His feet on the end of those neatly severed legs were turned in opposite directions—one forward, one backward. If you didn’t know better, you might mistake his legs for arms, his feet for hands. He looked like a meaty jigsaw puzzle of parts—with those feet-hands, he looked like a child’s drawing of a traffic cop, one hand saying “Stop!” the other beckoning “Go!” (86–7)

On the surface, this depiction of the bomb’s effect seems to precisely echo Cavarero: in the grotesque spectacle of dislocated hands, vaporized organs, and twisted legs that without a doubt must be mingled with the remains of the victims, the destruction of the “uniqueness of the body” is complete (8). What is at the center of this “spectacle of disfigurement,” however, is not the remains of the bomber’s victims, but the bomber himself. The space in which the mutilation of the singular human form is played out is not the bodies of the victims, but the body of the perpetrator. By making the suicide bomber the cause of the attack as well as the most prominently rendered victim of its effects, Abrams blurs clear distinctions between terrorist and victim. This blurring of the roles in turn makes a singular reaction—repulsion for the bomber, empathy for his victims—impossible. The blending of these two emotions is appropriately mirrored by Gooding’s reaction. On the one hand, he is repulsed by the visual evidence of the catastrophe the bomber brought onto himself and his victims: the image of the “sheared-off torso” gives evidence of the complete destruction of the human form (87). On the other hand, he is deeply affected by the thought of the “ripping away of life” not only of the victims (87), but also of the bomber himself. Despite his revulsion, Gooding reacts with a feeling of general empathy for the casualties of the war and appears to collectively regard them as victims united in being brutalized by warfare, no matter their nationality, allegiance, or status as combatants.

Unable to restrict his emotional response to the image of the suicide bomber to repulsion and contempt, Gooding can control his visceral reaction to the image only when he zooms in to a scale on which the bomber is no longer identifiable as human. In *Fobbit*, the sanitization of the devastating effects of warfare on the human body is achieved especially through visual de-humanization of the war’s victims: the still-identifiable “sheared-off torso” must be visually distorted to the degree that it becomes “strawberry jam” (87). Similar

to the American public he accused of demanding a depiction of the war that went well with “toast and eggs” (2), Gooding is forced to distort the war in a way in which its victims no longer appear to be human, lest their sight provoke uncontrollable empathy.

However, the problem with a sanitized depiction of warfare is made evident by Gooding’s reaction to the image once he changes scales again. As soon as he zooms back out to where the comforting illusion of strawberry jam gives way to a recognizable human body, he is overcome by a visceral reaction. Gagging and salivating, Gooding is reduced to “pray[ing] he didn’t ralph all over his keyboard” (87). In the initial sections of the novel, he may be able to cope with the violence of war as he is able to actively manipulate unsettling images to a degree at which identification with the depicted victim is no longer possible, thereby precluding an empathetic reaction. But the success of this approach is predicated on Gooding being confronted with a very particular kind of media, namely images that he is able to control via his computer screen.

But as Gooding finds himself increasingly exposed to images that, for various reasons, lie beyond his power of manipulation, it becomes much more difficult, and finally impossible, to successfully suppress his empathy. At a later point in the story, Gooding and his colleagues watch a news report of a mass panic. Abrams seems to have modeled the events after a catastrophe occasioned by a false rumor of a suicide bomber in a religious celebration taking place in Baghdad in August 2005, claiming the death of around 950 people according to the *New York Times*, and making it “by far the greatest one-day loss of life since the American invasion in March 2003” (Worth). As the masses rush uncontrollably towards a bridge, Gooding watches the television in horror:

Dust clogged the air, swirled by screams and flailing limbs. The mob funneled onto the bridge, all of them squeezing toward the other end only to find their way choked by an impenetrable Iraqi police checkpoint. People were crushed, the breath pushed from their lungs, their ribs cracked, their organs compressed, the legs and arms and necks of young children snapped like thin, dry twigs. [...] The Fobbits, watching from their sterile distance, struggled to make sense of it. They tried to separate truth from fiction, rumor from confirmed report. [...] [I]t was almost too much for Gooding to bear. (277–9)

The text charts how, in an effort to control the dissemination of such images, Army attempts to secure and maintain control over how the war is reported begin to grow more frantic. The list of guidelines of how to behave during television interviews, for instance, grows more and more bizarre. Warning the soldiers of the dangers of “consum[ing] flatulence-producing foods” prior to an interview (207), it ends with the reminder “**Don’t** ever forget: ‘We are WINNING the Global War on Terrorism’” (208; emphasis in original). While particularly the last point is meant to inspire the troops’ confidence, it implies

quite the opposite: the military seems to be caught in a dire military situation, since the winning side in a war hardly needs to insist that it is, in fact, winning.

And watching the news report of the panic on *Al-Arabiya* TV, these regulations no longer apply: the Fobbits, finding themselves confronted with a depiction of the war fully beyond their control, “struggled to make sense of [the report]” (279). Following Baudrillard, critics like Andrew Hoskins reiterate the notion that the media saturation beginning with the First Gulf War “fundamentally disconnected the machinery of warfare from the bloody consequences of its use” (10). Taking a different position, though, and pushing back against what she considers “breathtaking provincialism” (98), Susan Sontag argues that

it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people’s pain [...]. There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality. (99)

Keeping in mind, for instance, the success of the so-called Islamic State in rousing and arousing its audience through shocking imagery, it becomes hard to argue for a universally desensitizing effect of war imagery.

In the case of *Fobbit*, the passage not merely echoes but also extends Sontag’s theoretical claim. While the Fobbits nominally belong to the privileged group that determines the depiction of any given event, when watching footage of the panic on a television channel whose mode of reporting does not conform to American regulations, they are confronted with horrific images they cannot control. Temporarily bereft of the possibility to manipulate the images in order to emotionally distance both themselves and their implied audience, the soldiers are thrown back to being baffled spectators, unable to stem the flood of images forcing the grimness of war onto them as the screens show how

[t]he huge mob of pilgrims pushed and screamed, shoved and ran, jostled and tripped, the fallen trying to rise but being kicked down by more and more feet fleeing the feared blast zone, those at the edge seeing the surging human tide and turning, walking rapidly at first, then, as they felt the hot breath on their necks, also starting to run and also tripping and falling and lying flat to be stomped and suffocated by all those sandaled feet, the eight thousand sandals now running, running, running with blind panic. (277)

Unable to de-humanize the victims of the panic and forced to endure their representation on a scale that retains their quality of being human, watching the stampede “was almost too much for Gooding to bear” (279). In the initial stages of this passage, Abrams focuses on what Gooding can make out on the television: the de-personalized and anonymous “mob funneling onto the

bridge” (277). The description of these images, however, then bleeds into an empathetic understanding of the enormous suffering the images do not show but Gooding nevertheless understands them to signify: “People were crushed, the breath pushed from their lungs, their ribs cracked, their organs compressed, the legs and arms and necks of young children snapped like thin, dry twigs” (277). Strikingly, this perspective inverts the perspective on the remains of the suicide bomber but achieves a similar effect. Where zooming out forced Gooding to acknowledge the humanity of the bomber, this time what occurs may be understood as an internal zooming in—Gooding imagines the effects of the panic on individual bodies within the formerly homogeneous crowd—that, once again, sets off the immediate and visceral reaction. Given the horrific nature of the event, it is fruitful here to return to Cavarero for a better understanding of Gooding’s reaction.

Cavarero suggests that “[r]epugnance for the work of horror comes [...] not just from looking but also from imagining” (57). She, however, does not speak about the effects of war images in general but about images of the carnage wreaked by suicide bombers which in her reading translates to a feeling of repugnance. Abrams’ depiction of the trampling on the bridge is strikingly similar to the mechanism here imagined by Cavarero: his depiction of the effects of the panic—a crushing and twisting of organs and limbs in a stampeding mass—corresponds to Cavarero’s notion of horrorism as the disfiguring of the individual body past a point of recognition brought about, albeit indirectly in the case of *Fobbit*, by a suicide bomber targeting defenseless civilians. But in Gooding’s reaction to this and similar situations of mayhem, Abrams and Cavarero part company.

Gooding’s internal crisis—an inability to deal with the war—is indicated by the conclusion that “it was almost too much for Gooding to bear” (279). That this is brought about by his realization of the suffering behind the images is illustrated by how the uninterrupted narrative crosses over from what can be objectively seen to Gooding’s horrified perception of it, a testimony of the potentially devastating powers of imagination and empathy. There is, however, no indication given that Gooding’s reaction is predominantly determined, as Cavarero would have it, by repugnance for the suicide bomber or the victims. Instead, Abrams depicts Gooding as reacting in a forcefully empathetic way that stops just short of a full identification with the victims of the panic and a shared experience of their pain. But while his earlier reaction was physical—Gooding struggled not to “ralph all over his keyboard”—this time a psychological quality is added: the increasing mental inability to cope with the impact of war images by circumventing feelings of empathy (87). Adding a psychological layer to the previous purely physical reaction prepares the ground for Gooding’s ultimate collapse.

Such potentially startling depictions of the war defying official U.S. regulations become more prominent as a result of a diversified media landscape. In addition to Al-Arabiya, Al-Jazeera is perhaps the most prominent station to

articulate an alternative narrative by, as Graham Spencer argues, “screening voices and representatives from Arab worlds which remain largely invisible to media audiences on Western networks” (153) that also formally defy the American depiction by including images of “civilian casualties and atrocities which were notable by their absence on CNN” (155). This might certainly be true for U.S. networks. But with access to the Internet available in virtually every part of the country, American audiences are no longer limited to domestic networks that in turn follow guidelines, frequently even self-imposed ones, to minimize depictions of dead or severely wounded U.S. soldiers. Instead, the Internet has given rise to alternative sources that do not obey U.S. regulations and thus make the rigorous sanitization of warfare a practical impossibility.

But Abrams does not restrict media coverage diverging from the official template to foreign news stations but gestures toward the possibility that not even U.S. domestic networks continue to abide by Army guidelines and regulations. After a U.S. patrol is struck by an IED [Improvised Explosive Device], an event that Gooding is made aware of by a call, not from military intelligence but from a CNN reporter, he is tasked with producing a press release (57). As details arrive at his desk, the gruesome details of the attack are still unmitigated and unsparing in their account of the injuries inflicted upon the soldiers:

As it turned out, only one U.S. soldier was killed—a hot chunk of scrap iron finding that two-inch sweet spot between the helmet and the collar of the flak vest and ripping away half of the kid’s neck, causing him to stumble and trip into a puddle of ignited gasoline. Three others had been wounded with the usual assortment of burns, partial amputations, and concussions. (59)

Through a long series of drafting and re-drafting an official release, the bomb blast and its fallout are finally rhetorically neutered enough to be sent out to the press agencies. What remains of the fate of the U.S. soldiers is a dry mentioning of one soldier being killed, omitting the surviving injured ones and erasing three Iraqi civilian casualties from the event (74). However, Lieutenant Colonel Stacie Harkleroad, Gooding’s immediate superior, is distraught to learn that CNN did not wait to receive their information through the Army channels but instead covered the event independently: “‘It’s all over,’ he croak-whispered. ‘CNN beat us to the punch. They’re running a report on the attack’” (71). Spurred to try and at least maintain control over the way the attack is reported in print, Gooding broods over the question “you mean even though the news is now as cold and dead as the soldier himself, we should still put out a press release?” (74). In fact, immediately after sending out the press release, he receives a reply “from the Associated Press Baghdad Bureau; the subject line was ‘Stale News—better luck next time’” (74–5). Given the actual

depiction of the War on Terror in U.S. news media, Harkleroad might actually not have had to be so distraught.

Assessing the coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom in the U.S. media, Spencer argues that the coverage merely reinforces instead of investigates the administration's depiction of the war as smooth, just, and virtually bloodless, concluding that the media coverage "reveals a clear abdication of journalistic responsibility to hold political leaders to account and present alternative discourses in measure to government and official opinion" (163). Regarding the depiction of U.S. victims, Michael Kamber and Tim Arango report that "[a]fter five years and more than 4,000 U.S. combat deaths, searches and interviews turned up fewer than a half-dozen graphic photographs of dead U.S. soldiers" in a 2008 article for *The New York Times*. Partially, this is certainly based on strict Army regulations meant to make the depiction of dead or severely wounded soldiers virtually impossible. As Stacey Peebles writes,

digital texts [written by U.S. combat soldiers] would be subject to review and what some called censorship. Images, however, fared worse. In March 2007—around the same time that the Pentagon published its regulations—the Department of Defense created its own channel on YouTube, called MultiNational Force—Iraq. This channel features videos that, according to Andén-Papadopoulos, adhere to "traditional norms of propaganda" and are designed to "counteract the prolific posting of damaging video clips by its own troops." This effort was accompanied by an announcement in May that the military was blocking soldiers' access to YouTube, MySpace, and eleven other websites. (12)

That is, if these images could find a distributor in the first place. In an article for the *Atlantic*, Torie Rose DeGhett writes about U.S. photographer Kenneth Jarecke, who, during Operation Desert Storm, took a picture of an Iraqi soldier burnt alive in his truck. But instead of publishing the startling image, U.S. news outlets refused publication in an act of voluntary submission to the sanitized depiction of the war. The vanishingly small number of images of dead soldiers investigated by Kamber and Arango would then suggest that this reflex of anticipatory obedience is still very at work in the U.S. media during the War on Terror. But these concerns seem to hold little weight for Abrams' characters. In the world of *Fobbit*, CNN are still "[f]uckin' liberal news whores" (70), hated for their willingness to depart from Army regulations in their coverage. It would appear that Abrams retains a certain optimism as he depicts the hegemony of officially mediated warfare to be threatened by alternative, more truthful narratives.

As befits the preceding relative mundanity of the events detailed in *Fobbit*, Gooding's final breakdown does not follow in the wake of a singular disruptive experience. Instead, Abrams describes Gooding's final breakdown as the result of a cumulative process in which a single moment is enough to push him past his breaking point: "Chance Gooding Jr. felt part of himself break



away, like a chunk of glacier calving, a slow-motion slip and slide into arctic waters. Something fled, never to return” (366).

In what follows, Gooding stands up and surveys his surroundings in a series of separate vignettes, each only a few short words long:

The reams of Significant Activity reports,  
self-replenished every hour.  
The impatient cursor blinking on his computer screen, waiting  
for the approval of the press release.  
The tip of Harkleroad’s nose, the nervous blood that would soon  
grow to a red mustache on his upper lip.  
The CG threading his way through the cubicles, a missile aimed  
at the trembling target: P-A-Fucking-O.  
The clack and clatter rising from a hundred  
keyboards in the palace.  
The voice of the SMOG reeling off another casualty:  
arm broken, foot missing.  
Someone across the room whooping at a  
computer solitaire victory.  
Someone else brewing a cappuccino with a boiling hiss. (367)

Mirroring Gooding’s rapidly decreasing ability to cope with the war, even the relatively small and structured office environment that he works in turns into a whirl of seemingly disjointed impressions of the war. In this situation, shortly before Gooding’s final breakdown, there is no longer any way of distinguishing between the significance of a missing arm and of a victory in a game of solitaire. Even the most mundane office activities are infused with and inextricably linked to the death and destruction that Gooding knows to be occurring in the war at the very same time. The result is an increasingly unmanageable barrage of sensations whose psychological impact Gooding cannot escape, leaving him unable to effectively differentiate between them.

And eventually, Gooding’s impressions exceed the limit of what he can actually perceive and extends to what he as a Fobbit has never personally witnessed but nevertheless understands to lie outside the realm of his experience. A momentary mental breakdown lets Gooding seemingly assume a painfully omniscient perspective that extends his sensory facilities to the improbable distance

outside the palace on the other side of the FOB, Gooding could see an American sergeant at an M16 firing range teaching an Iraqi sergeant—for the twenty-eight time—about breath control and trigger squeeze. [...] And farther beyond the protective ring of security around the American base, the scream of a Local Native being tortured by Sunni interrogators. The cold, precise snip of pruning shears removing a set of toes one at a time. The laughter, the scream, the “*Al-lahu Akbar!*” And farthest of all, the intangible thud of a mortar striking the earth followed by the mewl of sirens. (367)

before “Gooding’s head floated back down, returning to his neck with a crisp snap” (368), and he is in control of his senses again. In this passage preceding Gooding’s final moments, he combines a wealth of sensory impressions—screams, images, sadistic laughter, the thud of a mortar hit—into a single, hellish whirl. Following this barrage of impressions, Gooding declares “I’ve had enough”, sheds his battle gear, and runs out of the base towards Baghdad where it is suggested that he is struck by a mortar grenade (368–9).

Crucially, Gooding does not personally witness these moments nor has he seen anything comparable at a previous point in the text. In contrast to watching the victims of the mass panic, he does not even see them as television images. What he witnesses here and what sets the slow-motion slipping and sliding away of his sanity into motion is perhaps best described as internalized mediation that manifests itself as a double awareness: Gooding is perpetually aware of the many images of war and, more importantly, he is aware of the suffering these images signify. He therefore no longer has to even see war in its mediated form. The ingrained familiarity with the various media representations of the war are sufficient to trigger the multi-sensory experience of the final scene. And since his breakdown is brought on not by sudden external triggers but by a consistent internal awareness of the horror of war that slowly corrodes his mental stability, Gooding cannot take recourse to controlling the disturbing qualities of his impressions. In this final scene, the full awareness of the horrors of war thus irrecoverably forces its way into his psyche in a manner that can no longer be mitigated. The retreat into the comfort of strawberry jam is irreversibly barred.

Due to an increased awareness of the psychological effects of war, the inclusion of instances of PTSD and trauma into war narratives has now almost become a staple. But texts like *Unmanned* and *Fobbit* add an additional dimension to the toll of war that eschews sudden trauma. Gooding’s breakdown is not brought about by unique combat experiences. In fact, it is quite the opposite: Abrams carefully sets Gooding up as an average military every-man and perhaps the closest a character in the military can come to a civilian readership surrogate as he remains removed from actual combat. *Unmanned*, on the other hand, imagines the technological mediation of drone warfare to be so sophisticated that it comes full circle and the psychological impact of derealized warfare is comparable to that of warfare in its most immediate form. Both novels thus imagine the impact of war to extend beyond the consequences of direct combat experience. Instead, the reality of war impacts the psyche of even those who witness it indirectly and at a distance.

Ultimately, the texts examined in Chapter One represent a strand of contemporary war literature that stands in stark opposition to efforts at depicting warfare as a largely derealized affair free of physical suffering. They focus on American soldiers whose physical and mental suffering, often depicted in gruesome detail, constitutes a central element of their experience of war. But

the lack of public recognition of the impact of the war—be this reception actually experienced or merely assumed by the soldiers—leads for these military characters to a sense of increasing disenchantment and mounting resignation both with how the War on Terror is waged and its civilian reception. Most of these characters are stationed abroad, however, and remain removed from American soil or retreat into a state of mental or geographical isolation after they return home. In the discussion of Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* in Chapter Two, I examine a novel in which soldier characters make a temporary return to America and experience what they take to be public callousness about the War on Terror. In this novel, their frustration with the public comes close to having violent consequences.

## Chapter Two

# “Extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence”: Spectacular Militarization, Commodification, and Disenchantment

In an article for *The Atlantic*, writer and journalist James Fallows describes watching a speech by President Obama on the television screens scattered around the terminals at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. In Fallows’ account, the speech teems with praise for the military: explicit, albeit “still-not-quite-natural-sounding callouts to the different military services,” assurances to the military that “the nation was grateful for their nonstop deployments and for the unique losses and burdens placed on them through the past dozen years of open-ended war,” and the insistence that “the ‘9/11 generation of heroes’ represented the very best in its country, and that its members constituted a military that was not only superior to all current adversaries but no less than ‘the finest fighting force in the history of the world.’” But the speech fails to capture any sustained interest. Barely reacting to these claims to military valor, as hyperbolic as they may seem, the people in the terminal “went back to their smartphones and their laptops and their Cinnabons as the president droned on.” Instead of an intrinsic investment and gratitude, Fallows identifies a “reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military—we love the troops, but we’d rather not think about them.”

The literary response to such an attitude of general public disinterest in the military, broken only by brief spells of interest in public displays of patriotic zeal and ostensible gratitude to the U.S. military, lies at the heart of this chapter. In his 2012 Iraq war satire *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, Ben Fountain imagines the War on Terror as a war in which notions of American suffering are virtually absent in the public mind, the war having been turned into a spectacle. Fountain achieves this by displaying the war’s public depiction as conforming to a one-dimensional, though effective, melodramatic framework. Enacted for the sake of public militarization, this melodramatic spectacle strips the soldier characters of any agency when it comes to the public representation of the war and leaves no room for a public acknowledgment of the soldiers’ actual experience. I argue that in Fountain’s account, the ultimate purpose of the administration’s public militarization is not only to inspire public support for the War on Terror and investment in the Global Homeland.

Instead, the intention is also a commodification of public patriotism for the sake of financial gains. As the soldier characters directly experience what they perceive as an intentional distortion of their experience of the war, the disenchantment of the military with the public sphere intensifies and transforms into hostility. While actual violence is averted but the underlying conflict remains unresolved by the end of the novel, Fountain posits that the public depiction of the War on Terror threatens to result in a hostile division between the U.S. military and civilian spheres.

As I argued in Chapter One, this division is prominently rooted in the technological progress of warfare subsumed by Michael J. Shapiro's claim that the "technologies that permitted killing in the absence of seeing had removed specific, suffering bodies in a way similar to the way they are effaced in the theoretical language of war [...]" (75). The authors of the novels and stories examined in Chapter One strive to produce a recognition of the suffering occasioned by contemporary warfare in a time when the War on Terror is sanitized for a civilian audience. The texts chart the growing disenchantment of these military characters with the civilian sphere, something which finds articulation in the increasingly antagonistic stance of the military toward the domestic America. However, this sense of disenchantment in these narratives is predominantly based on the assumptions the military characters' hold about their civilian audience rather than actual experiences. And since most of these characters serve on battlefields abroad, their disillusionment can never be truly articulated to American civilians. In contrast, Ben Fountain stages a direct, if temporary, confrontation between his military and civilian characters.

I first examine the way in which depictions of the American military circulating in the public culture are purposefully engineered to establish support for the War on Terror and its defense of the Global Homeland, a process defined by Catherine Lutz as the

intensification of the labor and resources allocated to military purposes, including the shaping of other institutions in synchrony with military goals. Militarization is simultaneously a discursive process, involving a shift in general societal beliefs and values in ways necessary to legitimate the use of force, the organization of large standing armies and their leaders, and the higher taxes or tribute used to pay for them. (723)

In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, public militarization is made possible by the halftime show and a proposed film adaptation of the central characters' war experience. Fountain sets up both the show and the film as melodramatic spectacles that serve as allegories for the national discourse of the War on Terror.

Investigating the conventions of melodrama, Peter Brooks acknowledges the genre's potential subtleties but argues that melodrama generally paints in broad strokes:

the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety. (11–12)

In the aftermath of 9/11, this triangular framework of innocent victim, devious villain, and virtuous hero acted out through heightened emotional gestures held an enormous political appeal. In what Elisabeth Anker terms “*melodramatic political discourse*” (2; italics in original), melodrama is invoked by

cast[ing] politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue. [...] It suggests that the redemption of virtue obligates state power to exercise heroic retribution on the forces responsible for national injury. (2)

Anker’s point is that the state fantasy of the Homeland Security State draws on melodrama and its easily identifiable and adaptable structure of hero, villain, and victim. By conceiving of the public militarization in his novel as modeled on a melodramatic narrative, Fountain displays the resulting public investment in the military as lacking nuance. In essence, the political melodrama of the public militarization in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* exclusively ascribes the notion of suffering to the victimized civilian nation. The role of the hero, in this case attributed to the Bravos, is purely virtuous and leaves no room for the public acknowledgment of the actual suffering that, as examined in the preceding chapter, occurs in the war.

I therefore begin by examining how Fountain stages the melodramatic narrative on the spectacular scale of the halftime show. In this context, I use the term spectacle to signify both the excessive dimensions of the show itself and its political implications. In his 1967 discussion of the sociopolitical function of public spectacle, French philosopher Guy Debord interrogates its various political implications. And although the circumstances of Debord’s work are rather specific—he was a Marxist theorist involved in the French student protests in the 1960s—his ideas resonate with Abrams’ novel. When Debord proclaims that modern society has come to be dominated by public spectacles to the degree that that “[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation,” his claims foreshadow Baudrillard’s arguments concerning the simulacrum of the Gulf War overruling an understanding of the actual events decades later (Thesis 1). Moreover, Debord draws a direct connection between the spectacle and consumerism, arguing that the spectacle renders “alienated consumption [...] as an inescapable duty of the masses” (Thesis 42). Fountain, I would suggest, enacts a similar double logic in the novel: the aim of the spectacular halftime show is to replace an actual understanding of the war with

a melodramatic depiction. At the same time, the spectacle is employed to financially capitalize on the patriotic rapture of an overly naïve American public by rendering the consumption of certain brands and goods as synonymous with patriotic virtue.

I subsequently move on to Fountain's interrogation of the underlying principles of the War on Terror threatening to be brought to bear on the American population itself. As Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen points out, the war follows the logic of risk management in which "what matters is not so much what happens but what may happen" (4). The military force legitimized and enabled by the spectacular melodrama of public militarization is thus employed against continuously shifting targets that are constructed and re-constructed based on speculative predictions instead of definitely outlined ones. And given the global scope of the Homeland Security State outlined in the introduction, this process of speculative and pervasive securitization allows the state to designate both foreign parties and citizens of the domestic U.S. as potential targets. Fountain depicts this logic of the perpetual production of risk as self-defeating since the Bravos' emotional detachment from the nation stems from eventually being understood as potential risks by a system they (unwillingly) helped propagate by their appearance in the halftime show. Ultimately, Fountain presents the possibility of the soldiers' ensuing emotional disconnect from the civic population as resulting in actual acts of hostility. He thereby suggests the necessity of renouncing the sanitized melodramatic spectacle, as appealing as it might be, in favor of acknowledging the mental and physical suffering the War on Terror brings on.

Set primarily in Dallas on November 25, 2004, the day of the traditional NFL Thanksgiving Game, the novel centers on Billy Lynn who, together with seven of his comrades, is on the last leg of their "Victory Tour" through the U.S. before they are deployed back to Iraq for an additional eleven months (4). After a brief video of an embedded Fox News crew that shows the soldiers in a firefight with Iraqi insurgents goes viral, the eight soldiers surviving unharmed rise to fame under the moniker Bravo squad, a shortening of the more unwieldy if accurate "Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo" (4). Under this simpler, if imprecise, name the soldiers make a string of public appearances as highly decorated war heroes—" [c]ounting poor dead Shroom and the grievously wounded Lake there are two Silver Stars and eight Bronze among them" (3)—throughout the U.S. designed to drum up support for the War on Terror. Apart from a short interlude in which Billy visits his family in Stovall, Texas, the narrative focuses on the few hours leading up to and including a final appearance in the background during the halftime show headlined by Destiny's Child in the 2004 Thanksgiving Day game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Chicago Bears. The time before the halftime show is spent alternating between encountering civilians, meeting football players, and negotiating a film adaptation of the Bravos' story. After the negotiations fall through and the Bravos get in a

physical altercation with stadium security, the novel is brought to an end by the soldiers' return to their tour of duty, which prevents serious bloodshed in the nick of time.

The connection between warfare and football is certainly not a novel concept but one harking back to a long tradition in both fiction and critical thinking: in a strategy paper in which sports tactics are argued to usher in a new military era of military thinking, for instance, Colonel John R. Lovell and Clinton B. Conger argue that “[t]he strategy and tactics that mark English Rugby may have held good for battles as late as 1918, but today’s [1945] battles are won and lost on principles that characterize another game – American football” (66). In the realm of fiction, football also plays a notable role as the allegorical stand-in for war, for instance the Korea War and nuclear war in, respectively, Richard Hooker’s 1968 *MASH* and Don DeLillo’s 1972 *End Zone*. But while Fountain draws on the tradition of engaging with warfare through the lens of American football, the focus of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* lies less on the game itself and more on the surrounding spectacle.

Examining the intersection between popular culture in general and politics, media scholars Michael L. Butterworth and Stormi D. Moskal claim that “Americans are implicated in a structural relationship between government, the military, and entertainment industries to the extent that it has become functionally impossible to live outside the rhetorical production of war” (413). In Butterworth and Moskal’s account, popular culture constitutes a potential propaganda tool for drumming up public support for the War on Terror and is instrumental in the militarization of the U.S. public by producing public support for both the troops and the ends to which they are deployed. Within the general framework of popular culture, Fountain draws on two specific modes in his narrative: film and professional sports, specifically American football, that are employed to render the public understanding of War on Terror sanitized and profitable.

In fact, Fountain draws specific attention to the way in which the Bravos’ public status as war heroes is not self-evident but requires cultural production and continuous reaffirmation: when the Bravos are driven to the stadium, an SUV pulls close and “women, actual females, are hanging out the windows and yelling at the Hummer [...] amped as all fuck, bellowing, whipping their hair around like proud war banners, they are the girls gone wild of Bravos fondest dreams” (8). But as soon as the Bravos lean out and become identifiable as soldiers instead of local celebrities or athletes,

you can just see those girls deflate. Oh, soldiers. *Jarheads*, they’re probably thinking, because it’s all the same to them. Not rock stars, not highly paid professional athletes, nobody from the movies or the tabloid-worthy world, just grunts riding on some millionaire’s dime, some lame support-the-troops charity case. (9)



With the filter of mediation removed, the soldiers no longer possess any allure of their own. This brief instance illustrates the novel's depiction of the way in which the mediated representation of an event has become more important than the event itself, ascribing an enormous transformative potential to media representations to which reality cannot live up. A group of soldiers is simply not enough to inspire much enthusiasm. But a group of soldiers that is part of the spectacle of the halftime show inspires a patriotic frenzy.

Examining the effectiveness of specific forms of popular culture for the sake of militarization, Michael L. Silk and Mark Falcois posit sports as an ideal ideological vessel that serves "as an economy of affect through which power, privilege, politics, and position are (re)produced" (221). Butterworth and Moskal also identify U.S. sports as constituting "an especially persuasive vehicle for sustaining and extending the culture of militarism" (413). The ubiquity of American football within popular culture that makes it a prime candidate for the purposes of militarization culture is readily apparent: in the beginning of 2015, the nation waited with baited breath for news on what had quickly been termed "Deflategate" or "Ballghazi." Virtually all media outlets, including such varied sources as *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and National Public Radio, grappled in great detail over an extraordinary amount of time with a question that came down to whether or not the football thrown by Tom Brady had sufficient air pressure. Butterworth even ascribes such pervasive sociocultural significance to American football that he ties it to Robert Bellah's famous concept of "civil religion" (318). In the eyes of Butterworth and likeminded scholars, American football is thus less a national pastime than a constitutive element of the American national identity.

This is not to suggest that other sports are less likely to be coopted for the sake of militarization. Even golf, the perhaps seemingly most counterintuitive sport, has strong ties to the military; as media scholars Geoff Martin and Erin Steuter point out, "the U.S. military is known as a strong supporter of the game of golf, and owns and runs as many as 234 golf courses in the United States and around the world" (137).

But even a sporadic observer of American football games will recognize the allusions to military violence inherent in football. A large portion of the game's vocabulary takes its cues from militarized imagery and has become the standard vernacular of football commentators and players: games are alluded to as "battles"; players profess their intention of "going to war" without a sliver of irony; rushing the opposing team's quarterback is termed "blitz", alluding to the German word *Blitzkrieg*, a particular offensive formation goes by "shotgun."

On a more tangible level, military personnel is regularly featured prominently in ceremonies surrounding the game in accordance with the claim that "[s]upporting the military is part of the fabric of the NFL." Featured on the aptly titled official "Salute to Service: Military Appreciation" NFL site, the

slogan is indicative of the longstanding—and heavily monetized—cooperation between the U.S. military and the NFL. Even though both organizations have been secretive about the exact amount of money that changed hands, a 2015 report by Republican Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake uncovered the profitability of placing military propaganda at sports events. Between 2012 and 2015, the report states, “the military services reported \$53 million in spending on marketing and advertising contracts with sports teams” and “[m]ore than \$10 million of the total” paid to professional sports teams in the major American sports leagues (5). Placing advertisements at major events is unremarkable in and of itself, but the Department of Defense was unable or unwilling to account for more than \$7.3 million of the total spent. Supposedly, this money was at least partially spent on what the report describes as “paid patriotism”: “These paid tributes included on-field color guard, enlistment and reenlistment ceremonies, performances of the national anthem, full-field flag details, ceremonial first pitches, and puck drops” (6). The participation of Billy and the rest of the Bravos in the halftime show, this suggests, would at least partially have been paid for by the Army. Instead of a display of pure patriotism by a private organization proud to do its part to drum up public support for the War on Terror, the soldiers’ appearance is de facto little more than an advertisement for which the Dallas Cowboys demand compensation.

In terms of the game itself, Billy is struck by how football, a game that he describes as an “elaborate systems of command and control where every ounce of power resides at the top” (164), emulates the military in a way that not only resembles but, much to the bewilderment of the soldiers, sometimes even exceeds the original. On the Bravos’ tour through the stadium, Billy is greatly impressed by the NFL’s supply lines as the equipment manager catalogues the items required for the team and estimates that “it takes two semis to haul all our gear, we’re talking nine, ten thousand pounds of equipment” (182). And he is equally impressed by how the logistics required to maintain the team, “these blown-up versions of the human frame” and allegorical stand-ins for the military (172), handily surpass the capacities of the military to supply its soldiers. Even to Billy who is acquainted with the “pure and ultimate realm of dumb quantity” (221) that is contemporary logistical warfare, “these mind-numbing quantities of niche-specific goods and everything labeled, sorted, sized, collated, stowed, and stacked” are impossible to fully grasp (182). And as the Bravos briefly meet the Cowboys team, Billy is immediately struck by how “[t]he players seem so much more martial than any Bravo. They are bigger, stronger, thicker, badder, their truck-sized chins could bulldoze small buildings and their thighs bulge like load-bearing beams” (174). Silently awed by the appearance of the athletes, Billy thinks to himself that

they are the among the best-cared-for creatures in the history of the planet, beneficiaries of the best nutrition, the latest technologies, the finest medical care, they live at the very pinnacle of American innovation and abundance,

which inspires an extraordinary thought—send them to fight the war! Send them as they are this moment, well rested, suited up, psyched for brutal combat, send the entire NFL! (184)

While Billy's train of thought ends on a note of caustic absurdity, it nevertheless points to an actual concern of the soldiers with the spectacular celebration of war. Among the many worries for soldiers in the War on Terror, problems with the military equipment rank highly. For instance, the award-winning journalist Michael Moss reports in an article for *The New York Times* that inadequate body armor is responsible for a large number of fatalities:

A secret Pentagon study has found that as many as 80 percent of the marines who have been killed in Iraq from wounds to the upper body could have survived if they had had extra body armor. Such armor has been available since 2003, but until recently the Pentagon has largely declined to supply it to troops despite calls from the field for additional protection, according to military officials.

The connection between the imposing size of the football operation and Billy's reaction suggests a central concern of the novel: the reversal in the relationship between the military and militarization. That the public enjoyment of the halftime show's simulacrum of war has become more important than the actual war itself, reduces the Bravos to props in the militarized spectacle of the game instead of actually being the objects of celebration. Billy's frustration is thus based on the way in which the athletes, the actors in a militarized spectacle, are afforded supreme sociocultural and logistical support while the soldiers, the actors in actual warfare, are relegated to the status of an afterthought.

I argue that within the spectacle of the football game, the Bravos serve a double function. Most immediately, they serve as temporary objects of celebration, as military heroes to inspire the public. Less overtly, the inclusion of the soldiers in the show speaks to Philip Boyle and Kevin D. Haggerty's concept of "the spectacle of security" (263), meaning that the security apparatus surrounding public events itself becomes an object of adoration. However, the heavy securitization of this public performance of military celebration is rooted in a deep national anxiety that does not acknowledge the realities of the Iraq campaign. Ultimately, the security apparatus intended to protect the game from outside threats is deployed against the Bravos themselves. The processes securing the "porn-lite out of its mind on martial dope" of the halftime show that Billy was a part of just moments ago are now turned against him and his comrades as they are perceived as a potential risk standing in the way of an unobstructed spectacle (235). Here, Fountain depicts the processes securing the spectacle of the game and the halftime show not as primarily focusing on public safety but as ensuring the smooth progress of the melodramatic celebration of U.S. militarism.

By locating the narrative in the Texan heartland during a Dallas Cowboys game, Fountain draws on several political and cultural characteristics to depict a particularly radical sociopolitical climate that is imagined as caught between excessive militarism and an unwillingness to acknowledge the increasingly unsuccessful war in Iraq. An essential reason behind turning the Dallas Cowboys into one of the globally most recognizable sports franchises is certainly the team's name and its allusion to the myth of the American cowboy. The central element of this myth is what Richard Slotkin termed "regeneration through violence" (12): the notion that the violent struggle of the frontier has strengthened the spirit of the frontiersman as well as later iterations of this figure, the cowboy and American soldier. Upon return to civilization, this mythical character would serve to reinvigorate the spirit of the nation which had previously deteriorated due to a life of complacency. In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Fountain points toward the public persistence of this idea as Billy is frequently linked to the defenders of the Alamo as well as to the Texan Second World War veteran Audie Murphy and thus inaugurated into the pantheon of Texan folk heroes by Norman "Norm" Oglesby, the fictionalized owner of the Dallas Cowboys: "Audie Murphy, the heroes of the Alamo, you're part of a famous tradition now, did you know that?" (111). Crucially, Fountain frequently describes the evocation of the myth of regenerative violence only to undercut its pathos by depicting it as coupled with simplistic political views. When, for instance, a particularly ebullient member of the audience expresses his belief in such regenerative forces of violence by musing that "[m]aybe we need a war now and then to get our priorities straight," the man positions Billy as a distant descendent of the cowboy myth who now guides the nation on a path to moral rejuvenation through his exemplary military heroism (198). But Fountain undercuts this sentiment by letting the character go on to claim that one of the positive side effects of 9/11 is that it "shut the feminists up" (197), thereby tying jingoism to sociopolitical regressivism.

In fact, Fountain frequently skewers the audience's excitement of witnessing the militarized spectacle. Reviews may differ in their general appreciation of the novel but Fountain's command of the Texan colloquial language has garnered universal praise: in a short review in *The New Yorker*, Andrew Martin highlights the "pitch-perfect ear for American talk [that] drives the satire." Likewise, *The Guardian's* Theo Tait praises the "sharp, profane language that makes English English sound terminally dull," and Khaled Hosseini applauds Fountain's "patois" as giving "such an expressive, lyrical quality to the dialogue" in a discussion of the book with Alexandra Alter for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Indeed, Billy is repeatedly confronted with audience members like the man who sets the tone for most of Billy's interactions with civilians as he "embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain" on the very first page of the novel (1). These patriotic professions are graphically set off from the text in

the form of a barrage of militaristic buzzwords that imitate a Texas drawl which Fountain, a Dallas resident, is certainly intimately familiar with, and which turns “courage” into “currj” and “nine eleven” to “nina leven” (2). The way in which these terms are arranged as spatially and logically set apart from each other on the page may certainly simply be read as Billy letting his mind wander while pretending to listen. I would, however, suggest that they also serve as an indictment of U.S. jingoism whose confident delivery is not shaken by the fact that it is built on a specious understanding of political and military contexts. With nothing linking these terms together, they hover divorced from any context that might imbue them with meaning and instead appear as empty signifiers, rattled off without much reflection on how they might stand in relation to each other.

Moreover, Oglesby’s reference to Audie Murphy as spiritual guide and Billy’s military ancestor suggests a public tendency of omitting details—Murphy suffered from PTSD and pill addiction resulting from his service—that might interfere with a sanitized and mythologized depiction of the American military. To be publicly regarded as regenerative, violence and warfare must at least appear to be bound to a higher ethical and moral authority. As Billy is informed by a local honorary,

it’s a code of honor that goes back to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, we don’t attack unless we’re attacked first. We aren’t barbarians. *We* didn’t attack on nina leven. Or at Pearl Harbor, for that matter. [...] But when we *are* attacked, there’s hell to pay, am I right? (202)

American warfare, this suggests, is fundamentally different from barbaric violence by firmly standing on the high ground of chivalry, defined by Leo Brady as “loyalty [...]; prowess [...]; *franchise*, or an openhanded largesse to one’s fellows and followers; and women, children, and the elderly” (82). Contrasting an “Anglo-Saxon tradition” with “barbaric” one also clearly racializes the notion of American chivalry.

And warfare must not only be forced upon the nation by “barbarians,” to inspire patriotic admiration, it must also be rhetorically sanitized (202). Billy believes that for most American civilians, meeting the Bravos constitutes “the Moment: His ordeal becomes theirs and vice versa, some sort of mystical transference takes place and it’s just too much for most of them, judging from the way they choke in the clutch” (39). Evoking David Abrams’ depiction of “Something that Mattered” through its capitalization and conceptualization (*Fobbit* 164), Fountain’s “Moment” also connotes the way in which the Bravos infuse a self-serving sense of presumed regeneration, awe, and patriotic affection in the civilians who “know they’re being good when they thank the troops and their eyes shimmer with love for themselves and this tangible proof of their goodness” (40).

The Bravos frequently consciously thwart their ideological cooptation. When, for instance, Dime, the Bravos' commander, employs technocratic jargon to describe war to a local patron as "the exchange of force with intent to kill" (65), the man is delighted. But Dime goes on to claim that the men actually enjoy battle:

"We *like* violence, we *like* going lethal! [...] [T]his is the most murdering bunch of psychopaths you'll ever see. I don't know how they were before the Army got them, but you give them a weapons system and a couple of Ripped Fuels and they'll blast the hell out of anything that moves." (65; italics in original)

The shocked reaction of the patron shows that for American warfare to be celebrated, it must be mediated so as to appear committed by an idealistic military making a stand against the onslaught of the barbarian tide. By suggesting the notion of bloodlust, Dime reclaims narrative autonomy by intentionally violating the codes of chivalry, temporarily defying appropriation through militarization. He is unable, though, to couple this defiance with introducing a narrative of his own.

Much of the disenchantment of the soldier characters in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* stems from the fact that they remain unable to effectively counteract the game's spectacular militarization. Michael Rogin writes in the vein of Debord's claims that the political purpose of the mass spectacle is to serve "an escape from troubling depths so that their residues can safely appear on the surface" (119). In the context of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, it does just that: the spectacle of the halftime show celebrates a sanitized idea of the military while obfuscating the more troubling aspects of the War on Terror.

Although they cannot fully articulate it, the Bravos are certainly aware of this function. Nevertheless, the sheer scale of the spectacle of the halftime show impacts not only the civilian audience but also the Bravos themselves. When watching public spectacles, the audience typically registers the interplay between lights, sounds, and choreographed performance without itself participating. But even to an uninvolved spectator, the culmination of the show in the performance of Destiny's Child's "Soldier" could be staggering. During the actual halftime show, the song was not played in full but adapted to fit into the larger show, presumably to ensure that its lyrics would not be deemed overly risqué. Fountain only incorporates two brief sections that are set off from the rest of the text and emulate their actual phrasing, akin to the barrage of patriotic buzzwords:

*Need me a soldjah, soldjah boy*  
*Where dey at, where dey at*  
[...]  
*Soldjah gone be real fah me*  
*Yeah dey will, yeah dey will*

*Soldjah gonna get chill fah me*  
*Yeah dey will, yeah dey will.* (238–9; italics in original)

Neither section is an actual excerpt from the song as it is performed during the show or on record, but they hew closely enough to the song's actual lyrics that they could easily be mistaken as genuine. And trading on militaristic veneration, the song's eponymous "soldier" describes what Garrett Hamler, one of the songwriters under his stage name Sean Garrett, calls "a representation of the guy [Destiny's Child] were actually into" in an interview with Lauren Nostro.

And while the halftime show featuring Destiny's Child is dazzling to the uninvolved viewer, it is terrifying to the Bravos as its melodramatic nature adheres to the overwhelming emotional excess Peter Brooks identifies with this mode. Ushered into the show without much guidance or instructions, Billy is caught in a mixture of anxiety and adrenaline that makes him "wish[...] he was back at the war. At least there he basically knew what he was doing [...]" (238). In Fountain's depiction, the football game and show resemble a stroboscopic *panem et circenses* of "[t]oy soldiers and sexytime all mashed together into one inspirational stew" (234). While the performance is meant to rouse patriotic sentiments and support for the war, it is too faithfully modeled on actual warfare for the Bravos. The show is so effective in its approximation of actual warfare that it temporarily triggers Billy's memory of preparing himself for death before deploying to Iraq: he has barely taken the stage before

[s]uch an unholy barrage of noise pours forth that Billy thinks he might be lifted off his feet. It is a dam bursting, bridges collapsing at rush hour, tsunamis of killer froth and boulder-sized debris revising the contours of the known world. *Just assume you're going to die*, so they were instructed in the week before deploying to Iraq. (232; italics in original)

The spectacle comes so close to evoking warfare that its impact on the soldiers becomes comparable to their experience of the real thing. While Billy struggles and ultimately succeeds in maintaining control over himself, the blend of "sex and death and war" proves overwhelming for some of his comrades (235): one of them "is flinching, his poor head keeps swagging to the side," before a "howl commences deep in [his] throat," and he eventually "starts laughing, gasping for breath" as he is mentally defeated by a show that has become "a prime-time trigger for PTSD" (230). Billy reacts to the pandemonium of the show with a mixture of defiance and indignation, thinking that

Bravos can deal, oh yes! Pupils dilated, pulse and blood pressure through the roof, limbs trembling with stress-reflex cortisol rush, but it's cool, it's good, their shit's down tight, no Vietnam-vet crackups for Bravo squad! You can march these boys straight into sound-and-light show hell and Bravos can deal, but, damn, isn't it rude to put them through it. (230–1)

Strikingly, Billy prides himself not on his resilience during combat, but on his seemingly more impressive ability to withstand the “sound-and-light-show hell” of the halftime show (231).

The temporal setting of the novel, too, lends additional relevance to Fountain’s satire of the public militarism. On May 1, 2003, President Bush delivered what came to be known as the “Mission Accomplished” speech, taking its name from a banner with the slogan printed on it hanging in the background, aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. Clad in a flight suit, President Bush took to a podium to announce that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed,” declaring victory in Iraq a virtual *fait accompli*. However, 2004 saw a steep incline in military and civilian death tolls in Iraq. Iraqi insurgents gathered unprecedented strength, culminating in the fiasco of the second battle of Fallujah that was still fought during the time of the Thanksgiving Game. U.S. confidence in its armed forces had further been shaken by the publication of photos of the torture practices at the Abu Ghraib prison. As a result of these developments, the public opinion on the war began to curdle: a poll conducted by the PEW Research Center, for instance, showed public approval of the Iraq War plummeting from 72% at the beginning of the war to around 40% by the end of 2004, while a Gallup poll saw public support decrease from 72% to 48%.

Fountain’s setting of his novel in Texas in late 2004 rather than 2011, the year of the virtually complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, results in a paradox. Writing with the benefit of hindsight, he seems to want the novel’s title to refer not only to the actual halftime show, but also to mock the misguided optimism about a speedy and decisive victory in Iraq. Where the game’s halftime show signals not the end but merely a short respite from the action of the game, the Bravos’ “Victory Tour” represents not an ending of their tour of duty but only a brief intermission before their return to the battlefield of Iraq. What Fountain could not foresee in 2012, when the novel was published, however, was the rise of ISIS. To halt its progress, President Obama authorized in June 2014, among other measures, military campaigns in Iraq and Syria, eventually named Operation Inherent Resolve. By late 2015, Kathy Gilsinan calculated in an article for *The Atlantic* that the progressive increase in U.S. involvement had led to the deployment of “more than 3,000 U.S. troops” in Iraq again. And judging from the state in which Iraq and Syria find themselves in 2017, Billy’s allegorical halftime show appears as more of a pre-game warmup.

In the novel, the underlying ambiguity of the public opinion on the war clashes with its staunch support of the military (or rather its public depiction), resulting in what Billy perceives as a tension frequently bordering on an air of public anxiety: as he is accosted by a group of middle-aged women, Billy briefly fears that “they’ll tear him limb from limb, their eyes are cranking those crazy lights and there is nothing they wouldn’t do for America, torture,



nukes, worldwide collateral damage, for the sake of God and country they are down for it all” (207). At the same time, Billy “suspects that his fellow Americans secretly know better” (11), but “want so badly to believe, he’ll give them that much, they are as fervent as children insisting Santa Claus is real because once you stop believing, well, what then, maybe he doesn’t come anymore?” (219). The overt public investment in the spectacle of the halftime show, articulated through the frenzied celebration of the military, is thereby configured as the expression of an increasing anxiety about the War on Terror. Fountain depicts the militaristic patriotism on display not as a sign of public confidence in the state of the war, but also as a public self-delusion in an effort to at least temporarily drown doubt or dissent in the halftime show’s sea of noise, fireworks, and “some mystical combination of diva mojo and StairMastered thighs” (230).

The melodramatic elements of the halftime show are foregrounded even further in the plans revolving around a film version of the Bravos’ experiences, touching on the processes through which patriotism is commodified and made profitable that I investigate in greater detail later. Initially, the film negotiations are carried out by Albert, a washed-up producer negotiating on behalf of the Bravos, over the phone with various prospective business partners. Throughout the negotiating process, the script adheres to the melodramatic structure of injured innocence and triumphant redemption to soothe the rising sociopolitical anxieties:

Everyone worries, everyone feels at least a little bit doomed basically all the time, even the richest, most powerful, most secure among us live in perpetually anxious states of barely hanging on. Desperation’s just part of being human, so when relief comes in whatever form, as knights in shining armor, say, or digitized eagles swooping down on the flaming slopes of Mordor, or the U.S. cavalry charging out of yonder blue, that’s a powerful trigger in the human psyche. Validation, redemption, life snatched from the jaws of death, all very powerful stuff. Powerful. (6)

Although Fountain restricts the depiction of the negotiation phone calls to Albert’s part, his replies suggest that the Bravos’ actual story may just not be stirring enough. To be convinced to join the movie cast, a supposedly interested Hilary Swank is “floating the idea of playing Billy *and* Dime. We’d fold both parts into one role and she’d play that as the lead” (6; italics in original). No matter how dramatic reality might be, Fountain appears to suggest, it is too mundane for Hollywood. The same holds true for the temporal setting: as mentioned briefly, Universal Studios is interested but “on condition that the story relocates to World War II” (59), suggesting that to attract a sufficiently large audience, the film has to depict a war whose public perception is less ambivalent than the one of the War on Terror. In order to monetize U.S. patriotism, the ethical and political ambiguity of the War on Terror is traded for

a nostalgic depiction of past wars resembling how David Abrams' character Brock Lumley and Kevin Powers' John Bartle tend to view these wars.

Norm Oglesby, the literary stand-in for Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, eventually emerges as the most interested financial backer. But instead of providing the soldiers with a financial incentive for their involvement, Oglesby appeals to the Bravos' patriotic sentiments by positing the movie as a way of reigniting patriotic vigor:

I believe in your story [...] and I believe in the good it can do for our country. It's a story of courage, hope, optimism, love of freedom, all the convictions that motivated you young men to do what you did, and I think this film will go a long way toward reinvigorating our commitment to the war. Let's face it, a lot of people are discouraged. The insurgency gets some traction, casualties mount, the price tag keeps going up, it's only natural some people are going to lose their nerve. (274-5)

What Oglesby omits is his own financial interest in the movie. Dime and Billy eventually express disappointment with the financial structure of the proposed deal. They are not averse to a melodramatic depiction of the war, they simply demand to be paid for it, stating that the proposed "fifty-five hundred don't cut it. [...] Hundred thousand up front, then we're out Norm's hair" (283). Faced with these reservations, Norm intensifies his patriotic appeal, arguing that "[o]ur country *needs* this movie, needs it badly. I really don't think you want to be the guys who keep this movie from being made, not with so much at stake. I sure wouldn't want to be that guy" (278; italics in original). The duty of the Bravos as soldiers, this suggests, is not only to participate in combat. It is furthermore their obligation to provide their experiences for public and profitable consumption, in this case in the form of a melodrama of regeneration through violence.

Ultimately, the Bravos are able to deflect Oglesby's attempts at forcing them into a deal. To circumvent the soldiers, Oglesby eventually appeals to a general with whom he is acquainted to strong-arm the Bravos into a mean which would mean that "any rights [the Bravos] claim will be shunted into the catch-all category known as 'collateral,' i.e. things to be administered after it's too late" (284). The scheme does not succeed but only because the general is "a big *Steelers* fan. The *Steelers*, Billy, yo? Which just by definition means he hates the Cowboys' guts" (287; italics in original). Although the situation is resolved favorably for the Bravos, the decision was based on the whim of a general who, had he been a fan of a different football team, might have decided against them. Although the situation provides the Bravos with a small victory, its outcome recalls Dime's earlier intentional violation of the chivalric code: the soldiers may be able to temporarily deflect an unwanted appropriation of their experiences, but they remain unable to produce an actual counter-narrative of their own through which to actually articulate their perspective.

But whether it occurs in the halftime show or a film script, the desire for sanitized simplicity that Fountain ascribes to the public increasingly hinders them in forming a nuanced political opinion. Following Anker, narratives that cast the 9/11 attacks as melodrama worked to soothe the public by

displac[ing] the confusions of more commonplace forms of diminished agency onto a singular terrorist action that created a dramatic spectacle of nationwide suffering, a suffering caused by a clearly defined enemy attacking America. [...] Post-9/11 melodrama worked [...] to flatten, generalize, and displace more complex and differentially allocated forms of vulnerability and unfreedom directly onto the 9/11 events. It named a cause for these experiences: the evil enemy of terror. This enemy could be easily verified, which also meant that it could be eliminated through national heroic force. (161)

According to this argument, the War on Terror unleashes a “national heroic force,” carrying the promise that “once terrorism is punished, killed, or overcome, individuals’ commonplace experiences of foundering agency will be eradicated and their rightful freedom restored” (151). This is precisely the “extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence” (11) that Billy believes his fellow countrymen to be so fond of in their anxiety of being “so scared all the time, and so shamed at being scared through the long dark nights of worry and dread, days of rumor and doubt, years of drift and slowly ossifying angst” (39). The success this crude yet appealing explanation enjoys leads Billy to perceive the American public as regressing into a state of childlike ignorance: they are obsessed with “teenage drama” (11), they look “like a bunch of hulking twelve-year-olds” (23), and “stammer, gulp, brainfart, and babble” (39).

Fountain certainly uses these passages for comedic effect but, more importantly, also points to potential ramifications of applying an overly simplistic model to war and terrorism. Indeed, Billy feels “contempt for the usual public shock and outrage when a particular situation goes to hell. The war is fucked? Well, duh. Nine-eleven? Slow train coming. They hate our freedoms? Yo, they hate our actual guts!” (11). Through Billy, Fountain thus dismisses the notion of a virtuous America taken by surprise in the 9/11 attacks as escapist fantasy, pointing to arguments about how these or similar attacks should have been anticipated. Casting history and politics as melodrama, this suggests, prevents an unbiased investigation of past tragedies and threatens to repeat this failure in the future.

But while Fountain satirizes the melodrama informing the halftime show and planned movie as excessive and potentially harmful, the depiction of the Bravos’ battle also follows a melodramatic model that threatens to reinstate notions of American exceptionalism. The narration of combat in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* is restricted to only a few pages and does not constitute the center of the narrative. Instead, it primarily functions as the backdrop to allow for an engagement with the sanitized and spectacular portrayal of the War on Terror in the name of public militarization. But as infrequent as the

passages detailing actual combat are, their impact is the more jarring due to a tonal shift bordering on the melodramatic but lacking the satirical bent of the rest of the text.

In Fountain's narrative, the conduct of the War on Terror figures largely as a logistical and disembodied enterprise. Billy, for instance, states that

war is the pure and ultimate realm of dumb quantity. Who can manufacture the most death? It's not calculus, yo, what we're dealing with here is plain old idiot arithmetic, remedial metrics of rounds-per-minute, assets degraded, Excel spreadsheets of dead and wounded. (221)

But by focusing on the effects of the logistics of war on the body of the dying Shroom, Fountain undercuts the notion of the War on Terror as a truly bloodless affair and reestablishes an understanding of the physical toll of warfare. However, the reconfirmation of suffering applies exclusively to the American characters. In a flashback of the fatally wounded Shroom in combat, Billy recalls

doing about ten different things at once, unpacking his medical kit, jamming a fresh magazine into his rifle, talking to Shroom, slapping his face, yelling at him to stay awake, trying to track the direction of the incoming rounds and crouching low with absolute fuck-all for cover. [...] He remembers the whole front of his body being covered in blood and half-wondering if any of it was his, his bloody hands so slick he finally had to tear open the compression bandage with his teeth, and when he turned back to Shroom the big bastard was sitting up! Then going right back down, Billy sliding crabwise to catch him in his lap, and Shroom looked up at him then with his brow furrowed, eyes burning like he had something crucial to say. (61–2)

The confusion and chaos of the firefight between a group of Iraqi insurgents and the Bravos is condensed to the interaction between Billy and Shroom. No matter the claims of disembodied and mediated warfare that ostensibly makes physical suffering of American soldiers at least a concern of the past, Fountain's depiction of battle pays tribute to the cruelty of war in a passage depicting the gruesome death of an American soldier. Although the narrative contexts differ, the reconsideration of the individual in logistical warfare is reminiscent of the way in which David Abrams' character Charles Gooding Jr. is unsettled by zooming in on pictures of the head and "sheared-off torso" of a suicide bomber (*Fobbit* 87). Once it is taken out of the context of depersonalized mass carnage and made recognizable on an individual, human scale, the image becomes relatable and unbearable. Fountain, too, performs a literary act of honing in on the individual, thus urging the reader to eschew the depersonalized mass spectacle of the halftime show and instead reconsider the suffering behind the spectacle.

But the detailed account of the wounded Shroom—the pulsing blood, the wounded sitting up and sliding back down, the final glance—does threaten to cross over into the excessive emotional appeal of melodrama as defined by Anker: “moral polarities of good and evil, overwhelmed victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, grand gestures, astonishing feats of heroism, and the redemption of virtue” (2). In the depiction of battle, the structure of virtuous victim, avenging hero, and scheming villain that Fountain satirizes is his depiction of the halftime show is enacted by Shroom, Billy, and a band of Iraqi insurgents.

Particularly the contrast between American and Iraqi suffering is striking here. Investigating the discrepancies in the perception of the loss of Western and non-Western lives, Judith Butler argues that not all lives are commemorated equally, thus raising a set of questions around the properties that determine whether or not a life is worth mourning: “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes for a grievable life?*” (20; italics in original). In this section of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, the answer seems clear: what makes a life grievable is its political or military allegiance with America, illustrated by Billy’s account of the final, desperate assault of the insurgents in which the Bravos “blew apart, hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests” (125). This passage is certainly also dominated by a focus on physical suffering. But while the depiction of Shroom’s death was meant to evoke empathy, the physicality on display in this passage is so overabundant that renders the killing of the Iraqis grotesque instead of affecting. And whereas the focus on Billy and Shroom serves to reinstate the notion of human individuality in the face of disembodied warfare, the insurgents merely figure as a homogeneous group of “bleeps” whose killing is depicted as little more than incidental, troubling only in relation to how the situation affects the American soldiers. This is not to suggest that the depiction of killing in war has to assign equal measures of sympathy. As illustrated, David Abrams, for instance, has his character remain with a sense of revulsion for the bomber in aftermath of a suicide attack. But Abrams simultaneously reestablishes an acknowledgement of the universality of human suffering in the War on Terror as the bomber’s remains are indistinguishable from those of his victims, something which shies away from an exclusive notion of empathy that would discriminate based on political or military allegiance. Such empathy is absent in the murder of the cartwright in Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (211). But this absence is not merely an oversight; it suggests Bartle’s general and morally troubling desensitization to violence. In the case of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, however, the Bravos fulfill a heroic role that sets them apart from the villainous Iraqis whose death borders on slapstick. That the scope of reinstating empathy should be constrained to the American soldiers risks suggesting a privileged position of American suffering in the War on Terror.

But in the case of the Bravos, the carefully crafted public investment in the spectacle not only serves to build support for the Global Homeland but is further translated into a system of commodification that suggests that patriotic zeal is measured in consumption. As Anker argues, a large part of the appeal of the “identification with state power” promoted by the political melodrama rests on the implicit promise that the turn to the nation state’s authority may provide a solution to the conflict “between a desire for freedom and generalized conditions of political powerlessness in contemporary life” (189). Among the factors contributing to this contemporary crisis, Anker counts the way in which “citizens are excluded from national politics and made into consumers rather than active players in the operations of collective decision making” (189). Through the logic of political melodrama, these concerns of powerlessness “were located to the 9/ 11 events, which then become their site of origin. Melodrama orgiastically displaced a broadly shared but deeply isolating and confusing sense of powerlessness onto a clearly shared and obvious sense of being attacked and robbed of one’s freedom” (16). Examining the encouragement of specifically patriotic spending in the post-9/11 U.S., Jennifer R. Scanlon illustrates how the turn to the state was monetized by

advertisers and merchandisers [who] won the battle against a sluggish spending trend by linking patriotism, American prosperity, and consumerism [...]. [C]ontemporary Americans could sacrifice by filling the stores, increasing debit card debt, and displaying material goods as symbols of morality and civic duty. (179)

Anker argues similarly that the equation of patriotism and fulfilled civic duty with consumption turned the American population into “consumers rather than active players in the operations of collective decision making” (189). This logic of mobilizing patriotic sentiments for the purpose of consumerism, I would contend, is central to *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*.

In the novel, the Bravos perceive the domestic U.S. as having slid into pure consumerism: as Billy thinks to himself that

all the malls [...] and the civic centers and hotel rooms and auditoriums and banquet halls [...] are so much alike across the breadth of the land, a soul-squashing homogeneity designed more for economy and ease of maintenance than anything so various as human sensibilities. (201)

Especially startling to him is what he sees as an ill-conceived link between the public landscape primed for consumption and patriotism, something that becomes evident as the teams take to the field:

The Dallas Cowboys and the Chicago Bears, these are two privately owned, for-profit corporations, these their contractual employees taking the field. As

well as the national anthem at the top of every commercial, before every board meeting, with every deposit and withdrawal you make at the bank. (207)

Decrying the social devolution into a society concerned with consumption above all else is of course not a novel idea. However, Fountain adapts it by portraying a society in which consumption and patriotism have become virtually synonymous, and the Dallas Cowboys have been conflated with the idea of the nation to such a degree that spending money on the franchise becomes a legitimate way of publicly performing a presumed patriotic duty.

The most striking symbol for the commercial exploitation of patriotic sentiments is the use of the “jumbotron,” an enormous large-screen television display used in arenas to show close-ups of the events unfolding on the field that the back ranks might not be able to see without assistance (36). Prior to the game, the display suddenly shifts from footage of the players warming up to a graphic commemorating the Bravos in a display that marries militaristic glorification to the whimsical as

the screen cuts to a flag-waving, bombs-bursting cartoon graphic against a background of starry outer space, and from within these inky depths enormous white letters suddenly zoom to the fore

**AMERICA’S TEAM PROUDLY HONORS AMERICAN HEROES**

which disappears, clearing the way for a second wave

**THE DALLAS COWBOYS**

**WELCOME HEROES OF AL-ANSAKAR CANAL!!!!!!!**

**STAFF SGT. DAVID DIME**

**STAFF SGT. KELLUM HOLLIDAY**

**SPC. LODIS BECKWITH**

**SPC. BRIAN HEBERT**

**SPC. ROBERT EARL KOCH**

**SPC. WILLIAM LYNN**

**SPC. MARCELLINO MONTOYA**

**SPC. KENNETH SYKES** (36–7; emphasis in original)

This graphic, prominently displayed on enormous screens, names two central entities: the Dallas Cowboys and the Bravos, the “heroes of Al-Ansakar canal.” Accordingly, the Dallas Cowboys are not simply a football team among many but a patriotic *primus inter pares*: while the Bravos are America’s heroes, the patriotic investment of the Dallas Cowboys makes them “America’s team” (36). Supporting the American troops then becomes virtually synonymous with supporting the Dallas Cowboys. And if the support of the military is understood as a public obligation, then so, too, is the support of the team.

Again, the display of the jumbotron provides an instructive display as to how public support may best be expressed. Looking up at the screen during the game, Billy is struck by the way in which it figures as a pretext for advertising:

It's not like you're supposed to watch the actual game anyway, no, you watch the Jumbotron, which displays not just the game in real and replay time but a nonstop filler of commercials, a barrage of sensory overload that accounts for far more content than the game itself. Could it be that advertising is the main thing? And maybe the game is just an ad for the ads. (220)

Fountain presents the crass commercialism fueled by the patriotic sentiments of the halftime show as so intense that the game itself becomes a pretext for assembling a mass audience for commercials. And if the game is merely "an ad for the ads" (220), so are the Bravos.

The inclusion of the Bravos in the spectacle of the halftime show is therefore less a way of inspiring patriotism than to instill a militaristic American patriotism that specifically must be articulated through consumption. In fact, Fountain draws on, but subverts, the promise to liberate the American public from feelings of political powerlessness and blind consumerism inherent in melodramatic political narratives as proposed by Dubord and Anker. The political narrative surrounding the game and halftime show certainly holds the promise of, as Anker puts it, reaffirming the "sovereign freedom for both the state and the individual" (11), grievously wounded in the 9/11 attacks, through the language of patriotic consumption. Thus, American political discouragement, brought on by factors such as mindless consumerism, is addressed in a manner encouraging even more consumption. With consumption established as a patriotic duty, true power is wielded by those controlling the various iterations of commodified, mediated warfare whose consumption allows for the declaration of patriotic allegiance.

While it is in these people's power to ascribe patriotism, it is conversely also possible to withdraw it. As Anker argues, "[m]elodramatic discourses can mark people who find its depiction unconvincing or wrong, or who actively question the legitimations it enables, as morally bankrupt, as un-American, as villainous, or even as terrorist" (6). This prescriptive dualistic power, reminiscent of President Bush's doctrine of "[e]ither you are with us, or you are with the terrorists," is pointed out to Billy in relation to a particularly affluent investor watching the game:

"Those guys are smart, they know who the enemy is. They aren't fooled by a couple of bullshit war medals." [...] "I'm not the enemy." "Oh hooooo, you don't think? They decide, not you. They're the deciders when it comes to who's a real American, dude." (200)

Again, the mediated, spectacular version of the War on Terror takes precedent over the Bravos' actual experience which is effectively displaced in turn. The implication of this passage reaffirms the Bravos' dependence on a positive public depiction: the people in charge of the mediation of the War on Terror decide who counts as belonging to the American way of life and Homeland but also who does not. In case of a negative depiction, the sacrifice that Billy's



“bullshit war medals” attest to would not be sufficient to prevent branding as un-American (200). Within the system of mediating and commodifying the War on Terror, the Bravos, and in extension the military, are little more than anonymous props utilized to ensure the patriotic sheen of consumption and are, as I demonstrate, easily discarded.

It should, however, also be noted that the branding as, in Anker’s words, “un-American, as villainous, or even as terrorist” is a larger literary concern that is not restricted to military narratives (6). In his 2014 novel *The Man Who Wouldn’t Stand Up*, Jacob M. Appel expresses a similar concern with the highly partisan nature of the American political climate. The story follows Arnold Brinkman, a retired, middle-aged botanist in New York, as he is vilified after the stadium screens show him refusing to get up for the National Anthem before a baseball game, instead sticking out his tongue in a moment of defiance. As childish as the gesture might be, Appel goes to great lengths to set it up as an act of a socially reclusive curmudgeon that in no way expresses a political agenda. But the public sees Brinkman as deeply unpatriotic and intentionally undermining the national spirit, which eventually results in him being chased as a potential terrorist. As different as Fountain and Appel’s novels are, they share a concern with the danger that the stark duality of a melodramatic political narrative could lead to the obliteration of a pluralistic political discourse in which partial dissent, nuance, and debate become all but impossible.

For the Bravos, the conflation of patriotism and consumerism in the spectacle of the halftime show eventually becomes a point of thorough disenchantment and the beginning of an openly hostile turn against the American public. The Bravos are not fundamentally opposed to an adapted depiction of their story; they simply demand what they perceive as their just share of the profits. But over the course of the novel, the soldiers come to realize that while they are being used for the sake of public militarization and advertising, they remain firmly excluded from the economic gains. As Billy and another Bravo stroll into the “Cowboys Select, the highest-end of all the on-site establishments offering Cowboy apparel and branded merchandise for sale,” they do so with an air of detachment; “primed for an ironic retail experience” (29), they come with the intention of ridiculing the anticipated gaudy excess. But though braced for it, the discrepancy between their own and the store patrons’ economic station staggers the soldiers. In the context of the halftime show, Billy is a highly priced commodity whose value transcends money: “they all need something from him, this pack of half-rich lawyers, dentists, soccer moms, and corporate VP’s, they’re all gnashing for a piece of barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year” (38–9).

Removed from this context and put in a situation in which Billy’s patriotic cachet holds no tangible value, however, his economic precariousness returns to the fore. Taking in the price tags of the various goods on offer, the soldiers realize that virtually every item is beyond their financial grasp:

His 'n' hers cotton terry-cloth-robos, like, four hundred dollars. Authentic game jerseys, a hundred fifty-nine ninety-five. Cashmere pullovers, cut-crystal Christmas ornaments, Tony Lama limited-edition boots. [...] Dude, check it out, sick bomber jacket. Only six hundred seventy-nine bucks, dawg. (29)

The Dallas Cowboys may brand themselves “AMERICA’S TEAM” (36; emphasis in original), but this version of America excludes its military in financial matters. Even the soldiers’ ironic detachment buckles under the weight of this realization as “their shame and sense of insult mount” (29). Attempting to defuse the mix of exasperated disbelief, shame, and perceived exclusion through a physical displacement activity, the two Bravos start a friendly brawl that soon turns vicious:

Suddenly they’re grappling, they’ve hooked arms in a fierce shoulder clench and lumber about like a couple of barroom drunks, grunting, cursing each other and butting, laughing so hard they can hardly stand up. Their berets go flying as they tear at their ears. It hurts and they laugh harder, they’re gasping now, *bitch*, *shitbag*, *cumslut*, *faggot*, Mango jabs at Billy with stinging uppercuts, Billy crams a fist into Mango’s armpit and off they go on a left-tilting axis, pottery wheel and pot rolling loose across the floor. (30)

The soldiers’ slow realization of their economic exclusion lets a friendly tussle spiral into a brawl that serves as a temporary physical outlet for the Bravos’ frustrations. The situation can eventually be mitigated and although the soldiers did physically express their mounting frustration, it is aimed at each other rather than bystanders. But this is merely the first step in the manifestation of an increasingly antagonistic attitude towards the American public. And as this antagonism remains unresolved by the end of the novel, so is the potential threat of violence that comes with it.

The soldiers’ socioeconomic exclusion from civilian society is further underscored in Billy’s encounter with a group of players after the tour through the stadium’s logistical facilities. Fascinated with the idea of war, they interrogate Billy about his combat experience, particularly focusing on his use of different weaponry and killing enemy combatants: “Huh, fah real doe. But like you ever cap somebody you know of? Like, fore yo’ piece and dey go down, you done that?” (176). But when Billy mistakes their fascination for actual interest and suggests joining the military, he is roundly laughed off: “We got *jobs*,” one of the players tells him, “this here our *job*, how you think we gonna quit our *job* to join some nigga’s army? Fah like, wha, three *years*? Break our contract an’ all? [...] Go on now. Yo’ boy over there callin’ you” (187; italics in original). To be sure, there is no misunderstanding of Billy’s employment status. The players certainly do not think of Billy as unemployed; after all, they are deeply fascinated with what he does. What the bemused derision denoted by the italicized “*jobs*” instead suggests is that a career in the military does not equal a real job (187). From this perspective, the question of what

qualifies as a “job” is not simply settled by whether or not one is employed. More important seems to be the question of whether one’s income is sufficient to allow for full social participation. Where this line runs remains unclear, but judging from the reaction of the players, it is obvious that the “\$14,800 a year” that a career in the military earns Billy does not qualify (39). The amount may be sufficient to subsist on, but it does not enable social inclusion and status. This scene thus serves as yet another reminder of the socioeconomic exclusion military characters have to grapple with upon their return, an issue which will be a point of more thorough investigation in Chapter Three.

These characters, so fascinated by military spectacle but amused at the idea of an actual military career, are contrasted to Patrick Daniel Tillman who is briefly, yet crucially, mentioned. As Dexter Filkins writes,

Tillman, a free-thinking, hard-hitting safety for the Arizona Cardinals, walked away from a multimillion-dollar contract after 9/11 to enlist in the Army. He joined an elite unit, the Rangers, and was killed on April 22, 2004, in a canyon in eastern Afghanistan. The story did not end there: Tillman’s commanders and possibly officials in the Bush administration suppressed that he had been killed accidentally by his own comrades. They publicly lionized Tillman as a hero who died fighting the enemy and fed the phony account even to Tillman’s grieving family. The sordid truth, or most of it, came out later.

Tillman did what Fountain’s fictional football players dismiss as ludicrous: forego a highly lucrative sports career in favor of a military one. What made Tillman’s death through friendly fire particularly impactful was that he had become the real-life embodiment of the melodramatic virtuous hero intent on taking revenge on behalf of the victimized nation. While the football players may be fascinated by warfare, enacting a patriotic melodrama in a similar way is unthinkable to them; their interest lies purely in mediated depictions of warfare—the halftime show, and the *Destiny’s Child* songs—that remain firmly on the level of the militarized spectacle.

The focus of the militarized melodramatic spectacle, as I have argued, is at least partially on its economic dimensions. Therefore, the halftime show and game must be secured in a way that accounts for possible external threats to the performers and audience but also internal threats that may disturb the spectacle. The double role the Bravos fill in this suggests further growing socio-political anxiety about the progress of the War on Terror. Following the events of September 11, security measures at virtually all public events saw a sharp increase in both spending and personnel. For Fountain, the enormous logistics involved in the securitization of the game appear to merely be a minor concern as he lets Billy comment on “about eight different kinds of police and security personnel” in a more a scoffing dismissal of overblown measures than an actual estimation (21). What this leaves unmentioned are the things that go beyond the immediately perceptible. Already during Super Bowl XXXV, held in January 2001, as John D. Woodward, Jr. points out, a biometric system

relying on facial recognition was in place (3). Boyle and Haggerty add “gamma ray inspection trucks, bomb-detecting robots and F-16 jets equipped with satellite imagery” to this list. More importantly for the purpose of my argument, Boyle and Haggerty observe what they call “the tendency for security itself to become a spectacle” (263) in a process in which “[s]ecurity practices are increasingly fashioned for public consumption” (264). Security measures, they suggest, become to a degree objects of celebration in their own right; they are instituted in such a fashion that they do not alarm the audience but still figure prominently enough to conjure “public reassurance that aims to fashion a safe image of event sites” (264). The actual effectiveness of the measures, however, matters less than their imaginary usefulness, their “prospective ability to nurture public trust” (264). The inclusion of the Bravos in the halftime show therefore serves not only as a means of promoting consumerism by way of public militarization. It also contributes to the audience’s feeling of security, a sense provided by the visibility of highly decorated war heroes.

But this sophisticated security apparatus is eventually turned on the soldiers themselves. The novel is brought to an end when the long-simmering disagreement between the stadium’s security team and the soldiers climaxes in a brawl that just stops short of bloodshed. Still, it is so vicious that one Bravo quips to the driver taking them to the airport “Take us someplace safe. Take us back to the war” (307). The disagreement springs from of a brief pre-game moment in which the Bravos take to the end zone to throw a ball around before being chased off the field. Even taking into account a groundkeeper’s pride in a meticulously maintained lawn, it seems like a minor infraction, especially given that the field is about to be plowed by two clashing teams of “industrial-sized humans” (173). A similar thought strikes Billy. Listening to the team owner, Norman Oglesby, jovially apologizing to the Bravos and jokingly professing his lack of power in the matter, Billy thinks: “But isn’t Norm the boss? So it seems like he could ...” (165; ellipsis in original). And Norm certainly could do a great number of things. But what Billy fails to understand is that the conflict does not stem from an arbitrary overreaction, but follows from a central tenet of the War on Terror.

In the wake of Rumsfeld’s explanation of the alleged “failure of the imagination” leading to the attacks of 9/11, Rasmussen argues that U.S. policies in general, and the use of the military in particular, are no longer governed by a concern with tangible threats, but by the far more elusive concept of risks. Crucially, the notion of risk lacks any clearly demarcated relation to the element of probability, meaning that “what matters is not so much what happens but what may happen” (4). By design, the success of a policy of risk management cannot be determined

with any degree of finality because success depends on creating a reality different from what one feared would happen. However, if one prevents a scenario

from becoming real, the result will probably be to create new risks, which then rise to the top of the agenda. The theoretical outcome of this process is that risks are infinite. (4)

The governing concern is thus no longer the probability of an event, but simply if it can be imagined and what additional risks may result from these scenarios, *ad infinitum*.

In a civilian context, such speculative and anticipatory policies are further informed by what has become widely known as the “Broken Window theory” in law enforcement. As Boyle and Haggerty point out, the securitization of mass events increasingly follows this strategy in which security lays its “focus on small-scale incivilities and disorderly activities. The underlying logic of concentrating on what would otherwise be seen as trivialities unworthy of police attention, is that “if left unchecked such behaviors will proliferate and escalate” (263). This logic represents a shift “away from a primary focus on the objective harms of crime to the wider meanings of disorder” (263). Akin to the risk management in the War on Terror, Boyle and Haggerty note “not only are risks spatially, temporally, and socially de-bounded, they are also de-bounded from quantitative, predicative actuarialism and invigorated with cultural constructions and speculative popular imaginations about what could potentially transpire” (261). This suggests, then, that the potential danger of a risk is no longer determined by a model based on quantitative factors but by whether or not it can be imagined. Ultimately, they argue that this model of risk management serves to protect, as Fountain can be seen to illustrate in his novel, how the “circuits of capital and consumption” are promoted by militarized mass spectacles (264).

The attention to the Bravos’ minor infraction should therefore not simply be read as an instance of an overzealous groundkeeper enforcing the rules. It may also signal an effort to prevent more severe rule violations that are presumed to follow inevitably in the case of lesser ones left unchecked. The Bravos are thus not only foreclosed from partaking in the economic exchanges they help promote, they themselves are cast as a risk that needs to be managed preemptively. In the case of the Bravos, of course, what is at stake is not crime, but adherence to the militaristic consumerism purported by the football game and its halftime show. They are targeted due to a risk-based logic dictating that even these objects of militarized admiration be expelled based on the theoretical possibility of their behavior disrupting public enjoyment of the spectacle. Here, *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* points toward an impending crisis as the support for the War on Terror is predicated on the very public militarization which causes the chasm between the military and the public to widen.

But despite their disenchantment with the war and its public reception, the Bravos do not actually question their role as soldiers. In his review of the novel, Theo Tait rightly argues that Fountain “graft[s] an alienated, educated,

leftish perspective on to his cast of young soldiers.” But the thought of acting on this attitude and their disappointment with the war by turning on the military as an institution is unthinkable to the Bravos. While Dime’s tag in Iraq might be “Fuckin’ Liberal” and he has to be reprimanded for his “savage mockery” of Vice President Cheney, he disallows any and all thoughts of questioning the Iraq campaign (15). When Billy approaches with the question whether or not he would go back to Iraq if he had a choice, “Dime lifts his head; he is not pleased. ‘But I don’t have a choice, do I? So your question lacks relevance.’ ‘But if you did have a choice.’ ‘But I don’t.’ ‘But if you did.’ ‘But I don’t!’ ‘But if you did!’ ‘Shut up!’ ‘I’m just—’ ‘SHUT!’” (264). Dime clearly does not harbor any particular fondness for the war, saying that “If I’m never in another firefight as long as I live, that’ll be okay by me” (264). But actively disobeying military orders is unthinkable.

Similarly, a storyline revolving around Billy’s possible desertion ends with a reaffirmation of his role as a soldier. During his short stay with his family, Billy’s sister Kathryn, a fervent opponent of the war, repeatedly hints at the possibility of deserting, claiming that

[t]here’s a group down in Austin, they help soldiers. They’ve got lawyers, resources, they know how to handle these things. I did some research, and it looks like they’re really good people. So if you decided ... look, I’m just saying, you’d have some help with this. (99; ellipsis in original)

Confronted with the decision of whether or not to take part in an unpopular war in whose justification he does not believe, Billy appears as a direct descendant of Tim O’Brien’s literary depiction of his younger self wrestling with the same question though in a different war. The question of his role in the Vietnam War looms large in O’Brien’s writing but is especially pertinent in “On the Rainy River,” a chapter in his 1990 novel *The Things They Carried*.

This chapter revolves around a trip to the Canadian border during which O’Brien is tempted by the very real possibility of avoiding the draft by deserting, only to eventually dismiss the possibility and returning to his home to go to war. In an interview discussing two of his other Vietnam novels, O’Brien mentions the social forces that ultimately deterred him from deserting: “I sensed that the people I cared for in my life—friends, college acquaintances, professors—would have looked askance at my deserting. [There was] a feeling of emotional pressure—a fear of exile, of hurting my family, of losing everything I held to be valuable in my life” (133). It is the same fear of social disgrace that drives O’Brien to return home in the story:

My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café. (49)

Although deserting may be “the right thing” (49), what holds O’Brien back is his sense of affective allegiance to his fellow countrymen and the nation that he is loath to betray. Ultimately, his desire to remain in good social graces and to lead an idyllic American life—represented by the nostalgically tinged trifecta “baseball and hamburgers and cherry Cokes” (48)—overrides the dread of the battlefields of Vietnam.

Billy may come to a similar conclusion – as tempting as it may be, deserting is unthinkable. But whereas O’Brien’s decision was based on an emotional investment in his image of America, Billy’s return to Iraq, I would argue, results from an ideological and affective curtailment rooted in the lack of emotional ties to the nation. As O’Brien states about young men escaping from going to Vietnam in the interview: “Those soldiers who actually did desert were able to imagine a happy end to it” (134). But Billy is unable to imagine such an alternative, an inability springing from a virtually complete disconnect from the civilian sphere. In the early stages of the narrative, “Oh my people” becomes a wistful refrain (23). Alluding to Psalms 81:8, “Hear, O my people, and I will testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me,” it expresses a desire to testify to the experience of warfare to a nation that, despite its ignorance, is still understood as close kin. However, after spending the better part of the story trying to get various civilian characters to stop imposing their sanitized notion of the war on him, Billy comes to the deflating conclusion that, as technologically and ideologically distorted as it may be, the civilian perspective is the culturally and politically clearly dominant one:

it dawns on Billy that these smiling, clueless citizens are the ones who came correct. For the past two weeks he’s been feeling so superior and smart because of all the things he knows from the war, but forget it, they are the ones in charge, these saps, these innocents, their homeland dream is the dominant force. (306)

This realization marks a distinct break between Billy, the military, and the civilian America as he realizes beyond a shadow of a doubt that the military and civilian perspectives on the war are fundamentally opposed and can no longer be reconciled, if indeed they ever could. Considering the different natures of civilian and military reality, Billy wonders if “[t]o learn what you have to learn at the war, to do what you have to do, does this make you the enemy of all that sent you to the war?” (306). And as he seems to silently answer in the affirmative Billy comes to understand the military and civilian sphere as antagonists, casting him and his comrades as the “enemy” of civilian America and effectively precluding the possibility of fully re-transitioning into a civilian role. Billy’s return to Iraq is thus not based on the conviction that it is the right thing to do or on any sense of civic obligation, but on the absence of emotional investment in the American civilian population. As terrifying as the return to the war may be, Billy’s awareness of the competing realities makes

it preferable to the alternative of returning to a civilian life, rendering the military and civilian spheres diametrically opposed instead of permeable.

In this context, the multilayered ironies of the titular halftime becomes apparent. As I have argued, Fountain sets the story in 2004, writing with the benefit of hindsight and fully aware of the fact that the war in Iraq would continue for another seven years until the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011. And in addition to undercutting the triumphalist official rhetoric surrounding the war, the title may be read as drawing attention to the civilian challenge of veterans returning back home. Waging the war, this suggests, is only the first part of the challenge posed by the War on Terror to the U.S. public. The second, inextricably linked but so far ignored aspect is the need to facilitate the re-integration of returning veterans who have been physically and mentally impacted by the war. Throughout Fountain's text, however, the U.S. public collectively fails to adequately address this need. The gradual disillusionment of the Bravos during the mere two weeks of their Victory Tour results in a series of potentially increasingly violent events: the Bravos' brawl in the gift store, a moment in which Billy "resists a brief but powerful urge to smash [a man's] esophagus into the back of his neck" (116), a run-in with security that sends Billy into a "homicide moment" in which he "would gladly bust their heads" (224), and the final fight that can only be stopped by a warning shot. Fountain, I would argue, suggests that it ultimately is precisely the militarized spectacle with its logic of risk management that produces this very real and acute escalation. In the particular case of the Bravos, this concern is temporarily delayed by their return to Iraq for another eleven months. But that the Bravos and similar units will eventually return home for good does raise the question of how to re-integrate returning soldiers into a civilian society that they perceive as their antagonist, a question that will be central to Chapter Three.



## Chapter Three

# “But his mind did not have a safety and there was no way to shut it off”: Returning Veterans, the Homeland, and Violent Frustration

Investigating the justification for the War on Terror, Donald Pease finds that the administration of President George W. Bush based its case not only on factual claims, but equally on a “provision of an imaginary response” to the events of September 11 (2). As I argued in the introduction, the decision to go to war drew prominently on “the national mythology [that] supplied the master fictions to which Bush appealed to authorize the state’s actions” (2). Among these “governing metaphors” (2), Pease draws particular attention to the emphasis of a concept he terms “the Homeland” (2). Instead of a geographically circumscribed area—Pease emphasizes that it is “not identical with the land-mass of the continental United States” (7)—the post-9/11 Homeland describes an imagined global space charged with metaphorical and affective significance. Essentially, the Bush administration employed the Homeland to suggest that the War on Terror was waged to protect an American way of life based on a set of central national metaphors, particularly the ideas of “‘Virgin Land,’ ‘Redeemer Nation,’ ‘American Adam,’ ‘Nature’s Nation,’ [and] ‘Errand into the Wilderness’” (1).

According to Pease’s argument, the intention behind the invocation of the Homeland as a metaphorical instead of purely geographical space is not merely to establish a rhetorical device whose affect-laden nature is meant to ensure support for the war. Under the guise of promising to restore the nation’s belief in itself as a “Redeemer Nation” in pursuit of its “Manifest Destiny,” the invocation of the Homeland was instead meant to secure public approval of policies that furthermore “fashion[ed] exceptions to the rules of law and war that formally inaugurated a state of emergency” (6).

In this context, the role assigned to the American military is not simply to safeguard the integrity of the borders of the nation state. More importantly, the military is positioned as the custodian of an ideologically charged American way of life. But while soldiers are instrumental to the preservation of the

Homeland, historian Andrew J. Bacevich claims a diminished civilian investment in the military. Bacevich writes that during the War on Terror, the relationship between the U.S. military and civilian society

has been heavy on symbolism and light on substance, with assurances of admiration for soldiers displacing serious consideration of what they are sent to do or what consequences ensue. In all the ways that actually matter, that relationship has almost ceased to exist. [...] Maintaining a pretense of caring about soldiers, state and society actually collaborates in betraying them. (14)

This suggests, in addition to the erosion of citizen rights claimed by Pease, that the purported public support shown to the soldiers actually masks a civilian disinterest in the physical and mental well-being of the military.

The fictional response to this development, an increasing sense of frustration that threatens to result in an antagonistic, potentially violent, relationship between the U.S. military and the civilian population, informs the preceding chapters in my dissertation. But clearly, the figure of the disenchanted and in the most extreme cases dangerous veteran did not emerge with the War on Terror. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the First World War, historian Barbara W. Tuchman contends that this war marks the first instance of a virtually complete loss of idealism as “the war had many diverse results and one dominant one transcending all others: disillusion” (523). But even the Vietnam war, the U.S. war perhaps most closely associated with a general disillusionment of soldiers and the public alike, did see a resurgence, though a reconfigured one, of idealism that tempered such disenchantment with the war. As Andrew J. Huebner suggests, Vietnam veterans inhabited an ambiguous sociocultural position as they were portrayed as “perpetrator[s] of unacceptable violence against the people of Vietnam” (278). But they figured equally as “victim[s] of [their] military superiors” and “scapegoat[s]” for the transgression of the higher ranks (278). G. Mitchell Reyes argues the cultural engagement with the Vietnam war reflected this ambiguous attitude to the military. Reyes draws attention to cinematic narratives such as “*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Rambo*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home*, *Heaven and Earth*, and *Deer Hunter*” to suggest that these rendered “untenable the idealistic myths of patriotism, war, and glory” (578). Such idealistic myths, however, did not just disappear, but were rather shifted from the military as an institution to individual soldiers whose idealism was now frequently preserved by an adversarial stance against the military apparatus. As Reyes claims, “narratives of Vietnam severed the warriors from the institutions for which they fought” and replaced the sense of admiration for the military at large with the “veneration of individual soldiers” (579).

What seems to change with the texts examined in this chapter is that such potential idealism, however reconfigured, appears deflated in the War on Terror. An alternative to the current War on Terror, whether it be grounded in

institutions or the individual, does not seem imaginable. Such disillusionment is not even necessarily based on an antagonistic relationship to the U.S public. Rather, the returning veterans are met by a disinterested civilian public in a way that would seem to illustrate Bacevich's claims. The soldiers tasked with protecting the Homeland seem excluded from genuine public investment as they experience the ubiquitous displays of patriotism as empty gestures. Ben Fountain has his character Billy Lynn express as much when he compares the way in which Billy and his comrades are met to that of Vietnam veterans: "No one spits, no one calls him baby-killer. On the contrary, people could not be more supportive or kindlier disposed, yet Billy finds these encounters weird and frightening all the same" (38). This leads to the paradoxical situation that even the open hostility with which Vietnam War veterans were frequently met would be preferable to this reception. But while the conflict between the soldier and civilians in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* comes close to becoming violent, that is temporarily defused by the soldiers' return to Iraq.

In this chapter, however, I focus on soldier characters whose return to America is permanent. I contend that the texts I examine express an anxiety revolving around the realization of the potential for violence perpetrated by veteran characters against the Homeland and its inhabitants. This return to the American Homeland is not the literary escapism of the return to scenes of blissful domesticity, safely removed from cataclysmic global events that critics such as Richard Gray identify. Rather, through the figure of the returning veteran, the texts illustrate how the domestic becomes part of the War on Terror instead of refuge from it.

The imagined soldier characters' permanent geographical return to the domestic U.S. does not necessarily result in their re-entering the state fantasy of the Homeland, which in turn prevents their full re-integration into civilian society. The result is the veterans' heightened sense of frustrations not only with the conduct of the war itself but also with being socially ostracized upon returning, a frustration eventually threatening to manifest itself through acts of violence against the civilian population. In this chapter, I chart the gradual intensification of this frustration that moves from a threat in George Saunders' "Home" to the watershed moment of actualized violence in Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*, and finally to the depiction of this particular violence as a social given in Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage*.

I begin by briefly investigating the depiction of the conduct of the War on Terror, how despite the heroic glorification of the military and sanitization of warfare, the mental and physical well-being of the military personnel is callously disregarded. In fact, although returning veterans are shown to be suffering from severe and thus far untreated physical and psychological conditions, they are frequently met with indifference or even active disregard. I argue that the logic of social and economic exclusion, touched upon in Chapter Two, is imagined in greater detail in these texts, but similarly resulting con-

tributing to the widening rift between civilians and veterans. As I will demonstrate, the literary imagination of this concern ranges from barely averted acts of violence to fully realized violence. I contend that Joyce Carol Oates shows how the association of veterans returning home with discourses of danger has become so socioculturally dominant that it overrides the logic of militarized glorification. The result is a shift in the civilian perception of soldier characters from objects of patriotic admiration to potential risks. And finally, I argue that Atticus Lish imagines the policies of the Homeland to conflate the foreign and domestic spheres to the degree that civilian life in the U.S. comes to function according to the same logic as a foreign battlefield, in effect turning the U.S. into a militarized domestic war zone.

One of these returning veterans stands at the center of the short story “Home” by George Saunders. A writer with an impressive string of critical laudations—finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award in 1996, finalist for the National Book Award in 2013, and recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in 2006, among others—Saunders first published “Home” in *The New Yorker* in 2011 before making it the eighth out of a total of ten stories in his 2013 collection *Tenth of December* for which he received the Story Prize as well as the Folio Prize.

Throughout the story’s thirty-eight pages, the narrator is Mike, a soldier returning home to his mother’s house from serving in a war rendered identifiable as the War on Terror primarily through the date of the story’s publication. Although the exact details of the family’s circumstances remain unspecified, Mike’s family appears to have fallen on hard times. As he returns to his mother, who possibly suffers from a brain tumor, she and her new partner are evicted from their house. Mike himself suffers a series of social humiliations and exclusions: his sister, married to a wealthy and possibly abusive husband, does her best to sever ties with her family while his ex-wife seeks to prevent Mike from reentering her life to take care of their child. Mike’s frustrations with the life he has returned to, the civilian reception of the war, and his family are surely not unique. Indeed, their representation recalls similar feelings voiced by characters like Ben Fountain’s Billy Lynn or Kevin Powers’ John Bartle. There is clearly a shared lineage that extends from the conduct of the war on foreign battlegrounds to domestic frustrations. In contrast to these earlier characters, however, Mike’s permanent return to the U.S. makes it possible for him to act on his sense of frustration as it threatens to happen in the story’s final pages. In this last section, Mike’s frustrations has seemingly become overwhelming and as he approaches his ex-wife’s house, intent on murdering his family that has gathered there, the “contours of the coming disaster expanded to include the deaths of all present” (201). Not until arriving at the front porch does Mike change his mind, although the specter of violence still looms large in the story’s final phrases: “Okay, okay, you sent me, now bring me back. Find some way to bring me back, you fuckers, or you are the sorriest bunch of bastards the world has ever known” (201).

Read superficially, this demand, “now bring me back” (201), may seem puzzling at first since for all intents and purposes Mike has been brought home. Not only is he back in the U.S., he is back in his childhood home. What Mike demands is then not merely a geographical return to American soil, but a return to the more elusive concept of “home” that would involve his social inclusion and the extension of genuine care toward him. While a full reintegration into civilian society, as I will argue, is made difficult by the only superficially supportive American public, the family’s lack of care for Mike is striking and his sense of social isolation is palpable; visiting his sister and her husband, for instance, Mike is immediately struck by the class divide between them made evident by their house: “I couldn’t believe the house. Couldn’t believe the turrets. [...] Couldn’t believe the yard” (175). Mike’s immediate sense of this divide is confirmed by their apparent lack of permission to directly enter the house. Instead, he has to surprise his sister in the garden after “squatt[ing] in some bushes by the screened-in porch” (175). Startled by his sudden appearance, his sister does not invite him in and does not want her husband finding out about Mike being there. Instead, she merely suggests that Mike “[c]ome over on Thursday, we’ll hash [whether or not he may enter] all out” (178). Precious little emotional care is extended to Mike and his mental or physical well-being, and his having just returned from the war is not even touched upon.

When Mike visits his ex-wife with their child and new husband whose house, much to Mike’s dismay, “was even nicer than [Mike’s sister’s]” (183), the reception is equally cold. The living conditions of Mike’s ex-wife and her new family serve as another poignant illustration of the class divisions that throw their respective situations into sharp and tangible relief: while his sister and ex-wife live in a part of town “full of castles” (188), the area where he and his mother live looks “like peasant huts” (188). Following the logic of this simile, Mike is relegated to a socioeconomic class that is only reluctantly and temporarily admitted to those inhabiting the more affluent parts of town. And even this relative refuge on the lower socioeconomic rungs of the middle-class ladder are under attack as Mike’s mother is threatened with the foreclosure of her house. After the eviction, Mike’s sister offers to pay for a hotel, but since she still does not allow them into her own house, this gesture reads more as keeping the help that cannot be entirely shirked to an absolute minimum, abstaining from any genuine emotional investment or care across class boundaries (194).

Saunders does not present Mike’s frustrations as a specifically military issue, but as part of a larger cluster of domestic socioeconomic factors. Broad critical consensus exists about certain traits in Saunders’ work generally, especially his use of the everyday vernacular of a beset American middle-class. Through this device, Saunders manages, as Charles Yu puts it in his review of *Tenth of December* in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, to “capture the way people think, representing thought in its purest form: the artfully imprecise,

clumsily inventive, and cryptically private shorthand of a mind talking to itself,” while trying to navigate through their everyday lives. However, Saunders’ version of the world is frequently set apart from straight-forward realism by the inclusion of vaguely futuristic or absurdist elements, the inclusion of which enables his satirical yet realistic treatment of social contemporary mechanisms. In the particular case of “Home,” Mike browses what seem to be mobile communication devices when the sales clerks offer him the choice between a device named “MiiVOXMAX” and “MiiVOXMIN” (184). While the exact form, function, and price of these devices are left obscure, their respective suffixes, -MAX and -MIN, are sufficient to immediately establish a hierarchy between both models. Saunders utilizes the suggestion of one of the clerks that the MiiVOXMIN “might be more in [Mike’s] line” to indicate Mike’s precarious socioeconomic position whereas his sister (196), it seems safe to assume, would have been offered the presumably superior MiiVOXMAX.

The divide between socioeconomic spheres is a recurring concern in Saunders’ texts. Generally speaking, he crafts sympathetic sketches of characters in an economically and socially beset American middle-class; David P. Rando calls them “the losers of American history, the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history’s winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth” (437), desperately doing their best to meet the rising demands of their lives while trying, though not always succeeding, to follow their moral instincts. This portrayal of everyday struggles certainly holds true for *Tenth of December* in which, as Gregory Cowles puts it in his *The New York Times* review, “[m]oney worries [...] have deepened into a pervasive, somber mood that weights the book with a new and welcome gravity. Class anxiety is everywhere here.” Mike’s inclusion among these stories of middle-class strife suggests, I would argue, that Saunders considers the challenges to veterans to partially stem from their experience in the War on Terror, but to be firmly rooted in an American class struggle as well.

The formal characteristics of the genre of the short story, as Martin Scofield writes in his classification of the genre, make it particularly apt for depictions of everyday struggles as it is driven by

this idea of the “democracy” of the form. [...] [T]here is a sense in which the form does lend itself to the examination of scenes from the life of the common man or woman, episodes and crises which are typical of those of ordinary life but hardly demand the developed treatment of the novel. (8).

This democratic concern is most frequently expressed through an impressionistic focus on “a single idea or image (whereas the novel can incorporate several and chart the relation between them)” (5). “Home” is not the only short story discussed in my dissertation; several stories from Phil Klay’s 2014 *Redeployment* are central to the argument of Chapter One. However, while

Klay's stories can be said to confirm to Scofield's notion of focusing on "a single idea or image," they nevertheless deal with various, sometimes wildly disparate, aspects of the War on Terror (5). By assembling a number of individually limited perspectives, Klay circumvents the relative thematic narrowness of the short story and edges closer to a panoramic perspective on the war, but yet remains exclusively focused on the perspective of military personnel.

As Rando points out, Saunders has placed "Home" in a collection of stories about domestic troubles: the father of a lower middle-class family whose desperate attempts to live up to upper-class luxuries leaves him blind to the suffering of the even less fortunate; a pair of brothers who resort to arson to prevent the repossession of their childhood home; a teenager trying to negotiate his ethics with the strict rules of his parents when he witnesses an attempted abduction and sexual assault. In short, these characters all represent a struggling American middle-class, and Mike is placed right in their midst. This formal setup suggests that Mike and his fellow returning soldiers with all their struggles are firmly part of the American society and need to be addressed as if they are instead of being glorified to a degree that obscures the necessity of considering them in the context of ordinary life.

In "Home," this concern is brought to the fore by Mike's inability to fully adjust back to civilian society. The war, although it serves as impetus for the story, remains unspecified and the references to it never rise above mere allusion. The most significant of these brief glimpses into Mike's past in the war comes when he wishes that he could tell his mother about "what me and Smelton and Ricky G. did at Al-Raz" (192). It is safe to infer that Mike was involved in something that he is unable to confess to his mother and is reluctant to articulate even to himself. However, it is unclear whether it is concerns about legal prosecution, the fear of moral outrage, an intrinsic sense of guilt and shame, or an inability related to PTSD or trauma that prevent him from doing so. The question of who else was involved—allied soldiers, enemy forces, civilians—remains shadowy. While certain sites, predominantly in Afghanistan and Iraq, have acquired such importance that they have entered the American consciousness, Kabul, Fallujah, Baghdad, and Mosul, for instance, are inextricably linked to the War on Terror, but Al-Raz, by all accounts, is not. The fact that Saunders does not operate under the imperative of filling in the blanks in "Home" and instead focuses on Scofield's notion of the "single idea" implies a shift (5), or at the very least the presumption of such a shift, in the American understanding of the War on Terror.<sup>8</sup> The omission of immediate descriptions of the war in "Home," this is to say, is not to be read as literary occlusion. Rather, detailing what exactly Mike took part in during his deployment as well as the ways in which it mentally affects him simply does not seem necessary. A general inkling of what Mike, Smelton, and Ricky G. were

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<sup>8</sup> The city of Al-Raz might be read as being entirely fictional or as borrowing its name from Al Ras in Dubai. In either case, the name seems to have been chosen because it fails to resonate with an American audience and thus does not carry any implications.

involved in that Mike seems to remember but cannot articulate, for legal or psychological reasons, does not rest on the literary rendering of such possible death and destruction. Instead, Saunders takes a general awareness of such events among his readership as a given after more than a decade of war. Thus, the configuration of the short story takes for granted both that American soldiers have quite possibly taken part in atrocities and the reader's knowledge of this fact.

Saunders frames the American civil society and the military not as different spheres that function according to their own specific set of rules but suggests the latter as the extension of the former, albeit on a decidedly escalated scale. When Mike recalls a teenage summer job of cleaning out a pond, he is struck by memories of having inadvertently killed "like a million tadpoles, dead and dying, at whatever age they are when they've got those swollen bellies like little pregnant ladies" (199). Trying to come to terms with the dead tadpoles, Mike weighs his options:

It was like either: (A) I was a terrible guy who was knowingly doing this rotten thing over and over, or (B) it wasn't so rotten, really, just normal, and the way to confirm it was normal was to keep doing it, over and over. Years later, at Al-Raz, it was a familiar feeling. (200)

Mike here clearly draws an immediate connection between the killing of the tadpoles and the practices he would later encounter during the war. The two sections in the quotation are set apart by a paragraph break, but their intimate proximity nevertheless suggests a logical progression that adheres to the same logic as expressed by the words in the quotation. Confronted with the extermination of defenseless life, first of the tadpoles and later of the War on Terror, Mike conceives of two options: the unbearable realization of his culpability in such occurrences or the gradual normalization of terrible events through their incessant, intentionally unreflective repetition.

Saunders essentially suggests that warfare is linked to the American everyday life as both adhere to the same fundamental principle of denial of the culpability in killing, albeit on radically different scales. Whether these killings are motivated by negligence or malice appears to be of little or no consequence to Saunders' story. Just like he was unaware of what he did to the tadpoles, Mike is at no point said, or even implied, to take pleasure in serving in the war and combating enemy forces. In what marks a departure from the texts explored in the previous chapters, the potentially gruesome events that Mike is unable to confess to are not the result of bloodlust, brazen disregard for non-American life, or intense psychological crises, but rather appear to spring from a cognitive and emotional dissonance that does not allow for an objective consideration of the effects of the war lest it result in an impossibly devastating acknowledgment of American guilt. And with regard to how Saunders includes "Home" in a collection of stories of civilian middle-class discord, the



dissonance that Mike is so painfully aware of becomes not just a military concern but a problem for American society as a whole.

Much of Mike's frustration stems from the fact that the appreciation of the ties between the military and the civilian spheres exhausts itself in purely performative gestures. Chiefly among these is the phrase "Thank you for your service," a phrase whose social ubiquity has become shorthand for the thinly veiled social disinterest in the military; it is no coincidence that David Finkel chose this particular phrase as the title of his seminal and highly acclaimed 2013 study of the difficulties veterans of the War on Terror face upon their return to the American Homeland. In "Home," the repetition of phrases such as "Thank you for your service" quickly becomes a dark punchline in the text, illustrating the way in which actual social disinterest is rhetorically glossed through the use of expressions of supposedly sincere appreciation.

Nowhere does this incongruity between what the phrase seems to signify and what it actually means become clearer than during Mike's family's eventual eviction from their home. After Mike scares off the owner of the house that his mother rents, the family is visited by the sheriff who requests them to comply with the eviction. Informed about Mike's service and return from the war just a few days earlier, the sheriff pays the homage that is expected of him and goes on with warning the family against any acts of resistance: "'Thank you for your service,' the sheriff said. 'Might I ask you to refrain from throwing people [referring to the owner of the house] down in the future?'" (189). In this instance, the acknowledgment of Mike's service is reduced to a platitude. Having paid lip service to civilian investment in the military, the sheriff can now prepare the ground for the eviction of the family of the man to whom he professed gratefulness just seconds before.

The scene is repeated the next day when the sheriff returns to lock the family out and take possession of the house. Again, Mike's mother points to her son's military service and is summarily dismissed:

"My son served in the war," Ma said. "And look how you're doing me." "I'm the same guy that was here yesterday," the sheriff said, and for some reason framed his face with his hands. "Remember me? You told me that already. I thanked him for his service. Call a van. Or your shit's going to the dump." (191)

On the surface, the sheriff's irritation acquires the qualities of a darkly comic punchline in which his minor inconvenience of having to discuss with the family far outweighs their tragic situation. More disconcertingly, however, is the way in which the passage suggests the erosion of the relationship between the American civilian society and the military and how this is masked by hollow gestures.

The claims put forth by Andrew J. Bacevich resonate with the implications of the above passage. Bacevich's *Breach of Trust* is essentially an investigation of the decoupling between the American civil society and its military forces. Focusing on the role of the present all-volunteer force in this process, Bacevich's conclusion may err on the side of the polemical when he writes that

[t]he all-volunteer force is not a blessing. It has become a blight. Americans can, of course, choose to pretend otherwise, but those choosing such a course cannot be said to love their country. Nor can they be said to care about the well-being of those sent to fight on the country's behalf. (196)

Bacevich dismisses considerations that go beyond a strict dichotomy between a citizen-soldier army and a volunteer force as essentially unpatriotic and ignorant. Nevertheless, his book is filled with descriptions of the crisis in the relationship between the American state and its military. Expressions like "Thank you for your service," omnipresent "Support our troops" bumper stickers, and the public display of military service personnel in the vein of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* indicate the way in which, according to Bacevich,

Americans—with a few honorable exceptions—have settled for symbolism. [...] The message that citizens wish to convey to their soldiers is this: although choosing not to be *with* you, we are still *for* you (so long as being for you entails nothing on our part). Cheering for the troops, in effect, provides a convenient mechanism for voiding obligation and perhaps easing guilty consciences. (4–5; italics in original)

The sheriff's surprised irritation about having to repeat his gratefulness for Mike's service may be read in a different light. The irritated remark "You told me that already. I thanked him for his service" is not a result of having to restate the phrase (191), but is grounded in the fundamental difficulty in understanding how thanking Mike for his service is to be understood. The sheriff, it would appear, intended the phrase as a purely symbolic utterance. In the situation in which the sheriff finds himself, thanking Mike for his service is socially expected and perhaps even mandatory behavior. Once voiced, the sheriff's conscience is sufficiently assuaged and the phrase does not connote any obligation for him to act on his purported gratefulness.

To use the seminal taxonomy of John R. Searle, the sheriff understands the expression of his gratitude as an expressive utterance; his aim is to

express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content. The paradigms of Expressive verbs are 'thank,' 'congratulate,' 'apologize,' 'condole,' 'deplore,' and 'welcome.' [...] In performing an expressive, the speaker is neither trying to get

the world to match the words nor the words to match the world, rather the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed. (12)

The frustration displayed by the sheriff then stems from the fact that the family, especially Mike's mother, does not simply accept the phrase as self-contained but attempts to infer further consequences: to go against the nature of the expressive utterance and, in Searle's words, try to get "the words to match the world" and help prevent the eviction (12). The sheriff's steadfast refusal to match his actions to his words may appear to be an isolated act. However, the sheriff is not to be understood as an individual here but acquires symbolic meaning. In the context of the story, he is the sole purveyor of the state's authority, thus serving as a symbol for the general failure of not only civilian society, but also of the state to honor their obligations to the military.

But for Saunders, the domesticity of the American family does not offer a safe haven from a negligent state. Instead, Mike's family is equally implicated in his disillusionment when they use the supposed public gratefulness for their own purposes. In her complaint to the sheriff, the mother pleads with him by mentioning Mike's service, but Saunders depicts her as switching referents: "'My son served in the war,' Ma said. 'And look how you're doing me'" (191). Initially, the mother's anger seems to stem from the way in which she believes that Mike's service in the military is not properly appreciated. But the question of who exactly it is that faces grave injustice quickly moves from Mike, "my son," to herself, "me." The mother's anger thus stems less from the way in which Mike's service is ignored than from how this disregard prevents his service from standing in the way of her eviction.

Thanking Mike for his service also serves to rhetorically preempt any genuine discussion of what precisely this service entailed, thereby effectively barring any acknowledgment of the cost of warfare. Saunders humorously introduces the banishment of discussing inconvenient topics through the mother's habit of self-censoring cuss words in which the strongest admonishment becomes a "Beep you" (170). This practice of trying to defuse unpleasant sentiments by simply refusing to put them into words acquires a more unsettling quality as more severe issues, such as the fact that Mike's sister may be physically abused by her husband and his mother's possible tumor, are all equally designated taboos that must not be addressed. This eventually extends to the considerations of Mike's military service. What actually did transpire at Al-Raz appears to have resulted in a court-martial, the military equivalent of a criminal court, for Mike. At least parts of his family are aware of this but are unwilling to fully acknowledge or address such a thing. The only instances in which he is asked about the court-martial by his sister (180) and his mother's new partner (191), their respective interest lies in the legal and lurid aspects of the charges instead of the possible effect these had on Mike. Again, Saunders conceptualizes the military and civilian spheres not as separate, but inter-

twined. Refusing to address the traumatic and unsettling sides of Mike's military service is not exclusively the result of a civilian disinterest in the military, although it certainly does play into the problem. Rather, the unwillingness to address Mike's service beyond the superficial follows from a societal practice of refusing to acknowledge inconvenient truths.

The story concludes with Mike's mounting frustrations solidifying into the intention to kill his family. That he would indeed resort to violence seems inevitable as the text has repeatedly foreshadowed severe violence by getting Mike into a number of physical altercations, attempting to set his mother's house on fire (182–3), and considering whether or not he could intentionally hurt his sister's baby (195). Walking toward the house in which his family is gathered, Mike still seems poised to see his plan through to the end as “[t]he contours of the coming disaster expanded to include the deaths of all present” (201). But in the last moment, his rage is deflated as “something softened” by the unexpected “sight of Ma so weak” (201). A sudden and unexpected surge of empathy and affection for his family overrides Mike's anger and averts the immediate threat of violence. But while Saunders thus still allows for a possible resolution of Mike's crisis, it is far from resolved. The lingering threat to “[f]ind some way to bring me back, you fuckers, or you are the sorriest bunch of bastards the world has ever known” thus has to be read as a demand for the concept of the Homeland with its overtones of care and social inclusion to be extended also to him (201).

Crucial to a full appreciation of the consequences inherent in Mike's threat is an understanding of the unspecified “you” it is aimed at whose ambiguous nature endows it with national significance beyond the instantly recognizable familial. Mike clearly addresses his immediate family: he mutters the threat as he is on the way to a family gathering which would put the responsibility of bringing him back into the folds of the American society on his close family circle. However, reading the passage as a bid for a conservative and purely domesticated solution to the crisis of returning soldiers would be to ignore the role the state authorities have played in the escalation of the situation. Mike should be read not merely as an individual character, but as a symbolical representation of the American military. In this larger context, the “you” that is addressed does not merely function as a closely circumscribed reference aimed at Mike's immediate family, but extends the demand to make good on the promise of the Global Homeland to a national level. Crucially, the way in which this demand is articulated marks a distinct departure from texts that depict their respective veterans as quietly lamenting their frustration. Kevin Powers, for instance, has his equally disillusioned narrator retreat into both literal and metaphorical wordless solitude in *The Yellow Birds* and thus frames the societal obligation to the returning military personnel as a quiet moral and ethical concern. Through the desperate demand delivered by Mike, however, Saunders makes a stronger demand. The re-integration of returning military personnel into the purported affective construct of the Homeland is framed as

a call to action lest the barely averted articulation of frustration through violence should be realized.

The increasingly menacing, if still preventable, threat posed by a disillusioned military examined in Chapters Two and Three is brought close to the tipping point in “Home” and reaches its climax in Atticus Lish’s 2014 debut novel *Preparation for the Next Life*. At the novel’s center lies what reviewer Dwight Garner calls “perhaps the finest and most unsentimental love story of the new decade,” though one fraught with complications, both political and personal. Particularly the backstories of its two primary characters give the narrative a sociopolitical relevance that far exceeds their interpersonal relationship. The novel begins with Zou Lei, a female member of the beset Uighur minority living close to the border to Afghanistan in Northwestern China. Remembering her father, a Han Chinese soldier, only for his emphasis on military training and discipline, Zou Lei achieves her mother’s dreams of westward migration. Her journey eventually leads to America as an illegal immigrant, working low-paying jobs in the fast food industry while evading immigration authorities. On one of her shifts, Zou Lei is approached by Brad Skinner, a veteran of three tours in Iraq who has just returned to the U.S. himself. A tumultuous relationship ensues between the two, complicated by Zou Lei’s precarious legal status and Skinner’s precarious physical and mental condition. A mortar hit that killed his friend and wounded Skinner as well as the generally harsh conditions of a war zone have left Skinner in a physical state that serves as constant reminder of his military service: he is “covered in half-healed cuts” and suffers from “[c]rotch rot [a fungal infection of the groin]” (39) as well as “a scar that did not look like flesh at all” that results from a severe back injury (40). These physical wounds are accompanied by a severe case of psychological trauma that is denied effective treatment, a combination that results in Skinner slowly developing violent impulses that become increasingly harder to control. The arrival of Jimmy Murphy, the son of Skinner’s landlady from whom he rents a dingy basement apartment, causes the gradual escalation of the antagonism between Skinner and his environment into acts of violence. After a decade in and out of prison, a “war zone” in its own right (169), Murphy has been radicalized by his affiliation with a White Power gang and desensitized to violence, committing unsparingly depicted acts of rape and, perhaps, murder. A period of Murphy harassing Skinner is followed by an attack on Zou Lei that pushes Skinner into losing what little restraint he has left. After shooting Murphy, Skinner takes his own life while Zou Lei departs for a life of relative normalcy on a farm in South Dakota. Through his depiction of the traumatized and violent veteran Skinner, Lish imagines an American society that has severely failed its military in a way that is reminiscent of Saunders’ depiction of Mike. But whereas Mike is able to at least temporarily exercise self-restraint, Skinner’s circumstances do not allow him to curb his violent impulses. Instead, Lish images Skinner as fundamentally unable to return to the mythologized notion of the Homeland. This paints

Skinner's eventual spiraling into violence as caused by a tragic communal social failing rather than an individual lapse.

Using a third-person narration and alternating the point of view between Zou Lei, Skinner, and Jimmy Murphy, the novel's thematic concern with the returning veterans' socioeconomic exclusion mirrors the one of "Home." But instead of Saunders' wry irony, Lish's text is stylistically dominated by a tone of impending doom and mounting desperation. The bulk of *Preparation for the Next Life* is set in the socioeconomic fringes of U.S. society on the underbelly of Flushing, Queens, Manhattan, lying "across the black water, a postcard view with all the lights and just the sheer scale of it, the sky violet with energy" might seem to hold enormous promise to Skinner upon his arrival (35).<sup>9</sup> Yet the New York inhabited by Skinner and Zou Lei is one riddled by palpable poverty, urban decay, and social ostracism that severely impact the characters' interior lives. In the depiction of the people surrounding Zou Lei and Skinner, "[a]dult men lifted their heads like horses, their long, hollow-cheeked skulls, staring" while "[y]ou could see the wooden faces of women in aprons" (128). The people of Flushing seem to have regressed into a state in which they frequently are not recognizable as human anymore and hew closer to an animalistic state of being. The social class they are a part of, it seems, has been cut off from the U.S. society at large and has regressed into animalism beyond the point of re-entry into mainstream society.

And on their arrival in Flushing, the same forces begin to work on Skinner and Zou Lei. The food they eat or, more importantly, do not eat becomes an instrumental narrative device in this regard, signaling for the reader the extent of their socioeconomic exclusion. Throughout the novel, they come across various kinds of food that are desirable for their nutritional value or particular taste to the point that food becomes the currency by which the world is measured. Having bought a notebook to help her learn English, Zou Lei is immediately struck by buyer's remorse, calculating that the expense of "[s]even dollars would have bought her a pound and a half of lamb" (179). Another scene has Zou Lei and Skinner walk through an Asian supermarket, the only time that America comes together as the proverbial cultural melting pot in a narrative teeming with isolation and social divisions as Zou Lei observes an abundance of eclectic groceries on offer: "Honey Flavored Syrup, Old Fujian Wine, Squid Fish Sauce, Cane Vinegar, Coconut Sport, Sarap-Asim, Chicken Essence Drink" (180). Again, however, the offerings are prohibitively expensive. Thirdly, and perhaps most instructively, Zou Lei considers the purchase of cooking ware, but a "wok was \$8.99. [...] The cheapest rice cooker cost fifteen American dollars and that was too much" (181).

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<sup>9</sup> Although the reason for Lish choosing Bradley Skinner as his protagonist's name remains speculative, the name does resonate on multiple levels. Firstly, it may be read as an allusion to the American behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner. Secondly, the name may also refer to *The Simpsons* character Principal Skinner who, as a result of his service and imprisonment in Vietnam, is equally beset by trauma and social exclusion.

The unfeasibility of buying cooking supplies might appear as simply yet another illustration of Zou Lei and Skinner's poverty as they cannot even come up with the lump sum of some \$24. But it also signals the characters' inability to establish even a modicum of independence by ensuring their own food supply in an autonomous fashion that would go beyond pure concerns about the next meal. Instead, they are forced into an almost literal hand-to-mouth economy in which subsistence rests on an endless gruel of cheap fast foods: cold fries reheated by dipping them into coffee (39), street-bought lamb skewers that Skinner knows to interfere with "[l]ike digestion or whatever" (97), and rice that "was cold and the grease had larded all throughout the rice and turning thick and white" (186). Lish's depiction of how such pressures and humiliations reduce Skinner and Zou Lei's everyday experiences to that of scrambling to survive is suggestive of the narrowing of their sensual and intellectual world into one consisting out of "heads like horses" and "wooden faces" (128). Ultimately, Skinner's desperate regression into acts of violence is thus not to be understood as an instance of individual liability but as the result of external societal forces applied to him and other returning veterans in comparable situations.

The focus on Skinner's tragic fate as shaped not only by himself but also by external forces beyond his control suggests that Lish as writing in the tradition of chronicling social ills. Indeed, with regard to the novel's focus on narrating the experience of the disenfranchised urban classes, reviewers such as Patrick Flanery for *The Guardian* argue that "[i]n his determination to narrate America from the bottom, Lish seems influenced as much by Dickens as by American modernists such as Ralph Ellison and John Dos Passos." In the perhaps most immediately notable nod to the American literary tradition of detailing social plights, Skinner first appears in the text as he catches a lift from a truck driver. During the drive, he is introduced primarily through his clothes that play a pivotal role in hinting at his past without fully spelling it out. This introduction alludes to the entrance of Tom Joad, protagonist of John Steinbeck's 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps the definitive American novel of social protest. Tom Joad is marked as a released convict by his conspicuously "new cap, [...] new clothes [and] new shoes" (10), while Skinner's new boots that had to be exchanged for the old ones because they "got someone's brain all over them" marks him as a recently returned veteran (32). But while, as Gordon Hutner claims, earlier examples of the genre and *Grapes of Wrath* in particular depict "the righting of the workers' abject plight less in the vaguely socialistic vision of union and more as the proper alignments of family feeling and relationship" (193), the perspective of *Preparation for the Next Life* will be demonstrated to be both more pessimistic and, due to the backstories of its characters, global in scope.

Bradley Skinner's background story is dominated by his participation in the War on Terror as a veteran of three tours of duty in Iraq. Having signed up

in the aftermath of 9/11, Skinner “would have gone anyway, just to do something” (124), making his reason for joining the military a strictly rational decision to escape the poverty of his childhood. In the segments detailing his combat experience that Lish intersperses throughout the narrative details about Skinner’s assignment, however, remain shadowy.

This uncertainty is partially rooted in Lish’s portrayal of the combat area as a zone of intense confusion in which ordinary and civilian means of perceiving oneself and one’s environment lose their significance. As Adam Piette argues, the notion of a “war-scrambled spatio-temporal zone [...] has classic status in any war story” (38). This means that the understanding of measures such as time and space in a civilian context differs greatly from that in a military context. But for Skinner, the structure and logic of the war zone is beyond comprehension. For instance, “[t]ime jumped or crawled” (59), no longer following any discernible logic. In *Preparation for the Next Life*, the combat zone emerges as an incomprehensible vortex governed by a perpetual sense of confusion and visceral violence that defies claims of the prevalence of derealized warfare and its sanitizing effects as the soldiers are subjected to war in its most immediate form when they “tried to cradle [a shot soldier’s] head and unintentionally put their hands inside the cavity in his skull” (62), when Skinner is struck by a grenade (66), and his friend is reduced to “a half body” by the same hit (67). These and similar episodes are emblematic of the way in which Skinner experiences the war not as derealized and largely logistical, but as a horrific and intensely corporeal enterprise. This experience in turn leaves him physically scarred and prone to violent outbursts as a result of severe bouts of what appears to be PTSD.

Just like Saunders’ character Mike, Skinner is expelled from an affective and ideological conception of an American civilian society.<sup>10</sup> But whereas Saunders imagines Mike’s frustrations as based on being denied the reentry into civilian society that he wishes for, Lish depicts Skinner’s reentry as impossible due the physical and mental fallout of his military service and the subsequent unwillingness of the state to address these consequences. The mental and physical breakdown of Skinner’s deployment in Iraq following his injury is condensed into a mere two pages. This short section details the Army’s reckless neglect of its personnel as their focus is on ensuring Skinner’s temporary physical functionality at the expense of his mental stability. After a rudimentary medical check, following the brief rehabilitation period that exclusively focuses on his physical abilities, Skinner is returned to combat duty with “unbearable headaches and double vision. The army gave him reading glasses. There was no mention of PTSD or TBI [traumatic brain injury]” (68). Lish posits the Army’s custom of addressing trauma by “handing out antidepressants like free candy” (69)—a description echoing the Army’s liberal prescription practices of psychiatric drugs whose long largely unregulated use is

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<sup>10</sup> The ambiguous notion of a civilian society in the Homeland Security State is taken up in the introduction.



increasingly linked to a surge of “drug dependency, suicide and fatal accidents” (Dao)—as ignorance of the obvious red flags that should be apparent to any trained medical staff:

Skinner was mentally ill, logging day after day in a combat zone, compounding the damage: cuts that wouldn’t heal, back pain, diarrhea, hearing loss, double vision, headaches, pins and needles in his hands, insomnia, apathy, rage, grief, self-hatred, depression, despair. (69)

Skinner’s already critical situation is exacerbated by being “stop-lossed” (68), a term that term refers to the military’s ability to extend its personnel’s active duty past the end of their service without their expressed consent, a practice discontinued only in 2011 by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, although its re-institution remains a possibility, and it did affect a total of about 120,000 soldiers (Shaughnessy).

This combination of untreated trauma and prolonged military service escalates during Skinner’s second tour in Iraq. From a physical altercation with his brother while on leave (68), Skinner moves to shooting an unarmed Iraqi civilian, “killing him in cold blood” (69), with no feelings of remorse or, remarkably, legal consequences. The way in which Lish sets up the killing of the unarmed man recalls Kevin Powers’ depiction of the shooting of an Iraqi “cartwright” by American soldiers (96). Both instances hint at a shared concern with a callous attitude of at least parts of the U.S. troops in regard to non-American life, a lack of moral concern that, in the case of Lish’s text, threatens to also become the attitude of returning veterans to the U.S. civilian population. Lish suggests as well that Skinner’s case is far from singular but rather representative of a larger military concern; Skinner moves into subgroups that appear uncoupled from all checks and regulations that civilized warfare and the chivalric code examined in Chapter Two purport to:

Within his unit, he became identified with a group of soldiers called the Shit-bag Crew. [...] A tribal life began. Some of the gangs within the infantry were involved in murder. [...] A gunny from Akron, Ohio, was the capo of a death squad. (69)

Defying any claim to chivalry and romanticized valor in warfare, Lish depicts the devolution of swaths of the U.S. military from guardians of an idealized Homeland to murderous gangs. This particular section distinctly recalls the events that Jim Frederick, managing editor of *Time.com* and executive editor of *Time* magazine chronicles in his 2010 book *Black Hearts*. Frederick traces the way in which a fatal blend of administrative negligence, combat stress and desensitization, failure of the military chain of command, and plain bloodlust culminated in the rape of a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and the murder of her and her family at the hands of four soldiers of Bravo Company in 2006.

The wide-spread turn toward unhinged violence among active combat duty troops that Lish suggests becomes a pressing concern for the U.S. civilian society due to the military's unwillingness to account for these potential effects of doing duty as part of the War on Terror. In the case of Skinner, the state eschews its responsibility as an "army med board had determined that his psychological trauma had not been caused by the war and he wouldn't be getting any money for it" (271). As in the case of Mike, the representatives of the Homeland fail to translate their ostensible gratitude for Skinner's service into tangible consequences, in this case treatment and compensation for his sustained mental and physical damages. In lieu of economic compensation and psychological care, he is forced to attempt—unsuccessfully—to cope with the help of a system of self-medication with alcohol, prescription medication, and illegal drugs that quickly spirals out of control. Despite his geographical return to the U.S., Skinner is thus left in a state of fundamental disconnect from civilian society, a state brought on by the trauma of war that prevents his mental return to what Pease subsumes under the umbrella of the "Homeland."

While the depiction of war-related trauma is not exclusive to *Preparation for the Next Life*, Lish's depiction of the severity and continued impact of Skinner's trauma marks a drastic departure from the engagement with similar afflictions discussed in earlier chapters. This departure applies especially to the way in which Skinner re-visits accounts of wartime atrocities, both remembered and recorded. Texts like *Fobbit* and *Unmanned* utilize the traumatic impact of sanitized and derealized warfare to depict soldiers as characters whose inner conflicts arise from having to negotiate their complicity in war with a deep sense of empathy. But Skinner's alienation is due to the obliteration of his capacities for forming the most basic social bonds, something which suggests the necessity of extensive psychological care as a pre-requisite for the reentering into civilian society.

Throughout the text, Skinner recalls gruesome episodes that illustrate the War on Terror as a war where empathy is virtually completely absent. The soldiers Skinner surrounds himself with even appear to actively eschew the possibility of not having to directly engage enemy combatants afforded by derealized warfare. Instead, the experience of warfare in its most direct and unmediated visceral form is actively pursued by the soldiers: "We picked up a head on the battlefield and made somebody carry it. My sergeant put it between a body's legs. He made it wink. We took corpses and made them do nasty shit. [...] I probably laughed at shit that no one would believe" (330). Skinner's reaction—regarding the grotesquely twisted bodies as a source of humor instead of horror—indicates a rupture between the principles that govern military and civilian life. This rupture, implicitly acknowledged by Skinner's remark that "no one would believe" what he laughed at (330), may very well be understood as an expression of what Piette describes as a "war-scrambled spatio-temporal zone" that extends to the level of ethics and moral and suspends civilian concepts of acceptable behavior (38). Skinner appears to be

partially removed from the unflinching set of his former military mindset. The reliability of Skinner's recollections is destabilized by the use of "probably" (330), a choice of words that indicates Skinner's remove from his previous military mindset, one adopted during his deployment through his own inability to fully reconstruct what exactly was so funny about the desecrated corpses.

But although Skinner does not appear to fully comprehend or recollect his own amusement, he is not repulsed by the memory. Instead, he narrates it in a sober and remarkably collected tone that indicates his continued empathetic void. This emotional disconnect finds its most striking illustration through his consumption of unsettling imagery after the permanent return to the U.S. Drinking a bottle of Bacardi, Skinner watches a video of combat footage on his laptop, beginning with a beheading during which

[a] man's body tensed while his killer sawed at his neck. Two men kneeled on him. The audio was bad, and Skinner turned the volume up. That sound was him protesting. The clock was running. The film advanced. The man had become inanimate in the last thirty seconds. Now they lifted up the head, separating it from the corpse. [...] He watched guys who got hit by a sniper, getting punched down. He watched a wounded fighter lying in the dirt. The ground was smeared with a wide red swath of blood. The fighter lifted his AK-47 and the good guys shot him. (204)

Particularly the first part of the video is sure to resonate with audiences as Lish's depiction alludes to the videos of executions most prominently proliferated by ISIS. But instead of being shocked, Skinner willingly puts on the video, deriving a certain amount of pleasure from the images which further underscores his waning capacity for empathy.

And Skinner does not just watch the pure video footage but scores the it with "cock rock, thrash metal, big rock ballads, country and western—the numbers they used to play in battle" (204). Strikingly, because of his impaired hearing Skinner turns the "volume up" to hear the victim better (204). The purpose of the music he plays in the background, this suggests, is not to cancel out the sounds of the execution for fear that it may be too disturbing. Rather, it is intended to aurally amplify the effect of the images and thus result in a multi-sensory enjoyment. Instead of sanitizing the images, the mediation of warfare in this instance serves the purpose of in fact heightening its impact, converting the horrors of war to a source of entertainment.

That Lish explicitly includes instances of a beheading in these scenes, the detached prose mirroring Skinner's disengaged reaction, is of particular relevance for making sense of his condition. As Adriana Cavarero argues, scenes of contemporary violence are determined by their "particularly repugnant character [...] which locates them in the realm of horror" (29). Drawing on the beheading of the mythical Medusa, Cavarero ascribes an especially disturbing quality to the act of beheading as it marks a form of violence "which aims primarily not to kill [a human being] but to destroy its humanity, to inflict

wounds on it that will undo and dismember it” (16). Witnessing such an act should result in a universal sense of revulsion for its perpetrators as “[w]hoever shares in the human condition also shares in disgust for an ontological crime that aims to strike in order to dehumanize it” (16). As I have discussed, David Abrams has his character Charles Gooding Jr. react to the images of the remains of a suicide bomber in a way that not only echoes Cavarero’s argument but extends it. When the image of “[a] head. [...] In the blackened head, the eyes were squeezed shut, as if in the final reflex before the bomber pulled the det cord” flashes on his screen (*Fobbit* 86), Gooding is overwhelmed in equal measure by revulsion, as presumed by Cavarero, and empathy for the bomber. Skinner, on the other hand, is not gripped by any sense of empathy. Far from it: he appears intent on fully taking in the video footage rather than being repulsed by it.

Lish depicts this empathetic void as rooted in a general disregard for abstract human qualities. Watching the video, his mind begins to wander and he thinks of Zou Lei. Zou Lei, Skinner remembers, is the embodiment of all that “he had ached for when he was over there” (204–5). Now, however, even the idea of “having a woman to love him” (205) has lost its luster and Skinner is struck by a sense of absolute social disconnection:

The world was dull and annoying to him, and she was just like any other female, he felt: she had certain functions. And he had seen those functions turned inside out by high explosives. He knew what was inside people, and there was nothing there. It was gross. It was boring. It was sickening and that was all. (205)

Skinner essentially reduces the state of humanity to its core physical functions that he experiences as repulsive which precludes him from developing notions of empathy or affection. The realization of the extremity of Skinner’s emotional disconnection is deeply unsettling even to himself: “When I was younger, I always wanted to be in love with somebody someday. The thought that that was over, that I couldn’t feel that anymore, this hit me really hard. It took my hope away” (205).

This attitude appears as an inversion of Cavarero’s claims: Skinner dehumanizes his environment precisely through the abnegation of “the human condition” that extends beyond its perfunctory physical qualities (16), thus essentially replicating what Lish portrays as the military’s treatment of its personnel. The understanding of the human qualities that is, despite Skinner’s return to U.S. soil, still fundamentally grounded in a military logic extends beyond a sense of social disconnect. It informs even his practical relationship to his everyday civilian environment, resulting in a clash between the military and civilian perspectives as the former is frequently brought to bear on a civilian context. Watching cars on an expressway, for instance, Skinner slips into a military assessment of the situation: “Imagine if this was Iraq right now, he

thought. You'd be lighting up all these cars. [...] These people have no idea" (206). Similarly, the first time Skinner sees Murphy, he draws on his memories of the battlefield to position Murphy as "probably half a mile away in the dusk—nearly out of M16 range" (243). In accordance with the militarized understanding of the civilian environment, the people who Skinner and Zou Lei encounter as they walk through the streets of Flushing register as "paper targets" (81).

And as Skinner's frustrations and feelings of repulsion with the civilian U.S. grow stronger, his grip on reality wanes. His untreated PTSD and regimen of self-medication make it increasingly difficult to differentiate between flashbacks to the combat zone and his actual location in the domestic U.S., risking triggering the same impulses that led to the cold-blooded shooting of the Iraqi civilian. Lish symbolizes the ever-present possibility of Skinner acting on his mounting frustration through the handgun that is his constant companion. Disaster is continuously barely averted, as when Skinner has to run back into a fast food restaurant to retrieve "the assault pack with the pistol in it, which he had left forgotten under the seat where [he and Zou Lei] were sitting" (100), and even when he is lying in bed, the gun appears to develop a mind of its own as "the nine [M9 Beretta handgun] slipped and fell between the mattress and the wall" (210). The gradual loss of control over the gun is as much a manifestation of Skinner's slipping sense of reality as a reminder of the violence that might manifest itself at the slightest provocation against a civilian population that Skinner is deeply disconnected from. Another instance of mental slippage has Skinner repeatedly fall asleep at a McDonald's restaurant, drifting into a flashback to Iraq, and finally jerking back into reality: Recalling the death of his friend and his own injury, Skinner

collapsed because his body finally realized that he had been wounded too. Graziano ripped out plastic from his butt pack and stuffed it over the hole in his chest cavity.

He stopped.

There was no one here—he huddled frozen rigid, waiting for things to fall into place. Limb by limb, he unclenched himself, dropped his head back against the plastic seat, let out his breath, sat there on the floor blinded by the white fresh sunshine. (67)

The memory is so vivid that it is rendered physically palpable as Skinner experiences anew the effects of being wounded. Despite its vividness, the transition from the flashback to reality and back appears seamless and abrupt, something that is underlined Skinner's consciousness moving from one state to the other in the break of a paragraph. The result of this cognitive permeability is a persistent insecurity as Skinner can never be fully certain about the reality of his surroundings.

With this general disconnect and volatile mental state in mind, Skinner shooting Jimmy Murphy and then committing suicide do not appear as isolated acts rooted in personal antipathy but rather acts imbued with potential national relevance. Lish's depiction of the killing skews closely to an act of vigilante justice: in the section preceding his death, Murphy rapes and possibly kills another Chinese immigrant before he sets his sights on Zou Lei. But his behavior merely appears as the trigger that finally snaps Skinner into action. In fact, Lish depicts Skinner as posing a general threat to the civilian population. Contemplating killing Murphy, Skinner articulates a threat that resembles the one posed by Mike: "After I waste this motherfucker, I'll show them" (344). The choice of words, "waste" instead of kill, is certainly indicative of Skinner's empathetic disconnect that leads to a dehumanization of his environment as, essentially, wasted. But who precisely the addressee of this "them" might be remains unspecified, giving the utterance an air of a generalized threat of random acts of violence that is issued, again much like Mike's generalized "you," to the entire American population. Unlike Mike's suspended threat, however, Skinner's eventual resort to violence is shown to be a virtual inevitability. Lish is clearly forecasting an impending surge of similar behavior. As coverage of returning soldiers grows more prevalent, a rising number of soldiers "gave testimony about the folly and evil of what they had been a part of" and, even more disconcerting, what folly and evil they are likely to continue to be part of long after their return to the U.S. (193–4).

An (assumed) act of violence committed by a deeply troubled veteran against a civilian constitutes the focal point also of Joyce Carol Oates' 2014 novel *Carthage*. Unlike in the case of Saunders and Lish's texts, however, this act does not actually take place, nor is it imminent. Rather, Oates depicts the fraught relationship between the U.S. military and civilian spheres as colored by a general familiarity with how violent veterans of the War on Terror lash out against the U.S. populace, with such behavior of veterans having become something of a commonplace.

The novel, predominantly told in a third-person perspective with focus shifting between its protagonists, begins in upstate New York in the summer of 2005, and, though it is frequently interrupted by extensive flashback sections, follows the disappearance of the socially maladjusted Cressida Mayfield. The daughter of lawyer and former major Zeno Mayfield and his wife Arlette, Cressida was last seen driving away from a rowdy bar in the company of Brett Kincaid, a severely physically impaired and traumatized Iraq veteran and ex-fiancé of Juliet, Cressida's older sister. Although Cressida's body remains missing, Kincaid emerges as the primary suspect in what presumably is a murder case. After a struggle with PTSD, self-medication, and memories of war crimes he witnessed in Iraq overwhelm Kincaid, he becomes deliriously convinced of his own guilt and falsely confesses to having killed Cressida even while he remains unable to remember the murder. He is, however, sentenced for voluntary manslaughter. After a flash forward of seven

years to the spring of 2012, Cressida reemerges as the assistant to a professor specializing in uncovering social injustice. The events that are falsely assumed having been a murder are now revealed to have begun by Cressida confessing her love for Kincaid. When he refuses her advances and then loses consciousness due to a mixture of heavy medication and alcohol, the embarrassed Cressida flees the scene and eventually assumes the position as research assistant under a new identity while her family believes her to be dead. During a guided tour of a prison, Cressida enters a gas chamber, is overcome by guilt and moved to return to her family that has broken apart in the interim years, bent on atoning for her disappearance, Kincaid's false conviction, and the family's rupture.

As this summary suggests, *Carthage* is a novel of considerable scope; a meditation on parenthood, sisterly relationships, and the (im-)possibility of social bonding, it is at the same time an indictment of the American penal system and the War on Terror as well as a consideration of both bigotries and redemptive qualities of the Christian faith. This long, yet still incomplete, list of concerns is then supplemented by a multitude of classical cultural, philosophical, and political references: the name Zeno refers to the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea, whereas Cressida is an allusion to a female character in the Trojan War. The eponymous Carthage itself warns of the pitfalls of military hubris and overextension, while a consideration of "the 'Golden Age' of Athens" serves as a reminder of the connections between military potency and democracy (339). But within these concerns, the most striking is the shift in the relationship between the U.S. military and civilian population, a shift primarily explored through the character of Brett Kincaid. To emphasize this concern, I argue, Oates draws neither on the satire of Saunders nor the gritty writing of Lish, but, rather surprisingly, appears to follow the conventions of the crime novel.

In the depiction of Kincaid's motivations for joining the military, Oates inverts the rationale that Lish and Abrams assign to their soldier characters. Examining the reasons behind a decision to choose a military career, Michael J. Shapiro proposes a distinction between a "rationalistic or utilitarian" appeal that claims "a match between what are projected as the recruit's personal career objectives and the way that the military unit can provide resources and a context for achieving them" on the one hand and an "ontological" appeal that "describes the military unit as a place in which the self can be realized or perfected" (107), traditionally along the lines of a stereotypical masculinity, on the other. To undercut the narrative of a flood of new recruits driven by patriotic fervor as a response to September 11 propagated by the Bush administration, Lish and Abrams give their characters a decidedly utilitarian attitude to the military. Oates, on the other hand, heightens the pathos of Kincaid's realization of the actual nature of warfare by basing his decision to pursue a military career on a blend of the purely ideological and a firm belief in the officially propagated rationale for war.

Kincaid's emotional investment in the military is rooted in having grown up with only pictures of an absent father, haunted by his own military past, showing him

with other soldiers in his platoon, in uniform: you could see a family likeness among the men, from the oldest to the youngest. Here was a mysterious family of *soldier-brothers*. You felt—if you were a young child, fatherless—a profound envy of this family, like nothing in your diminished life. (138)

In lieu of actual family structures, the military thus becomes a romantically cast surrogate family. Kincaid furthermore excels at his training; as “[t]he drill sergeant seemed to like him. The other guys seemed to like him. He’d been chosen ‘platoon leader’ in his training class” (146), he emerges as a *primus inter pares*, “a man among men” (153). Eager to put his training to the test, he volunteers for deployment, expecting to “be sent to the Middle East, probably. Infantry. [...] Iraq, Afghanistan—he didn’t care which” (146). In his patriotic fervor, Kincaid unquestioningly supports the government’s now all-too-familiar rationale for the War on Terror:

The fight against terror is a fight against the enemies of U.S. morality—Christian faith. [...] It had been explained to them by their chaplain—this is a crusade to save Christianity. General Powell had declared there can be no choice, the U.S. has been forced to react militarily. [...] No choice but to send in troops before the *weapons of mass destruction* are loosed by the crazed dictator Saddam—nuclear bombs, gas and germ warfare. (132; italics in original)

This religiously inflected political reasoning, uncritically accepted by Kincaid, openly alludes to the Bush government’s oft-propagated and well-researched reasoning for the War on Terror. As Richard Jackson, for instance, argues, “the war is imbued with a sense of theological calling and divine sanction through the ubiquitous use of religious terminology” (142), going back to a press conference on September 16, 2001 during which President Bush referred to “this war on terrorism” as a “crusade” (142), while Kincaid’s faith in the alleged weapons of mass destruction conjures up images of Defense Secretary Colin Powell’s infamous presentation before the UN council on February 5, 2003. This depiction of Kincaid’s affective investment in the military and his patriotic belief in the righteousness of its cause coupled with a pronounced average intellect—Zeno, upon learning about Kincaid’s academic prowess, wishes “for his beautiful daughter a man just slightly better than a B+ at Plattsburgh State [State University of New York at Plattsburgh]” (40)—is so guileless that it frequently threatens to cross over into satire.

While Kincaid’s relationship to the military and his conduct deviate from that of the majority of other soldier characters—he is known as “Boy Scout Kincaid” (134), whereas Lish’s Bradley Skinner becomes part of the “Shitbag



Crew” (*Preparation for the Next Life* 69)—his experience of the Iraq campaign is nevertheless similar to the other texts examined in my dissertation. Like Skinner’s, Kincaid’s experience of the war in its most immediate and unmitigated form is a far cry from that promised by derealized, logistical warfare that is virtually devoid of direct combat. Kincaid too witnesses, although he does not take part in them, war crimes rooted in a loss of empathy and the devolution of conduct into unbridled barbarity when he “had a glimpse of a pouch made of civilian faces, carelessly sewn together” (164). The discrepancy between his romanticized idea of the War on Terror and its stark reality finally becomes unbearable when he witnesses the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl and her family; an act that, recalling the reduction of horrific images to pure entertainment in *Preparation for the Next Life*, is documented through “[s]ecret pix you wouldn’t want to get into the wrong hands” (164). Compelled by his consciousness, Kincaid reports the incident to the unit’s chaplain (134). What remains of his faith in the military as a surrogate family with a firm moral code is eroded by the ensuing trial where his accusations are deemed unfounded, leading instead the accused soldiers to “conspire[e] to kill him if not outright then to set up circumstances in which (possibly) he’d be killed” (153). This suggests the possibility of Kincaid’s eventual injury really being attempted murder.

Following the grenade hit that severely wounds Kincaid, he perceives his own physical conditions in terms that border on gothic horror:

Still, they’d shoveled and swept the parts of him together. Ingeniously stitched and glued and inserted wires to hold him together [...]. Intraocular lens in his mangled left eye. Titanium implant holding together the broken skull. The skin/skins of his face stitched together [...]. Tight-strung wires in the lower part of the body [...]. (149–50)

Perceiving himself as an incarnation of Frankenstein’s creature for the age of the War on Terror, Kincaid’s psychological center cannot hold: his reconstructed physical state leads to a serious identity crisis as the near-death experience causes a profound sense of self-alienation making it impossible to preserve his old identity, instead necessitating the creation of a new “*self*” (149; italics in original). This new identity may be called “some convenient name—*Brett Kincaid*,” but it is a continuation merely in name and not in spirit as Oates depicts the experience of the war not as a temporary but a permanent rupturing of the ties to the civilian society that a physical return to the U.S. alone cannot mend (149; italics in original).

The ensuing disconnect from the American civilian society by and large corresponds to the trajectories sketched out by Saunders and Lish and sees Kincaid spiraling into bursts of domestic violence, severance of his social ties, and an increasing drug abuse in addition to his medication that lead to the break-up of his engagement and social reclusion. Kincaid certainly attempts

to work against these but ultimately fails to negotiate a civilian existence for himself. But the fashion in which Oates introduces Kincaid's struggles marks a distinct departure from the narrative mode of the rest of the text, making an understanding of his narrative contingent on the readership's familiarity with the concerns of returning veterans in general, effectively rendering Kincaid a type onto whom civilian anxieties are projected. For these purposes, Oates abandons the generally dominating limited third-person perspective of the text, depicting Kincaid's initial difficulties to readjust to civilian life through a series of brief dialogues scenes between him and his fiancée Juliet that exclusively relay Juliet's part of the conversations. Her replies manage to provide indication of domestic struggle and violence as a result of Kincaid's increasingly unstable condition and also serve as indictment of civilian ignorance even without Kincaid's replies. But a full understanding of this section rests, I would argue, on the kind of familiarity with the struggle of returning veterans that makes it possible to anticipate the content, if not the exact wording, of Kincaid's responses. Just like in the case of understanding Mike's suppressed memories in "Home," the assumed general understanding of and familiarity with what may happen in the war is assumed and a prerequisite for making sense of the fragmentary rendering of the conversations.

Kincaid's numerous frustrations are caused by his trying to negotiate life at home with the consequences of the war: Juliet's fruitless assurance that "[y]ou are mistaken—you do not look wounded. You do not look 'battered.' You do not look 'like shit!'" point to Kincaid's inability to get used to his condition (19); the calming "Just fireworks, Brett! Over at Palisade Park. . . . I can turn the music higher so you won't hear. I said honey—just *fireworks*. You know—*Fourth of July in the park*" hints at his panic-struck reaction to noise (20); "I can bring you a glass of water. OK, a glass of beer. But the doctor said . . . not a good idea to mix 'alcohol' and 'meds' . . . *Don't*—please" (20; italics, ellipses in original) points to his increased drug use. And finally, Juliet's "What did I tell them, I told them the truth—it was an accident. I slipped and fell and struck the door—so silly. [...] My jaw is not dislocated. [...] I know you did not mean it" sketches out scenes of domestic violence explained away as accidents (23). At the same time, Oates suggests a societal climate that severely restricts the possibility of addressing the effects of the traumatic aftermath of war. Stating that "I think it *is not real*. It is just *something in your head*" (21) and "Whatever you see in your head like in dreams is *not real*" (22; italics in original), Juliet dismisses the symptoms of Kincaid's PTSD as illusions that should not have any impact on him, a certainly well-meaning but nevertheless harmful unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to acknowledge and comprehend the effects of his traumatic war experiences.

Conditions similar to Kincaid's lead the veteran characters of Saunders and Lish to threaten or commit acts of violence against the civilian population. In the case of *Carthage*, an instance of violence—Kincaid's presumed murder of

Cressida Mayfield—similarly stands at the center of the text, though no violence has actually been committed. Instead, Oates outlines a societal climate in which the veterans’ potential for violence is no longer shocking but something that has come to be generally assumed to occur, indicating not only the military’s antagonistic perspective on civilian society but actually suggesting that the reverse is equally true. Before Cressida’s inability to bear the rejection of her advances to Kincaid and, after a brief scuffle, running off and going into hiding is revealed to be the real chain of events instead the assumed murder, Oates draws on the conventions of crime fiction. Examining the genre, John Scaggs claims that the “idea of the mystery or detective novel as a kind of game in which the reader participates, and the corresponding clue-puzzle structure of the novels, ‘invited and empowered the careful reader to solve the problem along with the detective’” (37).

In the first half of the text, this dynamic gives *Carthage* the appearance of a conventional crime story as the ambiguous depiction of the events appears to invite the participation of the reader to combine the clues and solve the mystery of Cressida’s murder. The way in which the text points to Kincaid as the most likely culprit seems to suggest his guilt as a foregone conclusion: Oates pointedly stages the meeting between Kincaid and Cressida at a local lakeside inn that, as is explicitly pointed out, had been taken over by the “Adirondack Hells Angels” (78). The presence of the Hells Angels might first and foremost serve as a shorthand to establish the inn as a place of ill repute and illicit dealings. More subtly, however, the explicit reference to the Hells Angels hints at a history of military veterans turned to violence and crime. In his portrayal of the Angels, Randy James points out that much, including “the history of the gang,” “remains shrouded in mystery.” Nevertheless, their military origins are well-documented, going back to 1948 when the Hells Angels was formed after a “vet named Otto Freidli [...] [broke] from one of the earliest postwar motorcycle clubs, the Pissed Off Bastards.” At a time when “military surplus made motorcycles affordable,” the Hells Angels attracted veterans who were, as James puts it euphemistically, “bored and itching for adventure.” Invoking the specter of the Hells Angels with their military history therefore serves as an additional hint of Kincaid’s guilt as it subtly suggests a history of veterans turning to crime upon their return home that Kincaid seems to follow.

Regarding Cressida’s disappearance, Kincaid is taken into custody after “he was found semiconscious, vomit- and blood-stained sprawled in the front seat of his Jeep Wrangler” (49), and later

acknowledge[s] that he’d encountered Cressida at the lakeside inn. He’d acknowledged that she’d been in his Jeep. [...] His account of the previous night was incoherent and inconsistent. Asked about scratch-marks on his face and smears of blood on the front of the Jeep he’d given vague answers. (46)

Kincaid delivers a confession about committing the murder even though he himself is not sure about the details of what happened nor why exactly he should have done it: “He’d hurt her *he thought*. Seemed to think yes—he’d *hurt her*. Couldn’t remember—why . . . Why he’d hurt her, then tried to bury her, couldn’t remember *why*” (173; italics, ellipsis in original). Despite the absence of a clear motive, Kincaid is frequently haunted by memory glimpses of how he buried the body of the young girl his comrades had murdered that he takes to be Cressida:

Later, he’d found a shallow place for her amid marshy soil, rocks. Tried to cover her with rocks and handfuls of muck. Trying to think *A body must be buried. A body must not be left for animals and birds*. He wasted precious time searching for a marker—a cross. (142; italics in original)

As both the police and Kincaid himself take his PTSD as the reason for killing Cressida, they also use it to rationalize the apparent inconsistencies of the case as Kincaid “was prone to seeing things *not-there* and hearing things *not-there* since the explosion in his head” (133; italics in original). With Kincaid no longer able to maintain a firm grasp on reality, inconsistencies such as Cressida’s missing body and her non-existent grave seem related to his inability to distinguish between fact and fantasy.

Only later, after the revelation of Cressida’s actual whereabouts, does Oates really complicate Kincaid’s testimony by suggesting that, as an effect of his war-related trauma, his inability to remember Cressida’s presumed murder leads him to unconsciously draw on the memory of burying the murdered Iraqi girl to make sense of what he believes happened. Until these later sections of the text, however, the invitation to the reader lies not primarily in figuring out the culprit. With the question of guilt seemingly settled, what remains to be understood is merely Kincaid’s motivation for murdering Cressida. The answer to this question is to be found in Oates’ depiction of Kincaid as a soldier character who, like Saunders and Lish’s characters, is unable to transition back to civilian life, and who seems to find an outlet for his frustrations through acts of violence against the civilian population. His admission of guilt is preceded by the already examined section in which Oates sketches his slipping into an increasingly uncontrolled use of medication, erratic behavior, and domestic violence. These frustrations, Oates suggests, might manifest themselves through violence as Kincaid explicitly warns Juliet that “he might hurt a civilian. Why a civilian, why would you hurt a civilian, he wasn’t sure” (175).

Crucially, Oates does not depict veterans of the War on Terror turning on American civilians as an aberration. The fate of Lish’s Bradley Skinner serves as a cautionary tale in its depiction of Skinner’s actions as a thus far isolated incident while gesturing toward future similar events possibly becoming more frequent. As videos “uploaded by disaffected soldiers, in which [Skinner’s]

comrades-in-arms gave testimony about the folly and evil of what they had been a part of” become more numerous and widespread, so does the possibility of these veterans acting in a similar way (193). In the case of *Carthage*, cases such as Kincaid’s no longer register as surprising. Given research such as the Death Penalty Information Center Report by Richard C. Dieter, nor is it possible to plead ignorance about the challenges veterans face upon their return to the U.S. At the time of its emblematic date of publication on Veterans Day 2015, the report claims that “[e]stimates from a variety of sources indicate that at least 10% of the current death row—that is, over 300 inmates—are military veterans” (4). The characters in the novel certainly display an acquaintance with these or similar statistics. This results in what appears to be a socially acknowledged probability of veterans turning violent. As Zeno contemplates his daughter’s presumed murder, he regards it in startlingly sober terms: “It was not a new or an uncommon situation—it should not have been, given media attention to similar disturbed, returning veterans, a surprising situation” (50).

In terms of the imagined relationship between the military and the civilian population, *Carthage* marks a sharp departure from the relative indifference found in the other narratives examined in my dissertation. Kincaid himself appears aware of the new apprehensive attitude to veterans, remarking that “civilians are afraid of you. In their eyes you can see they expect you to hurt them” (175). The ambiguous evidence of the crime scene coupled with Kincaid’s inability to remember exactly what did happen between Cressida and him in the moments before her disappearance is meant to tempt the reader to draw the same conclusion about Kincaid’s guilt. Oates initially seems to frame the text as following crime fiction conventions and inviting reader participation in filling in the blanks left open by the plot by drawing on readers’ familiarity with the troubles of returning veterans. In doing so, she lures the reader into coming to the same convenient conclusions that the characters in the novel do. Oates therefore illustrates the readership’s potential willingness to adopt the same societal attitude toward Kincaid that contributes to the ostracization of veterans by taking as a given the potential for violence associated with returning veterans.

However, while the articulation of these frustrations in *Carthage* inverts the depictions of Saunders and Lish—depicting the civilian willingness to assume the violent potential of veterans as opposed to depicting the violent potential of veterans—the texts express a shared set of anxieties. Disenchanted with the conduct of the war and impacted by its traumatic effects in spite of the propagated derealization of U.S. warfare, the returning veterans are shown to become further disillusioned upon their return to the U.S. Touted as the guardians of the American Homeland, these soldier characters find themselves disillusioned and angered by what they perceive as thinly veiled civilian disinterest and an unwillingness to acknowledge the war’s effects on the soldiers. Their physical return to the domestic U.S. therefore fails to coincide with a

return to the ostensibly deeply affective construct of the Homeland promised by the Bush administration. Whereas Chapters Two and Three examined literature that depicted a similar set of frustrations, the return home, if it happened at all, was temporary for most of the military characters of these characters. The threat of a violent conflict between veterans and civilians therefore figured as a future concern as the soldiers were returned to the battlefield or had not yet left it in the first place. In the case of war literature that places its veteran characters in immediate and permanent proximity to the domestic U.S., however, the ensuing antagonistic relationship between the U.S. military and civilian society produces an irrevocable social divide that manifests itself through different acts of violence, ranging from impending to regularly occurring ones in a period otherwise paradoxically rich in patriotic public gestures. Ultimately, these texts deal with the confusion, despair, and anger of their respective veteran characters, revealing how an antagonistic attitude to civilian society actually turns them from safeguards of the Homeland into potential or even assumed threats in their own right.

But in *Preparation for the Next Life* Atticus Lish goes even further in his portrayal of the way in which the War on Terror comes to impact life also in America as the civilian sphere increasingly functions akin to the logic of foreign battlefields. Most overtly, the shared socioeconomic position of Lish's three main characters illustrates the collapse of traditional political differences in much the way as it is theorized by Pease. I would also argue that Lish imagines this process to result in the Homeland Security State transposing a militarized logic onto the U.S. population at large. As Brad Evans and Henry Giroux write, one result of the post-9/11 policies has been that "war has become an extension of politics as almost all spheres of society have been transformed into a combat zone or in some cases a killing zone" (49). Similar to this contention, Lish can be seen to imagine a domestic U.S. society that increasingly functions like to a foreign war zone. In this zone, the processes leading to the returning veterans' violent frustration are perpetuated also in a purely domestic context and extended beyond the point at which the military operations of the War on Terror will have largely ceased.

As discussed in my Introduction, it is Donald Pease's contention that through the establishment of the Homeland and its policies, the U.S. sought to establish a system of "global rule" (173). However, the purpose of establishing a global system of dominance is not to facilitate the state's expansion through the physical occupation of additional territory but to safeguard a global system of economic transactions: "[The United States] wanted to exercise authoritative control over the global commons—the sea and the air—in the interest of guaranteeing the free movement of capital, commodities, and peoples" (181). It is particularly this economic aspect that Brad Evans and Henry Giroux focus on in their examination of the post-9/11 U.S. policies. They postulate a host of the rhetorical and political processes that have informed also the preceding chapters of this dissertation, among them "spectacles of violence have become

so ubiquitous that it is no longer possible to identify any clear civic, social, or ethical qualities in the enforced social order,” “forces of militarism have become so ingrained that they are inseparable from the daily functioning of civic life,” and “a world that has lost all faith in its ability to envisage—let alone create—better futures, condemning its citizens instead to a desolate terrain of inevitable catastrophe” (1). According to Evans and Giroux, the purpose of these and various additional processes is not the protection of the U.S. and its population. Instead, it is the establishment and protection of what they subsume under the general notion of “neoliberalism” that “operates throughout the global space of unregulated flows,” a claim that distinctly echoes Pease’s argument regarding the role of the Homeland Security State as the guardian of a global exchange of commodities (2).<sup>11</sup>

Following such a “reconfiguration of the nation-state,” Evans and Giroux find that the question of civic inclusion or exclusion is determined by the individual socioeconomic capital:

Discarded by the corporate state, dispossessed of social provisions, and deprived of the economic, political, and social conditions that enable viable and critical modes of agency, more and more sectors of civilian society find themselves inhabiting what [anthropologist João] Biehl calls ‘zones of total social exclusion’ marked by deep inequalities in power, wealth, and income. (51)

Societal inclusion, this suggests, is no longer predominantly a question of citizenship. Rather, in a society in which the “understanding of citizenship is diminished to consumerism” (97), it is enabled or curtailed by the socioeconomic capital available to the individual which may or may not suffice to “enable viable and critical modes of agency” and thus social participation (51).

A number of narratives examined in my dissertation engage with processes of socioeconomic exclusion akin to those theorized by the likes of Evans, Giroux, and Pease from a perspective that is distinctly informed by the respective characters’ roles in the U.S. military: In *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, for instance, Ben Fountain imagines Billy’s growing frustration with the processes that sanitize and commodify his experience of the War on Terror while simultaneously relegating him to a “zone of exclusion” as his socioeconomic capital is not sufficient to effectively voice dissent. Likewise, George Saunders’ narrator in “Home” struggles with his disillusionment with the public rhetoric of gratitude for his military service that accompanies his exclusion.

But in their respective narratives, Fountain and Saunders conceptualize the public militarization in the same way that Catherine Lutz casts it: as processes that produce public acclaim for and investment in a glorified notion of the

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<sup>11</sup> Although Pease, Evans, and Giroux employ slightly different terminology, Pease preferring the terms “Global Homeland” and “Homeland Security State” and Evans and Giroux favoring “security state,” their arguments are similar.

military. Atticus Lish, on the other hand, focuses on what Patrick Deer understands as militarism: the utilization of culture not to produce approval for the War on Terror, but as the very implementation of a military logic in regular American life. In narratives like *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* and "Home," the central conflict occurs between the civilian and military. While the conflict between these two spheres is seen to have grown more pronounced as a result of the War on Terror, this division itself is an established one. However, the socioeconomic positions of the central characters in Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* complicate the question of who is truly included in, or rather excluded from, the U.S. population and along which lines such in- or exclusion is demarcated.

Lish's three central characters, Bradley Skinner, Jimmy Murphy, and Zou Lei, inhabit sociopolitical positions that, judged according to the framework of the traditional nation state, would distinctly set them apart from each other: Skinner a discharged veteran, Murphy a felon with multiple convictions who moves between imprisonment and a life of crime. But while these two are divided along the lines of military and civilian, they are both American citizens. Zou Lei, on the other hand, is an illegal and undocumented Chinese immigrant working a string of odd jobs. But despite their vastly different political positions, Lish uniformly relegates all three characters to life in such "zones of total social exclusion" (Evans, Giroux 51): as argued above in greater detail, Flushing, the New York neighborhood that Lish's characters inhabit, is marked by urban decay and poverty. The destitute surroundings serve here as externalized representation of the diminished interior lives of the background characters inhabiting the area, the pressures of poverty and ostracism resulting in a state of social regression in which "[a]dult men lifted their heads like horses, their long, hollow-cheeked skulls, staring" and where "[y]ou could see the wooden faces of women in aprons" (128). Through this quasi-animalistic state, Lish suggests that the socioeconomically disenfranchised people of Flushing have become distinct from the general American population. And as Lish's central characters have been abandoned to this environment, the same forces of disenfranchisement and exclusion work on all three, though in slightly different ways.

On the surface, Lish's depiction of his characters' position on the fringes of society may certainly appear as a preoccupation with the question of class. In such a reading, his depiction of the shared socioeconomic situation of his characters does not necessarily translate to an engagement with the Homeland Security State's erasure of different political categories and establishment of a singular homogenous global category of control that Pease and Masco claim. But I would argue that Lish depicts how processes, most overtly the USA PATRIOT Act (commonly referred to as Patriot Act), facilitate a leveling of political difference that impact all three characters equally despite their seemingly belong to vastly different political categories. Initially an Act of Congress, the Patriot Act was signed into law in October 2001 and has gone



through various cycles of extension, renewal, and amendment since its original inception. In the context of *Preparation for the Next Life*, however, the Patriot Act functions as shorthand for what Pease would call the State of Exception and the legally authorized law enforcement overreach it enables.

Most overtly, this act impacts the life of Zou Lei, the novel's most sympathetically drawn character, as it grants the executive unprecedented power to exert virtually unlimited control over and violence on her as any effective checks and balances against such excess have seemingly been abolished. During a brief detainment, Zou Lei becomes aware of her precarious situation through a long monologue in which another female immigrant details what might happen to them in case of arrest:

Any deputy could take you by the elbow on a long walk through the jail to the other side. He could show you to a laundry room full of male trustees and say, Here's your new helper. Howbout I leave her here? He would wait just long enough for your blood to run cold. Just kidding. You shit yourself? You wanna check? And he would march you back to the female wing. Along the way, he would say, Bet you feel like being nice now. He would lock you in the bathroom and come back for you later. If you fought him, he was authorized to rush you like a man, tackle you, pound your head on the floor, Taser you backside while you crawled, drag you out by the leg while you screamed under the cameras recording all of this in black and white, strap you in The Chair, put the spit bag on your head and leave you there for up to twelve hours while you begged for water. And he could count to twelve any way he wanted. (13)

Making a living as an undocumented worker in the underbelly of New York, Zou Lei would certainly have been in permanent danger of deportation even prior to 9/11, but Lish repeatedly and explicitly connects the increased precariousness of her situation, and that of other undocumented immigrants, with the lack of restrictions enabled by the Patriot Act (10). And that the tone of the woman detailing the above list to Zou Lei is not one of agitation but of quiet resignation indicates that such institutional overreach has come to be accepted as a certainty and subsumed into the list of pressures contributing to the "wooden faces" and processes of irreversible social exclusion (128).

In fact, Lish's depiction of the constant threat illegal immigrants live under echoes the arguments made by Evans and Giroux when they claim that

[s]uch zones [of total social exclusion] are sites of rapid disinvestment, places marked by endless spectacles of violence that materialize the neoliberal logics of containment, commodification, surveillance, militarization, cruelty, criminalization, and punishment. (51–2)

But Lish figures these processes not merely as external impositions but also as internal occurrences. Zou Lei and other female immigrants are shown to be

in constant danger of abuse by the state and its institutions, but Lish also depicts a social dynamic in which the proverbial wretched of the earth populating the zones of socioeconomic exclusion turn on each other. Especially the female population of these zones seems vulnerable to violence not only externally imposed but also originating from within.

Particularly Jimmy Murphy commits a number of violent crimes against female Chinese immigrants. Depicting illegal immigrants as the victims of the state and its citizens, embodied by Murphy, might be read as at least partially reinstating citizenship as a functional division even within zones of social exclusion. However, Lish depicts all of these transgressions not simply as violence but explicitly as sexual violence. In case of an arrest, Zou Lei learns that the guards “were going to rape you unless you carried yourself a certain way, and even then, they could nail you anytime, misplace you in the laundry room. They did it to the small half-Indian girls in the Mexican gangs” (13). In a scene that Lish renders in unsparing detail, Murphy is shown to viciously beat, rape, and possibly murder a female immigrant and attempts to do the same to Zou Lei who only barely manages to escape him (309–10). Due to these explicit references to sexual violence committed by men against women, it seems that instead of simply returning to a distinction citizen—non-citizen, Lish imagines these zones of social exclusion to be at least partially divided along the line of gender, thereby calling attention to the especially dire consequences of social exclusion suffered by women.

While Lish’s portrayal of Zou Lei emphasizes the heightened degree of volatility and precariousness of the socioeconomically disenfranchised resulting from the politics of the Homeland, the gradual development of Jimmy Murphy’s inclination towards violence mirrors that of the frustrated veteran Bradley Skinner. All through this story, the text suggests a development akin to the one theorized by Evans and Giroux, the contention that as a result of the post-9/11 policies, “almost all spheres of society have been transformed into a combat zone or in some cases a killing zone” (49), something that is suggested through Murphy’s journey through the U.S. penal system that portrays such policies as quintessentially misguided and creating rather than mitigating threats to society.

Born into a blue-collar family, Murphy soon takes to a life of petty crime that, as a result of administrative negligence and the conditions within the prison system, results in progressively far more serious crimes and violent acts both in and out of jail and prison. Strikingly, Lish draws Murphy’s experience in the penal system as the domestic equivalent of Skinner’s experience in Iraq; a gradual sense of frustration, administrative negligence, and an environment dominated by violence which in turn leads to a sense of disillusionment, of being cut off from society at large, and to becoming not only desensitized to but ready for violent acts. The initial parallel between prison and war is drawn at the time of Murphy’s third conviction for which he is given “the option of

a five-month intensive rehabilitation program run on a boot-camp model” instead of serving his sentence (166). The militarized (and increasingly privatized, although this is not a concern that is addressed in the text) model that comes to determine the prison system is undercut as Lish shows the inability of such a quasi-military regimen to prepare Murphy for the “war zone” of prison in much the same way as Skinner’s military training failed to adequately prepare him for Iraq (169).

Lish in fact thematically likens the “war zone” of the Homeland Security State’s penal system to the actual one. As Murphy is transferred to institutions with ever higher security, populated by more volatile inmates, prison becomes the site of perpetual anxiety and confusion in which “[e]veryone had to be ready. The tension he had felt was constant and real” and acquires a palpable quality that he “could feel immediately, an air pressure, a difficulty breathing” (169), that is broken up only by fights after which “the tension started building again” (168). Going back to the claims of Adam Piette, prison appears to create an environment of confusion and uncertainty not unlike the battlefield. And much like soldiers, the inmates have to rely on self-medication with “tobacco or coffee or anything for a buzz” to cope with the constant prospect of violence (168). When violence does break out, it is described in terms reminiscent of Skinner’s experiences of visceral, direct combat in Iraq:

Correctional officers sprinted out across the turf towards two men attacking a third. The frenzy is unbelievable—you watch him getting hit one, two, three, four times—falling and scrambling away, trying to run and falling. Getting hit in the back—the other attacker hits him. The officers are hitting them with batons. The fight tumbles over the picnic table. The victim is still being stabbed. Another officer sprints around from the other side. One of the men flattens out—you see the knife flip out of his hands. They hit one with gas as he tries to get a last lick in, and he falls on his face. The victim pushes himself away with his sweatshirt in red flaps and his skin showing like someone bitten by a lion. (170)

Murphy’s inability to fully process the mayhem of the courtyard fight suggests an environment in which the state no longer can—or perhaps wants to—maintain control so that has instead been surrendered to a domestic approximation of warfare.

Reminiscent of Skinner’s spiraling into a mindset in which he grows increasingly desensitized to violence, resulting in joining the murderous rampages of the “Shitbag Crew” (69), Murphy undergoes a similar process of desensitization and forming of an attitude of radical antagonism toward society. This process sees him joining “a couple guys from New York who had in common that they were not black” (168) to answer the question “Are you a Nazi or an Aryan” by joining the Aryan Brotherhood, a radical organization among inmates with an explicitly racist agenda (169). This process of radicalization is taken to the extreme by a group of “gang foot soldiers” who take an

antagonistic stance against the state and society at large, declaring that they “could get transferred anywhere in the gulag system, from state to state, and wind up in the SHU [Special Housing Unit]. The Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal had just come out on CNN” (153). Linking the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib to the isolation of prisoners in the U.S., Lish again suggests a domestic continuation of practices originating from the War on Terror. These result in the inmates’ self-conceptualization of being “like Al Qaida” (153), thus implying that the way in which the penal system is run is turning it into a breeding ground for domestic terrorism.

Lish depicts Murphy’s inability to break the cycle of going in and out of prison to be based on institutional as much as personal issues. Even before his initial conviction, Murphy was given to violence and rumored to have committed rape, but Lish sketches the environment in which Murphy grows up as so divorced from the legal apparatus that no charges are filed (158–9). The conviction that does earn Murphy his first stint in jail, however, stems from the relatively minor transgression of a DUI in combination with stealing “a couple of bags of cement [...] and a Ryobi that retailed at six hundred dollars,” and a very distinct lack of support from his public defender (164). He fails to even attempt to mount a defense in the following case, instead ordering Murphy to “take the plea” (165), a practice that, according to Jed S. Rakoff in an article for *The New York Review of Books*, tends to lead to draconian sentencing while offering only a minimal chance of effective legal counseling.

Murphy’s prison sentences—already his second conviction sends him to Rikers Island, New York City’s main jail complex with a reputation for dire living conditions and violence—are extended progressively through what essentially becomes a legal perpetuum mobile: as Murphy is nearing the end of his sentence, “he and four other offenders rolled a cigarette using an envelope for writing letters home and lit it with a tulip [...] and smoked it standing on a footlocker and blowing their smoke into the vent” (167). This comparatively minor disciplinary infraction forces Murphy back into the war zone of yet another high-security complex without considering how such a practice compounds the detrimental effects it has on the increasingly volatile Murphy. The practice of extending Murphy’s prison sentence with little to no regard to the mental and physical fallout while providing no effective way of intervening in the process distinctly resembles the extension of Skinner’s tour of duty by way of stop loss-orders.

In much the same vein that Lish depicts Skinner’s development following his eventual return to the U.S., Murphy’s propensity toward violent behavior increases as his social ties and capacity for empathy decrease; left to his own devices after the release from prison, the unemployed (and by now unemployable) Murphy spirals into alcohol and drug abuse while his family is unable or unwilling to counteract this institutional abandonment by providing emotional or financial support of their own. Emblematic of this is that upon his release, “Jimmy’s mother did not pick him up. He took the Greyhound bus from

Krayville to the Manhattan Port Authority terminal with multiple stops on the way, a twenty-hour journey” (230). In short, the period between Murphy’s release and his eventual death is characterized by socioeconomic marginalization, lack of support in mitigating the physical and psychological effects of jail and prison, inability to fully reenter society, and erratic and violent behavior.

But while the same processes do characterize Skinner’s redeployment period, Murphy’s trajectory is entirely rooted in exclusively domestic and civilian processes that nevertheless produce the same violent frustration seen in returning veterans like Skinner. I would therefore argue that Lish sets up the parallel trajectories of Skinner and Murphy to warn of the failure of the policies of the post-9/11 Homeland Security State. Instead of effectively regulating the risks the United States sees itself faced with, the conduct of and public reception to the War on Terror is imagined to lead to returning disenchanted and marginalized veterans threatening to articulate their frustration through violence. The result is the inversion of the role of the military, from guardian of the Homeland to that of being a significant risk to it in its own right. As these same policies are brought to bear on a domestic context, specifically the penal system, a similar process of disenchantment and violent radicalization is set in motion. Lish thus suggests that even after the conclusion of the War on Terror, the U.S. will find itself locked in a cycle in which the policies of the Homeland Security State actually produce domestic threats that, in turn, will result in futile attempts to manage them through increasingly more draconian means. Through the establishment of “zones of total social exclusion,” the state produces the very conditions for its own destabilization as civilian America begins to turn into a war zone in which the foreign conduct of the War on Terror is mirrored precisely by the domestic.

## Conclusion: The War Comes Home

On July 7, 2016, Micah Johnson opened fire on police officers in Dallas, Texas, killing five and injuring nine others as well as two civilians. After a chase to the campus of El Centro College ended in a shootout with police and special units and a subsequent period of terse negotiations, the standoff ended when a remote-controlled police robot equipped with an explosive charge detonated its load close to Johnson, killing him in the explosion. As Richard Fausset, Manny Fernandez, and Alan Blinder report for *The New York Times*, Johnson was a veteran of the War on Terror having served in Afghanistan before his return following charges of sexual harassment of a female soldier. Despite maintaining an ordinary appearance, Johnson had apparently been radicalized and emotionally disconnected from his social environment before lashing out violently and apparently deploying military tactics against the victims of his shooting spree. He was finally killed with police equipment that has become virtually indistinguishable from sophisticated military equipment. This course of action led some law enforcement officers, Henry Fountain and Michael S. Schmidt report, to express their concerns about “the new tactic blurr[ing] the line between policing and warfare.” Both the actions of Johnson and the reaction of the police force had been shaped by the War on Terror. The war, it would seem, had come home.

Throughout this dissertation, it has been my central contention that for a nuanced examination of the interplay between the spheres impacted by the War on Terror, contemporary U.S. war fiction cannot, and indeed must not, be reduced to its representation of the war as it is fought on foreign battlefields. Instead, it is vital to acknowledge such fiction’s critical engagement with the post-9/11 policies of the Homeland Security State as both informing the war and impacting the sociopolitical order of American society. In offering stories in which the war abroad is always necessarily tied to domestic concerns, many of the literary texts express anxiety about the political and social implementation of a military order onto the U.S. society, an order that leads to the emergence of what Atticus Lish calls a domestic “war zone” (169).

As mentioned in the Introduction, Wallis R. Sanborn III, however, holds that the “violence of the American novel of war is real [meaning actual acts of warfare], not symbolic, not metaphorical, not verbal, not imagined, not cold,” (12) and “most often includes the deployment of American forces on foreign soils” (17). The thematic scope of the U.S. war novel, Sanborn sug-

gests, must be restricted to imagining the war as it is fought abroad. Thematically circumscribed in this fashion, war literature would in my view trade much of the structural and ideological flexibility—incorporating various, possibly opposed, narrative perspectives, fractured timelines, and expressing potentially competing positions vis-à-vis the War on Terror—elaborated on in the introduction to essentially mimic the limited and limiting scope of factual recollections found in either military blogs or military (auto-)biographies. To restrict war fiction merely to combat runs the risk of disregarding the interest in the wider political and social implications emerging from this field of literature.

This is not to suggest that there are no scenes of combat in war fiction or that they should be ignored in critical analysis. As I have demonstrated, the narratives examined in my dissertation undercut the publicly propagated version of a technologically removed and indirect U.S. warfare, a version fueling the state fantasy of an absence of psychological and physical suffering of U.S. troops in the War on Terror. Contrary to such fantasy, the analyzed literature teems with scenes of visceral and intensely immediate violence visited on both U.S. and non-U.S. soldiers: a young soldier is found after “his eyes had been gouged out [...]. His throat had been nearly cut through [...]. His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated” in *The Yellow Birds* (205–6). In another example, a suspected suicide bomber is hit by a bullet “lodging just below the [bomber’s] left ear, the pressure pushing upward, finally knocking loose whatever fibrous matter that had been holding the cleft halves of the man’s head together, painting the interior of the Opel with blood-brain-skull” in *Fobbit* (38). Virtually all of the texts examined in this dissertation posit direct and unmitigated violence as a constituent element of the War on Terror, whether they are predominantly set in a combat zone, like *The Yellow Birds*, or descriptions of the war are relegated to the background, as in *Preparation for the Next Life*.

At the same time, however, some texts include scenes of technologically fully mediated warfare that problematize a narrow definition of war literature such as Sanborn’s: such warfare does not truly correspond to the notion of war as “real” if the notion of real exclusively denotes direct and corporeal (12). Rather, it is literally symbolic as the central characters in novels such as Dan Fesperman’s *Unmanned* and David Abrams’ *Fobbit* witness the war from a spatial and technological remove that turns combatants into abstracted digital symbols on, respectively, a drone pilot’s screen and an Intelligence Officer’s monitor. But although these characters do not experience the war as a physical affair, it is my point that their stories offer a counternarrative to the publicly propagated equation of technological mediation and emotional distancing. The emotional response of characters such as Abrams’ Charles Gooding Jr. or Fesperman’s Darwin Cole is not contingent on the technologically mediated and physically removed way in which they perceive war atrocities. Seeing the image of a “sheared-off torso” (*Fobbit* 87) or “arms and legs, bright clothing,

smears of blood, the fleshy blur of faces with fixed and open eyes” on a screen does not drain the images of their affective potential (*Unmanned* 7), as Jean Baudrillard and subsequent scholars of the intersection between warfare and media technology would have it. Mediated experience does retain a devastating psychological impact not unlike seeing such atrocities in the flesh might have. Despite the remove from the frontlines of combat and the absence of contact with enemy troops, such characters end up suffering from severe psychological trauma. What emerges from these texts is a dismissal of the idea that the War on Terror is devoid of psychological and physical suffering. These fictional texts seek to reinstate a public awareness of the war’s lingering traumatic aspects, be it the still prevalent direct combat or the impact of technologies of derealized warfare.

What an approach to war literature limited to combat and possibly immediately adjacent activities—training, deployment, aftermath of battle—along the lines of Sanborn’s conceptualization inevitably excludes is the examination of how such contemporary war fiction ties the War on Terror as it is conducted abroad to the political, social, and cultural practices that determine the domestic sphere. I argue that the writers I discuss make use of fiction writing and extend the thematic scope of their narratives to link concerns about the military practice of the war abroad with the impact of post-9/11 policies on civilian life, thereby critically questioning the policies and state fantasy of the Homeland Security State.

What is of interest for such fiction is therefore not merely the respective military characters’ experience of the War on Terror but also a critical engagement with the particular way in which this experience is represented, or at least believed to be represented, to a civilian audience as well as how these representations are used to justify particular political shifts through which the War on Terror shapes the domestic life in the U.S. In his assessment of how American war culture engages with such processes, Patrick Deer distinguishes between two related, yet autonomous concepts: militarism and militarization. Quoting historian John Gillis, Deer argues that militarism is “an older concept typically ‘defined as either the dominance of the military over civilian authority, or more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in society’” (52). Militarization, on the other hand, “has been influentially defined by Michael Geyer as ‘the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence’” (52). The former process primarily aims at a reconfiguration of the political order and role of the U.S. nation state, while the latter is a sociocultural process drawn on to produce public approval of such political shifts via the work of state fantasy. Geyer specifically distinguishes between militarism and militarization since it is his contention that the latter notion offers a more vital field of interrogation (52). But as I argue throughout the dissertation, contemporary war literature attempts to offer an intervention in the public proliferation of both of these processes through a variety of fictional engagements that range from focusing on



a singular concern, be it public militarization or militarism, or imagining how they work in conjunction.

Central to the engagement with the work of public militarization in literature is the production of a sanitized depiction of the War on Terror. In order to maintain public investment in the War on Terror, such a sanitized media portrayal is shown to distort the reality of the war by draining its public reception of the physical and psychological impact on the soldiers. In *Fobbit*, for instance, Charles Gooding Jr. is convinced that the U.S. public is not interested in a truthful, albeit potentially troubling, representation of the war at all. Instead, he thinks the civilian population demands a portrayal of the war in which “the bomb attacks, the sniper kills, the sucking chest wounds, and the dismemberments” are turned into “something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs” (2). Such a depiction of the war that is heavy on patriotism but light on the acknowledgment of its repercussions for American soldiers also obfuscates and frequently even actively suppresses the articulation of contrary narratives by veterans.

The experience of such a disconnect between the sanitized public perception of the war and the military characters’ involvement in it intensifies in Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* as the public desire for a sanitized representation of the war is no longer merely assumed but witnessed first-hand by the eponymous Billy Lynn and his comrades. Fountain presents the public depiction of the war in the form of a melodramatic spectacle taking place during the halftime show of the 2004 NFL Thanksgiving Game, a representation that reduces the soldiers from ostensible objects of patriotic admiration to background props of a spectacular public militarization intended not only to drum up public investment in the War on Terror but also to commodify such investment for the sake of private financial gains.

What the U.S. public thus is imagined to be patriotically invested in is a particular sanitized depiction of the military that is starkly at odds with the actual war experience by military characters. This carefully adjusted picture of the war is characterized by the purported absence of mental and physical suffering on the part of the U.S. military, it does not really require any public effort to compensate for the impact of the war. Such investment can thus be articulated by purely rhetorical practices of ostensible allegiance to the U.S. military, an allegiance that does not call for any further political, financial, or emotional investment. The public adherence to such sanitized images of the War on Terror is seen to produce the military characters’ mounting sense of frustration with what they find to be the willful ignorance of the American public which results in their gradual sense of estrangement that threatens to be articulated through erratic acts of violence.

The specter of such violence can at least momentarily be averted in Fountain’s novel, but only through the soldiers’ separation from the civilian audience as they return to Iraq. But in texts like George Saunders’ “Home,” Atticus

Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*, and Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage*, when military characters return permanently to civil society violence does—or almost does—ensue. Upon the respective character's return from the War on Terror, the public gestures of admiration for and investment in the military does not translate into palpable aid, but the veterans are denied access to social or even familial networks of practical and emotional care necessary to effectively address the lingering psychological and physical effects of the war. Frequently permanently physically impaired and mentally volatile, these characters enact, or at the very least threaten to, their frustration and despair through violence aimed at the U.S. public. As I argue, these texts suggest a fundamental shift in the relationship between the U.S. military and public, and identify a fatal fallacy in the official state fantasy underpinning the War on Terror: while an abstracted and sanitized image of the U.S. military, displacing more truthful, albeit troubling, accounts of the war figures as the subject of patriotic admiration, actual veterans have to contest with processes of socioeconomic exclusion causing erratic acts of violence. This, in turn, results in a shift in the public perception of veterans: from objects of patriotic reverence to sources of danger in their own right.

In addition to concerns about the public militarization, U.S. war fiction engages with processes of militarism in society. Unlike the halftime show and game of American football that serve as domesticated and abstracted versions of actual warfare in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Atticus Lish suggests the creation of a domestic U.S. society in which a military logic derived from the conduct of the War on Terror abroad is transposed onto the U.S. population. As Brad Evans and Henry Giroux argue, the establishment of the Homeland Security State has resulted in war having become “an extension of all politics as almost all spheres of society have been transformed into a combat zone or in some cases a killing zone” (49). Echoing this development in his novel, Lish portrays an American society that, at its socioeconomic fringes, has turned into a domestic war zone. In such a zone, processes of exclusion and disenchantment similar to those eventually leading to the veterans' sense of frustration articulated through violence, are perpetuated in civilian and domestic settings. However, the policies of the Homeland Security State are revealed to be self-defeating as the increased logic of war-like security processes turns out to not mitigate but actively produce threats to the state.

Through narratives that oscillate between the foreign and domestic as they combine fighting in the War on Terror abroad with sociopolitical processes in the U.S., writers of contemporary war fiction go beyond the restrictions of (auto-)biographies or war blog detailing combat on foreign battlefields. Instead, the field has to be understood more productively as a literature also of militarization and militarism that binds the conduct of the war to the wider implications of the many different technologies, affects, policies, ideologies, etc. informing it.

Where the narratives examined in my dissertation do transcend precisely any “pure” illustrations of warfare, they also shy away from positing a dichotomy of a chaotic and dangerous abroad and a sheltered domestic space. According to literary critics such as Bruce Robbins, whose criticism of post-9/11 fiction is similar to the one voiced by Rory Stewart and Richard Gray, the works of American writers were predominantly driven by an escapist impulse to avoid the complications of an increasingly more unstable world in favor of “[r]ituals of retreat to a private or familial zone” (1098). But with regard to literature that shows the ultimate consequence of the Homeland Security State to the U.S. itself turning into a war zone governed by the same principles as the battlefields of the war, the assertion of American literature retreating into the ostensible safe haven of domestic preoccupation can hardly be upheld without further qualification. Rather, the dual perspective on the foreign and domestic in contemporary war fiction shatters old certainties, emerging as a lens through which to view the military, social, cultural, and political ramifications of the War on Terror on a variety of locales and bodies, both abroad and in the U.S. itself.

To perform their critical engagement with the implications and effects of the military conduct of the War on Terror, of militarism and militarization, and of the Homeland Security State, writers draw upon seemingly disparate genres such as the domestic novel, the novel of social protest, naturalism, crime fiction, etc. Written in a thematically and stylistically varied way, war literature exhibits precisely the characteristics that Caren Irr identifies as crucial to what she terms the emergent U.S. fiction of the “geopolitical novel,” comprised of “political narratives appropriate to the twenty-first century” (9). Such writing “tests the viability and boundaries of domestic literary conventions. The geopolitical novel draws on several alternative strains of writing in order to revive the problem of representing the world in a new, lively form” (9). When understood in a way that recognizes the narrative interplay of diverse political, social, and cultural processes, the war novel surely has to be counted among such “strains of writing,” in particular with regard to the genre’s potential for engaging conflicts both present and future (9).

The emergence, or in some cases re-emergence, of armed conflicts in old and new locales such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria will surely find its way into U.S. fiction. And with regard to the political developments in the U.S., processes of both militarization and militarism appear to grow more prevalent and occur throughout a variety of social sectors, rendering also further engagements of American fiction with such processes certain. Examples of such sectors include what Evans and Giroux term “the paramilitarizing of the police [...] as local police are now being militarized with the latest combat-grade equipment imported straight from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan to the streets of places like Ferguson, Missouri” (59–60). Other scholars fear the effects of militarism and militarization on the culture and education sectors:

Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, for instance, examine the role of public culture, claiming “the penetration and subordination of the public sphere through popular culture as the militarization of the public sphere” (42–3), while Giroux argues that the project to “turn universities into militarized knowledge factories producing knowledge, research, and personnel in the interest of the Homeland (In)Security State” is making inroads into the U.S. education system (64). If such an instrumentalization came to pass, it would threaten to transform U.S. culture into a propaganda vehicle for the state’s actions and the potential for future critical engagements and interventions. As it stands, however, I suggest that the thematically far-reaching and panoramic strand of contemporary U.S. war fiction examined in this dissertation may productively serve as a prism through which American literature produced about and under the impact of the Global Homeland can and should be read.

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# Index

- Abrams, David, *Fobbit*, 10, 30, 31, 36–37, 38–40, 42, 43–44, 50–53, 55–66, 135, 137
- Abu Ghraib, 40–41, 131–32
- Aday, Sean, Steven Livingston, and Maeve Hebert, 51
- Alter, Alexandra, 76
- Anker, Elisabeth, 70, 83, 85, 86, 88
- Appel, Jacob, *The Man Who Wouldn't Stand Up*, 89
- Aslan, Reza, 19
- Bacevich, Andrew J., 97–98, 106
- Baudrillard, Jean, 29, 33, 52
- Benedict, Helen, *Sand Queen*, 32
- Boyle, Philip and Kevin D. Haggerty, 75, 92, 93
- Brady, Leo, 57
- Brooks, Peter, 69–70
- Bruck, Connie, 40–41
- Bush, George W., 23, 80
- Butler, Judith, 85
- Butterworth, Michael L., 73
- Butterworth, Michael L. and Stormi D. Moskal, 72
- Buzzell, Colby, *My War Killing Time in Iraq*, 12
- Cavarero, Adriana, 58, 62, 115
- Chamayou, Grégoire, 47
- Childers, Thomas, 38
- Chivalry, 57, 77
- Commodified patriotism, 81–82, 86–89, 107
- Cowles, Gregory, 102
- Crawford, John, 20
- Crime fiction, 122–23, 125
- Danner, Mark, 40, 53
- Dao, James, 113
- Davies, Matt and Simon Philpott, 140
- Debord, Guy, 70
- Deer, Patrick, 21, 128, 136
- DeGhett, Torie Rose, 64
- DeLillo, Don, *End Zone*, 72
- Derealized warfare, 29–31, 135–36
- conflation with direct warfare, 43–44, 47–48
  - drone warfare, 45–48
  - psychological impact of, 42–43, 47, 58–62, 64–66
- Desensitization to violence, 54, 113, 114–16, 120–21
- Dieter, Richard C., 125
- Direct warfare, 135
- experience of, 49–50
  - physical impact of, 121
  - physical impact of, 109
  - psychological impact of, 42, 109, 111–13, 114, 117, 121–22, 124
- Docx, Edward, 14
- Dudziak, Mary L., 54
- Esch, Joanne, 24
- Evans, Brad and Henry Giroux, 28, 126–27, 129, 130, 138
- Exclusion of military characters
- socioeconomic, 89–91
- Exclusion of veterans
- affective, 107–8
  - socioeconomic, 101–2, 105–7, 110–11
- Fallows, James, 68
- Fausset, Richard, Manny Fernandez, and Alan Blinder, 134
- Fesperman, Dan, *Unmanned*, 10, 30, 31, 36, 45–48, 66, 135–36
- Filkins, Dexter, 91
- Finkel, David, *Thank You for Your Service*, 38, 105
- Flanery, Patrick, 111
- Fountain, Ben, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, 10, 30, 31, 50, Ch. Two, 99, 138

- Fountain, Henry and Michael S. Schmidt, 134
- Frederick, Jim, 113
- Gallagher, Matt, 13
- Garner, Dwight, 109
- Gilsinan, Kathy, 80
- Giroux, Henry, 140
- Global Homeland, 22–28, 126–27  
     national myths in, 23–25, 76, 97  
     state fantasy in, 26, 25–26, 27–28, 34, 135
- Gray, Richard, 16–17, 19
- Griggs, Brandon, 12
- Heller, Joseph, *Catch-22*, 38–39
- Hellmich, Christina, 36
- Holloway, David, 19–20
- Hooker, Richard, *MASH*, 72
- Hoskins, Andrew, 33, 61
- Huebner, Andrew J., 98
- Hutner, Gordon, 111
- Irr, Caren, 18, 139
- Jackson, Richard, 120
- James, Randy, 123
- Johnson, T. Geronimo, *Hold it 'til it Hurts*, 32
- Kamber, Michael and Tim Arango, 64
- Klay, Phil, *Redeployment*, 10, 13–14, 30, 31, 36, 42–43, 49
- Kyle, Chris, *American Sniper*, 11
- Lish, Atticus, *Preparation for the Next Life*, 10, 29, 31, 32, 50, 109–18, 126–33, 138
- Lovell, John R. and Clinton B. Conger, 72
- Lutz, Catherine, 30, 69
- Martin, Andrew, 76
- Martin, Geoff and Erin Steuter, 73
- Masco, Joseph, 26
- McCain, John and Jeff Flake, 74
- McLoughlin, Kate, 9
- Melodrama, 84–85  
     genre of, 69–70  
     political, 70, 83, 86, 88
- Militarism, 21, 92–93, 105, 128–33, 136–37, 138
- Militarization, 21, 69, 136–37
- Military blogs, 12
- Military frustration  
     with domestic U.S., 54–55, 74–75, 93–96, 98–99, 137  
     with loss of agency, 38–39, 44–45, 49  
     with public reception of War on Terror, 78, 81  
     with the War on Terror, 37–38
- Montopoli, Brian, 9
- Moss, Michael, 75
- National Public Radio, 14
- Nostro, Lauren, 79
- Oates, Joyce Carol, *Carthage*, 10, 32, 118–26, 138
- O'Brien, Tim, *The Things They Carried*, 94–95
- Otto, Jean L. and Bryant J. Webber, 47
- Packer, George, 9, 34
- Pascoe, David, 11
- Pease, Donald, 22–27, 34, 97, 126
- Peebles, Stacey, 19, 20–21, 35, 64
- Piette, Adam, 53–54, 112
- Powers, Kevin, *The Yellow Birds*, 10, 29, 31, 36, 38, 44–45, 49, 54–55, 135
- Rakoff, Jed S., 132
- Rando, David P., 102, 103
- Rasmussen, Mikkel Vedby, 71, 92
- Reyes, Mitchell G., 56–57, 98
- Robbins, Bruce, 15–16, 17, 139
- Rogin, Michael, 78
- Rose, Jacqueline, 25–26
- Rosenberg, Matthew and Michael D. Shear, 9
- Rothberg, Michael, 17–18
- Rove, Karl, 53
- Rowe, John Carlos, 14–15, 21–22
- Sanborn, III Wallis R., 20, 134
- Sanitization of warfare, 29, 33, 41–42, 52–53, 63–64, 137
- Saunders, George, “Home”, 10, 32, 100–109, 137–38
- Scaggs, John, 123
- Scanlon, Jennifer R., 86
- Scofield, Martin, 102
- Searle, John R., 107
- Shapiro, Michael J., 29, 33, 41–42, 69
- Shaughnessy, Larry, 9, 113
- Short story, 102–3

Silk, Michael L and Mark Falcous, 73  
Slotkin, Richard, 76  
Sontag, Susan, 61  
Spectacle  
    impact of, 79–80  
    of security, 71, 91–92  
    political, 70–71  
Spencer, Graham, 63  
Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 111  
Stewart, Rory, 16  
Swanson, Scott, 46  
Tait, Theo, 76, 94  
Tuchman, Barbara W., 98  
Turner, Brian, *Here, Bullet*, 21  
Veteran violence, 96, 100, 109, 118, 124–26, 137–38  
Vietnam War, 94–95, 98  
War on Terror fiction  
    “legitimate”, 11–15  
    conflation with 9/11 fiction, 18–20  
    criticism, 11, 19–21  
    scope of, 11, 20, 134–35, 139–40  
    Veteran writing, 13–14  
Woodward, John D., 92  
Worth, Robert F., 60  
Yu, Charles, 102

