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Andrew O. McLaughlin

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A Soldier's Home

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THESIS

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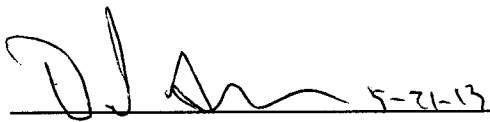
Master of Arts in Communication Studies

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2013

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A SOLDIER'S HOME

Thesis Essay

30 May 13

Andrew McLaughlin

M.A. Candidate

Communication Department,

Eastern Illinois University

Dedication

Both the written and video components of this creative thesis project are dedicated to Sergeant Christopher Paul Abeyta who died in an IED attack in Kot, Afghanistan on March 15th, 2009 along with three of his other platoon members. Two of the four other soldiers that died in the attack included Specialist Norman L. Cain III and Sergeant Robert M. Weinger who were both fellow Illinois National Guard members. Chris and his fellow platoon members were members of Delta Company 1/178 infantry battalion, which was a unit that I was a member of for more than six years. Chris was a great friend of mine and he will truly be missed. This project is in recognition that the most important thing that we can do for our fallen comrades is to live our lives to the absolute fullest and remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to put us in a position to do so. All have some, and some gave all.

Acknowledgements

I'd especially like to thank all of those that have helped me to come through with this project, in one way or another, along the way. Some have taught me new ways of thinking and others have given me reasons to make and move forward with this project. I couldn't have done it without any of you.

I'd first like to thank my best friend in Iraq, Specialist Joe Brewer, for documenting our tour much better than I did and giving me loads of photos and video to compose in the documentary. We had many good moments over there shooting with the video camera and editing. Sometimes, I wish that was the only thing we were doing. Regardless, I had a lot of fun. I never gave you enough credit for the inspiration that you have given me along the way, man.

I'd next like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. David Gracon, who taught me the most valuable lesson of all. He taught me that I could be an amateur filmmaker and still make a compelling film that audiences would want to see. *A Soldier's Home* has truly achieved that level of interest from my audience members. Before making this project, I assumed I had a long way to go before I would become a real "filmmaker." I think I'm finally there. I would also like to thank David for all of the extra support that he has given me for transitioning into the role of filmmaker. From discussions about film praxis, to giving me the heads up about conferences, to encouraging me to apply for the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, David has always been there.

This acknowledgements section would not be complete without me acknowledging that without Dr. Marita Gronnvoll, I never would have found my niche in rhetorical studies and an interest in persuasion and argumentation. More importantly, I

would have never gone to graduate school and, most likely, never would have made this project. I remember smoking a cigarette outside of Coleman Hall at EIU when Marita asked me to be her undergraduate Teaching Assistant for Communication Persuasion. That moment has forever changed my life.

I would also like to thank Dr. Robin Murray and her writing partner, professor emeritus, Heumann – both the key people in EIU's film studies program. I only took one class with Dr. Murray. But, with her as a member of my thesis committee, I found no one to be more encouraging of this project. Joe was the first college teacher that I ever had that exposed me to new films and ideas about film and simultaneously challenged that my notions of what film could and should be.

Additionally, I'd like to thank several other individuals who have helped me on the ground. I'd first like to thank my beautiful and talented girlfriend, Rachel Dean - thanks for learning how to film. I'd like to thank my parents for being proud of me and being great support units in the making of this project. I'd like to thank my friends and family. Specifically, I'd like to thank my friends, family, fellow soldiers, and fellow graduate student who found it important to show up to my first two screenings. I really appreciate it. Lastly, I'd like to thank all of the soldiers that I served with over my seven years in the military, regardless if we are still in touch. For other, more specific, acknowledgments please refer to the credits at the end of the film.

Introduction

There have been many documentaries that have focused on combat and the combat veteran, but few have explored the veteran's post-war home front. I am a combat veteran. *A Soldier's Home* is an hour-long documentary video I wrote, shot, and edited about my life after my participation in the Iraq war and how my identity has been socialized by the world around me in terms of the media, family, school, and the military. The title of the film has been borrowed from a short story written by Ernest Hemingway in 1925 and provides the thematic backbone of my project. Hemingway's story is about a soldier who returns with a different perspective about war than before he left. The narrative of my film also explores this theme. The narrative of my film serves as an alternative to the dominant media representations of combat veterans, which include the news, Hollywood fiction films, and documentaries about war. The biggest limitation of these accounts is that they do not see into the lives of individual soldiers. This film seeks to construct an alternative discourse that is neither pro nor anti-war, but a discourse that is pro-veteran autonomy. Veterans having autonomy means those veterans are in control of their own voices in the public discourse rather than leaving it to the dominant media to interpret their words.

From 2005 to 2006, I was deployed to Iraq as an infantryman in the United States Army. After seven years of service, two improvised explosive devices, a handful of bullets directed at me, and a Combat Infantry Badge, I returned home to the Midwest to become a college graduate student. The documentary examines personal artifacts including medals, documents, videos recorded while in Iraq, and photos from before, during, and after my deployment. These artifacts are symbols of socialization and my

combat experiences. I reflect upon these personal artifacts and compare my experiences with dominant representations of combat veterans that have been mediated, perpetuated, and normalized across multiple mediums and channels of mass media. The objective of my film is to offer an alternative perspective in terms of identity and the American combat veteran.

The most concise way to describe *A Soldier's Home* is as a representation of my personal reflection of war. The representation of self that is constructed in *A Soldier's Home* is comprised of images from several different sources. The film uses many family home videos from when I was younger to show the initial stages of my socialization process into becoming a soldier. Additional images come directly from footage that I shot while in combat in Iraq. Other diary images provide insight into my life at present as a graduate student and, and more broadly, as a war veteran. For instance, I spent time at a veteran's memorial in Springfield, IL and filmed my present day interaction and thoughts on this space.

The present day images come in the form of video diary entries. Video diaries are video logs, captured through the camera that can serve as an everyday reflection of the world around me in a non-scripted manner. For example, I use video diary to log and explore several of my war themed dreams. As part of my critique, I take images from dominant media outlets and re-appropriate them in a way that provokes questions about them. For instance, I show videos of vehicles being blown up by IED's that were produced by Islamic Extremists and ask if the videos are what Americans will use to teach their children about the Iraq war.

A final component of the footage is composed of archival footage that I use to tell my life's story from before I was born. This footage includes government sponsored documentary footage of the 82nd Airborne, which was an Army unit that my father was a part of during the time that I was born in 1985. Together, these images work to produce a narrative construction that helps me to reconstruct my own memory and help to gain a better understanding of life as a soldier and a war veteran. This is a narrative that dominant media representations fail to construct in a way that makes sense from my perspective, so this is one that I had to construct on my own.

A Soldier's Home takes an alternative, experimental ethnographic approach to the documentary form. According to Russell (1999), experimental ethnography attempts to disrupt power dynamics in conventional documentary film forms. Russell (1999) continues, "Experimental film [provides a challenge] to conventional forms of representation and the search for new languages and forms appropriate to a more pluralist social formation" (pp.3). *A Soldier's Home* is an alternative representation of the combat soldier that accounts for a more pluralist view of the world. The film seeks to provide layers of truth in an attempt to examine rich complexities of experience and memory, as opposed to a monolithic and narrow representation of "truth."

The aim of *A Soldier's Home* is to challenge pre-existing mediated representations of war and combat veterans through an alternative diary aesthetic that examines my personal experiences and reflections as a war veteran. Challenging dominant representations and offering an alternative representation for myself and for other veterans is the most significant reason why I made this documentary. The documentary is not for war or against it. This documentary acts as mediated memory,

which indirectly serves as a critique of the conventional one-sided history that American's are so used to. It's intent is not to stand in opposition to other mediated memories of the war. Instead, it focuses on something different – an alternative instead of an oppositional representation. It focuses on coming home.

Rationale

In this section, I will be making a case for the validity of this project and rationale in terms of various filmic and theoretical decisions. I will explain how the deployment of my documentary, an alternative representation of veterans, is an essential supplement for the advocacy and public voices of veterans in the United States as well as in the rest of the world. Veterans everywhere have something in common. They followed the directives of collateral damage that have been ordered by the state and are a part of that collateral damage both mentally and physically. In this section, I will explain why I chose to make an alternative representation, in the form of a documentary about my life as a combat veteran and why I chose an experimental ethnographic approach. I will also discuss why I chose to incorporate video diaries and found footage, and what I hope this representation will do for the veteran community.

Understanding the importance of creating the film on behalf of the veteran community begins with an examination of the title. *A Soldier's Home* is the title of a short story written by Ernest Hemingway, which was first published in 1925. It is a story about a soldier returning from WWI. It is unclear what nationality the soldier is but it can be assumed that he is American. The story begins with the protagonist returning home, after the war had already ended, from Germany. The antagonist of the story is society, which finds his war stories not worthy of listening to without embellishment. This

conversation of whether to embellish or not is an internal dialogue that runs through the protagonists head throughout the duration of the story. The protagonist cannot stand the idea of embellishment. In terms of embellishment, I am talking about lies or additions to combat stories to make them fantastic enough for others to listen.

The dilemma that is presented in Hemmingway's short story is that veterans must lie. They must cater their stories to what the conventional documentary audience is looking for. If they do not lie, their stories might not be listened to at all. The intent of my film is to provide an alternative to this dilemma. The goal is to advocate for speaking for one's self, regardless of the immediate consequences, in hope of a better future. The themes in Hemmingway's story provide the core reason for why this documentary was made. It was made because I, like the protagonist in Hemmingway's story, was tired of catering my combat stories to what people wanted to hear. I made *A Soldier's Home* because I wanted to tell my own stories and to not feel like I had to embellish them.

A Soldier's Home seeks to challenge the representations of veterans in the popular media that are opposed to the war that "we (veterans)" know. I have found myself competing with many mediated war stories that are purely based on fiction. I believe that these media texts construct a cultural need for embellishment and even fuel the embellishment. For example, films like *The Hurt Locker* (2012) compromise the realities of war because they are based on spectacular fiction. As I mention in the film, whether a war movie is fiction or non-fiction (or some classification in between), if it becomes a significantly popular interpretation of history, it will become the most remember, the most watched, and the most referenced – the interpretation of history that is the most thought about. As the most thought about interpretation of history, it becomes

a significant frame of reference for history (regardless if it's fiction or non-fiction). I am not saying that fiction has no place in depicting realities such as war. However, in the film, I intend to critique the idea that movies are just movies – that they have no real world implications such as changing its audience members' outlook on world politics. Movies, specifically the ones that tell fantastic stories about super-soldiers do violence to the real soldiers by putting them in competition with unreal representations of heroism. I made this film to critique the idea that soldiers need ever think to embellish their stories.

A main reason *A Soldier's Home* was created was to fill a gap that I saw in mass mediated images of veterans. For example, the corporate news media often speaks of the veteran population as a whole or uses one soldier's experience to generalize to the rest of the veterans. They rarely focus on unique, individual narratives such as the struggles of overcoming Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. I was not seeing veterans creating their own media, not even on YouTube, which is problematic because it does not make for a plurality of voices discussing veteran's issues in the public sphere. For instance, homeless veterans are often represented as one entity as a statistical representation instead of homeless individuals with individual problems and needs. There are plenty of discourses about veterans by veterans circulating around the Internet but none venture to mediate the discourse into the general public sphere. In other words, the contrast between veteran in-groups and out-groups is very polarizing. The not-for-profit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, for example, is a prolific voice for veterans in legislation. However none connect, nor do they have the ability to connect to a wide audience that includes non-veteran members.

I believe that video is the best way to make this connection because of its ability to connect mass audiences simultaneously. At present, it other powers in the dominant media (dominant media “filmmakers” and the like) besides veterans themselves have created every documentary about veterans, and more broadly, war themed Hollywood narratives. In my opinion, *A Soldier's Home* is a clear alternative representation to this long-standing inconsistency of voice between veterans and their representations. I was interested in creating this representation because the existing ones were not working for me in my own personal life. These experiences did not provide an authentic representation of my experience as a soldier and as a veteran.

I chose an experimental-ethnographic approach for *A Soldier's Home* because I believed that this approach could be utilized in the same way that Trinh T. Minh-ha had used it to challenge notions of power and documentary representation in her work. For example, in her documentary *Surname Given Viet Name Nam* (1989), the documentary deploys a poetic and experimental structure rather than a conventional linear one. Her work is reflexive in a way that draws attention to its constructedness. By acknowledging its constructedness, *Surname* challenges mainstream notions of representation, truth, and power. Minh-ha challenges the traditional unseen film director's non-location (Minh-ha, 1992, pp. 115). Experimenting with narrative form alerts the audience that they are bearing witness to an alternative message – an alternative representation. These representations open critical spaces for reflection, as opposed to unified definitions of “truth” and knowing, in very particular ways. The disruption that is created by experimental ethnography allows the filmmaker to create alternative forms of representation that challenge the very definitions of documentary.

Given Minh-ha's accomplished record of producing mediated pluralism and alternative representations in her documentary films, I chose this approach intending to challenge power in the same way. For example, I narrate over a series of photos that show me in combat. During this scene I tell the audience that all humans experience trauma and that everyone should acknowledge and reflect on trauma beyond the documentary and into their own lives. Trauma is a general theme that humans share and trauma isn't just for combat veterans. To specifically address why I rejected the dominant media modes and representations, when I began making the film, I had not come across a documentary or fiction film that I believed was truly an alternative representation of soldiers and veterans.

Not even the documentaries that are projected as having been made by soldiers, including *Combat Diary: The Marines of Lima Company* (2006), *Restrepo* (2010) and *The War Tapes* (2006), contained an alternative message about war. They were the same story in terms of content. Like representations of war from the dominant media, these documentaries focused on what the conventional audience wants in any great war narrative full of tension and suspense - combat! *A Soldier's Home* focuses on something adversely different, which is coming home and starting a new life after the war, which is sort of an anti-spectacle.

A Soldier's Home was created because I was tired of not being able to say anything about my permanent status as a combat veteran. I wanted to tell my story based on my own experiences, upbringing, and circumstance. I wanted to better make sense of my life as a soldier and veteran. I was tired of leaving it up to Hollywood filmmakers

and corporate media institutions to tell my story in a distorted manner because this was a story that I had trouble relating to.

My decision to incorporate a video-diary aesthetic into my project was based on the filmic practices George Kuchar used in his documentary *Weather Diary 3* (1988). Kuchar's video diaries are characterized by a first person, direct address style that allows him to be up-close and personal with his subject and audience. In many scenes, Kuchar is so close to the camera that the viewing audience can see every pore on his face. My choice to integrate the intimacy of video-diary into my video came from the previously mentioned idea that veterans are rarely in control of the media discourses that surround, and even constitute, their existence. I point the camera at myself and tell my own story to ensure that I am in control of my image in the discourses about myself as a veteran. I modeled my project after Kuchar's work in video diary to produce the same sort of intimacy with my documentary's audience. Additionally, my documentary is intimate at another level. The documentary opens up a space of discussion that is often kept silent. While many soldiers do not like to talk about their experiences in war, I use *A Soldier's Home* to tell my story as a way of challenging the notion of silence about the war. I believe that veterans should be proud of their service and should feel no shame providing labor to state action. The state should be taking more responsibility when soldiers are simply following orders. Yet, they have often historically been made to feel shame for their service and can find no alternative space to "house" their perspective, so to speak, that is outside of the control of the dominant media. For instance, soldiers of the Vietnam War took the brunt of the most significant account of public shaming of soldiers. My film is an alternative media project that seeks to house the perspective.

There is yet another reason why I found it necessary to produce a film about combat-veterans and student veterans in an academic setting. Since returning home from the battlefield in 2006, I have found myself in a new battlefield. This new battlefield is the academy. An issue that we have often discussed in the student veterans organizations that I have been a part of is the idea that veterans are often met with the grief of trying to fit in with traditional undergraduates as non-traditional, students and they are often met by adversity by all members of the academic community. There is a slow evolution of understanding between veterans and other groups on campus. In my chosen discipline of communication studies, I am often asked to reflect on the negative connotative meanings of war such as it's destructive nature. As a result, I find that I question my own validity as an American hero.

Most academic professionals have individuals or groups that do not agree with their work, but few (if any) are asked to critique their identities as war veterans from a critical perspective. War is a concept that is generally opposed by critical studies because war is power – it is hard for me to condemn my own actions. In a way, I had to make this film to put the contradictory binary that I was developing between critic and subject of criticism to rest in my own mind. These are all issues that I've realized other soldiers have faced during my recent appointment to a committee hiring the new Veterans Affairs coordinator at Eastern Illinois University. In theory, other student-veterans will also benefit from this documentary by also being given the chance to put these feelings to rest, or at least a space to get some kind of dialog going.

Lastly, in *A Soldier's Home*, I wanted to make a point that, even though I have been part of the military machine, I did not make that machine's decisions. Like other

veterans, I'm a component in the system. Fighting wars was my job, and the job entailed directives given by military and government officials. Making this distinction has been the hardest part of living my identity over the last six years because it is hard for people outside of the military to understand that saying no to orders was not possible.

A Soldier's Home is an attempt to engage these complicated feelings, which the dominant media fails to represent. I wanted to find new ways of thinking about my feelings and perspectives on the war through video form. I do not want to go another day of my life thinking about my identity as combat veteran as I have seen it negatively projected by the dominant media. The representations are one-dimensional and do not fit with my complicated feelings. *A Soldier's Home* helps me put the feelings of uncertainty about my position as a hero to rest. It provides both a mediated and mental alternative to my adverse feelings about my involvement in the war that have been produced since coming home, and will hopefully open a discursive space and dialog for other veterans. It will also hopefully give the greater public an alternative and very personal representation of the life of a soldier and veteran, one that isn't typically seen in the dominant media discourse.

Literature Review

This literature review will identify and unpack many seminal works and key theorists who have contributed to the areas of representation, rhetoric of the body, documentary genre, experimental ethnographic filmmaking, personal filmmaking, and diary video. These works are important to my documentary project because they have provided the conceptual framework that has allowed me to create an alternative image and discourse of veteran culture.

Representation

Representation is a re-presentation of real world actualities through mediation such as video. Hall (2002) provides a conceptual map for how mediated meaning, or representation, is created. He suggests that meaning is not created until it is assigned meaning by dominant media or other meaning makers. He adds that there is reality and then there is representation and that anyone studying representation should look at how representations are inherently distorted by the makers of meaning. This distortion becomes higher in concentration as the re-presentation passes through more channels. One could think of this process of distortion as being analogous to a signal weakening as it travels further down a wire. For instance, *A Soldier's Home* argues that a weakness in popular representations of war veterans is that they are informed by other representations, or prior filmic texts. Hall (2002) proposes that things are without meaning until they are represented and that representation is then an essential part of the meaning. My intention for *A Soldier's Home* is to provide a representation created by me; myself as a veteran becomes part of the meaning making process. While this video will still be a representation of reality, my aim is to draw attention to the work as a representation via reflexive documentary techniques, and to create an alternative representation vis-à-vis the dominant media.

Hall (2002) also states that those in control of media institutions and the means of visual production choose who, "has the power to circulate what meaning to whom." This idea is particularly relevant to my project. Through self-production of a representation of myself, I will be in control of my own agency for meaning making. Of course, the way that I view myself is an ongoing tension between agency and how I am socially

conditioned as a person. My intent in *A Soldier's Home* is to create an alternative representation.

According to Atkinson (2010), media must be described by one of the three criteria to be considered an alternative representation: (1) It is comprised of “alternative content (content that is created outside of the funding, and production of the dominant media),” (2) It uses “interpretive strategies of audiences (audiences are constituted through the work itself),” and/or (3) It is created through “alternative production (means or methods – those that do not align themselves the conventional means and methods of the dominant media).” (pp. 22). Alternative media is usually challenging power, and in search of new ways of living, being, and thinking. *A Soldier's Home* is an alternative representation because it includes all of these components. To plug *A Soldier's Home* in to Atkinson's ideas, the film was produced with my own personal finances, the project is an alternative representation of war, and defines its audience as those who find themselves interpellated as audience members by its message. Therefore, the film meets all criteria for being an alternative representation, according to Atkinson (though, according to Atkinson, it only needs to meet one).

Rhetorician Roger Stahl has also looked at the rhetoric of representation through the mediated image. Stahl (2010) looks at how soldiers and veterans have been portrayed in the dominant media since the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Specifically, Stahl looks at how the dominant media industry has produced a consumable war that can be visually digested (as a substitution for lived experience), in many cases, from the American living room. Stahl suggests that, for instance, the consumable war has offered Americans, through virtual mobile-military training facilities (otherwise known as virtual

military playgrounds for civilians), the opportunity to experience what basic training is really like. Although the reality it is that the experience offered by these facilities is merely a consumer friendly representation. Stahl also suggests that video games with leading titles like "Real War: Air, Land, Sea" are producing individuals who feel as though they have the technical experience of seasoned soldiers (Stahl, 2012, pp. 92-112). These individuals have trained to fight on their gaming consoles. Stahl's exploration of these representations of real world experiences is something that I have been seeing in my own life for years. These representations are never analogous to the real thing. I hope *A Soldier's Home* does, and will continue to, disrupt and challenge these representations in the minds of my audience.

Achter (2010) has also looked at representations of soldiers and veterans in the media. Achter examines how soldiers have been appropriated by governmental and dominant media entities for arguments that depoliticize their bodies to divert the argument that war is collateral damage. To briefly define war as collateral damage, war creates casualties out of the bodies of combatants and non-combatants as well as destroying other property owned by the state and individual citizens (buildings, vehicles, and even human beings). Achter calls the process of appropriating the bodies of wounded veterans domestication. In domestication, the negative connotation of the wounded (one that alludes to the collateral damage of war) is obscured and replaced with a positive message of healing. For example, Achter points out that, during his term in office, President Bush often invited wounded veterans to be showcased at his public addresses to divert attention from the connotations of war's destruction to praise of soldiers who are healing in spite of the war's ongoing existence. *A Soldier's Home*

challenges prior disruptions to pertinent discourses (such as efforts of domestication) and redirects the conversation towards other alternatives of addressing war's effects on soldiers. For instance, the film resurrects discourses that question how veterans will be treated once the wars are over. Will veterans make the decisions about what happens to them next? Will they be called to action to speak out on behalf of themselves to make sure that they received the benefits and rewards that they were promised for risking their lives? Making a mass mediated document such as a documentary that challenges the public's opinion of veterans and creates a discourse surrounding the future of veterans is the intention of this project.

Definitions of Documentary

Nichols (2010) makes a distinction that documentary is not simply non-fiction film. Nichols proposes that all documentary films are a combination of indexical documentation, poetic experimentation, narrative storytelling, and rhetorical oratory (pp. 128). These tenants give more description to John Grierson's first definition of documentary, which is that documentary is, "the creative treatment of actuality" (Aufderheide, 2007, pp. 4). Both of these ways of defining documentary suggest that documentary is more than non-fiction film. Non-fiction is without fiction, whereas documentary makes room for creative treatment. Documentary is not about the truth, but it contains layers of truth (through its allegorical structure). I have taken both of these definitions into account as I have developed *A Soldier's Home* as a creative representation of my life in the military.

Nichols (2010) states that participatory documentaries are a collective production effort between subject (or subjects) and filmmaker (pp. 188). Participatory

documentaries are reflexive in that they make both the subject and filmmaker of the film known. Unlike ethnographic documentaries that are non-participatory, filmmakers do not hide behind the camera. Documentaries that are reflexive, "...ask us to see documentary for what it is: a construct or representation" (Nichols, 2010, pp. 194).

One of the goals of *A Soldier's Home* is to be a participatory and reflexive work. *A Soldier's Home* is not only participatory; it combines the role of filmmaker and subject into one unified body where the filmmaker is the subject. Additionally, there are several allusions to the film's reflexive nature throughout its duration. For instance, in the beginning of the film, I state I want to speak for myself and consistently reaffirm that what I am saying is a matter of opinion. By consistently alluding to the fact that I am making a film, I am encouraging more active viewing from my audience.

Experimental Ethnography

Experimental ethnography is a documentary approach that represents subjects in such a way that it disrupts control over the documentary form by conventional dominant media outlets (Russell, 1999). More specifically, experimental ethnography disrupts the process of othering of documentary subjects that persisted in the older models of ethnographic filmmaking and ethnographic research. In the old model, First World documentarians often entered Third World settings to scientifically document indigenous peoples (Lutkehaus & Cool, 1999, pp. 119). This denied agency for Third World and underprivileged cultures to study and represent themselves. It disallows their voices to be articulated. Instead, their voices are constructed by the editorial articulation of the researcher or filmmaker. The goal of *A Soldier's Home*, like the goal of modern ethnographies is to give veterans a voice as a veteran.

According to Russell (1999), the goal of experimental ethnography, in general, is to eliminate the binary between “us” and “them.” My documentary represents one unified version of us and them, seeking understanding in a reflexive way. I am both the “us” and the “them.” Additionally, prior ethnographic approaches to documentary filmmaking had a tendency to make documentary subjects “‘perform’ themselves with various complicity in front of the lens” (Russell, 1999, pp. 99). In these instance, culture is essentially staged for the camera rather than being authentic. Because experimental ethnography disrupts the binary, the form provides a dialogical opportunity between researcher and researched. The dialogical is a reflexive approach because it goes beyond studying them to incorporating them in the film process by including them in the decision making (Lutkehaus & Cool; 1999, pp. 119). In *A Soldier's Home*, the distinction between the ethnographic subject and researcher are collapsed and the intent is to open up the dialogue of the film and a way that is observable in the final documentary product.

Ethnographic reflexivity is where the filmmaker is known to the audience instead of having unknown presence masked by the production process. Trinh T. Minh-ha's work in reflexive, or participatory filmmaking, uses extensive allegory in the narrative construction (Min-ha, 1989). Nichols' (2010) would consider this to be poetic experimentation. While Minh-ha occasionally uses interviews to convey ideas in her documentaries, the ideas, expressions, and meaning in Minh-ha's work come primarily from allegorical experimentation. For example, *Surname* (1989) juxtaposes poetry with mythological history of the Vietnamese people in spoken word to produce a means of storytelling, through allegorical construction. *A Soldier's Home* contains no interviews and contains many experimental components such as using images to poetically convey

meaning. For instance, in one scene of the film, the audio track is silent as a means of expressing the importance of taking a moment of silence for the soldiers being represented.

As stated in the introduction, one of the main functions of experimental documentary work is to thwart control over the documentary form by the maker. Minh-ha (1992) specifically acknowledges her political power to disrupt Western control over the aesthetics by stating that she has intentionally made editing and cinematography decisions that were based on subverting conventional Western documentary aesthetics (pp. 115). For instance, Minh-ha intentionally cuts away from the action of a panning camera before the action is finished simply to acknowledge that she is not and does not have to follow the conventional rules. By combining these methods of disruption throughout each of her films, she is trying to disrupt the form more broadly. She also works with silence, use of blank space, induces ambiguity with her audio/images in a way that encourages a more open text. Minh-ha's rejection of Western aesthetics is not simply a stylistic choice. To once again address the theme of power in Minh-ha's work, she challenges the notion of what she calls non-location. To provide a definition, non-location is where the filmmaker examines subjects without identifying their positionality in the world and how their position is implicated in the lives of their subjects and in the film (for instance: First World filmmaker's impact on Third World subjects) (Minh-ha, 1992, pp. 115).

When addressing where non-location connects to *A Soldier's Home*, I believe that many representations from soldiers, including the ones portrayed in films like *Combat Diary: The Marines of Lima Company* (2006), *Restrepo* (2010), and *The War Tapes*

(2006), are still very much being projected from a position of non-location. Real soldiers are represented in the film, but the persona of the filmmakers behind the edit bays and cameras are not present – this is something that *A Soldier's Home* attempts to reconcile by having myself as the filmmaker in front of the camera.

In the history of documentary there have been extensive conversations about the possibility of film's potential for scientific objectivity. While this debate still continues in some sects of documentary filmmaking, it is not one that is entirely over. French documentarian Jean Rouch, since the 1950's, has been a major proponent of documentary's ability to tell the truth of his documentary subjects if the right protocols are followed (Ellis & McLane, 2005 pp. 218). *A Soldier's Home* does not attempt to convey truth. Instead, it attempts to convey layers of truth. Through the many different visual, narrative, and formulaic components, *A Soldier's Home* deploys layers of truth with the aim of creating a more nuanced and complicated representation of truth. It does so by building on the meaning of its representation and constructs a new truth that is completely independent of the reality that it is documenting – it is communicating an altogether new idea, a new representation.

Personal Filmmaking

Personal filmmaking, an ethnographic approach that is not always experimental, accounts for personal truths, or constructed layers of truth. According to Russell (1999), documentaries become, "...ethnographic at the point where the film – or video maker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes" (pp. 276). *A Soldier's Home* was created because I saw myself as implicated in a larger structural formation. In the film, I wanted to

confront myself and the society that has constructed me to be a soldier and a U.S. citizen. New ethnographies no longer focus on the primitive or exotic and instead bring the anthropological component of visual anthropologies to study culture back at home (Lutkehaus & Cool; 1999, pp. 124). Personal, or essay, filmmaking is new to recent decades and has been an increasing mode of documentary production since the entry of the video camera to the consumer market in the late 1960's. Specifically, with the increase in access to video equipment that was less expensive and more mobile than film equipment, virtually anyone could pick up a video camera and begin telling a story from their own perspectives (McLane, 2012, pp. 277). Personal filmmaking can also be thought of as autobiographical or auto-ethnographic filmmaking because it explores the self. Personal filmmaking goes a step beyond the ethnographic reflexivity and recognition of location of the filmmaker, than experimental-ethnography does, to clearly connect the filmmaker to their subjects of focus. Essentially, in personal films, the filmmakers are also part (or full) subject. Many personal films are about the filmmakers themselves. *A Soldier's Home* is about me and simultaneously about the stories of so many other soldiers. My story clearly demonstrates how I am implicated in the larger social structure of U.S. military and U.S. action in the global sphere.

Diary Video

Russell (1999) designates diary video as a form of experimental ethnography and under the banner of autoethnography. Russell defines autoethnography as explaining, “[Throughout various autobiographical writings], a sense of self emerges that is thoroughly grounded in experience and observation” (1999, pp. 275). While I have been observing the world as a combat veteran for the last six years, making this film has

allowed me to pull experience and observation together in the form of a video. One of the key assumptions that Russell postulates in her chapter on diary-video is that the camera is an essential extension of the body in that it becomes the technological mechanism for recording the subject's perspective as the filmmaker in lieu of other potential documentary participants (Russell, 1999, pp. 295). I believe that this assumption describes one of *A Soldier's Home*'s key principles of aesthetic, which is that the film focuses primarily on me and rarely on other participants. While this approach has its strengths, it also has its weaknesses. Diary video is a subjective view of the world beyond all others.

In Anne Robertson's *Five Year Diary* (1981), Robertson points the camera towards her point of view (and sometimes inserts herself into the film) to give the audience insight into her particular subjective view of the world over a five-year period. In her edits, she produces sequences that, along with commentary, represent her subconscious and the perspective of her cognitive processes to her audience (rather than a dialog that is decidedly in front of the camera). Her diary video is an abridged version of Robertson's life from her point of view. Robertson's first person point of view aesthetic, through diary video, is something that I have produced in my documentary. In fact, there are several scenes in the film where I am pointing the camera in a way that conveys a first person point of view to the audience. For example, in the film I depict a first person point of view as a ride my bike to work in the morning. It's the same ride and perspective that I have had every day that I've gone to work at EIU and I share it with my audience with voiceover narration.

In George Kuchar's diary-video *Weather Diary 3* (1988), he gives the viewer the impression that the camera is always with him. Since the film is about Kuchar's fascination with hunting down severe weather in the heart of Tornado Valley, Kuchar's camera is not always focused on the weather itself. The camera also focuses on George Kuchar's quirky moments of uncertainty and even vulgarity. These moments include sitting in an Oklahoma hotel room waiting for severe weather to strike and sometimes include Kuchar naked in his hotel bathroom. Kuchar's motives for making his films go beyond tracking the weather. For instance, Kuchar dedicates a portion of the film to videotaping his relationships with other storm trackers, and other trackers too, that he meets along the way that are not always aware of the specifics of their relationship – or not in “the know” about Kuchar's motives (Russell, 1999, pp. 289-291). Given that I am working with such delicate subject matter in my documentary video (representations of the marginalized veteran population), I consistently make sure that everyone is “in the know” regarding what I am trying to do. However, what I borrow from Kuchar's work is his ability to create intimacy between himself and his audience. I noted early on in my research for making this documentary that I also wanted to create an intimate video relationship with my audience by holding the camera close to my face.

Sadie Benning is a lesbian documentary filmmaker who dropped out of high school because of the normalized homophobic atmosphere (Benning, 1999). Benning's (1999) work in auto-ethnographic documentary transcends the confinements of normalized sexuality found in other documentary and fiction films. The simplistic lens of the pixel-cam (the Pixelvision by Fisher Price) used in her documentary work is an artistic way of producing a formal filmic rebuttal to these normalized images of sexuality.

For instance, she discusses her interest in kissing a girl and what it would be like to marry her. Her lesbianism represents a sexuality that the normalized homophobic high-school-student-social-sphere has traditionally alienated. Like Minh-ha, Benning uses an experimental aesthetic that blurs fiction and reality to tell her story. Benning's work is unique and it is her own. Through a series of provocative visual images, she creates a space for the discourse of alternative sexual orientations explored from an insider's perspective. *A Soldier's Home* has been informed by the work of Sadie Benning in that it uses a series of provocative images to bring the audience into a discussion of the discourse of my personal life. While Benning's work deals with issues of queer sexuality, *A Soldier's Home* deals with my personal struggle to talk about my experience in Iraq to individuals who haven't been "there."

Tarnation (2003) is a documentary film that conveys the intimate relationships that personal filmmaking and use of video diary can develop between subject and filmmaker. *Tarnation* was made for approximately \$200 with Caouette's (acting as both filmmaker and subject) use of Apple iMovie and his family's collection of home videos (McLane, 2012, pp.252). In *Tarnation*, the audience is also allowed in on the subject's intimate video relationship with the lens as Caouette repeatedly uses it to capture his image. The story that Caouette shares with his audience is about the many unfortunate events that surrounded his childhood and carried him into adulthood. These events detail both his mother's and his own dependent relationship with illicit drugs, which are personal matters that are not easily shared with the audience. *A Soldier's Home* has much in common with *Tarnation*. Specifically, like *Tarnation*, *A Soldier's Home* deals with details that are difficult to share with any audience like death and destruction. I thought

of *Tarnation* throughout the duration of the project as I thought about the most compelling way of incorporating and appropriating video footage of me as a child. I kept *Tarnation*'s approach in mind while I completed my documentary because Caouette communicated authenticity in his construction as a credible subject.

Throughout the literature review, I have discussed many theories, video aesthetics, and documentary approaches that have informed my documentary. Having considered the body of literature throughout the duration of creating my documentary, I have been reflexive in my film practices. I have been mindful that the representation that I create in the documentary and want it to be something I can stand behind as a veteran making a film about myself as a veteran. In the discussion/reflection section, I will further discuss how the literature has informed my work.

Discussion/Reflection

I created *A Soldier's Home* because I wanted to create a documentary as a service to the veteran community. The process of deciding what content would support the veteran community was the same as the process of deciding what my close comrades could stand behind (I needed to know what they thought), while also factoring in the vision of the documentary I wanted to make, was a long and arduous task. In the beginning, I wanted to make a documentary advocating for homeless veterans, but it was a logistical nightmare in the short amount of time that I had to put the project together. Based on a suggestion that I received from my thesis advisor, I ended up making a personal diary documentary with myself as the subject. I exploited and stirred my own personal feelings about the war instead of creating grief and trauma for other members of the veteran community. It is exploitation because, no matter how tastefully I feel like

I've depicted my own story, I simultaneously feel as though I have betrayed my own trust by extracting a story that was stored away, safe from criticism, in my mind. To clarify, even after completing the project, I still have some uneasy feelings about the filmmaker side of myself convincing the subject-veteran side to participate. In the beginning, I wanted to make a film but I never wanted it to be about me. I truly feel like I have been exploited because I can no longer take back the representation that I have created of myself by myself. The documentary, as a mediation of self, is permanent. While I have learned to deal with this feeling of exploitation, I find myself clutching my face tightly during screenings, wondering if my audience will say something during the question and answer session that will make me regret making the film.

In the last month, I've come to what are now the final stages of my video project where everything has come together. I've realized, over the course of completing my first documentary, *Star Worlds: A Pocket Full of Tokens and I'm Heading to the Arcade* (2011), and now *A Soldier's Home*, that there is no proper way to approach building the narrative of a documentary and that everything will eventually come together through experimentation and the arrangement of components of the story. I have tried to apply Curran-Bernard's (2007) systematic approach to documentary storytelling with both of my projects. While I always begin by outlining my projects according to her guidelines, I realized that such books do not have all of the answers and often encourage a narrow conception of documentary. In my case, this documentary project was very personal, and relied heavily upon my feelings and intuition. My feelings produced much of the content, made the decisions, and influenced the arrangement of the scenes. Every decision was subjectively based on being able to live with myself afterwards. I made a decision early

on that it was going to make a documentary about my military experience, and I was going to stay away from sensitive political topics related to the war, such as its validity.

Instead, *A Soldier's Home* focuses on combat veterans and a critique of public memory of war. I could not make a project that put me at political odds with soldiers that I had served with.

The Rough Cut Stage

In the beginning stages of the project, I didn't want to make a documentary about myself. My hesitancy to make the project about myself was because the military teaches soldiers to be modest and humble, which is not reflective of making a documentary about one's self. Making a documentary about one's self is antithetical to these characteristics in that autoethnographies are self-centered, self-interested, and narcissistic in their very nature. It was not until I convinced myself that making the documentary would be a service to the veteran community that I became fully on board with the project.

In the beginning stages of filming, I was ready to be the filmmaker, but not quite ready to be the subject. The earliest cuts of my work depicted me as trying too hard to host the video and not trying hard enough to find the interesting things in my life. This period of the project typically included me simply turning the camera on and speaking in an impromptu manner. I had never been put in the position of the host of a video before, so I was experiencing a new way for the camera to be looking at me. At that point, I was following the ideas that others (advisors, friends, family) had given me for what my documentary should be about. I had not yet considered that I had my own ideas and that I should make the film that I want to make. The documentary process was not going smoothly during the first few months of the project. During this time, I often felt that I

was very privileged just to be alive and educated, and felt I had no business drawing attention to myself over other veterans. My personal acceptance that it was okay to make this project was the single most important aspect of the production process. It is an idea that I continually revisited throughout the duration of the project.

In the beginning, my documentary consisted mostly of video diary logs. I shot video diary entries for several months where I simply turned on the camera and talked to it. I was planning on recreating the documentary form and aesthetic that I had seen in *Weather Diary 3 (1989)* and *Five Year Diary (1981)*, but the outcome of my video diaries were not as compelling as Kuchar or Robertson had made them. These entries were mostly done in my home. This earliest vision of my documentary, driven by these diary entries, didn't take the future audience anywhere. The video diaries were not visually compelling enough on their own. I needed some new ideas if I was going to tell the audience anything, especially in a visually compelling manner. I wasn't fitting Grierson's vision of the "creative treatment of actuality" (Aufderheide, 2007, pp. 4).

New Ideas and Fruition

After my first semester of thesis hours were over, I decided that I needed to completely reassess what I was making. I planned to go back in time by gathering videos and pictures that my relatives, fellow soldiers and I had recorded, to tell my life's story in relation to my military upbringing in terms of my family and military service. Over my seven years of enlistment, and especially the time that I spent in Iraq, I took hundreds of pictures and videos combined with my fellow soldiers. Unfortunately, I found that many of these images were destroyed or erased by carelessly built external hard drives whose lives were very short. Interestingly, most of what I could find was on the Internet as I

had passively shared the material (photos and videos) with friends and family over social networking sites.

After assessing the whole of my video collection and pictorial collection (in relation to this film), I decided that I still didn't have enough of what I needed to tell my story. It wasn't until a faculty member found out that I was born at a military hospital that I got new ideas about a narrative hook. According to this faculty member, I was born on a base that had the nickname Fayette-Nam (or Fayetteville, N.C.). Here, my dad was a paratrooper in the army airborne. Thinking about my birth triggered an entirely new series of ideas in my mind. I began looking through collections of old home movies [as Caouette did to produce *Tarnation* (2003)] to see if there were examples of my socialization into the military that I could trace from my childhood. One example that I found and employed in the documentary was a video of my dad's going away party from when he got called up to go to Afghanistan. Re-watching this video and seeing it in my documentary more than 10 years later has prompted a lot of tears from members of my family. I incorporated this video because I wanted to convey the sense of disruption that war brings to families and relationships to bear for my audience.

Since I found a limited amount of footage from my youth, I needed more footage to patch together my history of military socialization. I spent a few days reviewing government archival videos on public domain websites. These videos included promotional videos created for the U.S. Army by the U.S. army in the 1950's and 60's. This footage included such themes as current combat operations, coverage of new Army equipment, and videos promoting aspects of specific military units. The amount of footage that I found from these websites was more than adequate for telling my story

(before birth) and they gave me the insight that I want to research and compose more narratives using archival footage in the future. This footage told a history of the legacy of service that was developed by soldiers who served before me. This was a great addition considering that so much of my project is about recognizing and building upon a legacy of veterans and for veterans. From my perspective, the archival footage that I use from dominant media sources is more valid than other representations of soldiers and veterans by the dominant media because I am the one appropriating it.

I had always planned to use the footage that I had collected in Iraq in the documentary because of its inherent significance (given that it is actual footage that I took of myself in combat), but it was not working with the rest of the project because I was not using it in a way that it supplemented the narrative that I was creating. I intended for my Iraq footage to have an experimental, and naturally dreamy aesthetic (due to the fact that they were shot at 10 frames per second with a point and shoot camera that wasn't designed to shoot video) as a way of suggesting the videos were distant memories. However, its usage was so abstract that it wasn't delivering any message at all to my audience. I wanted the use of the combat footage to also suggest that the self-represented in these videos is a self that is different than who I am at present. This is established by the disjunction between past and present – video and dialog. In the first few edits, I could not determine an effective way to use the videos. To me, they represented specific moments that needed no elaboration. But, to my audience, the images were just “there” and without meaning. It took other later stages of the project to help me understand a way that they could be used effectively.

At this point, I had abandoned the use of most of my diary entries in the video and was now making a documentary out of the found government archival footage, old home videos, and footage that I brought back from Iraq. I edited the footage to produce sequences, which addressed my socialization as a child via the home video footage. I, finally, also found a way to incorporate my videos from Iraq in a way that would help me tell the story. I also found a new use for the diary footage that I had previously found to be dull and thought of abandoning. While the diary video footage could not be the primary narrative of the project, it effectively supplemented the other imagery that I was contributing to the narrative (images from the archives, childhood, and Iraq). In reflection, this was because the different components were finally working together in a way that they could not on their own.

Near the end of the project, I began to read letters (emails) that I had sent home, which my grandmother was kind enough to keep for me since I didn't see the value in archiving when I was writing them in Iraq in 2005 and 2006. I have spoken briefly about using this documentary to build and reconstruct memory. These letters detailed some memories of moments that I had long forgotten. For instance, I had forgotten that my First Sergeant (the head enlisted man in my company) was fond of the fiction movies I was making in Iraq. I used the story from this letter, and quite a few others, in *A Soldier's Home* as a voiceover narration. These letters ended up being the final missing link in the narrative. They brought a new perspective and expanded the context and meaning of the images and videos from Iraq that was too abstract in prior applications. The images from Iraq were finally working with the rest of the film because they were

meshing in a way that supplemented the narrative storyline that I was developing rather than being extraneous to it.

Closing in on a month before the first public screening of my project, the narrative was coming into place. The content of the letters gave me ideas for voiceover tracks that guided the audience's perception of the images that I was projecting on the screen. The images were no longer just images without overt meaning; I was acting as a meaning maker and guiding the representations of myself for the audience. I had become a maker of meaning, a builder of representation in the way that Hall (2002) had proposed that meaning does not exist until it is created. I was finally cognitively processing and creating meaning of representation in my documentary narrative.

Test Screenings

Before the first public screening of the documentary, I held several test screenings with the intent of determining how much my audience understood the message of my project. Unfortunately, these screenings came with little criticism and therefore, there was little feedback that I could use without using my imagination. I can only imagine that criticizing my project in any way meant more than criticizing the documentary to my audience members, it meant criticizing me as well. I could not convey to them that I would forgive them for providing the kind of feedback that would guide me to make a more coherent film and, overall, stronger narrative in the film.

I had two screenings with bigger, more diverse, audience consisting of a mix of friends, family, and professionals within the field of filmmaking. This time I gave everyone a list of questions to respond to. For instance, I asked my audience if I had effectively conveyed the idea that I was more afraid of making the film than I was about

being a soldier in a war. The feedback that I got was varied, but all was useful. One of my friends, who produces video advertisements in Chicago, critiqued my amateur looking aesthetic. I noted that I was an amateur and intended to produce the aesthetic of an amateur. By amateur, I guide the outcome of my film and control my own representation of the world at will. I was okay with having an amateur look to my film that was outside of the aesthetic form perpetuated by the dominant media. I was okay with it knowing the freedom that other filmmakers had attained via the amateur mode of filmmaking (Robertson, 1981; Kuchar, 1988; Benning, 1999; Caouette 2003).

The most disturbing feedback that I received was that I cannot convey my life to the audience through video, so why am I trying? I was never determined to convey my entire life. The audience member had indirectly made a critique of the limitations to representation. Other feedback was more general but interpreted my work as trying to convey specific meaning about my life and the images that I project in the film. I understood that all audience members would interpret the film differently – this is the nature of art. In fact, in *A Soldier's Home*, I was trying to disrupt the notion that documentary can show the audience what “it” was like beyond a monolithic mediated representation. For instance, in the film I make an allusion to the fact that the camera was not often present in combat because incorporating the camera would have compromised my platoon's ability to do our job effectively. I made slight alterations to the message to specifically address this feedback. My project was a critique of trying to convey a unified truth about lived experience through the video medium. I wanted to make sure that the audience understood layers of truth and that the representation of reality should be layered and complex, inviting multiple readings.

The most encouraging feedback that I got was during the 2013 PCA/ACA (Pop Culture Association/American Culture Association) conference in Washington, D.C. when, without seeing my project, an audience member of my presentation praised me for what I was doing. For the first time, I was among former soldiers who “got” what I was trying to do. At the same time, I had an academic audience who had a different set of questions, concerns, and interpretations. In other words, the veterans in the audience had a more vivid frame of reference for the concerns that my film was addressing, while members of the audience were less likely to understand these concerns without first seeing the film – the veterans had been to war and faced the same sorts of circumstances as I did. The conference experience did not inform the creation of the documentary, but it did remind me why I made it and that I want to reach as many members of the veteran community as possible as well as others who are willing to engage with the questions the film presents. I want to do this by hosting more screenings and discussions and bringing the discussion of veterans that my film addresses to future academic and non-academic conferences that deal with communication, film studies, and veterans advocacy.

Reflecting on the process of making this film is difficult. Like documentary, this process has its own narrative and complexities. I didn't plan the film, its just came together. One of the beauties of documentary filmmaking is that the narrative typically comes together in postproduction with a vision that is different from the one that was projected in pre-production. *A Soldier's Home* has truly turned out to be different from what I intended. I had no idea that I would have the worries that I continue to have about producing a documentary that would be deemed an acceptable representation by my comrades. I've had a lot of people tell me that I shouldn't care what everyone thinks

about my work. I don't. But, I do care about what my comrades think. We gave too much to each other to stop caring after we made it back from the war.

Contributions to the Field

Making *A Soldier's Home* has allowed me to make several contributions to the field of Communication Studies and scholarship about combat veterans and representation in general. Of course, since I have created an artifact for my creative thesis, I can only speculate on what this piece of art will do for the field. How the film is interpreted will ultimately be up to the audience over time. Regardless of how this film is interpreted by the audience, the intent of this documentary project is to provide a representation of veterans, of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of the veterans in the war, that is entirely alternative. What makes this film such a significant alternative representation is that it focuses specifically on the soldiers and does not address the total scope of the war. Other war films are focus on combat or the politics of the war. *A Soldier's Home* is just about the soldiers.

The primary contribution that this video gives to the field is an alternative representation of veterans, as opposed to dominant representations that are controlled by producers and other media gatekeepers. This alternative representation is also intended to build upon existing discourses about veteran's personal agency and voice in the general public sphere and to encourage veterans to engage in it. This project also contributes to new discourses about the legacy of individual veterans and a critique of public memory of war. The intent of this film is to start a conversation about the way we think of and remember soldiers. Just as I have mediated the memory of some of my deceased comrades in this film, I encourage others to do the same in terms of making

media. The success of *A Soldier's Home* will be measured for its contribution to the discourse of veterans affairs over time.

A Soldier's Home is also an acknowledgment that there are veterans in the academy who can write about being a veteran and are willing to talk about their experiences. It is communication in action. These approaches of filmmakers who speak, and are accountable for the message that they project in their films, are manifestations of attempts to eliminate ethnographic non-location (Minh-ha, 1992). Reflexivity is an acknowledgement that being the subject you're studying holds value of knowing beyond the viewpoint of the historian. Living in the world as one's own subject of study is a way of producing epistemic knowledge. I understand my identity as a combat veteran because I have experienced it.

A Soldier's Home also brings a discussion about reflexivity and awareness about the often-overlooked marginalized community of veterans. While the marginalization of veterans is not explicit, I created this documentary because I felt like there was no rhetorical space in which veterans could voice opinions, and freely contribute to the discourse about them in the way that Minh-ha contributed to her own voice as a Vietnamese-American woman in *Surname* simply by being a Vietnamese woman speaking about Vietnamese women (1989). *A Soldier's Home* defines a self-autonomous mediated space and implicitly calls other veterans to mediate their own voices in the space that it creates. It asks other veterans to tell their stories. It suggests that without telling stories, soldiers will be forgotten. This is stated in the film. Specifically, in the conclusion of the film, I acknowledge the fear that I have, even now, of being forgotten had I died in Iraq.

It is inferred throughout the documentary that *A Soldier's Home* also encourages veterans to make media and use their mediated voices to create discussion about veterans' issues in the general public sphere. I recently received feedback from a Vietnam veteran who thought about doing a documentary about himself after seeing *A Soldier's Home*. In an inspired sounding thought, he said he couldn't stop thinking about what his film would be like if he were to make it. Additionally, a Marine from my generation of veterans, told me thanks for putting things like "this" out there. Without a space, we have no voice. Gatekeepers in the media allow us to speak via formal privilege (on morning shows, late night shows, investigative journalism programs, etc.). These texts are better at identifying and exploiting the issues of veterans than they are of advocating or providing a solution. For example, the news raises awareness of homeless veterans as a statistically high epidemic instead of advocating that action be taken at the community level, or policy level, to change this outcome. As an alternative representation, raising awareness can promote individual activism and address other concerns such as suggesting how one can encourage their own communities to help. *A Soldier's Home* asks soldiers to speak for themselves instead of settling statistical representations.

An even greater contribution that *A Soldier's Home* offers is the proposition of a question to be answered by its audience. What if soldiers do not speak in the public sphere? *A Soldier's Home* ponders the fate of soldiers who decide for or against speaking for themselves. The model of dominant media does not always allow for everyone to have a voice, making alternative representations important for society. Using one's voice through one's own agency is in line with the key assumptions outlined by Atkins (2010).

Any soldier can make media. Aside from being allowed to contribute to the discourse only through privilege allotted by media gatekeepers, when soldiers do speak for themselves, they risk being kept from the discourse in an entirely different way, which I will describe now. Soldiers who choose not to speak have no voice. Conversely, soldiers who do speak for themselves risk defining themselves as inconsistent with the normalized and mediated image of veterans that has been perpetuated, via mass communication, and the military apparatus itself, over the 20th and 21st centuries. These images are the same images that Achter (2010) describes as being domesticated in the dominant media and Stahl (2010) describes as being perpetuated over gaming counsels. These are dominant media representations unlike the alternative one that I have created through. Being inconsistent from this normalized representation risks discrediting veteran voices that do speak. This normalized image, perpetuated by the dominant media and military apparatus is trained not to think for itself, it does not question the government, it follows orders, it works selflessly to accomplish the mission, it has no feelings and feels no pain. I know this because this image is what I was trained to be and reflects what I was for many years. In the film, I am looking for gaps in the logic of not speaking.

Most importantly, in the film, through the process of making this film, I seek to find where my identity fits into critical studies. It has been difficult to be a critical scholar knowing the extent to which I am part of the Western capitalist machine and that I've perpetuated social, economic, and political power as a participant in war (as a former service member of the U.S. Army). Being a scholar of critical studies and rhetoric and not speaking in a reflexive manner presents a contradictory way to live life and to operate

by in the academy. As a scholar, on one hand, I investigate pluralisms in identity and global power dynamics and, on the other hand, I have been conditioned not to ask questions and to follow orders. A goal of *A Soldier's Home* is to put my own conflict to rest by identifying and seeking to define the grief that this living contradiction has caused. It's given me panic attacks and produced personal anxiety levels higher in the last year than I have ever experienced in my life. Creating a mediated alternative perspective has put me in the position to synthesize these feelings. It has also given me the opportunity to be reflexive by speaking about veterans from the academy as a veteran and as an academic. Reflexivity in filmmaking is an aspect of ethnographic filmmaking that Min-ha (1992) has championed. I have not found another documentary that is a reflexive autoethnographic account of a veteran-academic.

A Soldier's Home has turned out to be more than just an alternative mediated representation of the combat veteran. The film works to define a rhetorical and alternative space that can be used by veterans to contribute to the discourse about themselves. It encourages other veterans to make media. I have yet to see what else *A Soldier's Home* will do for the veteran community over time.

Conclusion

A Soldier's Home is a multifaceted representation of a veteran (myself) who comes home to a world that is different than the one he left. The world is different now that my perspective is different. While the documentary does not have, or attempt to provide, answers, it provides many thought provoking and critical questions as well as insights into experiences of a soldier and war veteran.

Reflecting on my life in relation to my combat experience has been difficult because one does not simply research themselves. Instead, one must simplify the complexities of self into concrete ideas. To meet the challenge of the documentary medium, I was tasked to simplify a representation of self in a way that met the allegorical storytelling requirement of documentary filmmaking (Nichols, 2002). Referring back to Nichol's definition of documentary, *A Soldier's Home* is the incarnation of Nichol's definition, which requires indexical documentation, poetic experimentation, narrative storytelling, and rhetorical oratory (2002, pp. 128). However, simplifying the self in a way that could be mediated and understood by the audience was not the only challenge of my documentary project.

Limitations

This documentary project went by at such a hurried speed that I had no time to address the limitations while I was making the film. In my first documentary *Star Worlds* (2011), the limitations were all technical and logistical – it had all of the frustrations of a typical documentary. *A Soldier's Home* was a very different kind of project for me. In this documentary project, the primary limitation was my inability to fully accept what I was doing. My hesitancy to speak for myself, which is the main goal of the project, was constantly the hardest thing for me to overcome throughout the projects duration. In this section, I will discuss limitations in terms of access to sites that remain historically significant to my personal military history, the shortcomings of mediated representations, and especially the emotional trauma that kept me from creating the project that I had initially intended it.

In terms of sites significant to my personal military history, I didn't have a chance to interact with these spaces that I initially hoped to in pre-production planning. In fact, due to my minimal graduate wages and the intensity of a full course-load and teaching assistantship, I determined halfway through shooting that I just couldn't afford to go to the places that I wanted to go. I just couldn't afford the time or the money.

The two places that I had been set on going to were the Iraq and Afghanistan War Veterans Memorial Wall inside the Illinois Military Museum in Springfield and to Sgt. Chris Abeyta's grave site inside of the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery south of Chicago (Abeyta is the soldier that the film is dedicated to). It wasn't until one morning that I woke up in January that I decided I was going to go film whether I could afford it or not. I wish I would have been able to go to both places of significance. While the museum displays photographs of "all of the soldiers that I cannot see anymore (as I state in the film)," the museum has another filmic and rhetorical element that I wish I could have included. The gravesite is more than just a photo on a wall. The gravesite signifies that if society doesn't remember Abeyta through other means, such as being mediated through documentary, then Abeyta's memory will never leave the ground of the cemetery. One way to fix this limitation would be to go and film a sequence's worth of shots at the cemetery and cut the footage into a new version of the film. However, the film would be just that – a different version.

As I provided in the literature review, personal filmmaking is a qualitative method. And, living up to its name, personal filmmaking can be very personal. The biggest limitation of this entire project was dealing with my emotions. This is an ongoing limitation that often gets in the way of seemingly routine filmmaking decisions. I have

now created one permanent thing out of another. I created a film out of being a veteran. I can no longer take either of these identity characteristics back. Being a veteran was not a decision. I signed up in the guard to move sandbags and ended up in the desert shooting at Iraqi owned Opel sedans with drivers that were on a death charge. I chose to make a documentary to process these feelings. However, dealing with these feelings through the duration of the project was a limitation of its own. I had a lot to overcome in terms of what of myself I was willing to represent on camera. This brings up an interesting question for the limitations of video mediated representation. How much of the personal (or diary) filmmaker needs to be in front of the camera and how much of the filmmaker needs to be behind the camera to be reflexive?

Halfway through making the project, when I started feeling like I was really getting somewhere in terms of the narrative, I began having extreme panic-attacks. When I saw Cauoette weeping about the death of his mother in *Tarnation* (2003), I didn't believe that his emotions were authentic. Because documentary allows filmmakers to represent (or re-create) events as if they were happening authentically (Hall, 2002), I presumed he was faking it. It was too perfect to be real. During the opening scene of *A Soldier's Home*, I am having a panic attack and it is real. My panic was a representation but it was not a reenactment. It is a real re-presentation. The limitation was that I didn't know if I could show this (due to my anxiety about having anxiety) or that I should show this (because of the potential to compromise my credibility and potentially authenticity). I didn't know if anyone would believe me and felt like showing this would portray me as weak and compromise my image as a tough, cold-blooded combat soldier. This image was important to me because the most important segment of my audience is other

veterans. It was a difficult decision to make, but ultimately I decided to show it because it confronted the trauma in a way that was useful to me and provided an alternative representation of grief – it provided a perspective that other veterans could also use. Additionally, it depicts me initially putting myself in a vulnerable emotional position with the intent of making other soldier's feel more comfortable with doing the same. I'm not sure how much of the emotional trauma that I sustained during the making of this film came through, or if I will ever be able to measure it. It brought out all of my vulnerabilities, and while it put many of them to rest, it's forced me to interact with other thoughts about the war that I never wanted to. In short, the prospect of creating more trauma from feelings that had been dormant for many years was an enormous struggle with this project.

Since I incorporated the methods of personal filmmaking and diary video into my project, my perspective is blatantly subjective. While I believe that I demonstrate ethos for the subject I address in the documentary, my perspective is only one representation of one veteran. I do not suggest that it is anything else. However, I must acknowledge that many documentary audience members might appreciate a more seemingly objective representation of the American veteran. For instance, the an audience member looking for a more objective perspective might be interested in a documentary with many different interviews with many different soldiers to formulate an overarching claim, but that sort of representation describes the sort of representation that I have created an alternative to.

The qualitative method of interviewing was not utilized in this documentary project. To some, this could be thought of as a limitation, but it's not a limitation, from

my perspective, for this film. It was simply a stylistic choice not to interview anyone. As I say in the introduction to the documentary, this is my story. Had anyone been interviewed, had anyone else contributed to the story, it would not have been the same story nor would it have been my story alone. In my previous documentary project, *Star Worlds* (2011), I used interviewing as a qualitative method. In *Star Worlds*, interviewing was the exclusive method used to build the documentary narrative. I am not condemning interviewing as an approach, but it did not belong in this particular project.

Lastly, using documentary itself as a means of representation is likely the most significant limitation of this project. The frame of the camera can only capture so much of the real world that it is attempting to document, leaving the abundance of reality happening outside of the frame uncaptured. The camera includes as much as it includes, and editing does the same. One can edit out reality and one can edit in reality. A filmmaker can change the representation, the documentary truth that they have created, at will. When the camera or the edit of the film is manipulated, the meaning of it is changed all together. This manipulation of meaning making and distortion of reality is directed in line with the theory that Hall (2002). Given my many cuts of the film, I have changed the possible interpretations of my film several times throughout the course of this project. I only hope that I have the one that I desire now.

Future Research

The future of this project begins right now. In the next few months, I have already scheduled two screenings for the documentary and have two more in the works. Also, by the end of the summer, I want to add an additional half-hour to the documentary,

bringing it to 90 minutes. Additionally, I want to work on an essay for publication related to the content and themes addressed in the documentary and this essay.

I held the first public screening of *A Soldier's Home* at Eastern Illinois University on April 22nd of 2013. My next screening is scheduled to be in my hometown of Rockford, IL at the historic Veterans Memorial Hall, as part of the city's Memorial Day celebration on May 26th, 2013. Given that a lot of soldiers that I know are from the metro-area of my hometown, I want to share this project with them and with hometown in general. I want all of my communities to be exposed to the ideas that I explore in *A Soldier's Home*.

On June 10th, *A Soldier's Home* will be screened in Chicago and sponsored by The Fellowship of Reconciliation. While I am not affiliated with this organization, I have been told that they encourage the notions of veterans' right to heal. I am excited to engage with an organization that I have been told is antiwar. I believe that my film can appeal to a variety of opinions about war. While *A Soldier's Home* is not decidedly pro or anti-war, it will be interesting to see how this organization perceives my work or how they may expose the documentary to a wider audience, asking me to participate in future screenings or other events.

Since returning from the Iraq war, I have avoided all claims that I am healing and rejected suggestions that I might be. Instead, I am using my scars to tell stories and, in *A Soldier's Home*, I'm suggesting that veterans will better heal as a community than we will alone. Other screenings with different conversation agendas (to be decided) are in the works for Urbana Free Library (that my First Sergeant and a disabled comrade will attend) and the University of Iowa (where I will be guest lecturing in a summer school

class). These conversations will likely include discussions of themes prompted by the film such as notions of representations of combat veterans in popular media.

In terms of the 30-minute extension of the film, and the addition of the essay that I plan to produce, I have a lot of meaningful work ahead of me. I have produced an argument in *A Soldier's Home* that advocates for the personal autonomy of the bodies of veterans and is conversely different that the domesticated bodies of veterans that Achter (2010) explores in his essay. Having personal autonomy over one's body is deciding how and when it speaks and how the body is appropriated for non-verbal rhetorical communication. In these future projects, I would like to explore body rhetoric, in relation to the bodies of veterans. Two themes of body rhetoric that I would like to explore in the future are how the bodies of veterans have been rhetorically appropriated by the dominant (and alternative) media. Soldiers are built to be destroyed in both combat and mediated representations. In *A Soldier's Home*, I sought to disrupt this one-sided semantic construction of soldiers in terms of dominant media representations. With this in mind, I would also like to explore how mediated bodies of veterans have been normalized as semantically expendable over a wide array of communication mediums.

Concluding Thoughts

I have learned a lot about myself over the duration of this documentary project. The project has forced me to investigate parts of my life that I have previously wanted to avoid thinking about. The project has forced me to think about how my identity has come together over time. It's forced me to think about my negative implications as an agent of globalization and as a soldier who has fought in a war for the U.S. As a veteran I am implicated into so many things – especially the actions of the state against the Third

World (like the ongoing war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the occupations of other Third World Countries). Additionally, my project has required me to think about myself as someone with a learning disability, as a veteran, and as a veteran graduate student.

In the previous section I discussed how *A Soldier's Home's* contributes to the discourse about veterans but I have done little to acknowledge the extent to which the documentary works to keep the legacy of veterans alive. My friends who died in Afghanistan are represented in the film for the purpose of provoking the thought that we, as a society, cannot forget about our veterans.

It's my opinion that the greatest accomplishment of *A Soldier's Home* is that I made an alternative representation in which I speak for myself. However, I didn't only make *A Soldier's Home* to challenge myself to create an alternative representation of combat veterans. I also made the documentary so that I could mediate my opinion and put a lot of my feelings about my participation in the war to rest. It worked for me. I've had more solace than ever before by working on this project.

In addition to mediating my feelings about the war, the documentary has helped me to reconstruct, and make permanent, much of my memory of the war. In the discussion section, I described many parts of the process of making this documentary project. While reflecting upon my personal artifacts in the making of the film, I ventured beyond my expectation of gathering information about myself for my audience, to finding out new things about myself.

The military teaches soldiers to be modest and humble and to avoid talking about their experiences in the service. *A Soldier's Home* gives me an opportunity to synthesize and talk about my experience as a veteran and soldier. It has made me realize that it's okay

to talk about it. Further, it has encouraged me to encourage others to talk about their experiences. I hope that my documentary film can help guide, support, improve, and sustain the legacy of veterans as well as the discourse that surrounds them.

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