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# Shifting Binaries: American War Fiction from Vietnam to Iraq

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**Shifting Binaries:  
American War Fiction from Vietnam to Iraq**

By Elizabeth Eggert

Honors Thesis  
Presented to the Macalester College English Department  
Faculty Advisor: James Dawes  
April 5, 2018

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, thank you to my advisor, Jim Dawes, for his support in the development, editing, and completion of this project. I would also like to thank Penelope Geng and Karin Aguilar-San Juan for the time they spent reading and commenting on this paper. Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for their support, encouragement, and listening during this lengthy process.

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## Introduction

Poet and Vietnam War veteran Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Missing in Action" is constructed around a binary of an 'us' versus a 'them.' The poem appears in Komunyakaa's second full-length book of poetry, *Dien Cai Dau*<sup>1</sup>, which focused on his experiences serving in Vietnam. The poem does not use any names, but describes the actions of an unnamed 'they,' American civilians or politicians, and a group designated as 'we,' American soldiers in Vietnam. In the first stanza of the poem, Komunyakaa writes, "After they carve new names / into polished black stone, / we throw dust to the wind / & turn faces to blank walls" (Komunyakaa 59). 'They' memorialize the war, carving the names of dead soldiers into the Vietnam War memorial, while the 'we' of the soldiers fight in the war. The poem immediately differentiates between American soldier and civilian, separating the civilian's memorial from the soldier's blank wall. Komunyakaa also presents the us vs. them relationship as a one way interaction; after 'they' act, then the soldiers do, but the actions of the soldiers do not seem to impact the opposite way.

In addition to distinguishing between American soldiers and civilians, Komunyakaa also divides American soldiers from Vietnamese civilians. He writes that "Peasants outside Pakse City / insist the wildflowers / have changed colors" (59). By categorizing the people as 'peasants,' he immediately others them as both foreign and not soldiers. Rather than labeling them farmers, a category American readers can relate to, he calls them peasants, which makes the people sound like relics from another time or place. Komunyakaa also separates the perspective of the people from his own or other soldiers'. Instead of saying that the wildflowers had changed colors, or even that the peasants told them the wildflowers had changed colors, he

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<sup>1</sup> In Vietnamese, the title translates to 'crazy,' or 'crazy in the head,' a term often used to describe American soldiers during the war (*The Literature of War*).

<sup>2</sup> An Arabic word for a ravine or valley which becomes a river or stream during the rainy season.

<sup>3</sup> Global War on Terrorism, a term that usually encompasses the United States' military actions

writes that they 'insist' the flowers have changed. This implies resistance on the part of the people being told that the colors have changed, suggesting that the peasants are so different from the soldiers that the soldiers actually cannot see what they see.

The poem's ultimate binary, however, is death versus life. Komunyakaa describes how he and his fellow soldiers "splice voices on tapes" but "can't make one man / walk the earth again" (59). Their attempts at recreating their fallen comrades are futile because "not a single song comes alive / in the ring of broken teeth / on the ground" (59). This binary transcends Komunyakaa's original binary of soldier versus civilian; both groups are futile in the face of death. In burying the bodies, "they've left spaces / trees can't completely fill" while the soldiers learn that "pumping breath down tunnels / won't help us bring ghosts / across the sea" (59). Both 'they' and 'we' are useless at bringing the dead back. Ultimately, the dead are still dead, and nothing soldiers, civilians, politicians, Americans, Vietnamese, or anyone else, can do will change that.

Cultural and literary theorists find these binaries useful for developing theories of talking about war. Paul Fussell, himself a World War Two veteran, saw the First World War as a defining shift in aesthetic sensibilities, turning the generation of soldiers from romanticism to the harsher form of modernism. Fussell describes war, and war writing, as characterized by "gross dichotomizing," a "model of modern political, social, artistic, and psychological polarization" that divides everything about war into categories of 'we' or 'the enemy' (82, 83). Fussell stresses the moral judgments inherent in the binary categories, which entail "not...some Hegelian hope of synthesis involving a dissolution of both extremes....but...a sense that one of the poles embodies so wicked a deficiency or flaw or perversion that its total submission is called for" (86). The

creation of the other in war inevitably calls for the eradication of said other; the existence of an 'enemy' inherently threatens the existence of an 'us.'

Hannah Arendt writes after World War II that language and violence operate as binary opposites. Arendt was deeply informed by her experience as a German Jew who escaped the Nazis by leaving Europe in 1933. As such, the violence Arendt writes about always includes the total annihilation by the Nazi regime, even in works like *On Revolution*, which compares the American and French Revolutions. She imagines the relationship between language and violence as the physical architecture of a walled city-state. Outside the city-state, violence dominates, while inside, peace reigns, separated only by the wall of language that denotes order from chaos. Arendt posits that "where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws...but everything and everybody must fall silent" (*On Revolution* 9). Arendt imagines the silence of total violence to be not just a suppression of protective or moral laws, but instead an obliteration of the very idea of speech. She believes that "violence itself is incapable of speech, not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence" (9). At the same time, however, Arendt recognizes the power of language to create and execute mass violence. Writing about the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt describes the Nazi "language rules" which dereferentialized language to the extreme: "'extermination,' 'liquidation,' [and] 'killing'" became "'evacuation,' ... 'special treatment,' ... 'change of residence' ... [and] 'resettlement'" (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 85). Arendt acknowledges the necessity of this hyper-crafted language for mechanized mass extermination, stating that language rules "proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose cooperation was essential" to the Nazi killing machine (85).

Elaine Scarry expands Hannah Arendt's language-violence binary in the context of human rights law and torture. Scarry views the inexpressibility of physical pain as a defining crisis for humanitarian groups and law, such as Amnesty International, which rely on the general public believing the stories of pain they publicize. She posits that a photograph can more believably show pain than a piece of writing, perhaps giving hope for greater empathy in more digitized and publicized wars like those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Scarry describes physical pain as "anterior to language," returning people to the pre-language state of cries and groans, a fact that is "not simply one of [pain's] incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is" (Scarry 4). Building off the inexpressibility of physical pain, Scarry theorizes that torture, or the deliberate infliction and appropriation of pain, is doubly destructive in that it "inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying" but also "mimes...this language-destroying capacity in its interrogation, the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (19-20). Scarry, too, refers to the "mounting unreality of language" as a crucial component of making war, in that it removes previous signifiers from words to allow governments or armies to redefine language to support themselves and their goals (134).

James Dawes further binarizes the capacity of language as it relates to war. He examines the relationship between language and violence through two models: the emancipatory model, "which presents force and discourse as mutually exclusive," and the disciplinary model, "which presents the two as mutually constitutive" (Dawes 1). Dawes expands on the necessity of language for war, illustrating the ways war is "precisely dependent on speech" such as "negotiation, appeal, argument, propaganda, and justification" about "what it means to serve the cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity" even as war "imposes silence upon groups and, through trauma and injury, disables the capacity of the individual to speak effectively" (14-15,



2). In addition to the duality of whether or not language can express violence, Dawes argues that if language can capture war, it then becomes either a tool or a weapon. This “transformative capacity of language” can “[subtend] therapeutic and emergency responses to aversive stimuli, but can also serve as a mechanism of ideology complicit in the maintenance of violence” (103). Language can heal the psychological wounds of violence, but can also remove the understanding of violence to the extent of allowing physical violence to continue.

That these scholars organize their writing about war in terms of binaries is not merely incidental, or indicative of a human urge to categorize all of life, but a reflection of the deeper and fundamental structure of war. War relies on the construction of binaries—soldier versus civilian, combatant versus noncombatant, ally versus enemy, winner versus loser, dead versus alive. Beyond these, war operates through binaries within binaries. Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth century Catholic priest, philosopher, theologian, and saint, ruminates on whether or not Christians can wage war. Aquinas builds his philosophy off the writings of Augustine of Hippo, an early Christian theologian and saint, who argued that while Christians should be pacifist in their philosophy, this need not preclude them from waging war for the pursuit of long-term peace. Aquinas expanded Augustine’s philosophy to define what constitutes conditions under which Christians can go to war. In order for a war to be morally preferable to not waging war, he writes, war must fulfill three categories: it must be waged for a common, rather than personal, good; it must be waged by the proper authority, such as the state; and it must have the motive of peace even in the midst of war (*Summa Theologica*). Max Weber describes this authority to wage war as the defining characteristic of a state, which to him is “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given community” (Weber 1). This distinction between legitimate and illegitimate war is the defining

boundary between state and non-state. I juxtapose Aquinas and Weber in order to demonstrate that these inter-war binaries are intrinsic to a western, Christian-influenced understanding of what war is and should be.

Beyond the historical reasons for waging war, this idea of a just war can be further subdivided. Michael Walzer writes that “war is always judged twice, first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt” (Walzer 21). The two categories he describes are *jus ad bellum*, the justice of waging war, and *jus in bello*, justice as war is being waged. The latter designation is the basis for international humanitarian law. Walzer argues that “it is perfectly possible for a just war to be fought unjustly and for an unjust war to be fought justly” (21). Walzer argues that doctrines about just and unjust wars are not creating new ethical principles, but rather simply holding soldiers and politicians to the preexisting principles they claim to embody; he questions why war is allowed to be a site where moral laws break down, when instead moral laws should be the defining rationale for all behaviors in war.

The concept of just wars and laws within war have had an enormous impact on shaping modern conventions and requirements of war. The Geneva Convention, now considered one of the foremost moral requirements of war, designated the upholding of binaries, in particular combatants versus noncombatants, as a crucial moral aspect of war. The first Geneva Convention, in 1864, specified that medical personnel and facilities must be designated from soldiers, and treated as neutral. The Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field mandated that “ambulances and military hospitals shall be recognized as neutral, and as such, protected and respected by the belligerents as long as they accommodate wounded and sick...Hospital and ambulance personal...shall have the benefit of

the same neutrality” (Geneva Convention 1864). Later Geneva Conventions expanded the protected class of noncombatants to include civilians, injured or captured soldiers, or any “persons...who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in the case of conflict or occupation, in the hands of a party to the conflict or occupying power of which they are not nationals” (Geneva Convention 1949). Even as they are designated as a protected class, noncombatants are identified as “not nationals” of one “party to the conflict,” and thus nationals of the other; they exist as a subcategory of either one’s side or the enemy, rather than outside the binary altogether.

The idea of humanitarian aspects or requirements for war influences war philosophy and policy. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian military theorist and general in the Rhine Campaigns, emphasizes most of all the unpredictability of war, comparing it to a game of cards. Clausewitz’s philosophy focuses on the theoretical capabilities of war more so than the physical implications or effects, arguing that war executed with total violence and without moral stipulations actually reduces both the duration and likelihood of war. Clausewitz writes about war as a series of binaries in crisis, “war and politics, attack and defense, intelligence and courage...are never absolute opposites; rather one flows into the other” (Clausewitz 16). While these labels are opposed, Clausewitz argues that the boundaries between them are not as rigidly defined as Arendt’s physical wall of language; rather they become in flux during the ambiguity and chance of war. While Clausewitz sees binaries begin to break down in the interiority of war, he still views war as an irrevocably different state than non-war. He writes, “the great uncertainty of all data in War is a peculiar difficulty, because, all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not unfrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives

to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance” (54). Clausewitz describes war as a fog that distorts one’s vision, and thus one’s actions.

These binaries influence not just thinking about war generally, but specifically thinking about the self and the enemy. Carl Schmitt describes the friend-enemy binary as both referential and mutually constitutive. Schmitt’s writings, particularly regarding his idea of consolidating power through defining an enemy or stranger, are controversial due to his close affiliation with Nazism, but are nevertheless an important contribution to the trend of binarizing in war philosophy. He writes that the enemy is “the other, the strange; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (Schmitt 27). Schmitt’s enemy is self-referential; your enemy is whatever the opposite of you, rather than some inherent fixed definition; your enemy “need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly” as long as he is other (27). However, even if your enemy is defined by being not you, Schmitt posits, you are also defined by being not your enemy. War begins when “each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence” (27). In so much as one’s enemy is defined through their attempts to break down one’s way of life, one’s way of life is defined through its distinctiveness from the ways of one’s enemy.

In this project, I build off historical and literary war theories about binaries to interrogate whether the nature of war of writing has changed as war has changed. In particular, I analyze two Vietnam and two Iraq war novels for the ways they challenge or uphold the binaries of war. Essentially, I argue that the breakdown of a coherent ‘enemy’ due to the increase of a diffuse and decentralized insurgent force increasing from the Vietnam War to the Iraq War has begun to

break down the both the ally versus enemy binary and the combatant versus noncombatant binary in the countries in which the United States is waging war. At the same time, the elimination of the American draft has widened the gap between American soldiers and civilians as fewer and fewer Americans have served, or even know anyone who has served, in the military, leading to an increasingly polarized rhetoric surrounding American military projects.

In my first chapter, I examine the relationships between soldiers and civilians in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. While O'Brien's eponymous narrator tries to both relate to and humanely depict Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, he nevertheless portrays them perhaps not as enemies but certainly as 'other.' In one instance of trying to humanize a dead Vietnamese soldier, O'Brien paradoxically transforms the soldier into a different, but no less absolute other; the Vietnamese man becomes a feminized civilian to O'Brien's masculine soldier. At the same time, O'Brien's anger at the United States for waging war separates him from the people of his hometown, who he believes all support and are not impacted by the war. The narrator's solipsism obscures the true human cost of the Vietnam War, for both marginalized Americans who bore the brunt of the draft, and the Vietnamese.

In my second chapter, I examine the redefinition of the category of 'enemy' in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*. The novel follows the moral and then political decay of John Wade, a would-be Senator whose political career collapses after his connection with the My Lai massacre is revealed and who becomes the primary suspect in his wife's disappearance. I examine Wade's reconception of what constitutes his 'enemy' during his term in Vietnam, and his eventual disregard for American versus Vietnamese categorization in favor of condemning the land and everyone in it. Ultimately, however, this redefinition hurts Wade as well, as his stint in Vietnam eventually leads to the same designation of him as enemy; Americans label Wade,

rather than their own country which ordered or sanctioned his actions, as individually and uniquely evil.

In my third chapter, I shift to the Iraq War and the increasingly blurry boundaries between combatants and noncombatants abroad, and the duality of civilian reverence and loathing at home. Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* continues a redefinition of the concept of 'enemies'; in this novel's narrator's case, the self versus enemy binary expands to include everyone except himself and his closest friend. Powers' white, middle-class narrator who has voluntarily enlisted in the military becomes the novel's ultimate victim—of both of his own subverted expectations of the nature of war, and his alienation from civilians. O'Brien's disappointment with his country for sending him to war transforms into Bartle's disappointment with himself for not acting as nobly as he imagines.

In my final chapter, on Phil Klay's *Redeployment*, I examine the fragmentation of the novel form itself. The short story collection highlights a multiplicity of perspectives, attacking the idea of a universal war story or experience. Despite the different narrators, I explore the common themes throughout the stories of purposelessness at war, and isolation at home. Ultimately, *Redeployment*'s fractured narrators, distant civilians, and technologically enabled physical distance from battlefields challenge the nature of war itself as a binary category that is separate from peace.

## Chapter One: The Boundaries of Empathy in *The Things They Carried*

Forty-three years after the end of the war and twenty-eight years after its publication, *The Things They Carried* has emerged as one of the preeminent Vietnam War novels. Tim O'Brien's eponymous narrator tells and retells a series of interlocking, sometimes contradictory, stories, questioning the nature of stories, war, and ultimately truth itself. O'Brien portrays a deeply conflicted account of the war in which war is "nasty" but also "fun," "thrilling" yet "drudgery" (O'Brien 76). This divide about the basic nature of war extends to Tim and the other American soldiers' experience with Vietnamese people: while attempting to make genuine connections, Tim is nevertheless unable to bridge the divides between himself and the people he encounters, describing both soldiers and civilians as absolute others. Through Tim's position as a reluctant soldier, and his intertextual role as narrator and observer, he attempts to relay his experiences while neither condemning nor endorsing them, yet in doing so undermines his supposed critique of the war. At the same time, Tim's hyper focus on his own trauma at being forced to go to war obscures the demographic realities of who bore the brunt of the cost of the war; Tim views and portrays himself and other white soldiers as the war's ultimate victims.

The book's most substantial encounter with any Vietnamese person, a young soldier Tim may or may not have killed, comes in the story "The Man I Killed" and opens with a vivid description of the dead man's body in one long sentence. The narrator describes:

[The soldier's] jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of the skull, his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in

three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was this wound that had killed him (119).

The sentence mimics Tim's presumable inability to look away from the body, cataloguing all the places where it is damaged, before ending with the "wound that killed him" (119). While the description is one of visceral damage, Tim intersperses the man's injuries with the intact parts of the soldier's body. Despite the fact that one of the soldier's eyes is "a star shaped hole," and "the skin at his left cheek [is] peeled back in three places," his "eyebrows [are] thin and arched like a woman's," "his clean-black hair [is] swept upward," "his fingernails [are] clean," and, most poignantly, there is "a butterfly on his chin" (119). In witnessing the man's body, Tim immediately attempts to recreate the man in life.

He then goes on to imagine what the dead man's life was like while he was alive. Tim imagines that "he had been born, maybe, in 1946 in the village of My Khe near the central coastline of Quang Ngai Province, where his parents farmed, and where, during the time of the French, his father and two uncles and many neighbors had joined in the struggle for independence" (119). The Vietnamese man's "life was now a constellation of possibilities" (122). Perhaps "in his final year at the university, he fell in love with a classmate, a girl of seventeen...she liked his quiet manner; she laughed at his freckles and bony legs...they exchanged gold rings" (122). Tim humanizes the Vietnamese soldier by refusing to reduce the unknown man simply to the fact of his dead body; rather, he endows the man with a past and a future that he insists the reader care about. The man's death becomes a tragedy, rather than a fact of war.



Tim also imagines parallels between his own life and that of the dead soldier. He depicts a “the young man [who] would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle” and who “beyond anything else...was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village” (121). This echoes Tim’s earlier anguished decision about whether or not to dodge the draft in Canada. He ultimately cannot make himself run away because of “all those eyes on [him]—the town, the whole universe—[he] couldn’t risk the embarrassment...the mockery, or the disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule” (57). He realizes he “would go to the war—[he] would kill and maybe die—because [he] was embarrassed not to” (57). Tim pictures the dead Vietnamese man as a similar reluctant victim of familiar or cultural pressure to fight, another wasted youth. In placing himself in the position of the dead man, Tim harkens back to classical ideas of empathy as “the primary means for gaining knowledge of other minds” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

In his recreation of the dead man’s life, however, Tim tries to make him as palatable a victim as possible, suggesting the perceived limits of his or his readers’ empathy. He imagines the Vietnamese man’s impetus for going to war: “He would have been taught that to defend the land was a man’s highest duty and highest privilege...It was never open to question,” but that “secretly...it also frightened him... he hoped in his heart that he would never be tested. He hoped the Americans would go away” (119). Tim decides the soldier “was not a communist. He was a citizen and a soldier” (119). He envisions the Vietnamese man “attending classes at the university in Saigon, where he avoided politics and paid attention to the problems of calculus” (122). Tim redefines the dead man as not a true enemy: he is not a communist, he is explicitly apolitical, he doesn’t want to kill Americans, but would rather they just left. Furthermore, Tim looks at the man’s “clean fingers, clean hair” and decides “he had been a soldier for only a single

day” (123). This young man, who is not a communist and is barely a soldier, who most likely did not have time to kill any Americans in his brief tenure as a soldier, is an acceptable Vietnamese victim for Tim—and his American readers—to mourn. Tim also emphasizes the dead man’s femininity—he is “slim...almost dainty” with a “narrow waist” and “long shapely fingers” (118)—to further discredit his suitability for combat. This feminization, however, ends the comparisons between Tim and the dead soldier by “making [the dead man] absolutely other, that is, womanly” (“The Things Men Do” 23). Lorrie Smith argues that “recovery from this trauma (conceived explicitly in this story as regaining a voice) rests on asserting the living, masculine self in opposition to the dead, silent, feminine other” (“The Things Men Do” 23). As such, Tim’s telling of the story itself furthers his separation from the dead man, ultimately ending the comparisons between them.

Despite narrating the chapter, Tim as a character is nearly entirely absent from the story. The word ‘I’ appears only three times in the chapter: once in the title, and twice more in the phrase “the man I killed” (119, 122). The majority of Tim as a character’s actions are gleaned through his interactions with Kiowa, a Native American soldier who is the only American explicitly identified by race. Kiowa tells Tim, “What else could you do?...Nothing *anybody* could do...it’s a *war*. The guy wasn’t Heidi—he had a weapon, right?...I’ll tell you the straight truth, the guy was dead the second he stepped on the trail...we all had him zeroed” (120, 123). He turns Tim’s comparison between himself and the Vietnamese soldier on its head, asking him “You want to trade places with him? Turn it all upside down—you *want* that” (120). While in Tim’s image of the parallels he and the dead soldier are both victims, Kiowa explicitly pits their survival against each other. By presenting Kiowa’s excuses but not responding to them, Tim is simultaneously justifying and not justifying the death. Jen Dunnaway argues that Kiowa’s

position as “the voice of exculpation” for Tim allows the text to “enact a classic white forgiveness fantasy” wherein “whiteness is redeemed more generally for its presumed sins against racialized others” (Dunnaway 122).

Tim’s main other interaction with Vietnamese people—soldiers or civilians—comes when the American soldiers set up camp in a pagoda, where they encounter a pair of monks who welcome them in. The monks are described in almost childlike terms: they “[giggle] when [the soldiers] stripped down to bathe” and “[smile] happily when [the soldiers] soaped up and splashed one another” (113-114). The monks also seem actively pleased to have American soldiers staying in their sanctuary, despite both the threat it presumably poses to their wellbeing and the desecration of their holy site it entails. The younger monk “[presents the soldiers] with four ripe watermelons from his garden” and stands “watching until the watermelons were eaten down to the rinds, then he smiled and made the strange washing motions with his hands” (114). The monks don’t speak, and their only communication—hand gestures—are viewed as strange and incomprehensible. In an interview, Tim O’Brien defended the lack of Vietnamese characters and voices in his stories by saying that “one can’t pretend to know what one doesn’t...by and large, in American fiction that has tried to render the Vietnamese people, they have ended up as stereotyped cartoon figures or as puppets” (quoted in Christopher 234). Yet avoiding Vietnamese voices does not necessarily mean avoiding Vietnamese stereotypes, as O’Brien’s smiling, silent monks prove.

The monks seem to do nothing except help and accommodate the American soldiers; they are accorded no thoughts, speech, or desires of their own. One day the older monk “[carries] in a cane chair for the use of Lieutenant Jimmy Cross, placing it near the altar area, bowing and gesturing for him to sit down...[he] seemed proud of the chair, and proud that such a man as

Lieutenant Cross should be sitting in it” (O’Brien 114). The monks venerate Jimmy Cross by placing a chair for him to sit almost on their altar; Tim imagines that they see the American soldiers as godlike. The monks also help them with their weapons: “squatting quietly in the cool pagoda, they would help Dobbins, [one of the soldiers,] disassemble and clean his machine gun, carefully brushing the parts with oil...the three of them seemed to have an understanding...nothing in words, just a quietness they shared” (114). Though Tim presents this ‘understanding’ as equal between Dobbins and the two monks, Dobbins is able to talk to the other soldiers, while the monks are bound to this ‘quietness.’ Tim reiterates the monks’ quietness, saying, “though they spoke almost no English, they seemed to have great respect for the conversation, as if sensing that important matters were being discussed” (115). Tim, knowingly or unknowingly, presents the monks as subservient foreigners who elevate the Americans to a status above their own. Their ultimate purpose is as a conversation starter between Kiowa and Dobbins on religion; they are more props than people.

The monks are also described and perceived through an overtly Christian lens; the soldiers make no effort to understand their religion or customs. Kiowa objects to the Americans turning the pagoda “into a little fortress,” because he says “it’s bad news...you don’t mess with churches” (113). The monks take “a special liking for Henry Dobbins,” and say to him: “Soldier Jesus...good soldier Jesus” (114). Not only do the American soldiers view the pagoda as a church, Tim describes the monks as using this Christian framework as well: to show their approval, the monks call Henry Dobbins ‘Jesus.’ When Dobbins considers joining up with the monks after the war, he says, “One thing for sure, I’d look spiffy in those robes they wear—just like Friar Tuck. Maybe I’ll do it. Find a monastery somewhere. Wear a robe and be nice to people” (115). Even when acknowledging the universality of religion—“just being *nice* to

people, that's all. Being decent"—Dobbins brings Christian imagery in, imagining himself in a robe not as a Buddhist monk but a Friar Tuck figure (115). When Kiowa is trying to protect the sanctity of the pagoda, he says, "this is all wrong...setting up here. It's wrong. I don't care what, it's still a church" (116). The story illustrates how "a foreign culture can be occupied, even in fantasy and imagination, by an American culture (or an American consciousness) committed to imposing its own worldview on others" (Clarke 136). The American soldiers use the terms they know to understand religion, but they also impose their western framework on the monks and the pagoda, and the text leaves this unchallenged.

Despite the fact that the American soldiers encounter the pagoda with the monks already there, it is the monks who leave at the end of the story. After Kiowa asserts the wrongness of setting up camp in a 'church' and the monks have "finished cleaning the machine gun," Dobbins "[hands] each of them a can of peaches and a chocolate bar," and tells them, "okay...*didi mau*, boys. Beat it" (O'Brien 116). They "bowed and moved out of the pagoda into the bright morning sunlight" (117). Kiowa seems to be making an argument for religious sanctity and tolerance, but it is the monks who leave the pagoda, rather than the soldiers. The soldiers' solution to the wrongness of setting up in a sanctuary is not leaving, but rather making the place no longer a sanctuary by driving out the monks. As such, the "apparent peace" of the story is "undercut by the fact that the American are ultimately turning the pagoda into a fortress—not just a military fortress, but a solipsistic linguistic and cultural fortress as well" (Clarke 137). The American soldiers physically possess the pagoda by the end of the story, but they have also redefined it.

Tim's position as simultaneous narrator and character allows him to sidestep condemnation of his fellow soldiers' behavior. In the novel's final story, "The Lives of the

Dead,” Tim relays a story told to him by a fellow soldier, Rat Kiley. Rat, in turn, is memorializing the actions of a different soldier, Curt Lemon, now deceased. In Rat’s story, Curt:

sneaks into a hootch with that weird ghost mask on. Everybody’s asleep, right? So he wakes up this cute little mama-san. Tickles her foot. ‘Hey, Mama-san,’ he goes, real-soft like. ‘Hey, Mama-san, trick or fuckin’ treat!’ Should’ve seen her face. About freaks. I mean, there’s this buck naked ghost standing there, and he’s got this M-16 up against her ear and he whispers, ‘Hey Mama-san, trick or fuckin’ treat!’ Then he takes off her pj’s. Strips her right down. Sticks the pajamas in his sack and tucks her into bed and heads for the next hootch (O’Brien 227).

Rat ends his story by musing on Curt Lemon’s character, calling him a “class act” (227). Tim’s distance from the events of the story—he is being told at least second, if not third, hand—allow him to avoid commenting on the morality of Lemon’s actions. Yet by moving from the character who is listening to the story to the narrator who is recording it, Tim’s avoidance of the issue is its own form of endorsement. He ends the section not with Rat’s words, but his own, musing how “to listen to the story, as Rat Kiley told it, you would never know that Curt Lemon was dead” (227). To the narrator, the most important part of Rat’s story is not that Curt Lemon threatened a Vietnamese civilian with rape and murder—standing naked over her bed, holding a gun to her head, forcing her to strip—but that he is mythologized in doing so. Tim’s critiques of the Vietnam War ultimately fall short because, though he condemns the war in abstract terms, he doesn’t actually denounce the atrocities he witnesses or his friends commit. He is willing to criticize the war, but not anyone actually in it.

Even before he goes to Vietnam, Tim’s disapproval of the war is ultimately solipsistic; he thinks the war is misguided and wasteful, but most importantly, he personally does not want to fight in it. When Tim’s draft number is called up in June of 1968, he says he “was drafted to fight a war he hated” because “blood was being shed for uncertain purposes” and he did not think the country had “reasonable confidence in the justice and imperative” of the war (39).

While Tim states his critiques of the war, as well as his “modest stand” against it, his ultimate

opposition to the war is that he believes he is “too *good* for this war...too smart, too compassionate, too everything” (39). Tim’s story “[foregrounds] the individual (white) soldier’s angst and [sets] the war in a political vacuum that ultimately inhibits a full understanding of the complicated events surrounding US intervention in Indochina” (“Back Against the Wall” 115). His ultimate problem with the war is not that it is occurring, but that he has to fight in it. This solipsism is most present in his resentment with the social pressure from his town, who he believes to be “sending [him] off to fight a war they didn’t understand and didn’t want to understand” (O’Brien). From Tim’s retelling, he seems to be the only person in the entire town to be drafted. By 1968, over one million Americans had served in Vietnam, and roughly 37,000 had died; over 11,000 Americans died in 1967 alone (“Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics”). Yet Tim experiences the war as an event that happens solely to him.

O’Brien asserts that political elites did not bear the burden of the war; however, he fails to extend this assertion in the opposite direction, namely that lower-income individuals did. He says that the country should send “LBJ’s pretty daughters, or Westmoreland’s whole handsome family—nephews and nieces and baby grandson” to war, with the implication that the politicians making decisions about the war are not the ones affected by it. Yet O’Brien positions the political elite, those not affected by the war, opposite people like him, who are. While Tim and his family are certainly impacted by his being drafted, he doesn’t acknowledge that the war was overwhelmingly fought by poor people and people of color who did not receive graduate school deferments, couldn’t afford to escape to Canada to dodge the draft, or didn’t know how to manipulate military regulations to receive draft deferments. Roughly eighty percent of the 2.5 million Americans who served in Vietnam were from poor or working class backgrounds (Appy 6). In his essay, “What Did You Do in the Class War, Daddy?”, James Fallows asks “why, when

so many of the bright young college men opposed the war, so few were willing to resist the war, rather than simply evade it?" (Fallows 216). He also questions why so many middle and upper-class "well-educated presumably human young men...so willingly took advantage of this most brutal form class discrimination" by letting people who were unable to avoid the draft, such as "the boys from Chelsea," a predominantly working class area of Boston, be "sent off to die" (216). While O'Brien was not a draft dodger, his position as a middle-class, college graduate drafted relatively late in the war informs how he experiences the war and how he chooses to portray it; of the numerous other American soldiers Tim serves with, none are identifiably working class and none, except for Kiowa, are explicitly non-white. O'Brien's 'default' soldier is not representative of the actual demographics of the war.

O'Brien's focus on middle class, racially unclassified soldiers is especially apparent in his depictions of life after the war. Kiowa, the only explicitly racialized soldier, died in Vietnam; the only post-war journeys O'Brien depicts are his own and Norman Bowker's. Of his own experience post-war, Tim writes about his "smooth glide" back into civilian society, "sliding gracefully from Vietnam to graduate school, from Quang Ngai to Harvard, from one world to another" (151). Norman Bowker experiences more difficulty readjusting to America; he writes a letter to Tim describing "the problem of finding a meaningful use for his life after the war" (149). Norman tries to go to college but finds the coursework "too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake, certainly not the stakes of a war"; eight months after sending Tim the letter, Norman commits suicide (149). While Norman's struggles should certainly not be discounted, and his lack of description of PTSD does not preclude his suffering from it, even Norman, who Tim portrays as the unsuccessful post-war veteran in contrast to his own success, ultimately struggles with internal, rather than external problems. He describes a feeling of



uselessness, stagnancy, and a lack of personal satisfaction with his life. Notably, however, Norman does not describe abuse or disgust from civilians, poverty, homelessness, joblessness, or other issues suffered by many Vietnam veterans, especially working class and racial minorities. That Norman doesn't experience any of these issues speaks to his positionality as a white, middle-class veteran; as Marita Sturken writes, "the treatment of the veterans was a direct result of who the veterans were—not the white, middle-class men who had graduate school deferments, but working class blacks, Latinos, Guamanians, and Native Americans" (Sturken 65). Tim's representation of Norman as the veteran who struggles the most presents the Vietnam veteran as a depoliticized and decontextualized figure.

In an interview with NPR on a twenty-year publication retrospective of *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien said that one thing he wants his readers to take away from the book is that "in war, there are no winners" ("The Things They Carried,' 20 Years On"). While a true statement on the ultimately destructive nature of war, O'Brien's musing also flattens the differences between different experiences of the war, a problem that pervades the novel. In trying to relate to the Vietnamese people he encounters, O'Brien either tries to make them like Americans, as in the Christian-centric encounter with the monks in the pagoda, or actually others them further, as in his retelling of the dead soldier's story. Because of O'Brien's overall anger at the US government for sending American soldiers, and himself specifically, to war, O'Brien fails to either critique the abusive actions of his fellow soldiers, or acknowledge the discriminatory impacts of the draft. *The Things They Carried* ultimately tells the story of a personal, rather than national, tragedy.

**Chapter 2: *In the Lake of the Woods* and Memory**

*In the Lake of the Woods*, Tim O'Brien's third Vietnam War novel, is set in 1986 in an America that has not dealt with or moved on from the traumas and atrocities of the Vietnam War, some twenty years later. This tension is epitomized in the figure of John Wade, a Minnesota senator hopeful who loses his election in a landslide after his involvement with the My Lai massacre is revealed. Wade, who fabricated his army records to place himself in a different company, and his wife, Kathy, retreat to the North Woods to recuperate from the loss and rehabilitate their marriage; during this trip, Kathy disappears. Wade is tormented by resurfacing memories of Vietnam he has attempted to bury, and cannot remember what happened to her. The novel presents several possibilities in chapters titled "Hypothesis"—that Wade killed Kathy, that she left, that she drowned accidentally, or that the couple planned in advance to run away from their debts and failures—but is ultimately inconclusive.

An initial reading of John Wade's character seems to reveal a cold-blooded man who sees Vietnam as an opportunity for advancement and everything and everyone else a trick that can be manipulated. His revisionism of his past seems an effort to escape any consequence for atrocities he commits. Wade's initial perceived callousness breaks down in part to reveal a profoundly traumatized psyche struggling not to simply glibly escape consequences of his past actions, but also to forget horrors he can never truly erase. Through Wade's amnesia and the inconclusive ending, the novel critiques America's historical amnesia towards atrocities like the My Lai massacre and desire to neatly wrap up history by scapegoating individual veterans.

The novel must also be read within the context of historiography—the way we think and write about the past. Samuel Cohen describes two modes of understanding and representing war, the triumphalist and the traumatic. By his definition, "the traumatic is informed by a recognition

of the lasting psychological effects of violence not just on its victims but also on those who witness and commit it, while the triumphalist is built on a refusal to accept the latter because it contradicts our official national story of innocence, virtue, and victory” (Cohen 220). In this sense, O’Brien blurs the boundaries between the two modes: while Wade himself can be read through the traumatic mode, the public outpouring against him after the revelation of his involvement with My Lai do not affirm the event’s negative psychological impact on him as trauma, but rather use it to scapegoat him for his wife’s supposed murder. By marking Wade as inherently psychotic rather than traumatized, the public ascribes anything negative to him as a personal defect rather than an effect of the war, thereby removing his ‘stain’ from the nation as a whole and paradoxically reinforcing the triumphalist model.

While in Vietnam, Wade becomes “Sorcerer,” a cunning trickster who treats the war as an opportunity for manipulation and advancement. His alter ego initially emerges when he performs tricks for the other soldiers, but gradually the other men come to believe in his powers, and Wade encourages their superstition. Wade’s craving for their belief in him takes him beyond simple card tricks; he “[puts] on [displays] of his power, doing a trick or two, using the everyday objects all around him...much could be done, for example, with his jackknife and a corpse” (O’Brien 38). Wade’s mutilation of corpses and the other soldier’s presumable enjoyment of it is so unremarkable to him as to be undescribed; the bodies are simply ‘everyday objects.’ Sorcerer’s tricks then escalate to “[displaying] an ordinary military radio and [whispering] a few words and [making a] village disappear...there was a trick to it, which involved artillery and white phosphorous, but the overall effect was spectacular” (65). Sorcerer describes “a fine, sunny morning” where “everyone sat on the beach and oohed and ahed at the vanishing village” (65). Wade sees the bombing not as a war tactic, but a way to further cement his power in the eyes of

his fellow soldiers. It is “spectacular” and causes everyone to “ooh and ahh,” an ‘everyone’ which presumably does not include the villagers watching their village being destroyed. Peter Martinsen, an American interrogator during the war, described to the International War Crimes Tribunal, “[interrogations] where you beat the fellow to get an effect, and then you beat him out of anger, and then you beat him out of pleasure” (Foster). For Sorcerer, bombing villages and killing Vietnamese are not a question of right versus wrong, but rather useful versus not useful. He uses these atrocities for personal, rather than national or political, gain.

His disregard for Vietnamese civilians is exacerbated when the divide between who is and is not the ‘enemy’ breaks down. Sorcerer is “in his element” in Vietnam, which he describes as:

a place where decency mixed intimately with savagery, where you could wave your wand and make teeth into toothpaste, civilization into garbage—where you could intone a few syllables over a radio and then sit back to enjoy the spectacle—pure mystery, pure miracle—a place where every object and every thought and every hour seemed to glow with all the unspeakable secrets of human history. The jungles stood dark and unyielding. The corpses gaped. The war itself was a mystery. No one knew what it was about, or why they were there, or who started it, or who was winning, or how it might end. Secrets were everywhere—booby traps in the hedgerows, bouncing betties under the red clay soil. And the people. The silent papa-sans, the hollow-eyed children and jabbering old women. What did these people want? What did they feel? Who was VC and who was friendly and who among them didn’t care? These were all secrets. History was a secret. The land was a secret. There were secret caches, secret trails, secret codes, secret missions, secret terrors and appetites and longings and regrets. Secrecy was paramount. Secrecy *was* the war (72-73).

Sorcerer’s language of magic and trickery recurs here—he again describes bombings as spectacles for enjoyment, even going further to call them miracles. However, his focus turns from gaining the trust or belief of his fellow soldiers, and more to the unknowability of anything. He describes all the Vietnamese people he encounters as equally inscrutable—“Who was VC and who was friendly and who among them didn’t care?”—with no divide between Viet Cong combatants and innocent civilians (73). This secrecy goes beyond the Vietnamese, however, and

begins to permeate every part of the war; “the war itself was a mystery” (72). Everything is a secret to Sorcerer: “History was as secret. The land was a secret. . . Secrecy *was* the war” (73). Nothing is distinguishable from anything else; the binaries between decency and savagery, civilization and garbage, soldier and civilian, enemy and friend, are all crushed under the weight of overwhelming secrecy. Sorcerer’s impression of overwhelming, pervasive secrecy corresponds to the misinformation surrounding the war from the US Government, as revealed by the leak of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, which “exposed the sensitive inner processes by which the Johnson Administration had abruptly escalated the nation’s most unpopular—and unsuccessful—war,” all the while denying to the public that they were doing so (“Pentagon Papers: The Secret War”).

These breakdowns culminates in Sorcerer’s killing of a fellow American, PFC Weatherby. Sorcerer sees “no enemy to shoot,” so he “[shoots] without aim and without any desire except to make the terrible morning go away”; when Weatherby finds Sorcerer at the bottom of an irrigation ditch he “[starts] to smile, but Sorcerer [shoots] him” (63, 64). The inverse of everything outside Wade becoming his enemy is that nothing other than self-preservation and his own feelings matter. Wade-as-Sorcerer “thought he could get away with murder. He believed it” (68). Wade “tricked himself into believing [killing PFC Weatherby] hadn’t happened the way it happened. . . he pretended he wasn’t responsible. . . he pretended he couldn’t have done it and therefore hadn’t. . . he pretended it didn’t matter much” (68). Wade believes that everything in the war is a secret, therefore PFC Weatherby’s death is just another secret, minute under the weight of all the other secrets. Wade tries to justify Weatherby’s death not by saying that no one will find out, but that it does not matter. However, his exercise is ultimately self-defeating; he “[pretends],” but does not fully believe, “he [can] fool himself”

(68). While soldiers have killed their comrades or superiors in every war, this phenomenon increased during the Vietnam War to the extent that it became nicknamed ‘fragging,’ after the fragmentation grenades soldiers often used in an attempt to pass the deaths off as accidental or combat-related; the increase in fragging or attempted fragging incidents in the later years of the Vietnam War has been attributed to the unpopularity of the war, “the morale and discipline of the military, the rage against superiors, racial tension, and drug use” (Reinhold 101).

However, while these events show a breakdown in Wade’s individual morality, the conflation of Vietnamese soldier with Vietnamese civilian is not unique to Wade, but rather deliberately instilled and encouraged by his superior officers and pervasive throughout the American troops. Lieutenant Calley, the head of Charlie Company, describes the whole of the country of Vietnam as their enemy. He commands them, “Kill Nam...Kill it...Grease the place...Kill it” and “[points] his weapon at the earth, [burns] twenty quick rounds,” then reloads and “[shoots] the grass and a palm tree and then the earth again” (103). In one of the chapters labeled ‘Evidence,’ a member of Charlie Company, Fred Widmer, is quoted saying, “[I]n the end, anybody that was still in the country was the enemy” (259). In another ‘Evidence’ chapter, during his court-martial, Lieutenant Calley is asked, “What were they firing at?” and responds, “At the enemy”; when the questioner attempts to clarify, “At people?” Calley again responds, “At the enemy” (141). When the questioner asks, “They weren’t human beings?” Calley responds, “Yes, sir” (141). Calley also says, “I didn’t discriminate between individuals in the village, sir. They were all the enemy, they were all to be destroyed, sir” (141). In his history of the My Lai massacre, Michal Belknap writes, “far from checking the men’s passion for revenge, Charlie Company’s officers encouraged it, and even participated in the abuse of civilians” (Belknap 56). To Calley, and thus to the soldiers he commands, the Vietnamese men, women

and children are not just Viet Cong, but an amorphous 'enemy' that ultimately strips them of their status as innocents, and even humans.

Despite the encouragement of his superior officer in the dehumanization of Vietnamese civilians, Wade does not actually take part in the slaughter at My Lai. Sorcerer wakes to the immediate knowledge that "something was wrong" (104). He sees "Weatherby shoot two little girls in the face"; he hears "people dying loudly inside the L-shaped hooch" (106). Wade's first action is a protest; he says "No," and "then after a second," he says "Please!," "meaningless sounds" (107). Wade describes the killing as "brightly mobile figures engaged in murder," a specifically moral judgment (107). He sees, "Simpson...killing children," "PFC Weatherby...killing whatever he could kill," "Meadlo and the lieutenant...spraying gunfire into a crowd of villagers," "the lieutenant [shooting] down a dozen women and kids and then [reloading] and [shooting] down more and then [reloading] again" (107). Wade is relentless in his narrative assignation of specific crimes to specific people; he refuses to let his fellow soldiers become faceless blurs in the slaughter. Wade understands that "this was not madness...this was sin" (107). He clarifies that the slaughter is not a mistake in the heat of battle, but deliberately immoral actions. Despite his attempts to protest the massacre, however, Wade takes no substantive actions to halt the atrocities of his fellow soldiers; he is the "bystander" whose silence, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel writes, "hurts the victim most" (Kristoff).

Wade cannot stop the slaughter, so he attempts to banish it from his memory even as it is happening. It occurs to him "that the weight of this day would ultimately prove too much, that sooner or later he would have to lighten the load" so he "[gives] himself over to forgetfulness" (108). He says "Go away," then "[says] it again, firmly, much louder and the little village

[begins] to vanish inside its own rosy glow” (108). Over time, Wade comes to “remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory,” since “this could not have happened...therefore it did not” (109). In this way, Wade mirrors the eventual reaction of many Americans to My Lai, which was to “repress the entire Vietnam war experience in both their own minds and the nation’s collective memory” because “the event itself was so painful to recall” (Anderson 12). Wade’s deliberate disappearance of Thuan Yen from his own memory is both an attempt to shield himself from material or emotional repercussions from his actions and a way to survive trauma and disillusionment; the latter response cannot function without the former.

However, even when Wade can almost make himself forget what he has witnessed, he cannot forget his own actions. Wade would “remember forever how he turned and shot down an old man with a wispy beard and wire glasses and what looked to be a rifle” but “was not a rifle” and instead was “a small wooden hoe” (109). In particular, “the hoe he would always remember...in the ordinary hours after the war...Wade would sometimes look up to see the wooden hoe spinning like a baton in the morning sunlight” (109). Wade hyper fixates on the hoe because it is the piece that both redeems and condemns him—he thought the old man had a weapon, which distinguishes him from the other American soldiers relentlessly killing civilians they knew were harmless, but the weapon is ultimately not a weapon, meaning that he too has killed an unarmed civilian. Reread through the lens of Thuan Yen, Wade’s killing of Weatherby also seems less a cold-blooded murder and more a shock response; he is “at the bottom of an irrigation ditch” with “many bodies, maybe a hundred” (110). Instead of a meaningless,



thoughtless murder, Wade has instead been sought out by one of the men he is hiding from, so that he does not have to witness Weatherby happily slaughter innocent villagers.

Despite attempting to disappear Thuan Yen from his own head, Wade initially speaks out against Lieutenant Calley's revisionism of the massacre. A few hours after the killing stops, Calley tells Wade "you can tell [Thinbill] it was a slick operation. Lock an' load and do our chores" (205). He tells Wade that nothing out of the ordinary happened, a regular "search and waste," and Wade responds, "Except there weren't any weapons to speak of. No incoming. Women and babies" (205). Calley asks him, "No which babies are these?" and Wade falters, "The ones...you know" (205). He is unable to describe the atrocities he witnessed, which means that he cannot hold the other soldiers accountable for them. When the platoon is ordered to return back to Thuan Yen, Calley forces the soldiers to pretend they have not heard or seen anything criminal. He "[scoops] up a handful of flies" that are buzzing around the corpses and "[holds] them to his ear," saying "You *hear* this? Fuckin' flies, they're claiming something criminal happened here. Big noisy rumor. Anybody else heard it?" (210). Calley forces Wade and Richard Thinbill, the other soldier protesting the massacre, to say they haven't heard anything; as their commanding officer, Calley essentially cuts off any chance the soldiers might have of reporting the atrocities.

Wade's experiences in Vietnam are scattered throughout the novel; it opens after his political career has been ruined by the news that he was in the company that committed the My Lai massacre. However, before his involvement with Thuan Yen is revealed, Wade's military history seems to help his career. During the 2004 presidential race, John Kerry's military record distinguished him from his opponent, incumbent George Bush, who was alleged to have used his father's influence to join the Texas National Guard and thus avoid being drafted to Vietnam;

despite the continuing unpopularity of the war, military service was still a political advantage (Goldenberg and Burkeman). When discussing campaign strategy with his political consultant, Tony Carbo, Tony asks, “So what’s the pitch? War hero?” (150). While Wade at this point is not known as a war criminal, he also hasn’t won any medals or been recognized for any particular valor. After Wade’s connection with Charlie Company is revealed, however, the “polls went sour and in the press there was snide chatter about issues of character and integrity” (48). This introduction to Wade’s campaign reveals the hair-trigger line between venerating veterans and scorning them; while the Thuan Yen massacre is justifiably different than ordinary military service, it still reveals the instability of public opinion even years after the war.

In large part because of the widespread news of his involvement with the massacre at Thuan Yen, Wade is the primary suspect in Kathy’s death. While there are other factors that predicate this suspicion—he was the last person she was with, someone saw them arguing, many female murder victims are killed by their intimate partners, etc.—Wade’s military history certainly plays a large role. Claude Rasmussen, the owner of the cabin Wade and Kathy were staying in when she disappears, tells him, “No matter what, you were in for a lynching. People make assumptions and pretty soon the assumptions turn into fact and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it” (279). He also tells Wade that even if the police don’t find anything, he will still be assumed to have killed her: “no win, no tie. They don’t find anything, you’re still a sinner. After what happened with the election, all the garbage that leaked out...” (244-245). Wade is presumed guilty, and nothing can prove him innocent to the court of public opinion. However, the condemnation of Wade and the corresponding resurgence of public attention to the massacre at My Lai focuses exclusively on “stories about [an] American, rarely dwelling for long upon the toll of lives, limbs, health, families, communities, resources and history

experienced by the massacre's actual victims" (Oliver 250). The focus of the public outcry is on Wade and his actions, rather than their impacts on the victims.

The impulse to unhesitatingly blame Wade for Kathy's death reflects a broader scapegoating of Vietnam veterans in American culture. Marita Sturken described this phenomenon in that "the scapegoating of the veteran as a psychopath absolved the American public of complicity [in the war] and allowed the narrative of American military power to stand" (Sturken 66). Furthermore, many veterans "were labeled social misfits and stereotyped as potentially dangerous men liable to erupt violently at any moment" (66). As such, Wade is typified as psychopathic—and liable to kill his wife—because he was in the war, which paradoxically absolves the public of culpability for his actions during the war, because he is psychopathic. Despite this revulsion for Wade, however, the nation as a whole fails its "litmus test for American values, a question not only of who was to blame for My Lai, but how America should conduct war and what constitutes a war crime" through the outcome of the My Lai trials (Raviv 62). Of the roughly 200 soldiers who participated in or witnessed the massacre at My Lai, only 23 were charged with criminal offenses, and only Lieutenant Calley was convicted; he was sentenced to life in prison for the premeditated murder of 22 Vietnamese civilians, but served only four years (62).

This scapegoating is both subverted and upheld by the fact that the most vehement insister that Wade killed his wife is Vincent (Vinny) Pearson, a cop who is himself a Vietnam War veteran. Before the narrative shows Vinny meeting Wade, his testimony appears in one of the chapters labeled 'Evidence': "The fucker did something ugly" (30). From their first meeting, Vinny has already decided that Wade is guilty of something. Art Lux, the sheriff, introduces Vinny to Wade by saying, "Vinny here, he's another Nam type. Marines," to which Vinny

“[frowns] without looking up” and responds, “Didn’t kill no babies” (125-126). In another ‘Evidence’ section, Vinny says, “Something was wrong with the guy. No shit. I could almost smell it” (146). Even at the end of the novel, when the police officers failed to find Kathy’s body or any evidence incriminating Wade after thoroughly searching the cabin, lake, and surrounding woods, Vinny still remains sure in Wade’s guilt. He says, “My guess? I don’t need to guess. He did it. Wasted her. That stare of his, the way he didn’t even feel nothing... Who cares if we didn’t never find no evidence? All it means is he sunk her good and deep” (296). While Vinny is certainly not alone in suspecting Wade, and particularly so because of his Vietnam connections, his particular insistence beyond anyone else that Wade is undoubtedly guilty seems to come as a result of his own position as a fellow veteran. Like the rest of the country, Vinny is unable to admit that the military or even the United States as a whole is culpable for the Thuan Yen massacre, particularly because it would assign blame to him specifically, as a veteran. Instead, he persists in his belief that Wade is individually guilty of both the massacre and Kathy’s death, and that he, Vinny, is nothing like Wade.

In addition to noting the hypocrisy of the way the public responds to Wade, the novel links Wade’s amnesia to a greater historical amnesia. Wade’s forgetting of both his last night with Kathy and his actions during the war is “a way of representing the status of collective memory in contemporary American culture” because “Wade’s individual case of amnesia is inseparable from more serious collective memory failures (Melley 121). In particular, the chapters titled ‘Evidence’ pull back specifically from Wade’s life and whether or not he killed Kathy to tackle the Vietnam War as whole, and eventually all of US History. In one such section, multiple soldiers testifying regarding the My Lai/Thuan Yen massacre reiterate the theme of amnesia: “I am struck by how little of these events I can or even wish to remember”; “Look, I

don't remember"; "I can't specifically recall"; "I can't remember" (O'Brien 137-138). The juxtaposition of these comments "depicts an entire society committed to the terms of forgetting and 'deniability' that have defined American political leadership since the presidency of Ronald Reagan" who "established the proving ground of historical amnesia" (Melley 121-122). The combination of Wade's personal amnesia and the political amnesia in the court-martial transcripts depict a society committed to willful forgetting from the individual to the governmental scale.

Finally, the novel's inconclusive ending thwarts triumphalist attempts at codifying the past. The unnamed narrator posits many hypotheses as to Kathy's fate throughout the novel, but refuses to endorse any of them as the truth. This frustrates readers who want to be able to proclaim 'yes, Wade killed his wife,' or perhaps even, 'no, he didn't,' but don't want to wrestle with the ambiguity. In this way, the novel "can be understood to call attention to the persistence of our desire to close these gaps, to capture the truth about the past and move on" because "in causing readers to recognize their need to close the gaps between evidence and hypothesis, fact and narrative, and to focus on their frustration at the novel's refusal to allow them to do so, the novel historicizes the way we historicize (Cohen 225). The novel "forces us to enact the drive for closure that has animated the way so many Americans have thought about the nation's long history of wars of one kind or another, from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the Communist Reds, finding new enemies to fit into this old storyline" (236). Whether the reader (and the public) trusts or abhors Wade, the novel ensures that we cannot simply close the book on his story, and its implications for America as a whole. Like the Vietnam War itself—which Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes was "never settled"—Wade's story refuses to wrap up into neat history that can accumulate dust.

### Chapter Three: Solipsism and the Absent Enemy in *The Yellow Birds*

Kevin Powers began to think about writing *The Yellow Birds* two years after he returned from a one-year deployment, March 2004-2005 (LeGro). The title of the novel comes from a traditional U.S Army marching cadence, which begins, “A yellow bird / With a yellow bill / Was perched upon / My windowsill” and ends, “I lured him in / With a piece of bread / And then I smashed / His fucking head” (Powers). While writing, Powers came to see the figure of the yellow bird—unsuspectingly lured in, then brutally attacked—as a representation for soldiers themselves. He thought of “the lack of control soldiers have over what happens to them” because “the war proceeds, no matter what you think or do...you’re powerless, and powerlessness itself becomes the enemy” (Crown). The novel follows Private John Bartle, who enlists in the army to escape his small town. During basic training, Bartle befriends Private Daniel Murphy, a younger soldier, and promises Murphy’s mother that Bartle will bring Murphy home safe. Once they are deployed, however, Murphy’s mental health begins to deteriorate, and he eventually wanders off base during a skirmish, is captured by insurgents, tortured, and killed. After Bartle and his sergeant find Murphy’s body, they attempt to protect his family by covering up what was done to him: they dispose of Murphy’s body, kill the Iraqi civilian who helped them find it, and then Bartle writes a letter to Mrs. Murphy posing as her son, an action that eventually lands Bartle in military prison after Mrs. Murphy becomes suspicious about the nature her son’s death.

Murphy’s death is the central rupture of Bartle’s world, and the entire focus of his war story. Bartle sees his true enemy not as the Iraqi insurgents he is supposed to be fighting, or even the ones who kill Murphy, but his own powerlessness at his inability to save Murphy. Set in 2004, the novel “represents a phase of the Iraq war when the occupation began to unravel catastrophically and the US home front’s indifference to the wars became clear” (Deer 320). This

hopelessness pervades every aspect of the novel: Bartle doesn't know why he's in Iraq, who he's fighting, or what to do with himself when he comes home. Even as he attempts to sympathetically portray soldiers, however, Powers' focus on a white, middle class man who voluntarily enlists out of boredom rather than economic necessity limits the book's scope of who is considered worthy of sympathy, and who is not.

From the beginning of the novel, Bartle identifies his ultimate enemy not as Iraqi combatants or citizens, but as the war itself. The first sentence of the book reads, "the war tried to kill us in the spring" (Powers 3). Further down the page, "then, in summer, the war tried to kill us as the heat blanched all color from the plains" (3). The war "would take what it could get" and its "sole purpose [was] to go on, only to go on" as it "tried its best to kill [them] all...man, woman, child" (4). This description of a personified war with a mind of its own removes blame from American soldiers: they, along with Iraqi insurgents, are equally victims of the uncontrollable war. The cyclical nature of the war Bartle describes—literally tied to the seasons—calls to mind Paul Saint-Amour's 'perpetual interwar,' a war characterized by "the real time experiences of remembering a past war while awaiting a future one that may or may not arrive" (Saint-Amour 167). Stacy Peebles and Aaron DeRosa expand on this concept, describing "the condition of late modernity not in terms of a binary position of wartime versus peacetime, but rather through the felt sense that another war is always coming and another war is always here" (DeRosa and Peebles 208). The war that Bartle experiences is both perpetually attacking and perpetually preparing to attack; the soldiers exist in a liminal space between the war they are currently fighting and the war they anticipate fighting in the future. James Dawes argues this is a return to older notions of war; instead of the "medieval natural-law tradition" where "peace was viewed as the natural condition of humanity" and "war was an exception that required ethical

justification,” the United States’ war on terror actually espoused a “countertradition, reaching back to Greece and early, expansionist Rome” which “viewed international relations as a permanent state of war” (Dawes 400-401).

The cyclicity is heightened by Bartle’s narration of the purposelessness of the war. He compares his war to “his grandfather’s war” which had “destinations and purpose” (Powers 91).

In contrast, he imagines:

How the next day we’d march out under a sun hanging low over the plains 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 ills and wadis<sup>2</sup>, 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 more years from now (91).

Just as the soldiers know the war will loop back around but hasn’t yet, so too will these children become their enemies, but they still attempt to break out of the cycle by befriending the children they anticipate fighting in the future. This liminality is further heightened by the location of the narrative within Iraq; it occurs in Al Tafari, in Nineveh Province. While Nineveh is an actual governorate in Iraq, Al Tafari is a fictionalized city, an inversion of the real city of Tal Afar. This fictionalization “identifies [Al Tafari] as a non-place, an unknown region on the edge of foreign territory where war permeates both landscape and cityscape unequivocally” (Mann 343). This non-place seems to lack both real people and real enemies. The soldiers “see no enemy” and “[make] up none out of the corners of [their] eyes” (Powers 91). The soldiers’ sense of uselessness of the war is exacerbated by this near total lack of enemy appearances; they are bombed from afar or encounter the strewn remnants of dead bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> An Arabic word for a ravine or valley which becomes a river or stream during the rainy season.



While few Iraqi characters play a significant role in the narrative, neither is Bartle completely blind to their suffering. Bartle hears a “soft keening” that he imagines is from “women around the campfires...[pulling] their hair crying out in mourning” (85). Whether or not the sound is actually mourning, however, Bartle deems it “wrong not to listen,” a feeling so strong that it persists even in his recollection of the sound (85). While the only named Iraqi character, Malik, is killed nearly immediately after he is introduced, before his death he forces Bartle to contemplate their differing experiences of Iraq. Bartle “[tries] to imagine living [in Al Tafar] but [cannot], even though [the soldiers] had patrolled the same streets Malik was talking about and drank tea in the small clay hovels and [Bartle had] had [his] hands wrapped in the thinly veiled hands of the old men and women who lived in them” (10). Malik serves as the catalyst for Bartle’s realization of the American troops’ lack of true understanding of Iraq. This conversation reminds Bartle of “a woman...who’d served [them] tea in small, finely blemished cups”; he remembers “how she’d blushed and smiled, how impossible it was for her to not be beautiful, despite her age, a paunch, a few teeth gone brown and her skin appearing like the cracked, dry clay of summer” (14). Bartle’s encounter with Malik reminds him of one of his few truly human encounters with Iraqi civilians, an encounter that places him, the US soldier, and the old Iraqi woman as equals. However, after his death, Malik is never mentioned again, suggesting that however much Iraqis might influence Americans, their impact is only temporary.

Bartle then tries to recreate another encounter out of the remains of a suicide bomb victim. The man is first described as a “body bomb,” a weapon and a victim all in one (124). Bartle sees “a wet spot where the body had been and its remnants were scattered in pieces, some small and some large, others appearing infinite like the pieces we found near our feet: a piece of skin and muscle, entrails...others were larger, an arm and bits of legs closer to where he’d been”

(126). However, despite his encounter with the man's body being defined by fragmentation, Bartle tries to imagine the dead man as a whole person. He pictures the last moments of the man's life, imagining him "struggling and begging and asking Allah to free him, then realizing he would not be saved as they cut his throat and his neck bled and he choked and died" (127). Bartle tries to recreate the man's personhood from the chunks of his body, but is ultimately unable to look past the body; the encounter ends with the soldiers using grappling hooks to try and "snag the larger pieces of the body" which "[resist] then [jerk] hard on the rope" (127). Even in his attempt to recreate the man, however, Bartle is still only able to imagine him in the moments before his death, already a victim; he is unable to imagine Iraqi life outside the violence he has witnessed.

While Iraqis by and large fill the background but not the center of the text, Bartle's solipsistic narration is not just a privileging of Americans over Iraqis, but also a privileging of himself and Murphy over everyone else. Malik's death, three pages after his introduction, "transfers civilian trauma to the white American soldier [in] Bartle's struggle to "continue" amid civilian deaths" through the literal transfer of his death—his blood—onto Bartle's body (Darda 436). Bartle justifies his lack of reaction by explaining that he "only [paid] attention to rare things, and death was not rare" (11). While this seems to suggest that Iraqi death need not be commemorated but American death should, Bartle's solipsism extends even to his own unit: only Bartle, Murphy, and Sergeant Sterling are named, the other American soldiers just as much in the periphery as Iraqis. Bartle had "been trained to think that war was a great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth," but this is "bullshit" (12). No army trains its soldiers to believe that war will unify them with their enemy; as such, Bartle rejects the notion of camaraderie within his own unit. He describes war as "the great maker of solipsists" that

teaches people to ask each other, “how are you going to save my life today? Dying would be one way....if you die, it becomes more likely that I will not” (12). Bartle sees each individual person’s survival as coming at the expense of another person’s; as such, he believes every death, Iraqi or American, increases his own chance of survival. This is an escalation of the idea that “recognizing the humanity of the enemy and even civilian populations often conflicts with the experience of the soldier,” which leads to an “American war story tradition [that] tends to reify the individual soldier’s experience over a broader representation of the causes and consequences of violent conflict” (Haytock 337).

The only exception to Bartle’s solipsism is Murphy. Before they deploy, Bartle promises Murphy’s mother that he will bring Murphy home safely; he becomes obsessed with fulfilling this promise by cataloguing Murphy’s every action and eventually deteriorating mental state. Bartle starts “tailing [Murphy], trying to figure out what he was up to” (Powers 159). He doesn’t “want to believe that [he is] watching the actions of someone who [is] already dead, so [he searches] for evidence that would contradict this...some grasp, at least, at life” (159). This subsumes his entire experience of the war; he describes the change that leads to Murphy’s eventual death as the beginning of “everything that will ever matter in [his] life” (4). Bartle’s hyper focus on Murphy sharply contrasts his disinterest towards the rest of the war, in which “every action [is] a page in an exercise book,” rote and ultimately meaningless (159). Bartle’s disinterest is directed less at Iraqis specifically, and more at everyone and every thing that isn’t himself or Murphy. He ultimately sees Iraqi civilians as collateral damage in his quest to save Murphy.

Bartle’s lack of anger or emotion towards Iraqi militants is especially remarkable when it comes to Murphy’s death. When Bartle and Sterling find Murphy’s body, he has just suffered a

horrible death: “broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands...throat cut nearly through...ears [and] nose cut off...imprecisely castrated” (205). Yet despite Bartle’s hyper focus on Murphy’s mental state and ultimate death, he seems to ascribe little blame to the insurgents who actually tortured and killed Murphy. Instead, Bartle focuses his ire at Murphy’s death mainly at himself, and some at the military more broadly. When attempting to renarrate the past, Bartle wants “something that [he] could look back on and say...whatever failure or accident of nature that caused [Murphy] to be killed could be explained by something other than the fact that [Bartle] missed [him] giving up” (82). Murphy was murdered, yet Bartle describes his death as “an accident of nature” that, if anything, is Bartle’s own fault. Murphy may serve the function of “discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy,” but Bartle will not assuage his own personal guilt for Murphy’s death (Scranton).

In contrast to Bartle’s unfocused disdain, his superior officers view Iraqis generally as hated enemies, not bothering to clarify between combatants and civilians. The company’s colonel gives a speech, telling their unit that he knows he doesn’t “have to tell [them] what kind of enemy [they’ll] be up against,” but doesn’t actually tell the soldiers who their enemy is (87). He continues, “if those bastards want a fight, we’re going to give them one” (87). Sterling, the company’s sergeant, tells Murphy and Bartle to remember that the war “was their idea” and is “their idea every time” so “they ought to kill themselves instead of us” (42). Sterling places the entirety of the blame for the war on some nebulous contingent of Iraqis, not clarifying who he does and doesn’t mean (insurgents, civilians, etc.).

This institutionalized disregard actually extends to American soldiers as well. In the same speech in which the colonel calls the soldiers the force of divine justice, Bartle is struck by the

“colonel’s pride, his satisfaction with his own directness, his disregard for [the soldiers] as individuals” (87). The colonel is proud of himself and his idea of the troops, but not the soldiers as real people. This disregard is exemplified when Bartle takes his concerns regarding Murphy’s mental health to Sergeant Sterling. Sterling tells Bartle “no one gives a fuck about Murph,” and, later on says, “Some people just can’t hack it, Private. You’d better get used to the fact that Murph’s a dead man” (69, 155). The military concept of “leave no man behind” (in Latin, ‘nemo resideo’) originated in antiquity; this language is still codified in the US Army Rangers (“I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy”), the Soldier’s Creed (“I will never leave a fallen comrade”), and the Airman’s Creed (“I will never leave an Airman behind”) (Galdorisi). Yet Sergeant Sterling both figuratively and literally leaves Murphy behind: first ignoring his deteriorating mental health, then actually leaving his body in-country instead of sending it home to his family.

Indeed, even the investigation into Murphy’s death is not driven by the army, but by Murphy’s mother. The investigator who arrests Bartle tells him that “there had been an incident...civilians had been killed and so on” (Powers 186). The captain cloaks his motives in the language of vague concern for civilian death, but his actions are actually driven by a combination of “higher-ups [feeling] they needed to come down hard on someone to prove that all those boys with guns out roaming the plains of almost every country in the world would be accountable” and trying to make Mrs. Murphy “stop asking whether the army covered up the nature of her son’s death” (186, 179). As such, the military sacrifices both Murphy and Bartle; Murphy by not investigating his death or taking action against the actual perpetrators, and Bartle by scapegoating him to make an example of perceived justice to the broader world.

Bartle's war experience, lack of support from his own military, and loss of his closest friend come together to make his return to America one of profound isolation and disconnect from his expectations. He is distressed because "the usual had become remarkable, the remarkable boring, and toward whatever came in between [he] felt only a listless confusion" (103). The war has fundamentally changed how Bartle relates to home, and what he considers normal and abnormal, giving him an entirely different frame of reference than the people around him. Bartle finds himself "making strange adjustments to the landscape," picturing himself swimming in his childhood river "not as [he] could be in a few months...but as [he] had been" (109-110). In order to swim in the same river he remembers, Bartle has to imagine himself as he was in the past; if he swims as he is now, it will be a different river, because his way of interacting with it has changed. In his novel, *The Go-Between*, novelist L.P. Hartley wrote, "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there" (Hartley). When he returns, America and his past self seem more foreign to Bartle than Iraq.

Bartle's distance from civilians who have never been to war is especially noticeable in the way that civilians talk about the war and Iraqis. In the airport, flying home from his tour, Bartle has an uncomfortable conversation with a bartender about his military experience. The bartender tells Bartle, "we ought to nuke those sand niggers back to the Stone Age...turn the whole place into glass" (106). Bartle doesn't respond, so the bartender presses on, saying "whole place is full of savages, is what I hear" (106). Bartle finally responds, vaguely, "something like that" (106). While Bartle did not always speak compassionately about the Iraqis, he shies away from this wholesale dehumanization of the entire country as 'savages' that should be 'nuked.' However, he recognizes the uselessness of trying to explain the American soldiers' interaction

with Iraqis—enemies, allies, translators, victims, collateral damage—to a civilian, and so attempts to qualify the man’s statements without actually having to combat them.

The bartender refuses to charge Bartle for his drink; this is Bartle’s first taste of the civilian veneration he immediately despises. Bartle doesn’t “want to smile and say thanks” or “pretend [he’d] done anything except survive” (107). On his flight home, the pilot “made an announcement...how honored he was to be giving an American hero a ride home,” to which Bartle thinks, “fuck it” (107). This deference turns Bartle from a real person to an abstract idea; he is not himself, but an idealized hero. These attitudes actually harm Bartle and other soldiers: when Bartle is pulled out of a river near his house, the cops “didn’t make [him] go through the motion of any kind of psych evaluation out of respect for [his] service” (147). Military suicide rates continue to increase; in 2012, the VA reported that twenty-two veterans committed suicide every day, one every sixty-five minutes (Kempe and Bossarte 18). However, veteran suicides may be underreported due to a variety of factors, including dishonorable discharges, coroners not noting veteran status, homeless veterans without anyone to vouch that they are a veteran, and families not reporting suicides due to stigma. (Basu). Despite this, the police officers would rather avoid embarrassing themselves and Bartle then potentially saving his life by helping him access mental health services. They echo the public’s “reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military” wherein “we love the troops, but we’d rather not think about them” too much, which has “become so familiar that we assume it is the American norm” (Fallows).

Bartle’s distaste for this civilian reverence is fueled both by his own self-loathing, and his perception of it as a fundamentally unstable quality, based on misunderstanding and lack of knowledge. He thinks that if Americans knew what he had done, they would revile, not praise, him because he feels that he deserves to be shunned. Bartle “can’t tell anyone what’s going on

because everyone is so grateful to [him] all the time and [he'll] feel like [he's] ungrateful or something.... like [he'll] give away that [he] doesn't deserve anyone's gratitude and really they should all hate [him] for what [he's] done but everyone loves [him] for it and it's driving [him] crazy" (Powers 144). He believes the only possible civilian responses are unknowing fawning or knowing revulsion; he is disgusted by the former, and terrified by the latter. The more civilians honor him, the more he hates himself: "a deeper hole is being dug because everybody is so fucking happy to see you... and everybody wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down" (145).

Bartle's self-loathing is heightened by his voluntary enlistment in the military. He saw joining the military primarily as an escape from the boredom of his everyday life. Despite being one of only two and a half million Americans, or less than one percent of the country, to serve in Iraq or Afghanistan post-9/11, Bartle does not feel braver than his compatriots (Fallows).

Instead, he feels that his choice to go to war was an act of cowardice:

But then, you signed up to go so it's all your fault, really, because you went on purpose, so you are in the end doubly fucked, so why not just find a spot and curl up and die and let's make it as painless as possible because you are a coward and, really, cowardice got you into this mess because you wanted to be a man and people made fun of you and pushed you around in the cafeteria and the hallways in high school because you liked to read books and poems sometimes and they'd call you a fag and really deep down you know you went because you wanted to be a man and that's never gonna happen now and you're too much of a coward to be a man (145-146).

Bartle enlists not to serve his country, but to better his personal social standing. His self-loathing fundamentally comes not from what he did do during the war, but what he didn't do: become a hero, become a man, live up to his idealized expectations of what a soldier is and does.

Murphy also joins the military to escape the monotony of his everyday life; since he and Bartle are the only characters whose motivations for enlisting are shown, Powers obscures the important demographic realities of the supposedly "all-volunteer" army. Both Bartle and Murphy



had “had small lives, populated by a longing for something more substantial than dirt roads and small dreams” (37). However, neither are stated to need the military to provide them opportunities, such as higher education, they could not afford otherwise. This sets both men apart from the majority of enlisted troops, for whom “the AVF exploits the lack of opportunity elsewhere for poor people of color in the U.S. and targets them to become its unwilling ‘cannon fodder’ for fighting its imperialist wars abroad,” which can be seen by the fact that “people of color, and especially African-Americans, are overrepresented in the military” (Tannock 166). Women also tend to join the military “not because they are attracted by the life of a soldier or because they are intensely or discreetly patriotic, but because they see opportunities for vocational training, higher education, employment, [and] secure careers” (Woods 156).

Bartle’s military service sets him apart from those around him, but his narrative voice also challenges the perception that no one can understand his experience. He writes, “nothing is more isolating than having a particular experience” but then immediately qualifies it by saying, “at least, that’s what I thought. Now I know: all pain is the same. Only the details are different” (132). This is exemplified through his interactions with Murphy’s mother: their pain—both missing Murphy—is the same, while the details—Bartle cannot forget Murphy’s body, and Mrs. Murphy cannot imagine it—differ. The gruesome image of Murphy’s body is “burned into [Bartle’s] memory,” while Mrs. Murphy only has Murphy’s “absence from the family plot” (206, 219). However, “Bartle’s “missing [Murphy] became a grave that could not be filled or leveled, just a faded blemish in a field and a damn poor substitute for grief, as graves so often are” (139-140). The actual grave that Murphy’s body is denied is instead replaced by a perpetually open grave in Bartle’s mind; Murphy’s absence cannot be renarrated or healed. Both

Bartle and Mrs. Murphy have their own empty graves. This binds them together, and they both leave the conversation with “justified...resignation” (223).

In an interview with his alma mater, The University of Texas at Austin, Kevin Powers said, “The stories of the men and women who fight our wars are often I believe seen in our culture as incomprehensible, that if you haven't been there you can't understand,” but stated, “I don't know if I agree with that notion” (Youngblood). In his attempt to give his readers “an experience that they might not have had otherwise,” however, Powers focuses solely on a demographic that is already overrepresented in both fiction broadly, and war fiction in particular: the traumatized white man, or what Roy Scranton calls the “trauma hero” (Youngblood, Scranton). Powers' Bartle is ultimately focused on his own pain at his losing his friend; as such, he largely overlooks the suffering of his fellow American soldiers, and the pain they inflict on Iraqis. While he may seem to be breaking down the binary of ally versus enemy by disregarding even his American comrades, he is simply redefining it; rather than Americans versus Iraqis, Bartle's allies are himself and Murphy, and his enemies are everyone and everything else. Bartle is ultimately disappointed not by his country, but by himself and his personal sense of failure at not keeping Murphy alive, losing the opportunity for larger critiques about the nature and human cost of the Iraq War.

#### Chapter Four: *Redeployment* and the Limits of the War Novel

Phil Klay's *Redeployment* immediately departs from the other texts examined in this project, in that it is a collection of short stories rather than a novel, without even—like *The Things They Carried*—an overall narrator to bind together seemingly disparate chapters. The book does not claim to present any universal truths about war, and in fact attacks the idea of universal truth or experience at all. The ten narrators are infantry soldiers, officers, chaplains, Foreign Service officers, and adjutants—variously combatants and noncombatants, already home and still deployed, named and unnamed. In an all-volunteer army, demographically similar soldiers can have dramatically different reasons for going to war; one study cited various reasons for joining the military as economic/pragmatic—primarily lower income individuals searching for the opportunities afforded by the G.I. Bill or a career in the military, or what has been called the 'poverty draft'—or idealistic—perceiving military service as heroic—or some combination of factors (Roanova et. all 429). This disparate army of enlisted soldiers, officers, paramilitary contractors, civilian officers, and other noncombatants fought an equally disparate enemy that gave way to insurgents of various nationalities, creeds, and religious divisions. This multitude of different experiences of the war breaks down the idea of a universal war experience, and thus a war novel. In asking "Where's the Great Novel About the War on Terror," Matt Gallagher questions, "how can there be a definitive GWOT<sup>3</sup> novel when there's no definitive GWOT experience?" (Gallagher 5). As such, any analysis of *Redeployment* must be qualified: Klay's narrators contradict each other and have different opinions about the war, their enemies, and American civilians.

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<sup>3</sup> Global War on Terrorism, a term that usually encompasses the United States' military actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, as well as more general counter-terrorism actions.

*Redeployment* is rife with soldiers speaking crudely, violently, and in a racist manner about Iraqi combatants and non-combatants alike. Almost immediately after a soldier nicknamed Timhead has killed a young teenager, another American, Harvey, tells him, “Man, I’d have been up there so fast, bam bam, shot his fuckin’ hajji<sup>4</sup> mom too...ain’t no more terrorist babies be popping out of that cunt” (Klay 38). Harvey has no compassion for the youth of the dead child and in fact wants to go even further and kill his mother too, assuming that she is also an insurgent and will have future children who will also become insurgents; he uses both racist and sexist language. In the story “Prayer in the Furnace,” the narrator, a Catholic chaplain, worries that his soldiers have stopped distinguishing between insurgents and civilians. In one such conversation, the soldier he speaks too says, “the only thing I want to do is kill Iraqis...killing hajjis is the only thing that feels like doing something”; when the chaplain clarifies, “Insurgents, you mean,” he responds, “They’re all insurgents” (148). Historian Thomas Ricks argues that shortly after the beginning of the war, American soldiers began to view Iraqi civilians as “the playing field on which the contest occurs” rather than people who needed and deserved safety (Ricks 5-6). The same soldier, Rodriguez, gives a eulogy in which he says that a dead comrade “actually liked the Iraqis” and “was the only guy in the squad who thought the country wouldn’t be better if [the US] just nuked it until the desert turned into a flat plane” (131). Here Rodriguez escalates his logic, and indicates that the troops as a whole agree with him; not only does he say that every Iraqi is an insurgent and therefore an enemy, he also believes that they all deserve to die. In fact, he thinks the country itself deserves the death penalty; he doesn’t just want to kill

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<sup>4</sup> Originally an honorific given to a Muslim who completed the Hajj to Mecca, now used as racial slur by American soldiers beginning during Operation Iraqi Freedom to refer to Iraqis, Afghans, and anyone perceived to be Arab or Muslim. It is comparable in offensive intent to the slur ‘gook’ used by American soldiers during the Vietnam War.

every single Iraqi, he wants to destroy the entire region. Rodriguez treats the Americans' enemy not just as Iraqis, but also the country of Iraq itself.

This disregard both is and is not institutionalized in the military. Rodriguez's company is led by Captain Boden, who describes Iraqis as "a people who do not understand kindness"; he says, "they see kindness as a weakness. And they will take advantage of it. And Marines will die" (141). Boden's short, declaratory sentences provide an unbreakable link of cause and effect; if one shows kindness to Iraqis, inevitably Marines will die. He describes Iraqis as both conniving and subhuman; despite supposedly not understanding kindness, they are able to exploit it. The unit's Lieutenant Colonel also subscribes to the policy of excessive force, telling his troops, "when we shoot, we shoot to kill...Marines do not fire warning shots" (143). However, while Captain Boden and Lieutenant Colonel Fehr advocate for shooting anything and everything Iraqi, they are also teaching their unit "to ignore MEF<sup>5</sup> policy" and cause another Captain to be "stunned" (143). While Charlie Company's command institutionalizes brutality within their own unit, they also go against wider military policy; however, the structure of the military also enables this since "only a commander can recommend an investigation" into potential war crimes (144). By designating the company in "Prayer in the Furnace," the story in which the most abuse of civilians is described, Charlie Company, Klay explicitly connects military violence in Iraq back to Vietnam and the specter of My Lai. However, the same attitude that encourages excessive violence towards civilians ultimately harms soldiers as well. When the chaplain raises concerns about Charlie Company, the Major he speaks to shrugs and says, "they're led by an idiot. What are you gonna do?" (143). If Iraqis are 'collateral damage,' so are the Marines to some extent. In writing about the designations of injury and death as "byproducts"

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<sup>5</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force

of war, Elaine Scarry argues, “if one is talking about the interior activity of war, then injury is not something on the road to a goal, but is the goal itself” (Scarry 74). The American superior officers treat the damage to both Americans and Iraqis as an unfortunate and even unintended side effect to their ultimate goal, but this physical harm actually becomes the goal itself.

Rather than letting anti-war civilian readers self-righteously condemn the soldiers, however, Klay complicates this reading by revealing that the breakdown between enemy soldiers and civilians is not merely an issue of American perception, but an actual crisis of the war. Rodriguez, the soldier who tells his chaplain “the only thing [he wants] to do is kill Iraqis” also shows a photograph of a five or six year old Iraqi child “bending over a box...planting an IED” (148). In another story, a soldier kills a thirteen or fourteen year old child because “the kid had grabbed his dad’s AK when he saw [the US soldiers] standing there and thought he’d be a hero and take a potshot at the Americans” (32). While this does not mean that every Iraqi citizen is secretly an insurgent, and does not legitimize indiscriminate killing of Iraqis, it is also not as simple as war-crazed Americans losing the ability to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. In Iraq, child soldiers have been trained and used by both Saddam Hussein’s government and Kurdish armed opposition groups before and after the 2003 United States invasion, as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) (Wessells 236). Ultimately, however, this merely expands the American versus enemy binary without actually dismantling it; while the internal binary of soldier versus civilian or adult versus child breaks down, this only reinforces the ultimate American versus enemy binary by simply expanding the definition of who the enemy is.

Klay also subverts the effect of this blurring of boundaries by presenting the expectation of gleefulness at killing—an expectation on the part of both the soldiers themselves, and the

book's readers—that is then unfulfilled. Early on in the collection, we are introduced to PFC<sup>6</sup> Dyer, who is “excited” about the chance to “finally pop his cherry and shoot somebody” since “all he’s killed so far in the Corps has been paper” (17). However, after he actually does shoot an insurgent who just wounded a fellow soldier, he has to pack the man’s wound and finds himself very concerned with the man’s welfare. Dyer pulls apart “his own IFAK<sup>7</sup> to get gauze for the hajji” which he’s “not supposed to do” because “your IFAK is for you” (20). After the soldiers return to base, Dyer repeatedly attempts to ask the doctors how the Iraqi is doing, to the extent that the other soldiers conceal the man’s death from him. He ends the story staring glumly into “his ice cream melting into the cobbler” unable to “do the basic things” (27). The same Captain Boden who tells his Marines that Iraqis don’t understand kindness has a leadership style “that goes over well with nineteen-year-olds before they’ve actually been to war” because “when their lives are on the line, Marines want more than pure, unthinking aggression” (131). Klay subverts civilian expectations of military blood thirst by revealing the inexperience—in both soldiers and civilians—that drives this belief, and its potential ramifications for soldiers themselves.

Many of the soldiers also have similar concerns about the efficacy of the war. There is a undercurrent of an “unsettling, sometimes nauseating, sensation of defeat and despair” that runs through the stories; the fact that the “war in Iraq was a misbegotten venture begun on bad intelligence and without a vision to guide the soldiers after they destroyed the state” is not explicitly voiced by the soldiers themselves, but permeates the stories with an overwhelming moral fatigue (Filkins). While none of the narrators or main characters are Iraqi, a translator in “Money as a Weapons System” makes several bitter assertions about American actions in Iraq and the future of the country; he tells the narrator, “You have baked Iraq like a cake...and given

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<sup>6</sup> Private First Class, the second-lowest rank for enlisted personnel.

<sup>7</sup> Individual First Aid Kit

it to Iran to eat" (85). While the narrator stammers and tries to dispute this, he is ultimately unable to say the translator is wrong, acknowledging both American pessimism about the war, and the reasonable Iraqi cynicism. This moral fatigue comes out most of all in "Prayer in the Furnace," both during and after the soldiers' deployment. One soldier says to the chaplain, "What are we doing? We go down a street, get IED'd, the next day go down the same street and they've IED'd it again" (147). This sense of moral failure continues to permeate even after soldiers have returned home, shaping how they look at themselves and their actions while deployed. Another soldier from Charlie Company tells the chaplain, complaining about a fellow soldier who's spoken out against the war, "Alex is gonna go and act like a big hero, telling everybody how bad we were. We weren't bad. I wanted to shoot every Iraqi I saw, every day. And I never did" (165). The overwhelming failure of the war, even years later, permeates the soldiers' consciousness to the extent that not killing civilians becomes a success, rather than a given.

Beyond disappointment at the 'morally bruising' battlefield of Iraq, the stories express disillusionment at the reality of war itself; they are disappointed with their country for the war, but also disappointed at themselves for not acting heroically. The chaplain is concerned by the actions of his unit, but also disenchanted with the war itself; he says, "I had at least thought there would be nobility in war" but instead sees "mostly normal men, trying to do good, beaten down by horror, by their inability to quell their own rages, by their masculine posturing and their so-called hardness, their desire to be tougher, and therefore crueler, than their circumstances" (151). He sees the soldiers' potential abuses not as a byproduct of this specific war, but of war in general; it is not that the Iraq War does not live up to the nobility of previous wars, but that the nobility of war is fundamentally a myth. This myth, however, is actively encouraged by the



army; in 2006, as the Iraq War continue to drag on longer than expected, the US Army replaced its main recruiting slogan, “An Army of One,” with the now familiar “Army Strong,” emphasizing personal bravery and strength over military unity (Burns). Another of Klay’s veterans misses “the idea of Iraq all [his] civilian friends imagine when they say the word, an Iraq filled with honor and violence” (239). He misses not the Iraq that he experienced, but an imagined war in an imagined country that he perceives to be nobler than his own life despite having been to war and knowing that this idea does not exist. Even his unit’s “one no-shit hero...like you read about, like you see in the movies” ultimately died saving a man who wasn’t in real danger, in an alley the unit had been warned against entering. The story is only heroic if you leave out large chunks; if not, it is simply a pathetic tragedy.

If the experiences of soldiers in-country are characterized by rage and despair, their returns home are distinguished by profound alienation from American civilians. Roughly half the stories take place partly or wholly in America, where the characters feel both unable to describe what they’ve experienced to their families and friends, and unable to relate to the everyday life of someone who has never been to war. Hypervigilance is a frequent symptom of PTSD, which is estimated to affect between 4 and 17 percent of US Iraq War veterans; however, even veterans without PTSD reported significantly higher rates of hypervigilance than civilians without PTSD (Kimble et. all). After an attempted shopping trip with his wife throws him into a panic, one soldier thinks about the “people walking around by the windows like it’s no big deal...people who have no idea where Fallujah is...people who’ve spent their whole lives at white,” the lowest level of alertness or fear (12). In contrast, most veterans “stay orange, all the time” (13). These different levels of alertness to one’s surroundings or potential threats color veteran’s perspectives

on everything, fundamentally separating the way they see the world from the civilians around them.

This disconnect is heightened by the fact that the soldiers perceive civilians' response as primarily falling into one of two camps: empty reverence, or self-righteous contempt. They believe that American civilians either thank them for their service without understanding what that truly entails, or condemn them for choosing to participate in a war that most people don't understand. One narrator sums this up by saying that, "the weird thing with being a veteran... is that you do feel better than most people" because they "risked [their] life for something bigger than [themselves]" even if they didn't "understand American foreign policy or why we were at war"; at the same time, however, they "feel somehow less" because "what happened, what [soldiers] were a part of... was an ugly thing" (203). The lack of a draft is what ultimately both elevates and damns veterans: they chose to go to war, and most American civilians have neither made that choice, nor know anyone who has. The widening gap between soldiers and civilians at home (at the same time that it is collapsing abroad) contributes to an atmosphere that either completely praises or completely condemns soldiers; there is no room for subtlety because for most people, soldiers are an idea rather than real people they know. As such, the soldiers are disgusted by both responses: they neither want the praise, nor feel they deserve all the contempt.

In particular, the soldiers view the evolution from near total support to widespread condemnation of the war as hypocritical. One character says, "It's all phony... when the war started, almost three hundred congressmen voted for it... and seventy-seven senators... but now, everybody's washed their hands of it" (206). Furthermore, even self-identified anti-war people tend to thank the troops for their service: "the insufferable public interest crowd, who hated the war... didn't understand why anyone would ever want to own a gun, let alone fire one... still paid

lip service to the idea that I deserved some sort of respect” (251). This phenomenon is a different manifestation of the stigmatization of Vietnam veterans; both types of responses treat veterans as a fundamentally separate class of people who impact or are responsible for the war, which civilians do not see themselves as doing. While Klay does not directly talk about the antiwar movement, he views anti-war civilians as ultimately apathetic and not actually contributing to peace. In synthesizing peace movements in response to the Gulf Wars, James Dawes describes how “the peace movement has failed to centrally target...dysfunctional military-industrialism” and so “has restricted itself to the marginal role of affecting the length of time allowable for any given conflict” (Dawes 421). The antiwar movement does not address central conditions of the war, so cannot truly impact it, just as antiwar people do not understand what the soldiers experience, so thank them for their service without fully comprehending what they are thanking soldiers for.

However, this reverence versus revulsion dichotomy is fundamentally based on the assertion that no one can understand what soldiers have experienced, a view Klay subtly challenges. One character, himself a veteran, mocks this phenomenon, telling “an old joke, ‘How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a lightbulb?’ ‘You wouldn’t know, you weren’t there’” and describing this attitude as a “game” to manipulate his fellow college students that is ultimately “bullshit” (Klay 170). According to military historian Yuval Harari, this idea of the incommunicability of war experience and trauma developed in the post-Enlightenment period with the shift from a focus on empirical knowledge to personal witnessing and response. He describes this phenomenon in that, “a central tenet of the new stories of war was that those who did not undergo the key experiences of war cannot understand those experiences and cannot understand war in general” (Harari 232). Joyce Wexler expands this idea, stating, “only those

who were there can know what [a soldier] knows; others know nothing” (Wexler 2). While an accepted convention of war writing since the mid-eighteenth century, Klay disputes what he calls the “[fetishization of] trauma as incommunicable,” which is “an abrogation of responsibility” that “lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain” (“After War, A Failure of the Imagination”).

Instead, Klay presents instances of civilians who, though they may not have experienced war, have had their own traumatic experiences that Klay argues should allow them to empathize with soldiers, if not directly relate to their experiences. In “Prayer in the Furnace,” in response to the soldiers’ acknowledgement that many of them think no civilian will be able to understand what they’ve gone through when they return to the states, the chaplain tells them about a parishioner who had to watch his infant child develop a brain tumor and suffer through chemotherapy for months before finally dying and asks the soldiers, “Who would rather go through that than be in Ramadi?” (Klay 157). While not claiming that their experience of war is relatable to civilians, he argues that their experience of *suffering* is, and that this can be used as a building ground for the seemingly unbridgeable gap between soldier and civilian. In particular, women who have experienced sexual assault, and veterans who have experienced combat tend to report post-traumatic stress disorder at similar report (Farley et. all 3). In another instance, this same opportunity for connection is lost because the civilian woman, a victim of childhood abuse, tells the veteran she has just recounted her painful history to, “I’m not comparing what I’ve been through to what you have...I’m not saying mine’s as bad” (Klay 261). Despite trying to respect the veteran’s experience, the woman is actually speaking over him when he says that he doesn’t have PTSD and his war experience was actually not as bad as her trauma. Instead, she continues to insist that his experience is unimaginably worse, turning him from an equal to a mythologized

veteran figure, an encounter that is taken almost word for word from an exchange Klay himself relates in “After War, A Failure of the Imagination.”

That same veteran is able to connect to a civilian friend through the abdication of this position as the ultimate authority on trauma. When trying to decide whether to go into corporate or public interest law, he is told by a drop out from Teach for America, “America is broken, man...trust me, you don’t want to be the guy bailing water out of a sinking ship” (253). When he tries to assert his authority on this issue—“‘Iraq vet,’ I said, pointing at my chest. ‘Been there, done that’”—his friend refuses to accept this, saying “I’ll throw my middle school tour against your deployment any day” (253). The narrator briefly tries to reassert his authenticity, asking his friend if the middle schoolers shot at him, to which his friend responds that one student stabbed another, after which the narrator is forced to acknowledge that his friend’s experience “trumped the shit out of [him]” (253). However, because the veteran is able to acknowledge the similarities between his friend’s experience and his own—and because his friend is willing to challenge him—they can commiserate about being “a Band-Aid on a giant sucking chest wound” (253).

Despite *Redeployment*’s wealth of multiple perspectives, it is limited in that all the narrators are still American men. While the Defense Department did not lift their ban on female soldiers in combat positions until 2013, some 300,000 women served in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lemmon). Although officially excluded from combat positions, women attached to combat units endured virtually identical risks as their male counterparts, including engaging enemy fighters in close quarters (King 122). However, in *Redeployment*, women are by and large reluctant or fearful girlfriends, or sexual conquests, who either venerate or revile the soldiers’ experiences, but do not understand them. While Jessie, one of the only female soldiers depicted or named (“War Stories”), is described as tough and presumably competent, the focal point of

her appearance is her relationship with a male soldier, Jenks, and whether or not she will sleep with him, illustrating the principle that “however competent a women might be, her relations with male soldiers are finally determined by her sexuality” (124). The book examines the intricacies and difficulties of modern war—at times explicitly comparing Iraq to earlier wars such as the story entitled “In Vietnam They Had Whores”—but still ultimately considers war to be the provenance of men.

The inclusion of both combatant and non-combatant narrators depicts the multiplicity of experience of the Iraq War, however the divide in narrators creates a false dichotomy in interpretations of the war. The noncombatant narrators—a priest, a Foreign Service officer—are the characters most worried about abuse of power or civilians, and most respectful of the Iraqis they encounter. This divide led one reviewer to condemn the book for “[pigeonholing] veterans as dysfunctional, abusive, dependent, and violent” since the only characters “[allowed] to survive the war with a better understanding of the world” are civilians, or at least noncombatants (Mayfield 3). While I would argue that Klay complicates the perception of even his soldiers as violent, that the most unquestionably non-violent characters are all combatants can lead to a superficial reading that stigmatizes veterans. Furthermore, that all the narrators are Americans leads to Iraqis primarily being portrayed as the backdrop upon which battles are fought or life is lived, rather than real people with real experiences of their own suffering from the war.

*Redeployment* begins with a soldier coming home, and ends with a soldier making his first confirmed kill. The book’s nonlinear structure resists a narrative of recovery or closure, fitting for a nation still at war. In the last story, “Ten Kliks South,” the narrator becomes obsessed with determining the exact degree of culpability each member of his crew-served gun bears for their role in the killing of insurgents. He asks, “if we used a howitzer to kill somebody

back in the states...I wonder what crime they'd charge us with...murder, sure...but for each of us? In what degree? I mean, me and Bolander and Jewett loaded, right?... The lieutenant gave the order" (Klay 274). The narrator's questions reveal an experience of war deeply fragmented and isolated not just from civilians, but from itself; as a single member of a team of gunners, working in conjunction with other teams of gunners, firing on targets from a distance, he literally does not know if he has killed someone or not. Even if he has, he is unable to assess his degree of responsibility: "Platoon-sized is like, forty...figure, six guns, so divide and you got six, I don't know, six point six people per gun....divide it by nine Marines on the gun, and you, personally, you've killed zero point seven something people today. That's like, a torso and a head. Or maybe a torso and a leg" (272).

That Klay chooses to end the book with this story speaks to a larger series of questions surrounding the Iraq War itself. Just as the narrator is unable to tell at exactly what point he has killed, so too goes the ending of the war. While the last official combat troops left Iraq in December of 2011, more than 20,000 Marines and private contractors remained to guard the U.S. Embassy and act as Iraqi military trainers (Denselow). In 2014, the US dispatched troops back to Iraq in response to incursions by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS); as of now, some 5,200 American troops remain in Iraq (Hennigan). Like the soldier unable to tell exactly at what point he has killed someone, we don't know when the war is over. Did the war ever end? Does it end when the last US troops leave the country, or when the American public stops caring about it? Should the United States be like this soldier, dividing up what percentage of torsos and heads and legs we, personally, are responsible for? Is it possible for a nation to simultaneously be at war and not at war, if the war impacts only a miniscule number of its citizens?

## Conclusion

I began with a poem that illustrated the relentless binarizing of war, and I want to close with another poem that shows some of the breakdowns in these binaries. *Here, Bullet*, is the first book of poetry by veteran Brian Turner, written primarily while he spent a year as an infantry team leader in Iraq, beginning in November of 2003. Unlike much other American war writing, *Here, Bullet* writes from both American and Iraqi perspectives, and “[keeps] sight of the individuality of the Iraqi people” (Najmi 56). Turner’s multi-voiced narration rejects the idea of ‘sides’ in war; rather, he argues, everyone experiences suffering. In one poem, “The Hurt Locker<sup>8</sup>,” the poem rejects divisions and instead opens with the unifying experience of pain. The poem begins, “Nothing but hurt left here / Nothing but bullets and pain / and the bled-out slumping” (Turner 13). The poem does not distinguish between American hurt and Iraqi hurt or identify whose “bled-out” bodies are “slumping”; rather, everyone suffers regardless of whose bullets are fired.

In the next stanza, the poem differentiates different experiences in the war, but continues to blur binaries between soldiers and civilians. Turner writes, “Believe it when you see it. / Believe it when a twelve-year-old / rolls a grenade into the room” (13). He continues, “Believe it when four men / step from a taxicab in Mosul / to shower the street in brass / and fire” (13). Turner depicts the breakdown of categorization. In particular, the image of men stepping from a taxicab, not usually imagined as a vehicle of war, to attack, forces readers to imagine ‘real life’—which we, as Americans, consider to be life not at war—and war co-existing side by side. Furthermore, that the command to “believe it”—the it, in this case, being that nothing is left but

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<sup>8</sup> Although the poem shares a name with Kathryn Bigelow’s 2008 Iraq War film, there is no connection between the two. The phrase “the hurt locker” originated during the Vietnam War, and, along with related phrases such as “in the hurt bag” and “in the hurt seat,” was used to mean “in trouble or at a disadvantage; in bad shape” (Lighter).



hurt—comes primarily because of a twelve year-old throwing a grenade implies not just that we must contemplate a world in which twelve year-olds are simultaneously children in need of protecting and the perpetrators of war, but that no one should be able to remain unscathed in the face of this reality.

The poem ends with a return to amorphous images of violence and pain. Turner writes, “Open the hurt locker / and see what there is of knives / and teeth. Open the hurt locker and learn / how rough men come hunting for souls” (13). The final lines of the poem pull back from the specifics of the Iraq War to return to more primeval and enduring aspects of war; rather than IEDs, drones, or sniper rifles, the weapons are “knives and teeth,” and rather than oil, the installation of an American-friendly regime, or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the objective of the “rough men” is “hunting for souls” (13). I open with this poem not just to show the disintegration of some of the binaries present in my opening case study, but also to interrogate the poem’s demand of its (presumably American) audience: to listen and learn, illustrating the disconnect the author believes to exist between war experiences and war perceptions.

Throughout this paper, I have examined the effects of binary thinking on American Vietnam and Iraq War writing. In particular, I have looked at the dichotomy between American soldiers and who they consider their enemies to be while deployed, and the relationship between American soldiers and American civilians at home. While a true assessment of the impact of the elimination of the draft is beyond the scope of this project, I would argue that this has been one of the most significant factors in the widening gap between the American military and the broader American public. This disconnect, in turn, leads to a lack of oversight or concern for military actions abroad, causing the perpetual “waging of war against distant, racialized others, mainly in the Global South” because of the lack of impact on everyday American lives (Deer

315). Journalist James McGovern, in a 2007 proposal to raise taxes so as to truly spread the impact of war on Americans, describes a photograph he encountered of a handwritten sign in a US military facility in Ramadi, Iraq, which read, “America is not at war. The Marine Corps is at war; America is at the mall” (McGovern).

I explore how this disconnect begins to increase during the Vietnam War, which had a draft but was still disproportionately fought by poor people of color who could not avoid the draft through graduate school deferments or loopholes. The perceived alienation in *The Things They Carried* goes hand in hand with the scapegoating of individual soldiers in *In the Lake of the Woods*. Public disgust for veterans during and after the Vietnam War largely transforms into empty reverence for Iraq War veterans, in which even anti-war people thank soldiers for their service without understanding what it is they’re thanking them for. Both *The Yellow Birds* and *Redeployment* depict returning soldiers who are unable to connect those around them because they are seen as abstractions rather than people.

Corresponding to increasing alienation of American soldiers from the American public is the collapsing of distinctions between enemy combatants and noncombatants, due to the changing nature of warfare. In *The Things They Carried*, despite treating the Vietnamese civilians he encounters as alien others, O’Brien recognizes their status as noncombatants. *In the Lake of the Woods* portrays the wholesale slaughter of Vietnamese civilians during the notorious My Lai massacre, but also the acknowledgement from the narrator of the immorality of these actions. In *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle fails to meaningfully distinguish between Iraqi insurgents and Iraqi militants because they all exist in the background of his personal drama with Murphy. Finally, *Redeployment* displays the murkiness of morality in war zone in which not only do

American soldiers fail to differentiate between soldiers and civilians, but it is unclear to what extent these categorizations still exist.

In part because of the increased mechanization of war with drones and longer-range guns, not only are American civilians alienated from the wars our country is fighting, but soldiers themselves are increasingly so as well. The final story of *Redeployment* is narrated by a soldier who is unsure whether or not he has killed anyone, or to what is his degree of responsibility. Yet this soldier is still deployed in Iraq; increasingly, however, US weapons of war are controlled by military operatives from thousands of miles away, with even less of a personal stake in their actions, or not piloted at all. In “The Case For and Against Autonomous Weapons Systems,” James Dawes argues that the use of AWS will create a dystopian nightmare in which war is seen to have no casualties, “a shocking moral hypocrisy that only counts dead bodies on ‘our’ side” (Dawes 614). The lack of personal investment in America’s wars by the majority of Americans has already increased the frequency and duration of war; if no one in a country, whether soldiers or civilians, is threatened during war which is deemed to have no casualties, we come closer and closer to the Clausewitzian idea of total war without moral limits.

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