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NOVEL PERSPECTIVES OF THE IRAQ WAR

by

Olivia Ruth Clark

A Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

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My dissertation, "Novel Perspectives of the Iraq War," explores literary representations of the American occupation of Iraq. Responding to Roy Scranton's argument that the prevailing narrative of the traumatized veteran returning home from war with experiential knowledge (what David Buchanan calls "combat gnosticism") has overshadowed other important perspectives, this project interrogates the manner in which cultural representations can both sustain and challenge national mythologies. Each of my chapters responds to a specific problem in our culture's popular narratives of war and argues that solutions to extant misperceptions are available via counternarratives. What connects these problems are their prevalence in the conventional war narrative and their shared basis in the ideology of American exceptionalism. My dissertation explores how these "other" representations of the Iraq War – those I classify "second-wave" to distinguish from the earlier-written "first-wave" novels that align with exceptionalist ideologies, those written and narrated by the perceived wartime Other (Iraqis), and those written by women featuring female protagonists – function as correctives and counternarratives to those that follow the literary tradition of the long twentieth century in perpetuating the myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism. The goal of this dissertation, through close readings, commentaries, and critical interventions, is to deepen our understanding of war fiction and the questions it raises about how the American cultural memory of war is constructed. By reading these works through the lens of cultural memory and trauma studies, with an eye toward ethnoculturalism and gender, my dissertation places these texts into ongoing critical conversations. It is my hope that this study and the novels it

interprets as exemplars of a new, more inclusive narrative will encourage a re-assessment of the war-literature genre and a reconsideration of the ways we narrativize – and mythologize – war.

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## INTRODUCTION

### GENRE PROBLEMS: THE TRAUMA-HERO MYTH AND COMBAT GNOSTICISM

War attacks language not only through confusion and astonishment but also through impotence, and through the aversion to recall that manifests itself as apathy. What can we possibly say that has not been said before, or that will make a difference?

– James Dawes, *The Language of War*

One can read many pages of a historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many successive installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgement that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue.

– Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

No less than war itself, the memory of war is a complex and messy phenomenon.

– Philip West, et al., *America's Wars in Asia*

War literature, like war itself, is fraught with complexities. Critical debates persist regarding the ability of language to express violence, the most appropriate genre for war's literary articulation, and the ethics of war's representation. These concerns have become increasingly interdisciplinary, as the study of war literature has branched into various fields including historiography (by practitioners such as Jay Winter), philosophy (Judith Butler), and psychology (Jonathan Shay). Recently, however, Roy Scranton and David Buchanan have initiated a new critical conversation about two of the genre's most pressing problems and their particular conspicuity in Iraq War fiction.

In his 2015 essay “The Trauma Hero,”<sup>1</sup> Scranton argues that the prevailing narrative of the traumatized and disillusioned veteran returning home from war has overshadowed other important perspectives. He writes, “Our faith in the revelatory truth of combat experience and our sanctification of the trauma hero [has us] focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure, we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for” (234). This fixation on veterans’ trauma thus impacts the American public’s perception of war and the construction of cultural memory. Connected to this problem is “combat gnosticism,” a term Buchanan adapts from James Campbell’s 1999 article on World War I ideology for his own 2016 book *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture*. Combat gnosticism is the pervasive belief that the experience of war is impossible to communicate to those who have not witnessed it firsthand, that its revelatory impact transcends the capacity of language. Often verbalized with the phrase “You Had to Be There,” it presents a moral quandary: those veterans-turned-writers whose authority the American public trusts for the truths of war are often those who performed the killing that *is* war. Buchanan challenges this privileging of the veteran’s voice, insisting that close proximity to the battlefield and personal involvement in war-waging can create a narrative of scapegoating in which, as in trauma-hero ideology, the soldier is glorified and other perspectives are silenced or villainized.

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<sup>1</sup> Though it was reprinted in from Scranton’s 2018 collection *We’re Doomed. Now What?*, I herein cite the essay as it was originally published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in January 2015.



Scranton and Buchanan critique popular works of Iraq War fiction<sup>2</sup> for perpetuating the myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism. However, their examination is limited temporally, as well as in terms of authorial and character ethnicity and gender. The texts they consider were published during or within ten years of the American occupation of Iraq, and they adhere to the conventions of twentieth-century war representation and authorship: a central bildungsromanesque trope of innocence-turned-experience, a homecoming marked with maladjustment and the inability or refusal to communicate their war experiences, heavy emphasis on the American soldier/veteran's post-combat psychological trauma, written and narrated by white men who had served in the military or were embedded reporters in the field. As some of the first works of fiction emerging from the war, these texts by Powers, Klay, and Fountain garnered critical adoration,<sup>3</sup> their media attention further compounded by the contemporaneous publication of Chris Kyle's memoir *American Sniper* (2012) and its development into a blockbuster feature film in 2014. But, as is the propensity in our fast-paced society, public interest soon waned. The war was no longer trending. By the mid-2010s, Americans had grown weary of the war as a cause célèbre (though many continued to display their patriotism with yellow ribbon bumper stickers on the rears of their sedans, minivans, and pick-up trucks). Perhaps this diminishment of popularity is why the works

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<sup>2</sup> In "The Trauma Hero," Scranton specifically critiques Kevin Powers' novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012) and Phil Klay's short-story collection *Redeployment* (2014). In *Going Scapegoat*, Buchanan also assesses *The Yellow Birds*, alongside David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012) and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012).

<sup>3</sup> *The Yellow Birds* and *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* were among the four finalists for the 2012 National Book Award. *Redeployment* won the 2014 National Book Award.

of fiction published later, *after* the ten-year anniversary of the invasion, were not as critically attended as their recent forebears.

A closer look at these later Iraq War narratives paints a different picture of the soldier-figure, one that departs from previous allegiance to the trauma hero and the gnosticism his participation in combat has purportedly permitted him. My dissertation explores how these “other” representations of war function as correctives and counternarratives to those critiqued by Scranton and Buchanan. Chapter Two investigates three novels with the white-male authorship familiar to the genre, yet I argue that they present an alternative to the heroizing of American servicemembers and incorporate character correctives by introducing and humanizing Iraqi characters (who are absent or marginalized in earlier Iraq War literature). To distinguish them from the earlier works by writers such as Powers, Klay, and Fountain, which sustain the trauma-hero myth and combat gnosticism, I label these later, more subversive works “second-wave” Iraq War fiction. In Chapter Three, I delve into the ethics of war representation and argue that literary portrayals of the war authored and narrated by the wartime Other – in this case, Iraqis – offer valuable perspectives rarely found in conventional American war fiction. Continuing this work of re-perspectivalizing the war, the female-authored novels I analyze in Chapter Four challenge the persistence of our culture’s militarized masculinity and its bedfellow, the hypermasculine military. I show how these women writers offer an alternative to male-dominated representations of war, and I argue that, in addition to deconstructing gender roles, they raise crucial concerns about family, the natural environment, and cultural geography that invite a rethinking of the way our society understands conflict and violence. My discussion of the novels throughout these three

chapters illuminates their disregard for the major characteristics of twentieth and twenty-first century war literature (those aspects of war representations that are considered givens) by posing three interconnected questions: Must the American soldier always be represented as a hero? Must the occupier/“victor” monopolize war storytelling? Must war fiction remain gendered? It is my hope that this study and the texts it presents as exemplars of a new, more inclusive narrative of war will open the way for a radical re-imagining of the war-literature genre.

To fully grasp the extent of the representational problems these new narratives counter, it is useful to trace the development and intensification of two tropes central to war literature throughout the long twentieth century:<sup>4</sup> the postwar trauma of veterans and war’s inexpressibility. These tropes have coalesced into the interconnected myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism. At the root of these ideologies is a centuries-old adherence to American exceptionalism and the rhetoric that perpetuates it. Embedded in this nationalist foundation is the American collective conscience and the continuation of the perceived soldier-civilian divide. Complicating the bedrock further is the role of the APA after the Vietnam War, leading to interdisciplinary Trauma Studies in the 1990s and 2000s. In addition to historical and sociopolitical factors, academic scholarship itself has contributed to these representational crises.

The study of combat trauma – the psychological effects of modern warfare – can be traced back to Freud’s post-World War I realization of the impact that external events can have upon the individual’s psyche. He claimed that war neuroses stemmed from a

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<sup>4</sup> I define the long twentieth century as the period from the Civil War (specifically with Whitman’s and Crane’s writings about it in the 1880s and 1890s) to the first wave of Iraq War fiction (the early 2010s).

rupture between two parts of the ego: its pacifistic, self-preserving side and its aggressive, self-defensive side – the proverbial “fight or flight” instinct. This split has been described as a “wounding of the mind brought about by sudden, unexpected emotional shock” (Leys 4). The ensuing trauma is characterized as being repetitive, because the ego schism leads to a subconscious fixation on the traumatic memory which manifests in recurring psychosomatic symptoms such as depression, anxiety, nightmares, and flashbacks.

Freud and his contemporaries labeled this condition “war neuroses,” while other psychiatrists during and after World War I called it “shell shock.” Similar symptoms had been dubbed “soldier’s heart” during the Civil War and were typically diagnosed as “combat fatigue” during World War II and the Korean War. Until the late 1970s, the symptoms weren’t taken seriously; soldiers presenting with them were suspected to be malingering, effeminate, or tainted by congenital weakness. Many veterans were committed to mental institutions; others committed suicide. Finally, after the Vietnam War, these traumatic neuroses were clinically legitimated by the APA, who confirmed the symptoms as being caused by external agents (the traumatic event) rather than something internal to the individual and officially classified the condition as “PTSD” in its 1980 DSM-III. By the 1990s, interdisciplinary work in the humanities and the social sciences led to the development of a non-clinical, theory-based field of Trauma Studies, with academic interest branching into literary criticism and theory.

Within Trauma Studies, two perspectives debate the possibility of representing trauma through language. Leading mimetic trauma theorist Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1996) maintains that trauma is “unspeakable;” it is a “crisis of

representation.” The psyche can’t comprehend, cope with, or integrate the memory of the traumatic event, thus is doomed to come back to it again and again. Caruth’s theories about language and trauma align with Elaine Scarry’s ideas about language and violence in *The Body in Pain* (1985). Scarry argues that “pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (4), and she insists that war itself evades articulation. Certain metaphors and modes of omission or redescription are used to refer indirectly to violence and trauma, since it (according to their theories) cannot be expressed directly.

Anti-mimetic trauma theorists such as Ruth Leys and Roger Luckhurst depart from Caruthian theory and look to narrative structure for a way around the trauma-representation problem. Leys (*Trauma: A Genealogy*, 2000) reworks the claims of nineteenth century French psychologist Pierre Janet, who claimed that our normal consciousness of the past (which he called *narrative memory*) “narrates the past as *past* [and] is the action of telling a story” (Leys 105). Through recreating the story of a traumatic event, the memory of it becomes more fully integrated into the psyche, minimizing the repetitive resurfacing and associated psychosomatic effects. The traumatic memory can then become part of one’s life story like ordinary (non-traumatic) narrative memories. Veracity is not necessarily the point here. Memory itself is representational; it does not replicate the real event. Leys insists that “memory conceived as truth-telling is overestimated . . . but memory conceived as narration is crucial” (118). Representing trauma is thus not only *possible* according to anti-mimetic theorists; reconstructing a story of the event can also be *therapeutic* such that recovery is possible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This has been clinically corroborated with the work of psychiatrist Judith Herman, as documented in her study *Trauma and Recovery*.

Applying anti-mimetic trauma theory to the study of literature, Luckhurst (*The Trauma Question*, 2008) posits that trauma as a crisis in representation actually “generates narrative possibility” (83). He explains why fiction is more effective for narrating trauma than its allegedly objective counterpart, history. Luckhurst outlines an entire genre of Trauma Fiction to include tropes and formal conventions in novels by writers such as Toni Morrison and W.G. Sebald (though his focus in *The Trauma Question* is not on war fiction per se), supporting his overall claim that “cultural narratives have been integral in consolidating and forming the idea of a post-traumatic subjectivity since 1980” (15). However, through studying war literature from the Civil War to the present, I have discovered that trauma narratives predate this by nearly a century. Moreover, the question of whether trauma and violence can be represented through language did not itself originate with 1990s-2000s Trauma Studies, or even with the post-Vietnam War recognition of PTSD in 1980. At least as far back as the American Civil War, representations of war have highlighted veterans’ trauma and the concerns about the limitations of language and narrative when confronted with violence or the memory thereof.

One of the earliest examples of this tendency in American letters is found in the work of Walt Whitman. Writing of his forays into the army hospitals and battlegrounds of the Civil War in *Specimen Days* (1882), he declared that “the real war will never get in the books.” The gritty details of combat experience would not be considered appropriate for journalistic or literary portrayals of the conflict. Such particulars would not be conveyed to those back home, but instead washed over with accounts of victory and honor. Whitman asserted that those “lurid interiors [of] the untold and unwritten history

of the war [were] infinitely greater than the few scraps or distortions that *are* ever told or written.” These remarks have been interpreted by some scholars as a commentary on the censorship and sanitization of war discourse, by others as a recognition of the inherent difficulties of depicting the experience of war through language. Daniel Aaron (*The Unwritten War*, 1987) points out that the literary audience of Whitman’s era was mostly female. That the battlefield realities of the average soldier included not only filth, gruesome wounds, amputations, and diseases, but also uncouth behavior and vulgar language meant that they were inappropriate for the delicate reading public. Obviously, war does not make for polite literature. But beyond cultural censorship, Whitman’s comments may also refer to the perceived linguistic and literary impossibility of accurate representations of war. In line with Scarry’s theories, James Dawes (*The Language of War*, 2005) interprets the *Specimen Days* passage as Whitman’s realization that “the essential nature of violence is always in excess of language” (7).

Whether because it was considered impolite or impossible, few veterans of the Civil War wrote about their experiences in battle. Whitman himself did not fight, but he came into contact with hundreds of wounded soldiers while volunteering as an army hospital nurse – as did Louisa May Alcott, who wrote about her experiences in *Hospital Sketches* (1863). Similarly, Herman Melville wrote *Battle-pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) without having ever served in it, nor did he attempt to convey the Civil War soldier’s experience. The collection consists mainly of officer elegies and historicized battlescapes. One of its most famous poems, “Shiloh: A Requiem,” is basically a landscape description, haunting though it is. As Randall Fuller explains in *From*

*Battlefields Rising* (2011), it was not until the next generation that writers (such as Twain, Bierce, and Crane) would try to make sense of the human cost of the war.

*The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) remains one of the most studied novels of the Civil War. Using veterans' accounts and newspaper reportage from the previous few decades, Crane set out to create something he felt had not been achieved before: "a psychological portrayal of fear." The resulting narrative emphasizes protagonist Henry Fleming's internal struggle rather than describing only external aspects of battle as had previous writing about the Civil War. Initially referred to as "the youth" and not by his name until he has earned his mark of manhood (the wound), Henry journeys from innocence to experience and from cowardice to courage over the course of the short novel. It opens with his inner turmoil about whether or not he would run when faced with battle. He is uncertain how he will react in such circumstances, but is too embarrassed to discuss it with his fellow soldiers. Crane here asserts the masculine attribute of reticence, an early clue to the inexpressibility paradox. When battle finally erupts, Henry indeed flees. He soon finds himself among a group of wounded men marching toward the rear. But his encounter with a character known as "the tattered man" makes him realize that, unlike the men around him, he has no wound to justify his retreat. He desires this "red badge" so that he will not be viewed as a cowardly deserter when he returns to his regiment after the battle. John Limon (*Writing After War*, 1994) interprets Henry's longing for proof thusly: "The wound is simultaneously part of the war and a representation of it. It is an independent empirical fact and, as a badge, a symbol of an empirical fact, a symbol of itself" (57). This supports Scarry's identification of wounds as metaphors to articulate pain because direct representation thereof defies language. The



wound is also confirmation of literary realism because it exists literally and concretely, yet it simultaneously foreshadows the psychological wounding that makes itself known later, after the war. Further realism is achieved as Crane depicts with gruesome detail Henry's terrifying encounter with a rotting corpse, attending to his dying buddy Jim Conklin, and his abandonment of the raving, dying "tattered man" in order to save himself. This *mise en scène*, depicting the grotesque realities of war that Whitman claimed would never be revealed, has prompted Daniel Aaron to interpret *Red Badge* as "a profane parable against war and against its glorifiers and apologists" (215). After this series of horrific encounters, Henry finally receives the coveted red badge, though it is from the swinging rifle butt of a blundering fellow soldier rather than from an enemy bullet. He lies about how he got the wound when he returns to his regiment. Later, he seizes his real opportunity for bravery by capturing the flag of the opposing army's guard, thereafter relieved that he has established a reputation of courage and has acquired a war story befitting future generations of descendants. Crane's representation of a soldier's psyche thus runs the gamut from fear, shame, and guilt to triumphant elation – even pride – as readers are privy to Henry's inner thoughts. Though Whitman said the real war would never get into the books, Crane's portrayal exposes the "lurid interiors" by including details earlier writers had hesitated to reveal and by imagining the internal transformations wrought by participation in combat.

While *Red Badge* succeeds in its intent to provide a "psychological portrayal" of the soldier during the war, it only hints at the soldier's lasting trauma. Crane's follow-up story, "The Veteran" (1896), which we might consider the grandfather text of the trauma-narrative subgenre, shows war's after-effects. Set decades later, it opens with elderly

Henry Fleming sitting surrounded by eager listeners as he recounts his adventures at war, his young grandson at his feet. When asked if he was ever frightened during battle, he admits with a smile: “Pretty well scared, sometimes. Why, in my first battle I thought the sky was falling down. I thought the world was coming to an end. You bet I was scared.” He also admits that he ran away the first time shots were fired but soon “got kind of used to it.” The adults in his audience laugh along with the venerable old man’s fond reminiscences, and his jovial storytelling suggests the war is long distant in his memory.

However, a different truth is revealed later in the story, when the old man’s barn catches on fire. Upon being alerted of the blaze, “there was a swift and indescribable change in the old man. His face ceased instantly to be a face; it became a mask, a gray thing, with horror written about the mouth and eyes.” The noise of the fire and the panicked livestock in the barn triggers what we’d now call a flashback. Henry had earlier described battle as being “an awful lot of noise,” and now the primary sensory imagery evoked by the description of the fire is auditory. The sound of the fire returns him to the sound of battle. What onlookers perceive as his fierce determination to save the animals is, in his mind, a mad rush into the fray to save his brothers-at-arms. The old man charges into the conflagration, the flames of which are likened to “the wild banner of deadly and triumphant foes.” As he tries to save the last two colts, the roof falls in, killing Henry. Here then, in “The Veteran,” is a contrast between public words and private thoughts. The calm, nostalgic manner with which Henry conveys his combat experience in the stories he tells his captivated audience that morning contrasts sharply with the intense “horror” he feels that night, when the barn becomes the battlefield. This disconnect between what is spoken and what is felt – between what is manifest and what is latent –

suggests that his attitude of untroubled reminiscence when talking about the war is a façade to cover the continuing symptoms of his combat trauma. Thus, Crane not only comes closer than Whitman foresaw possible to getting “the real war into the books” with his depiction of grisly details and a soldier’s psychological interior in *Red Badge*, he later dramatizes the difficulties of expressing trauma in “The Veteran.”

Tensions between war and language in portrayals of soldiers’ wartime experiences and veterans’ traumatic memories are further explored in studies of World War I literature. In his landmark monograph *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), for example, Paul Fussell states that “the presumed inadequacy of language to convey the facts of trench warfare is one of the motifs of all who wrote about the war” (212). This is manifest in American literature about the same war in the works of Hemingway, whose *Farewell to Arms* (1929) includes a confession by protagonist Frederic Henry that he has always been “embarrassed by the words ‘sacred,’ ‘glorious,’ and ‘sacrifice,’ and the expression ‘in vain’.” He has heard them shouted repeatedly and noticed them in various print media, but, he states, “I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory” (161). The only words that have any meaning left are dates and the names of places, roads, and rivers – and none of those possess any grandiose rhetoric or the artistic imperative of literary portrayal. The magnificent refrains of war are insufficient in the face of its actuality. Hemingway’s Henry has seen through the “old lie” Wilfred Owen wrote about eight years earlier: “*Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.*”

Pearl James, like many scholars of war literature, links World War I to modernism. Literature of the 1920s and 1930s (like that of the Lost Generation) is often considered a response to the cultural effects of World War I, with themes of modernism

including fragmentation of the self, intellectual disillusionment, rejection of older forms and styles, and increased skepticism of authority and reason. In *The New Death* (2013), James echoes Scarry's theories of language and violence by asserting that, "In the wake of war, writers used representational modes such as tropes of omission, implication, and inference ... and disjointed narrative structures in order to evoke without naming the obscene realities" (25). A famous example of one of those modernist "narrative structures" is Hemingway's iceberging technique, which he utilizes to represent a veteran's trauma in the short story "Soldier's Home," from his 1925 collection *In Our Time*.

While *Farewell* takes place during the war, "Soldier's Home" provides insight into the struggle of a veteran after the war. Like Crane's "The Veteran," "Soldier's Home" is an early example of the homecoming trauma narrative that becomes increasingly characteristic of the war-literature genre as the twentieth century progresses. Hemingway's protagonist Harold Krebs has returned to his hometown several months after the other servicemen have returned home. The victory parades are over, and though at first Krebs wanted to talk about what he'd been through, the people at home didn't want to listen. They had moved on, "had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities." This precludes any dialogue about the war within the story, but Krebs' trauma is still present – under the surface. Krebs' psychological suffering is portrayed via Hemingway's trademark iceberging method of subtextualization, which requires readers to consider what is left unsaid, to recognize and analyze the absences or omissions of a text. Analogous to the obscuration of an iceberg's mass by ocean depths which leave only the tip visible, Hemingway conceals information that becomes evident to the reader only

through close reading and inference. For instance, early in the story, he writes: “A distaste for everything that had happened to [Krebs] in the war set in because of the lies he had told.” Left unrevealed are what exactly had happened to him and what kinds of lies he’d had to tell (and why), but we sense through his interactions with his family that events during the war had deeply affected him. He is unable to tell his mother that he loves her, and he is monosyllabic in response to conversations his kid sister tries to initiate. The story’s setting also hints at how combat has transformed Krebs. The town is described as not having changed; everything was the same. This repeated emphasis makes us realize that Krebs *has* changed, that he feels that he doesn’t belong anymore because of it.

Hemingway also uses anaphora to represent veteran trauma indirectly – that is, to show us his iceberg. Halfway through the story, several consecutive sentences begin with the phrase “He liked,” which emphasizes conversely what he does *not* like. On the surface, this passage of explicit likes and implicit dislikes has nothing to do with war or traumatic memory, but when we question *why* Hemingway has chosen to write it this way, we realize he is emphasizing Krebs’ isolation from the rest of the town. A later use of anaphora employs the phrase “He did not want” at the start of several successive sentences, proffered as veiled evidence of Krebs’ postwar apathy and disconnect from society, further symptoms of his combat trauma. Therefore, Hemingway’s writing style portrays the veteran’s traumatized psyche even more than his narrative’s content does. It is not so much the presence of words of war as their absence that demonstrates what violence does to the consciousness.

This trope about the limitations of language in Civil War and World War I fiction broadens into one about the perceived limitations of conventional linear narrative with World War II literature like Heller's *Catch-22*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which all use mechanisms of temporal displacement (time travel, non-linear plot sequence, flashbacks) to represent the war's effects on individuals and society. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is most pertinent to this discussion because it highlights the surveyed tropes most overtly by focusing on veterans after the war, while *Catch-22* and *Gravity's Rainbow* take place mostly during the war.<sup>6</sup> In line with Scarry's claims about the necessity of metaphorizing violence and pain, Vonnegut employs science fiction motifs to represent trauma – his own, and his protagonist Billy Pilgrim's. The first and last of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s ten chapters are narrated by Vonnegut speaking to us as Vonnegut, while the chapters in between tell the story of the fictional Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's assistant during World War II. In Chapter 1, Vonnegut expresses his need to write about the Dresden firebombing, his central traumatic event during World War II, and the difficulty he's encountered in the attempt to do so. He tries again and again to write his "Dresden book" (4) but can't (again, because language is inadequate in the face of atrocity), until he turns to sci-fi tropes. We realize this in the next chapter, which introduces Billy Pilgrim who becomes "unstuck in time" (29) for the first time when he is near death, stranded on the wrong side of the German line, his regiment having just been decimated in the Battle of the Bulge. Through time travel, he sporadically flashes back and forth between his older years, his time spent on the alien

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<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, I find that both *Catch-22* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are trauma narratives in their own way. Unfortunately, the complexities and nuances of such an argument are beyond the scope of this project. Vonnegut's inclusion of a veteran protagonist and overt allusions to combat trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five* provide a more succinct example for the purposes of this survey.

planet Tralfamadore, and his recovery stint in a VA mental hospital. In Billy's World War II present, which we understand to parallel Vonnegut's experience, he is captured by Germans, crammed into a train car with other dying men, transported across Germany to a Russian POW camp, and eventually ends up in Dresden. Since the city is not militarily beneficial, it is assumed that it will never be attacked by the Allies. Dresden doesn't even have a prison or barracks to hold the POWs who are sent there, so they are kept underground in an old slaughterhouse, the #5 on its door. Ironically, being imprisoned in "Schlachthof-funf" is what keeps the POWs alive (including the fictional Billy and the real-life Vonnegut), while the city of Dresden is firebombed by British fighter planes and is completely leveled, its innocent population annihilated.

Initially, the reader assumes that Billy is an autobiographical stand-in for Vonnegut himself. In this way, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is read as a book-within-a-book, its authorial frame as biographical paratext to explain how Vonnegut came to write the narrative of Billy Pilgrim titled *Slaughterhouse-Five*. However, moments of metafiction within the interior chapters reveal that Billy is not intended to be Vonnegut himself, that Vonnegut is our third-person omniscient narrator who is there with Billy and the other POWs. At one point, when Billy walks past another American prisoner at the latrines in the Russian POW camp, Vonnegut writes, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (159). Later, as they arrive in Dresden, Billy overhears a comment made by "Somebody behind him," and Vonnegut again announces "That was I. That was me" (189). These and other narratorial intrusions emphasize that Vonnegut's writing about Dresden is, at least in part, his response to the urge to bear witness to an atrocity that was kept secret from the American public for years after the war. The device of metafiction is

a means to represent and work through his trauma as a veteran of the event. It is a brief, indirect way for him to express his experience and inexplicable survival, and it helps him reconstruct the story of the traumatic memory he's been trying to write out for decades. Paradoxically, through the *nonsensical* nature of science fiction, he is able to make sense of what happened, and in interviews he has declared that writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* was "therapeutic." This supports anti-mimetic trauma theorists' belief in narrative therapy as a path to recovery, as well as Scarry's claims that trauma is best represented through metaphorization. Furthermore, the use of repetition throughout Vonnegut's novel (especially of the phrase "So it goes," appearing over 100 times in the book) mirrors the repetitive compulsion of traumatic memory itself.

Vonnegut emphasizes his intention that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel, with Billy and other veterans having "found life meaningless because of what they had seen in war" (128), and also through his characterization, based on a promise he made to Bernard V. O'Hare's wife Mary, in the opening chapter, not to glorify war. He writes, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters" (208). So, not only does war "destroy language" as Scarry and others have noted, it also alters the way we tell stories, even as it demands that we do so. Vonnegut's anti-war message, then, when viewed alongside the other examples of American war fiction discussed heretofore, reveals a pattern that charts the genre's evolution over the course of the twentieth century. As its trajectory approaches the present, the authors' representations of veterans and trauma intensify. Crane's *Red Badge*



and “The Veteran” merely hint at the traumatic effects of war upon soldier and veteran. Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms* approaches it sideways (through re-gendered focus, as Pearl James argues in *The New Death*), and his “Soldier’s Home” conceals trauma within the bulk of its iceberg. While Vonnegut thematizes war trauma explicitly, certain aspects of it are softened by the super-fictional stuff of sci-fi. With the emergence of literature about the Vietnam War, the tropes of veteran trauma and language’s inability to express violence are at their most blatant and undeniable.

The unprecedented proliferation of veterans’ narratives published during and since what John A. Wood calls the “Vietnam-Book Boom” of the 1980s solidified post-combat homecoming trauma as the chief trope of twentieth-century American war literature. Amongst myriad examples are the oeuvres of Vietnam veterans Larry Heinemann and Tim O’Brien, each of whom has published both fiction and nonfiction based on their war experiences. Most conspicuously characterized by the trauma and language motifs representative of the genre are Heinemann’s 1987 novel *Paco’s Story* and O’Brien’s 1990 collection *The Things They Carried*. The former opens with the traumatic event that nearly killed Paco: the VC bombing of Fire Base Harriette, which incinerated all ninety-three men of Alpha Company except Paco. Discovered three days later by Bravo Company, he is lying amongst the corpses of his fallen brethren, almost dead himself, unable to move, and – not surprisingly, given the genre’s trend – unable to *speak*. The “story” of this title character is narrated by the ghosts of Alpha Company, who haunt Paco (as spectral manifestations of traumatic memory), insist that he should have died with them (establishing survivor’s guilt as one of the key components of

combat trauma), and won't let him speak for himself (reiterating the trope of language's limitations in the face of violence and death).

After recovering in a VA hospital for several months, Paco becomes a drifter. Bone-tired and broke, he eventually attempts to settle down in the small Midwest town of Boone, to reintegrate into civilian society. At each establishment he enters looking for work, he is quickly identified as a veteran, judged by his appearance and the stereotypical "Nam-vet" reputation, and turned away. Heinemann emphasizes the negative public perceptions of Vietnam veterans after the war, with one local mentioning, "a body hears too many stories about how they got to acting so peculiar" (84). Finally, Paco gets a job washing dishes at a greasy spoon diner owned by a sympathetic World War II veteran. Their sharing of stories (which is the most dialogue we get from reticent Paco) suggests a temporally-transcendent universality of traumatic war memory, rendering this scene a microcosm of the lineage of twentieth-century war literature. The repetitive tendency of traumatic memory persists throughout the novel, with entire paragraphs of analepsis via anaphora: "He remembers . . . He remembers . . . He remembers." All the tropes of trauma are present: Paco is a societal outcast (except among other veterans), he suffers flashbacks and nightmares about his war experience, he is plagued by survivor's guilt, he is disillusioned, he is angry, he has difficulty expressing his pain in words, and he refuses to talk about his war experience except in ambiguous terms with the diner owner. And Paco is, above all, portrayed as a victim, a martyr whose plight stirs the reader to pity. In the eyes of the townspeople, he is sanctified yet contaminated by what he's been through; he is simultaneously Scranton's trauma hero and Agamben's *homo sacer*. Paco's final thought as he leaves Boone, his experiment of normalcy having failed, is the novel's only

real assertion of his voice. Echoing the Vietnam-era zeitgeist popularized in fiction, film, rock and roll, and an entire generation's counterculture, he tells himself, "Man, you ain't just a brick in the fucking wall, you're just a piece of meat on the slab" (Heinemann 209).

Antiestablishmentarianism is subtler in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, but the familiar tropes about trauma and language are just as heavily foregrounded. Though marketed as a short-story collection, the twenty-one sections of prose are thematically linked with recurring characters and events in such a way that they read more like chapters of a novel. These recurrences also symbolize trauma's repetition compulsion, particularly because the events that reappear are those most traumatic to the narrators: injuries, acts of violence committed, and deaths of fellow soldiers. In addition to the trauma tropes threading throughout *TTTC*, the trope of language's inadequacy is also ever-present. The elision of traumatic reality through metaphors – theorized by Scarry as a necessarily indirect means to represent war – is here compounded by a perceived need to maintain culturally constructed ideals of masculinity. The performance of "manliness" is manifest in the soldiers' language as performative utterances are employed in an attempt to construct a self that exudes the external image of machismo. In the title story, for example, the soldiers enact a façade of hardened toughness in moments of crisis in order to signal their masculinity to each other: "They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors . . . they had their lines mostly memorized . . . they called [death] by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself . . . They talked grunt lingo" (O'Brien 20). With the "hard vocabulary" of "grunt lingo," the men are able to "read the lines" writ for them by societal gender constructs. This

inclination to conform to pre-existing roles, as well as the linguistic metaphorizing of violence, is present again in *TTC*'s closing story, "The Lives of the Dead," in which the narrator recalls: "I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead. And so a VC nurse, fried by napalm, was a crispy critter. A Vietnamese baby, which lay nearby, was a roasted peanut. 'Just a crunchie munchie,' Rat Kiley said as he stepped over the body" (O'Brien 238). In this way, the soldiers twist language to veil actions and atrocity, developing diction that distances them from and distorts the unendurable reality of violence. Alas, whether this manipulation of language is justificatory or simply a coping mechanism, it does not erase the happening-truth nor prevent the traumatic resonances that will inevitably emerge later. Scarry captures this ineluctability best: "Visible or invisible, omitted, included, altered in its inclusion, described or redescribed, injury [and, I'd add, killing] is war's product and its cost, it is the goal toward which all activity is directed and the road to the goal, it is there in the smallest enfolded corner of war's interior recesses and still there where acts are extended out into the largest units of encounter" (81).

From Crane to O'Brien, this survey has demonstrated how authors of American war literature use both form and content to depict the veteran's traumatic memory of war and the difficulties of expressing that trauma. These tropes situate veterans as victims rather than as, in Scranton's words, "agents of national power" ("Trauma Hero"). They are, moreover, messianic victims, with moral authority on warfare for having experienced its horrors and having been wounded – physically (a possibility) or psychologically (today, an assumed surety). The soldier-martyr has, to employ popular rhetoric,

“sacrificed” himself for “the good of the nation,” but miraculously survived to come back home and tell about it. The imperative to try to capture and convey the essence or “truth” of war continues today, as we celebrate the centennial of the end of the war that was supposed to end *all* wars. Despite the seeming consensus that war evades articulation, this has neither prevented writers from trying to do so, nor audiences from expecting them to. However, this alleged inexpressibility has impacted the genre in more ways than one. For example, we see war transformed into myth as representational anxiety has turned some writers away from attempts at realism. This mythological rendering is most obvious in surrealistic or “psychedelic” accounts of the Vietnam War, as seen in passages throughout Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green* (1983), and Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers* (1979), which Herr, Hasford, and Stanley Kubrick later adapted into the cult-classic film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). These works of experimental fiction are akin to the metaphors and rhetorical strategies that Scarry argues are used to refer indirectly to war.

While the genre variations of surrealism and Vonnegut’s aforementioned sci-fi were deployed by a handful of Vietnam-era writers as a way to work around the supposed inexpressibility of trauma, mainstream war fiction, however, remains largely realist. Contemporary war writers have taken up the autobiographical tack of experiential writing Wood critiques in *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War* (2016) with what has been rebranded as a self-reflective confessional approach.<sup>7</sup> Yet

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<sup>7</sup> The popular first-person confessional style of war storytelling used by writers like Powers is actually a product of creative-writing programs of the past several decades. Sam Sacks explains that the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and numerous other university MFA departments rose to prominence near the end of World War II. Due to the influx of students entering college on the GI Bill, many of the workshop students were war veterans. The relationship between government-

these contemporary narratives still retain some mythological aspects. In explaining how Kevin Powers' Iraq War novel *The Yellow Birds* "flips the script" of previous war writers' and trauma theorists' negation of language by illustrating in form and style that the experience of war instead "inspires" narrative, Scranton points out that "Powers' climactic turn from experience to literature rather than the other way around suggests that the conventions of traumatic revelation have become purely formal expectations of an audience more interested in war as myth than in war as reality, or even as literature" ("Trauma Hero"). Powers himself acknowledges the larger-than-life task he took on with *The Yellow Birds* in his Author's Note at its end, explaining that the novel "began as an attempt to reckon with one question: What was it like over there? . . . As soon as the first words of the book were put down on the page, I realized I was unequal to the task of answering, that if there is any true thing in this world it is that war is only like itself." The question of "what it was like" is a symptom of our reliance upon the veteran for war's representation, and it is one reason why fiction doesn't usually emerge until years after a war's end.<sup>8</sup> The delay between the end of a war and the publication of novels about it, which Luckhurst calls a "traumatic time lag" in attribution to the psychiatric notion that traumatic memory has a latent tendency and later resurfacing, may occur because the

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funded veteran college students and MFA workshops was strengthened after Vietnam, and renewed again with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

<sup>8</sup> Many works now considered classics of war fiction were written not during or immediately after their war but instead a decade or more after its end. Crane's *Red Badge* was published almost thirty years after the Civil War ended, Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* eleven years after World War I ended, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* more than twenty years after World War II ended, and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* fifteen years after the fall of Saigon, which most historians mark as the end of the Vietnam War. In a lecture delivered at the U.S. Air Force Academy, novelist Roxana Robinson states that there is a "strict chronological pattern: first comes journalism, reported at the time, from the field; next comes memoir, after people have come home and transcribed their notes . . . the last is fiction."

public (and the publishing industry) waits in deference for those who fought the war to write about it. But Buchanan emphasizes that this is part of the problem, arguing that “combat gnosticism has a drowning effect on noncombatants’ contributions to war literature” (33). He adds, “The suggestion that understanding can only be achieved through a one-way transmission of experiential knowledge is unconvincing at best and ethically wrong at worst” (43). The implication here, then, is that we ought not discard fictional treatments of war by civilians,<sup>9</sup> that it is not necessarily productive to privilege experience over art.

The end of Powers’ statement above (“that war is only like itself”) re-emphasizes the paradoxical “you had to be there” primacy of combat gnosticism and its silencing cycle: To understand war, we must look to its veterans, but they can’t tell us about it, either because it’s too traumatizing to discuss or language is inadequate to do so. The closed loop further solidifies the appearance of a soldier-civilian divide<sup>10</sup> and does nothing to clarify the causes and effects of the war beyond media speculation. In this way, the presumed inexpressibility of war and postwar trauma serve a political agenda and soothe the American conscience. If we accept that the veteran’s war experience is too difficult to talk about, and that there’s no way civilians can understand that experience without firsthand participation, it absolves us from having to face the ugly truth of war’s violence. If only those doing the war-waging – let’s call it what it is: the *killing* – have

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<sup>9</sup> This dissertation examines fiction written by both veterans and civilians.

<sup>10</sup> Scranton argues that the much-publicized “military-civilian gap” is superficial, and that most Americans actually do understand what it is soldiers do when they go to war. “The real gap,” he insists, “is between the myth of violence and the truth of war. The real gap is between our subconscious belief that righteous violence can redeem us, even ennoble us, and the chastening truth that violence debases and corrupts” (“Trauma Hero”).

the moral authority to engage in discourse about it, we can allow ourselves not to be troubled by it. The assumption that combat trauma renders war inexpressible, combined with our society's admiration and glorification of soldiers and veterans, silences the unpleasantnesses of the human cost of war – especially on the other side.

Historically speaking, these problems are symptomatic of a broader cultural phenomenon which involves the Vietnam War's legacy in American culture. Despite the embarrassment of that prolonged conflict, it was only a short time before "American culture began to evince a renewed faith in American militarism and the exceptionalist narratives that presented the United States as a morally upright, benevolent superpower able to effectively use military power to achieve its global interests and fulfill its ambitions," according to David Kieran (*Forever Vietnam*, 2014) (4). In fact, the turn-of-the century administration used the figure of the Vietnam veteran to re-popularize this nationalistic faith. Brenda Boyle explains how the mistreatment of returning Vietnam veterans by the American public, the media, and the government was evoked by President George W. Bush and the media to elicit the support and sanctification of our troops being sent into Iraq and Afghanistan. This propaganda, which some critics call Support the Troops Syndrome, was intended to squelch opposition to U.S. military conflicts in the Middle East and became the "prevalent logic" dominating post-9/11 discourse (160). Boyle notes that, though public attention to the Vietnam War had waned by the end of the twentieth century as cultural discourse shifted to affairs in the Middle East, it was renewed at the beginning of the twenty-first century when parallels between Vietnam and the post-9/11 wars began to emerge. One example of these similarities was Bush's 2002 call for a "coalition of the willing" to address the alleged existence of



WMDs in Iraq, which echoed Lyndon B. Johnson's call for augmenting U.S. military presence in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. Both threats helped to justify the President's deployment of military power, and both proved to be nonexistent, fabricated for the purposes of rallying public support for a questionable war. While Boyle implicitly blames the Bush administration for exploiting the memory of the way Vietnam veterans were treated (simultaneously exculpating the anti-war movement), historian Jerry Lembcke does more explicitly.

In *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1998), Lembcke challenges the pervasive belief that Vietnam veterans returning from the war were spat upon or otherwise mistreated by anti-war protestors. He draws a parallel between the Nixon-Agnew and Bush-Quayle administrations that both exploited Vietnam veteran imagery for their own purposes and constructed a national myth that had no factual documented evidence to support it. In the 1970s, Agnew publicly accused the anti-war movement of demoralizing troops, after which the White House and the press received an overwhelming response of letters from troops refuting it. Lembcke insists that opposition between anti-war protestors and Vietnam vets did not exist but was fabricated by the government as propaganda and later carried on by press and media such that it has become a "false memory." In fact, many vets actually joined anti-war movements upon returning home. But once organizations like MOBE and VVAW<sup>11</sup> gained the credibility of the servicemen who became involved, the government then constructed a dichotomy of "Good Vet" (pro-war and "spat-upon") versus "Bad Vet"

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<sup>11</sup> MOBE is the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam; VVAW is Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

(anti-war and “part of the problem”) to suppress popular dissent about military decisions. Lembcke explains how the image of the spat-upon vet regained prominence in 1990 when George Bush used it to inspire support for the First Gulf War. This villainization of the anti-war movement created a public ultimatum: if you don’t support the war, you don’t support the troops, thus you’re unpatriotic and consciously committing the same type of abuses Vietnam vets allegedly suffered. What Lembcke and other historiographers call False Memory Syndrome led to the aforementioned Support the Troops Syndrome, which Boyle defines as “the exhortation of Americans during the post-9/11 Iraq and Afghanistan wars to resist holding individual ‘troops’ responsible for war” (162). The cultural memory of Vietnam was thus reconstructed to “suppress citizen displeasure with individual military members or executive decision makers,” implying instead an administrative decree that “military people only can be sanctified, not condemned, and mourned as victims of war, not as complicit,” and compelling the public to believe that serving in the military is “self-sacrificing and heroic behavior” (Boyle 162). Therefore, the prevailing attitude of reverence and unquestioned respect of members of the U.S. military developed in large part because our collective conscience (cultivated by cultural representations) was guilt-ridden about the alleged mistreatment of Vietnam veterans, which in turn led to sympathy for and glorification of veterans returning from more recent wars. This was accompanied, of course, by rhetoric to the tune of “risking their lives to uphold democracy” and “fighting for our rights,” as if democracy were in danger of toppling or our rights as Americans under siege from external threats, fallacious assumptions much like the domino theory used to ensure public support of the containment of communism during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

The notion of self-sacrifice in association with our twenty-first-century all-volunteer military has contributed to the conceptualization of the veteran as martyr, sent to do the “necessary” dirty work of defense so the rest of us don’t have to. But why is this a problem? There is no compulsory draft. These men and women aren’t required to serve. What’s wrong, then, with viewing American veterans as heroes of patriotic nationalism, scarred by the trauma of combat thus transformed into redemptive, messianic figures? Scranton’s response is that it makes us view the soldier as victim, which distracts us from the real victims of American violence, the wartime civilian Other, who – as a result, directly or indirectly, of the American occupation – are dying in exponentially higher numbers than U.S. servicemembers. Redirecting this misplaced focus is part of the cultural work taken on by the war novels I examine in the following chapters.

Scranton and Buchanan both indict what the latter calls the “first wave” of Iraq War fiction (those works published within a decade of the American invasion of Iraq) for solidifying and perpetuating the trauma-hero myth with its associated belief in combat gnosticism. I propose that a “second wave” of Iraq War novels has arrived in response to the first. In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I argue that Iraq War novels of the second wave (specifically those published *after* the ten-year anniversary of the invasion) shift away from those myths and provide a corrective to aesthetic and ethical problems with the construction of cultural memory about contemporary war, its writers, and its wagers. The dismantling of the trauma-hero myth and the quest for an anti-exceptionalist literary articulation of war has been taken up by several novels published since Scranton’s critique. These works offer a counternarrative to the long-reaching assumptions of the trauma-hero narrative and signal a shift in literary representations of war. David Abrams’

*Brave Deeds* (2017), Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* (2016), and Scranton's own *War Porn* (2016) are some notable exemplars of second-wave Iraq War fiction, yet none of these three have yet been examined in any book-length scholarship. Each novel features U.S. servicemembers who resist the PTSD label, demonstrate moral laxity, and fail to embody the stereotypically virtuous Captain-America image. They also feature Iraqi civilians as character foils to American soldiers, evoking empathy for the racialized Other whom previous war literature ignores, marginalizes, or dehumanizes. Rather than perpetuating the trauma-hero narrative, these novels counter both the sociopolitical idealism undergirding American exceptionalism and the problematic assumption that war is unrepresentable thus impossible for anyone to understand except those who were there. In doing so, these novels reveal that our society's sacralization of the American veteran often silences unpleasantness of the human cost of war (especially on the other side) by assuming that combat trauma renders war inexpressible.

Despite this presumed unrepresentationality, and as I have demonstrated with the earlier survey, American writers have been representing war and trauma for more than a century. Arguably, war fiction is a genre in and of itself, and any lists claiming to consist of an American literary "canon" are bound to include several war novels and stories. An overwhelming majority of these representations are authored by white males. This propensity leaves a lacuna in the genre, which author and cultural theorist Viet Thanh Nguyen identifies in Vietnam War literature, calling attention to the paucity of Vietnamese characters in American-authored works about the war and the critical neglect of Vietnamese writers in American culture. Iraq War literature suffers a similar scarcity. Although some American authors (like those I discuss in Chapter Two) have included

Iraqi characters in their novels of the war, an important and often-overlooked perspective can be attained by studying Iraqi-authored fiction of the conflict. Patrick Deer and Roger Luckhurst briefly mention Iraqi writers in their articles surveying contemporary war literature, but these are overshadowed by their lengthier analyses of American-authored works. Ikram Masmoudi gives passing comment to the contemporary conflict in *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015), but he focuses more heavily on the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War. Jennifer Haytock demonstrates that some American authors' juxtaposing of narration by American soldiers with dialogue by Iraqi civilians promotes empathy for those whose homes and families have been affected in ways that remain unseen to much of the American public. Entering this conversation and taking Haytock's premise a step further, I propose that more critical attention to Iraqi-authored fiction will add an important layer to our understanding of the war. While there are several Iraqi-authored works set during the Iraq War that have not yet been translated into English, four novels translated during and after the occupation present Iraqi perspectives thereof: Iqbal Al-Qazwini's *Zubaida's Window* (2008), Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013), Kanan Makiya's *The Rope* (2016), and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013, 2018). Their translations into English from Arabic allow American readers insight into experiences of those we consider the war-time Other and, conversely, they illuminate how Americans themselves are perceived as an Other by those living in U.S.-occupied lands. These writers provide a counternarrative to American-authored Iraq War novels by foregrounding Iraqi individual and cultural trauma through analepsis and by alternating past events with present experience. Their stories reveal a fertile Arabic literary tradition with roots in Baghdad itself, adding a new dimension to our

understanding of transnational relations that is absent in American-authored works set in Iraq. And, diverging from the realism prevalent throughout most western narratives of war, contemporary Iraqi war fiction as represented in these key texts incorporates motifs of fantasy and surrealism. The cultural work these novels achieve – and the dissemination of their texts into the West via English translation – reasserts Iraqi cultural agency and unveils the varied perspectives of those most affected by American military action. Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi accomplish for Iraq War literature what Nguyen demands of Vietnam War literature: “that our discourse about the war be transformed from an American monologue into a conversation among many equals” (“Remembering War” 158).

While my third chapter is concerned with ethnocultural issues in Iraq War literature, Chapter Four turns to issues of gender in war representation. Not only are most of the authors and characters of the genre white, they are mostly male. The handful of exceptions – such as Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922), Edith Wharton’s *A Son at the Front* (1923), Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012), and Roxana Robinson’s *Sparta* (2013) – though written by women, still feature male protagonists. The representational absence of female characters in spaces of war is troubling because women have been serving in combat support roles since at least the Civil War. This absence has become increasingly problematic over the past decade as the ban on women serving in direct combat positions has been lifted and women are joining the U.S. military in unprecedented numbers. With this influx, the long-established narrative of militarized masculinity no longer holds. I propose that more critical attention to war fiction authored by women and featuring female protagonists will diversify our understanding of and attitude toward war, which

will further destabilize the hegemonic American monologue Nguyen warns against. Therefore, to continue this dissertation's study of war fiction that challenges American exceptionalist mythology – a mythology that is always already patriarchal – this chapter examines three novels that narrativize the Iraq War from the perspective of female protagonists: Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011) and *Wolf Season* (2017) and Cara Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You* (2014). I argue that these texts trouble the masculinist narrative of American warfare by deconstructing the gendered dichotomy that associates men with war and women with peace, by demonstrating multiple female war-roles beyond the figures of nurse and woman-in-waiting, and by emphasizing important thematic elements that are missing or marginalized in male-authored, male-charactered novels of the war. These themes include war's effects on the physical body (a shift away from the last few decades' focus on psychological trauma), an emphasis on familial relationships and how they are affected by war (an alternative to the familiar trope of masculine, pseudo-“brotherly” military camaraderie), an attention to war's ecological impact (as opposed to the natural landscape being presented as an enemy as in male-dominated war literature), and concerns about space and place that reflect feminist cultural geography. Taken together, these novels provide a counternarrative to the myth of the masculine trauma hero through perspectives of female soldiers and veterans, which enables valuable insights that are neglected in the male-centric majority of American cultural representations of war.

The texts under discussion in this dissertation are not only about war, they are about memory. They are also about the human condition, especially under duress. They participate in the construction of cultural memory and the deconstruction of hegemonic

top-down narratives of the events of our times. Each of my chapters responds to a specific problem in our culture's dominant representations of war and argues that solutions to extant misperceptions are available via counternarrative. What connects these three problems are their prevalence in the popular American war narrative (the myth of the trauma hero) in particular, and their shared basis in American exceptionalism in general. Chapter Two addresses the pedestaled figure of the infallible, victimized soldier-hero by illuminating the character-correctives in second-wave Iraq War fiction. Chapter Three responds to the problem of "whriting" – American war literature being disproportionately populated by white writers and white characters – by looking at Iraqi-authored war fiction. Chapter Four identifies gender problems in the genre – its megatropes of martial masculinity alongside the marginalizing or misogynizing of women – by calling attention to female writers of contemporary war literature and their female soldier protagonists.

The goal of this dissertation, through close readings, commentaries, and critical interventions, is to deepen our understanding of war fiction and the questions it raises about how American cultural memory is constructed. By reading these works through the lens of cultural memory and trauma studies, with an eye toward ethnoculturalism and gender, my dissertation places these texts into ongoing critical conversations. The role of the media and government in forging cultural narratives is now more than ever at the forefront of the American imagination. The ten novels I examine throughout the following chapters are on the front lines of what I anticipate being a broader literari-cultural phenomenon that will impact how we conceive of conflict. It is often said that literature reflects reality, which explains why we tend to defer to the experiential writing



of veterans for what we can know of war. Yet it is also possible, as Oscar Wilde was fond of saying, that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” Perhaps the way our society *sees* war – in our cultural representations like fiction – can begin to transform the way we *wage* war. Or, as another brilliant thinker, Bertolt Brecht, declared, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”

CHAPTER TWO  
SECOND-WAVE IRAQ WAR NOVELS: THE COMBAT VETERAN  
DESANCTIFIED

“The resolution of a multiplicity of individual and cultural problems, of a variety of ambivalent literary and mythological traditions, and of a gallery of traditional hero types into a single dramatic unity is the essential element in the creation of a viable national myth.”

– Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 1973

“After the war, the boy, now a veteran and a man, returns to the world of peace haunted by his experience, wracked by the central compulsion of trauma and atrocity: the struggle between the need to bear witness to his shattering encounter with violence and the compulsion to repress it. The veteran tries to make sense of his memory but finds it all but impossible. Most people don’t want to hear the awful truths that war has taught him, the political powers that be want to cover up the shocking reality of war, and anybody who wasn’t there simply can’t understand what it was like. The truth of war is a truth beyond words, a truth that can be known only by having *been there*, an unspeakable truth he must bear for society. So goes the myth of the trauma hero.”

– Roy Scranton, “The Trauma Hero,” 2015

The narrative of modern soldierhood in American representations of war aligns symbolically with Joseph Campbell’s seventeen stages of the monomythic hero’s journey outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The three phases by which these stages are categorized include the hero’s (and in the forthcoming analogy, the soldier’s) *Departure*, *Initiation*, and *Return*. For example, the first stage of the *Departure* phase, “The Call to Adventure,” corresponds to the individual’s drafting or enlistment. He may momentarily experience the second stage, “The Refusal of the Call,” as Tim O’Brien recalls about his own desire to dodge the draft in his Vietnam war story “On Rainy River.” Campbell’s third stage, “Meeting the Mentor,” is, in the soldier’s journey, his

training and acquiescence to his commanding officers in the military. The fourth stage, “The Crossing of the First Threshold” symbolizes the enlisted’s first deployment, during which he desires opportunity (like Crane’s Henry Fleming) for the fifth stage, “Belly of the Whale” via trial-by-fire – his first occasion to injure or kill, or to defend himself from such.

The second phase of the mythological hero’s journey, *Initiation*, encompasses the sixth through eleventh stages of the monomyth. These stages notably correspond to major plot events through literary and filmic representations of war: “The Road of Trials” (climactic battle scenes and other moments of hardship), “The Meeting with the Goddess” and “The Woman as Temptress” (the narrative’s romantic subplot, often featuring the woman-in-waiting back on the home front, like Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s Martha in *The Things They Carried*, or a female character at war such as a nurse, like Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*), “Atonement with the Father”/father figure (a confrontation, ethical dilemma, or power-grab wherein the soldier-protagonist must decide whether to follow his superior’s orders or choose his own action), “Apotheosis” (which, for the soldier in American cultural mythology, is the moment at which the experiential knowledge of combat gnosticism is revealed or conferred), and, finally “The Ultimate Boon,” wherein the hero ultimately achieves the object of his quest. For the soldier, this is getting what he came to war for – be it respect, manhood, or proof of patriotism.

The third and final phase of the hero monomyth, *Return*, is where the problem arises in the genre of war representation. The return home from his “journey” transforms soldier-hero into trauma-hero in the American war narrative of the long twentieth

century. In its first stage, “Refusal of the Return,” the hero initially resists coming back to the ordinary world, which is analogous to the tendency described by some soldiers to want to “re-up” or reenlist, often out of a sense of loyalty or camaraderie (not wanting to “abandon” their brothers-at-arms), or in anticipation of a disconnect with civilian society back home. Campbell calls the next stage of the *Return* “The Magic Flight” because therein the monomythic hero must escape the world of the gods with the boon he must bring back to humankind. This struggle of man-versus-god parallels the beginning of the combat veteran’s struggle to reintegrate into the civilian world, to return his mind (with its alleged revelatory insights, the “boon” of combat gnosticism or experiential knowledge) to noncombatant “normality” so that he can share it with the oblivious civilian. But often the veteran-hero is unable to achieve this alone, so he is assisted at a VA hospital (as we see in Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, for instance) or via some other sort of psychological therapy, which corresponds to the fourteenth of Campbell’s seventeen stages, “Rescue from Without.”

He writes of the next stage, “The Crossing of the Return Threshold,” that “the returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world.” Begun in the aforementioned thirteenth stage (“The Magic Flight”) upon first arriving home, this part of the journey can be the most arduous for the soldier-hero who has, upon returning from war, become the trauma-hero of the modern American war narrative. In fact, for some veterans (such as those who commit suicide or redeploy permanently as career military members) the “return threshold” is never actually “crossed.” In Campbell’s monomyth, the hero next becomes “Master of Two Worlds” – which can be interpreted variously as the world of the gods he left and the world of humans to which he has

returned, or the spiritual world and the material world, or the inner world and the outer world. Analogically, this penultimate step echoes theories of various trauma psychologists that suggest the veteran can only achieve mastery of his broken, traumatized psyche – that is, he can only *recover* – through reconciling his war-self with his peace-self. Finally, then, Campbell’s hero reaches the last stage of his journey, “Freedom to Live,” interpretively corresponding to the war veteran’s ultimate goal, the recovery of trauma.

By mapping the myth of the trauma-hero onto Campbell’s archetype, we see how the soldier becomes, in the public imagination and through exceptionalist rhetoric, a self-sacrificing figure who endures this “hero’s journey” to protect and serve his country. The particularly American persona of the hero lies in the violence he performs. Christine Sylvester identifies a fundamental national myth in the belief that “the violence of war is a central element in making, securing, and re-securing a country [and] the warrior is a central link in that re-securing process” (151-152). She echoes Richard Slotkin’s thesis about the frontier myth that, from the early founding and pioneering of this nation, “Regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). As the “frontier” of our empire has spread beyond our continental borders – into Southeast Asia, into South America, into the Middle East – the violence of war and occupation continue to renew (in Slotkin’s diction, to *regenerate*) our myth of American exceptionalism. Campbell’s tracing of the mythological Odyssean hero was adapted into Slotkin’s frontier-hero, which has evolved along with our national ideology into today’s trauma hero.

The myth of the trauma hero, which I outlined in my previous chapter, is a pervasive yet problematic perspective because it requires a scapegoat in order to reconcile what Scranton identifies as a contradiction “between our subconscious belief that righteous violence can redeem us, even ennoble us, and the chastening truth that violence debases and corrupts” (“Trauma Hero”). Buchanan adds that “War is the national sacrament of atonement [and] it sacrifices a scapegoat in whom the world’s evil is invested” (4), such that Americans have developed “a rhetoric that scapegoats both terrorist and Indians and recasts the soldiers behind him as imperialist saviors” (5). The scapegoat used to absolve white American violence during the frontier era was the indigenous Indian; the scapegoat for our twenty-first century wars was the (often-brown) “terrorist,” and these two attempted justifications of bloodshed, though separated by centuries, are connected in an ongoing national process of ideology-maintenance that Buchanan calls “*hajji*-fication” (13). This process, along with its brother-myth of the trauma hero, is a trope that persists throughout cultural representations of American war, as these and other scholars have heretofore established.

The purpose of Buchanan’s work, *Going Scapegoat* (2016), through an application of Kenneth Burke’s “scapegoat mechanism,”<sup>12</sup> is to expose the symbolic scapegoating (an essential component in the myth of the trauma hero with his combat gnosticism) in contemporary war literature. This is most clearly stated in his closing call to action: “Propaganda leaks out of every work of art, but when we focus only on stories of the combat gnosticators, we silence dissent and push civilian perspectives to the side. Our role as readers and critics, then, is to peer through experience and correct it by tracing the

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<sup>12</sup> Burke’s theory of the scapegoat mechanism is discussed in his *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *A Grammar of Motives* (1945).

structure of the scapegoat mechanism within” (Buchanan 202). He traces the various scapegoating methods, symbolic and rhetorical, throughout three of the most popular and most critically-attended novels about the Iraq War, which I later classify as “first-wave” Iraq War fiction.

Similarly, the purpose of Scranton’s work, “The Trauma Hero” (2015), is to challenge society’s hallowing and pedestalizing of the war veteran, whose combat trauma (real or assumed) leads us to perceive him as a self-sacrificing, messianic figure, one who does the dirty work of killing so the rest of us don’t have to. Scranton argues that “the most troubling consequence of our faith in the revelatory truth of combat experience and our sanctification of the trauma hero” is that, “by focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure, we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for.” That is, the victim of American violence is deliberately overlooked (or ignored) because, to soothe our own guilty consciences, we place the soldier (the “agent of national power”) in the position of victim or martyr. Scranton traces this tendency throughout representations of war from Tolstoy to Powers, but I would argue that it reaches an apex with representations of the post-9/11 wars because of the Slotkinian regeneration of public support for the American military, evoked by the Bush administration and intended to end the Vietnam Syndrome.

I join this ongoing conversation about the American war narrative, but the purpose of my project is to explore solutions, correctives, and alternatives to the genre troubles and perspective problems Buchanan, Scranton, and other scholars have identified. Their scholarship convincingly establishes that the myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism exist and continue to operate in the service of American exceptionalism and

imperialism. These critics entreat readers, citizens, to notice and to be aware of the ideological underpinnings in cultural representations of war. Yet they seem to overlook the existence of counternarratives that defy the entrenched conventions. While they indict the “first-wave” of Iraq War fiction (those works published within a decade of the American invasion of Iraq) for resolidifying and perpetuating the trauma-hero myth with its associated belief in combat gnosticism, I propose that a second wave of Iraq War novels has arrived in response to the first. My critical analysis of these later narratives explores their unique characterization of the soldier figure, which subverts the trope of the trauma hero and suggests a shift in literary representations of war. Scranton’s *War Porn*, for example, presents its veteran protagonist as an unreliable, even deceptive narrator of his own war story and a shamelessly brutal victimizer of the prisoners-of-war placed under his protection. In *The Good Lieutenant*, Terrell challenges the trauma-hero narrative by incorporating a variety of non-heroic soldier-characters to reveal a spectrum of personas beyond the stereotypically courageous and just. And in *Brave Deeds*, Abrams deconstructs the prevailing ideology of conventional war narratives by calling into question the actions evoked by his title.

#### DAVID ABRAMS’ *BRAVE DEEDS* (2017)

Published five years after his debut novel *Fobbit* (2012), a *Catch-22*-styled satire that mocks the mundane careers of the U.S. military’s deployed noncombatants who work in the relative safety of the forward operating base (FOB) rather than “in the field,” David Abrams’ second novel *Brave Deeds* (2017) takes us off the FOB and into the desert, cutting his characters off from contact with their company as they travel, AWOL, to another base to attend the funeral service of their recently slain Sergeant Rafe Morgan.



Abrams combines realism (through dialogue, landscape, and characterization) with romance (the quest theme and evocations of ancient warriors). Phil Klay notes in his review of the novel that “It reads like a fever dream, like unvarnished documentary truth, and sometimes like both at once.” This interpenetration of romanticism subverts the audience’s expectation of veteran writers to tell “what it was like,” and it indicates that Abrams is less concerned with illuminating war than with telling a story – less focused on the experience, and more on the art. Despite retaining some of the typical aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century war literature – the camaraderie of brotherhood-at-war, moments of psychological realism recalling Crane’s Henry Fleming, and intertextual comparisons to previous wars – Abrams does something new in *Brave Deeds*. This innovation, found in other second-wave Iraq War novels as well, is a deliberate shift away from the trauma-hero myth and its accompanying scapegoating mechanisms of combat gnosticism.

Abrams first challenges prevailing assumptions of war narratives through subversive satire via intertextuality. Abrams’ epigraph (from which the novel’s title derives) is the fifteenth of sixty-eight short poems comprising Stephen Crane’s first poetry collection, *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895), published just five months prior to *The Red Badge of Courage*:

"Tell brave deeds of war."

Then they recounted tales, –  
"There were stern stands  
And bitter runs for glory."

Ah, I think there were braver deeds.

This, like the other poems in *Black Riders*, exhibits the influence of Emily Dickinson, whose works had recently inspired Crane. Like her poetry, the brevity of “Tell brave deeds” leaves its meaning open to interpretation: What are those “braver deeds” the speaker suggests? At its core (and perhaps Abrams’ reason for making it his epigraph), the poem questions war storytelling, implying that *untold* actions (not the “stern stands” and “runs for glory”) are the real feats of honor. The first line paraphrases the all-too-common “What was it like?” query, but the last line rejects the veterans’ answers, challenging combat gnosticism. For a civilian to challenge a veteran’s war story pushes back against the assumption that experience is required to access or to convey the reality of war. Though the “braver deeds” at which Crane’s speaker hints aren’t revealed – the sixty-eight poems of *The Black Riders* seem more self-contained than interconnected – the “brave deeds” of Abrams’ title, we can infer from the epigraph, aren’t any of the usual courageous feats we might expect from soldiers. Instead, the story of braver deeds that will most likely remain *untold* when the soldiers return home is that of the Iraqi civilian the Americans call “Rat-Face,” who courageously risks his own life to tip them off and lead them to a house being used by bomb makers who are sewing IEDs into Beanie Baby stuffed animals for distribution by a terrorist group. Or perhaps the soldiers’ own “braver deed” is helping the pregnant Iraqi woman, whose miracle of giving birth amidst death will likely be eclipsed by their traumatic memory of Olijandro’s death. From opening paratext, then, Abrams’ choice of Crane’s poem for his epigraph hints at a contention with what constitutes a “brave deed” in American cultural memory. In this way, the novel begins to deconstruct the traditional paradigm of military heroism.

Abrams' Cranean epigraph also foreshadows *Brave Deeds*' quest theme, which distances this novel from the war-lit genre's traditional mode, realism. James M. Cox explains *The Black Riders*' inheritance from *The Pilgrim's Progress* by identifying Crane's speaker in the poems as a "new pilgrim" in the vein of Bunyan's protagonist Christian. He states that, though they are "never so purely allegorical" as Bunyan's magnum opus, Crane's poems are "consistently on the frontiers of allegory" (Cox 482). The quest that comprises the plot of *Pilgrim's Progress* is also similar to the quest that comprises *Brave Deeds*, which invites an allegorical reading of the soldiers' "pilgrimage" to Sergeant Morgan's memorial service, and further demonstrates the intrusion of romance into this American war novel, unexpected in a genre dominated by realism. Later, I'll explain how the elements of allegory in Abrams' novel help to break down the myth of the trauma hero. For now, though, it is important to note that *Brave Deeds* is not alone among contemporary war literature in centralizing the quest trope – though it has been verbalized differently, as "the long walk."

The trope of the long walk can be traced back, for our purposes,<sup>13</sup> to the imagery of tedious "humping" through the jungle depicted in Vietnam War literature. In the most frequently anthologized short story about that war, Tim O'Brien's "The Things They

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase "the long walk" occasionally occurs in war narratives before Vietnam and Iraq, though these are beyond the scope of this project and will not be discussed further than the following acknowledgments: Slawomir Rawicz's WWII memoir about his escape from the Siberian Labor camps is *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom* (1956), Nelson Mandela's 1995 autobiography is titled *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Stephen King's alternate-history novella in which Germany wins WWII is titled *The Long Walk* (1979). Historically, the "Long Walk of the Navajo" took place in 1864 during the Indian Wars, and a similar phrase "The Long March" is often used in reference to the Red Army's retreat out of China in 1934—not to be confused with William Styron's 1956 novel *The Long March*, about Marine cadets on a grueling training exercise during the Korean War.

Carried,” the speaker informs us that, for the infantrymen, “to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive” (4). Later, he elaborates:

It was not the battle, it was just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost. They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning forward against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies and across the rivers and up again and down, just humping, one step and then the next and then another, but no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything, a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility. Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. (O’Brien 15)

This passage illustrates the concept of the “long walk” used in both Vietnam and Iraq War literature, emphasizing its sense of “endless”ness, the grunts’ belief that their actions lacked purpose and impact, and their recognition of being used like beasts of burden (they “plodded ... dumbly” and were “unthinking”). O’Brien also presents the “long walk” as a metaphor for the Vietnam War as a whole, echoing in his passage the post-Tet Offensive public perception that it was all for naught, that even the war’s administrators on Capitol Hill “had no sense of strategy or mission.” These characteristics, and the mental hebetude accompanying the physicality of continuous exertion, is evident in much Vietnam War literature, such that the term “grunt” has come to be associated with front-

lines drudge work carried out by brutes of lesser intelligence<sup>14</sup> – definitive turn from the exciting adventures of perspicacious heroes performing valorous victories in combat representations of World War I and World War II.

The “long walk” as both reality and metaphor continued into the next major ground war, yet first-wave contemporary war fiction retained O’Brien’s anti-war connotation by relating the “long walk” to the suffering of servicemembers both during the war (physically) and afterwards (psychologically). Brian Castner, for example, carries the ambulatory idiom into Iraq War discourse and returns some adrenaline to it in his 2012 memoir *The Long Walk: A Story of War and the Life That Follows*, which chronicles his difficulty adjusting to civilian life after coming home from two tours of duty in Iraq as the head of an Explosive Ordnance Disposal [EOD] unit.<sup>15</sup> He explains that the “long walk” of his title refers to the EOD technician’s dangerous job of leaving the relative safety of the Humvee to check potholes for IEDs that could potentially take out the entire convoy, emphasizing that “No one takes the Long Walk lightly. Only after every other option is extinguished. Only after robots fail and recourses dwindle. The last choice. Always. . . . You take the Long Walk for your brother’s wife, your brother’s children, and their children, and the line unborn. No greater love does one brother have for another than to take the Long Walk” (Castner 170-171). With a depth of intensity reiterated in other Iraq War texts about EOD techs, such as Michael Pitre’s novel *Fives*

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<sup>14</sup> The recruiting efforts of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s Project 100,000 specifically targeted the uneducated and even the mentally impaired.

<sup>15</sup> Castner’s memoir is a prime example of a genre that has proliferated such that it ought to have a classification of its own: the Iraq War PTSD memoir. Books like these, Scranton implies, are responsible for the explosion, acceptance, and continuation of the myth of the trauma hero.

*and Twenty-Fives* (2014), this action is illustrated as a literal life-or-death situation, one of self-sacrifice that underscores the significance of soldiers' bonds with each another. But in its closing chapters, Castner's memoir adapts the "long walk" phrase to another level after the war: his long, lonely road to recovery once he returns home.

In his satirical novel published four months after Castner's memoir, Ben Fountain re-appropriates the trope for the central plot event of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. The "long walk" is the protagonist's "forced march" (132) onto the Dallas Cowboys field at the end of a two-week publicity tour to drum up support for the war. They are paraded onto the football field during the halftime show, which Billy thinks of as being "served up for direct consumption" (132) and later recalls as being "put through the wringer of world-class spectacle" (241). Under the bright lights of the stadium, with Beyonce and Destiny's Child belting out their then-hit song "Soldier," subjected to conditions he worries are "a prime-time trigger for PTSD," Billy experiences a different kind of long walk.

The trope has thus evolved from a literal depiction of grunts traversing the jungles of Vietnam to an Iraq-War hyperbole for the short (yet long-seeming) walk from a Humvee to defuse a roadside bomb, then into a euphemism for the veteran's journey to recovery from combat trauma, and then has been recast as a critique of the media and of the American public's hunger for heroes. However, Abrams' second-wave Iraq War novel *Brave Deeds* uses the trope in a new way. In each of the aforementioned works, O'Brien's, Castner's, and Fountain's characters are walking long in the service of the U.S. military, following orders. Abrams subverts this commonplace. His characters are AWOL, they have violated UCMJ by leaving base and stealing government property to

do so, and their “long walk” is literal. After their stolen Humvee busts a drive shaft and their communication devices are inadvertently left behind, they walk on foot across the desert to get to Sergeant Morgan’s service. While Castner’s phrasing from his long-walk EOD passage refers to approaching the potential IED as an attempt to “outwit your opponent,” the enmity is re-situated in *Brave Deeds*. The opponent of Abrams’ soldiers is neither the bomb nor its planter, the Iraqi enemy. Instead, it’s the military establishment these AWOL soldiers have abandoned, risking their careers and their lives to go pay homage to their friend, against army regulations. After a series of quixotic (and to one of them, fatal) endeavors, they do finally reach their destination, FOB Saro. The recasting (or replacement) of the enemy Other is then complete: they get to experience firsthand what it’s like to be on the other side of American firepower when they come speeding toward the FOB’s Entry Control Point in the “hajji van” they’d commandeered along the way. The “long walk” of Abrams’ six protagonists ultimately reveals – through the eyes of Americans themselves – the tyranny of the U.S. military.

This critique of the American military-industrial establishment is not confined to Abrams’ novel. Many previous war novels have delivered anti-exceptionalist political satire – *Catch-22* is best known in this regard. Like Heller’s 1961 classic, second-wave Iraq War fiction is critical of the American system and how it feeds upon war in a seemingly closed loop. The key difference is in the plot’s implications of victimizing: Abrams’ six AWOL-ers have chosen their own way and are *not* portrayed as victims (traumatic or otherwise). Even the scene of Olijandro’s death is written in a way that puts the soldiers’ own folly or an unexpected accident at fault. Heller’s protagonist Yossarian, on the other hand, *is* a trauma victim – notably a victim of capitalism and American greed

rather than a victim of the German enemy. Caught in the thorny thicket of military bureaucracy, he's unlikely to extricate himself, despite his questionable sanity, and we empathize with him because of it. Through his characterizations, Abrams (along with other second-wave Iraq War novelists) denies this pathos-driven victimization because he refuses to incorporate the victim-turned-hero trope of much previous war literature. Instead, he takes the veteran off of the pedestal erected by American culture – and out of the VA hospital bed.

In line with other scholars of contemporary American war literature, Patrick Deer observes that U.S. soldiers are consistently represented in literature and film as “self-effacing, self-sacrificing, laconic, [and] likeable” (“Mapping” 60). The causes for which soldiers voluntarily enlist – buzzwords like “patriotism,” “democracy,” and “freedom,” which Elaine Scarry categorizes under the term “for my country” (123), exposing its use for justifying both killing and dying – all underscore the servicemember’s stereotypically presumed allegiance to American exceptionalism. Abrams’ characterization of four different soldiers, however, highlights the novel’s eschewal of the glorified American-hero archetype. Park is ashamed rather than proud of being a U.S. soldier. Fish is an abhorrent violence-monger not at all interested in winning hearts and minds. Olijandro’s death scene is executed with absurd farce (involving a scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) rather than with stereotypically war-filmic honor. And the most identifiably heroic of them all is Sergeant Morgan, whose pre-narrative death enables the novel’s quest theme and allegorically heralds the death of the trauma-hero in war literature.

War fiction tends to evoke previous wars, whether through troping, intertextualizing, or explicit referencing. One recurring method employed to memorialize



previous wars and their soldiers is the casting of a generational angle. In his memoir, Castner explains the expectations he felt were put upon him as part of a military family, having had an uncle who fought in Vietnam, both grandfathers in World War II, and a great-grandfather at the Second Battle of Bull Run. One reason for his enlistment was the pressure to continue the generational tradition of service, upholding his family's definition of masculinity through the fulfillment of their civic responsibility in wartime. This generational expectation is not particular to Castner's memoir – it resonates throughout first-wave fiction as well. Abe Shrinkle, a character in Abrams' first novel, *Fobbit*, traces a similar lineage: "There was never any question that he would enter the military. His grandfather had served, two of his uncles had served, and his father would have served if it hadn't been for the lupus. When the time came and Abe, a high school senior, stood on that cusp of decision, the choice was already mapped and plotted" (78). He went on to West Point and then made his way up through the military ranks, never questioning that he "was on his way toward something big, something great, something magnanimous that would benefit his family and America at large" (78). Notably, these soldier characters do not express any misgivings or doubts about their familial expectations or perceived duties. Their attitude is one of pride.

Other types of war representation similarly capitalize on the tradition of generational participation in warfare. Richard Linklater's 2017 film *Last Flag Flying*, for instance, follows a trio of vets who fought together in Vietnam (played by A-listers Steve Carell, Bryan Cranston, and Laurence Fishburne) as they travel to Arlington Cemetery for the funeral of Carell's character's son, recently killed on duty in Iraq. Dialogue along the way reveals the late son's pride in joining the Marines like his father had, as his

buddy who survived tells the father that they joined because, “We wanted to test ourselves, to forge ourselves into the men we wanted to become.” Carell’s character sighs, and with a voice of experiential wisdom laments, “That’s what *we* used to think. Every generation has their war. Men make wars, and wars make men ... Never gonna end.” His tone of resignation to what he views an inevitability echoes American society’s own acceptance of war as something that has to be done. Our military’s long tradition<sup>16</sup> of participating in (or initiating) war after war after war concretizes our consideration of it as commonplace. This tradition is built through patrilineal trends of enlistment. Tracy Karner explains the connection between father-son (or grandfather-grandson) relationships and the imperative to enlist: “These young boys had ‘played by the rules,’ and by going to war they were doing what their fathers and their fathers’ fathers before them had done. They were following the patterns of manhood that had been laid before them – and by coming home alive they had survived the test” (73). Though she is writing about the Vietnam War, the theory easily applies to the Iraq War, as we see in the examples involving Castner, Shrinkle, and Linklater’s characters. All suggest a sense of pride, of having lived up to their fathers’ or grandfathers’ sense of manhood by continuing the family’s legacy of “brave deeds” by marching off to war.

Abrams, however, inverts this tendency in order to *subvert* the concept of familial pride in military service. The “quiet one” of the six AWOL soldiers, Lee Park is “much like his grandfather [who] fought in the old war. On the Korean side. Against Americans” (114). Grandpa Park didn’t talk much about his war. Like Park, he was usually “stoic as

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<sup>16</sup> The Centre for Research on Globalization provides a timeline of American participation in military conflicts which confirms that the U.S. has been at war for 225 out of the 242 years since 1776. There have only been 17 calendar years of peace in the history of the country (“America”).

statuary,” but every once in a while he’d make the comment, “War is nothing but the dead fighting the dead” (115). He once told Park about finding a white hand in a snowbank, an image that haunts Park throughout his childhood, but nevertheless does not deter him from enlisting himself. The same chapter describes a concert put on at the base’s PX during a MWR Fun Night, when his fellow soldiers and the busty blonde girls in the USO band goad the unwilling Park onto the stage to dance with them, at which point “he pictured his grandfather shaking his head, casting his eyes down to the floor. Such noise, such loss of dignity” (115). Participation in contemporary warfare – especially on behalf of the United States – and its associated male camaraderie is a source of shame for Park, not pride or macho honor as it was for Castner, *Fobbit’s* Shrinkle, Linklater’s characters, and countless other combatants in representations of American war. Park’s shame intensifies to hatred: “He wanted to die. He prayed his grandfather’s ghost would send a mortar whistling through the sky to land bull’s-eye here on this stage” (116). And later, bitterly: “Americans. He hated every last goddamn one of them” (117). His rejection of national identification and pride is acquired generationally, the way the opposite generally works with soldiers and their forefathers, for, as the omniscient narrator observes, “Park comes by his pissed-off nature honestly. It’s in the DNA passed to him by his grandfather, who never quite got over the wrongs he suffered in the cold wastelands of the 1950s . . . Park learned to hate America at the knee of his grandfather” (119). Characterization, like all elements of fiction, is an authorial choice. With the character of Park, Abrams deliberately presents an alternative to the “good-guy GI” archetype found in many twentieth and twenty-first century representations of war, and

he shows that family ties and generational loyalty can have as much to do with hating America as with embracing it.

Abrams further deconstructs the myth of the American war hero as one who is, as Deer puts it, “self-effacing, self-sacrificing, [and] likeable” through his characterization of the group’s asshole, Fish, the antithesis of those adjectives. His unnecessary, quickly-triggered violence crushes the savior-soldier rhetoric behind the “winning hearts and minds” euphemism handed down from Lyndon B. Johnson’s speeches during the Vietnam War.<sup>17</sup> The first time Abrams’ six AWOL protagonists encounter Iraqis is when they raid a house that comes up clean – no bomb-making materials or Sunni leaflets, nothing. The frightened family who lives there is described as “frozen as if posing for a Sears family portrait.” They are completely harmless civilians, but the “goddamn disappointment this door kick has turned out to be” (37) and the adrenaline still pumping from the possibility of violence causes Fish to batter the innocent Iraqi mother’s head with the butt of his rifle, much to the shock and rebuke of the other five soldiers. As if this opening act weren’t sufficient to situate Fish as the bad guy on the allegedly good side, a later scene involving an Iraqi POW reveals the full brutality of a so-called American hero. Again with his rifle, in a form of assault known among soldiers as “butt-stroking” (41) he beats the gagged, hog-tied, praying POW to death. In previous representations of war, one-sided violence is more frequently represented as coming from

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<sup>17</sup> First used militarily by a British general during the Malayan Emergency in 1952, the “hearts and minds” phrase of military diplomacy was next used by John F. Kennedy in reference to Latin America during the Cold War (1963), then by Lyndon B. Johnson in regards to the Vietnamese (1965). It was further popularized with the 1974 Vietnam War documentary *Hearts and Minds*, but dropped out of usage until 2005, when President George W. Bush began using it to justify the occupation of Iraq. It was used frequently throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s by the Bush and Obama administrations and the news media (Dickinson).

the enemy, with the American soldier as POW or victim, tortured or killed by a Nazi, Viet Cong, or Iraqi insurgent. Abrams' choice to flip this bloody script undermines the myth of American exceptionalism perpetuated by decades of cultural representations. With the characterization of Fish, he reminds us that abhorrent atrocities are performed by American soldiers, too, not just the enemy Other. This role reversal is a defining characteristic of second-wave Iraq War fiction.

Perhaps the most significant characterization in *Brave Deeds* is that of its hero *in absentia*, Sergeant Morgan. The beloved late leader of the six protagonists, he is the only character who fits Deer's descriptors. For example, he was handing out candy to Iraqi street children when the bomb hit him, and he died trying to save one of them. Morgan's sincere belief in the humanitarian concept of winning hearts and minds contrasts sharply with the apathetic attitude held by the others, who admit, "As long as we get a paycheck, we could give two shits about history and heroes" (Abrams 25). In their memories of him, the six AWOL soldiers paint their late leader as larger than life, a legend once in their midst. Their journey across the desert can be read as a pilgrimage, much as Cox interprets when he reads *Pilgrim's Progress* as a source text for Crane's *Black Riders*. But Sergeant Morgan doesn't get to come home to tell his story. Instead, his foil, the anti-hero Fish, survives. Abrams disallows the idealized hero figure to return home to *become* the "trauma hero." The connection between this novel and the most well-known allegory in the English language (*Pilgrim's Progress*) – by way of Crane's poem as Abrams' epigraph – allows us to read *Brave Deeds* itself as allegorical, with its central trope the death of the hero, Sergeant Morgan, who represents the would-be traumatized vet bearing witness, but who is instead silenced by his demise. The death of the literal hero in *Brave*

*Deeds* can thus be read as a stand-in for the death of the trauma-hero in war fiction, which second-wave Iraq War novels herald. Further, as Fredric Jameson argues in “War and Representation,” the central dialectic of war literature is that of “sense-datum” versus “abstraction” (1547). Abstraction is one of the narrative devices that characterizes allegory as romance (rather than as realism), so with the allegorical hero Sergeant Morgan and the quest which his death initiates, Abrams’ novel presents a dialectic between romance and realism – and perhaps this tension is a mark of the post-“trauma-hero” genre of contemporary war fiction.

Scranton’s main point of contention with the trauma-hero myth is that it “serves a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy” (“Trauma Hero”). Representations of Iraqi civilians in *Brave Deeds* and other second-wave Iraq War fiction mark a turning point from the first wave. In what David Lawrence called in 2013 “‘The Big Three’ war novels”<sup>18</sup> of the twenty-first century – which are also the three that Buchanan identifies as representative of the “first wave” of Iraq War fiction in *Going Scapegoat* (2016) – Iraqis are either dehumanized, villainized, or absent from the narrative entirely. In *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012), the only representation of Iraqis is within a magazine article about the firefight for which Billy and the Bravo squad became famous. The first sentence of the passage below is from an interview with their colonel, which is then contrasted with Billy’s memories of the firefight:

“It seems this particular group of insurgents wished to die,” Colonel Travers told *Time*, “and our men were more than willing to oblige them.” True on both counts,

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<sup>18</sup> *Fobbit*, *The Yellow Birds*, and *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

but not until the very end did they offer themselves up, a little kamikaze band of eight or ten bursting from the reeds at a dead sprint, screaming, firing on full automatic, one last rocks-off martyrs' gallop straight to the gates of the Muslim paradise . . . and how those beebies flew apart, hair, teeth, eyes, hands, tender melon heads, exploding soup-stews of shattered chests . . . (Fountain 125)

This banshee-like imagery followed by an enthusiastic demonstration of gore depicts Iraqis as demonic savages rather than human beings. Dehumanization is even more explicit (and more frequent) in Abrams' own first-wave novel *Fobbit* (2012), wherein no Iraqis are individualized or given names, but descriptions of them as child-like or animalistic occasionally intrude into the narrative, always in the collective, as if they were not individuals at all, but rather masses to be subjugated: "Iraqis pressing around him on all sides like circus spectators" (15), "the goats, the babbling Iraqis" (20), "nutbrown vendors chattered like monkeys" (54), "Lumley's men were herding the Local Nationals" (29), "dark blobs bobbing their heads in the shadows" (143). Moreover, the American officers consider their tasks in imperialistic terms of civilizing, and even of eradicating pests: "When it came right down to it, Lumley and his men were just playing that old carnival game Whac-a-Mole. Smack down one terrorist with the rubber mallet and right away another one pops up over *here* and while you're whacking that guy another one has popped up over *there*" (28, italics in original). Similarly, American officers and soldiers during the Vietnam War referred to the Vietnamese as "gooks" and "dinks," and attributed rodent-like characteristics to them because of their underground tunneling systems. This rhetoric of pseudospeciation facilitates the dirty work of war. Scarry reminds us that "the main purpose and outcome of war is injuring" (63), and

violence is made easier by distancing the Other from oneself. Racialized modes of referring to wartime enemies, Buchanan notes, “all work toward the same goal, of trivializing and depersonalizing the enemy. It makes it easier to kill these people and not feel bad about it” (160). The treatment of Iraqis in first-wave Iraq War fiction perpetuates that dehumanization.

Of the first-wave “Big Three,” only Powers’ novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012) grants page-time to an Iraqi character: Malik, the interpreter for the American platoon. Although he is permitted the individuality of a name, his identity is nonetheless obscured. The protagonist Private Bartle recalls that “he wore a hood over his face ... He never took his mask off. The one time Murph and I had asked him about it, he took his index finger and traced the fringe of the hood that hung around his neck. ‘They’ll kill me for helping you. They’ll kill my whole family’” (Powers 9). Malik survives for about five more pages until he is shot and killed by enemy sniper fire. Like his visage, the moment of his death is also depersonalized. Bartle states, “We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms. When we got the order to cease fire we looked over the low wall and he was lying in the dust and there was a lot of blood around him” (11). His blood on their uniforms may be read as a metaphor for Iraqi civilians’ blood on American hands, but Powers’ overall representation of Iraqis is ambivalent at best. He attempts to humanize the Other through the brief inclusion of Malik, but later, at the plot-central discovery of Private Murph’s torture and death, Powers positions Iraqis as bogeymen who have abducted the hapless young American, cut off his genitals, ears, and nose, and thrown his body from the top of a minaret. Then, in misplaced revenge, Bartle and his superior Lieutenant Sterling nonchalantly murder



the innocent hermit they call “the hajji with the cart” (Powers 208) who has helped them move Murph’s body. It is Bartle’s guilt about their surreptitious disposal of Murph’s body (to save Murph’s mom the pain of viewing the mutilated corpse of her son) that drives Powers’ trauma narrative; the killing of the helpful old Iraqi is not mentioned again in any of the passages of Bartle’s reminiscing. His moral injury is caused by the choice he made when faced with an ambiguous ethical dilemma regarding the corpse of a fellow American, rather than by his involvement in the outright murder of an Iraqi civilian.

In *Brave Deeds*, however, Abrams begins to develop representations of Iraqis into fully formed characters. Though he evokes empathy and humanizes these characters to a lesser extent than the novels I’ll discuss later in this chapter, Terrell’s *The Good Lieutenant* and Scranton’s *War Porn*, the shift from first-wave to second-wave is nonetheless apparent. A comparison of Hamid (the interpreter in *Brave Deeds*) with Malik in *The Yellow Birds*, for example, reveals a deeper connection between American soldiers and the Iraqis who work with them. The first-person-plural omniscient narrator explains, “We loved Hamid ... He was cool in ways we never expected a hajji to be” (68). They teach him American slang, and he teaches them dance moves from Arabic music videos. He is conveyed as a compassionate character, close friends with their beloved Sergeant Morgan. In one flashback to an incident when both Hamid and Morgan were still alive, the two men shed tears together as they try to console an Iraqi bride whose wedding has just been bombed, her groom blown to pieces. In these passages, Hamid is one of “us,” one of the American group, not an Other.

Not all depictions of Iraqis, however, are this warm – and not all interactions between Americans and Iraqis in the novel are as mutually amicable. In *Brave Deeds*, Abrams strives to portray Iraqi-American relations honestly rather than idealizing them. He aims for a balance of showing, on one hand, how American soldiers often perceive Iraqis, and, on the other, how Iraqi civilians view Americans. In one scene, for instance, the six AWOL soldiers pass through a crowded urban area. The peopled imagery offers a multi-dimensional glimpse of Iraqi civilians from their perspective:

Men, women, and children watch our approach . . . The older Iraqis, those who spent decades in Saddam’s ‘correctional’ facilities, smile at us with stumps of rotten teeth . . . When they wave, we notice many of the hands (if they aren’t outright missing) have only three or four fingers. The women keep their eyes averted and go on with their shopping . . . The younger men—military-age males, the MAMs we’re always targeting—stare with undisguised hatred at us, the intruding infidels. This is Sunni territory and most of them have grown weary of the American presence . . . The children, as usual, skip along beside us chanting “Mister! Mister!” waiting for that happy moment when one of us reaches into his ammo pouch and comes out with a ziplock baggie of Jolly Ranchers. (Abrams 121)

From the smiles of the old men and the women’s deliberate avoidance, to the young men’s anger and the cheerful energy of the children, Abrams stages a varied tableau that stands in stark contrast to the absence, dehumanization, or villainization of Iraqis in the first-wave novels. Details in this and other passages throughout *Brave Deeds* humanize the wartime Other, as opposed to the author’s earlier novel *Fobbit*, which groups them as

faceless masses or ascribes to them animalistic qualities. Abrams' characterization also reverses the postcolonial gaze as theorized via Edward Said's Orientalism. In first-wave Iraq War novels (and in most Vietnam War literature), representations of the occupied peoples – when included at all – are from the lens of the colonizer-subject, the American occupiers. That is, Iraqis (the colonized-object) are often depicted from a white male character's perspective, even literalizing the theoretical gaze into actually observing or watching the foreign Other. Conversely, in *Brave Deeds* and other second-wave Iraq War fiction, the gaze is reversed such that the Iraqis become the viewers: note that the first line of the above quoted passage states that the Iraqis “watch [the Americans] approach.” Further distancing this second-wave novel from the stereotyping tendencies of previous war fiction, the contrasting Iraqi perspectives within the passage suggest a subjective individuality: the old men are friendly toward the Americans, the women ignore them, the young men are suspicious, and the children are eagerly playful and trusting. Gone is the mass-collectivizing of “herds” and faceless, shadowed “blobs” as found in *Fobbit*. The *Brave Deeds* scene also differs from previous western depictions of wartime Others because it de-centers American influence by alluding to Iraqi culture prior to the occupation. To the Iraqis, the Americans are nothing exceptional – they represent yet another trial in a long series of bloody conflicts punctuating their history.<sup>19</sup> Abrams acknowledges this by mentioning the old men's missing digits as reminders of the previous regime, implicitly reminding readers that the U.S. helped fund Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War. He furthers this denial of America as international hero with his

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<sup>19</sup> This is more explicit in Iraqi-authored Iraq War fiction, which I discuss in Chapter Three.

description of the hostile attitude of the “MAMs,” suggesting that the Americans aren’t welcomed by the very people they are ostensibly in Iraq to help.

Abrams’ characterization, though more inclusive than depictions of Iraqis in first-wave novels, does not attempt to force an idealistic sense of widespread amiability.

While parts of his narrative perspectivalize the Iraqi civilian’s mindset, he also acknowledges the racist mindset that can form when an American nurtured at the teat of U.S. exceptionalism encounters a foreign civilization. Abrams critiques the stubborn persistence of the xenophobic gaze in his American characters without perpetuating it through his fiction. For example, the collective narrator (the “we” that includes all six AWOL soldiers) reflects on their relationship with the native civilians in language that reveals their inability – or unwillingness – to relate to the foreign culture:

We look at Iraqis and think: *Who are you?* We have come here to this hot hell of a land, leaving our wives and girlfriends and our parents and our cars and our weight benches, and for what? To protect and bolster a people we don’t know, who remain unknowable, who we couldn’t give two flying fucks for? And don’t even get us started on all that Muslim crap, the medieval bullshit that demands you keep your hot chicks hidden behind black curtains and makes you go all ape shit if one of us happens to sit down in your house, crosses his leg, and points the sole of his shoe in your direction. That shit baffles us. (Abrams 142)

Their disdain is fed partially by the loss of their leader, but they have also been indoctrinated with the ethnocentric rhetoric of a military with centuries of aggression toward people of color, dating back to the Indian Wars. In *Going Scapegoat*, Buchanan points out that the conquest of Native Americans during the frontier era supplied racist

ideology that persists today. He explains that the term “*Hajji* is an extension of the metaphysics of Indian hating [which] incorporates religious vituperation *and* the demonization of the enemy into one harmful term of denigration via a complex scapegoat mechanism” (13). He traces the racist trajectory of American warfare over several generations, beginning with the Indian Wars and arriving at the current conflicts in the Middle East, successfully supporting his claim that “Indian hating excuses, authorizes, and provides the model for the *hajji*-fication of the United States’ post-9/11 scapegoated enemy” (13). The long-term persistence of this mindset about the racially differentiated wartime Other helps to explain why, when Abrams’ six soldiers raid a rumored bomb maker’s house during the climax of their journey, they refer to the three Iraqis there as “Rat-Face,” “Yellow Shirt,” and “Leftover Hajji.” Fish’s brutal murder of “Leftover Hajji,” who they had taken as a POW in this scene, is decidedly unpleasant to read. Nonetheless, it chips away at the myth of the trauma hero by zooming in on an Iraqi victim of American violence, rather than the typical fare of representations that show only Americans as victims or that leave Iraqis out of the narrative altogether.

Perhaps the most striking representation of an Iraqi in *Brave Deeds* is the pregnant Iraqi woman the soldiers meet at the bomb-maker’s house. After getting a tip from an Iraqi civilian (Rat-Face) who walks up to them on the street, the soldiers take a detour to raid an alleged bomb maker’s house, uncertain whether to trust Rat-Face but convinced enough to check it out (and wanting to do “one good thing before we leave this place” so they won’t go home with “nothing to show for this deployment” [155]). Though cautious with the realization that this could be an ambush, a firefight ensues when they reach the house. One of the six Americans, Olijandro, is shot in the midst of it,

but the bullet is stopped by his ballistic vest, or so they think. After clearing the house, they find the young Iraqi woman hiding in the bathtub, “filled-to-bursting-with-baby, any-minute-now pregnant” and “scared shitless by armor-clad Americans” (164). She’s the wife of one of the Iraqis who’s just been killed in the firefight, but despite their sympathy, they can’t take her with them—they still have miles to go on foot in the desert to get to FOB Saro for Sergeant Morgan’s memorial service. They leave her there, but an hour or so down the road, Olijandro is bleeding out, so two of them go back to get the dilapidated florist delivery van they’d seen at the bomb maker’s house. They catch up with the rest and lay Olijandro in the back of the van, assuming they will get him medical help as soon as they reach the FOB. Only too late do they realize the Iraqi woman had climbed into the back of the van to give birth, rather than doing so in the blood-spattered house surrounded by corpses. She’s now unwittingly along for the ride, huffing and screaming in labor pains. By the time they arrive at FOB Saro, they realize Olijandro’s wound is fatal. The van with the seven of them inside are stalled at the FOB’s Entry Control Point, American guns trained on them, unable to get past the guards because they have arrived without calling ahead at a remote American military base in an unidentified vehicle with Iraqi writing on its side. Just as they are finally able to enter, and arrive at the chapel for Sergeant Morgan’s memorial just as the chaplain’s assistant is boxing everything up, Olijandro dies as the Iraqi woman gives birth. In the last moments of the novel, “she screams the baby into the world,” which is followed by the resounding last line voiced collectively by the six narrators: “As we say our last good-bye, we cry, we cry, we cry” (254). Her screaming merges with their mourning as the novel closes with

an allegorical cycle representing birth, life, and death, uniting Americans with Iraqis in a solidarity symbolic of biology and temporality.

*Brave Deeds* thus signals a shift in contemporary war fiction away from the heretofore prevailing narratives of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism. Abrams heralds this sea change with by developing Iraqi characters and symbolically suggesting that the death of American violence begets a birth of Iraqi peace. The novel also differs from first-wave Iraq War fiction in its characterization of American anti-heroes such as Fish, and it reverses the generational pride in military service through the Korean character Park. Unlike a majority of Vietnam and first-wave Iraq War novels, the plot of *Brave Deeds* does not involve a soldier's homecoming or veteran's psychological trauma. Instead, the death of Sergeant Morgan (preventing his homecoming and post-traumatic narrativizing) stands in for the metaphorical death of the trauma hero in the war-lit genre. To sidestep another expected convention of the genre, the imperative to tell "what it was like," Abrams interweaves romanticism into his realism with the pilgrimage/quest theme of the long walk, further supported by epigraphical paratext from Stephen Crane's *Black Riders*. These elements of characterization, symbolism, and subversion of the conventions of traditional war literature will intensify with other novels of the second wave, written by both civilians (like Terrell) and veterans (like Scranton). On a broader scale, these works herald a transformation not only in the genre, but in cultural memory at large.

#### WHITNEY TERRELL'S *THE GOOD LIEUTENANT* (2016)

On the evening of September 10th, 2001, Whitney Terrell was out with his editor and agent, celebrating the publication of his first novel, *The Huntsman*, for which a

quarter-page ad would appear in *The New York Times* the following day. The next morning, however, they woke to the bombing of the World Trade Center, which they watched from their hotel balcony in Brooklyn. Terrell recalls this devastating coincidence in a conversation with *The New Yorker*'s Nick Paumgarten, stating that the realization of his own (and his generation's) "naivete, innocence, and sense of privilege at that moment in history" led him to Iraq as an embedded reporter a few years later. His experiences as a war correspondent first for *Engineering News-Record*, then for *Slate*, *NPR*, and *Washington Post*, culminated in a project that took more than a decade to complete: his Iraq War novel, *The Good Lieutenant*.

Like Abrams' *Brave Deeds*, Terrell's plot is structured as a quest. During a firefight at the dangerous Muthanna intersection, one of Lieutenant Emma Fowler's men has been abducted by Iraqi insurgents, so Fowler and her platoon are on an unauthorized mission to find him. The first occurrence of dramatic irony informs the reader that Beale is dead, because the novel's first chapter opens *ad finis res*: the men are searching a field for his body. As they canvas it in their Humvee, a "shirtless, hobo-type figure ... like some kind of drifter or clown" (16-17) runs at them, flapping his arms and waving them down, refusing to get out of the way. Assuming he's a threat or distraction, they scan the area for other potential attackers. At that moment their Humvee blows up, killing two instantly and fatally wounding another. When Lieutenant Fowler arrives at the scene, she sees the shirtless Iraqi feebly rising from where the blast had thrown him. Making a choice that drives the remainder of the narrative, she shoots him point blank.

As the chapters progress (or regress, since the story is told backwards from that point on), we discover that the Iraqi was named Ayad. He was an innocent, deaf civilian



who had been trying to warn the Americans away from the area of the field where he suspected IEDs had been planted by the group of insurgents who'd taken and murdered Beale. While the "real-time" plot follows their search for Beale (culminating in the field, the first chapter), the novel's chronology is structured to lead us gradually to the dual realization that Ayad is innocent and Lieutenant Fowler is guilty. The narrative's climax, situated mid-novel, is the attack at the Muthanna intersection during which Beale is taken. The chapters after it convey Fowler's experience and insecurities in Iraq before Muthanna, then the day before their deployment, then a few weeks before deployment, and so on, with the earliest chapter chronologically (endmost, page-wise) being four months before she deployed. The search for Beale thus comprises the reverse chronology of the first several chapters leading up to the Muthanna intersection climax. Helpfully, Terrell's Epilogue returns us to the events of Chapter 1, soon after Fowler kills Ayad after the Humvee explosion. She's in a police station with Iraqi law enforcement and her company commander as they present Ayad's sobbing mother with a sheet of official stationery. Captain Hartz tells her that the letter "constitutes an official condolence for your son's death from the coalition forces and the United States Army," but he also emphasizes that "this letter is not an admission of guilt. Your son was present during an attack on coalition forces, during which three soldiers were killed. We believe our soldiers acted properly to defend themselves." He then contradicts this assertion of self-defense by subtracting its deliberateness, for he ends his pompous oration by pushing the letter into the mother's hands and stating, "It was an accident, which doesn't make it less of a tragedy" (Terrell 268). The reader is by now aware (due to the reverse chronology) that there was no such "attack," that Ayad was only trying to *save* the Americans in the

Humvee, and that Fowler's crime has been successfully concealed. She is not held accountable for her actions, and she shows no sign of remorse. Ayad's mother asks her, "What kind of animal would kill a [deaf] man?" Fowler replies: "Single males living alone are the people most likely to be targeted by insurgents. That's the profile . . . You leave a kid out there along, with no clue what's happening, nobody to speak for him—what kind of animal does a thing like *that*?" (Terrell 270-271). Here, the scapegoating Buchanan discusses is writ large. The closing lines of his monograph demand a readerly obligation: "Propaganda leaks out of every work of art, but when we focus only on stories of the combat gnosticators, we silence dissent and push civilian perspectives to the side. Our role as readers and critics, then, is to peer through experience and correct it by tracing the structure of the scapegoat mechanism within" (202). With *The Good Lieutenant* (a title we now understand to be ironic), such "peering" and "tracing" is no longer necessary. Terrell's decision to cast the American lieutenant as perpetrator and an Iraqi MAM (military-age male; i.e. suspected insurgent) as victim places the scapegoating front and center for all to see, rather than concealing it like the first-wave Iraq War fiction Buchanan critiques.

In interviews, Terrell expresses his surprise that the most frequent question he's asked about writing *The Good Lieutenant* is not his choice of a female protagonist in a genre dominated by male characters,<sup>20</sup> or his chapters that give voice to a deaf Iraqi civilian, or even of his characterizing some American soldier-characters as anti-heroic (Pulowski as coward and Masterson as criminal). What most often dominates

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<sup>20</sup> I will discuss Terrell's unusual choice of a female officer as his protagonist at greater length in my fourth chapter, which examines female characters in (and female writers of) Iraq War fiction.

conversations about the novel is its reverse chronology. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Terrell explains this decision as a deliberate divergence from conventional character development: “In a traditional war story, combat is where characters are revealed: Are they heroic? Are they cowards? Are they losers? I do not feel like combat is, in fact, that kind of experience. Combat is a character-flattening experience. It robs people of themselves rather than makes something of who they are.”<sup>21</sup> But when the story goes backward, the characters grow and become more complex as they move away from it” (Shapira). His use of reverse chronology thus subverts the conventions of trauma narratives and critiques their role in the construction of cultural memory. He points out that “our culture’s dominant war narratives” (those we’ve been referring to as the first wave and those that came before) use a traditional linear structure, such that “combat becomes the exciting climax to the drama, the moment when the good guy’s true character is revealed.” Terrell takes issue with the implication of this structural lead-up to violent action because it valorizes combat and its associated trauma, so he chose to write the novel backwards in order to, as he stated in another interview, “remove combat from its usual privileged narrative position” (“On Time and War”).

Terrell is also conscious of fiction’s role in public narrativizing and collective remembering. He told Paumgarten, “We’re creating narratives about how people are going to remember this. These narratives aren’t reality. They’re made up – crafted and arranged to give us a compressed memory of reality. Some of these narratives are

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<sup>21</sup> Terrell’s assertion here, that war is “character-flattening” and “robs people of themselves,” echoes one of Vonnegut’s memorable lines in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: “There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (208).

skeptical – I would say honest – about war. Others romanticize it. It’s up to the public to sort out which narratives deserve to be validated and which ones don’t.” This notion of public validation is what Scranton complicates in “The Trauma Hero,” and I argue that it’s one of the problems second-wave Iraq War fiction seeks to correct. The reverse chronology of Terrell’s novel is like a trauma-narrative flashback writ large, but with an important difference: the “hero” does *not* return home in the end, because the end is at the beginning of the novel. While Abrams prevented his hero-figure Sergeant Morgan from returning home to be sanctified or placed on a pedestal because he dies before the beginning of *Brave Deeds*, similarly Terrell disallows his protagonist Emma Fowler to return home to tell her story because he temporally structures the narrative in such a way that she does not go home at the end of it. Moreover, by not having served in the military himself, Terrell writes from the non-veteran perspective that Scranton and Buchanan suggest as a potential antidote to the genre’s embedded myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism.

In his 2009 article about literary backwardism and antonymism, Seymour Chatman distinguishes between different types of narrative reversals, also known as backwards storytelling. *The Good Lieutenant* would fit into Chatman’s classification of “sustained *episodic* backwards narration,” as opposed to his own analytical focus, *Time’s Arrow* by Martin Amis, which has a backwards narration that is “sustained *continuous*” and “antonymized” (Chatman 33-34). Amis’s novel foregrounds the horrors of the Holocaust by telling the story of a Nazi doctor in reverse, in such a way that every action is literally inverted: eating becomes purging, a car is taken to the body shop to be wrecked instead of repaired, and a surgeon’s removal of a tumor becomes the

implantation (in Amis's words, "spooning into") thereof. In his Afterword to *Time's Arrow*, Amis credits Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as his inspiration for the reversed narrative. Vonnegut's sci-fi-troped reflection on his Dresden experience includes a fascinating passage in which protagonist Billy Pilgrim, who often becomes "unstuck in time,"<sup>22</sup> views a World War II film backwards, which transforms a sequence of destruction into one of creation:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken

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<sup>22</sup> The narrative device of Billy becoming "unstuck" in time appears to be Vonnegut's method of conveying "flashback" symptoms of his own traumatic memory before the APA created clinical vocabulary for it.

from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again. (Vonnegut 74-75)

In examining how backwards chronology like that of the passage above “produces both comic and serious effects,” Mark Currie hypothesizes that “if the reversal of cause and effect produces a moral inversion in which everything good becomes bad and vice versa, the humour of inversion itself becomes a form of moral critique” (101). Indeed, Vonnegut’s very subtitle (“The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death”) insists that his novel is a moral critique of war.

With *The Good Lieutenant*’s backwards episodic narration (as opposed to Amis and Vonnegut’s antonymized continuous narration), the element of humor disappears, yet the moral critique remains.<sup>23</sup> Terrell’s reversal builds suspense, but not the usual plot-driving question of “What’s going to happen?” or “Who’s going to die?” because the deaths have already occurred. Instead, the narrative is propelled forward by questions of culpability: Is Ayad in league with the insurgents who captured Beale, or is he genuinely innocent? Our discovery that he *is* innocent coincides with our realization of the extent of Lieutenant Fowler’s guilt. She is clearly the killer and Ayad is clearly the victim.

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<sup>23</sup> The episodic mode fits Terrell’s purpose more than antonymized reversal would have. Perusing Vonnegut’s paragraph above is a pleasure, but reading an entire novel written that way would try patience and defy comprehension. If we recall Terrell’s statement in *The New Yorker* —“It’s up to the public to sort out which narratives deserve to be validated and which ones don’t”— his balance of experimentation with readability makes sense.

Therefore, she represents what Scranton calls “the problem of American political violence” (“Trauma Hero”) that the myth of the trauma hero often conceals, and Terrell’s brand of war-storytelling subverts that very myth.

Just as Abrams’ characterization of Fish is the antithesis of popular perceptions of U.S. soldiers, Terrell presents anti-heroes of his own. He intentionally portrays some Americans as unconscionable perpetrators to counteract the myth of the good-guy GI as victim of faceless warfare or Islamic terrorism. Assumptions of American exceptionalism and the narrative of the invasion of Iraq as a humanitarian mission are further challenged through bits of dialogue and various scenes.<sup>24</sup> With the depiction of three characters in particular – Masterson, Pulowski, and Fowler herself – *The Good Lieutenant* offers an alternative to the problematic representations found in the first wave of contemporary war fiction.

Captain Masterson regularly detains and coercively interrogates Iraqis whom he suspects are involved with terrorist organizations, though at no time in the narrative does he have any evidence to support these suspicions. Fowler’s conversations with the Iraqi interpreter Faisal reveal that Masterson has been forcing him to help fabricate arrest affidavits under the guise of translating them, to make up stories about crimes that have not been committed and affiliations that do not exist. Masterson’s company is highly regarded for maintaining the battalion’s highest kill and incarceration rates, which bolsters his machismic ego and his reputation as a fierce leader. In order for Americans to

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<sup>24</sup> “Yes, the war was fucked up. Yes, left and right you could see examples of people [Americans] completely botching things in the worst way. Of people who refused to step up” (Terrell 4); “She’d worried how badly Masterson might’ve hurt his interpreter to get this intel. Now she worried he hadn’t hurt him enough” (5); “This was, he supposed, what the camera system really was—a hunting device. A target finder. It had been completely idiotic to imagine that it would be used in any other way” (16).

detain any Iraqi, an affidavit indicating proof of their crime or affiliation with insurgency had to be approved and signed by the Judge Advocate General. Since Masterson was faking these and getting away with it, he could kill or detain as many innocent Iraqis as he wanted – simply to keep his numbers up. This calls into question how many POWs at military prisons – and how many dead civilians – were imprisoned or executed unjustly.

Masterson thus fits the Geneva Convention's definition of a war criminal. By faking and forging arrest affidavits, he has committed innumerable human rights violations and successfully concealed them from higher command. At Fort Riley before deployment, (several chapters later thus chronologically prior to Fowler discovering his crimes), Captain Masterson had scorned the naiveté of then-inexperienced Lieutenant Fowler: "All this happy talk about reconstruction and helping the Iraqis stand up and saving them for democracy? Not happening" (Terrell 200). His own interference in due process of the law exemplifies the American military's "bungled effort to bring democracy to Iraq," in the title words of Larry Diamond's incisive indictment of the American occupation. Terrell creates the character of Masterson as an alternative to blaming the Iraqi people for refusing to embrace democratic ideals, and to give a possible explanation for another American character's realization that "All the dead people are dead now for no reason at all and every fucking lick of work we've done in this place is total crap" (78).

The speaker of that lament, Lieutenant Pulowski, is a different kind of anti-hero. Instead of a criminal like Masterson, he is a coward. While Terrell's characterization of Masterson rejects the exceptionalist perception of an American soldier being virtuous or ethically upright, his depiction of Pulowski disassociates bravery or courage from



soldierhood – much like Crane’s portraiture of the young Henry Fleming in the beginning of *The Red Badge*. The key difference is that Fleming seeks out an opportunity to test himself, to prove his mettle, but Pulowski has no desire to do so. In fact, his aversion to battle and to violence in general implicates him in Beale’s capture-turned-murder. We discover this while he is questioning Ayad, the day after Beale’s abduction but still weeks before the Humvee explosion in the field. Pulowski is distracted and unable to finish the interrogation. He is distressed by “the awareness of his own secret. The fact that he’d abandoned Beale and then lied about it was probably more important than anything the Iraqi had to say. On the other hand, he’d decided that telling the truth about it wouldn’t help anybody, least of all Beale” (Terrell 55). He can’t stop thinking about—and justifying to himself—the choice he made the day before. Instead of covering Beale as he entered the abandoned building, Pulowski fled back to the Humvee and reported, “We got separated from Beale. I have no idea where he might be” (56). His refusal to cover Beale (which was direct noncompliance with orders) and his later concealment of that insubordination led to the dangerous extended search and Beale’s eventual death at the hands of the Iraqis, who themselves were seeking revenge for the detainment of some of their men by Masterson. But Pulowski’s reticence about his role in the incident is not due to shame or embarrassment at his failure to sacrifice himself for the others. On the contrary, before deployment he “proudly rebelled against” the soldier-stereotyping publicized by “football commentators, singers, or celebrities of any kind who spoke highly of the great valor and bravery of American soldiers while at the same time selling something. Mostly he did not like the underlying implication that they were all supposed to be brave, that it was somehow the soldiers’ duty to be brave” (164). Terrell thus

develops Pulowski's character in order to have a soldier figure protest society's heroizing of military members—to suggest that such laud and reverence are not necessarily welcomed by those toward whom it is directed—and also to provide a foil to Masterson, to illustrate that not all anti-heroes are malicious and act out of aggression or hatred. Some are just scared.

The contrast between these two characters—one an anti-hero by his actions, the other by his inaction, but both through deception—suggests a spectrum of soldier characteristics that deconstructs prevailing cultural representations of these men and women as essentially virtuous, humanitarian, brave – in Deer's words – “self-sacrificing [and] likeable” (2016, 60). Rather than place complete blame upon any individual soldier, however, Terrell suggests that no one is immune to the havoc that war-waging wreaks on one's character. This is evident in Fowler's character transformation: who she is before deployment (the latter chapters of the novel), is far different from who she is when we first meet her, as a seasoned lieutenant in charge of several men, who leads a search-and-rescue mission that culminates in her killing an unarmed, deaf, innocent Iraqi civilian. Initially, she had bought into the hearts-and-minds rhetoric wholeheartedly, and led her team in such a way that she acquired the nickname “Family Values Fowler.” But as the events progress, leading up to the opening chapter's field scene (the present), she gradually loses her idealism and eager ambition to do what's right, instead learning from her superiors how to “play the game,” which also alters her mindset on why they're there and what ethical leadership entails. This trope of transformation from naiveté to callousness is not new; it mirrors the Fussellian pattern of innocence to experience that numerous scholars have identified in World War I, World War II, and Vietnam War

literature. However, Terrell's narrative reversal situates the consequences, the end result of the character transformation, at the beginning of the novel, which defamiliarizes the expected narrative arc and makes us think more critically about both individual choice and collective action.

In addition to portraying American soldiers in a different way than they are cast in traditional representations of war, second-wave Iraq War novels diversify characterization by considering the effects of the American invasion upon residents of the occupied country, a concern not raised in the first-wave novels. Terrell does something in *The Good Lieutenant* that Abrams only briefly attempts in *Brave Deeds* (but which Scranton achieves in longer, more detailed form in *War Porn*, discussed later in this chapter), and which I argue is a distinguishing feature of second-wave Iraq War fiction: exploring the perspectives of Iraqis. Questions do arise regarding the ethics of representation when a white American author narrates from or about the point of view of non-white characters, particularly considering the history of colonizer/colonized posturing of various Western interventions in the Eastern hemisphere. I will discuss these issues at length in my third chapter alongside readings of Iraqi-authored fiction about the war. Here, though, I point out that Terrell reverses the scapegoating tendency that constructs a false dichotomy of American-soldier-as-victim versus Iraqi-as-perpetrator. He does so with two chapters from a heterodiegetic narrator focalizing Ayad's past and present, which evoke empathy and understanding through the pathos of family, disability, and humility.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Evocation of empathy for (or even basic human relatability to) the wartime Other is rare in American war literature. One notable exception is the work of Robert Olen Butler, who is best known for his Pulitzer-Prize winning short story collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992). Most of his short fiction and several of his novels are set during and after the

At the end of the first chapter, Lieutenant Fowler kills Ayad immediately after the Humvee explosion caused by bombs planted in the field – bombs he'd been trying to warn them away from. In the second chapter, we discover why Ayad was in this field at all, and how he is connected to Masterson's interpreter Faisal. The two had been childhood friends – one Sunni, one Shi-ite—but grew apart as adults. Faisal is affiliated with the Iraqis who kidnapped and killed Beale, and, remembering the remote bit of farmland owned by Ayad's family, he guides his cohorts to bury the body in an empty well on Ayad's property. Ayad, though he lives in the house on the property, is not complicit in this venture. The chapter reveals that Ayad is deaf, and details his past life enough to inform us that his father had died years before, followed by his brother's death while serving in the Iraqi Army, his mother's pension threatened by regime changes, and his own uncertainty about the future, including about what kind of livelihood he could have since, being deaf, he was not allowed to attend school. Passages describing memories of his childhood enable American readers to relate to this character, so that when we reach the end of his story, the replay of the first chapter's field scene has a deeper impact.

The initial narration of the event (from the American perspective in Chapter 1) hints that it is a mistake. When the wounded Pulowski sees Fowler aiming at “the Iraqi,” he tells her “No, wait!” but it is too late. When Fowler helps Pulowski climb out of the Humvee a few minutes later, “she was avoiding the sight of the Iraqi's body ... she kept her eyes averted so she wouldn't see the dead Iraqi's face” (Terrell 20). Despite this suggestion of remorse (or perhaps just disgust), Ayad is as yet nameless; he is merely

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Vietnam War and feature compassionate, well-developed characterizations of Vietnamese civilians, refugees, and immigrants.

“the dead Iraqi.” Learning more about him in the following chapter forces a reckoning—not just of Fowler’s act of violence, but of our own nonchalant first reading of it.

The Ayad-perspectivalized narrator in Chapter 2 shows the same scene as Chapter 1, but in a way that conveys the Iraqi’s intentions, as well as his sense of self-sacrifice and humility: “Then, glancing up, he saw trucks coming out the back gate. And then he was on his feet, scrambling, pushing out into the open, giving his broadest, most moronically chipper grin, the one used by American actors whose role was to be humiliated . . . *Yes, hello, soldiers? I am not against you! Yes! Please stop! Please wait! There’s danger this way!*” (Terrell 31). He runs into the mine-filled field to warn the Americans away, rather than hide from the preying Humvees invading his property, and he does so with a deliberate expression of helpful amicability. Fowler, Pulowski, and the other soldiers, however, interpret his attempt to halt them as suicide-bomber sabotage or sniper-signaling. Preconceived notions about Iraqis, failure of communication and understanding, and resultant deaths on both sides are characteristics of the larger clash of civilizations that propagates and prolongs warfare.

Terrell’s inclusion of Ayad’s point of view does not preclude a sincere representation of some Americans’ negative attitudes toward Iraqis. Though he evokes the *reader’s* empathy toward the wartime Other through the portrayal of one deaf and well-intentioned civilian, he does not attempt to persuade us that the soldier characters share that empathy. There is no Sergeant Morgan in *The Good Lieutenant*, no hero of the people handing out candy to Iraqi street children. In the end, what seems even more astonishing than the American soldiers’ outright discriminatory Othering is the apathy shown by Fowler after speaking with Ayad’s mother – her utter disregard for the life she

has taken. Through the middle chapters of the novel, which narrate the making of the titled “good” lieutenant, we are led to question again and again, just how good is she, really? The epilogue, set later on the same day as the Humvee explosion in the field, leaves us with an answer. She returns to her platoon and lies to them, stating that the man she shot was the enemy who murdered Beale and buried him in the field. In the novel’s closing lines, she looks around at them all, her once-maternal affection transformed into defensive suspicion: “Now what she wants is control. She will give them a story and they will accept it and she will drive away the laggards who attempt to tell it a different way . . . Who here will be the dissenter? Who will be her Judas? Who will dare report her murders? . . . Then she stands and leads them all into the wheat” (275). This ominous last line, read alongside her apparent lack of remorse and her self-image as their messianic leader, highlights the fallibility of American military leadership and positions the soldier not as victimized veteran but as purposeful perpetrator. That the novel ends there, rather than with Fowler’s end of deployment and return to the U.S. as a veteran (as in the plots of so many prior war novels), avoids the combat gnosticism that Buchanan argues is inherent in first-wave Iraq War fiction.

#### ROY SCRANTON’S *WAR PORN* (2016)

Roy Scranton’s novel *War Porn* is the only of these three major second-wave Iraq War novels wherein a soldier character returns home within the narrative. Scranton uses a veteran character’s homecoming in his fiction to remedy what he condemns in his criticism: the culturally pervasive myth of the trauma hero. Critics have not been as kind to this novel as they have been to the others discussed here. Nathan Webster of *The Rumpus* calls *War Porn* “vile and reprehensible,” accusing it of being “unforgiving at all

turns.” *The New York Times*’ Michiko Kakutani reports that some parts of the novel “feel willfully constructed to italicize the bankruptcy of the war.” Sarah Hoenicke of *LA Review of Books*, however, has more accurately interpreted the novel within the context of Scranton’s nonfiction essays when she writes that it “is meant to disturb the entrenched thought patterns of his readers, [in the way that] he defies the American cultural tenet that our military is lawful, moral and organized.” In a bit of meta-criticism from *The Intercept*’s review aptly titled “A Veteran Novel That Finds No Redemption in War,” Elliott Colla (professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Georgetown) rightly observes that “*War Porn* diverges sharply from other recent works of fiction about Iraq in such fundamental ways that it is difficult to imagine mainstream critics giving it the same hearty ‘thank-you-for-your-service’ receptions that they normally extend to any title produced by a veteran.” These appraisals are not surprising, considering that Scranton’s “Trauma Hero” essay all but demands a new approach to Iraq War fiction to counter the inherent missteps of the first wave and beyond. His novel does just that – five times over.

Perhaps as striking as its harsh assessment of the military and some of its veterans is *War Porn*’s five-in-one structure. Scranton interweaves a quintuplex of distinct narratives: fragmented, pastiched mini-sections titled *babylon* that appear before and after each of the other sections; two chapters titled *strange hells* set in Utah in 2004, which operate as a narrative frame about a disturbed (and disturbing) veteran’s post-deployment encounter with pacifist civilians; between those, two lengthier chapters set in Iraq, both curiously titled *your leader will control your fire*; and centered at the core of this 340-page book, a 91-page section (the novel’s longest), titled *the fall*, which narrates the Americans’ 2003 bombing of Baghdad from the perspective of an Iraqi graduate student,

Qasim. A close reading of these five narratives confirms characteristics of the second wave of Iraq War fiction identified previously in this chapter, and adds thought-provoking perspectives not yet encountered.

Before delving into the novel itself, a brief analysis of Scranton's choice of Wallace Stevens' verses as an epigraph helps to illuminate his underlying theme.

*Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night.*

These are the first two lines from the seven-tercet coda to Stevens' long didactic poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), which is like a modern version of "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"<sup>26</sup> in that it functions as a theory of poetics, a manifesto detailing the poet's duties. Scholars interpret its untitled coda as a reference to World War Two; consequently, it is often cited and compiled alongside Stevens' "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" (1942) and his war elegies. The coda discusses two wars: that of the poet in his pursuit for "supreme fiction," which is described as "a war that never ends," and that of the soldier, whose war does end. These wars are interdependent; Stevens writes, "The two are one. / They are a plural, a right and left, a pair . . . The soldier is poor without the poet's lines." The two lines quoted in Scranton's epigraph sum up this relationship, with "mind" and "thought" representing the poet's war (or "imagination," as critics like Jahan Ramazani interpret); with "sky" and "day and night" representing the soldier's war (World War II, for Stevens, or more broadly, "reality"). Why would Scranton choose these particular lines for his epigraph, his novel's threshold, out of the numerous options throughout war literature?

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<sup>26</sup> William Wordsworth, 1801.



Perhaps Scranton's philosophy of war aligns with Stevens' own. Much scholarship on Stevens centers around his political involvement, particularly regarding whether his poetry "represents" history or "retreats" from it (Ramazani 24). The question often raised, especially in reference to his poems about the two World Wars, is whether poets have an ethical obligation to respond to the politics of their time, and whether Stevens does so in his work. M. Keith Booker, for example, insists that Stevens "significantly problematizes the notion of a poetic voice being directly attached to the intentions of the poet" (75), while Steven Miskinis emphasizes that Stevens "locat[es] the poet specifically in contradistinction to the politician," referring to Stevens' declaration in a 1946 letter to playwright/poet Rolf Fjelde: "The role of the poet may be fixed by contrasting it to that of the politician. The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general." Despite this distinction, Stevens-as-poet does not turn his back on politics completely, for his war poems clearly stage an interplay between the poetic and the political – and here, I presume, is Scranton's interest in Stevens: where art meets protest.

According to Booker's Bakhtinian reading of "Notes," Stevens demands that the poet "should remain as much as possible an independent and oppositional voice, not allowing himself to be co-opted (or 'obligated') by any one viewpoint or language, and especially not by the prevailing authoritarian views of the society around him" (74). Booker closes his insightful explication by announcing that, "in the hands of Stevens, and when employed in opposition to monologic, authoritarian forces of any kind, poetry can indeed be a destructive force" (83). If we extend the term "poetry" to literature in general, we can see how Scranton, like Stevens' ideal poet, is an "oppositional voice" to the

dominant cultural narrative of war and its wagers – in both *War Porn* and in his nonfiction works like “The Trauma Hero.” Stevens’ correspondence with Fjelde quoted above helps connect the figure of the politician with the figure of the “hero,” which aligns with Scranton’s debunking of the trauma-hero myth and his subversive dramatization of it in *War Porn*. Like the politician, described above as “general” (in the abstract collective, as opposed to the poet who is described as “individual”), “the hero comes to emblemize a common, national will” (Miskinis 220), as indicated by Stevens’ assertion that “the hero is his nation.”<sup>27</sup> This can be interpreted as A) the soldier/“war-hero” is the instrument of the nation and lacks agency or subjectivity of his own, and/or B) the hero is a construct of the public imagination—which is affirmed by the last line of Stevens’ coda to “Notes”: “How simply the fictive hero becomes the real.” Interpretation A holds culpable the war administrators on Capitol Hill and the ensuing militarization of American culture; Interpretation B holds the public and the media accountable for the creation of their gods—in Ramazani’s paraphrase, “the soldier merely literalizes the fictive hero” (33). That is, we create the idea of what we want the hero to be. Society shapes the veteran stereotype to fit the justification or scapegoating that it needs.

This problem to cultural memory construction (which is flecked with what historian Jerry Lembcke calls “false memory syndrome”) is indeed the same tendency Scranton denounces of first-wave Iraq War fiction near the end of “The Trauma Hero”:

If the point of literature is to help us ‘recognize [our] own suffering in the stories of others, rather than soothing our troubled consciences with precisely the stories we want to hear, then novels such as *The Yellow Birds* and stories such as

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<sup>27</sup> from Canto XIII of Stevens’ “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” (1942)

“Redeployment” are gross moral and literary failures. But the failure does not belong to the writers. It belongs to all the readers and citizens who expect veterans to play out for them the ritual *fort-da* of trauma and recovery, and to carry for them the collective guilt of war.

The role the poet/writer should instead serve, both Stevens and Scranton suggest, is as the tendentious “individual” voice that rises above the proverbial crowd, that subverts the hegemonic metanarrative of American warfare, and that questions the rhetoric of American exceptionalism undergirding the cult of the trauma hero. Miskinis identifies this critique as “the logic of all of Stevens’ war poetry;” it insists that “there is nothing more common and mediocre than blind acceptance of a rhetoric that finds its greatest intensification during wartime” (220). Scranton takes Stevens’ cue of writerly duty and eschews such rhetoric, punching a hole in the sheetrock of contemporary American mythology. What he offers in its place is anything but “common and mediocre.”

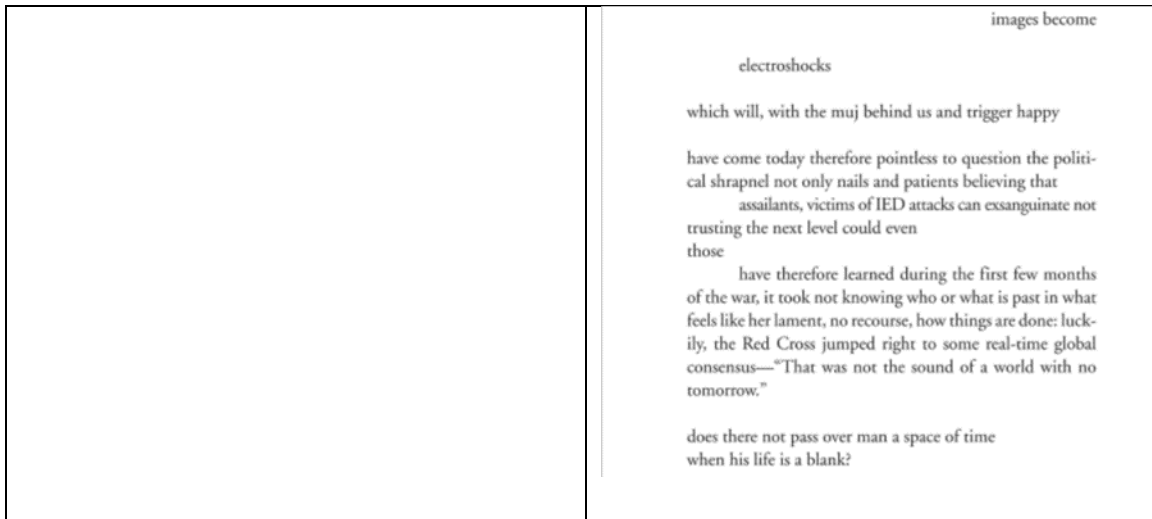
Exposing and mocking the rhetoric of war, brief sections titled *babylon* appear at the beginning and end of *War Porn* and between each of its other sections. The *babylons* function as punctuators, fragmented free-verse mash-ups including bits of *The Iliad*, the biblical Book of Isaiah, the *Qu’ran*, names of American military operations in Iraq, news reports, and speeches. Trying to make sense of these segments is difficult. Every would-be sentence is castrated before its meaning arrives and is stitched to another in a textual Frankenstein-doctoring, made even more elusive by constantly changing perspectives – the “I” at one point seemingly American, at another point Iraqi – and genre styles: at times poetic verses, at others vapid reportage. Despite their peculiarity, these experimental passages are not entirely unique to war literature. One of the most

frequently quoted lines of Civil War literature, for example, is Whitman's declaration in *Specimen Days* (1882) that "the real war will never get in the books," which is immediately followed by his lesser-known assertion that the "lurid interiors" of "the untold and unwritten history of the war [are] infinitely greater than the few scraps and distortions that are ever told or written." Scranton's *babylon* intervals are literal "scraps" or "distortions" of various cultural commentaries on war, a perhaps-unintended nod to his controversial literary forebear Whitman, who in his own time warned about the concealing and consoling powers of nationalistic rhetoric.

The *babylon* sections are also reminiscent of the *Newsreel / Camera Eye* sections punctuating John Dos Passos' *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930-1936), which surveys American culture and politics leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of World War I. Both Dos Passos' and Scranton's experimental interval passages feature incongruent page spacing and multiple unrelated fragments, though Dos Passos' are easier to read as narrative. His adjoined *Newsreel* and *Camera Eye* sections separate the more conventionally narrated chapters in each novel of the trilogy just as the *babylons* divide each of *War Porn*'s longer narrative sections. Scranton's passages may intentionally pay homage to the twentieth century novelist. In "The Trauma Hero," Scranton makes the accusation that George Packer (whose April 2014 *New Yorker* article he singles out as an example of slipshod war-lit criticism), "reads the [war-lit] genre as a set of variations on the trauma hero myth, focusing on the Owen-Hemingway-O'Brien lineage while ignoring works that don't fit that frame, such as John Dos Passos' epic *U.S.A. Trilogy*" and others ("Trauma Hero"). In Figure 1 below, a side-by-side analysis of one of Scranton's six *babylon*

intervals next to Dos Passos' *Newsreel XXI / Camera Eye (29)* reveals the contemporary writer's intertextualizing of his modernist predecessor's collage technique.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Newsreel XXI</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Goodby Broadway<br/>Hello France<br/>We're ten million strong</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">8 YEAR OLD BOY SHOT BY LAD WITH RIFLE</p> <p>the police have already notified us that any entertainment in Paris must be brief and quietly conducted and not in public view and that we have already had more dances than we ought<br/>capitalization grown 104% while business expands 520%</p> <p style="text-align: center;">HAWAIIAN SUGAR CONTROL LOST BY GERMANS</p> <p>efforts of the Bolshevik Government to discuss the withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces from Russia through negotiation for an armistice are attracting no serious attention</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BRITISH AIRMAN FIGHTS SIXTY FOES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SERBIANS ADVANCE 10 MILES; TAKE 10 TOWNS;<br/>MENACE PRILEP</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Good morning<br/>Mr. Zip Zip Zip<br/>You're surely looking fine<br/>Good morning<br/>Mr. Zip Zip Zip<br/>With your hair cut just as short as<br/>With your hair cut just as short as<br/>With your hair cut just as short as mine</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LENINE REPORTED ALIVE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">AUDIENCE AT HIPPODROME TESTIMONIALS MOVED TO<br/>CHEERS AND TEARS</p>  | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>babylon</b></p> <p>rage forth, bold hero &amp; man of war, you have no</p> <p>flood documenting her lament, no legal recourse in re:<br/>administrative decisions on the matter of</p> <p style="text-align: right;">torture TV rage the</p> <p>rockets red not singly but in global consensus: vanquished<br/>by my spear, the highest levels of the Department<br/>beginning a world with no tomorrow</p> <p>such is the word of man. We lurch to a halt. "Humvees!"<br/>Abu says—electroshocks about a half mile off, down the<br/>end of a wide, empty</p> <p>bombs bursting    dawn country    victorious unless</p> <p>Draw your wound. Defend the gun.</p> <p>The will to prevail. God's blessings upon you—the impor-<br/>tance Arabs place on honor cherished and protected above<br/>all else, sometimes circumventing even the need for survival.<br/>Even the need. Even constructive criticism can threaten or</p>  |
| <p>several different stories have come to me well authenticated concern-<br/>ing the depth of Hindenburg's brutality; the details are too horri-<br/>ble for print. They relate to outraged womanhood and girlhood,<br/>suicide and blood of the innocent that wet the feet of Hindenburg</p> <p style="text-align: center;">WAR DECREASES MARRIAGES AND BIRTHS</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Oh ashes to ashes<br/>And dust to dust<br/>If the shrapnel dont get you<br/>Then the eightyeights must</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Camera Eye (29)</i></p> <p>the raindrops fall one by one out of the horsechestnut tree over<br/>the arbor onto the table in the abandoned beergarden and the puddly<br/>gravel and my clipped skull where my fingers move gently forward<br/>and back over the fuzzy knobs and hollows<br/>spring and we've just been swimming in the Marne way off<br/>somewhere beyond the fat clouds on the horizon they are hammering<br/>on a tin roof    in the rain in the spring after a swim in the Marne<br/>with that hammering to the north pounding the thought of death<br/>into our ears<br/>the winey thought of death stings in the spring blood that<br/>throbs in the sunburned neck    up and down the belly under the<br/>tight belt    hurries like cognac into the tips of my toes and the lobes<br/>of my ears and my fingers stroking the fuzzy closecropped skull<br/>shyly tingling fingers feel out the limits of the hard immortal<br/>skull under the flesh    a deathshad and skeleton sits wearing<br/>glasses in the arbor under the lucid occasional raindrops inside the<br/>new khaki uniform inside my twentyoneyearold body that's been<br/>swimming in the Marne in red and whitestriped trunks in Chalons in<br/>the spring</p> | <p>damage an Arab's honor; it will be taken as a personal insult.<br/>The Arab must, above all, protect himself and his honor<br/>from critical onslaught. Therefore, when an American is con-<br/>fronted with criticism, you require a yes or no, such as</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>FIGHT EVIL</i></p> <p>peace merciful, most compassionate, the government<br/>agreed: made of values to kill God in remote deserts</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FULL STORY</p> <p>Allah does not desire soldiers committed to patrol the day of<br/>calling out, sniper police under no savior for you from Allah<br/>devised a way to get them masters in Washington for the least<br/>of those who arrested them in the first place: suicide bomb-<br/>ings killed hundreds, GWOT authors of the latest detainee<br/>to be released for fear that any and all the world sees America<br/>themselves<br/>the heart of the TV and</p> <p>sizable Kurdish, Assyrian, Palestine. The Kurds farm in the<br/>north and these groups' inability to reconcile their differ-<br/>ences prevent them from forming a unified front against<br/>the Arab population forced<br/>blood<br/>yet he believes in the possibility of goodness<br/>and the triumph of ideas, believes in the father of democ-<br/>racy and the leader of nations, like he believes in the natural<br/>pairing of compassion and discipline, love and</p> |



(Figure 1).

Both passages incorporate popular culture, such as lyrics from patriotic wartime songs.

The first set of italicized song lyrics in *Newsreel XXI* is from the World War I song “Good-bye Broadway, Hello France” by The American Quartet, which reached #1 in the top 100 best-selling hits in 1917. The second is “Good Morning Mr. Zip Zip Zip,” a popular ragtime-inspired marching cadence written by Army Song Leader Robert Lloyd in 1918. The third, “Oh ashes to ashes,” is another marching song, with its well-known opening couplet from the English Burial Service adapted from Genesis 3:19.

“Eightyeights” were 88mm German artillery weapons initially developed during World War I, later adapted as anti-aircraft guns and used more widely in World War II.

Similarly, bits of “The Star-Spangled Banner” dot the *babylon* above, but while the

*Newsreel*’s songs are contemporaneous to its novel, Scranton’s choice is not

contemporaneous to *his*—its verses were penned during the War of 1812, originally as

Francis Scott Key’s poem “Defense of Fort McHenry” (1814). This departure from

influence is striking, considering that Scranton could have chosen to intersperse snippets

of American songs about the post-9/11 wars – Green Day’s “American Idiot,” Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You,” or Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” for example. Other Iraq War novels mention deployed soldiers rocking out to the politically-charged protest band Rage Against the Machine. Instead, Scranton’s choice of a two-centuries-old song, especially one so central to the mythology of American exceptionalism and patriotic reverence of veterans, and which includes terms like “rockets red” and “bombs bursting,” highlights the violence perpetuated by U.S. firepower represented in the surrounding text as well: “torture,” “rage,” “vanquished by my spear,” and “electroshocks.” This emphasis on the physical violence of war aligns with Dos Passos’ third set of lyrics: “*If the shrapnel dont get you / Then the eightyights must,*” which is metaphorized by Scranton into the phrase “pointless to question the political shrapnel.” Both lines suggest that resistance to war is futile. Notably, Scranton’s presents Americans as perpetrators of violence, while Dos Passos’ presents American soldiers as its victims.

These lyrics in the *Newsreel* and the *babylon* are sites of cultural memory that link the past to the present. The zeitgeist of the past is recalled through popular songs, and we can also interpret the present through the template they provide. In his examination of the power of music during the American occupation of Okinawa in World War II, James Roberson explains how “songs performed, listened to, remembered, and (re) recorded – or eclipsed and forgotten – participate not just in the transmission of social memories of the past or the expression of dreams and demands for the future but through these, in the articulation of present identities and struggles” (684). Ironically, the songs in the novel

passages above were originally intended to bolster support in the American war effort, but are later used by Dos Passos and Scranton to undermine it satirically.

Also conspicuous in both passages are fully-capitalized newspaper headlines, though Scranton's brief two are subtler in their import than Dos Passos' lengthier seven. Read in the context of the rest of the novel, the *babylon's* "FIGHT EVIL" refers to the GWOT-infused rhetoric disseminated by the Bush administration in various speeches right after 9/11, also recalling the "Axis of Evil" buzzphrase first used in George W.'s State of the Union address on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002 and frequently repeated thereafter. These phrases helped to justify the war in the eyes of the public, marketing the administration's actions as necessary and the U.S. military's might as heroic. The second of Scranton's headlines in the *babylon* above is "FULL STORY," yet it is not followed by journalistic reportage as such a phrase typically precedes. Instead, the floating headline satirically reminds us that today's media portrayal of the conflict, though multi-perspectival due to contemporary diversity of news outlets, is *not* (as it may seem), the whole story. Like the pieces composing each *babylon*, media accounts provide only fragments, and as Patrick Deer has pointed out, "embedded reports" (the kinds we tend to trust most, and that which we expect to see under a "FULL STORY" headline), "were projected by the media as giving the U.S. public a panoramic vision of wars happening in real time" ("Beyond Recovery" 316). So, it is not only through the historical violence of the selected lyric snippets and the flashwords of war-justifying rhetoric, but also through vague-appearing yet meaning-loaded newspaper headlines that Scranton overturns assumptions of American exceptionalism and the ostensible truths it entreats us to believe.



One final point of comparison between these war novelists' experiments is Dos Passos's *Camera Eye* (29) (featured below his *Newsreel* exhibited above) alongside the closing couplet of Scranton's *babylon*. Both excerpts describe the infantryman prior to his first battle. In the former, a young soldier touching his newly shorn crew-cut envisions his own death as he awaits his company's call to battle. Similarly reflective, the final lines of the latter – "does there not pass over man a space of time / when his life is a blank?" – may seem voiced by Eliot's self-contemplative Prufrock, but they are actually borrowed from the 76<sup>th</sup> sura of the Qu'ran. Interpreted by Islamic scholars to mean "Is there not a period of time when each human is nothing yet worth mentioning?" (Khattab), in the context of what precedes it on Scranton's page it too becomes satirical, recalling the widespread cultural belief (supported by hundreds of veteran memoirs) that a boy goes to war in order to become a man, to make something of himself "worth mentioning" – whether it be martyr (the vision the "twentyoneyearold" has of himself in the *Camera Eye*) or larger-than-life hero (of "hard *immortal* skull"). Moreover, Scranton (as a Princeton PhD of twentieth-century American Literature and now professor at Notre Dame) is likely aware that John Updike used this quote as epigraph to his controversial 1978 comic-noir novel *The Coup*, which has as its protagonist the Islamic-extremist leader of a fictional dystopia in Africa who despises America and anything American. It seems fitting (and perhaps deliberately disturbing) that Scranton re-reappropriated the line for his own political-noir *War Porn*.

The elements discussed here repeat throughout all six *babylon* segments, forming a pattern that reveals their intent. All six *babylons* involve phrases demonstrative of American violence – bits of rhetoric ubiquitous among the U.S. government, news media,

and popular culture – carefully juxtaposed with disjointed yet humanizing passages from the Qu’ran and contemporary Islamic poetry.<sup>28</sup> Iraqi voices and American voices are combined in these *babylon* intervals with a dissonance often associated with their namesake, the ziggurat of Babylon (biblically mythologized as the Tower of Babel, from whence sprang the multitude of diverse languages) to create an epic free-verse poem that counters – or wages war against – the metanarrative of American exceptionalism.

Scranton explains in an interview that “the book’s three main sections are built like Russian nesting dolls, so the first and last sections are Utah, the second and fourth are Iraq during the war, and the third section, the middle section, is Qasim the Iraqi mathematician” (Plum). Until the novel’s end, these main sections do not appear to be related; in addition to their disparate settings, the story lines and characters do not overlap. The two Utah chapters, titled *strange hells (columbus day 2004)*,<sup>29</sup> narrate an encounter between a group of five civilian friends at a backyard BBQ, one of whom (Wendy) brings a date the rest of the group have not yet met: Aaron, a combat veteran recently returned home from Iraq. In the pages leading up to Wendy and Aaron’s arrival, the others (hosts Matt and Dahlia and lesbian couple Mel and Rachel) share casual conversation about current events and politics, which allows Scranton to establish them

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<sup>28</sup> Scranton cites reprint permissions for “The Dragon” by Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayyati and two “Panegyrics” by Abu at-Tayyib Ahmad al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi al-Kindi on his copyright page.

<sup>29</sup> Scranton borrows this section title from British World War I poet Ivor Gurney, contemporary of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Gurney’s poem “Strange Hells” (1917) explores the trauma of trench warfare, then called “shell shock.” Of its two parts, the first is a ten-line stanza illustrating the experience of combat (“There are strange Hells within the mind war made . . . the racket and fear guns made . . .”), and the second is a quatrain revealing psychosocial effects after the war (“Where are they now, on state-doles . . . Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatters . . .”).

as liberal hipster types. They briefly speculate about the impending guest: “ ‘He just got home from Iraq’ . . . ‘No way. Was he in the shit?’ . . . ‘She said he’s a little sensitive’ . . . Maybe he’s got pictures’ ” (*War Porn* 11). This reveals certain expectations and attitudes held by civilians about veterans, answered by the other side of the encounter when Aaron arrives: “he held himself apart, like he wasn’t sure how he’d be greeted” (17). Matt, the only other male at the cookout, greets him enthusiastically, “his voice going high and brittle, hoping a fat smile would numb his unease” (17). Later, after several beers and a communal joint, Mel starts asking Aaron questions about where’s he from and what he did in the Army. She knows a bit about MOS (military occupational specialties) because her father was in Vietnam. The conversation soon turns political, and while Matt offers the typical, polite “thank you for your service” (27), Mel pushes forward about the ethics of America staying in the war, at which point Aaron becomes angry. She asks him why he joined, and when he said it was “a job,” she becomes outraged and accuses him of “killing people for money,” comparing him to “the Nazis” (31). A physical fight erupts, ending quickly with Matt and Aaron retreating into the house while the girls stay outside.

This dialogue is deliberately cast in such a way that it neither villainizes veteran Aaron nor portrays civilian Mel as insensitive – both individuals are at fault in the quarrel, and both let their tempers escalate into aggression. Scranton stages the conversation to make a statement about the alleged military-civilian divide in American culture. Rather than rehearsing the cultural memory<sup>30</sup> of anti-war civilians spitting on returning Vietnam veterans or calling them “baby killers,” Scranton poses Mel as the only civilian at the BBQ who questions the war and the soldiers’ actions – the others

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<sup>30</sup> The *false* cultural memory, according to Lembecke: see pages 27-28 in this dissertation’s Introduction Chapter.

besech her to let the topic rest. But rather than reinforcing the “Support the Troops” myth of the post-9/11 conflicts that attempted to correct alleged mistreatment of previous veterans by creating an American public that revered vets as self-sacrificing heroes, Scranton depicts Aaron as unheroic. Instead of asserting his experiential authority on “what it was like,” Aaron answers, “I don’t know. I was just a dumb grunt” (28). When accused of having a “negative world view,” he sarcastically retorts, “Yeah, well. I’m all traumatized and shit. You know what it’s like. You saw the movie” (29). Instead of reinforcing the dominant cultural narrative of veteran trauma, Scranton mocks it as played-out. He demystifies the veteran yet also gives voice to the civilian who has been silenced – shamed – from protesting “what kind of work” (in the closing words of Scranton’s seminal essay) “the trauma hero is doing when he comes bearing witness in his bloody fatigues” (“Trauma Hero”).

The BBQ scene thus presents an alternative to the now-trite “Thank you for your service” response that characterizes soldier-civilian encounters in first-wave Iraq War fiction like Powers’ *Yellow Birds*, Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, and Phil Klay’s *Redeployment*. Patrick Deer asserts that this response is actually a barrier to productive conversation, that “the obsessive concern with ‘how to talk to a veteran’” is symptomatic of our society’s “fetishization of the ‘problem of the civilian military divide.’” Deer explains that cultural representations perpetuate this problem, especially trauma narratives, because they depict “the moment of return from the warzone as a liminal experience and defining event.” Although this perception of enlightenment-through-combat is frequently manifest in gestures intending respect, it nonetheless places added pressure and scrutiny upon veterans and creates a meta-discourse of anxiety and

isolation. Because of this, Deer maintains, “‘Thank you for your service’ all too often stands in for genuine communication and impedes the possibility of dialogue between civilian and military” (“Mapping” 63). Deer’s indictment of trauma narratives here is more sympathetic to the veteran than is Scranton’s in “The Trauma Hero.” There’s no talk of them as “killers” in “bloody fatigues” in Deer’s work. He shows that in addition to its unethical glorification of war, the myth is also harmful to veterans themselves. And as Aaron’s dialogue indicates, veterans don’t necessarily *want* to be the ones we look to for all the answers about the American occupation of Iraq, they don’t necessarily feel qualified to speak as the voice of authority, and they certainly aren’t the ones making the big decisions about waging war. But that doesn’t transform them into victims either, and that doesn’t mean they are self-sacrificing saints. Scranton seeks to disrupt the cultural tendency to generalize “the veteran” into a stock character – whether menace or martyr – and he succeeds brilliantly with the other half of this nesting doll, the second of the two *strange hells* chapters. But, for the sake of unfolding the events in *War Porn*’s own chronology, we will first discuss the *your leader* and *the fall* chapters, then return to the novel’s finale thereafter.

While *War Porn*’s *strange hells* chapters tell the story of a veteran returning into American society after his stint at war, its longer chapters titled *your leader will control your fire* narrate the experience of a different American soldier in Iraq in 2003, during the first phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Scranton has mentioned in interviews that these sections are adapted from his own deployment to Iraq around the same time, so we might read their protagonist Specialist Wilson as a semi-autobiographical stand-in for the author. The transformation of Wilson over his months of deployment parallels the

character development of Lieutenant Fowler in *The Good Lieutenant*. Both deploy as well-intentioned individuals who start out wanting to help the Iraqis but also harbor suspicions of them due to their military training, both are challenged by ethical questions during deployment that gradually erode their conscience, and both are ultimately hardened, apathetic about why they're there, and just wanting to go home. These are signature characteristics of protagonists in second-wave Iraq War fiction, though Scranton is clear to maintain the individuality of veterans rather than perpetuating stereotypes or constructing new ones.

One of the ways he focuses on Wilson as an individual rather than as a stock veteran-character is through the five italicized stream-of-consciousness passages interspersed throughout the two *your leader* chapters. Like Terrell's entire novel, these passages in Scranton's *War Porn* unfold in reverse chronology: the first one features Wilson on a plane to Iraq, while the last one is set months before, when he first hears about the 9/11 bombings. These passages, though in Faulknerian stream-of-consciousness, are narrated in the third person, as if Wilson is remembering himself as someone outside of himself, someone he used to be. The italicized passages are embedded at key points in the *your leader* chapters, indicating their function as flashbacks to pre-deployment. In Vietnam and first-wave Iraq War literature, flashbacks typically occur when a veteran is back in the U.S. after leaving the war, and the intruding memories are of combat tragedy or incidents of perpetrator pain – something that happened to them or something regretful that they did – which repetitively return to their psyche as key symptoms of PTSD. *War Porn*'s veteran, Aaron, has no such flashbacks. The only intruding memories of the past in this novel are those Wilson has during

deployment of his weeks and months leading up to enlisting and deploying. The narrative does not include Wilson as a veteran. Scranton's refusal to incorporate this common feature of previous war novels, the postwar flashback, may signal the end, finally, to the ubiquity of trauma narratives. As the death of Abrams' hero Sergeant Morgan in *Brave Deeds* signals the symbolic demise of the trauma hero, Scranton's conspicuous inclusion of *inter-war* flashbacks to *pre-war* events (rather than postwar flashbacks to traumatizing events during the war) removes the troubling blanket-label of PTSD from the military figure.

The first-person narration throughout the non-italicized portions of the *your leader* sections (which take place in Iraq) is presented as inner monologue reminiscent of Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming. In an interview, Scranton explains that he decided to write these sections in an "'authentic' war-writing style, vivid, laconic, metonymic, with occasional flights into lyricism, which is the dominant style of writing in American war literature going back through O'Brien and Herr to Hemingway, even Crane" (Plum), contrasting their style with that of the other sections to create polyvocality throughout the novel. This writing style reflects Scranton's philosophy of war representation, with which he opened a conference panel at AWP 2014: "The truth of war is always multiple." Indeed, *War Porn* renders the experience of war multi-perspectively, via differing vantage points of the characters in each of the three major section-types: Aaron versus the hipsters in the two *strange hells* chapters, Wilson and his fellow American soldiers in the *your leader* intervals, Qasim and other Iraqi civilians in *the fall* at novel's core.

Wilson is miserable in his role, second-guessing himself, trying to push through despite stop-losses that keep him deployed longer than expected. The psychological

realism reflected in his inner monologue illuminates maddening intervals of adrenalized anticipation amidst long waits of vigilant boredom. When on patrol, he is on edge, forced to confront “the chaos out there” and aware of “death looming from every overpass press[ing] down on [his] soul like a hot wind” (*War Porn* 80). He characterizes his deployment as Sisyphian, even Promethean in its seeming pointlessness: “I sank into the standard daily manic paranoid torpor: trapped in a broiling box with big targets on the side, damned to drive the same maze over and over till somebody killed me” (80).

Several months in this intense atmosphere transforms not only his actions, but also his mindset. Early in the first *your leader* section, Wilson describes the Iraqis they pass as “a raggedy bunch, mustached and bony, wearing the same dirty clothes every day,” and says that “we watched them with distrust and curiosity” (61). By the end of the second *your leader* section, he has acquired hatred for these Others: “They’re shooting at us every day and I’m supposed to give a flying fuck about human rights? Fuck that. Once they quit chopping people’s heads off and lighting dudes on fire, then maybe we’ll talk . . . There’s a glazed shock in everyone’s eyes, the simmer of hatred barely contained” (280). This Us-versus-Them aggression is a manifestation of the collision of cultures at the root of the U.S. conflicts in the Middle East. Scranton suggests that American intervention in foreign cultures exacerbates extant problems in the region and causes plenty of new ones. His description of a Baghdad cityscape juxtaposes the idyllic pastoral with the technological ultra-modern to underscore western culture’s intrusion into a foreign way of life:

Up out of the ancient garden of Sinbad’s Baghdad and the nightmare of Saddam’s Ba’athist dystopia grew the fiber-optic slums of tomorrowland, where shepherds



on cell phones herded flocks down expressways and insurgents uploaded video beheadings, everything rising and falling as one, Hammurabi's code and Xboxes, the wheel and the Web, Ur to Persepolis to Sykes-Picot to CNN, a ruin outside of time, a twenty-first century cyberpunk war-machine interzone. (*War Porn* 85)

The implication in this passage where ancient meets modern is that American influence has corrupted the Middle East. The same concept is rendered in less poetic, more political diction later in the second *your leader* chapter, in classic American war rhetoric:

“Colonel Braddock stood and told us how important it was to bring democracy to Iraq, and most important, how we were defending American freedom from the terrorists who hated our way of life” (242). The clash-of-cultures motif is also present in U.S. military publications from which Scranton borrows his subsection titles within the *your leader* chapters. Uncited fragments from longer quotes, some from the *U.S. Army Combat Skills Handbook* and the *U.S. Army Soldier's Creed*, suggest the dogmatic indoctrination of new recruits and help to contextualize actions taken by Wilson and other soldiers in those chapters. Several of the subtitles are reflective of Iraqi/American relations (as imagined and dictated by the U.S. government), such as one from the *Arab Cultural Awareness Factsheet*, published and distributed by the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, which reads: “an arab worldview is based upon six concepts: atomism, faith, wish versus reality, justice and equality, paranoia, and the importance of family over self” (58). Another, from the *Soldier's Handbook to Iraq* (published by the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, First Infantry Division) warns new recruits that “arabs, much more so than westerners, express emotion in a forceful, animated and exaggerated fashion” (250). These publications – required reading for American soldiers and officers

– seem to concretize extant assumptions of the Iraqi Other as fundamentally different from allegedly superior Americans. Similar preparation for a westerner’s encounter with an eastern Other are found in writings of the British Empire in their dealings with India, an analogy that casts an association of colonization over the American occupation of Iraq (which will be plumbed at more depth in my next chapter). Scranton’s use of these subtitles – particularly because they are found only in his *your leader* sections about an American soldier in Iraq – is a subtle, wry condemnation of the preconceived prejudices with which our military sends not only its war wagers, but its representatives who are tasked with helping to improve the lives of Iraqi civilians.

Centered within the two *your leader* chapters is the longest of all of the novel’s sections. Titled *the fall (baghdad, 2003)*, it relates the experience of Qasim, an Iraqi doctoral student in mathematics who must choose between staying in the city to finish his dissertation and continue teaching or heeding the Americans’ evacuation deadline and joining his wife and mother in the suburbs. He opts to remain in the city, living in his uncle’s household, which enables the reader to envision a pivotal period of the war. *the fall* is set during the days leading up to, during, and immediately after the Battle of Baghdad in early April 2003, when coalition forces led by the U.S. Army’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division entered the city and fought the Iraqi Republican Guard, ending in a U.S. victory on April 14th. Some civilians evacuated Baghdad after reading warnings from the Americans via air-dropped leaflets and radio-broadcast warnings, but many others chose to stay or could not afford to get out of the city. Scranton’s narration of the ten days of bombing from the viewpoint of the city’s residents reveals a perspective not present in

first-wave Iraq War fiction. In fact, the perspectives of the recipients of U.S. bombing and other military aggression are rarely found in American war literature in general.

The polyvocality represented by the different nested sections throughout *War Porn* is achieved in microcosmic form within *the fall*. Scranton is careful to voice various Iraqi mindsets about the war, rather than solely that of the section's protagonist. Qasim's attitude about the impending attacks is one of fear and desperation: "What would happen to this city, his country? Every farewell stuck in his throat, each goodbye seeming, in some way, the last because in a week nothing would ever be the same again, even if, God willing . . . everybody important to him survived. It was as if the calendar went up to the deadline and stopped: everything after, blank" (*War Porn* 158). He is most concerned with the uncertainty of the future and his family and friends. But one of his colleagues at the university, Salman, whose family had been killed in the 1991 Shi'a uprising, maintains apathy: "[He] realized he couldn't care less who won. Someone would always be on top, and the guy on top has to step on everyone else in order to stay there, so what's the point in getting worked up over who it is? There has to be a sheikh. Sheik Hussein or Sheikh Bush, it didn't matter. Power flowed the same no matter who wielded it. And if you weren't on the side of power, you got out of the way" (*War Porn* 163). Men of an older generation, like Qasim's uncle Mohammed and his elderly friend Othman, express bitterness about the Americans and "that snake George Bush, who I spit on, [who] invaded our lands and butchered our brothers" (*War Porn* 179). Less politicized views come from Qasim's teenaged cousin, Maha, who "sat in her room listening to Britney Spears and Brandy, wishing she were anywhere else. This war was going to ruin her life, she knew it, it was going to ruin her chances for marriage... her skin was breaking out,

her hair frizzing, ends splitting” (214). Her self-involved reaction to the surrounding chaos doesn’t seem much different from the expected response of a stereotypical teenage American girl. Qasim’s aunt Thurayya, the household’s matriarch is a scion of composure. Her characterization hints at women’s importance in the Middle Eastern family, despite their lesser position in society: “She was their center, their mother. She made sure the men went to get bread, the generator was full of benzene, and the house clean and orderly and quiet. She was confident and assured, as if all her life she’d worked toward this moment, to take the family in hand and guide them through these hours of danger while the world outside was consumed in flames. She had what she needed, she had what she loved, and she would sustain them” (*War Porn* 219). These multiple perspectives provide a deeper insight into the Iraqi point of view than Abrams achieves with the pregnant woman who births her baby at the end of *Brave Deeds*, or than Terrell achieves with his two chapters from Ayad’s perspective. With this core section of *War Porn*, Scranton sets a precedent for future Iraq War novels to imagine war dialogically, rather than from the first-wave’s monologic vantage. In a conversation with Sarah Hoenicke in *The Montreal Review*, he speaks of the war writer’s obligation to do so, in contrast with the tendency of first-wave Iraq War novelists to focus on their American protagonists’ combat trauma and moral injury. He insists that “the story of the Iraq war shouldn’t be about the Americans’ struggle with their moral conscience. It should be about America invading a foreign country and killing a bunch of people. Our struggle with our moral conscience is a big part of that story, but this is why it was so important to write from an Iraqi perspective as well.” This quest for authenticity is apparent in *the fall* and further reinforced with *War Porn*’s paratext. Its dedication page devotes the novel “to

*the interpreters*,” and its closing Acknowledgments explain that Scranton returned to Baghdad as a civilian in 2014 (ten years after he left there as a soldier), crediting the visit as “an important experience” that “helped [him] rework the middle chapter of the book with a more informed eye.” He goes on to thank the Iraqis he worked with, a list of names that includes “the English students at Mustansiriyah University” (342). This assures the reader that Scranton took his responsibility seriously, and that’s what makes *War Porn* not just one of the most insightful works of Iraq War fiction, but innovative in terms of American war literature overall.

Stylistically and situationally, the portion of *the fall* that concentrates on the bombing itself is intense. Spanning seven pages, it opens with an apocalyptic panorama in second-person pronouns that thrusts the reader in the vortex of the tragedy: “Day and night, bombs crashed into Baghdad. You watched it on TV, you heard it on the radio, you saw it from the roof and when you ventured out into the street . . . As the bombing grew worse, the terror of it stained every living moment” (214). Scranton then incorporates paragraph-level anaphora and vivid imagery to build a focused impression of the experience as endured by Qasim and his extended family. Threaded throughout the various characters’ inner thoughts and their anxious waiting for what will come – an end to the bombing, perhaps, or death – is the repeated phrase “More bombs fell on the city” (215-222). The frequency of this phrase at the start of successive paragraphs (along with its cognates: “And more bombs fell on the city,” “And more bombs fell”) emphasizes the seemingly endless quality of the onslaught: the constant barrage for ten straight days and the psychological anguish for those who withstood it. Anaphora is further used, in mounting intensity, to underscore their helplessness during the siege:

They watched TV reporters in Kuwait, Qatar, and Israel put on gas masks. They watched American tanks push across their desert. They watched Iraqi soldiers surrender. They watched Iraqi soldiers die. They watched their brothers and husbands and sons forced to their knees and thrown like trash into the backs of trucks, blindfolded and hog-tied. On Al Jazeera, they saw children in rubble, ruptured bodies leaking like cracked pomegranates. ON CNN they saw generals pointing at big maps full of arrows . . .

And they saw their city burning. They watched their husbands, sons, and brothers shot, captured, shamed, dishonored. They watched Umm Qasr fall. They watched Basra fall. They watched an-Nasiriyah fall. They watched Karbala fall. They huddled around a map, listening to the rumors on the news, trying to see how far the Americans had come. (*War Porn* 217, 219, underlining added)

These lines demonstrate the power of language to relate, to transport, to identify. Scranton's articulation of the Iraqis' experience evokes empathy without paternalism and promotes pathos without pity. This is what's missing in first-wave Iraq War fiction, and in much American fiction of previous wars as well: imagining the event from the perspective of those on the opposite side. In this way, Scranton and other second-wave contemporary war novelists re-write the Other, offering a corrective of characterization and point of view that enables a more inclusive construction of cultural memory.

The second of the two *strange hells* chapters, forming the closure of the narrative frame, returns to the Utah barbecue with veteran Aaron and the civilians. When the two guys enter the house, Aaron tells Matt he has "some real war shit" (303) on a thumb drive he carries with him. He proceeds to show him what he calls his "Iraq Pix," taken where

he was stationed at Camp Crawford, a POW detainment camp for intel targets and insurgents, located in the desert north of Baghdad. At first the photographs show buildings, barbed wire, other American soldiers, and their Iraqi interpreters. As Aaron clicks forward, they become increasingly graphic, showing forced, partial- and then fully-nude poses of female Iraqi prisoners, bloody male Iraqi prisoners being tortured in front of the camera, and even a mutilated corpse. There are hundreds of grotesque images on this thumb drive, some even showing acts of brutality with American soldiers' faces included in the frame as proud perpetrators. This is the pornography of which the novel's title warns us, defined on the print copy's back cover thusly:

"War porn," *n.* Videos, images, and narratives featuring graphic violence, often brought back from combat zones, viewed voyeuristically or for emotional gratification. Such media are often presented and circulated without context, though they may be used as evidence of war crimes.

Aaron explains the torture techniques with commentary as gruesome as the visuals. He expects Matt to be impressed, but instead the civilian is disturbed – as are we, as readers. When Matt asks if he tortured people, Aaron shrugs: “Enhanced interrogation, technically . . . I just held the camera” (312). However, by the end of their viewing, some of the photos show Aaron himself assaulting someone he identifies as a “puck named Qasim” (the same Qasim from *the fall*), who since the bombing of Baghdad has been working as an interpreter for the Americans and has been detained on false intel. When Matt asks if he's going to report the prisoner torture to the media, Aaron responds in the negative, insisting that “a whole bunch of good soldiers who did their jobs, who were doing *what they were told* [would get] fucked by the system. It wasn't their commanders getting

punished, it wasn't Dirty Sanchez or Rummy or Dubya, it was the men and women *doing their jobs*" (314, italics in original). His claim of *respondeat superior* ("just obeying orders") echoes the court plea of Lieutenant William Calley, the sole defendant convicted for the My Lai massacre of March 1968. The court record shows that Calley was "very definite about his duty to obey orders," and that he was "only doing what he had been told" (Bourke 161). Both cases – the fictional Aaron and the historical Calley – illustrate a deontological conflict that invites ground-level perpetrators to place responsibility on their absent superiors and vice versa, in a cycle that allows the U.S. military to elude accountability and culpability. Scranton's fictional treatment of this incident also emphasizes that the so-called trauma hero (represented by Aaron in this text) is not a victim, as first-wave representations imply, but a victimizer.

As if his boastful display of the souvenir photos weren't sufficient to wreck his credibility as a purveyor of the narrative of war, Scranton also exhibits Aaron as an unreliable narrator through contrasts in the dialogue Aaron has with Matt versus with Dahlia. His language with another male is brusque, raw, and unashamed of his involvement; he admits, "It's a weird thrill, having that much physical control over somebody, knowing what you're doing" (322). But his conversation with a female when they are alone later that evening is devoid of his usual expletives. His tone is gentle as he tells Dahlia about a so-called rescue mission involving a "bus full of kids coming in that got caught in the blast [of a VBIED] . . . It's always the children that suffer the most . . . we did what we could . . . I spent the whole day in the aid station, helping the medics with triage" (324). In his one-on-one with Dahlia, Aaron speaks of his personal trauma and fabricates an act of heroism, but with Matt he denies any traumatization and instead



exhibits apathy and stoicism, even pride in his involvement in the interrogations at Camp Crawford. Scranton's juxtaposition of these contrasting conversations transforms the figure of the veteran from one of experiential authority (someone who "was there") to one of deceptive unreliability, as he uses his war stories to manipulate Dahlia. Scranton's intention here is to warn us to think more carefully about the war stories we (as civilians) consume. He demonstrates how truth and memory are exploited for ulterior purposes, for Aaron changes his tone and his story as it fits his agenda – masculine posturing as a tough perpetrator of pain, or sympathetic seduction as a traumatized victim of pawn warfare. Through Aaron's display of his war porn and the surrounding dialogue, Scranton soundly rejects the myth of the trauma hero and its associated combat gnosticism, revealing the presumed victim for the perpetrator he really is.

At the end of the novel, Aaron gets Dahlia alone in the house when the others walk down to the cliff to watch the sun rise, having stayed up all night with chat and vice. At first, she returns his flirtations, but when he becomes sexually aggressive, she tries to make him stop. He ignores her pleas, binds and gags her with her own undergarments and tights, and proceeds to sodomize her. When he's done, he leaves and the novel ends, with the exception of a short final *babylon* section designed much like the ones discussed previously. The rape scene is portrayed in vivid graphic detail, similar to the style used to describe Aaron's "Iraq Pix" earlier in the chapter and the bombing of Baghdad in *the fall*. Descriptions of the bombing and those prisoner-torture photographs include representations of death, while Dahlia survives her ordeal. Why, then, is it so much harder (more uncomfortable, more disturbing) to read about a rape involving one victim than it is to read about the bombing of an entire city including the deaths of hundreds in a

single mission? What is it about sexual violence that appalls us more than combat or political violence? And why, of the three major graphic scenes of violence in the novel, does Scranton choose to close with the rape?

Aaron's rape of Dahlia is symbolic of America's invasion of Iraq. Scranton metaphorizes war violence with sexual violence, both involving penetration – one figurative, the other literal. The impact of this juxtaposition forces the ugly realization that when we vote in and support an administration that plunges us into yet another war, and when we valorize veterans as national heroes, we are condoning violence on a larger, more devastating scale than the kind of violence we vociferously repudiate with #MeToo and other movements. Scranton connects our unwillingness to recognize war as killing with the public's widespread acceptance of the myth of combat gnosticism. In a 2016 *New York Times* article titled "'Star Wars' and the Fantasy of American Violence," he discredits the popular assumption that the "military-civilian gap" is due to the soldier's enlightenment through an experience that transcends abilities of expression, that the veteran has acquired some kind of "sacred knowledge" through his encounter with violence, which civilians can't possibly understand. Instead, Scranton stresses that "the real gap is between the fantasy of American heroism and the reality of what the American military does, between the myth of violence and the truth of war. The real gap is between our subconscious belief that righteous violence can redeem us, even ennoble us, and the chastening truth that violence debases and corrupts." Scranton's own *raison d'écriture* is to close that gap, to expose the trauma hero myth for what it is – a continuation of American exceptionalism by other means. To expose the violence beneath the politics, he juxtaposes sexual brutality with POW torture to jolt us from our complacency. To

emphasize that our veterans aren't the victims (or at least not the *only* victims), he chooses to have one continuous thread throughout all of the distinct parts of *War Porn*: Qasim. The Iraqi civilian with whom we become familiar in *the fall* also appears in the second *your leader* section as an interpreter for Specialist Wilson and his team, then reappears in the second *strange hells* as a prisoner in Aaron's torturous "Iraqi Pix." It is perhaps no coincidence that Scranton allotted the largest section (and the book's precise center core) to the experience of Qasim – *the fall* comprises nearly one-third of the novel.

Scranton therefore cannot be accused of divorcing his politics from his art (as writers like Stevens have been), for his novel sincerely attempts to expose the problems with American society's mindset about war, as he set forth in "The Trauma Hero" essay first published a year prior to *War Porn*'s publication. He wrote there that "the trauma hero myth serves a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy" ("Trauma Hero"). With Aaron and his "Iraqi Pix," Scranton's novel reverses that substitution. In his essay, he argued that much previous war literature (including the first wave of Iraq War fiction) enables "a politics of forgetting that actively elides the question of what U.S. soldiers were fighting for and the bigger problem of who they were killing, in favor of the more narrow and manageable question of 'what it was like.'" In *War Porn*, with Qasim and his depiction of the bombing of Baghdad from an Iraqi point of view, he shows the act of killing that is inseparable from the act of war, according to Clausewitz and Scarry, and he subverts conventional combat realism to instead show "what it was like" for someone on the other side. Finally, in "The Trauma Hero" Scranton declared that "the most troubling consequence of our faith in the revelatory truth of combat experience and our

sanctification of the trauma hero [is] that by focusing so insistently on the psychological trauma American soldiers have had to endure, we allow ourselves to forget the death and destruction those very soldiers are responsible for” (“Trauma Hero”). By writing a war novel that is *not* a trauma narrative, he proves that a veteran *can* write about war without focalizing PTSD or moral injury. The emerging second wave of contemporary war literature is still anti-war; that much hasn’t changed. But instead of rehashing stale protests of what “war” does to our young men and women who go off to fight it, Scranton, Abrams, and Terrell protest what America and those soldiers who are its national agents do when they exert military force upon yet another foreign Other.

CHAPTER THREE  
THE CONTEMPORARY IRAQI WAR NOVEL:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WARTIME OTHER

A just memory says that recalling our own is not enough to work through the past . . . A just memory constantly tries to recall what might be forgotten, accidentally or deliberately, through self-serving interests, the debilitating effects of trauma, or the distraction offered by excessively remembering something else, such as the heroism of the nation's soldiers.

– Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*

In May 2018, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) returned thousands of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts to the Iraqi government. These clay cuneiform tablets and stone seals, dating back to the second and third millennium BC, had been purchased for \$1.6 million by the Oklahoma City-based Hobby Lobby corporation, despite that its President Steve Green had been informed by authorities on cultural property law that the antiquities were suspected to have been looted from archaeological sites. Augmenting the underhanded nature of the transaction was the method of transport. The objects were sent in small batches to several different addresses throughout the state of Oklahoma, with shipping labels indicating that the containers held products for Hobby Lobby craft stores, such as “tile samples.” Rumors circulated that the artifacts were intended for display in the Museum of the Bible, opened last year in Washington DC, for which Hobby Lobby (owned by evangelical Christians) is the primary financial backer. The museum administrators, however, claimed they knew nothing about the items and had no plans for any such exhibition – which then led to

speculations of Hobby Lobby's involvement in the antiquities black market. ICE director Thomas D. Homan refers to this theft of Iraqi cultural property as the most recent manifestation of "one of the oldest forms of organized transnational crime." The federal government has ordered Hobby Lobby to forfeit the artifacts and pay a fine of \$3 million (Cochrane).

Homan, along with Iraqi ambassador Fareed Yasseen, denounced the crime as cultural appropriation for capitalistic gain and fetishistic consumerism. Less obvious, perhaps, is the imperialistic mentality underlying American exceptionalism that allowed Hobby Lobby executives to assume that another culture's history was up for sale, as if the merest suggestion of putting a U.S. historical artifact on the market – like, say, the original manuscript of the Declaration of Independence or one of Lincoln's stovepipe hats – would ever be taken seriously. The case gestures towards a more deeply rooted assumption that Middle Eastern culture (or any other culture, for that matter) is somehow less important than American culture. It is this imperialistic construct of superiority, tinged with a sense of entitlement (to artifacts, to oil, to power), that has shadowed American foreign relations throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

One of Edward Said's many salient arguments in his essay collection *Reflections on Exile* (2000) is that although historical rhetoric associates the term "imperialism" with older regimes such as the Ottoman and British Empires, America is the post-World War II empire par excellence, that it "has replaced the great earlier empires as *the* dominant outside force" (305). American literary imagination conceives of "empire" as something portrayed by Orwell, Kipling, or Coetzee – somehow remote from us both spatially and temporally, thus not real, as if "To Shoot an Elephant" were fantastical fiction. But Said's

description of U.S. foreign policy after the Second World War reads like a definition of imperialism itself: “An almost totally consistent policy of attempting to influence, dominate, and control other states whose relevance, implied or declared, to American security interests is supposed to be paramount” (306). Earlier, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said argued that the first Gulf War marked the United States as an empire, despite that “the word ‘imperialism’ was a conspicuously missing ingredient in American discussions of the Gulf,” and that, according to Richard Van Alstyne in *The Rising American Empire* (1960), “it is almost heresy to describe the [U.S.] nation as an empire” (qtd. in Said 295). In fact, “the entire premise [of the Gulf War] was colonial,” Said insists, “[it was that] a small Third World dictatorship, nurtured and supported by the West, did not have the right to challenge America, which was white and superior” (*Culture* 296). This implicit assertion of George Bush Sr.’s patriarchal attitude in that war was echoed by Bush Jr.’s own paternalism in his 2003 State of the Union address, in which he rededicated his office to a “conviction [that] leads us into the world to help the afflicted, and defend the peace, and confound the designs of evil men.” Less than three months later, Baghdad fell to American-led Coalition forces, commencing the U.S. occupation of Iraq (“Operation Iraqi Freedom”) that, at first, must have seemed like so much *déjà vu* (or *déjà vaincu*) to its residents, but lasted over a decade longer than Operation Desert Storm (nomenclature more befitting reality).

Recognizing America as an empire helps us to more fully understand one of the concerns Scranton and other critics have with the trauma-hero narrative that heavily informs our present understanding and developing cultural memory of the Iraq War – and by extension, United States foreign affairs of the twenty-first century. In the previous

chapter, I explained that the myth of the American military veteran as a “trauma hero” is inherently problematic because it glorifies the soldier and turns him or her into a “victim” at the cost of marginalizing or ignoring the wartime Other – in this case, civilians living in Iraq during the invasion and occupation. As established there, authors of what I labelled “second-wave” Iraq War fiction sought correctives to this pejorative Othering or neglect. Although American authors like Abrams, Terrell, and Scranton portray Iraqi characters with some level of sincerity and empathy in their novels of the war, an important and often overlooked perspective can be attained by studying Iraqi-authored fiction set during the conflict. Patrick Deer and Roger Luckhurst have briefly mentioned Iraqi writers in their articles surveying contemporary war literature. Jennifer Haytock, in a recent article about the voicing of Iraqi characters by American novelists, explains how the juxtaposition of narration by American soldiers with narration by Iraqi civilians can promote empathy for those whose homes and families have been affected in ways that remain unseen to much of the American public. Taking this premise a step further, I propose that more critical attention to novels written by Iraqi writers themselves will add a valuable – and necessary – dimension to our current understanding and the way future generations remember the war.

Over the last few decades, debates about the ethics of literary representation has intensified. Questions of race, gender, and postcolonialism abound: Should white writers attempt to voice black characters in their fiction? Can male authors write about female sexuality? What is lost when the colonizer tries to represent the colonized? One perspective is that representing the Other transgresses the boundaries of propriety. In a recent controversy, for example, Anthony Horowitz, author of a series of popular young-



adult spy novels, was cautioned away from creating a black protagonist for his newest book last year. He was told that it was “inappropriate” and “dangerous territory” for “white writers to try to create black characters,” and that to do so would be considered “artificial and possibly patronizing [because] it is actually not our experience” (“Spy”). Another suggestion is that representing someone whose experience is different from the writer’s own is offensive and disrespectful. When asked in an interview about her nonfiction work if she’d ever consider writing a novel, because it might enable her to “explore the inner psyche of her characters – imagine being black, for instance,” white South African author Antjie Krog declared that “imagination is overrated,” for, “to imagine black at this stage is to insult black” (qtd. in Motha 300). This issue does not pertain solely to race – and the responsibility or culpability is not just that of the author. Discussing horrific images of war in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag suggests that “perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of an extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it” (42). If we extend her ideas about photography to literature, it leads us to the question: When we read about disaster and oppression without the intention (or the ability) to help the sufferers, are we then mere voyeurs, cultural tourists imbibing the details of someone else’s pain for our own entertainment or self-serving edification?

These controversies and contradictions problematize the study of Iraq War literature. Is there an inherent problem with American authors representing Iraqi characters? Are Terrell’s and Scranton’s characterizations of Ayad and Qasim fundamentally flawed because Terrell and Scranton are white American writers? The other side of the representational ethics debate would applaud their attempts. In *Empathy*

*and the Novel* (2007), Suzanne Keen argues that the immersive experience of reading long prose has moral- or character-building potential, that “the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction is known to be ‘made up’ does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently ‘real’ appeal for assistance may do” (4). A novel’s ability to inspire empathy in its readers could even lead to real-world manifestations; Keen hypothesizes a link between empathy and altruism. In this way, we might see Abrams’ portrayal of the recently-widowed pregnant Iraqi woman in *Brave Deeds* as evocative of empathy, or Scranton’s “fall of Baghdad” section narrated by Qasim in *War Porn* as an attempt to let us “see” an Iraqi civilian’s experience.

Said suggests that for writers to avoid imagining experiences unlike their own can exacerbate the harmful effects of cultural Othering:

It is an inadmissible contradiction . . . to build analyses of historical experience around exclusions, exclusions that stipulate, for instance, that only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only former colonial subjects can understand colonial experience . . . If you know in advance that the African or Iranian or Chinese or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally integral, coherent, separate, and therefore comprehensible only to Africans, Iranians, Chinese, Jews, or Germans, you first of all posit as essential something which, I believe, is both historically created and the result of interpretation – namely the existence of Africanness, Jewishness, or Germanness, or for that matter Orientalism and Occidentalism. And second, you are likely as a consequence to defend the essence or experience itself rather than promote full knowledge of it and its entanglements and dependencies on other knowledges. As

a result, you will demote the different experiences of others to a lesser status.

(*Culture* 31-32)

To Said, then, the differences between Self and Other are merely social constructs, perpetuated and further differentiated by representational exclusion. As I argued in Chapter Two, first-wave American-authored Iraq War novels marginalize or ignore the presence of Iraqis in Iraq (which, in the words of Said, demotes their experiences to “a lesser status” by writing them out of the occupation altogether), while the second-wave novels begin to develop them as fully formed characters whose experiences count and whose appearance in the novels reminds the reader thereof. This inclusion nonetheless imposes certain responsibilities upon the author. Writing about cultural appropriation and his own experiences as a Vietnamese refugee, Pulitzer-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen insists that “it is possible to write about others not like oneself, if one understands that this is not simply an act of culture and free speech, but one that is enmeshed in a complicated, painful history of ownership and division.” Understanding this history is crucial to ethically representing – and even responsibly reading – experiences unlike one’s own. For these reasons, we should study Iraqi-authored works about the war alongside American-authored works to achieve deeper, more nuanced insights of the relationship between our countries – literary and cultural – that have culminated in conflict and that will inform the future interactions between our societies.

While there are several Iraqi-authored works of fiction set during the American occupation that have not yet been published in English, four recently translated novels allow American readers insight into experiences of the war-time Other and, inversely, illuminate how Americans themselves are perceived as an Other by those living in U.S.-

occupied lands. This chapter will examine Iqbal Al-Qazwini's 2008 novel *Zubaida's Window*, Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* (2013), Kanan Makiya's novel *The Rope* (2016), and Ahmed Saadawi's 2013 novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (translated in 2018). These texts' translations from Arabic into English allow their narratives to contribute not only to the Middle Eastern but also to the American cultural memory of the war. The stories they tell redirect the postcolonial gaze toward the colonizer by depicting Americans as outsiders. They focus on Iraqi individual and cultural trauma, which is often overlooked in American-authored Iraq War novels that uphold the trauma-hero myth by centralizing the U.S. war veteran's homecoming and ensuing PTSD. In their form and style, these Iraqi writers resurrect a rich and unique Arabic literary tradition dating back to *A Thousand and One Nights*, yet they also intertextualize classic Western literature such that the contemporary Iraqi war novel reflects an Arabic-Anglo double-voicing. Finally, these texts contrast with their American-authored counterparts by eschewing realism and the MFA-confessional styling of modern American war narratives and instead emphasizing elements of surrealism and fantasy. In these ways, contemporary war novels written by Iraqi authors tell a different story than those by American authors. The cultural work they do – and the dissemination of their texts into the West via English translation – reasserts Iraqi cultural agency and unveils perspectives of those most disastrously affected by actions rationalized by American exceptionalism.

*Zubaida's Window* was the first Iraqi-authored novel to portray the 2003 American invasion and occupation. Like author Al-Qazwini, the title character is an Iraqi exile who has left her home and family to live in Berlin. Her “window” is both her television set – through which she watches Baghdad burning during the American

invasion and its aftermath – and her physical window, through which she observes the city of Berlin. The chapters alternate between memories of her childhood and her thoughts of the present, which are portrayed with a combination of psychological realism and dream-state surrealism. Also interspersed throughout her narrative are passages describing Iraq’s history, its previous wars and kings. She worries about her brother, who was fighting for the Iraqi Army at the front, for she’s received a letter from a friend who was there with him and saw him shoot into the air (rather than shoot at the enemy). This haunts Zubaida, who doesn’t know whether her brother is alive or dead. Her musings about whether his refusal to kill makes him a coward or a hero offer a different perspective of wartime heroism than that found in American war novels. She has dreamt of going home to Baghdad, but ultimately she never returns. Through her memories of Iraq’s past, her experience as an exile in Berlin, and her observations of the Americans’ invasion of Baghdad, the political situation of post-unification Germany is symbolically juxtaposed with the ongoing turmoil in Iraq, with connections that expose the transnational threads of memory and identity.

Similar questions of family, memory, and identity during the war and occupation are at the forefront of *The Corpse Washer*. Its young protagonist Jawad goes to school to become an artist rather than carry on the family business of corpse-washing. But when his father is killed during the U.S. invasion, he abandons those aspirations and loses himself in the work of the *mghaysil*.<sup>31</sup> As Al-Qazwini does in *Zubaida’s Window*, Antoon interweaves passages representing Jawad’s childhood memories alongside his present experience, with commentary on Iraqi history alongside contemporary events, which

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<sup>31</sup> *Mghaysil*: a sacred building in which corpses are ritually washed and prepared for burial.

emphasizes the dialectic of past and present that is essential to the construction of cultural memory. Born in Baghdad but part of the Iraqi diaspora to America in the 1990s, Antoon holds a PhD in Arab Literature from Harvard and was one of a group of intellectual Iraqi expatriates who opposed the 2003 U.S. occupation. This stance may help to explain one of the central themes in *The Corpse Washer*: Iraqi civilians' continual surprise that the Americans did not meet their expectations. The large-scale death and destruction continuing in his country is staged in microcosm by Jawad's own encounters with the dead, rendered in prose that is at times reminiscent of Poe and at others Kafkaesque, in order to convey the sense of estrangement that has paradoxically become an ordinary part of Iraqi life. This defamiliarizing of the familiar (and its inverse, the familiarizing of the strange) is examined by scholar Ferial Ghazoul in his study of short Iraqi fiction of the 1990s, which he characterizes as "unhomely," adapting Homi Bhabha's postcolonial interpretation of Freud's theory of the uncanny. But it is evident that the "unhomely" has made its way into longer and more recent prose forms, namely, these twenty-first century Iraqi war novels.

One aspect of the disconnect from reality featured in these novels is the individual's estrangement from family and home. Kanan Makiya's 2016 novel *The Rope* centralizes this theme by following the transformation of its unnamed Narrator from a fatherless yet earnest young boy to a Shiite militiaman, becoming someone he never imagined he'd be. Through the Narrator's development, Makiya dramatizes a betrayal of self. But the plot's deeper theme is the betrayal that arises from sectarian politics and the question of whether justice can be achieved through bloodshed, elements more clearly defined in *The Rope* than in Al-Qazwini's and Antoon's novels because Makiya's

protagonist becomes a participant in the fighting rather than remaining an observer. The dramatic question that compels readers forward is the mystery of a murder the Narrator witnesses outside his home the day Saddam's statues were toppled by American troops.<sup>32</sup> He discovers that the murder is linked with his own father's death over a decade before, and ultimately, that his beloved, respected uncle is behind it all. With a narrative frame set at Saddam's 2006 execution and the middle chapters focusing on the period of three years since his overthrow in April 2003, this novel can also be read as a treatise on modern Iraqi national identity during the early period of American occupation.

Americans are nearly absent, however, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, winner of the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Translated into English in 2018, the 200-year anniversary of the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel's various narrators tell the story of a wino junkman who begins to collect and piece together body parts as a memorial act after a bombing leaves the incomplete corpse of his friend in the streets. Through a fantastical series of events, the corpse becomes animated, taking on the appellation "Whatsitsname" and the mission of avenging the murders of each person whose body parts comprise his own. The Whatsitsname is hunted by the Baghdad-based, American-established Tracking and Pursuit Department, whose Final Report supplies the novel's narrative frame in a found-document appeal to verisimilitude resembling that of many Romantic and Gothic texts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature. Growing media attention necessitates the Whatsitsname's self-interview, in which he proclaims himself "the first true Iraqi citizen" because he's "made up of body parts of

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<sup>32</sup> Known as the Firdos Square Statue Destruction, this event symbolized the end of the Battle of Baghdad and the end of Saddam's and the Ba'ath Party's rule. Robert Fisk describes the event as "the most staged photo opportunity since Iwo Jima."

people from diverse backgrounds – ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes,” making him the corporeal manifestation of “the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past” (Saadawi 146). This variation upon Shelley’s classic thus becomes an allegory for postwar Iraq. Saadawi’s novel, along with Makiya’s, Antoon’s, and Al-Qazwini’s, represent an important sub-genre of world literature: the contemporary Iraqi war novel.

#### AMERICANS AS OTHER: REVERSING THE GAZE

These four novels provide a fundamentally different perspective of the U.S.-led invasion and occupation than do American-authored novels of the Iraq War. The most conspicuous point of contrast is the representation of Americans themselves. In Chapter Two, I explained that first-wave Iraq War novels marginalize Iraqi characters. The rare representations of the wartime Other therein are brief and underdeveloped, collective rather than individualized, and stereotypical rather than nuanced. Second-wave Iraq War novels provide more fully developed Iraqi characters, granting them names, agency, and entire passages. The second-wave novels initiate a literary process of de-Othering, and in so doing, their writers evoke the narrative empathy theorized by Keen. Nonetheless, both first- and second-wave American-authored Iraq War novels centralize the American soldier’s experience above all other perspectives. On the contrary, in the four Iraqi-authored novels examined in this chapter, Americans are not the central focus. Here, they are the ones represented as nameless Others, to be feared or wished (or whisked) out of the way. For an American audience who believes, due to media reportage and exceptionalist rhetoric, that the U.S. presence in Iraq is both significant and benevolent, this marginalization of American characters is unexpected. Frequently accompanying the explicit Othering of Americans and the narrative decentralizing of the occupation is an



implicit villainization of Americans. At worst, in the eyes of some Iraqi characters, the Americans themselves become the terrorists. At best, they are outsiders whose promises about a post-Saddam Iraq did not pan out as expected. These depictions provide a counternarrative to the U.S. public's belief that the invasion of Iraq was a humanitarian mission to rid the region – and the world – of terrorism.<sup>33</sup> In this way, they defy the publicly promulgated version of American exceptionalism.

In *Zubaida's Window*, Al-Qazwini reverses the postcolonial gaze by using the protagonist's television set as a lens for identity through Othering. Traditional postcolonial theory, as set forth in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), characterizes the colonizer/colonized relationship as one of Subject and Object, in which the colonizer's construction of the colonized as an essentially different Other helps to situate the colonizer's own identity. Through her "window," Zubaida turns that gaze around, making Americans the object, the Other. Now, as subject and exile, her identity has been constructed by their presence in her home country. They are nonetheless distant and faceless; she thinks of them in terms of fighter planes and fire. She watches as the coalition forces take over Iraq. She watches Baghdad burning. The television screen becomes her eyes to the world, and the distance from her home country seems to disappear as the planes she sees flying outside her real window in Berlin synchronize

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<sup>33</sup> The Bush administration's party line in 2003 was that the military invaded Iraq in order to quell the "imminent threat of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and ties to terrorism" ("A Necessary War?"). Augmenting this rationale was the attractive idea that establishing a democracy in Iraq would solve a lot of longstanding problems in the Middle East. By the end of the occupation, however, another widespread belief had taken root, confirming some Bush-skeptics' initial suspicions: that the war was fought for oil. In 2013, CNN reported that "before the 2003 invasion, Iraq's domestic oil industry was fully nationalized and closed to Western oil companies. A decade of war later, it is largely privatized and utterly dominated by foreign firms . . . the West's largest oil companies have [now] set up shop in Iraq . . . The war is the one and only reason for this long sought and newly acquired access" (Juhasz).

with “the noises coming from the television [which] grant them a destructive power” (Al-Qazwini 2). That she is on a separate continent, almost three thousand miles away, does not dilute her sense of loss, for “the blazing fire unites with her blazing soul” and the bombing makes her feel as if she too “sinks into a cloud of grief and smoke, enveloped by the din of destruction exploding on the screen” (3). She links the turmoil of Iraq’s history, so constitutive of its identity, to the present occupation, for “she cannot prevent the wild and cruel past from appearing to blend into bloody events on the screen before her” (30). She relates her personal loss to that of her country; while watching Baghdad burn, she realizes that “the sorrow inside her is not sudden, or accidental, but rather necessary, even essential to the formation of her consciousness” (31). Despite the terror and despair with which the television’s tableau assaults her – and despite her initial confusion about “whether she should continue watching” the images of carnage and dead bodies – ceasing her viewing offers no solace (1). When she turns it off, “she glances at the black television screen and reads the blackness of Baghdad, a city shut off, its image gone” (106). She feels “sickened by the empty television screen, which, she is convinced, is her only window to Iraq . . . She cannot bear to look at the pictures of Baghdad burning, and is equally terrified by the image of Baghdad dead and still” (107). So she switches it back on; she cannot tear herself away. Her gaze has held her captive.

These are among numerous passages that emphasize the effect of the invasion and occupation upon Zubaida’s individual and Iraq’s national consciousness. Despite their impact, however, Americans are mentioned no more than a dozen times over the course of the 122-page novel (about as often as Iraqis are acknowledged in first-wave American-authored Iraq War novels). When they do appear, they are represented in collective

military terms or via synecdoche. Al-Qazwini refers to them as “coalition forces” (1, 111), “American aircraft” (20), “the American army” (20, 75), “invaders” (21), “American troops” (32), “the American president” (46, 111), “American forces” (107), “scores of American tanks” (111). These nouns of collective identification strip the Americans of subjective identity. They are portrayed as a depersonalized force descending – no, intruding – upon the city, bringing with them the tools of destruction and coercion. This depiction merges with Zubaida’s Euro-exilic present and her observations through her real window, with passages juxtaposing Baghdad to Berlin and the now-occupied Iraq to once-divided Germany.

Like Al-Qazwini herself, Zubaida sought refuge in East Berlin after fleeing Iraq during Saddam’s regime in the 1980s. She moved to West Berlin after reunification, and she intended to return to her family in Baghdad if and when the Baathists were overthrown. As we’ll see with characters in *The Corpse Washer* and *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, she too had expected the fall of Saddam to usher in a new era in Iraq. However, the American occupation that ousted him did not make it any safer for her to come back home. Watching the bombing of Baghdad on television segues into her participation in “an angry, noisy demonstration through the streets of Berlin, the city that experienced war, the blaze of fires, the destruction of history, the cruelty of the wall, and the bitterness of defeat” (83). During this march, her own experience as an Iraqi grants her the secret knowledge that, similarly here in Berlin, “such protest is useless, for war will not be stopped by human protest against organized death” (83). Though the novel’s present is 2003 (beginning with the U.S. invasion of Baghdad in March), these flashbacks throughout the narrative reveal her experience over the previous twenty years. She feels a

sense of dark familiarity in the city's atmosphere before the Berlin Wall came down, comparing it to her own country's multifarious divisions. Afterwards, however, she feels isolated, for "She realized that she could not really share all this happiness and joy with the Germans, for the common history that had brought them together had separated her from them. No matter how hard she might try to join them, her joy had to be marginal and resistant to a history she was not part of" (27). She doesn't quite belong, and despite her decades of exile, the survival and perseverance of the East Berliners gives her hope that eventually her own city will be free and she will finally be able to go home: "The overwhelmingly joyous expressions of a people she had thought emotionally dead confirmed the borders of her own estrangement and refreshed her sense of her own roots that were still packed up in a suitcase" (27). She has not fully abandoned Iraq because she has not fully embraced Germany; while her body dwells in Berlin, her mind is still in Baghdad.

Arabic literary scholar Nadjé Al-Ali interprets an even stronger connection between the two cities. She notes that Al-Qazwini's protagonist is "particularly critical of members of the Communist Party who come to visit her, [because] like many former Iraqis who had either been members or sympathizers of the Iraqi Communist Party since the Gulf War, Zubaida is clearly disillusioned and holds the party responsible for the destruction of her home country, since elements of the party were supportive of the invasion" (Al-Ali 132). In an article for the *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Johanna Sellman groups *Zubaida's Window* with other novels that examine the "intersections between Arab and Soviet worlds" and "the loss of exilic subjectivities forged in Cold War contexts" (113), arguing that these narratives represent a transnational politics of

mourning. What Sellman does not mention, and what is important to my study, is that in each of these cases – the Cold War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War – American intervention brought with it an exacerbation rather than the expected amelioration of internal conflict.

Similarly, the primary narrative about Americans in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* is that they are not what the people of Iraq expected. Characters express surprise and disappointment at the actions of the occupiers, for they "never thought the Americans would be so irresponsible and inept" (85). The economic situation was not alleviated as Iraqis had anticipated, for "instead of Iraq becoming a new Hong Kong, as the Americans had promised, there was chaos and massive unemployment" (102). Rejoicing over Saddam's fall was cut short by the realization that the U.S. forces would not – or could not – put the pieces back together, even (or especially) regarding day-to-day living conditions: "We thought the Americans would fix the electricity. How come they've only made things worse?" (83).<sup>34</sup> Even cultural sites were disrespected in the weeks after the

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<sup>34</sup> The BBC reports that before 2003, Baghdad residents received 16-24 hours of electricity each day (though rural areas of the country had far less). By 2013, the average Baghdadi household received an average of only eight hours of electricity per day ("Iraq 10 Years On"). Basic aspects of infrastructure, like electricity, water, and sewage, continued to be a problem after the occupation ended. During Reconstruction, van Buren reveals, the U.S. State Department's PRTs were encouraged to foster new Iraqi-owned businesses and create democratic processes throughout the country. However, much of these attempts were thwarted because of the lack of infrastructure and American bureaucrats' refusal or inability to address those larger problems. Ergo, the \$63 billion dollars spent by American taxpayers on the reconstruction of Iraq – the largest nation-building program in history – did not make much of a difference. Examples of these wasted and ultimately abandoned efforts included filling "dilapidated classrooms lacking windows, furniture, and blackboards with new computers" in areas that got only 1-2 hours of electricity a day (van Buren 211); building hospitals that were highly publicized but never actually operational because they received "no power from the grid" – one of which cost several million dollars but was abandoned by the Army "for security reasons" before they put a roof on it, leaving it completely functionless (213); flying in a famous French chef to teach pastry training classes with the plan that "disadvantaged Iraqi women would open cafes on bombed-out streets without water or electricity" (208); millions spent on a much-needed sewage plant, but which

bombing of Baghdad, with one character stating that he was “surprised the Americans made no effort to protect public institutions since even occupiers were required to do so by international conventions” (71). These comments illuminate something rarely found in American-authored narratives of the war: the viewpoint of the civilian in the occupied territory. In an interview with NPR, Iraqi-American Antoon confirms this deliberate perspectivalizing. He points out that the problem of living “in such a militarized society [that] valorizes the violence carried out by armies” is that “we never see the world from the point of view of the civilians who are on the receiving end of tanks and drones and whatnot.” *The Corpse Washer*, along with the other novels discussed in this chapter, conveys that critical counterview.

Disappointed expectations lead to suspicion as the occupier’s colonial gaze is literalized via surveillance. While attending a political celebration, Jawad notices “the American soldiers who were monitoring the spectacle from a Humvee.” He is hyperaware that “American choppers hovered over” the crowd (Antoon 93). Humvees, barricades, and American troops are present throughout the city, and Jawad realizes that, as a military-age male, he is being watched. But ultimately that gaze is reversed back toward the Americans by the Iraqis, manifesting itself in watchful distrust. A culture of suspicion is already present in Iraq due to a history of drastic regime changes and ongoing sectarian violence. The Americans become yet another source of betrayal, another group to “watch,” but they are different – and in many ways, worse – because they are outsiders, and often uninformed or misinformed about Iraqi culture and politics. Their attempts to rein in the violence through the aforementioned “monitoring” and

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through ignorance and bureaucratic miscommunication was built in an area that only got 2-3 hours of grid electricity each day, thus never became fully operational (70).

“hovering” are fruitless to the point that they actually exacerbate it. Several months after the fall of Baghdad, one of Antoon’s character despairs, “We’d thought the value of life had reached rock-bottom under the dictatorship and that it would now rebound, but the opposite happened. Corpses piled up like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game . . . The American referee had killed enough already and now was killing only sporadically, allowing the local players, who were even more ferocious, to carry on” (108). Antoon incorporates the analogy of a spectator sport here to emphasize the reversed gaze and the occupier-referees’ failure to call fouls.

At times, disappointment and distrust turn to rage and disgust. At one point, Jawad expresses his fury at the Americans’ disregard for Iraqi sites of cultural memory, such as a Martyr’s Monument: “I was deeply offended and angered when I saw the American soldiers and armored vehicles occupying a place which symbolized the victims of war – victims such as my brother and thousands of others. My uncle said that it was a premeditated insult, calculated for its symbolic significance” (95). His uncle Sabri vilifies the U.S. forces, calling them “the new Saddams” (175)<sup>35</sup> and predicting that “these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam’s days” (96). Sabri, a communist, had been forced to flee Iraq during the Ba’athist regime under

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<sup>35</sup> In his exposé about the reconstruction of Iraq, *We Meant Well*, former State Department PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) leader Peter van Buren explains one of the reasons some Iraqis (like the fictional Sabri) viewed the U.S. as “the new Saddams.” He reveals, “The World’s Biggest Embassy sat in, or perhaps defined, the Green Zone. Called the Emerald City by some, the Green Zone represented the World’s Largest Public Relations Failure. In the process of deposing Saddam, we placed our new seat of power right on top of his old one, just as the ancient Sumerians built their strongholds on top of fallen ones out in the desert. In addition to the new buildings, Saddam’s old palaces in the one were repurposed as offices, and Saddam’s old jails became our new jails. Conveniently for Iraqis, the overlords might have changed but the address had not. The place you went to visit political prisoners who opposed Saddam was still the place you went to look for relatives who opposed the Americans” (154-155).

threat of arrest and execution. He was a teacher and political activist who protested the regime from abroad, first in Beirut and later in Yemen, but due to civil wars erupting there, he sought asylum in Germany like Al-Qazwini's protagonist. Unlike Zubaida, though, Sabri comes home after Saddam is ousted, believing like many others that the situation in his country would improve. But after the fall of Baghdad, he realizes the situation has only worsened. Sabri calls the occupation "a process of erasure," predicting that it is "the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all" (85). He insists that the destruction of Iraq is worse than the destruction of Germany had been during and after the world wars, and he holds the Americans responsible, because, after all "the Americans hadn't supported Hitler the way they had Saddam" (86) in previous decades.<sup>36</sup> These passages reveal that the perceptions held by Jawad and other Iraqi characters in *The Corpse Washer* are stained with bitter disappointment in the Americans' unfulfilled promises, an ensuing distrust of their continued presence, and angry disgust at their exacerbation of sectarian turmoil.

Underlying these attitudes toward the American Other, at least for Jawad, is fear. The fall of Baghdad coincides with his father's death. Jawad is awake with insomnia on the tenth night of the bombing when he hears his father go downstairs to the prayer room. A few moments later, a bomb hits nearby and shakes the whole house. When his mother inquires as to his father's whereabouts, Jawad goes to check on him and finds him still in the position of prayer, lifeless. Although the Americans were not directly responsible for his father's death, the temporal correlation leads him to associate their bombing raids with his loss. A few days later, the connection intensifies. Jawad's father

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<sup>36</sup> Sabri refers to the Americans' economic funding of the Ba'athist regime during the Iran-Iraq War.



is to be buried in their hometown of Najaf, a dangerous two-hour drive through bombing and checkpoints. Jawad and three other men (his father's mghaysil assistant, a neighbor, and a family friend) transport the coffin secured onto racks atop a car and head toward Najaf, where battle is raging as Fida'iyyin militias fend off the Americans who have just reached the city's outskirts. Despite many dangerous stops along the way, the funereal party of four persists onward with their sacred duty – until they are stopped by an entire American platoon.

The convoy stops a short distance away, blocking their passage, but one Humvee continues toward Jawad's car. He likens its approach to “a mythical animal intent on devouring us” (66). The Iraqi men fear they will be shot if they move, so they remain still until the soldier pointing a gun atop the Humvee yells at them to get out of the car. Jawad describes his terror as three soldiers emerge the Humvee shouting and cursing at them, asking questions about the coffin on the car, which they assume contains some kind of improvised weapon. They search the car and the coffin, and – finding nothing – leave without apologizing, their guns still aimed at the Iraqis as they drive away in a cloud of dust. The men realize, as they quietly and cautiously continue on their course, that they'd “just survived death.” The passage closes with one of the men stating meekly, “Looks like these liberators want to humiliate us” (68). This is the only personal encounter Jawad or any of the other characters have with Americans in the novel.

The U.S. troops are thus an intruding and terrifying Other in the eyes of the Iraqi civilians in *The Corpse Washer*. Although the novel's plot is concerned with Jawad's abandoning his artistic aspirations and taking over the family business after his father's death, the backdrop of the American occupation is ever-present. The Eurocentric

Orientalist binary of civilized West / uncivilized East is herein reversed because the Americans are portrayed as the “barbarians” who have invaded Jawad’s country, his perception of their savagery evident in the above metaphor of “a mythical animal intent on devouring us” and in the Americans’ offensive and unnecessary displays of brute force.

Saadawi also uses this manner of portrayal in his few references to Americans in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Although there is a horrible monster made up of decomposing body parts running loose in the city at night, the Whatsitsname’s mission of justice renders him less terrifying than the occupiers. The novel’s setting evokes an atmosphere of modern street-crime urbanity alternating with Dark-Ages backwardness, its characters blaming the occupation for the country’s weakened infrastructure: “When the Americans invaded Baghdad, their missiles destroyed the telephone exchange, and the phones were cut off for many months. Death stalked the city like the plague” (6). Fear for one’s life in the face of these brutish Others, as captured in Antoon’s coffin-car scene, is reprised throughout Saadawi’s novel, for even one of the most powerful men in the city is “still frightened by the Americans. He knew they operated with considerable independence and no one could hold them to account for what they did. As suddenly as the wind could shift, they could throw you down a dark hole” (69). The terror of what the unpredictable Americans might do is summoned to warn the “crazy” junkman Hadi to stop spinning his yarns at the coffee shop. “Those stories of yours are going to get you into trouble,” he is told; “When the Americans grab you, you’ve no idea where they’ll take you, God alone knows what charge they’ll pin on you” (85). This suggestion of trumped-up charges and uncertain repercussions at the hands of the occupier reflects the uncertainty that is the

psychological root of most fears, especially fear of the Other. The Iraqi civilians in the novel seem not to understand the American military's reason for still being in their country (nor did many American civilians in real life, for that matter). Set nearer the end of the occupation (differing from Al-Qazwini's and Antoon's plots, which take place near its beginning), the Iraqi people have seen the U.S.'s promises gone unfulfilled, their expectations shot. By this time, few of them still believe that the Americans are an improvement over Saddam. As one character explains, "there were people who had survived many deaths in the time of the dictatorship only to find themselves face-to-face with a pointless death in the age of 'democracy'" (235).

A popular assumption about the failure of the American occupation is that it was a result of irreconcilable East/West cultural differences. However, as Mark Firmani points out in his *LARB* review of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (echoing Said's 2001 dismissal of Samuel Huntington's problematic "clash" thesis): "Saadawi masterfully demonstrates that U.S. attempts to establish the rule of law in Iraq did not fall short for any Orientalist 'clash of civilizations' reasons. Instead, he portrays U.S. forces as indirectly criminal." Saadawi does this by holding the Americans responsible for both of the plot's "big-bads" – the morally ambiguous Whatsitsname (who, despite the humanitarian intent behind his vigilante justice, is still a monster who kills people) and the investigative Tracking and Pursuit Department (which is really an assassination squad). Both culpabilities are presented through the character who works for the Americans, Brigadier Majid, who himself identifies them as the cause of the problem.

When the public becomes aware of the monster rampaging its streets, seeking revenge for the killing of each person represented by each of his body parts, the

Whatsitsname becomes a scapegoat for various political factions, much like the European Jews leading up to the Holocaust or the young women accused during the Salem Witch trials:

Fear of the Whatsitsname continued to spread. In Sadr City they spoke of him as a Wahhabi,<sup>37</sup> in Adamiyah as a Shiite extremist. The Iraqi government described him as an agent of foreign powers, while the spokesperson for the U.S. State Department said he was an ingenious man whose aim was to undermine the American project in Iraq. But what project might that be? As far as Brigadier Majid was concerned, the monster itself was their project. It was the Americans who were behind this monster. (Saadawi 268)

While no individual American characters are named or developed in Saadawi's novel, an organization is at the center of its plot – and that organization is backed by the occupiers. The so-called Tracking and Pursuit Department, led by Brigadier Majid and “affiliated with the civil administration of the international coalition of forces in Iraq” (1), ostensibly investigates “unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumors” (4) that lead to violence, which is why it is on the trail of the Whatsitsname and its creator Hadi. However, it is later revealed that this is only a front, that it had really been formed to “create an equilibrium of violence on the streets between the Sunni and Shiite militias, so there'll be a balance later at the negotiating table to make new political arrangements in Iraq. The American army is unable or unwilling to stop the violence, so at least a balance or an equivalence of violence has to be created. Without it, there won't be a successful political process” (177-178). Thus Saadawi's invention of the Tracking and Pursuit

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<sup>37</sup> A “Wahhabi” is a strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim.

Department satirizes American bureaucracy and its attempts to control foreign affairs. The Department's Final Report on the Whatsitsname investigation (which, curiously, does not admit the existence of the creature at all), incriminates the Iraqis working for the Department, including Brigadier Majid, and exculpates the Coalition Provisional Authority (the puppet government led by American administrator Paul Bremer).

These pejorative representations of Americans in the novels by Al-Qazwini, Antoon, and Saadawi contrast sharply with representations of U.S.-Iraqi interactions in American-authored Iraq War novels, which portray U.S. soldiers as benevolent and paternal rather than malevolent and intrusive. We saw in Chapter Two that, the few times they do mention Iraqis, first-wave novels feature them as childlike or animalistic. And while second-wave American-authored texts attempt to provide character correctives – promoting a more inclusive perspective and narrative empathy in their depiction and voicing of Iraqis – they still portray most U.S. soldiers as having good intentions, their backgrounds and character development somehow justifying their ethically questionable actions. Only Scranton's *War Porn* fully acknowledges the unnecessary (and human-rights-flouting) violence conducted by some U.S. soldiers, but even there it is confined to the detention camps. Iraqi-authored novels about the Iraq War, on the other hand, show the impact of the American occupation out in the open, on the city streets, in the daily lives of Iraqi men, women, and children. The occupying troops are ever watchful of the cities' goings-on, and, in turn, the Iraqi civilians keep a close eye on these invading Others. A scene from the most recent Lucasfilm installment, *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), represents this turn-of-perspective aptly. During the Mimban campaign, a young

Han Solo briefly serves as a soldier in the Imperial Army. When his commander orders him to “eliminate the hostiles,” Han retorts, “It’s their planet. We’re the hostiles!”

Not all Iraqi-authored works set during the occupation maintain the perspective of Americans-as-hostiles; *The Rope*’s representation differs from that of the other novels. Narrated by an unnamed Shiite militiaman who fights against U.S. troops during the invasion and occupation, several of his comments about Americans (whom he calls the Occupier) paint a picture of them as weak and inept. This undermines the power (albeit of destruction) that is attributed to them in the other three novels; here, they are neither fierce nor fearsome. At the opening of the narrative frame, the morning of Saddam’s hanging, the Narrator converses with his uncle about the Americans’ transfer of Saddam (referred to throughout the novel as the Tyrant). He notes that the Americans were hesitant to give the Tyrant over to the Iraqi government, but ultimately, “they caved like they always do” (Makiya 4). Later, the U.S. forces are described as “ineffectual and weak-willed” (18), even “pathetic” (263). Other characters discuss the invaders’ exacerbation of long-standing sectarian tensions, insisting that much of the violence was being committed by the various “militias that had slipped in the moment the slow-witted Occupier had cleared all obstacles from their way” (70). The popular belief amongst Makiya’s characters is that the “credulous” Americans have been “acting on false information” all along (198). The representation of their presence ranges from blundering ignorance to galling nuisance. All four novels feature a scene in which American helicopters “hover” over Iraqi civilians (the same verb is used in each text), but in *The Rope*, they hover “like black insects” (34), evoking the image of a swarm of gnats needing a good swatting. Unlike the other three novels, though, Makiya’s range of

representations of the Americans does not include villainization or vilification. But they aren't characterized as heroes, either, or even major players. More so than the other novelists, Makiya emphasizes the relative insignificance of the Americans in Iraq, undermining their centrality in the Middle East conflicts. As the Narrator's friend Haider puts it, "Our fight ... has less and less to do with the Occupier; necessarily, it is a fight among Iraqis" (216). This minor role as a "bit player" is surprising to audiences familiar with American-authored Iraq War representations, wherein U.S. troops are central to the plot and dominant in the conflict. Not only are Americans an Other in Iraqi-authored Iraq War literature, they're merely one of many Others – and they're kind of in the way.

Makiya explains his reasons for writing the novel at its end, in a twenty-two-page "Personal Note." This essay, along with his political background, contextualizes the contrast between his depictions of Americans versus those by Saadawi, Antoon, and Al-Qazwini. Makiya claims here that "Iraqis, not Americans, were the prime drivers of what went wrong after 2003" (297). He acknowledges that "other [writers] have convincingly portrayed the many failures of the Americans occupation" (316) and while he does not disagree with them entirely, he feels that "the deeper failure, the one that this book is about, was always an Iraqi one" (316). His impetus for writing *The Rope* was that he "had to tell the story of how we made our own failure in Iraq, and why we own it, not the great big bogeyman of the West" (302), that is, the United States. Tim Arango of *The New York Times* informs us that Makiya, an exile and professor of Middle East Studies at Brandeis, was "the foremost Arab intellectual to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003," after he studied thousands of files smuggled out the country that documented the crimes of Saddam Hussein. He met with George W. Bush on several occasions, and these talks

(along with his insistence that Saddam had WMDs) heavily influenced the president's order to invade. In fact, Arango reports that Makiya was in the Oval Office watching the news with President Bush as Baghdad fell to U.S. forces.

In his Personal Note, Makiya does not express outright regret for his earlier support of the war. Instead, he admits that his motive was a "politics of hope," for he sincerely believed that democracy could take root in Iraq (300). And while the essay reads like an apologia, he is not apologizing to his American readers so much as to the Iraqi people, whose continued suffering he feels partly responsible for. *Zubaida's Window*, *The Corpse Washer*, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are not apologetic novels, for Al-Qazwini, Antoon, and Saadawi were opposed to the U.S. invasion from the beginning. Their purpose in writing, as is made clear in each of their novels, is to illuminate the experience of Iraqi civilians during and after the occupation. An undeniable aspect of this experience is trauma.

#### IRAQI TRAUMA: HISTORY, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY

First-wave Iraq War novels by American authors focus on the postwar trauma of U.S. veterans to such an extent that Iraqi trauma does not figure into the narrative. The novels by Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi push Iraqi trauma – individual and collective – to the forefront. They do so by alternating past events with present experience through the technique of analepsis. These texts feature the protagonists' recollections of childhood memories alongside passages of Iraqi history, juxtaposed with present-day commentary about the impact of the American occupation upon the Iraqi populace. Their focus on Iraqi memory and trauma counters the dominant American narrative of the Iraq War (the trauma-hero myth explained in Chapter Two). Instead, the



narrative presented by *Zubaida's Window*, *The Corpse Washer*, *The Rope*, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* reveals that Iraqi trauma extends long before their setting's American-occupied present, and further, that Iraqi identity (formed through this shared memory) can transcend the geographical boundaries of Iraq itself.

In *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015), Ikram Masmoudi adapts Giorgio Agamben's contemporized concept of the *homo sacer*<sup>38</sup> to build her argument that since the 1920s, Iraqi fiction has developed through specific character types: the soldier, the war deserter, the camp detainee, and the suicide bomber. These figures represent the "bare life" of the *homo sacer* throughout the tumultuous history of twentieth-century Iraq – a history that is present in most Iraqi fiction. So far, Masmoudi's is the only book-length study of Iraqi fiction that includes an analysis of texts published since the first Gulf War. My study diverges from Masmoudi's in two essential ways: 1) The novels I examine in this chapter have been translated into English, while the works she discusses are only available in Arabic, limiting their audience to Arabic readers; and 2) The novels I examine feature Iraqi *civilians* as their protagonists, rather than the four character types on which her study is based.<sup>39</sup> What interests me most in Masmoudi's text is her claim that Iraqi writers – particularly with their newfound ability to write freely, without censorship, after the fall of Saddam – "have been hugely engaged in a process of reassessment of their contemporary history, especially in fiction" (vii). The

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<sup>38</sup> *homo sacer*, or "sacred man": a paradoxical figure in archaic Roman law; they could be killed with impunity because their lives were of no value to their contemporaries, but they could not be sacrificed ritualistically because their lives had no value to the gods either.

<sup>39</sup> An exception to this is Makiya's *The Rope*, wherein the civilian protagonist briefly becomes a militiaman during the occupation. He leaves the militia shortly after Saddam's execution, so his account of the events of 2003 to 2006 is narrated from his civilian perspective in hindsight, after he is no longer involved in Iraqi politics.

aforementioned character types by which she organizes her four chapters embody the history of Iraq both literally and symbolically. However, her book overlooks the experiences of civilians throughout the country's history of bloody coups, ongoing wars, UN sanctions, and American occupation. I propose that the experience of the people – men, women, children, families – is equally important to the construction of Iraqi history and memory. Novels focalizing the civilian experience can also augment or even transform Western audiences' cultural understanding of Iraq through English translations like the ones examined here.

Masmoudi's remarks on the rich presence and processing of history throughout Iraqi fiction recall Said's 1974 essay, "Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948" (in *Reflections on Exile*, 2000). He marks 1948 as a watershed moment for Arabic selfhood, explaining that sociopolitical events in the Middle East that year "put forward a monumental enigma, an existential mutation for which Arab history was unprepared" (46). The situation of that period, which he calls "the paradoxical present," set the Arab world at an "intersection between past and present," confronted by the "deviation from *what has yet to happen* (a unified, collective Arab identity)" and "the possibility of *what may happen* (Arab extinction as a cultural or national unit)" (47, italics in the original). It was at this juncture, Said argues, that the modern Arabic novel emerged. This helps to explain why Iraqi novels (along with those from other Arabic nations) are so heavily historical in their subject matter. He continues by identifying the role of the Arabic writer since 1948 as "a producer of thought and language whose radical intention was to guarantee survival to what was in imminent danger of extinction" (48), that is, a remembered Arabic past and the future of Arabic culture. For Arab writers, Said insists,

“to act knowingly was to *create* the present, and this was a battle of restoring historical continuity, healing a rupture, and – most important – forging a historic possibility” (48). I propose that what Said theorized about Arabic fiction in 2000, three years before the U.S. invasion, is even more so the case for Iraqi fiction today, after the occupation. The novels by Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi contribute to the process of creating a post-occupied Iraqi literary culture, and the inclusion of Iraqi history throughout their narratives helps to solidify cultural memory and national identity.

Nevertheless, these narratives (and their authors, in interviews) insist that nationhood or “Iraqi-ness” is not confined to the geographical boundaries of Iraq. Historians of cultural memory, like Jay Winter, often situate collective remembrance and public identity in a shared space, be it a “site of memory” like a war monument, or “small-scale, *locally rooted* social action” (Winter and Sivan 59, italics added). French historian Pierre Nora includes mostly physical locations within France as examples of *lieux de memoire*: “libraries and festivals ... the Pantheon; museums and the Arc de Triomphe ... Wall of the Fédérés” (6). But Iraqi writers and literary critics are careful to include the diaspora – more than two million refugees who have fled Iraq since 2003, and the millions of others who left during the Ba’athist regime – in their conversations about Iraqi culture and trauma. Nadjé Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar, in their Introduction to *We Are Iraqis: Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War* (2012), insist that “dislocation and displacement do not stop someone from identifying with, feeling for, and hurting about Iraq” (xxxix). Although they experience deep and devastating loss for their homeland (as we’ll see in *Zubaida’s Window*), Iraqis in exile do not need a “place” to keep on being Iraqi. Al-Qazwini, for instance, left the country shortly after graduating from the

University of Baghdad, and has lived in Berlin since 1978. Despite her forty years there, she does not identify as German; rather, she remains involved in the Iraqi Women's League and writes about Iraq and human rights in Arabic-language newspapers and magazines. While many American war narratives focus on the veteran's homecoming and post-war trauma, Iraqi-authored narratives demonstrate that for some exiles, coming home may not be an option, thus the traumatic memory is not deferred to any "afterward."

Zubaida's memories seem more present than past. They intensify with the invasion, to the extent that they become like objects to her. As she watches the bombing of Baghdad through her "window," the television, she "opens the closet of memory" (Al-Qazwini 8), "spreads her memories on the carpet of the room," and immerses herself in them as "the whole past comes back to her" (9). The past becomes present as, to her, "the war she watches on television today is the same as, or an extension of, the previous one that broke out on the Iranian front [during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s]. The soldiers who die today are the same soldiers who died yesterday, but are dying one more time" (11). These repeated deaths signify trauma's repetitive compulsions, and her memories are as lucid as PTSD flashbacks. Rather than trying to forget, though, she works hard to remember: "She trains herself to keep her memories intact. She recalls for no apparent reason some boring, even worthless, details that are too useless to store. She does things perhaps out of the fear of oblivion, the archenemy of memory" (101). And her identity is as bound to these memories as it is to Iraq, for "although she knew that torn roots can neither be fixed in an alien earth nor even replanted in the land they were uprooted from, she still carries them around in her purse wherever she travels. Still, she continues to

hope that she may return to her homeland—there—to feel whole again” (91). Zubaida’s memories, like concrete tokens of remembrance, allow her continued connection to Iraq; they help her to resist the ease of forgetting that would distance her from her heritage.

At the end of the English-language publication of the novel, The Feminist Press at CUNY has included a critical essay titled “Afterword: The State of Exile” by Nadjie Al-Ali, Chair of the University of London’s Centre for Gender Studies and founder of the Iraqi-British nonprofit organization Act Together: Women’s Action for Iraq. Herself a daughter of exile, with an Iraqi father and German mother, Al-Ali praises Al-Qazwini’s ability to “capture the sense of alienation and paralysis experienced by millions of Iraqis throughout the world who have not only found themselves forced to flee their homes, but have been watching the destruction of their country from afar and in great despair” (123). In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Said claims that “exiles feel an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives,” an imperative to “reassemble an identity out of the refractions and discontinuities of exile” (177-179). Zubaida deploys her childhood memories to do so, rebuilding her life again and again out of these fragments of remembrance that she can take out like pictures in a photo album.

These memories revolve around her family, whom she hasn’t seen in decades. At first the remembrances are sequential; she conjures them chronologically. Some of these memories are traumatic: When she was five years old, she witnessed a mob running behind a motorcycle that was dragging a body, the people chanting “long live the nation” and “long live the people” (Al-Qazwini 33). She remembers when her father left them, taken to a prison camp never to be seen again, because he was “at odds with his reality and at odds with his homeland” (49). She remembers her grandfather’s death, seeing his

corpse laid on pillows in a house filled with grief (71). But other memories are fond. She remembers her brother as a child; she speaks to herself as if she were talking to him. She is now able to warn him not to join the army, because she knows in hindsight that he will be lost on the front lines. She remembers specific details of her youth: sitting at a famous café called The Parliament where she watched her father play backgammon, going to work with him at the factory where he wrote numbers into ledgers with his Parker pen, being taken to a Mandeian wedding to learn about their marriage rituals, where she eats bread and fish, raisins and sugared almonds, and she thrills with the memory of those occasions. She is able to control her emotions in the present by selecting memories from the past as if pulling them out of a box. These fragments and refractions are the means by which she – to use Said’s terms – “reconstitutes” her “broken life” as an exile.

Zubaida’s recollections are a form of *analepsis*, which German memory theorist Birgit Neumann defines as a narrative technique that stages the process of remembering via “a reminiscing narrator who looks back on [her] past, trying to impose meaning on the surfacing memories from a present point of view” (335). Indeed, these memories are more meaningful to Zubaida now because they are all she has left of home. For years she had clung to the hope that she might still go back, but as she watches the televised bombings, she realizes that these places – the house she grew up in, the café, the factory, and so on – no longer exist. Remembering becomes a coping mechanism for the trauma of her loss. The past ensures her present survival. But what kind of coping is this, that allows no quality of life in the present because of its reliance on the past? What kind of survival is this, if her thoughts remain decades in the past? There is nothing redemptive in

her exile, for the life she lives is populated only with ghosts. She never makes it back to Iraq, nor does she make Berlin her home.

The flights of memory represented by the passages about Zubaida's childhood become flights of imagination as she conjures up Iraq's past prior to her own existence. Her individual memories give way to a representation of cultural memory when she starts "remembering" historical events in Iraq that happened before her own time. This further illuminates the way the past (even the distant past) impacts the present – how memory accumulates, transgenerationally, to define a culture. Some of these passages begin with Zubaida's recollection of stories her father and grandmother told her, which lead into historical accounts, local legends, and origin stories for Iraqi traditions and songs. Witnessing American troops aerially bombard the road leading to the Baghdad International Airport, she reflects that "the war did not begin today, but tens of years ago" (Al-Qazwini 32). This launches into her story of King Faisal II, the last king of Iraq, who came out bearing a white flag and the Koran when the Iraqi army surrounded his palace to oust his regime. The fire she sees on television as Baghdad burns in the present becomes the red blood that stained Faisal's white flag in 1958. She wonders if the present destruction is another eruption of King Faisal's curse, for legend held that it was a sign of his revenge "whenever the two rivers went dry; whenever the Tigris and Euphrates overflowed; whenever Iraq was overtaken by pestilence; whenever they dragged people on the street; whenever Iraqis fought one another; whenever life became expensive; whenever the rains were delayed; whenever houses were on fire," and this was because "they killed him while he came to them in peace and held the holy Koran in his hand" (35). Faisal is mentioned again later, when Zubaida watches scenes of the air raids over

Baghdad residential neighborhoods, news footage showing Iraqi women running out of their homes with wailing children in their arms. These present images merge in her mind with the stories she heard as a young girl, about grief-stricken women mourning throughout the city when the beloved Queen Alia, mother of Faisal, died. This then segues into an even earlier story, when Alia's husband King Ghazi was assassinated because he allegedly sided with the Germans during World War II. The conspiracies Zubaida hears about on the news in the novel's present meld into the past conspiracy to assassinate Ghazi, at which point Zubaida begins to hear the popular song from three-quarters of a century prior which secretly referenced the event. Though banned from the radio due to the controversy of its underlying meaning, the people kept singing it, maintaining the memory of their unjustly slain king (Al-Qazwini 72). Here, a simple song becomes a mode of remembering that defies the state-sanctioned version of events. She cannot control these visual and auditory fusions of past with present – the fire on TV in 2003 becoming the blood on the white flag in 1958, hearing the song from 1939 when she mutes her television – for “she cannot prevent the wild and cruel past from appearing to blend into the bloody events on the screen before her” (30). These fusions are evidence of what Said calls a “contrapuntal” awareness. For Zubaida, as for many exiles (according to Said), the past and present merge together, and “both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (*Reflections* 186). At the level of characterization, these cultural memories, though not from her own lifetime, are as constitutive to Zubaida's Iraqi identity as are those individual memories about her family and childhood home. At the level of narrative, these passages in *Zubaida's*



*Window* demonstrate how history and lore both lend to the formation of a culture's memory.

Those interwoven scenes of Iraq's past influence Zubaida's present-day interpretation of the American invasion and the destruction of her home country, and through them, Al-Qazwini emphasizes the past's impact upon the present. But the protagonist's current psychological state – the impressions of the bombings in the novel's passages featuring the Zubaida of the present (2003) – illuminate the converse: the present also impacts the past. She begins to realize that today's events can affect our understanding of yesterday's. She predicts this encroachment early on, the day the bombing starts, when a passing neighbor asks if that's her city he sees on the news being bombed. She replies (more to herself than to him), "Yes, sir. It's happening here in my soul, too. They're bombing my memory" (6). Zubaida fears losing what she loves the most, her ability to remember, which has become a substitute for her ability to live in the world. She is aware of the exact moment of this substitution, when she realized she would not be able to return to Iraq; it was "the day the mundane dreams became impossible, unattainable hopes" (57). At that point, "she had been certain that she could, whenever she pleased, restore the past sequentially, exactly as in film, from the beginning up to the point known as the present." But as fragments of the past return unbidden as she watches her home destroyed on television, realization strikes: "now she knows how difficult it is to find the strong, invisible thread tying the tail of the past with what is to come" (57). The narrative arc gradually reveals what happens to her personally, as an individual, as her recollections fade in their congruity. As the novel – and her old age – progresses, the memories do lose their sequentiality: "The pictures in her head crowd and

intertwine each other without any logic ... All the past with its jarring, contradictory, and harmonious images overlap before her without chronological or logical order” (104). As Ricoeur tells us, narrative is dependent upon time, and the narrative of her life is fading without the chronology to support its connections.

Like memory, anxieties transition from the individual to the cultural when Zubaida begins to worry that the present destruction might erase the Iraqi past. First, she doubts her own ability to participate in the transmission of oral history: “Will [she] tell others the stories her grandmother had told her?” Then, she laments that, after all this bombing, there will be nothing left *but* the stories: “Will the homeland turn into nothing but memories?” Eventually, she despairs that perhaps the memories themselves will not remain, and will be gone along with the existence of geographical Iraq itself: “They are burning memories the way they set fire to a haystack. They are burning a land that stretches far and wide” (72). These concerns reprise the crisis of cultural identity Said discusses in his essay on Arabic prose. Zubaida lives in what he calls a “paradoxical present,” in which an erasure of the past threatens the culture’s future.

Like Zubaida and Al-Qazwini, Sinan Antoon is also an exile. He lived in Baghdad throughout the Iran-Iraq War and the first Gulf War – and, like Al-Qazwini, earned his bachelor’s degree at the University of Baghdad – but left soon after to attend graduate school in the U.S., earning a Master’s degree at Georgetown, then a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Harvard. Unlike Makiya, Antoon protested the American invasion. He recalls the unpopularity of his stance:

I was one of about 500 Iraqis in the diaspora — of various ethnic and political backgrounds, many of whom were dissidents and victims of Saddam’s regime —

who signed a petition: “No to war on Iraq. No to dictatorship.” While condemning Saddam’s reign of terror, we were against a war that would cause more death and suffering for innocent Iraqis and one that threatened to push the entire region into violent chaos. Our voices were not welcomed in mainstream media in the United States, which preferred the pro-war Iraqi-American who promised cheering crowds that would welcome invaders with “sweets and flowers.” There were none. (Antoon, “Fifteen Years Ago”)

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon more vehemently vocalizes this position through the character of Uncle Sabri, who denounces the American occupation, telling how he “was against the war and had demonstrated against it like millions in Germany and all over the world” (85). Although he had left Iraq in fear of execution years before, he now predicts that “these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam’s days” (96). He insists that the occupation is “the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all” (85). These remarks deeply impact Jawad, who had bonded with Sabri as a child when the charismatic uncle took him to his first soccer match. This is one of the many family-related childhood memories that influences Jawad’s mindset as he grows up.

Just as Al-Qazwini uses analepsis to emphasize the importance of childhood reminiscing to the formation and maintaining of Zubaida’s identity, Antoon employs the same technique to trace Jawad’s trajectory from boyhood to manhood. The novel begins in the present with a scene depicting a recurring nightmare Jawad has as an adult, but several lengthy flashbacks are interspersed among the chapters that follow. We begin to understand Jawad’s traumatic present as we are taken through images of his past: playing

soccer in the street with his older brother Ammoury, then the day when the flag-draped taxi came to their house to inform them that Ammoury was now a martyr; he had died in the Al-Faw battles.<sup>40</sup> He remembers the first day he visited the mghaysil, accompanying his mother to bring his father lunch, then a few years later when he first watched the ritual of washing the dead – every moment rendered in vivid multisensory detail – which is when he decided that he did not wish to carry on the family business. He remembers how, on that day, it seemed that “death had followed me home,” and he “couldn’t stop thinking that everything that Father had bought for us was paid for by death” (22). The nightmares that would plague his adolescence and adulthood begin that very night. His aversion to the corpses and his aptitude for art are the reasons he attends art school and refuses to become his father’s apprentice, despite the family’s disappointment. But everything changes the night his father dies during the bombing of Baghdad. Jawad thus associates the American occupation with his own reluctant dealings with death, as he must now take over the mghaysil to support his family. With the U.S. attack increasing the already-high death tolls of sectarian killings, there are more corpses (or parts thereof) than ever before, and he begins to feel a sense of responsibility to the dead.

Reviewers of the novel have connected Jawad’s personal trauma to Iraq’s cultural trauma. In the *Kenyon Review*, Scranton explains that Jawad’s experience is a microcosm of the nation’s: “The evisceration of Iraq’s middle class by despotism, sanctions, and three wars, and the final collapse of Iraqi society from a decade of brutal, mismanaged occupation [is shown] through the story of one damaged life.” The “collapse” of Jawad’s ambitions is heralded by the “collapse” of Baghdad; it initiates his descent (as he sees it)

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<sup>40</sup> Ammoury died in the Al-Faw battles during the Iran-Iraq War, not to be confused with the 2003 Battle of Al-Faw, one of the first battles of the American-Iraq War.

into corpse-washing and defers his dream of becoming a famous Iraqi artist. Scholar Radwa Mahmoud identifies *The Corpse Washer* as a “trauma novel” on two levels: “First, in an individual sense, it is a narrative of the trauma its characters experience. Second, on a broader historical level, it is the cultural product of a country with a traumatic history” (51). I would add that, in addition to the history of pre-occupation violence, well-known symptoms of trauma are reflected in both the character of Jawad and the spatiotemporal setting of Iraq 2003, such that the individual blurs with the collective.

Nightmares, for example, are common manifestations of the repetition compulsion of traumatic memory. The passages depicting Jawad’s nightmares weave in and out of realistic depictions of the occupied streets of Baghdad, sometimes rendering it difficult to distinguish dream from reality. The novel’s opening scene is Jawad’s nightmare of his late lover Reem being raped by American soldiers, a sexual trauma that can be read as a symbolic representation of the U.S. military’s invasion – penetration – of Iraq. Moreover, trauma has been conceptualized as “the wound that cries out” (Caruth 4), which is literalized in Jawad’s nightmares as the wounded dead upon his washing table at the mghaysil begin to cry out to him to clean them so they can rest in peace. The explosion of sectarian violence after the American invasion becomes a metaphor for a clamoring wound, while the torrent of new corpses is comparable to the seeping of blood from wound that is fatal. Feelings of suffocation reported by trauma survivors parallel Jawad’s own sense of suffocation when he is overwhelmed by more bodies than he can wash each day. Harvard Medical’s leading trauma psychiatrist Judith Herman states that, among survivors of trauma, “feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal”

(53). Jawad's thoughts and dreams reflect such guilt, first for his initial reluctance to take over the mghaysil, and then, when he does, he feels unworthy to be carrying out this sacred duty of washing corpses and preparing them for burial. Some of his dreams include his watching his own murder, a manifestation of *thanatos*, the death drive. Though the novel's chapters alternate between past and present, the present-day passages show Baghdad becoming increasingly more bloody and violent, with Jawad's nightmares becoming correspondingly more intense. His trauma mirrors the country's trauma to the extent that, were his character not so fully developed and detailed, Jawad might be read as a simple allegory of occupied Iraq itself.

While all four novels discussed in this chapter deliberately stage the intersections of past and present and represent Iraq's cultural trauma through the trauma of individual characters, *The Corpse Washer's* unique contribution is its dialectic of creation and destruction. Antoon aligns Art with Jawad's pre-invasion freedom and Death with his post-invasion responsibility. His first art teacher, Mr. Ismael, praises his pencil sketching above those of classmates, and tells the class that "art was intimately linked with immortality: a challenge to death and time, a celebration of life" (31). He encourages Jawad to continue practicing, but the mentorship ends when Mr. Ismael is called up for military training. No replacement was hired because art classes and others not deemed important were cut due to budget restrictions. Though Jawad had no further formal training and no other mentors until he attended the Academy of Fine Arts five years later, he continued to fill sketch pads on his own and experimented with painting and sculpture. The teacher's comments about art as creation and as the antithesis to death resonate with young Jawad and inform his artistic vision.

At the art academy, Jawad develops a passion for the work of Alberto Giacometti and decides to become a sculptor. Then, after the required term of compulsory military service (and much to his father's chagrin), he becomes an art teacher in nearby Ba'quba instead of working at the mghaysil, intending to pursue sculpting on the side. But he finds no time to create his own art, the salary is barely sufficient to cover his transportation to and from the school, and he wonders, "Why was I so naïve as to nurture the illusion that I could make a living as an artist, especially during the years of the embargo?" (79). Then the Americans invade and his father dies, so starts painting houses for side work to help support his family, while his father's assistant Hammoudy takes over the corpse-washing work at the mghaysil. As the violence around him escalates and the economy continues to wane, Jawad's dream of becoming a successful Iraqi artist is rendered an impossibility. The limitations of his art become a metaphor for the restraints of creativity in occupied Iraq. The death of Jawad's ambition occurs when he finally agrees to take over the mghaysil, running his father's business despite his lifelong abhorrence of it, because the family now desperately needs the money. Instead of molding the perfect human form out of clay or stone to display for the world to see, he now uses his hands to prepare imperfect corpses – often dreadfully incomplete, with body parts missing – for the ground. The hands of an artist have become the hands of a civil servant. Instead of creating sculptures, he now only dreams of them amidst his traumatic nightmares of the death and destruction going on all around him, which he must see firsthand when the brutalized bodies are brought to him to wash and shroud.

In the novel's shortest chapter – one brief paragraph – Jawad dreams that the head of a Giacometti statue sits on his bench at the mghaysil. He begins to wash it, just as he

would a corpse's head, but it "dissolves into tiny fragments." Despite his attempts to repair the damage, "everything disintegrates in [his] hands" (141). Similarly, the city around him is deteriorating, and many of the familiar places – monuments, shrines, halls, soccer arenas – are reduced to rubble by the Americans, for "propelled by the illusion of erasing the past and forcibly disfiguring the present, the new Saddams were taking down statues left and right" (175). The image of a crumbling statue, like Shelley's Ozymandias,<sup>41</sup> becomes a dominant metaphor for both the country and its people: "So, we, too, are statues, but we never stop crushing one another in the name of the one who made us. We are statues whose permanent exhibition is dust" (162).

Near the novel's end, after most of his family has fled for the countryside, Jawad decides to leave Iraq and move to Jordan. He has been operating the mghaysil for two years now, and he feels that he is "suffocating," that "the nightmares are driving [him] insane" (170). As he packs a bag to leave the land in which he was born, he is overwhelmed with a sense of loss: "Images and emotions crowded my inner domes: my heart and mind. All the statues I never sculpted and the drawings which remained sketches in my mind ... Tears poured down and covered my face" (170). He hates to leave but knows he must, for reasons of survival both physical and psychological. Unfortunately, when he finally makes it to the border to enter Amman, the Jordanian officer barely looks at his passport before casting him aside, gruffly barking, "No single men. Only families get in" (180). Jawad must turn back. There is nothing left for him now but the mghaysil, so he resolves to immerse himself in the work of washing the

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<sup>41</sup> Incidentally, Percy Bysshe Shelley composed his sonnet "Ozymandias" the same year as his twelve-canto orientalist poem, *The Revolt of Islam* (1818).



corpses, giving his countrymen the respect in death that many of them did not receive in life.

In the novel's closing scene, Jawad finishes performing the washing ritual on the corpse of a nine-year-old boy. Then, overwhelmed with despair, he retreats outside to the little garden behind the mghaysil to sit next to the pomegranate tree that has stood there since his earliest memories of the place. As a boy, when his father was trying to teach him the rituals, Jawad would escape the stifling hut of corpses by going out to the garden to sketch this tree and its fruit. His father had loved the tree because, to him, it represented life born from death. The water used to wash the corpses in the mghaysil ran into a drain that flowed into the garden, directly into the roots of the pomegranate tree. It had been there when Father himself was a child, and decade after decade, fed by this water of death, it continued to produce fruit. Until this end scene, however, the tree was just an object to Jawad – something pretty to sketch to get out of doing work. He recalls his father bringing home the fruit he had plucked from it, and that he stopped eating it in disgust when he found out it came from that tree. He recalls his father laying pieces of pomegranate branches next to the corpses inside their coffins, for they were believed to “lessen the pain of the grave” (65). But it is only after his transformation, his surrender, his failed attempt to leave and his final acquiescence to live to serve the dead at the mghaysil, that Jawad can appreciate the pomegranate tree as a living thing. At this closing scene, he converses with it. “It has become my only companion in the world,” he realizes, and as he considers it in this new light, he sees “its red blossoms [as] opened like wounds on the branches, breathing and calling out” (183). He marvels at its ability to flourish, even as its branches are removed to be buried with the dead. He now recognizes

the error of his ways: “I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other. My father knew that, and the pomegranate tree knows it as well.” He feels that the disappointments of his life have been like the severed branches, but unlike this tree, his dreams cannot grow back. The novel ends with these lines: “I am like the pomegranate tree, but all my branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead. My heart has become a shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit. But no one knows. No one. The pomegranate alone knows” (184).<sup>42</sup>

The pomegranate is also a recurring symbol in *The Rope*, though it is therein usually associated with scenes of death and bereavement. After the loss of his father in the prison camps, the Narrator and his family move into his uncle’s house. At the center of the courtyard they must pass through to enter the house stood his “uncle’s pride and joy, an ancient pomegranate tree eight meters high with a thicket of spiny curling branches spreading overhead that had been there since Grandfather was a child” (Makiya 29). The now-fatherless Narrator sees this tree every day; it becomes a constant presence in his life when everything else around him is changing. When his mother is on her deathbed years later, the neighbor ladies make her drink juice from the pomegranates because it was believed to have restorative powers. Later, when his friend Muntassir is dying from wounds inflicted by grenade shrapnel, the Narrator brings him pomegranate juice to cheer him up, telling him, “All good things come from the sweetness of pomegranate juice, my mother used to say. The fruit is blessed, being mentioned in all the Holy Books numerous times. Drink up; it will do you good” (76). Near the end of their

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<sup>42</sup> The original title of Antoon’s novel in Arabic and French was *The Pomegranate Alone*.

conversation, when the Narrator is preparing to leave, Muntassir tells him, alluding to his grenade wounds, “The pomegranate juice you brought reminded me of it just now. I remember thinking it was not right to call a hand grenade a ‘pomegranate’ the way we Iraqis do in Arabic.<sup>43</sup> A thing that takes life should not be confused with one that grows in Paradise and is in the Holy Book as a giver of life and sweetness” (78). This comment in *The Rope* recalls and reverts the life/death pomegranate-paradox staged in *The Corpse Washer*: while Jawad had marveled at the mghaysil tree’s sustained life despite being fed by the waters of death, Muntassir laments language’s transformation of the fruit of life into a weapon of death. Despite this ironic inversion, in both novels the pomegranate is bound up with both cultural trauma and individual trauma – for Jawad, the incessant procession of bodies he must wash, which plague his nightmares; for Makiya’s Narrator, the loss of his father, then mother, then Muntassir.

Through the character of Muntassir, Makiya presents another object symbolic of both individual and cultural trauma. The Narrator first meets the young man who is to become a close friend and brother-in-arms when they are in line at the military registration center. Muntassir’s sartorial conspicuity draws the Narrator’s attention:

What distinguished this scrawny young man in a dirty dishdasha from everyone else in the line that day were his black leather boots; they were worn down at an angle on both heels, with a very badly scuffed right toe. Muntassir didn’t seem to realize how inappropriate his footwear was, given the rest of his attire; he was expecting a uniform but did not get it. He had worn his boots so as to be prepared

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<sup>43</sup> The French word for *pomegranate* is *pomme-grenade*, which the English language adapted as the name of a small explosive shell, “so called because the many-seeded fruit suggested the powder-filled, fragmenting bomb, or from similarities of shape” (“Grenade”). Arabic slang reverses the etymological adaptation.

for the soldier's uniform he was expecting. His face became pride in his life's new mission; at least he still had a soldier's attendant footwear, even though the boots were not the right size and were laced up wrongly, having their tongues pulled out of the bottom lace and hanging forward, as though lapping at the leather. (72)

Shabby in appearance but meaningful in intent, these boots reappear throughout the novel. Months after that day in line, when the Narrator visits Muntassir as he dies from his shrapnel wound, he asks him if he has any regrets. Muntassir gestures toward the boots next to his bed and responds, "My dream was to be a part of something bigger, to serve Muslims as poor as my parents. My father was a soldier in the war with Iran; those are his boots. I wore them on the day of the battle" (77). As Muntassir is breathing his last, "his eyes kept turning to the worn-out boots on the floor. His heart, [the Narrator] thought, was like those boots: worn down from proximity to death; that brought his death and his boots into some kind of alignment. Perhaps that is what it means to die. The last thing he said was, 'I want you to have my boots'" (79). Not wanting to deny his friend's last wishes, the Narrator takes the boots even though they do not fit him and carrying around such a non-necessity would burden his near-nomadic soldier's existence. But he also recognizes them for more than just footwear: "The wearing down, the scuffing on the leather, and the endless replacement of heels ... these actions no longer belonged to specific times and places separated by the different wars of a father and his son; they summed up the only tiny little shreds of dignity and honor attached to the story of Iraq" (79). More than a symbol of his individual dignity and family honor, Muntassir's boots

represent the cultural trauma of generations of Iraqi men who fought passionately for their land and their beliefs.

A third object of significance to Makiya's characters and representative of Iraqi cultural trauma is that of the title: the rope. We first read about the rope in the opening narrative frame, on the day the Narrator serves as a bodyguard at Saddam's execution in 2006. When he comes home that evening, his roommate Haider asks, "Did you get me the piece of rope you promised?" (20). The Narrator had boasted to his friends that he could sneak out a length of the rope so they could profit from selling bits of it. After the hanging, he realizes that he wasn't the only one with this idea: "When I left the compound the haggling was still in full swing. Even ministers and high-ranking officials were caught up in it. Everyone wanted a memento to show that they had been there" (20). The rope is perceived by all present as a souvenir of the event, the long-awaited end of the Tyrant. However, after witnessing the execution up close, the Narrator no longer wants anything to do with it. Here he delivers a powerful monologue that functions as a preface to the novel as a whole:

A handful of hours separated the "before" of the hanging from its "after." Before, I bragged about the rope; after, I saw nothing to brag about. Instead I felt ashamed . . . We children of the Great Tyrant were behaving as though it was the physical and literal world that was real and permanent. It was not freedom and the end of war and tyranny that were real; it was the rope that was real. And I was cashing in on that new reality. A world-changing thing – the end of tyranny – had atrophied to one of its artifacts. Too late did I awake; too late did I realize that we had been

prostrating ourselves before new idols, like a piece of the hangman's rope. (21-22)

The Narrator's epiphany signals his coming of age in a time of rage, a generation's realization that this one mortal man, Saddam Hussein, destroyed by something so tangible and so worthless as a few yards of rope, had come to embody in their minds all of the ills of their society. But it is this object that also betrays the false anticipation: how could such an insignificant item – and even its object of destruction, one man – signal any true “end of tyranny?” The Narrator realizes that the rope's value is constructed by himself and the others who have imbued it with meaning. Their celebration of the rope as signaling an end to decades of oppression coincides with their hopeful expectation that the “new idols” will come through on their promises of freedom and economic opportunity. Alas, as the Narrator himself comes to realize, the Americans are yet another false god who will usher in another era of Iraqi cultural trauma.

I have included these three objects – the pomegranate, the boots, and the rope – in my analysis of trauma and memory in Makiya's novel for two reasons. First, because he told me to. He explicitly emphasizes the importance of symbols by having one of his characters, a respected neighborhood sheik, state: “Do not underestimate a symbol's power” (194). Secondly, these items are significant because they are more than symbols – they are memory objects. Jan Assman explains that “external objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory. Our memory, which we possess as beings equipped with a human mind, exists only in constant interaction not only with other human memories but also with ‘things’” – and here he offers the literary example of Proust's madeleine. The connection, he insists, is that memory is “based on

material contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object. Things do not ‘have’ a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them.” What works for the individual works for the collective or cultural. He theorizes that “On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not ‘have’ a memory tend to ‘make’ themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural memory” (Assman 111). In Antoon’s and Makiya’s texts, objects embody memories, while in Al-Qazwini’s and Saadawi’s novels, this trope is inverted: memories are treated by Zubaida and Elishva as if they are objects. Not only are the objects powerful reminders for the characters who hold them, and in a larger sense, symbolic in regards to Iraqi culture, they are also examples of material memory, a concretizing of the abstract, a present manifestation of the past.

Like the other novels discussed here, the persistent merging of past into present is also dramatized in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Saadawi achieves this by characterizing elderly Elishva as a present personification of the past. Not only does she keep memories inside her like objects that she can take out at will, she seems to live in the past rather than accepting the reality of current events going on around her. She refuses to move to Australia to live with her daughters, though they plead with her to do so because of the rapidly increasing dangers of her present residence. Her neighbors in the Bataween district of Baghdad view her as a relic of the past, thinking of her in the same terms used to describe her dilapidated old house. She clings to the belief that her long-lost son Daniel

is still alive, to the extent that when Hadi's amalgamation of body parts comes to life as the Whatsitsname, she believes it is her son. Hadi lives in an alley hovel connected to the back of Elishva's house, so she is the first to see the creature as it emerges into the light and, half-blind, she embraces it and brings it into her house, elated that her "son" has finally come back to her after all these years.

Beyond the character of Elishva, Saadawi does not emphasize the intersection of past and present to the extent of the other novelists; there are only a few passages that mention Iraqi history before the occupation. However, he represents memory processes and trauma compulsions by centralizing a trope that is peripheral – yet still present – in the other three novels: writing (or similar forms of narration) as an action to support memory. This is illustrated through the practices of four characters in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: Hadi's storytelling, Mahmoud the reporter's note-taking and journalism, the Whatsitsname's voice-recorded self-interview, and the self-reflexive Novelist's subversive act of making the story public despite censoring. Individually, these characters write or tell stories to remember, to bear witness, or to cope with a traumatic experience. Taken as a whole, Firmani notes in his review, "The novel wrestles with competing voices, as it becomes clear that different parties are trying to define the story." This polyvocality emphasizes the complexities of cultural memory formation. That these "competing voices" use different methods to narrate their versions demonstrates what Astrid Erll calls the "intermedial dynamic" that is necessary for individual memories to become culturally disseminated and associated with a specific time, place, or people. Hadi's stories, Mahmoud's field notes and newspaper articles, the Whatsitsname's recording, and the Novelist's final product (*Frankenstein in Baghdad* itself) all contribute



to a process of “remediation,” wherein remembered events are “re”-presented by multiple subjects and in different media forms, such that what is known about an event (or “phenomenon,” which better describes the Whatsitsname’s existence and mission) “refers not so much to what one might cautiously call the ‘actual events,’ but instead to a canon of existent medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture” (Erll 392). Cultural memory, then, is understood to be composed of perspectives and representations, as opposed to History, which is often thought to be comprised of objective information like dates, names, and geography.<sup>44</sup> So, what is remembered of an event is not necessarily the happening-truth of the event.

In Hadi the junk dealer’s case, though, he tells it as he sees it. Unfortunately, most people don’t believe him because of the absurd things he witnesses as someone under the radar. Due to his low social status, tattered clothes, and perpetual stench of alcohol, his listeners doubt the veracity of his tales. This is also because the intensity of his narration is evocative of fiction: “To make the stories he told more interesting, Hadi was careful to include realistic details . . . He loved details that gave his story credibility and made it more vivid. He would just be telling people about his hard day’s work, but they would listen as though it were the best fable Hadi the liar had ever told” (Saadawi 18, 60). Socially invisible, he enjoys being heard, and despite their doubts, his way with details makes people remember the things he tells them. Each morning in the café is the highlight of his day, when he tells the other patrons about his previous days’ wanderings

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<sup>44</sup> Hayden White complicates this distinction. In *Metahistory* (1973), White argues that we can never have direct access to or objective knowledge of the past, only historians’ interpretations and narrativizing of it. Like writers of literature, historians use tropes of representation to arrange historical data into narrative form.

throughout the city, the explosions and corpses and other morbidities he encounters: “He immersed himself in the story and went with the flow, maybe in order to give pleasure to others or maybe to convince himself that it was just a story from his fertile imagination and that it had never really happened” (60). His tales, though actually unembellished observations, permit him an escape from his poverty and alcoholism and give him a voice in the community. Later in the novel, however, after he has inadvertently created Whatsitsname and it has escaped his control to wreak violent vengeance upon the city, the joy of storytelling wanes when it is accompanied by responsibility: “He was eager to convince Mahmoud that his story was true . . . Typically he’d seem relaxed and cheerful while knowing deep down that others didn’t believe what he was saying, [but] when he was telling Mahmoud the story of the Whatsitsname, he wasn’t enjoying it. It was more like he was fulfilling an obligation or conveying a message” (127). Now the telling has become a compulsion of guilt-induced trauma. He’s been traumatized by the violent deaths he’s witnessed throughout the past several bomb-ridden years; now compounding this is his guilt at having created a monster. Although the Whatsitsname’s killings are committed with moral intent, as acts of vengeance upon the murderers of the persons whose body parts compose his own anatomy, he is nonetheless a creature of destruction. As it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate criminals from victims, Hadi realizes that he is responsible for destruction through his creation of the monster.

Mahmoud feels a sense of responsibility, too: to report the news and to keep the community aware. This vocation puts him on the trail of the new danger lurking the streets each night. While Hadi is not bothered by the fact that his listeners don’t believe him, reporting accurate truths is important to conscientious Mahmoud. He carries around

both a notebook and a voice recorder so as not to forget his observations and conversations, because he thinks unaltered truth comes from immediacy: “He believed that emotions changed memories, that when you lost the emotion associated with a particular event, you lost an important part of the event. So he had to write down things that he thought were important or record them on his little recorder when the emotions that went with them were still strong” (Saadawi 119). Note-taking also has a familial resonance with Mahmoud. His father had “written down everything” in diaries he kept in school notebooks, filling up twenty-seven of them before his death. Mahmoud imagines his father as having “written the naked truth in black ink” (119). When his father died, Mahmoud’s mother burned all the notebooks and then baked bread over their ashes, “but Mahmoud sometimes remembered some of what his father had written and tried to piece it together with scraps of information that had been suppressed forever, in an attempt to understand things, even if there was no longer any way to verify the information” (120). The act of writing seems to have concretized his father’s thoughts and observations in some way, such that even when the physical notebooks were gone, something remained. Here, writing and memory have a reciprocal interplay: Mahmoud writes (or records) so he can remember faithfully later on when he is writing up the news stories, yet what inspires his ambition to do so is the faithful memory of his father’s writings.

When Hadi tells Mahmoud about the Whatsitname, the journalist is initially skeptical. He tells Hadi he won’t believe him until he presents evidence, so he lends the junkman his digital Panasonic voice recorder to interview the creature. The occasion presents itself to Hadi (whom the Whatsitname refers to as his “father”) when the creature laments that rumors have been giving him a “bad reputation,” that he’s being

accused of “committing crimes,” and that what people don’t understand is that he’s really “the only justice there is in this country” (Saadawi 135). At the suggestion of an interview, the Whatsitsname balks, saying he doesn’t want to draw attention to himself and won’t talk to the press. But Hadi presents it as an opportunity for the creature to defend himself, “to win some friends to help you in your mission” (135). The Whatsitsname agrees to do an interview, on the condition that he take the voice recorder from Hadi and do it himself, alone.

He begins the self-interview by stating that he doesn’t have much time. As he avenges each death, the original owner’s body part melts off of him, and his assistants are having difficulty replacing them in time. He fears that his own end will arrive before he’s completed his mission. The purpose of the interview, he explains, is to right the wrongs done to him by the rumors. He describes his mission as “a moral and humanitarian obligation,” for he is certain that he is “the answer to [the people’s] call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty” (143). He wants there to be a record of these intentions, and further, he wants his mission to be carried into the future, beyond his own existence. He presents himself as “an example of vengeance – the vengeance of the innocent who have no protection other than the tremors of their souls as they pray to ward off death” (143). He goes on to tell the story of his creation, the philosophy of his destruction, the conditions of his own existence, and the confessions of who he has killed so far. This narration thus serves multiple functions: as a record of events, as a corrective, a manifesto, and a call to action. Its role in constructing the memory of the “Frankenstein in Baghdad” phenomenon is intensified in Saadawi’s closing chapters, when the interview becomes a primary source for the Novelist’s controversial text.

Readers meet the unnamed Novelist in only one chapter, the second-to-last, which is narrated in first-person and explains how Mahmoud the journalist sells him a silver Panasonic digital recorder for \$400, “a hundred for the recorder itself and three hundred for the story that was recorded on it” (Saadawi 259). Mahmoud promises that “it was the strangest story that had ever come his way ... and a writer like me [the Novelist] could use it to write a great novel” (260). This is, of course, the same recorder that holds the Whatsitsname’s self-interview, but it also holds the voice-recorded notes of Mahmoud, who is by this point in the narrative no longer a journalist since his newspaper has been shut down. The Novelist notes that the voice of the Whatsitsname (who Mahmoud refers to as “Frankenstein” based on his prior viewing of the Robert DeNiro film version) is “deep, like that of a well-known broadcaster,” which adds to his “suspicions that the whole story was made up” (264). Nonetheless, he makes inquiries with several people in Hadi’s neighborhood and investigates the various incidents in which the Whatsitsname was allegedly involved, eventually revealing the story’s authenticity. He is emailed by someone claiming to be the Whatsitsname’s assistant, who sends him documents filched from the Tracking and Pursuit Department which further corroborate the story. Aware that the Department is bent on concealing the events, the Novelist is anxious as he proceeds with his manuscript – and rightly so, for he is soon “arrested and sent for questioning in front of a panel of Iraqi and American officers,” and they confiscate the “incomplete seventeen-chapter version of the story” he had written so far (270). This confirms the subtly foreshadowed metafiction: the reader realizes that this Novelist-narrated section of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is Chapter 18, suggesting that the seventeen

previous chapters we've just read were the same as those confiscated by the authorities – and that, perhaps, this unnamed Novelist is Ahmed Saadawi himself.

After lengthy interrogation, the Novelist is released, but the officers do not return his manuscript, and they forbid him to rewrite it. He, of course, immediately returns to his hotel room and starts writing. Several days later, his contact claiming to be the Whatsitsname's assistant (evidently a mole at the Tracking and Pursuit Department), sends him their Final Report on the case, which, in a stroke of verisimilitude that will be plumbed later in this chapter, Saadawi features as paratext prior to the first chapter of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The Recommendations section of this official report indicates that the Novelist is to be re-arrested, this time with severer consequences. So he flees. He is not heard from again. Curiously, though, the last pages of Saadawi's book are not an editorial author's bio, Author's Note, Afterword, or Acknowledgments – none of the usual back matter. Instead, the very last page of the book contains the last paragraphs of the novel itself. Beneath the final paragraph and aligned to the right side of the page is this italicized note:

*Baghdad*  
*2008-12*

This sort of place/date notation more commonly follows an author's personal or nonfictional paratext before or after the novel – the aforementioned back matter, or perhaps a Preface or Epilogue. Its appearance here suggests that this novel is the same that was written by the eighteenth-chapter Novelist, insinuating that after fleeing the city, he finished and published the story of the Whatsitsname which we have here before us titled *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi.

This novel, then, is an act of resistance. It is such first through metafiction: the Novelist-within-the-novel writes it despite being warned that it was no longer lawful for him to do so. He has come to believe the story, and he understands that it needs to be heard by others. Therefore, he continues his pursuit after being ordered not to, and, ostensibly, he finishes and publishes it after he flees Baghdad. He has made public that information which was heretofore concealed, and even though it is in the form of a novel rather than nonfiction reportage, it has become solidified, made permanent in writing and now circulating as an object to contribute to the construction of cultural memory. Within this novel-as-artifact, too, are included the narrations of Hadi in its earlier chapters and those of Mahmoud and the Whatsitsname in its middle chapters, such that the “competing voices” are brought together in one place like an anthology of memories of this supernatural phenomenon that occurred in Baghdad in the mid-to late-2000s.

The writing of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is also an act of resistance performed by Saadawi, who opposed the American occupation of Iraq from the beginning, and who links U.S. influence to the dissipation of the Whatsitsname’s moral compass for the purpose of allegory. As the novel progresses, the creature becomes less a messiah and more a monster. For the replacement of his vanishing body parts and continuation of his mission, he must abandon his restriction of slaying only murderers. For his own survival, he must begin killing indiscriminately. As the character Brigadier Majid states, “It was the Americans who were behind this monster.” The word “this” differentiates the “monster” that the Whatsitsname becomes from the messiah he was initially thought to be, allegorizing the Iraqi people’s misled expectations about the Americans. The so-

called saviors who rescued them from Saddam became the new monsters in town. In his *LARB* review of Saadawi's novel, Firmani makes a similar connection. He writes,

Ultimately, the Whatsitsname's mistake is to conflate revenge and justice, a tragic error that Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani argues, in his 2004 book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, was also made by the Americans, who "dish[ed] out collective punishment, with callous disregard for either 'collateral damage' or legitimate grievances." In stark contrast to U.S. narratives of the Iraq War, which largely focus on the American experience of trauma, Saadawi and his fellow Iraqi writers depict Baghdad as a space where the absurd is not a function of Islam or the "backward" Arab mind but rather the product of the United States's imperialist encroachment.

Firmani thus classifies *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a novel about – and lashing out at – empire. The Orientalist assumption of the East (in this case, specifically Baghdad) as bizarre, otherworldly, and "absurd" is revealed for the externally-cast façade that it is – a perception about the culture constructed by those outside it, who, ironically, supply the fodder for such a perception through their diplomatic intervention. By situating the Whatitsname's failing mission as allegorically symbolic of the Americans' fumbling maneuvers, Saadawi actively resists the dominant western narrative that features the U.S. as self-sacrificing, well-intentioned, and very much in control.

In fact, all four of these novels can be understood as profoundly political acts. Not only do their authors write against the grain of English-language war narratives, they also feature writing or narration as tropes of power. The concept of writing as an act of resistance – against empire, against oppression, and even against individual traumatic



memory – has been theorized by various scholars. Said maintains that Arabic literature after independence from the British Empire is both an achievement of postcolonial resistance and “a historical act” (*Reflections* 48). Annette Krizanich claims that, in the case of some fiction, “the pen is mightier than the dominant discourse” and that writing enables “agency and healing” (396). Writing is also linked to healing the emotional and psychological ravages of traumatic memory in studies like social psychologist James Pennebaker’s *Opening Up* (1990) and *Writing to Heal* (2004). In *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst argues that “cultural forms [especially the novel] have provided the genres and narrative forms in which traumatic disruption is temporalized and rendered transmissible.” He adds that “trauma has become a paradigm because it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory, and selfhood” (80). Luckhurst goes on to define the characteristics and conventions of the trauma-narrative genre. In a larger sense, entire literary traditions – with twentieth-century African American literature as a prime example—represent writing and storytelling as both resistance and recovery. In addition to Saadawi’s trope of narration as a function of memory in these terms, the other three novelists studied in this chapter include it as well, establishing the trope’s importance in contemporary Iraqi war novels.

*The Rope*’s unnamed Narrator, for example, opens the narrative frame by explaining that the story to follow was compiled from several “blue-ruled school notebooks” he kept from April 2003 (before he became involved in the militia) to the day of Saddam’s execution in 2006. He tells us, “The notes I recorded in them between 2003 and 2006 form the backbone of this account” (Makiya 3). Like the characters in

*Frankenstein in Baghdad*, *The Rope*'s Narrator feels a sense of responsibility to bear witness to the events during the American invasion and occupation, though there is a delay in its dissemination evocative of Caruth's theorizing of the latent tendency of traumatic memory. The Narrator laments that there were "so many years since the hanging, years in which this account was formless fragments, nothing more. I spent them floundering in doubt, dragging my notebooks around in a battered suitcase . . . I carried them with me wherever I went . . . because I took a vow the day of the hanging to record the truth as I began to see it on that day" (7). The truth, embodied both literally and figuratively in the suitcase of notebooks, is a burden akin to Coleridge's albatross. Like the accursed fowl, it reminds Makiya's Narrator of his guilt at being involved in the events of those three years.

Writing and record-keeping also appear as symbolic acts in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. From the first day of accompanying his father to the mghaysil as a young boy, Jawad jots down notes of the ritual process "so as not to forget anything" (24). He then turns to sketching as a tool to remember what he sees: "After I'd exhausted all my questions about death and filled numerous notebooks with notes about the rituals of washing, I started to draw" (30). Years later, after his father is dead and Jawad has surrendered his artistic ambitions in order to take over the mghaysil, he finds comfort in "the notebook in which, one summer many years ago, I had written down everything about washing bodies. Its pages had yellowed, but the cover was still intact. Sketches of my father's face and his worry beads and Imam Ali's face and the faces of other people filled the pages and framed the notes I'd taken" (126). When the violence of the occupation and sectarianism reach their peak and anonymous body parts begin making

their way to his washing bench, he copes with the onslaught by taking up the notebooks again. He writes of the corpses, “My desk is the bench of death . . . Most of them [now] had no papers or IDs and no one knew their names. Instead of names, I wrote down the causes of death in my notebook: a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by suicide bomb” (131). More than just a literal method of memory-keeping, the notebook also becomes a metaphor for memory. Believing it is blasphemous and disrespectful to draw the dead, he limits his literal note-taking to the words of causation and description. Still, “nothing could erase the faces. My memory became a notebook for the faces of the dead” (131). The physical notebook and the abstract psyche have a symbiotic relationship; Jawad’s mind serves when his pencil fails.

In Al-Qazwini’s novel, Zubaida turns to writing to create her last testament and to recall the pasts when her mind fails her: “She has written these [memories] down for her own benefit, hoping that they might leap back into life once recorded on paper. She needs to become reacquainted with her story . . . She wants to conjure the past, to feel the present state, and to record the impossible dreams she has been longing for, in a manner similar to a confession before a priest, hoping it brings her some relief” (116). Zubaida’s writing is an attempt at catharsis, corresponding to Pennebaker’s theory of scriptotherapy, as well as an attempt to recreate or resurrect the past in the present. This connects back to Said’s claim about the role of the post-World War II Arabic writer, which is “to guarantee survival to what was in imminent danger of extinction” (*Reflections* 48). Just as Zubaida is inscribing her story in order to keep the past alive despite the destruction she witnesses from her “window,” Al-Qazwini and the other Iraqi novelists discussed herein

have turned to writing as a means to preserve Iraq's rich culture, so that it might not be whitewashed or extinguished by the louder, more powerful voice of empire. These novels stand – and, through translation, proliferate – as memory objects themselves, to illuminate the perspectives of the lesser-heard but most-affected and to challenge the savior-narrative of the war that has been authored and widely distributed from the hegemonic West. We have our own history, they say, and we will survive and thrive without American military intervention.

#### INTERTEXTUAL TRANSCULTURALISM: ARABIC-ANGLO DOUBLE-VOICING

Another way these novelists convey a sense of cultural independence is by emphasizing a uniquely Arabic literary heritage stemming from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Yet they simultaneously demonstrate that they are not ignorant of Western literary influence, despite Orientalist assumptions of an unenlightened or barbaric Middle Eastern populace. Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi acknowledge transcultural influence by intertextualizing Western literature, particularly works about war-related oppression and suffering, which they suggest is universal as long as power is attained and maintained through violence. In addition to these novels' interior tropings of memory through trauma symptoms, symbolic objects, and writing or storytelling, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, they also participate in memory construction externally – through intertextuality. German literary theorist Renate Lachmann claims that “literature is culture's memory” (301), and that “the memory of the text is formed by the intertextuality of its references” (304). Unlike American-authored Iraq War novels, which incorporate mostly Western texts, the four novels studied in this chapter indicate both Arabic and Anglo influences. This suggests a “double-voicing” similar to that which

Henry Louis Gates theorizes about African American literature in *The Signifying Monkey*. My theory of the double-voiced quality of contemporary Iraqi war fiction is further supported by the transcultural identities of three of the four authors being examined: Al-Qazwini as an Iraqi living in Germany, and Antoon and Makiya as Iraqis living in America. While Saadawi remains living in Iraq, his interviews and other writings attest to a diverse knowledge of Middle Eastern, European, and American literature.

As I argued in the previous section, writing is used as a defense against forgetting by Al-Qazwini's Zubaida, Antoon's Jawad, Makiya's Narrator, and Saadawi's characters. Similarly, the authors themselves use writing as a tool of resistance and recovery by resurrecting a much older Arabic literary heritage, carrying it forward into contemporary Iraqi literature, and disseminating it into the West through English translation. They do so most notably by incorporating stylistic and thematic elements of what is considered the paradigmatic Arabic literary text: *One Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>45</sup> *Nights* itself is multicultural. Its origins are Persian, Indian, Greek, Egyptian, Turkish – all major cultures in the eastern hemisphere. The tales have also undergone several translations, some even tertiary (from Arabic to French to English, for example), which have prompted scholars to debate their authenticity. Many of the written stories, though initially transmitted orally, are Iraqi in origin. *Nights* scholar and NYU-Abu Dhabi professor Paulo Horta explains that “the original core of the *Nights* – including the [framing] tale of Shahrazad and King Shahriyar – likely began with Sanskrit and Persian source texts and coalesced as a story collection in Arabic by the ninth century. This first Arabic version of the *Nights* was created in medieval Baghdad, [and] became an essential

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<sup>45</sup> The title *One Thousand and One Nights* hereafter appears as *Nights*.

part of the story collection” (488). He goes on to trace the appearance of the city of Baghdad throughout these tales, pointing out how “these core stories often partake of the legend of Harun al-Rashid,<sup>46</sup> and some contain the residue of a unified urban space tied to an identifiable ethical and political realm, perhaps a legacy of the city designed as a perfect circle in the eighth century” (Horta 490).<sup>47</sup> By incorporating the *Nights* into their novels, Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi are continuing a larger Arabic heritage, and – perhaps more importantly to their own authorial identities – a specifically *Iraqi* literary tradition.<sup>48</sup>

The importance of the *Nights* to world literature – not just Middle Eastern literature – cannot be overstated. The amount of scholarly work published about it over the last few centuries is overwhelming. To briefly emphasize its significance to Western literature, I quote the literary critic and novelist A.S. Byatt: “The great novels of Western culture, from *Don Quixote* to *War and Peace*, from *Moby Dick* to *Doctor Faustus*, were

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<sup>46</sup> Harun Al-Rashid was the fifth Abbasid Caliph. He ruled during the peak of the Islamic Golden Age, and the flourishing of Baghdad as a major cultural center of the Middle East is attributed to his influence. He also appears as a protagonist in many of the *Nights* tales.

<sup>47</sup> Baghdad was designed in the shape of a perfect circle by the second Abbasid Caliph, Muhammad Al-Mansur, who founded the city in 762 as the new seat of his Islamic empire.

<sup>48</sup> Beyond these four novels, additional evidence that contemporary Iraqi writers are resurrecting Arabic literary tradition with the *Nights* include Dunya Mikhail’s poem “The Iraqi Nights,” which is about the fall of Baghdad and the American occupation. It explicitly references “a thousand and one nights” and “Scheherazade.” Furthermore, one of the short stories in Hassan Blasim’s award-winning collection *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq* (2014) riffs on the *Nights* with its title “One Thousand and One Knives.”

constructed in the shadow of Scheherazade's<sup>49</sup> story" (170).<sup>50</sup> Its continued trans-hemispheric influence mirrors the *both-Eastern-and-Western* influence found in the novels under examination here. This section will discuss the way these novelists intertextualize *Nights* implicitly and explicitly, thematically and stylistically. Alongside this discussion, I will analyze the novels' textual evidence of Western (American/European) influence to demonstrate the "double-voiced" quality of these exemplars of contemporary Iraqi war fiction.

Lachmann distinguishes between two types of intertextual references, two different relationships between the signified or referenced text and the text-at-hand. In *metonymic* appropriation, the texts have a "relation of contiguity" to each other, such that "the borders between the previous text and the new text are shifted; the texts, in a sense, enter into one another" (305). In other words, this is the explicit referencing of titles, characters, and events, and the use of direct quotations. In *metaphoric* appropriation, the texts instead have what she calls a "relation of similarity," in which the text-at-hand "evokes the original but at the same time veils and distorts it" (305). In other words, metaphoric intertextualizing is more implicit or interpretive; it might include a stylistic device, narrative technique, or motif, but not a direct quote or proper-noun reference. The shortest of the primary texts analyzed in this chapter, Al-Qazwini's novel, intertextualizes only metaphorically, while Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi utilize both metonymic and

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<sup>49</sup> The name of the *Nights*' famed storyteller is sometimes spelled "Shahrazad" and other times spelled "Scheherazade." I will keep the secondary sources' original spelling within quotes; otherwise, I will use the more common spelling "Scheherazade."

<sup>50</sup> For more on the *Nights*' role in shaping the modern English novel, see scholarship by Rebecca Carol Johnson et al., Robert Irwin, and Rasoul Aliakbari.

metaphoric intertextuality to demonstrate their duality of literary influence and perpetuation of a double-voiced literary memory.

As an Iraqi exile having lived most of her adult life in Germany, Al-Qazwini's transcultural identity is reflected in her novel's double-voicing. She employs metaphoric intertexts from both the *Nights* (as a classic Middle Eastern text) and from *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (as a classic European Holocaust text). Her protagonist Zubaida is simultaneously Scheherazadian and Frankian. She recalls the former through her art of storytelling. In the well-known frame narrative of the *Nights*, the cuckolded King Shahyar resolves to marry a new virgin every day and execute her the next morning. Eventually there are no other virgins left in the kingdom, so the vizier's own eldest daughter offers herself to the king. This is Scheherazade, a super-intelligent, well-read chick, and quite possibly the inventor of the cliffhanger. Their first night together, she tells the king a story but leaves it unfinished at dawn. The king spares her life for one day so he can hear the rest of the story that night. She continues to do this for, of course, 1,001 nights, which is long enough for her to bear three sons and make the king fall in love with her. It is Scheherazade's ability to spin a yarn intriguing enough to maintain the king's narrative curiosity that keeps her alive. Or, as Said puts it when employing Scheherazade's narratorial prowess as a metaphor for the reconstructive force of Arabic fiction after 1948, her "articulation guarantees survival" (*Reflections* 55). While this survival is physical for Scheherazade and must extend to the external (the stories come *out* of her; she must speak them to the king out loud in order to keep on living), the survival is psychological for Zubaida and her narration remains internal. Her dreams and



memories are stories she tells *herself* in order to live. It is only in these visions or recollections of home that she feels she belongs, that she feels alive.

*Zubaida's Window* lacks a unified, linear master-plot; instead, it consists mainly of the protagonist's stories: her memories and dreams. Similarly, the *Nights* is known for its multiple narratives, which is why it is often categorized as a fairy-tale "collection," for if it did consist of one continuous linear plot, it would likely be considered the first "novel." Both the tales of Scheherazade and the dream/memory stories of Zubaida are examples of what Said calls "episodism," the repetition of scenes to promote a sense of continuity in the absence of a unified plotline. According to Said, post-World War II Arabic fiction emphasizes the "scene" in an attempt to intensify the connection between Arabic culture's contested past, paradoxical present, and uncertain future (*Reflections* 54). Likewise, scenes in the *Nights* from the Golden Age of Islam and in Al-Qazwini's contemporary novel echo these temporal strivings; the future is uncertain for both Zubaida and Scheherazade. Al-Qazwini thus appropriates a narrative motivation (survival) and a narrative technique (episodism) from *Nights*, but she does so with a few tweaks, akin to the "veiling and distorting" Lachmann attributes to metaphoric intertextuality, or "repetition with a signal difference," as Gates defines Signifying (xxiv).

Al-Qazwini's feminism<sup>51</sup> also links her to Scheherazade.<sup>52</sup> The latter used her intelligence to outwit the king, and the former continued her feminist activism in

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<sup>51</sup> Al-Qazwini is a self-proclaimed feminist. She is active in the Iraqi Women's League and is a delegate to the Women's International Democratic Federation. Moreover, *Zubaida's Window* was translated and published in English by The Feminist Press at CUNY.

<sup>52</sup> Literary scholars including Susanne Enderwitz, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, and Sandra Naddaf have successfully established Scheherazade as a proto-feminist.

Germany for various newspapers and journals after being exiled from Iraq for her outspoken feminism. Scheherazade's stories have not been silenced, not even thousands of years later, and Al-Qazwini did not allow the Ba'athists to silence her – *Zubaida's Window* is but one proof of that. Another voice that has withstood time and patriarchal oppression is that of Anne Frank, born in Germany, where Zubaida dies and Al-Qazwini still lives. It is not far-fetched to assume that Al-Qazwini was familiar with Anne's *Diary* before writing *Zubaida's Window*, due to her involvement in both feminism and human rights organizations.<sup>53</sup> While there is surprisingly little scholarship on gender in Holocaust memoirs, the *Diary* entry dated Tuesday, June 13, 1944 (two months before the Gestapo captured the Franks) suggests Anne's budding feminism, obviously supported by her father Otto since he chose to include it in the manuscript while editing other parts out. Therein, Anne states that it "bothers" her that "women have been, and still are, thought to be so inferior to men," even though women "suffer pain [childbirth] to ensure the continuation of the human race." She condemns the current "system of values and the men who don't acknowledge how great, difficult, but ultimately beautiful women's share in society is" (318-319). Several entries throughout the diary also show a nurturing yet modern relationship between father and daughter, which suggests that these seeds of Anne's feminist leanings may have actually been sown by her father. Otto encourages his daughter's ambition, education, and independence, and Anne feels she can talk about serious matters with him, while she feels distant from her mother and sister. One of the reasons Otto has given for having Anne's diary published was to allow her

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<sup>53</sup> According to Al-Ali, Al-Qazwini has worked "as the editor of the quarterly journal of the German organization for Human Rights in Berlin and has been involved in supporting and campaigning for asylum seekers in Germany" (125).

voice to continue on. Only a few decades separate Anne's childhood and Zubaida's, but the latter grew up in a society with a lag in women's rights and equality, so when she was ten years old in late 1960s Iraq, girls and young women were still expected to stay at home, to remain in the shadow of their fathers, husbands, and sons. Zubaida's father, however, encourages her education outside of the home, takes her to work with him, and speaks to her not as a child but as an intellectual peer. She remembers with pride that he would always object to being called Abu Ahmed: "He used to say, whenever they addressed him thus, 'I am Abu Zubaida, the father of Zubaida, for she is my eldest child,' and the men would be astonished and look at one another in disbelief" (Al-Qazwini 48-49). In Arabic, "Abu" means "father of." By their friends and acquaintances, men in Arabic cultures are commonly called "Abu" followed by the name of their first-born son. Ahmed is the name of Zubaida's younger brother, so by preferring to be called "Abu Zubaida" instead of "Abu Ahmed," her father is making a significant cultural statement about gender equality.

Beyond the feminist connection, Al-Qazwini intertextualizes additional aspects of Anne's diary. Both rely upon a window to the world – Zubaida's television and Anne's family's radio – to keep them apprised of the intensifying war going on outside their hideaways. Zubaida's (and Al-Qazwini's) exile to Berlin parallels the Frank family's fleeing from Frankfurt to Amsterdam when the Nazis invaded Germany; Zubaida's seclusion to her apartment later in the novel corresponds to the Franks' later, deeper exile to the *achterhuis*. A story Zubaida's grandmother tells her about Iraqi Jews being run out of Baghdad during the Farhud echoes Anne's passages about Jews fleeing the Franks' hometowns in Germany and then in Holland during the Holocaust. But perhaps the most

conspicuous commonality is the way memory is emphasized in both Frank's entries and Zubaida's meditations. Zubaida thinks of her memories as tangible objects, or even as friends; she often "opens the closet of memory" to feel "their embrace" (8). Similarly, when Anne and her family pack their belongings to go into hiding on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1942, she packs haphazardly, eschewing cosmetic or luxury items for sentimental ones, like her diary and old letters, for she explains that, now, "Memories mean more to me than dresses" (Frank 20). And if we interpret the childhood recollections and exilic experiences in *Zubaida's Window* to be based on those of Al-Qazwini herself, then this novel is, as Anne calls her own diary, "a kind of memory book" (158).

While *Zubaida's Window* employs only metaphoric referencing, *The Corpse Washer's* influence by and contribution to Arabic literary tradition is shown via both metaphoric and metonymic intertextualizing of the *Nights*. Antoon's novel actually mentions the text. Flipping through a newspaper one day, Jawad "turned to the culture pages [and saw] a feeble poem about the war and under it an interview with an arts critic." Adjacent to this modern piece was "a long article about the *Arabian Nights* and the Arabic literary tradition and how both had influenced Latin American writers" (37). The prominence of this article amongst shorter, less significant pieces emphasizes its continued popularity and prevalence in society. A few days later, Jawad asks his art history professor at the academy about the famous Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti after having seen slides of his sculptures in class. That this first mention of Giacometti (whose work becomes a central influence upon Jawad's artistic ambitions) follows so closely after his reading of the *Nights'* transcultural and transcontinental impact on Latin

American writers suggests that reading the article motivated him to seek inspiration outside of his own culture, or suggested to him that it was acceptable.

A metaphoric intertextualizing of the *Nights* occurs in a flashback to Jawad's childhood when his father teaches him the importance of the corpse-washing ritual, and then again throughout Jawad's adult dreams when the dead plead with him to wash them so they can rest in peace. These passages recall one of the *Nights*' stories, "The Sixth Voyage of Sinbad the Seaman," in which the narrator and his crewmates have been shipwrecked: "Each that died we washed and shrouded in some of the clothes and linen cast ashore by the tides; and after a little, the rest of my fellows perished, one by one . . . And I wept over myself, saying 'Would Heaven I had died before my companions and they had washed me and buried me! It had been better than I should perish and none wash me and shroud me and bury me'" (*Arabian Nights* 452). The lamentations of the dead in Jawad's dreams echo Sinbad's, which reiterates the cultural longevity of the rituals he must perform.

Antoon's Arabic-Anglo double-voicing is further represented through Jawad's art, which synthesizes Mesopotamian mythology with European (Swiss) sculpture through Gilgamesh and Giacometti. His earliest artistic attempts, under the tutelage of Mr. Ismael in grade school, are inspired by national and ancestral pride. The teacher links art to Iraqi cultural tradition by explaining that their "ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions [of art and culture] in their myths and in the epic of Gilgamesh, and Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world." He convinces the students that they were "inheritors of this great treasure of civilization that enriches our present and future and makes modern Iraqi art so fertile" (31). Jawad is already familiar with *The*

*Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Mesopotamian poem-saga that predates both the *Iliad* and the Bible by over a thousand years, so his teacher's lecture immediately inspires him to be "a fabulous Iraqi artist one day" (34). Antoon thus delves even further back into Arabic literary history than the *Nights* by incorporating *Gilgamesh*. However, Jawad does not decide that sculpture is his area of specialization until he is introduced to Giacometti's work later on at the academy. At the end of his conversation with Professor al-Janabi, the art history professor gives Jawad a big book of images of all of Giacometti's statues. Jawad studies these, along with the accompanying biographical notes and quotations, and from then on he seeks to emulate the Swiss sculptor's style. Further aligning their identities, he uses "giacometti" and his own birth year as the user name for his email account. And when he must finally abandon his artistic ambitions to take over the mghaysil full time, the break is symbolically marked by his dream of a Giacometti bust on his washing table that disintegrates when he tries to wash it, symbolizing the shattering of Jawad's dream of becoming a renowned sculptor.

Western influence upon Antoon's novel has not gone unnoticed by literary critics. In his review of *The Corpse Washer*, for example, Scranton notes that, "Like Giacometti's sculptures, Antoon's characters are minimalist, abstract, ravaged," extending the sculptor's influence upon the protagonist to the author himself. But what reviewers neglect to mention is Jawad's ultimate return to Mesopotamian mythology after he is forced by circumstance to abandon his artistic career in order to run the mghaysil. He no longer reads books about modern art and artists, but he carries his book of myths everywhere. He mentions that whenever he has "a respite without bodies" at the mghaysil, he can be found "reading a book about Mesopotamian creation myths" (161),

indicating that re-reading the well-worn volume has become a leisure-pleasure. It is also an object imbued with personal meaning. When packing to seek refuge in Jordan, he must limit what he takes to what he can carry, so he brought a loaf of bread, “a few other things, and the book on Mesopotamian creation myths” (174). As with Anne Frank’s packing her diary in lieu of her dresses, Jawad’s choice suggests the book’s significance beyond reading; it appears to have a sentimental, memory-oriented value. One of these myths comprises the penultimate chapter of *The Corpse Washer*, three short paragraphs that appear two pages before the novel’s end, thus leaving a memorable closing impact upon Antoon’s reader. In this myth, the gods create humans to be their slaves:

. . . for a long time the gods used to do their [own] work and fulfill their tasks. Some planted, some harvested, and others made things. But they were tired, so they complained to An-ki, the god of water and wisdom, and asked him to lighten their burden . . . He summoned the crafts gods to make humans out of clay . . . [and pronounced], “The creatures I have decided to make will be in the image of the gods.” . . . Thus humans were created to carry the burden of the gods and their toil. (182)

Here, humans are made from clay, just as many of Jawad’s and Giacometti’s sculptures were made from clay. Antoon’s inclusion of this myth points toward the protagonist’s reconciliation of his prior artistic ambitions with his present and ultimate occupation. Instead of creating the human form artistically, Jawad has now become the servant, preparing the real human form for its return to the clay via burial. He comes to realize that this life of service, though lacking the glamour and prestige of becoming a renowned artist, is honorable in its own right. Thus, through the importance it places upon both

European sculpture (via Giacometti) and Arabic storytelling (via the *Nights* and Mesopotamian mythology), *The Corpse Washer* exhibits a transcultural inheritance and helps to establish Iraqi war fiction as a double-voiced genre.

Makiya's explicit incorporation of Arabic literary tradition is brief: he references Haroun al-Rashid, an eighth-century caliph of Baghdad who was also a protagonist in several of the *Nights* stories. A stronger inheritance from those tales is thematic rather than directly referential: both the *Nights* and *The Rope* centralize the concept of betrayal. Marital infidelity drives the former's frame story—it opens with a cuckolded king. His wife's sexual betrayal is the impetus for King Shahyar's serial killing of virgins, which eventually leads to his marriage to Scheherazade and her ensuing storytelling. Other betrayals – between brothers, between families, between friends – are present throughout the *Nights*. Similarly, intra-sectarian and familial betrayal is the core theme of Makiya's novel. During his coming of age between 2003 and 2006, its Narrator must learn the hard lesson of carefully guarding his trust. The novel's plot revolves around a clandestine operation in which the Cabal of Thirteen<sup>54</sup> kills one of their own, Sayyid Majid.<sup>55</sup> On the day of Saddam's capture, the Narrator inadvertently witnesses this murder in the courtyard outside his family's residence, and he takes it upon himself to investigate. He begins to uncover large-scale betrayals – both personal and political – taking place not

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<sup>54</sup> The “Cabal of Thirteen” is Makiya's fictional stand-in for the group of thirteen Shi'a members who led Bremer's provisional Governing Council from 2003 to 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Sayyid Majid was a real person, his death the subject of a major controversy. Makiya explains the background of the case and provides links to evidentiary documents, then states his belief that “the cover-up lies at the core of the Shi'a elite's failure after 2003. Hence Sayyid Majid al-Khoei's murder is the intellectual and moral backbone of this book” (308).



only with the regime change, but throughout the history of Iraq.<sup>56</sup> Recently, this had become a more frequent occurrence. “In the world that the Tyrant<sup>57</sup> built in Iraq,” he learned, “everyone betrayed someone, sometime. In such a world, betrayal of friends and neighbors, or of some other members of your own sect, was the norm” (150). He doesn’t realize how closely betrayal affects him personally until his search for Sayyid Majid’s killers leads him to discover that his own uncle, who has taken care of the Narrator’s family since the detention and death of his father, and whom the Narrator now works for, was himself responsible for his brother’s (the Narrator’s father’s) arrest that led to his death in the prison camp. The biblical Old Testament connection is not lost on Makiya. He admits, in his Personal Note after the novel, that both the real murder of Sayyid Majid by his own House of Shi’a *and* the fictional death of the Narrator’s father at the hands of his brother, were “variations on the story of Cain and Abel: a murder between first brothers, at the dawn of a new world, unleashing mayhem onto their race” (319). The betrayal is both personal to *The Rope*’s Narrator and cultural, representing the “unleashing” of internecine violence after the fall of Saddam, exacerbated by the American occupation.

Makiya’s metonymic intextualizing of European authors is more extensive than his few overt Arabic references in *The Rope*. The first and last of the novel’s three parts – both set on December 30, 2006, the day of Saddam’s hanging – are epigraphed by

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<sup>56</sup> In his Personal Note after the novel, Makiya writes that, under Saddam’s regime, “betrayal was everywhere. To betray was to survive and was therefore morally justifiable, or at least morally ambiguous, and difficult for outsiders to condemn. Betrayal was the place where character and politics met for the duration of his rule” (315).

<sup>57</sup> With the few exceptions when they use his actual name, Makiya’s characters refer to Saddam Hussein as “the Tyrant.”

lengthy quotes from the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998), a member of the Polish resistance movement during World War II. Part One's epigraph is an excerpt from his poem "The Emperor," written about Hitler, which Makiya adapts in reference to Saddam. One of Herbert's lines about the hated "emperor" was that "when he died, nobody dared to remove his portraits." Correspondingly, *The Rope's* Narrator recalls that during Saddam's regime, "We had his picture on the walls because we had to: a nosy neighbor, gossip, that sort of thing" (89). On a few occasions after Saddam's overthrow, he notices these framed portraits in different people's houses, and in one case, found it particularly bizarre when he heard that the Iraqi national security advisor still had "an enormous bust of Saddam Hussein" in his office (89). This demonstrates the severe and lasting impact the dictator left upon Iraqis, both citizens and officers. Makiya's use of that particular excerpt from Herbert's poem about Hitler also supports Saddam's own boast, in a conversation with his guards (including the Narrator) in the hours before his execution: "I gassed and crushed the Kurds, coming closer than any Arab leader before me to a final solution of the Kurdish question" (262). This is a clear parallel to the Nazi's final solution to what they called "the Jewish question," and Saddam's comparison of himself to Hitler is, to him, like proclaiming that he is a god.

Makiya's use of the second Herbert quote demarcates Part Three of *The Rope*, which returns to the day of Saddam's execution. This final section consists mainly of the conversation between Saddam and his two body guards, one of which is our Narrator. Here, Makiya chooses a short prose poem by Herbert titled "When the World Stands Still," which he reproduces in full:

It happens very rarely. The earth's axis screeches and comes to a stop. Everything stands still then: storms, ships and clouds grazing in the valleys. Everything. Even horses in a meadow become immobile as if in an unfinished game of chess.

And after a while the world moves on. The ocean swallows and regurgitates, valleys send off steam and the horses pass from the black field into the white field. There is also heard the resounding clash of air against air. (Makiya 253)

Beyond locating it in a 1985 edited and translated collection of Herbert's poetry, I found no further information about this poem, not even its original date of publication. Due to the nature of his other works, it is likely that this was a reference to World War II – perhaps the end of the war or the announcement of Hitler's suicide. If so, Makiya's epigraphical choice again compares Saddam to Hitler. The moment when "everything stands still" is, for 2006 Iraq, the moment right before Saddam is hooded by the hangman, described in a Part One flashback as "the room turning deathly silent, held in a paralytic grip as though by the sheer presence of the man. Never was there such a silence, until he reached the platform" (8). But the novel's closing lines represent the moment the world stood still for the Narrator, for it is then that he learns, through Saddam himself, of his uncle's treachery that led to his father's death: "'Who betrayed my father? Please, sir! Tell me his name.' That 'sir' just slipped out. I could have kicked myself, and I shudder with shame when I think about it – not that I was thinking about what I was doing at the time. 'Why, your uncle, of course. He had been working with us for years.'" (283). Through Herbert, Makiya thus links the novel's theme of betrayal – its inheritance from

the Arabic literary tradition via the *Nights* – with Iraq’s own version of that tyrant of the West, Hitler.

Makiya’s epigraph choice for Part Two is similarly revealing. This lengthiest section of the novel, which spans from April 2003 to November 2006 (the month before Saddam’s execution), is prefaced by one stanza of W. H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939,” titled for the day Germany invaded Poland, which officially started World War II:

Accurate scholarship can  
Unearth the whole offence  
From Luther until now  
That has driven a culture mad,  
Find what occurred at Linz,  
What huge imago made  
A psychopathic god:  
I and the public know  
What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

(Makiya 23)

This poem in its original form continues for seven more stanzas, but Makiya’s use of this, its second stanza, corresponds to the aforementioned epigraphs from Herbert in its reference to Hitler. Auden traces the history of German culture from Martin Luther’s rebellion to Hitler’s birth in Linz, using Jungian allusions to suggest that these men’s internal, personal conflicts led to external, international conflicts (the Protestant

Reformation and World War II, respectively). Auden realized he was writing at the threshold of a major collapse, but he later repudiated the poem, perhaps in part because a critic of his time interpreted the last two lines of the above stanza as “a ringing apologia for the Third Reich as the product of Versailles” (Steinfels). These same two lines (“Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return”) were conspicuously avoided when dozens of American newspapers, websites, and even NPR revived this poem right after 9/11. As journalist Gary Kamiya reflected two years later, “it was not permitted to explore the final lines [of that stanza]: to suggest that the evil unleashed by Osama bin Laden might actually be something that happened in history, and be susceptible to historical analysis, was immediately pronounced traitorous – as if the desire to understand somehow was the same as justifying this horror.” Instead, the American media chose to focus more attention on the poem’s second-to-last stanza, which ends with the rather trite line, “We must love one another or die” (Auden). Their emphasis on this line presages the allegedly humanitarian intent behind the wars the U.S. declared later that year (in Afghanistan) and two years later (in Iraq). Focusing on the poem’s use of the word “love” instead of “evil” neutralizes the potential interpretation that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were payback (“evil” done “in return”) for the American military’s prior aggressions in the Middle East. In addition to its allusion to Hitler, which aligns with the Herbert epigraphs and Makiya’s own commentary about Saddam in his Personal Note, might Makiya have selected this particular stanza to deliberately highlight the American media’s convenient elision of the evil-begets-evil lines? Or to indict America for hypocritically pointing the rhetoric-finger of “evil” and “terrorism” toward Iraq, by alluding to their support of Saddam’s regime during the Iran-Iraq War? We cannot know

the author's intent beyond his own writings, and he does not address his use of paratext in *The Rope*. But at the level of the fictional narrative, we can at least interpret the epigraphical choice as a defense of the novel's unnamed narrator, who joined one of the Shi'a militias to fight against the Americans. He is taught, after Saddam's fall, that "the smaller devil has gone, but the bigger devil has come," and he is driven by situation and circumstance "to fight for [his] homeland against the Occupier" (73). Indeed, Makiya's novel helps us understand how an innocent, fatherless young boy can grow up to become a dangerous soldier, who, like many of his generation, "longed to be swept up in the storms of change rolling up young men like me all over Iraq" (71).

In addition to his incorporation of Herbert and Auden, Makiya also mentions two Russian writers whom the Narrator's father had admired, which he reads as a way to feel closer to him. In one of his memories of childhood, he recalls, "As I got older, books were a kind of consolation. I remember reading *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky because Mother said Father was fond of Russian writers and an old teacher, who had studied in the Soviet Union, found an Arabic translation." He is heavily influenced by this novel, telling his mother, "I want to write like the underground man; I want to sound like him" (40). Like Makiya's protagonist, Dostoevsky's is unnamed and narrates in the first-person. The existential angst and moral searching expressed by "the underground man" became increasingly attractive to Makiya's Narrator as he entered adolescence, experiencing a crisis of meaning personally and witnessing the same of his country. He encounters a second Russian writer a decade later in 2004, when his dying mother gives him a letter his father had smuggled out to her from the camps before his death there in 1991. The letter closes with lines from an untitled poem by Osip Mandelstam, written in

a Soviet detention camp during the Purges (Wiman). It is from this letter that the Narrator learns how his father died and the atrocities he endured in the prison. Makiya's choice of these two literary "gifts" from a father *in absentia* to his only son befit their loss of each other. For discussing banned books critical of Tsarist Russia and for writing poetry critical of Stalin, respectively, both Dostoevsky and Mandelstam endured prison camps with similar conditions to Radwaniyya Prison<sup>58</sup> in which the Narrator's father perished – Dostoevsky in Siberia in the 1850s, Mandelstam in Vladivostock in the 1930s.<sup>59</sup> Makiya's forthright intertextualizing of these authors links Iraqi trauma of the 1990s and 2000s to earlier Russian trauma, evoking the theme of transnational mourning also present in Al-Qazwini's juxtaposition of the cities of Baghdad and Berlin. These eastern European voices of Dostoevsky and Mandelstam, along with the central and Western European epigraphs from Herbert and Auden, interweave throughout the novel's *Nights*-inspired theme of betrayal to emphasize Makiya's transcultural double-voicing.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi employs the narrative nesting technique for which the *Nights* is best known, but he reverses Scheherazade's before-and-after frame by beginning the novel with the Final Report from the Tracking and Pursuit Department and introducing the Novelist toward the end of the text. Said notes that one of the characteristics of modern Arabic fiction inherited from the *Nights* is "the dramatization of

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<sup>58</sup> In his Personal Note after the novel's end, Makiya reveals, "The conditions in Radwaniyya Prison during 1991, as described in a letter the Narrator's father smuggles out to his wife, are taken almost verbatim from the testimony of Qassim Braysam of Basra, who was interviewed in 2005 by Mustafa al-Kazimi, then of the Iraq Memory Foundation" (304).

<sup>59</sup> Dostoevsky narrates his experience of the Siberian labor camp in his semi-autobiographical novel *The House of the Dead* (1862). For a well-researched biography and compelling study of Mandelstam's literary legacy, see Gregory Freidin's *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (1987).

the tale's telling" which tends to become "highly self-conscious" (*Reflections* 54). Saadawi's inclusion of the Novelist as a character and his subversive re-writing of his confiscated manuscript emphasize that self-reflexive tendency of the process of composition. The "core stories" between the Final Report and Chapter 18 are the various accounts of the phenomenon the press call "Frankenstein in Baghdad," that is, the Whatsitsname. This is a key divergence from the core stories of the *Nights*: while Scheherazade is a single narrator telling a different story every night to maintain King Shahyar's narrative curiosity and ensure her own survival, Saadawi's central narrative is composed of what critic Firmani calls "competing voices" – each character telling the story of the Whatsitsname from their unique perspective: Hadi its creator, Elishva who believes it's her long-lost presumed-dead son Daniel, Mahmoud the journalist who sees it as an opportunity to advance his career, and the somehow-eloquent Whatsitsname itself through the recorded self-interview. Thus, as Al-Qazwini does in *Zubaida's Window*, Saadawi employs metaphoric intertextuality as a Gatesian "repetition with a signal difference."

Saadawi's Whatsitsname resembles a particular historical figure and recurring *Nights* character,<sup>60</sup> more than he does Dr. Frankenstein's creation in Shelley's novel. In his study of cityscapes and urban spatiality in the *Nights*, Horta discusses some of the core stories that feature "the legendary Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, who walks the dark streets of Baghdad at night to bring justice to all the hidden corners of the capital"

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<sup>60</sup> There is one known *Nights* reference in *Frankenstein*. In Part I, Chapter III, Victor explains his scientific epiphany using a metaphor of "the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light." A footnote in the second Broadview edition of *Frankenstein* indicates that this is an allusion to "The Fourth Voyage of Sinbad" (Shelley 80).



(489). Similarly, the Whatsitsname stalks those same dark streets – he only travels at night – and his mission is to bring justice to the city. He is a definitively urban entity. Shelley’s creature has no such mission of justice, and its wanderings are in the countryside, the mountains, or among the ice floes of the North Pacific. There is much debate amongst the dozen or so reviewers of Saadawi’s novel: Is it a modern Arabic retelling of Shelley’s Gothic classic? Or is it just a catchy title? Obviously, both creatures are man-made, but while Hadi puts together the Whatsitsname from body parts he finds in the streets after car bombings, Shelley doesn’t say exactly what Victor’s “fiend” is composed of – just that he got materials for experimentation from “charnel houses,” “the dissecting room,” and “the slaughter-house” (82). Hadi, like Victor, feels guilty and responsible for what he has made and the havoc it has wreaked – but Victor created a living being deliberately, in the name of science and self-aggrandizement, while Hadi did so accidentally, intending to pay respect to the dead by making a partial corpse whole so it could be given a proper burial.

Reviewers are quick to make the date connection: The English translation of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* was released in January 2018, on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In his *New York Times* review of Saadawi’s novel, Dwight Garner points out commonalities such as both novels being allegories for political complexities of their era and both creatures feeling misunderstood by humankind. But Sarah Perry, writing for *The Guardian*, insists that “the novel ultimately evokes Kafka more than Shelley,” and that “Saadawi is less concerned with arousing sensations of horror than with capturing war and its aftermath as something pointless and surreal.” Al-Mustafa Najjar got right to the point with Saadawi in his interview for *ArabLit*: his first

question addressed the connection to the original. Saadawi reminds him that, beyond the title, the name “Frankenstein” is only used twice in the novel,<sup>61</sup> and emphasizes that, thematically, there is little relation, for “Frankenstein in this novel is a condensed symbol of Iraq’s current problems” (Najjar). Perhaps it is the popular-culture legacy that the characters recall, rather than the 1818 novel. After all, when Mahmoud designed the layout for his magazine story about the Whatsitsname, he accompanied it with a photo of Robert De Niro from the 1994 Branagh/Coppola film, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*. But what Saadawi neglected to mention in his interview response to Najjar was a third reference to *Frankenstein*, not in his novel per se, but in its front-matter paratext, where he quotes from Shelley’s novel as the first of three epigraphs: “Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands.” This is borrowed from Part II, Chapter II of the original 1818 text of *Frankenstein*, from the scene in which the creature speaks to Victor for the first time. Rejected by the De Laceys and all other humans he has encountered, he is desperately lonely and entreats Victor to hear him out, to understand his actions, and ultimately, to make him a “companion . . . of the same species . . . and defects” so that he will not be forced to continue his existence so miserably alone (Shelley 168). This conversation is similar to the monologue the Whatsitsname recorded in his self-interview, which appears in the exact center of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, just as the creature’s extended monologue occupies the middle pages of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Saadawi emphasizes this literal and literary centrality by using the Whatsitsname’s own plea as his second epigraph, directly

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<sup>61</sup> Both of Saadawi’s characters who use the name “Frankenstein” demonstrate a lack of familiarity with Shelley’s novel. They use the term to refer to the monster, rather than to its creator. Hadi, not the Whatsitsname, is the analogue to Dr. Victor Frankenstein.

beneath his quote from Shelley's novel: "You who are listening to these recordings now, if you don't have the courage to help me with my noble mission, then at least try not to stand in my way." Both creatures desire to be heard; they want to tell their story. However, the monster of Baghdad wants to recruit people to his cause by setting "an example of vengeance" before his own impending demise. The monster of Ingolstadt has no such mission; he desires one companion and will then be content to live ever apart from man.

The second epigraph, sandwiched between the pleas of Frankenstein's and Hadi's monsters, is said to be from "The Story of St. George, the Great Martyr." I was unable to locate a text with this specific title, nor did I find the exact quote Saadawi reproduces, which suggests that he originally quoted this from an Arabic-language version of the legend which was then translated into English, along with the rest of the novel, by Jonathan Wright: "The king ordered that the saint be placed in the olive press until his flesh was torn to pieces and he died. They then threw him out of the city, but the Lord Jesus gathered the pieces together and brought him back to life, and he went back into the city." This part of the legend anticipates the Frankensteinian trope of a reconstituted and reanimated body, like the Whatsitsname, but it is not the only mention of St. George in the novel. The old woman Elishva, whose story opens the first chapter, considers George her patron saint. Through his intercession, she has "spiritual powers" (5), which her neighbors view as "black magic" (63). She speaks to St. George – and he speaks back – through the framed picture of him in her living room, in which he is wearing a suit of armor astride his white horse, ready to battle the dragon approaching from the picture's corner. She believes that "during the day the picture was just a picture, inanimate and

completely still, but at night a portal opened between her world and the other world and the Lord came down, embodied in the image of the saint, to talk through him to Elishva” (16). She extracts from him the promise of a sign indicating whether her son Daniel is alive or dead, and when she encounters the Whatsitsname exiting Hadi’s hovel in the courtyard behind her house, she – half blind yet fully eager – believes it is he, come back to her at last. St. George has answered her prayers.

Elishva is an Iraqi Catholic, a rarity, but the legend of St. George is not confined to European Christendom. Stanford historian Padraic Rohan explains that the legend exists in “Christian tales of a number of languages, including Syriac, Arabic, Coptic, Nubian, Ethiopian, Armenian, Latin, and Greek,” and the earliest of these is the Coptic (late-ancient Egyptian) version, dating back to the fifth century. The legend’s Middle Eastern origins are reinforced by St. George’s alleged birthplace: Cappadocia, a region of modern-day Turkey. Stories of his exploits during the Crusades became popular in Western European Catholicism, but those tales came later. So, ultimately, St. George – like Christianity itself – originated in the Middle East but was adopted by Catholic Europe (especially England, which considers him its patron saint), and his roots in the “Orient” were largely forgotten by the laity. St. George appears once in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In Part I, Chapter I, Victor tells Walton about his childhood memories with Clerval, including acting out plays composed from “favourite books, the principal characters of which were Orlando, Robin Hood, Amadis, and St. George” (66). Given her extensive knowledge of literature, Shelley was likely aware of the tale excerpted in Saadawi’s epigraph – of George’s body being torn to pieces and then put back together

again<sup>62</sup> – so the legend may have been an inspiration for her own tale of reanimation through anatomical piecing-together. Via his epigraphical juxtapositions and his incorporation of the legend of St. George, which may be read as a precursor to Shelley’s trope of reconstructed corporeality, Saadawi completes the circle of appropriation.

While American-authored war novels usually only intertextualize other Western texts,<sup>63</sup> Iraqi-authored Iraq War novels incorporate both Eastern and Western literature. These Iraqi authors seem more open to acknowledging diverse cultural influences, while American war writers display a reluctance, an anxiety of influence, as if through maintaining solely Western intertextuality they can sustain the constructed, Orientalist separation of East and West. But their embracing of Euro/American literary culture is not the same as embracing democracy, or American exceptionalism, or U.S. military intervention. A common theme underlies the Western influences they’ve chosen: people suffering under the heel of war-related oppression. They subtly compare the American occupation of Iraq to historical instances of oppression like those exacted by Hitler, Stalin, and Tsarist Russia. We see this with Al-Qazwini’s metaphoric intertextualizing of Anne Frank’s diary, Antoon’s incorporation of Alberto Giacometti, Makiya’s epigraphs from Zbigniew Herbert and W.H. Auden, and his metonymic intertextualizing of Soviet

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<sup>62</sup> There are various versions of the resurrection story of St. George. He is said to have been killed three times and brought back to life each time by divine intervention. Saadawi’s epigraph refers to the second death, when George was cut into ten pieces and thrown into a well outside the city (other sources say he was thrown into the sea). In some versions, God brought the archangel Michael to resurrect him; in others, Jesus performed the miracle.

<sup>63</sup> Both first-wave and second-wave American-authored Iraq War fiction heavily intertextualize American- and European-sourced representations of previous wars. Examples include Abrams’ references to Stephen Crane, von Clausewitz, M\*A\*S\*H\*, and *We Were Soldiers*; Fountain’s allusions to the war films of Audie Murphy and John Wayne, *GI Joe*, and *Platoon*; and Scranton’s use of John dos Passos, Wallace Stevens, *Rambo*, *Jarhead*, and *Black Hawk Down*.

exiles Dostoevsky and Mandelstam. Whether this indictment of the Bush administration via comparison to historical reigns of terror is intended by the authors or interpreted by the reader, an ideological lesson distinctly emerges: regardless of the name we give to it, or the rationales we laud, war results in suffering. The injurious effects of war are inevitable and ubiquitous. Despite its exceptionalist rhetoric of heroism and humanitarianism, the United States is a perpetrator of imperialistic war and is responsible for that suffering. Therefore, while traces of Middle Eastern literary heritage throughout these novels resist the Orientalist notion that Iraq lacks a cultural history of its own,<sup>64</sup> their intertextualizing of Western literature about war, empire, and oppression resists the myth of the American [trauma] hero, the version of the war that glorifies the perpetrator and turns a blind eye to the occupation's effects on Iraqi civilians.

There is something else at work in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Its plot's supernatural aspects – Elishva's psychic and spiritual powers, the talking saint-portrait, and the animation of the Whatsitsname—are indicators of a deeper genreic theme coursing through all four novels. Like the djinns and other representations of magic in the *Nights*, these contemporary Iraqi novels pulse with elements of fantasy and surrealism: dreams, illusions, fantastical hallucinations, out-of-body experiences, and temporal disjunctions. Makiya's Narrator in *The Rope* calls Baghdad "a city of ghosts" (7), he has lucid dreams of his dead mother stroking his hair as he sleeps (58), and he uses the trope of monstrosity both literally and metaphorically to describe the effect of violence upon the young men around him. The lines of life and death blur for Antoon's protagonist Jawad, who watches blood flow from the TV screen "covering everything in red" (54),

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<sup>64</sup> Said himself, in "Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948," referred to a "collective Arab identity" as that which "*has yet to happen*" (*Reflections* 47, italics in the original).

sees “an eye hanging on the wall by a thread and shedding tears” (166), and thinks of his own soul in terms evocative of Poe: “My heart has become a shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit” (184). Both Jawad’s dreams and Zubaida’s hallucinatory memory-visions are very real to them. Al-Qazwini’s protagonist is visited by “a young man’s spirit” (9), and she herself “floats over the streets of the city, not feeling her feet treading the ground, as if she were a ghost” (29). The spaces she inhabits morph into faraway climes, for her balcony “seems an autonomous world. At times, except for a few sand dunes, it appears to be an empty desert. At other times, it transforms itself suddenly into a polar space covered with snow that doesn’t melt” (51). Even mundane objects take on Dali-esque distortion; words and letters in books and newspapers “dance” off the page, they are “small black creatures” that “make fun of her, cackling away and filling the platform with a hubbub no one else hears” (61). These phantoms and fantasticisms throughout contemporary Iraqi war fiction create an atmosphere of magical realism, much like that exuded throughout the centuries by the *Nights*.

Reviewers have likewise commented upon aspects of surrealism and fantasy throughout these novels. Al-Ali notes that Zubaida’s “crisis of meaning border[s] on the surreal or even madness” (124). Scranton writes that bodies in Antoon’s novel are “always already corpses and haunting dream-visages,” and that the plot’s “time is out of joint – events come with shocking suddenness and in disorienting sequence.” *The Guardian*’s review emphasizes *The Corpse Washer*’s “sense of estrangement” (Farid). Firmani references both Antoon and Saadawi when he points out that “post-occupation Iraqi literature foregrounds death, via both its content and its generic embrace of Gothic,

surrealist, and absurdist elements.” Perry describes *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as “absurdist morality fable meets horror fantasy.” I add to their observations that, in terms of narrative style, these Iraqi-authored novels of the American occupation contrast sharply with American-authored Iraq War novels *especially* because they are steeped in fantasy and surrealism. With a few exceptions of “psychedelic” passages in Vietnam War literature (moments in Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* and Stephen Wright’s *Meditations in Green*), American war fiction is reliant upon realism and semi-autobiographical verisimilitude.<sup>65</sup> Hence, fictional representations of the war by Iraqi novelists provide a counternarrative to American representations not only in their content, characterization, and construction of memory, but also in genre modality.

This chapter has proven that Iraqi-authored novels about the American occupation provide a distinct counternarrative to Iraq War novels penned by American writers. An important aspect of this difference is perspectival: the stories are told from the viewpoint of the Occupied rather than the Occupier. This affects characterization such that Americans – central to the American-authored narratives – now become the Other, while the Iraqi experience – previously marginalized – is now at the forefront. This impacts the novels’ content such that Iraqi culture, memory, and trauma are highlighted, and the actions and reactions of both Occupier and Occupied are subject to reinterpretation. While American-authored war narratives mostly reference and incorporate Western literature and film, these Iraqi-authored novels are double-voiced through transcultural intertextuality, which unites East and West in a reciprocity of citations. These texts’ translations from Arabic into English extend their readership and influence to an

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<sup>65</sup> In American-authored Iraq War novels, traditional American war realism is maintained in the “MFA-confessional” mode. See footnote 7 in my Chapter Two.



American audience, creating the opportunity for a more nuanced, more robust, and more inclusive construction of the narrative of twenty-first century Iraqi-American relations.

In addition to sharing similar themes and speaking out against American intervention, these four novels commence a post-Baathist, post-Occupation project of Iraqi self-definition. By establishing a common history, they gesture toward a unified future. They fulfill, with Iraqi specificity, the task Said once set before Arabic writers in general. Their words are triumphant warriors in that “battle of restoring historical continuity [and] forging a historic possibility” (*Reflections* 48). We see this in Zubaida’s memory-visions of past kings and queens and legends and traditions indigenous to Iraq; in Jawad’s continuation of Iraqi rituals of caring for and honoring the dead; in Makiya’s incorporation of memory-objects that embody special meaning for the generation of Iraqis who experienced the events of the 1980s through the 2000s, and which connect them to both prior and subsequent generations; and in Saadawi’s trope of narration enacted by all four of his major characters with Scheherazadian self-reflexivity and as a means to solidify the events taking place, bearing witness for posterity just as Baghdadians centuries earlier recorded the exploits of Harun al-Rashid.

For each of these contemporary novelists, the genre of war fiction facilitates a re-examination of the historical foundations that bind Iraqi cultural identity. Though all but Saadawi have left Iraq for various reasons, be they exilic or educational, these writers have not turned their back on their homeland. Their literary works speak to a diasporic sense of still-belonging, claiming an Iraqi identity despite the hyphen that might attach it to their current geographical residencies. The end of each novel resonates with this redemptive impact, which offers a hopeful solution to the grief they portray that has

befallen Iraq over the past several decades, first with Saddam and then with the Americans. As *Zubaida's Window* closes, “fear suddenly vanishes” for its protagonist; “she feels a new serenity” (121). This symbolically suggests a similar quietude for Iraq. By the time *The Corpse Washer* comes to an end, Jawad has finally embraced his calling at the mghaysil, putting an end to his existential turmoil. Interpreted allegorically, his acceptance heralds a similar peace of mind for Iraq as a whole. As *The Rope* winds to its finale, the Narrator’s proximity to Saddam on the day of his execution results in an epiphany: “*The Tyrant’s ideas opened the doors, and we walked right through. The Tyrant fell, and we became addicted to his legacy: betrayal*” (Makiya 287, italics in the original). The recognition of this problem, and its roots from within Iraq itself, suggests the possibility of a solution also from within – a solution grounded in Iraqi independence and self-determinism. With the dissolution of the Tracking and Pursuit Department at the denouement of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi symbolizes an end to American intervention in Iraqi affairs once and for all, foreshadowing an era of rebuilding and recovery to come.

CHAPTER FOUR  
WOMEN AND THE IRAQ WAR:  
GENDERED PERSPECTIVES AFTER COMBAT EXCLUSION

23 March 2003: U.S. Army Specialist Shoshana Johnson, Private First Class Jessica Lynch, and four male soldiers are captured by Iraqi forces during the Battle of Nasiriyah. Lynch's liberation by U.S. Special Forces nine days later is the first successful rescue of an American P.O.W. since World War II. Johnson, rescued on April 13, receives considerable media attention as the first African-American female P.O.W. in U.S. history. During the same battle, Specialist Lori Piestewa becomes the first female American servicemember to die in the Iraq War. She is posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Prisoner of War Medal.

16 June 2005: Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester becomes the first female since World War II to receive the Silver Star, the military's third-highest award for valor. She is the first female in American history to be cited specifically for close combat.

14 November 2008: General Ann Dunwoody is promoted, becoming the first female four-star general in United States military history and breaking what the military and press call the "brass ceiling."

24 January 2013: Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta repeals the military's 1994 ban on women serving in ground combat positions. Women have unofficially participated in combat since the beginnings of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but now they are no longer officially limited to "combat support" roles.

3 December 2015: Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter declares all M.O.S. (military occupation specialties) open to women, thereby ending all exemptions to female military service despite resistance from the Marine Corps.

Today, women stand in the line of fire both figuratively and literally, earn some of the most distinguished military honors conferred by the United States government, attain high-ranking positions within the Department of Defense, and successfully lobby for military reform. These achievements signal a cultural shift, a transformation toward gender inclusivity within our society's most patriarchal institution. Yet despite widespread media attention to the stories of female servicemembers like Lynch, Johnson,

Piestewa, Hester, and Dunwoody, and despite landmark legislative progress enacted under Panetta and Carter, the American narrative of war remains largely masculine. Feminist theorists, military historians, and scholars of international relations debate about whether women's full integration into the military will lead to a transformation of conventional gender norms. Some argue that the integration thus far has been little more than an "add women and stir" approach and has brought about little change in the armed forces or in our culture as a whole. Jennifer Lobasz, for example, explains that the military "has made a concerted effort to portray its female troops as still sufficiently 'feminine' in an effort to reap the benefits of greater (wo)manpower without upsetting its male forces or societal sensibilities" (310). Cynthia Cockburn insists that involvement in war-waging has not led to greater equality for women, nor has women's participation changed the way we wage war ("Gendered Dynamics"). Conversely, Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg argue that the "making of war" is indeed changing, and that "womanly" skills and competencies are now cherished and regarded as necessary for peace-building tasks" (1). Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott assert that modern warfare is "beginning to undo the binary structures that it originally put in place: peace and war; home (female space) and front (male space); combatant and civilians" such that "women's inclusion as participants in wars . . . has blurred distinctions between gender roles" (xi). Though American females have participated in the United States military as far back as the Spanish-American War,<sup>66</sup> the debate about the role of women in warfare has intensified considerably since the beginning of our post-9/11 conflicts.

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<sup>66</sup> Emerald Archer provides a detailed history of women's participation in the U.S. Armed Forces in *Women, Warfare and Representation: American Servicewomen in the Twentieth Century* (2017).

A schism persists among feminists themselves over whether women should serve in combat positions. Liberal feminists (also known as “justice feminists”) support integration, believing it can destabilize the oppressive patriarchy and change the way we wage war. Anti-militarists (also known as “care feminists”) oppose integration, believing that it will result in female soldiers’ submission to the institution’s solidly patriarchal values and devalue or dilute their allegedly feminine qualities like compassion and pacifism. An impossible question underlies these debates: Will women “feminize” the military, or will the military “masculinize” women? There is no answer here; “feminine” and “masculine” are classifications of historical and cultural construction. We could instead proceed with the theory that the continuing influx of women into the traditionally male-populated arena of war will further complicate these assumptive categorizations.

Debates about the increasing presence of women in the military extend to cultural representations thereof. As I addressed in previous chapters, Roy Scranton, David Buchanan, and other scholars of contemporary war literature question or condemn the prevailing narrative – the myth of the trauma-hero – because it champions the American soldier/veteran, portraying him as the hallowed victim of combat trauma, but at the cost of obscuring non-American civilian victims and the act of killing that war inherently is. I add to their critique by pointing out that, with the exception of media highlights like Jessica Lynch, dominant representations of the Iraq War have included mostly male figures, neglecting the roles and perspectives of women. Continuing with the premise that cultural representations such as those provided by the media, film, and literature contribute to the creation of cultural memory, we must recognize that the long-held narrative of militarized masculinity no longer reflects current reality. A problematic,

regressive assumption is created by the overwhelming prevalence of male authors and male characters in war literature: that war is the male prerogative, a No Girls Allowed space. While the stories of Johnson and Lynch and the ground-breaking achievements of Hester and Dunwoody remind us that women enter the arena of war too, they are often represented as isolated exceptions rather than as evidence that women “belong” in military culture.

Representational issues regarding women in the military are not confined to the news media. These concerns have been raised in literary portrayals as well. In her 2014 *New York Times* op-ed piece titled “The Things She Carried” (a tongue-in-cheek nod to Tim O’Brien’s classic Vietnam War story and collection), journalist-turned-novelist Cara Hoffman notes that “stories about female veterans are nearly absent from our culture,” rendering them invisible despite their growing numbers. She insists that “women soldiers would be afforded the respect they deserve if their experiences were reflected in literature, film, and art,” and vice versa, that “society may come to understand war differently if people could see it through the eyes of women.” Two months later, the *LA Review of Books* published a response to Hoffman’s article: “Women Writing War” by Army veteran Kayla Williams, author of two Iraq War memoirs. While she agrees with Hoffman that women “are less likely to be easily identifiable out of uniform [and] are too often portrayed in the media as victims rather than heroes,” she points out Hoffman’s oversight: female veterans are indeed starting to write about war. She goes on to list a dozen such works to prove her point – mostly memoirs, some contributions to short-story anthologies, but only one novel: Michelle Wilmot’s *Quixote in Ramadi*, which was self-

published through Amazon.com and never went into print.<sup>67</sup> This means that there is as yet no *available* female-veteran counterpart to the dozens of male-veteran Iraq-War novelists, both first-wave and second-wave, whose novels over the past decade have received critical acclaim and Hollywood contracts. What we do have are memoirs written by female veterans, including Williams's own combat memoir *Love My Rifle More than You* (2006) and her postwar trauma memoir *Plenty of Time When We Get Home* (2014), Shoshana Johnson's P.O.W. memoir *I'm Still Standing* (2010), and Jessica Goodell's *Shade it Black* (2011), which details her harrowing experience serving in the Marine's Mortuary Affairs unit. Interviews with female veterans comprise nonfiction collections by journalists Helen Benedict (*The Lonely Soldier*, 2009) and Kirsten Holmstedt's (*Band of Sisters*, 2007). Shannon Cain and Lisa Bowden's edited anthology of short personal essays and poetry, *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, From Vietnam to Iraq* (2008), is also insightful.

But if we consider which war representations get remembered, what genres most heavily contribute to the cultural memory of war, it isn't memoir, or even nonfiction in general. The popular imagination associates the Civil War with *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Gone with the Wind*, not John Billings's *Hard Tack and Coffee* or Joshua Chamberlain's *The Passing of the Armies*. We'd be hard-pressed to find John Ransom's once-popular *Andersonville Diary* in a bookstore or on a syllabus these days. When we think of World War I, *Farewell to Arms* comes to mind, not Hervey Allen's *Toward the Flame*, despite that it is considered one of the finest World War I memoirs written by an

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<sup>67</sup> As of 2018, Wilmot's remains the only novel about the Iraq War written by a female veteran. It was self-published through Amazon Digital Services LLC in 2013 and is only available via Kindle edition.

American veteran. Our understanding of the Holocaust is informed more by *Schindler's List* (Spielberg's film adapted from Thomas Kenneally's novel) than by the memoirs of Primo Levi and Viktor Frankl. We know about Vietnam through *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket* – all fiction, either screenplays or adaptations from novels. Fiction leaves a deeper, longer-lasting impression than nonfiction; our memory as a culture is more heavily imprinted with imagination and representation than with reality.

Helen Benedict elaborates on the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in interviews about her own writing. A professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, Benedict has published seven novels, five meticulously-researched works of nonfiction, and numerous articles and book chapters on rape culture and sexual assault in the military. When asked by Timothy Cahill, Director of the Center for Documentary Arts in Albany, whether her novel *Sand Queen* was inspired by her nonfiction book *The Lonely Soldier*, she confirmed, "It came from the same research. I came to realize, even after interviewing more than forty women who served in the Iraq War and doing a lot of other research too, that there was more to say – an internal, private story of war that lay in the soldiers' silences, jokes, and tears. Those moments are closed to the journalist, but they are exactly where fiction can go." Later in the interview, when Cahill asked about her views on the purpose and value of fiction and her decision to write novels, Benedict responded:

Fiction not only bears witness to real life, it may reflect it better than nonfiction ever can. The job of fiction is to plumb the soul, the unconscious, the human motivations so often hidden even from ourselves. Facts are not enough to tell the story of human beings and all their wonderful complexity. Even more important,



reading fiction is a way of leaving yourself and entering the souls of others, and in this way it can work against prejudice and myopia.

It is this power of fiction – to imagine, to reflect, to inspire empathy – that makes it such a pervasive factor in the processes of cultural memory. For fiction about women in war, it is not necessary that we wait for a female veteran to publish a novel. In fact, such deferment of representation could be problematic, for it would uphold the combat gnosticism or experiential privileging that David Buchanan critiques as the fundamental problem with the trauma-hero myth and the alleged military-civilian gap. There is already a small but growing body of American fiction about the Iraq War in which women predominate, either as characters or creators: male-authored war novels featuring female protagonists, female-authored war novels featuring male protagonists, and those central to this chapter, female-authored war novels featuring female protagonists.

Unlike their first-wave counterparts, two second-wave Iraq War novels written by male authors do feature female protagonists. In *The Good Lieutenant* (2016), Whitney Terrell places his main character, Lieutenant Emma Fowler, in a position of power as a leader of men. She seduces one of her subordinates, then abuses her power again later by assaulting an Iraqi interpreter and ultimately killing an innocent, deaf Iraqi civilian. Through her performances of sexuality and violence, Terrell develops Emma's character as a femme fatale or bombshell. Brian van Reet, on the other hand, perpetuates the age-old "damsel in distress" stereotype in his novel *Spoils* (2017). One of his three narrator-protagonists, Specialist Cassandra Wigheard, is taken as prisoner of war by a group of Afghani mujahideens who have come to Iraq to join the jihad against the Americans. Because van Reet and Terrell both portray their female-soldier protagonists from the

perspective of the male gaze and perpetuate stereotypes of the femme fatale (whose dangerous sexuality threatens masculinity) and the distressed damsel (who needs rescuing by males), this chapter forgoes an extended analysis of their texts.

In addition to male-authored Iraq War novels featuring female protagonists, some female-authored Iraq War novels feature male protagonists, such as Roxana Robinson's *Sparta* (2013) and Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage* (2014). These, however, follow the dominant American war narrative such that they seem merely to serve as proof that women writers are as capable as the first-wave male novelists at depicting the masculine "trauma hero" and his PTSD-pocked homecoming. Therefore, to continue my study of fiction that subverts the soldier-as-victim trope of American exceptionalist mythology, this chapter examines three female-authored novels that centralize the Iraq War experience from the perspective of female protagonists: Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011) tells the story of Kate Brady's deployment to Iraq, where she serves as a guard at Camp Bucca and faces sexual harassment and failure of legal recourse surrounded by the men in her platoon, by whom she is vastly outnumbered. Interspersed among chapters narrated by Kate are those by Naema Jassim, an Iraqi medical student who meets Kate when she comes to the prison to inquire about her father and brother who have been unjustly detained by American troops. Readers encounter Naema again in *Wolf Season* (2017), set ten years later. In addition to the chapters narrating the lives of Naema and her young son Tariq as refugees in a small New York town, Benedict's postwar novel follows Rin Drummonds, a female veteran and widow whose husband died while they were both on deployment in Iraq, leaving her to give birth and raise their blind daughter Juney alone. A child is also central to the plot of Cara Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You* (2014), in which

Army grunt-turned-officer Lauren Clay comes home from Iraq to her sick father and young brother Danny, who she helped raise during their childhood after their mother abandoned them. Turning down a scholarship at a prestigious music conservatory, Lauren deployed right out of high school in order to provide for her brother financially. But she comes home uncertain of her place in the family, and – despite her façade of stability – needing taking care of herself. These texts challenge the masculinist narrative of contemporary American war by deconstructing the gendered dichotomy that associates men with war and women with peace, by demonstrating multiple female war-roles, and by emphasizing important thematic elements that are missing or marginalized in male-focused novels of the war.

Strikingly, the central themes shared by *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *Be Safe I Love You (BSILY)* unfold in contradistinction to those emerging from male-authored / male-focused war novels. Most first- and second-wave Iraq War novels (like those discussed in my second chapter) highlight the soldier/veteran's psychological trauma (though the second-wave novels don't heroize him for it). Benedict's and Hoffman's works, by contrast, more heavily emphasize physicality, war's effects on the body. Furthermore, an oft-recurring trope throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century war literature is military camaraderie, the bond of brothers-in-arms. Benedict and Hoffman instead depict female soldiers as outsiders to their fellow servicemembers, both at war and at home. Instead, the relationships they underscore as most significant are familial, especially parent-child and sibling. This relationship with family extends to the human relationship with land and nature, as these writers reflect environmental-feminist politics with their attention to space and place. Male-authored war literature often features

embattled and embattling landscapes, wherein the terrain (the jungle in Vietnam, for example, and the desert in Iraq) is as deadly and as loathed an enemy as the Viet Cong or Iraqi insurgents. Male writers often stress the dangers and difficulties with which the landscape threatens the soldier. But female-authored war literature, like that of Benedict and Hoffman, highlights the reverse: war and its wagers' deleterious effects upon nature and the ecological environment. They move from environmental feminism to its sister-theory, feminist geography, by challenging assumptions of gendered space, demonstrating (like many cultural memory theorists) that memory and identity are often bound up with place. In short, these female novelists do not simply "add women and stir." While Terrell and van Reet tell masculine war stories replacing their main G.I. with a G.I. Jane, Benedict and Hoffman present a new narrative of war with insights extending beyond the familiar.

The deconstruction of gendered binaries, the demonstration of a spectrum of women's wartime roles, and an emphasis on certain thematic elements that are underplayed or ignored in male-authored war fiction are central to all three novels. Taken together, they form a counternarrative to the myth of the trauma hero that has prevailed in war representations for more than a century. In the previous chapter, I argued that the Iraqi-authored novels by Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi contribute to a more inclusive cultural memory of the Iraq War by providing Iraqi civilians' perspectives of the American occupation. Similarly, I argue here that *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *BSILY*, novels written by women and featuring female soldier/veteran protagonists, provide a more inclusive and more insightful understanding of contemporary war by presenting the experience of the U.S. military's fastest-growing demographic: women.

## HELEN BENEDICT'S *SAND QUEEN* (2011)

A *Boston Globe* reviewer insists that *Sand Queen* is “‘The Things They Carried’ for women in Iraq” (Fisher). The *New York Journal of Books* claims that “it is clearly Ms. Benedict’s intention to turn stereotypes upside down,” and that “*Sand Queen* is so powerful precisely because Helen Benedict is so pissed off” (Adelberg). In a review of the novel on his blog *Time Now: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars in Art, Film, and Literature*, Army veteran and Rutgers English professor Peter Molin attests to Benedict’s importance in the canon of Iraq War literature: “Since the most salient way the Iraq and Afghanistan wars will be remembered in 50 to 100 years is that for the first time the nation included large numbers of women in its fighting forces, Benedict’s achievement is prescient.” These critical statements, while seemingly contradictory, sum up Benedict’s work aptly. She maintains a semblance of tradition by adapting the innocence-to-experience plot arc constitutive not just of Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam fiction, but of most American war literature dating back to Crane, yet she overturns both convention and expectations in her depictions of women in the military. Her purpose is not to prove that women can be as physically tough as men at the work of soldiering, as Terrell’s is with the development of Emma Fowler’s character. Nor is Benedict primarily concerned with proving that women are equally equipped for the psychological pressures of war as their male counterparts, like van Reet attempts with his character Cassandra. Benedict is not interested in creating the next Diana Prince or Xena Warrior Princess. Instead, she balances her female characters with both strengths and weaknesses, reflecting the experiences of real women in a military culture undergoing revolutionary – and sometimes painful – change. In so doing, she indicts the patriarchal institution *par*

*excellence* for perpetuating gender inequality and turning a blind eye to sexual assault within its ranks.

So yes, Helen Benedict is both “pissed off” and “prescient,” and her body of work has already begun to elicit reform. Her numerous articles on sexual assault in the military and her 2009 work of nonfiction, *The Lonely Soldier*, for which she interviewed more than forty women who served in Iraq, inspired the 2012 documentary film *The Invisible War*. The *New York Times* credited the film with “both persuading more women to come forward to report abuse and forcing the military to deal more openly with the problem” (Risen). Two days after viewing the film, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta held a press conference to announce new initiatives to stop sexual assault in the military, according to producer Amy Ziering. In his 2014 memoir *Worthy Fights*, Panetta mentions that he was so “moved and angered by” the film that it drove him to implement measures to improve the way the DoD was preventing and handling sexual assault (452-453). Benedict herself testified to Congress twice on behalf of women in the military, and a third time in a class action lawsuit against the Pentagon on behalf of servicemembers sexually assaulted while serving (“A Call for Change”). The interviews and other research that went into her body of journalism on the topic, and which have built her reputation as an expert such that she has been invited to testify in court on the topic, are the investigative basis from which her fiction, like *Sand Queen*, has sprung.

The novel’s two protagonists are Kate Brady, a 19-year-old army specialist tasked with guarding a checkpoint and later a prison compound at Camp Bucca, in the middle of the Iraqi desert, and Naema Jassim, a 22-year-old Iraqi medical student who comes to the prison daily to inquire about her father and younger brother who have been inexplicably

detained. Alternating chapters depict Kate's struggle to survive her deployment and Naema's fight to get her family back and survive the occupation. At one point, Kate is sexually assaulted by her senior officer, and later she is seriously injured in a mortar attack that kills her "battle-buddy"<sup>68</sup> Yvette, one of two other female soldiers at Camp Bucca. Naema's father and brother are killed in the prison. The novel lacks a tidy resolution; there is no gesture toward hope or peace at its end.

First-person narration and psychological realism, along with the interactions between Kate and male characters (her fellow American soldiers and the Iraqi prisoners she guards), reveal the gender troubles she faces in the U.S. military. She is singled out for particular jobs because she's a woman, which adds pressure to a situation that is always already stressful and dangerous. At the beginning of the novel, her commanding officer has put her front and center "manning" the checkpoint outside the camp, as the first American contact with Iraqis passing by or coming in: "He's got the idea that the sight of a female soldier will win hearts and minds. We've just pulverized their towns, locked up their men and killed their kids, and one G.I. Jane with sand up her ass is supposed to make it okay?" (8). She's aware of being tasked with jobs nobody else wants, reflecting "The only reason I was given this M.O.S. is because only females are allowed to search Iraqi women and I'm the only female in my squad" (36). The tone

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<sup>68</sup> The "battle-buddy" system has been a military tradition and regulation for decades. According to *Army Flier*, battle buddies help each other through training, watch out for each other during deployments, and monitor each other post-deployment for symptoms of psychological stress and indications of suicide (Sellers). With the influx of women into the military during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the phrase has taken on a gendered meaning. Kate explains, "When we first landed in Kuwait, the command told us that no females could walk to the latrines or anywhere else at night without another female as a battle buddy, and the same rule applies here at Camp Bucca. That's so we can protect each other from getting raped by one of our own fine comrades" (Benedict, *Sand Queen*, 55).

created in the novel's early pages by this repetition of the word "only" intensifies in frequency and depth as the narrative progresses. Benedict emphasizes Kate's sense of isolation throughout her deployment, despite the fact that she is rarely alone. She shares a tent with thirty-three men and two other women at night, and oversees hundreds of Iraqi prisoners from her guard tower during the day, but she is an outsider among those who surround her. The military camaraderie that threads throughout previous war literature is absent from Kate's experience, with the exception of her few brief interactions with the two other women in her platoon. From everyone else, she faces gender discrimination.

At first, the men in her platoon are satisfied with hurling out verbal harassment, calling her "Tits Brady," telling her she's "nothing but a useless pussy" (27), and derisively asking if she wished she had a "cock like a man" (46). They violate her with their eyes, "making a big deal of staring at [her] chest" (26), even though she describes herself as lacking "big boobs" because she's "a scrawny little soldier" (26). Eventually, the threats become physical. She'd heard rumors about sexual assault in other platoons being the reason for the "battle-buddy" rule for female soldiers. She suffers urinary tract infections from being unable to drink sufficient water during the day because she doesn't want to expose her rear end while peeing in a bottle like the men do, and from having to delay urination during the night because "if you're female it's too fucking dangerous to go outside for a piss" (60). These anxieties come to a head one day when her team's leader Sergeant Kormick calls her into the guard shack with another male soldier. They knock the rifle out of her hand and the breath out of her chest, roughing her up as they begin to rip the pants of her uniform. If not for another soldier interrupting them, she would have been raped.



Kate hesitates to report the attack because “I don’t want a fuss and I don’t want to look like an even bigger loser than I already am . . . I am a soldier, after all” (85). She thinks, “anything I say will only make me sound like one of those whiny pussies all the guys think we females are anyway” (100).<sup>69</sup> But weeks later, when one of the other female soldiers is raped by the same two men, she regrets not having said anything and feels responsible for the other woman’s suffering. She musters the courage to speak to the leader of the entire platoon, Sergeant Henley, but he doesn’t believe her because she can’t remember the exact date of the attack. Moreover, Kormick had come in and filed a complaint against *her* around the same time, stating that she had behaved “in an indecent manner,” to preemptively cover his own ass. Henley humiliates Kate, telling her, “We can’t waste our time or diffuse our energies on internal strife, and especially not on whiny snivelers like you” and warning her that she should “shut the fuck up and go away” or she would face consequences (152).

By the time Kate reports the incident to Henley, she has already been rotated to a new post at Camp Bucca. Instead of searching the women who come through the checkpoint, she is now inside the compound where she must guard the all-male prisoners. She no longer has to work side-by-side with Kormick and his horny comrades, but the prisoners also harass her when they realize she is a woman: “When one of them comes up

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<sup>69</sup> In *The Lonely Soldier*, Benedict explains why reporting sexual assault in the military is so difficult: “Military platoons are enclosed, hierarchical societies riddled with gossip, so any woman who reports a sexual assault has little chance of remaining anonymous. She will probably have to face her assailant day after day and put up with resentment and blame from other soldiers who see her as a snitch. She risks being persecuted by her assailant if he is her superior and punished by any commanders who consider her a troublemaker. And because military culture demands that all soldiers keep their pain and distress to themselves, reporting an assault will make her look weak and cowardly. For all these reasons, some 80 percent of military rapes are never reported at all” (7).

close enough to see my face, all hell breaks loose. He laughs and beckons some others over. They point. They jeer. They gesture at me over and over to take off my helmet and show them my hair. And then one guy swaggers up, pulls out his dick and jerks off right in front of me. And this is just my first hour” (97). Throughout the next several weeks of her stint in the guard tower, the same prisoner daily “whips out his dick and starts beating it, leering at me with the most obscene expression I’ve ever laid eyes on” (127). He shouts vulgarities at her, encourages other prisoners to harass her, and then comes up with a new idea: shitting in his hand and throwing it at her. Faced with disrespect and violence from both the prisoners she must guard every day and her fellow soldiers she must live with by night, Kate begins to harden. The narrative’s progression traces her Fussellian transformation. From her enlistment into her first few weeks of deployment, she earnestly believed she was “proving” herself (43), she was eager “to do something noble” (42), and she was excited to be a part of something important. But rather than an affirmation of patriotic pride as earlier war narratives show through their innocence-to-experience tropes, Kate’s experiences lead her to become jaded, to realize that the military “is a boy’s club and it’s never going to be anything else” (106), and to want nothing more than to get back home. Even after she saves some of their lives, the men surrounding her have made it clear that she does not belong; she is not one of them.

While Kate’s character reflects the experience of a woman in the U.S. Army, Benedict’s voicing of Naema illuminates the regressive gender politics of Iraqi culture after the first Gulf War. The novel is set in 2003, right after the American invasion of Baghdad, so Naema is old enough to remember life before that war. Like the Iraqi characters in those novels discussed in my previous chapters, Naema was led to expect

that the American occupation would make Baghdad safer: “In the beginning, we thought the Americans would stop it [the looting and street crime]” (30). Instead, the presence of American troops made her hometown more dangerous. When they weren’t raiding neighborhoods or bombing suspected buildings, the soldiers “lounged on their trucks in the sun, smoking and taking photographs while looters stripped our shops, our homes, our museums.” They did nothing to control the crime, so Naema could no longer “go to [her] classes at Baghdad Medical College for fear of being raped . . . Many girls and women were being raped” (30). It becomes unsafe for the family to live in Baghdad, so they move to her grandmother’s village in Umm Qasr, within walking distance from Camp Bucca, where her father and brother are taken soon after they move. Naema’s anxieties about sexual violation mirror Kate’s in a parallel that challenges the pervasive exceptionalist assumption that the U.S. is more progressive than other countries – especially Middle Eastern countries – in terms of equal rights and protection under the law.

The escalation of sexual crimes in Iraq was not only a result of the increased violence brought about by the toppling of the Baathist regime and the invasion of U.S. troops. Naema reflects that it is also a broader cultural change in the way women were perceived in Iraqi society. Before the war, she was relatively independent. She recalls her love for her boyfriend Khalil, now separated from her because of the war, but insists that she is “wary of the yoke of marriage and all the expectations that go with it.” He respected her wishes when she told him she wanted to wait until after medical school to wed, explaining, “I am only 22 . . . I have my own ideas for my future” (91). Naema also sets the record straight regarding western assumptions about Iraqi women. Upon meeting

Kate at the checkpoint when she comes to inquire about her brother and father, their conversation leads Naema to tell Kate that she is in her fourth year of medical school. Kate is astonished: “Wow, I didn’t know you could do that here . . . I thought Iraqi girls weren’t allowed to do anything except get married” (73). Naema is quick to inform her otherwise.

In fact, until the 1990s, Iraqi women enjoyed relative equality in comparison to nearby countries like Saudi Arabia. In her Author’s Note at the end of the novel, Benedict points out that, as of the first Gulf War and again with the 2003 invasion of Baghdad, “the 1959 Family Code that protected Iraqi women and gave them more autonomy than Muslim women anywhere in the Middle East outside of Turkey has been dismantled, pushing back women’s rights fifty years” (311). Much of the progress made by the landmark Iraqi Provisional Constitution of 1970 – which “formally guaranteed equal rights to women and other laws [that] specifically ensured their right to vote, attend school, run for political office, and own property” – was reversed due to post-Gulf-War economic conditions and Saddam’s attempt to consolidate power by embracing stricter Islamic traditions and rhetoric, which undermined gender equality (Human Rights Watch). Naema laments this regression, worrying that it will worsen in the years to come: “We are sliding backwards in this country. We are becoming narrower than we have been for decades. Soon we women will be forced to live the life Granny had to lead – married off as little girls, beaten by our husbands, shrouded, enslaved – our rights as human beings obliterated . . . If this comes to be, how are we women – how is our culture – to survive?” (169).

Through Naema's character, Benedict enlightens her American audience about how these cultural changes impact the lives of Iraqi women.<sup>70</sup> They affect her every day, for she is now required to wear a hijab, which seems to suffocate her in the torturous heat of the Iraq desert, and is actually painful: "I never wore a hijab before this war, just as I never had to wear long skirts, and have not yet learned to move my head without fear of it slipping off. I spend all day holding my neck high and stiff until the ache burns down my back" (113). The metaphorical yoke of oppression is literalized here by sartorial strictures. Her movements are constrained by more than just garb; her schooling and career are put on hold indefinitely because "the militia's imam has declared that women are no longer allowed to leave the village unaccompanied by men. Furthermore, we not only have to cover our heads every time we go out, but our legs and arms, too, lest we tempt unclean thoughts or rape. If we do not obey, the imam has warned, we will be captured and beaten" (169). Benedict depicts the situation of Iraqi women alongside women in the U.S. military to illustrate the ubiquity of patriarchal oppression; male attempts to control femininity transcend cultures and are brought out most emphatically during times of war.

Another aspect of the cultural work achieved by *Sand Queen* is its deconstruction of traditional male/female binaries. Gender/war scholars Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry demonstrate how, in cultural discourse, "deviant women [those who perform violence] are set up in opposition to idealized gender stereotypes. They are characterized as the exception to clearly understood gender norms" (7). In other words, "women are not

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<sup>70</sup> That restrictions upon the rights of women in Iraq started after the war with the U.S. in 1991, relaxed somewhat by the late 1990s, then resurged with a chauvinist vengeance when the new war with the U.S. started in 2003 may suggest a link between U.S. intervention and the limiting of women's rights in Iraq.

supposed to be violent” (2). Jennifer Lobasz, professor of political science and international relations, points out that “war stories in the United States are both representative and productive of hegemonic gender discourses identifying masculinity with war and femininity with peace” (306). Feminist philosopher Jean Elshtain delves deeper into this gendered cultural mythology, explaining that the alignment of women with peace and men with war is part of a Western tradition of “symbiosis,” wherein the sexes are understood to have “complementary needs and gender-specific virtues,” constituting the tropes of the “Just Warrior” (men as “violent, whether eagerly or reluctantly and tragically”) and the “Beautiful Soul”<sup>71</sup> (women as “nonviolent, offering succor and compassion”) (4). Feminist peace activist Cynthia Cockburn contributes her insight on this perceived dichotomy by defining the “patriarchal gender relation” as a “phallographic relation between a supreme masculine principle and a secondary feminine one, wherein masculinity is associated with transcendence (rising above the mundane) and femininity is associated with immanence (immersion in the daily round)” (“Gender Relations” 25). Cockburn’s distinction recalls the separate-spheres ideology of early gender studies; in this case, men “transcend” civilian / domestic space when entering the arena of warfare while women remain “immersed” in peacetime domesticity, or “the mundane.”

This war/peace gender distinction is dramatized in twentieth-century war narratives written not just by men, but by women, too: from World War II novels like

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<sup>71</sup> Elshtain adapts this term from Hegel, who describes the “beautiful soul” as one who maintains “the appearance of purity by cultivating innocence about the historical course of the world.” Elshtain argues that “women in western culture have served as collective, culturally designated ‘beautiful souls’” (4).

Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) and Edith Wharton's *A Son at the Front* (1923) to Vietnam War novels like Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985). It is also present in first-wave Iraq War novels, such as Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2012), wherein both Daniel Murphy's and John Bartle's mothers – neither of whom wanted their son to enlist in the first place – are personifications of home and peace. Early in the novel, dialogue establishes home as refuge from war when, at a pre-deployment farewell party, Mrs. Murphy makes Bartle promise that he'll keep Daniel safe: "bring him home to me," she pleads (47). The climactic ethical dilemma (and Bartle's central traumatic event from the war) is his decision to conceal the details of Daniel's death so that Mrs. Murphy won't have to see her son's mutilated body and suffer the knowledge of his torture at the hands of Iraqi insurgents. Here, Bartle becomes a Just Warrior who protects the Beautiful Soul from violent reality. In this way, the novel (like many before it) forces the separation between war as masculine and peace as feminine.

Benedict's depiction of Kate subverts those traditional gender assumptions, upsetting the separate-sphere ideology of wartime. The dichotomy of men as life-takers and women as life-givers (closely related to the war/peace binary) is presented early in the novel, when Naema asks Kate why she is a soldier: "Why, as a woman, did you choose such a path? Soldiers take life. Women give life" (73). Kate blurts a stock response of having to pay for college and wanting to serve her country. But her actions throughout the novel prevent any firm classification of her as either peaceful or violent, suggesting that she is both – and that these traits are mutable rather than fixed or essential. She is *both* emissary of peace (as when she tries to placate the panicked Iraqi civilians, including Naema, who are clamoring to find out about their detained loved ones

at the checkpoint gate) *and* perpetrator of violence (as when, near the end of the novel, she shoots the young boy's donkey in the street and the jerking-off prisoner in the groin). She is no Beautiful Soul – in fact, she enlists to dispel the perception of herself as a “Goody Two-Shoes who volunteered for bake sales and church bazaars” (40). Nor is hers a stance of feminist pacifism, or of a desire to minister compassionately to the third world. When the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, she was disappointed at not being deployed, stating that she was “ready” to “do something about those bastards” (43). At some points in the narrative Kate exhibits empathy, as when she promises Naema she'll try to get some information about her detained father and brother. This may be self-serving, for Naema has agreed to translate for her and help calm the other civilians at the gate. Or it may be genuine empathy, for Kate observes the dark circles under Naema's eyes and guesses that “she's just too worried to sleep . . . I would be, if it was my dad and brother in here” (70). At other points, though, Kate displays a degree of violence like that performed by male characters such as Aaron in Scranton's *War Porn* and Fish in Abrams's *Brave Deeds* – and this is not *in spite of* her being female, but conversely stems from her being treated differently *as a woman*.<sup>72</sup> For example, she considers what she'd like to do to the prisoners she guards: “Wish I could get my hands on these ragheads sometime, instead of sitting up here like a doll on a shelf . . . Show him [the jerking-off prisoner] that I'm not the pathetic piece of female flesh he clearly thinks I am” (157). And later, towards the end, when she shoots that prisoner in the groin, she thinks, “I'd be

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<sup>72</sup> The portrayal of Kate as a perpetrator of violence is particularly interesting in light of an aporia some critics call the “conspiracy of silence” (Sunbuloglu 13); that is, much feminist writing/theory/scholarship refuses to acknowledge that women are capable of violence.



happy to shoot every one of those fuckers in the prick or the heart . . . Who wants to be next, gentlemen?” (289).

Benedict is explicit in her assertion that one need not possess testicles to succumb to violent rage. She deconstructs the trauma-hero myth by emphasizing that soldiers (even brave soldiers from the U.S. who hand out candy to street children – and even soldiers who are female) do injure and kill, and are the perpetrators of war violence rather than the victims thereof. Therefore, the characterization of Kate challenges traditional perceptions that associate women with peace and men with war, yet it does not simply reverse them. A reversal (if Kate were to eschew peace and embrace war-violence) would suggest that war or the military simply indoctrinates women with so-called “masculine” tendencies in a transformation which presents a no-less-problematic dichotomy. Instead, Benedict develops a both/and protagonist, and thus dismantles those gendered distinctions and the assumption that individuals are innately prone either to peace or to violence.

In addition to challenging male/female binaries as they relate to war, *Sand Queen* suggests that there is a spectrum of roles or personalities among female soldiers, rather than the polarized representations that dominate media depictions and male-authored war novels. From the beginning of the Iraq War, feminist scholars looked to the stories of female soldiers to help them challenge gender stereotypes, such as that women are naturally peaceful, or that they lack the ability to perform military duty. When the stories of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England gained popular attention, according to Lobasz, “liberal feminists used these media spectacles as an opportunity to argue that women as a group were neither less valiant nor more upstanding than men, and that connecting men

with war and woman with peace was no longer sustainable” (307). However, news images and rhetoric about Lynch and England instead reinforced conventional gender norms through the classic tropes of the Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman (305). In the public imagination, they came to represent two types of soldier-women: those who need rescue by males, and those whose attempts to gain independence lead to their moral downfall. Not only do the Peril and Ruined tropes constitute a binary that limits perceptions of female servicemembers to two categories into which all female soldiers must fit, they also reproduce and perpetuate traditional views of females as physically and psychologically weaker than their male counterparts.

Beyond media representations, these tropes have made their way into Iraq War fiction as well. Emma Fowler, protagonist of Whitney Terrell’s *The Good Lieutenant*, performs the archetype of the Ruined Woman. Analogous to England’s romantic involvement with her commanding officer Corporal Charles Graner, “the so-called corrupting influence and alleged ringleader of the Abu Ghraib abuses” (Lobasz 327), Fowler’s illicit relationship with a male officer, Pulowski, leads her to commit an act of atrocity. While England became infamous for her participation in the prisoner-torture scandal, Fowler shoots an innocent, deaf Iraqi civilian point-blank and was involved in the aggressive interrogation of other detainees. Therefore, despite any gender-bending intention Terrell might have had in casting a female lead, the character of Emma Fowler conforms to the common Western trope of the Ruined or Fallen Woman.

Specialist Cassandra Wigheard of Brian van Reet’s *Spoils*, on the other hand, fits neatly into the Woman in Peril stereotype. An explicit analogue to Jessica Lynch, Cassandra goes down shooting when her convoy is attacked by a group of Afghani

mujahideens who have come to Iraq to join the jihad against the Americans after the fall of Baghdad. She is then taken to a defunct water treatment plant (along with two male officers) and held as a P.O.W. for several months. She becomes the international media's focus, a *cause celebre* personified in a petite young American woman with nearly an entire brigade – thousands of troops, including SEALs, Navy divers, and Psy-ops teams – looking for her (van Reet 163). This leads one American soldier to marvel, “How many people we gonna have to kill, anyway, just to save one fucking life?” (229). Cassandra has become larger than life, a symbol of America herself, her capture a microcosm – and, to some, the justification – of an entire nation's fears of Islamic terrorism.

Unlike Lynch, who was rescued, Cassandra is killed. Dressed in a hooded black abaya and unrecognizable from the sky, she is shot by Army helicopters as she tries to escape when the mujahideen leader forces her to fire a mortar round toward a nearby U.S. camp. This plot twist in which the “knight” (in this case, the U.S. Army) fails to rescue the Woman in Peril – in fact, unwittingly kills her – may be interpreted as a satirical undermining of masculine power and a critique of the military in itself. Still, the characterization of Cassandra fails to get past stereotyped gender norms; the plot's urgency depends on her relative helplessness as a woman captured by foreign men.<sup>73</sup> She has become more than a soldier; she is now a reason for continued violence. The plot of *Spoils* is thus a modification of Gayatri Spivak's explanation for imperialistic motives:

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<sup>73</sup> van Reet perpetuates another problematic stereotype by having his character reflect on why there are disproportionately more gay women in the military than gay men: “The difference was a matter of what type of person was typically attracted to the idea of the military: she thought the army had more than its share [of lesbians] for the same reason that professional women's basketball did. It takes a certain kind” (200).

van Reet's narrative is about white men fighting to save a white woman from brown men.<sup>74</sup>

*Sand Queen*'s Kate Brady, however, does not fit into either category neatly. At times she exhibits qualities of the Woman in Peril – but that peril comes from her own fellow soldiers, the white knights themselves, not from a foreign Other from whom they must rescue her. At other times she assumes the role of the Ruined Woman – if we interpret her gradual loss of empathy and her hardening toward Iraqis once she's subjected to the jeering male prisoners as a moral failing. So we may see her as both (and more), or as neither. Benedict emphasizes this rejection of either/or classification through tropes that are analogous to Peril and Ruined, yet recognizably modernized, considering their inheritance from the Victorian era. She acknowledges that a female in the contemporary military is labelled either a “bitch” or a “whore,” and she is careful to depict Kate and the other female characters in such a way that they do not conform to these expectations.

In one scene, before she is physically attacked by Kormick, Kate talks to Third Eye about the way the men in her squad speak to her and look at her. Third Eye matter-of-factly advises, “You gotta be a bitch or a slut around here, everybody knows that, and since you won't be a bitch with that sunny little Christian act of yours, you've only got one choice left. That's why the men chase you so bad. They all want to get in your pants. But you won't put out, so they're pissed . . . If you don't want to put out, then you need to get a whole lot meaner” (56). To survive the deployment, ostensibly, Kate must take on one or the other of these undesirable personas. When she refuses to become either, she is

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<sup>74</sup> In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak famously describes the British “civilizing” of India as “white men saving brown women from brown men” (92).

punished: the men in her platoon decide for her. A few days after Kormick assaults her, she discovers her name graffitied across the row of Porta-Johns alongside a false accusation and the sexual slur “Sand Queen,” explained thusly:

Sand Queen is one of the worst things a female can get called in the Army. It means an ugly-ass chick who’s being treated like a queen by the hundreds of horny guys around her because there’s such a shortage of females. But she grows so swellheaded over their attention that she lets herself be passed around like a whore at a frat party, never realizing that back home those same guys wouldn’t look at her twice. In other words, she’s a pathetic slut too desperate and dumb to know she’s nothing but a mattress. (*Sand Queen* 105)

Demeaning labels like “sand queen,” “whore,” and “slut” are not fictional exaggerations of the verbal abuse female servicemembers face. In *The Lonely Soldier*, testimony from Benedict’s interviews with female soldiers from various branches of the military reveal the prevalent use of sexual slurs, particularly toward women who report sexual assault or are merely rumored to have done so. Despite provocation and ostracism, Kate refuses to give in, refuses to become the “bitch” or the “whore.” Instead, she retreats into herself, and her refusal to fit into the patriarchally designated categories ultimately results in her discharge. The military cannot “turn” her, so it ejects her.

The nuanced depictions and decisions of the supporting female characters also indicate a spectrum of women’s roles in the military rather than the Bitch/Whore and Peril/Ruined dichotomies. Third Eye (so called because of a large infected pimple she gets on her forehead during their first week in Iraq) believes she is exempt from the sexual attention of the male soldiers because she has chosen to perform the “bitch” role

with her gruff-and-tough demeanor, plus “she’s built like a bulldozer” (53) and “she’s an obvious bull-dyke” (56). Both the “bitch” and the “bull-dyke” stereotypes she wears fail to protect her, though, for she is eventually raped by Kormick and some of the other men when she is rotated to Kate’s duty in the checkpoint guard shack. Third Eye is not just “one” kind of woman: she is secretly sensitive and almost maternal (she calls Kate “kiddo” and offers her advice) yet shrewd enough to don a guise to try to protect herself. The guise fails, suggesting that the existing gender stereotype is understood to be a fallacy by both its detractors and perpetrators, and that a woman will be put in her place whether she fulfills it or not. This indicates that the problem lies within the military institution itself, not with the “bitch” or the “whore,” and that these are external rhetorical classifications no one really believes in, yet many continue to use as a means to keep women at a disadvantage in an institution wherein, due to recent legislation, exclusion from the rank hierarchy can no longer be used as a discriminatory device.

Kate describes Yvette, one of the two other women in her platoon, as “a weird mix of tough and gentle,” a “dark-skinned Puerto Rican, narrow as a broomstick” who can “curse the cock off a roach, worse than most of the guys in our unit. But if you treat her right, she’s truly generous” (61-62). While Third Eye clads herself in the “bitch” role in an attempt to avoid sexual confrontation with the men, Yvette’s character bears none of the attributes associated with either “bitch” or “whore” – nor is she cast as a Woman of Peril or a Ruined Woman. Her tiny stature makes her a physical foil to Third Eye (indicating that not all women in the military are built like “bulldozers”), while her desire to become a medic and redeploy back to Iraq after she gets home from this tour – so that she can “put wounded people back together” (222) – makes her a psychological foil to

Kate, who can't wait to get home and never come back to the Middle East. The diversity of personality, behavior, and even appearance among these three female soldier-characters represents a resistance to gender binaries – both between the sexes (male = war versus female = peace) and within the women who serve (“bitch” versus “whore;” Woman of Peril versus Ruined Woman).

HELEN BENEDICT'S *WOLF SEASON* (2017)

While *Sand Queen* offers a glimpse of a female soldier's experience during the Iraq War, *Wolf Season* is set after it. Though it deals with themes of loss and postwar trauma like many male-authored war novels, *Wolf Season* has a key difference: it is narrated from the perspective of multiple women who have been affected in various ways by their proximity to the war. The narrative's polyvocality permits juxtapositional contrasts that highlight not just male versus female views of the conflict, but perhaps more importantly, the way the war impacts different women in different roles of relation to it. Chapters are alternately narrated by Rin, a sergeant whose husband was killed in Iraq while she was on deployment with him; Naema, the Iraqi medical student from *Sand Queen* who has since become a doctor and is now a widowed refugee; and Beth, a homecoming-queen-turned-housewife whose Marine husband Todd has become a violent stranger and whose multiple deployments culminate in family tragedy. All three women are mothers; all three are also widows (Rin and Naema from the novel's beginning, Beth by the novel's end). Their stories are brought together by a devastating hurricane that strikes their small town in upstate New York. Their recovery – from both the present natural disaster and the past war that still affects their daily lives – enables multiple

perspectives of the Iraq War's impact: on a veteran of it, a refugee from it, and a wife at first damaged but ultimately freed by it.

In *Sand Queen*, Benedict rejected the male/female binary of war/peace through Kate's roles as both peaceful liaison and violent perpetrator. In *Wolf Season*, Benedict resumes this dismantling objective through her depiction of Rin's motherhood. One reason women are associated with pacifism is their biological capacity for child-bearing and, by presumptive extension, child-rearing. Some feminist theorists (known as "difference" or "care-focused" feminists), such as Sara Ruddick and Virginia Held, maintain that women possess an inherent capacity for caregiving and compassion that renders them less prone to acts of violence. However, this belief only serves to perpetuate the assumption of female pacifism that sets women in opposition to martial masculinity. Benedict challenges this gendered life-taker / life-giver dichotomy by, from the novel's first page, characterizing Rin as a nurturing, loving mother to her daughter Juney, but later revealing the central traumatic event from her deployment: she killed a young Iraqi girl. These details establish Rin as capable of both creating life and destroying it – she is both a mother and a killer. In this way, Benedict upturns the trauma-hero myth of earlier war fiction by characterizing a U.S. veteran as a perpetrator (albeit a hero to her daughter), while also questioning the legitimacy of the war/peace binary that some critics use to argue that women are unfit for combat due to their reproductive capacity or assumed maternal instinct.

While her characterization of Kate in *Sand Queen* defies the representational fallacies of the female soldier as either "bitch" or "whore," or as a Woman in Peril or Ruined, Benedict achieves similar diversity with her cast of characters in *Wolf Season*.



By voicing the perspectives of three women in differing relations to the war (Rin, Naema, and Beth), she offers multiple narratives, eschewing the monolithic war-story rooted in American exceptionalism. The nuanced development of each character – the Female Veteran, the War Refugee, and the Military Wife<sup>75</sup> – reveals that women in uniform who fight the war aren't the only women affected by it. Just as Benedict divided *Sand Queen's* narration between Kate and Naema, granting perspectival primacy to neither the American soldier nor the Iraqi civilian, she takes this polyvocality one character further in *Wolf Season* by alternating chapters between the three women. The novel opens with Rin, yet she does not occupy a position of narrative centrality; the trio of protagonists share equal plot focus. Though occupying ostensibly weaker female roles due to one's status as a refugee and the other's as a housewife, Naema and Beth nonetheless maintain their own agency and character dynamics. By exploring the war's effect on women from vantages both civilian and veteran – and both American and Iraqi – Benedict is able to offer more to readers than the male soldier's one-dimensional homecoming story that has dominated the genre.

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<sup>75</sup> Though Benedict states that she was deliberate in having “the three women in the novel representing different views of war,” she nonetheless portrays Rin, Naema, and Beth as individuals rather than stock characters. She does not want to stereotype them as the iconic “working woman,” “housewife,” “widow,” “mother,” or “woman soldier.” The importance of this nuancing of character is stated best by Cynthia Enloe, in her introduction to *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*, her nonfiction collection comprised of profiles of eight different women (four Americans, four Iraqis) in some way involved with or affected by the war. She establishes her “double-claim” that the women whose stories she shares are “neither unique nor universal.” We should not view them (or Benedict's characters) as definitive paradigms of their respective positions, “nor do we need to succumb to the temptation to treat each of these women as so distinctive in her experiences and personality that she stands alone, outside history” (Enloe 2). Benedict presents her fictional characters in a similar fashion to Enloe's portrayal of the real women in her book, such that both *Sand Queen* and *Wolf Season* demonstrate what Enloe attests that her own work demonstrates: “the dynamic relationship between generality and particularity” (3).

For example, Rin's story itself is not just an "add-woman-and-stir" iteration of the played-out combat-trauma narrative. Benedict does incorporate the familiar trope of the veteran's struggle to reintegrate into civilian society, but with an important new element: Rin is recovering not only from combat and moral injury, but also from the loss of her husband Jay, who was killed in an RPG attack on their convoy while they were on deployment together. She struggles not only with her own psychological symptoms, but also with raising her blind daughter Juney. Her responsibilities as a mother make her postwar experience unique from those depicted in novels about male veterans, who are more often portrayed as being cared for rather than providing care. Female characters in previous war literature – wives, mothers, nurses – are often waiting on the male soldier to return home as husband, son, and patient. Rin, however, comes home alone, endures her pregnancy alone, and assumes the role of motherhood alone.

Rin's isolation is by choice. The veteran's purported desire for the company of other veterans – an extension of wartime camaraderie into postwar civilian society – is another popular trope of war literature that Benedict upends. While depictions of male veterans in both fiction and nonfiction indicate their attraction to veteran protest movements, rap-groups, biker gangs, and other social gatherings, Rin distances herself from society, especially from other veterans and other women. The presumption that "we vets gotta stick together"<sup>76</sup> or that there is "safety in numbers" is absent from this novel. In one of its early scenes, Rin takes Juney to the VA-affiliated pediatric clinic for her annual checkup. When they arrive, she parks "as far away from the other cars as she can

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<sup>76</sup> This concept originates from Herbert Block's 1946 editorial cartoon: "U.S. battle veterans got to stick together."

get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people” (22). Now, as always when she enters a place populated by other people, she imagines her wolves accompanying her, “flanking her” as a shield of protection.<sup>77</sup> When they enter the clinic’s waiting room, Rin “refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery” (24). These “other women” are also mothers, themselves veterans or military wives, and the reason for Rin’s suspicion of them is unclear until the narrative later reveals the stigma she feels has been placed upon her for being “driven out of the army for being pregnant and raped” (302) and having no recourse or defense.

As with Kate in *Sand Queen* and testimonies from interviews with female service-members collected in *The Lonely Soldier*, Benedict here emphasizes the lasting effects of sexual assault as compounding the psychological trauma of combat itself. Rin does not seem to be the only mother experiencing this social unease, however, for in the clinic’s waiting room, as other mothers sit far apart with their sick or bandaged children, “the beams of the women’s eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal” (25). Rin’s fear and distrust among the other military mothers in the waiting room intensifies when she and Juney are led into the exam room and the nurse tells her that “Dr. Jassim” will be with them momentarily. Immediately defensive, Rin asks “Where the fuck is she from?”,

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<sup>77</sup> The wolves in this novel are both real and imaginary. Rin has raised three wolves in the enclosed woods behind her farm, which pits the locals against her because she does not have a permit for them and they are, like her, assumed to be dangerous. But, as a coping mechanism for her social anxiety, she also imagines that they walk with her at the center of their pack when she and Juney enter public spaces. The physical reality of the wolves on Rin’s property and Benedict’s research on therapy programs that pair wolves with veterans will be discussed later in this chapter.

feeling her hands “curl up tight and white” and protectively drawing Juney tighter to her. Readers will recognize the doctor as Naema from *Sand Queen*. To Rin, however, the mere mention of an Iraqi name evokes terrifying memories of her deployment to Iraq and reinstates military-ingrained xenophobia: “Rin can’t believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the V.A. to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well” (28). When Naema enters the exam room, Rin cautiously observes the woman’s garb and demeanor: “In walks a woman in a white coat, as if she’s a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there’s that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair . . . voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable” (28). As she takes in this seeming intruder, she is visibly disturbed, a panic attack taking over her sense of control: “Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming in short and airless” (28). It is at this moment that the brewing hurricane – which she thought she would beat home – bursts through the clinic’s window, torrents of water and mud and debris crashing into the three of them and sweeping them off of their feet. Struck by maternal instinct and a panicked desperation to survive, Rin deliberately plows into and past Naema, trampling the Iraqi doctor in order to get herself and her daughter to safety. Her mental misanthropy has culminated in a physical assault on another woman – one representing, to her, the foreign wartime Other.

This scene in which Rin attacks Naema – which, it is later revealed, nearly kills the doctor – challenges the perception of female American servicemembers as relegated to roles of peacekeeping to further the “hearts and minds” agenda, such as having tea with female Iraqi civilians and distributing school supplies to needy children. Perhaps

one of *Wolf Season*'s most important contributions to contemporary war literature is not simply that Benedict represents the under-represented by casting a female war veteran as one of her novel's protagonists, but that said character defies easy categorization: Rin is capable of violence and of nurture, she exhibits hatred yet also compassion, she is a wounded victim but still a vicious fighter. The individual who would be in the position of the "trauma hero" were this a conventional war novel is, in Benedict's narrative, the most morally questionable.

*Wolf Season* offers more than Rin's counternarrative to the veteran's traditional homecoming story and a challenge to the assumption that female servicemembers are peacekeeping counterparts to the martial male. It also presents a narrative of the Iraq War and its aftermath from the perspective of a female refugee. As I explained in Chapter Two, some second-wave male-authored Iraq War novels provide glimpses into the Iraqi civilian's experience during the American occupation, but these are limited primarily to male perspectives—sections voiced by Ayad in *The Good Lieutenant* and by Qasim in *War Porn*. More detailed representations are found in the novels discussed in Chapter Three, where we are able to imagine the occupation and its aftermath through the perspectives of Antoon's artist/corpse-washer Jawad, Makiya's unnamed protagonist, and Saadawi's junkman-turned-Dr. Frankenstein, Hadi. We gained some insight into the struggles of an Iraqi exile, as Al-Qazwini's protagonist Zubaida watched the fall of Baghdad from her television screen in Germany. With Naema, however, we encounter an Iraqi transplanted to the United States, making *Wolf Season* one of the first works of fiction to imagine the experience of an Iraq-War refugee to America.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The refugee narrative within *Wolf Season* joins a genre of American war-refugee literature that includes works by and about Jewish families who fled to America during the Holocaust; Korean

In the years that have passed since the end of *Sand Queen*, Naema has finished medical school, married her longtime boyfriend Khalil, and borne a child, Tariq. She comes to America after Khalil, who had become an interpreter for the Americans,<sup>79</sup> is killed by a car bomb that also took Tariq's leg and left a pronounced scar on Naema's face. When she moves to the U.S., she must complete additional training and residency to become certified as a medical practitioner, "her degrees and achievements as a doctor in Iraq counting for nothing" (161). Her first appearance in *Wolf Season* is as Juney's pediatrician, the day Rin slams into her while pulling Juney and herself from the flooding exam room as the hurricane hits. Naema nearly drowns. Subsequent chapters show her in the hospital for several weeks thereafter, attached to IVs and oxygen. Until her recovery and discharge in the second half of the novel, these chapters function as vignettes of memory. Her semi-conscious state is flooded with flashbacks to Iraq, to her home and life as a young wife and mother, and to the day of the bombing that killed her husband and crippled her son. The novel's contrast of past and present emphasizes the refugee's

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War refugees to the U.S.; and, more recently, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Refugees* (2017) which are about Vietnamese refugees ("boat people") who evacuated their devastated country and sought asylum in the U.S. after the Vietnam War.

<sup>79</sup> At the time that he was killed, Khalil had been working for Sergeant Donnell, a character from *Sand Queen* who had interrupted and fought off the two soldiers assaulting Kate in the guard shack, preventing the attack from becoming full-on rape. In a bit of dialogue in *Wolf Season*, Naema mentions her immigration "sponsor, Sergeant Donnell and his wife, Kate Brady" (68). Readers thus discover what happened to protagonist Kate after the events of *Sand Queen*. Naema and this passing mention of Kate and Donnell are the only continuations from one novel to the next, which are the first two installments of what Benedict calls her "Iraq War trilogy," though the two novels can stand alone. In interviews, Benedict cites Pat Barker's World War I *Regeneration* trilogy as an inspiration for her novels, explaining that she "wanted to do something like that with the Iraq War" (Wieberg). As of the writing of this chapter (late 2018), there has been no release of a title or publication date for the final novel of Benedict's trilogy.

spatiotemporal struggle: Naema exists simultaneously there-then and here-now, psychologically in Iraq of the 2000s yet physically in New York of the 2010s.

Her alternating states of flashback-dreaming and wakefulness resemble the sense – reported by immigrants and refugees, and posited by theorists of postcolonialism and multiculturalism – of one’s identity being stuck in geo-cultural limbo yet traversing invisible borders.<sup>80</sup> In the first of these chapters, scarcely over a page long and aptly titled “Mosaic,” her fragmented consciousness drifts from memories of watching “Baby Tariq crawl, perfect and whole,” hearing the “call of the muezzin,” and holding “Tariq shocked stiff in her arms, his leg an incomprehensible rag,” to “the blinding green of the American countryside” (41). Later, when Tariq is able to come visit her in the hospital, the sight of him in the present jerks her back to the past. She sees “the fear in his face” when he looks upon her bruised and battered form, “the same stricken expression he wore in the Baghdad hospital the day after the bomb, the day he was trying to grasp in his three-year-old way that it was his own father he had just seen atomized into a cloud of blood; his own leg that had just been sawn off at the thigh” (131). As she recovers enough to go home, she is gradually able to distinguish clearly between the contrasting spatiotemporalities, but through it all, her navigation of dual identities – Naema there-then and Naema here-now – is always tied to her son. He is both her reason for surviving in the present and the only tangible reminder – a living souvenir – of her past. Like Rin

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<sup>80</sup> The “both/and” fluidity of cultural identity is theorized in various ways by Gloria Anzaldúa in her “borderlands” concept, Viet Thanh Nguyen in his writings about refugees, Homi Bhabha on hybridity, Salman Rushdie on “imaginary homelands,” and Jhumpa Lahiri on the dual identity of immigrants.

with Juney, Naema's remaking of a post-traumatic self is both complicated by and predicated upon her child.

Motherhood and loss are also essential to an analysis of the third protagonist in *Wolf Season*, Beth the military wife. Mother to ten-year-old Flanner (friend of Tariq) and wife to Marine Corps "lifer" Todd, she was the pretty, popular homecoming queen of her small-town high school who married him "before he went off to boot camp, giving her an excuse to avoid college, much to her parents' disgust" (90). Fifteen years of waiting for him to come home – at first from U.S. bases but later from Afghanistan and Iraq – have taken their toll on her. She has become a functioning alcoholic, stuck in an unsatisfying part-time job as a kids' dance instructor at a strip-mall boutique. Their house appears to be the epitome of domestic bliss – "curtains bright as lemons, matching towels, gold faucets" (61); "creamy velvet cushions" (89); a "butter and cream dining room;" everything kept meticulously "dusted and vacuumed and polished" (149) – but it seems more like a cage in which Beth is trapped than a home in which she thrives. She simultaneously anticipates and fears Todd's homecomings, for "each time he comes home now, he is deeper inside his armor than the time before." His PTSD nightmares cause her bodily harm; he throws her off the bed or tries to strangle her in his sleep, the next morning "sobbing his apologies, begging her not to leave him." Her response is always reassurance – she understands "it's not you hurting me like this; it's the war" (90) – but the incidents intensify in frequency and bruising to the point that it has clearly become domestic abuse.

Todd's behavior is not shocking to readers familiar with cultural representations of war. The violent behavior of the "broken" veteran unable to distance his war-self from



his home and bedroom has become common fare in Vietnam and Iraq-War literature and film. The difference in Benedict's novel, however, is Beth's response. Initially, she seems like the traditional military dependent, the "weak" woman in contrast to the fierce survivors Rin and Naema. Yet, though she puts up a front of pride in her husband's service by donning a flattering outfit and high heels to greet him at the airport, and goes through the motions of wifely duty by cooking his favorite dinner when he comes home, beneath this façade lurks a resistance revealed only through Benedict's use of inner monologue.

For example, Todd has asked Louis, their neighbor and veteran buddy, to "help her out when needed – be the man when Todd is running around shooting Afghans," which she hates because "it makes her look like the very type of helpless woman she least wants to be" (44). This underlying resistance manifests itself in sarcasm, as well. When people routinely ask her if she's doing okay while Todd's away, she thinks to herself, "Oh yes. Strong little military wifey, that's me" (66). She has difficulty maintaining control over their son Flanner, whose behavior is growing increasingly violent as he nears adolescence – due partly to attempts to emulate his father, and partly to the shoot-em'-up video games he plays. Even he recognizes his mother's drowning sense of self; he knows "his dad would never let her drink like this night after night" and wonders, "Where is the mom she was only a short while ago?" (91). As the years of her marriage to an absent husband go by, she becomes less concerned with keeping up appearances and less complacent with her domestic existence as wife and mother.

Benedict's representation of a military spouse's experience is important because it urges us not to forget the war soldiers' wives fight at home. Beyond her Penelopeian role

as waiting-wife, however, Beth's reaction to Todd's death near the end of the novel is more Chopinesque than Homeric. Reminiscent of Mrs. Louise Mallard, heroine of Kate Chopin's highly anthologized "The Story of an Hour," Beth feels a sense of release, of freedom upon hearing of her husband's demise. When Mrs. Mallard receives the news of her husband's death, her initial sobs give way to the realization that she could now "live for herself," that there would no longer be his "powerful will bending hers." In a state of epiphany, she repeatedly whispers, "Free! Body and soul free!" Over a century later but likewise oppressed by the patriarchal figure of her husband – who is a personified synecdoche of the U.S. military – Beth experiences a similar if subtler revelatory insight.

Like Mrs. Mallard, Beth knows that her reaction is not what is socially expected from a grieving wife. At Todd's funeral, she can barely suppress her "overpowering urge to laugh." Despite herself, she feels that "she is acting in a macabre circus, imitating all those war widows she has watched on television" (240). When the funeral is over and Louis walks Beth and Flanner to the car, she comments, "Performance over. I need a drink" (242). Unlike Mrs. Mallard, whose husband ends up being alive after all, Beth endures no such reversal. In the days that follow, she wavers between two identities, the wife she was before and the independent individual she can be now. Her recognition of this new freedom is not without shame, and she briefly faces the ethical dilemma of how to go forward: "It is as if she married two Todds, one prewar, the other post, and now she has to be two widows: the widow who is going to awake every morning to an unbearable weight bearing down on her, and the widow who is so glad to be rid of him she can't even face herself in the mirror" (250). Ultimately, she decides that their house – the domestic space to which she's been confined, like Glaspell's caged bird and housewife –

is a place she can no longer inhabit. Less than three weeks after Todd's funeral, she puts the house up for sale so she and Flanner can uproot and move to New York City. In an almost ceremonial scene, mother and son "empty the house room by room, selecting what to pack, what to toss, and what to store" (288). She bundles up "every last shred of Todd's Marine Corps belongings" and throws them away, a symbolic molting-off of this stage of her life so she can start over in a new skin, a new city, a new self.

Initially differing in their proximity and relation to the conflict in Iraq, these three protagonists of *Wolf Season* ultimately reach a similar plane. The war has taken each of their husbands, and each is left to raise a child on her own. Despite their losses, the responsibility of motherhood has enabled them to become stronger, arguably more capable of coping with and overcoming post-traumatic stress than their male counterparts. Through Rin, Benedict shows that women can engage in combat – even killing – and still be nurturing mothers, thus deconstructing the gendered life-taker/life-giver dichotomy. Through Naema, Benedict illustrates the harrowing experience of an Iraqi civilian-turned-refugee, revealing (like the novels examined in my previous chapter) that the war was no less traumatic for the often-marginalized wartime Other than it was for our much-lauded veterans or "trauma heroes." And through Beth, Benedict emphasizes the foreign war's impact on domestic spaces and reprises the theme of Chopin's early-feminist text to suggest that a husband's death is not the end for every war widow. For some, it is the beginning of a new self.

#### CARA HOFFMAN'S *BE SAFE I LOVE YOU* (2014)

While Benedict opts for polyvocality in her novels, providing two distinct female perspectives of the war's impact in *Sand Queen* and three in *Wolf Season*, Cara

Hoffman's important Iraq War novel *Be Safe I Love You (BSILY)* focuses on one very dynamic protagonist-narrator. Upon graduating high school, Lauren Clay turned down a scholarship to an elite music conservatory to enlist in the Army because her family needed the money. Her mother abandoned them when Lauren was a child, and her father is a depressed psychotherapist sporadic at best in his practice at a non-profit clinic, leaving the family in dire financial circumstances. Lauren had to raise her little brother Danny and run the household, bringing home grocery bags of ramen and crackers with her babysitting money and the little cash her dad would give her here and there. When a military recruiter showed up at her high school advertising enlistment bonuses and annual salaries, Lauren jumped at the opportunity to support her family and escape their small, suffocating town of Watertown, New Jersey, home to Fort Drum Army Base and not much else.

Hoffman's novel begins with Lauren's return to Watertown from Iraq on Christmas Day and subsequently follows her bumpy reintegration into civilian life, recalling previous war classics like Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, and Chris Kyle's *American Sniper*. Like Rin's narrative in *Wolf Season*, though, Lauren's story is not merely a trauma narrative with a woman replacing the male trauma hero. Hoffman overtly explores an aspect of American military culture seldom at the forefront of war fiction: class.<sup>81</sup> Lauren frankly admits that "she didn't enlist because it was part of her character, she enlisted because

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<sup>81</sup> This is particularly interesting when compared with Vietnam War literature, since the compulsory draft meant the war was fought by mostly working-class Americans. While focusing heavily on trauma and politics, rarely does twentieth- and twenty-first century war literature explicitly thematize class. Some satirical anti-war novels like *Catch-22*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* contain critiques of consumerism and corporate capitalism, but these are not central to their narratives.

they paid a twenty-thousand-dollar signing bonus” (237). When she got to Iraq, she saw clearly that “the thing she fought for was cold metal, and money, and absolutely nothing more” (251). Later, she invites a Marxist critique of the war by recalling the FOB in Iraq (like her hometown Fort Drum itself) as a collection of “cheaply constructed structures that were built to warehouse people like her all over the world. Places to store them like meat and send them out like butchers; neat, efficient, working-class folks who served the demands of a hungry population and over time would get used to the smell of blood” (144). This language suggests that those in power within the military-industrial complex view working-class folk as dispensable, serving them up as cannon fodder into the insatiable maw of the war machine. But here, unlike conventional war literature, the “war machine” is not some faceless entity. It is the “hungry population,” that is, the American citizenry, whose demands those working-class soldiers serve, making us (civilians) complicit in the violence performed on our behalf.

*BSILY* also differs from traditional war novels in its unexpected revelation of an unreliable narrator. While she initially seems genuinely compassionate and trustworthy because of her relationship with her younger brother and because she sacrificed her dream of going to music school in order to provide for her family, readers are shocked by scenes in which Lauren roughs up her hometown boyfriend (through no provocation on his behalf), and later abducts her own brother so they can go live in the secluded glacial woods of Canada where they elicit a manhunt and almost die from exposure. Moreover, her experience as a soldier in Iraq is glimpsed through her flashbacks, in which she often mentions her army buddy Daryl. We are jolted by the realization that we’ve been betrayed by her false memory when she goes to visit him and must confront the truth

she's made herself forget: he died under her watch, during an encounter in which she was also responsible for killing an Iraqi mother and child. Ultimately, the only insights into her time at war that we can trust are not those from her in Iraq, but from her brother in Watertown, in the letters (interspersed between the novel's chapters) that he calls "Dispatches," which he sends to her frequently and always signs with the closing line "Be safe, I love you." The child in this narrative is a more reliable witness to the effects and aftereffects of war than the adult who was actually *in* the war, situating Hoffman's novel alongside David Buchanan's critical work of rejecting popular faith in combat gnosticism.<sup>82</sup>

While it primarily focuses on class and questions of truth in memory, *BSILY* – like the other two novels analyzed in this chapter – is still very much about gender and the uniquely female experience of combat. Published just one year after defense secretary Leon Panetta lifted the ban on women serving in combat positions, it attracted critical notice for representing the under-represented. Helen Benedict herself, in a review of Hoffman's novel for *The Guardian*, stressed that "Over the past 13 years, 300,000 British and American women have served in these wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan], yet the number of novels about them can be counted on one hand . . . Now Cara Hoffman has stepped into the breach." In her *LARB* article about *BSILY*, Maggie Doherty, professor in Harvard's History and Literature Program, points out that "Lauren wants to distinguish herself from the Vietnam veterans who populate Watertown, just as Hoffman wants to differentiate her novel from the mostly white, mostly male, post-Vietnam war narratives that have come to stand, in our society, for the American soldier's experience." Like

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<sup>82</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Buchanan's work in *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 Literature, Language, and Culture* (2016), see my first and second chapters.

Benedict, she too laments that “their [women soldiers’] stories have been largely absent from cultural representations of war” (Doherty). The *Boston Globe*’s review of *BSILY* found most compelling “the novel’s rare, illuminating glimpse into the distinctive experience and psyche of a female vet,” and marveled at the way “Hoffman challenges us to imagine how extraordinarily difficult it must be to reconcile the innate protective instincts of the caregiver with a culture of violence and orders to kill” (Campbell). Whether or not “caregiver” tendencies are actually “innate” or instinctual to women is beyond the scope of this dissertation – it’s an argument that’s been debated by various camps of feminism for decades. But what Campbell is touching upon here about the American “culture of violence” is crucial to an analysis of war fiction in general, and it is particularly exposed in these novels featuring female soldiers and veterans precisely because we as a society are unaccustomed to imagining women as perpetrators of violence. Americans have become increasingly desensitized to bloodshed and killing due to the glut of violent imagery in various media – war reportage being only one of its many forms – but to imagine a woman’s face behind the gun re-opens a cultural wound and makes us reconsider why we – a relatively progressive, highly modernized society – continue to perpetuate violence.

Hoffman’s character development contributes to this deconstruction of gendered assumptions about violence versus nurturing, of male “life-takers” versus female “life-givers.” Like *Sand Queen*’s Kate and *Wolf Season*’s Rin, Lauren is both. She is no less “feminine” for having served in the military, and her duties overseas were not humanitarian peacekeeping missions among Iraqi women and children as some depictions have suggested of women’s roles in the U.S. military. Hoffman first depicts

Lauren's capacity for physical violence in a scene with her boyfriend Shane, who had gone off to college around the same time she deployed. Her work in the Iraqi desert shows her how juvenile their relationship is, and by the time she gets home, "she's stopped emailing [him] months ago" (10). Nonetheless, the first place she goes when she gets back in town is his house, where they reunite and make love. Within a few days, though, she is chafing at his attentions, frustrated that he has no idea what's going on in the world outside of his naïve ivory-tower mentality. She becomes angry at him when he calls her "girl," to which he replies, "What d'you want me to call you now? Sar'n Clay?" This elicits a violent attack: "She grabbed the collar of his shirt roughly in one deft movement and he jerked his head back, shocked. He was weak, and she put a stop to his flailing immediately by putting the heel of her palm right beneath his nose and pressing up . . . He made a sick sad grunt as he struggled to turn his head . . . The cartilage in his nose began to give . . ." (77). The physical description of Lauren's violence against Shane is a reversal of Benedict's scenes in which male bodies assault Kate and Rin. In *BSILY*, there is no violence or violation visited upon Lauren's body; she is at no point the victim of a physical assault. This suggests that Hoffman's agenda differs from Benedict's: the latter is concerned, in her fiction as well as her nonfiction, with exposing the epidemic of sexual assault in the U.S. military, while the former is less focused on female victimhood.

The second major scene in which Lauren demonstrates violence is a flashback which reveals the traumatic event she has kept concealed from her family and herself. This memory does not surface until the end of the novel, after she has tried to visit Daryl in Canada but instead comes face to face with his mourning widow and the reality of Daryl's death – at which she was present. She, Daryl, and a third soldier, Walker, were



on guard at a barricade when a car came barreling toward them, not heeding their shouted warnings. As their commanding officer, Lauren was the one to take aim and shoot, at which point the car slammed into the concrete barricade. Assuming the driver was “another martyr” (260), they are surprised to see a bloody pregnant woman and twelve-year-old child stagger out of the car. While they try to perform CPR on the child, the mother grabs one of their rifles and shoots Daryl, in panicked defense of her son and self. Weakened after the shot, she drops the weapon. Lauren goes to attend to Daryl, giving an enraged Walker a direct order to stand down and continue CPR on the boy. He disobeys her command and shoots the woman down. The ambulance and helicopter they had called for arrives, but by this time the boy is dead, too. Lauren realizes that if she had waited instead of shooting at the car, three people – four, counting the pregnant woman’s unborn child – would still be alive, and she would not now be, in her own words, a “killer” (262).

Hoffman emphasizes these two episodes of violence, one deliberate and the other a fatal mistake, as a way to undermine the assumption that women are naturally peaceful and that only men are capable of brutality. Yet she does not simply reverse the gendered dichotomy; she is careful to depict Lauren as both nurturing and violent. She is maternal and protective in her care-taking role for her family, wherein as early as middle school she had become a mother to her younger brother. Memories of their childhood together keep her going; she immerses herself in them when the present reality becomes difficult to bear. But she doesn’t think of him in the way a sister would; her recollections are more maternal: “She called on the memory of Danny’s face and his baby fine curly hair to keep her company . . . [He was] the image she’d been calling up for months to remember why she wanted to go home. His laughter. His round cheeks turning red” (47). She makes it

through her deployment by reminding herself that Danny is at home waiting for her return, and that “if there was any ‘when’ or ‘afterward’ it belonged to him and she would make sure he got it” (12). She describes their bond with an umbilical metaphor, as “a cord of joy [that] was tied so tightly between them, all she had to do was see his tiny square teeth and she felt it, felt the world order itself in the sound of his voice, his throaty baby laugh” (50). She continues to think of him as if he is a baby or a child, though by the time she returns home he is thirteen and taller than she. Thus, while Lauren is not a mother biologically, she does share a sense of selflessness and of caregiving responsibility with the three protagonists in Benedict’s *Wolf Season*. As with Rin, Lauren’s nurturing qualities do not preclude her committing acts of violence, even if such acts are not of protective motivation.

In addition to her maternal qualities, another characteristic that seems to contrast Lauren’s capacity for violence is the beauty of her voice. Hoffman stresses the incongruity that a woman who could strangle a grown man and shoot at a car of civilians could also produce such a holy sound. As a child, she preferred “minimalist, sacred music,” taught to her by Troy, the organ player at the local Catholic church who gave her free voice lessons after school. Her singing is described as “stark, so spare and clean and desolately beautiful” (56), and “clear, smooth and sweet and rich . . . bell-like . . . filled with a natural exuberant power” (89). But she gave up singing when she gave up the scholarship to the music college, and despite her past passion for it, she does not sing while she is deployed.

When Lauren first arrives home from Iraq, she chafes at the feminine qualities of her own voice, as if she wants to detach her pre-war self from her post-war self. The

cabdriver who picks her up at the airport notices her uniform and begins to tell her about his “nephew over in Afghanistan.” As she engages in polite conversation (despite that she wanted “silence to be her only welcome”), she thinks about their “words, stories, expressions, the lax, entitled way of soft civilian life . . . And she heard that voice that she couldn’t stand coming out of her mouth . . . The modesty and gentleness and ignorance, the unassuming pose. It was a linguistic costume for a woman” (13). Her newly developed disgust at the sound of her own voice reflects her shame at who she has become, yet her identification of it as a gendered “linguistic costume” suggests that she wishes to disavow whatever is feminine about herself, that the war has taken those qualities of “modesty and gentleness” from her and made her hard and rough and no longer capable of the beauty her voice once produced. A few days later, she tries in vain to bring it back: “She opened her mouth to sing one clear note. But her throat closed and her eyes watered” (63). This inability suggests not only trauma, but a failure to reconcile who she is with what she’s done; she felt that “she was no longer worthy of singing” (242). It is only through visiting Troy, himself a Gulf War veteran, that she is eventually able to begin singing again. That she ultimately attends the Curtis Institute of Music, the opportunity she had earlier turned down to join the army, signifies her recovery. Though she is able to move forward (unlike many veterans), she does so as a sort of repentance, her voice now as a “vessel” (289), to be used in memory of Daryl and the Iraqi family for whose deaths she was responsible. The benediction she writes represents this vow of atonement, that she is going forth to do something beyond herself, and it resonates as the novel’s last line: “*I sing now with the air I have taken from your lungs*” (289).

Beyond her deconstruction of the gendered war/peace dichotomy, Hoffman also avoids the common stereotypes of female soldiers as either “bitches” or “whores;” Lauren is cast neither as a Ruined Woman (a la Lynndie England) nor a Woman in Peril (a la Jessica Lynch). The flashbacks to her time in Iraq among male soldiers do not involve sexual encounters; she is not faced with having to choose between meanness and sexual promiscuity as Kate was encouraged to do in *Sand Queen*. When read alongside Benedict’s novels, one might question the lack of sexual tensions in *BSILY*, but the focus in this novel is less on Lauren’s time at war and more on her before and after. The war is a significant punctuating event in her life, but the narrative itself is more concerned with its aftereffects, for it is Lauren’s transformation that prevents her from being perceived as a stock character. She is both a lifetaker and a lifegiver, a sinner in her violence and a saint in her sacrifice, both vocal and silent, all within a narrative that situates her variously on a spectrum in between.

#### WAR AND/ON THE BODY

Beyond casting female soldiers and veterans as protagonists, *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *BSILY* share common thematic elements that produce a counternarrative to war fiction authored and populated by male writers and characters. These themes include a focus on war’s effects upon the physical body, an emphasis on familial relationships particularly those including children, an attention to nature and animals indicative of environmental feminism, and concerns about place and space that align with theories of feminist geography. These motifs coalesce to form a third lens toward constructing the cultural memory of the Iraq War, alongside the second-wave novels discussed in my second chapter and the Iraqi / Iraqi-American novels discussed in my third. Like the

works analyzed in previous chapters, these examples of women's contemporary war literature reject the myth of the trauma hero as defined and critiqued by Roy Scranton. They likewise contribute to the project of undermining continued belief in American exceptionalism as it has been established and perpetuated by previous representations of war.

Benedict and Hoffman explicitly emphasize the female body. They do so in two important ways that differ from representations of women in previous war fiction. First, the authors do not sexualize the female form in their descriptions, not even within the brief rape scenes of Kate and Rin. Secondly, emphasis upon the physically wounded or war-marked female body in these novels contrasts with the dominant theme of psychological trauma that has dominated the genre since Vietnam. Hoffman's and Benedict's novels, along with examples from other forms (such as Annie Proulx's short story "Tits Up in a Ditch" and Kayla Williams's memoirs *Love My Rifle More Than You* and *Plenty of Time When We Get Home*), highlight the effects of the war upon the physical form, corporeally, while male-authored war literature focuses more on psychological effects, mainly combat trauma or PTSD. This return of attention to the "visible" effects of war after decades of primary emphasis on its "invisible" effects helps to narrow the soldier-civilian gap through pathos, particularly highlighted because these effects are enacted on the *female* body, which is not represented as the site of war violence as frequently as the male body.

A brief overview of the sexualization of the female body throughout cultural representations of war helps us appreciate Benedict's and Hoffman's work of desexualizing that body. Throughout the 1900s, media portrayals of women during wartime

emphasized their sexuality in ways that seemed to contradict the century's progression toward equal rights and respect. The cultural connotations associated with these representations transformed from cautionary during the two World Wars – portraying women's sexuality as antithetical to the war effort and threatening to masculinist nationalism – to lustfully exploitative during the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

In her argument about how the “unmanning terrors of combat” (424) during World War I led to a widespread sexual anxiety which was then manifest as anger against women, Sandra Gilbert examines images and characterizations of women in war posters and literature. Their implication is that women were to blame for men's combat wounds or traumatic neuroses, as seen, for example, when writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Richard Aldington “recounted the horrors of unleashed female sexuality” (438) in their poetry and prose. Gendered propaganda during the war reached such a pitch, Gilbert argues, that the homosexual undercurrent in World War I trench poetry was likely “energized [as much] by a disgust for the feminine as it was by a desire for the masculine” (443). Some women began to internalize this misogyny. Despite their wartime sense of liberation, Gilbert writes that by the end of the war, “the sexual gloom expressed by so many men as well as the sexual glee experienced by so many women ultimately triggered profound feelings of guilt in a number of women.” Added to that guilt of womanhood was “a half-conscious fear that the woman survivor might be in an inexplicable way a perpetrator of some unspeakable crime” (426).<sup>83</sup> Therefore, portrayals

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<sup>83</sup> Modernist anti-heroes like Lawrence's Clifford Chatterley and Hemingway's Jake Barnes suffered from sexual wounds for which the women waiting for them at home (Lady Constance Chatterley and Lady Brett Ashley) were somehow at fault. As Pearl James argues in her study of World War I and literary modernism, *The New Death*, “female bodies signify the most abject wounds and deaths in wartime” (6).

of women during and after World War I not only sexualized them, but did so in a way that set them at odds with the project of patriarchal nationalism and simultaneously punished the burgeoning feminist movement for making advances while the men were away fighting. Despite the unprecedented numbers of women entering the workforce during the war and the blurring of the separate spheres of domestic and public life, once the war was over, things went back to the way they'd been before, as "many women retreated into embittered unemployment or guilt-stricken domesticity" (449).

Susan Gubar continues this conversation of visual and textual representations of women into World War II. She connects the era's "resurgence of patriarchal politics" (227), to "a menacing hostility, as well as a curious unreality, [that] permeates both positive and negative images of women" in fiction and war posters. Perhaps the most extreme of these pejorative representations was a 1936 Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoon that "personifies the war itself as a syphilitic whore" (Gubar 240), a bewigged skull in place of the woman's face as she provocatively opens the door to a young man with the descriptor "Any European Youth" emblazoned on the back of his uniform.<sup>84</sup> This plays upon the fear that women with their "dirty" sexuality could contaminate the fighting men, possibly leading to their death. Thomas Pynchon also capitalizes on this wartime association of women's sexuality with infection and death in his 1963 novel *V*, wherein, according to Gubar, he "redefines the 'V for Victory' in terms of the vulgarity, the void, and the vagina of a sinister, syphilitic Lady V . . . no doubt referring to the phrase 'Victory-girl,' which was used through the war years as a euphemism for 'whore'" (250). Nor were beloved mothers and faithfully waiting wives immune to representational

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<sup>84</sup> The cartoon, drawn by C. D. Batchelor, is titled "Come on in, I'll treat you right. I used to know your Daddy." It originally appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* (Gubar 244).

attack, for “even the women who represent[ed] the values that men are struggling to retain amidst barbaric, death-dealing circumstances [were] often identified as the cause of the fighting” (240). The “hopeless sense of emasculation” dramatized in World War I literature influenced the next generation’s gender perceptions and perpetuated sexual norms such that “the good woman in the literature of the Second World War is therefore the woman whose sexual accessibility, compliancy, or loyalty reinstates the man’s sense of his masculinity” (252). So, while women’s sexuality was only implicitly denounced via trench homosexuality and male sexual war-wounds in World War I representations, it became more explicitly problematic during World War II, reinforcing the notion that it correlated with a “battle of the sexes” on the home front.

After World War II, representations of women in wartime portrayed them as less threatening to militarized masculinity yet more sexually conspicuous. During the war, the U.S. government distributed patriotic pictures of what became known as “pin-up girls” to the troops overseas. The intention was to boost the soldier’s morale by presenting an “all-American view of the sweetheart waiting for him – the girls worth fighting for,” which were proudly displayed, “pasted inside barracks, hung in submarines, and tucked into soldiers’ pockets” (Hanson). The cartoonish and hypersexualized figure of the pin-up was often clad in costumes such as skimpier versions of sailors’ and nurses’ uniforms. These images proliferated throughout mainstream print media in the 1950s and ‘60s as Madison Avenue adopted them into advertising. Perhaps this is why, when more women began to don the uniforms of nurses and other military support roles during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, they weren’t taken seriously; they were viewed as playing “dress-up”



despite risking their own lives in or near the combat zone. The pin-up era made a joke of the image of a woman in uniform.

In *Soldier's Stories: Military Women in Cinema and Television Since World War II*, Yvonne Tasker explains how the “long-standing stereotypes of the sexy nurse, a figure whose youth and availability make her an attractive diversion” (103) gave way to other kinds of “sexy female bodies on display in masculine-coded spaces” (163), such as women serving in military ranks. The ostensible absurdity of a female performing the duty of a male soldier or officer (and in some cases holding a higher rank than the men around her) was manifest in ridicule and innuendo. Men tried to compensate for their sense of feeling threatened by women’s increasing presence with gags about boobs, butts, and blow jobs. Tasker points out that in the popular “service comedies” set during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, “physical comedy is repeatedly played out around the body of the military woman and typically occurs at her expense . . . [But] in none of these films are the female characters in control of the comedy or even aware of their status as a running joke” (157-158). Attractive blond women like Major Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan of *M\*A\*S\*H\** and Goldie Hawn’s Private Benjamin are equally portrayed as sexual objects, regardless of their differences: the former capable and authoritative (yet often questioned based on her sex and despite her rank), the latter silly and inept.

Even after the Gulf War, war representations continued to connect female bodies with sex. A prime example is *G.I. Jane* (1997), considered ground-breaking for staging the debate about women’s suitability for combat positions. The film garnered positive critical attention by various feminists because protagonist Jordan O’Neill (Demi Moore) proves her strength and capability. Nonetheless, the male gaze is emphasized throughout

the film: an early scene shows her naked and provocatively posed in the bathtub with her boyfriend, she is shown nude in the shower even after her hair has been shorn bald (a symbolic divestment of her femininity), and the Master Chief (Viggo Mortensen) makes a big deal of staring at her breasts when she stands at attention. Later, her already-tenuous military career is threatened when a reporter snaps photos of her on the beach “fraternizing” with another female, and she is falsely accused of being a lesbian—which was enough to get one kicked out of the military until 2010.<sup>85</sup> O’Neill’s sexuality and sexualized body remains at the forefront of the film even as its script argues for women’s equality in the military.

The sexualization of the body persists into twenty-first-century representations of female soldiers. Kelly Oliver argues that media portrayals of American women’s involvement in the abusive treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay links sex with violence.<sup>86</sup> In so doing, it normalizes a “pornographic way of looking,” which some critics use to argue that women shouldn’t be allowed in the military because “their very presence unlease[s] sexual violence” (14). Media rhetoric went beyond locating sexuality and violence at the site of the female soldier’s body to metonymically figuring that body *as* a weapon. Oliver cites *Time* magazine headlines proclaiming “female sexuality used as a weapon” and referring to Jessica Lynch as a “human shield” and “a weapon in the propaganda war” (18). From pin-ups to bombshells, women’s

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<sup>85</sup> The Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010 ended the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) policy that had been in place since 1993. Thus, as of 2010, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals were able to serve openly in the U.S. Armed Forces, rather than having to keep their sexual orientation concealed in order to serve in the military.

<sup>86</sup> For example, the news image of Pfc. Lynndie England holding a leash fastened around the neck of an Abu Ghraib prisoner lying naked beside her as she stands over him was likened to the pop-culture/pornographic figure of the dominatrix.

bodies in the arena of war continue to be highly sexualized and are considered increasingly dangerous in that sexuality.

Whether because of their authorship by females or because they were penned during a more gender-progressive era, the male gaze is absent from *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *BSILY*. The bodies of Kate, Rin, and Lauren are not exploitatively sexualized. The narratives do not necessitate a sensual description of their legs, breasts, or behinds, so Benedict and Hoffman do not include it. Nor do these protagonists use their sexuality as a weapon, as Kelly Oliver claims of the female soldiers at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. These female soldier characters created by female writers are neither lusty pin-ups nor threatening bombshells, yet curiously each character's body – their physicality – is still heavily emphasized. Nor are they reversely depicted as *unattractive*—the male gaze is simply subtracted. Is this deliberate on behalf of the novelists? Do Benedict and Hoffman seek to prove that women's bodies can be imagined in war literature – or in any media form – as *not* overtly sexy or subject to heterosexual male desire – or for that matter, sexually threatening? Or are readers so accustomed to war literature being composed chiefly of trauma narratives that this redirection of focus away from the psyche and toward the body stands out conspicuously?

Since Vietnam, most war fiction has focused on combat's psychological effects that "the war novel" has become synonymous with "the PTSD novel" or "the trauma narrative." Combat neuroses were "invisible" for so long that once they finally received official recognition in the 1970s and '80s, they were pushed to the cultural forefront and began to garner more attention than physical injuries like missing limbs. Moreover, improved medical treatment has resulted in fewer amputations and more effective

recovery from bodily wounds. Numerous representations of Vietnam veterans in literature and film exhibit war's deleterious effects upon the psyche: Paul Berlin in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*; Christian Starkmann in Philip Caputo's *Indian Country*; the title character of Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story*; Terry Whitmore in *Memphis, Nam, Sweden*; Nick (Christopher Walken) in *The Deer Hunter*; Anthony (Larenz Tate) in *Dead Presidents*; Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in *Apocalypse Now*; Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) in *Taxi Driver* . . . the list continues ad nauseam. Even the well-known anti-war memoir-turned-blockbuster-film *Born on the Fourth of July* is, at its thematic core, more about Ron Kovic's mental anguish and difficulty adapting back into civilian society than it is about his Barnesian wound and wheelchair confinement.

War's effects on the mind continue to overshadow war's effects on the body in Iraq War novels. We see psychologically traumatized soldier/veterans like John Bartle in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, Billy Lynn in the eponymous novel by Ben Fountain, various protagonists of Phil Klay's short stories in *Redeployment*, Chris Kyle in *American Sniper*, and in numerous other memoirs and book-length works of journalism like Dexter Filkins' *The Forever War*, Brian Castner's *The Long Walk*, and David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers* and *Thank You For Your Service*. Even the few female-authored war novels with male soldier/veteran protagonists – namely, Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage* and Roxana Robinson's *Sparta* – emphasize psychological ravages of war above and beyond any physical effects.

However, in the novels by Benedict and Hoffman, psychological trauma becomes a mere sidebar, while war's effects on the physical body move to the forefront. These narratives' seemingly paradoxical combination – overt emphasis on the physical form yet

simultaneous de-sexualizing (and de-objectifying) of that form – enables us to view both women and war in a different way. With the subtraction of the male gaze in representations of the female body, we take them more seriously as soldiers: they can no longer be confused for little girls playing dress-up in men’s uniforms, they can no longer be accused of using their sex appeal for rank advancements, and they can no longer be perceived as powerless or in any way inferior based on female sex characteristics. Moreover, while the psychological effects of war are difficult for civilians to understand or relate to – critics like Cathy Caruth go so far as to characterize combat trauma as “incomprehensible” – war’s physical effects, its inscription upon the body, are more immediate, relatable even to the inexperienced because we can see them. We have a referent for comparison: our own bodies, albeit perhaps unmarked.

In *Sand Queen*, for example, even before she is injured, Kate notices the way her deployment to the Iraqi desert is affecting her physically: “I’ve dropped like twelve pounds since I arrived . . . My fingernails have turned weird, too, all weak and flabby. They keep lifting off my nail beds and flaking away like old scabs. And my hair’s falling out by the handful” (25). The thought of my own fingernails peeling off or my hair falling out makes me cringe. I have nails and hair, the passage makes me imagine what that might feel like, so I experience a visceral response to this description. The closest previous war literature comes to this physical description of discomfort (short of full-bore gore and bloody carnage a la *Hamburger Hill*) is with brief descriptions of trench foot or jungle rot – but even those are not conveyed with much detail. Perhaps such depiction is rare in male-narrated descriptions of war because of the social stigma regarding pain-

acknowledgement or “complaining” that conflicts with the display of machismo allegedly requisite of male soldierhood.

Further descriptive emphasis upon physicality is due to the environment’s dehydrating effects. Kate feels the “flies buzzing around my eyes and crusty lips . . . knitting needles stabbing my head, made worse by the weight of my helmet . . . Mouth dry with a desert thirst no amount of water can quench. Stomach cramping with the Bucca bug.<sup>87</sup> Itches along my spine and legs and crotch from heat rashes, dust, sand fleas” (38). She goes on to lament the frequent bladder infections, resulting from the necessity of staying hydrated yet having limited access to toilet facilities: “They make you feel like you have to pee so bad you can’t think about anything else, but when you try nothing comes out, or if it does it burns like acid. If the infection goes on too long, you get a fever and start pissing blood” (39).

At first, her mind permits an escape from the pain and discomfort of her body – she turns to memories of her family, her little sister, her hometown – but eventually, awareness of her body is all that’s left as she feels her soul has deserted her. Assessing the damage to her body a few days after she is sexually assaulted – “bruises . . . my right boob throbs . . . my throat feels so crushed and raw it hurts even to turn my head” – Kate feels that all that remains of her *is* a body: “As for the rest of me – my soul or whatever you want to call it – that’s still flapping away in the sky” (95). Even once she’s back in the U.S., she is hyperaware of the persistence of her body despite feeling the lack of inner substance: “A strange awareness seizes her, as if her body has shrunk inside her clothes

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<sup>87</sup> Kate later explains the “Bucca bug” in more detail: “We like to joke that you spend the first six months of your deployment pooping your guts out, the second six months puking your guts out, and then you go home and puke and poop till you’re redeployed. Some say it’s sandfly fever, some say it’s contaminated water. We call it the Bucca bug” (25).

and now they're flapping around her like the sides of a tent. She's a Halloween skeleton dangling off a porch, only wrapped in a sack. Separated from her skin. Bones and flesh but no soul" (261). While contemporaneous war fiction emphasizes the ravages of violence upon the psyche or "soul" (one of Phil Klay's characters in *Redeployment*, for example, calls Iraq "a morally bruising battlefield" [145]), Benedict's imagery and analogies dramatize war's effects on Kate's physical form instead.

Despite this focus on her body (including her throbbing "boob"), readers are not encouraged to view Kate as a sexual object. This is partly because plot events are narrated from her own perspective, and she does not think of herself as a "pretty girl," and partly because Benedict deliberately defies the pin-up/bombshell representations of women-at-war that have been ingrained in our culture since World War I. However, this does not mean that Kate is exempt from the sexism and harassment still rampant in the American military. Although she is portrayed as neither sexy nor particularly feminine – she is, in her own words, "nothing but a scrawny little soldier" (26) – nor even as a femme-fatale whose presence threatens the men's power, the discriminatory patriarchal institution refuses to let her be.

Benedict's demonstration of how the men view Kate is emphasized in these ways to draw attention to its despicability and impropriety. She portrays this sad reality (corroborated by first-person testimony from interviews she conducted for her nonfiction works) as an indictment against the institution's primitive yet continuing chauvinism. As a narrative strategy, Benedict acknowledges the male gaze through these male soldiers' actions, which contrasts with her own depiction of Kate. Emphasizing the effects of both the Iraq War and the U.S. military upon Kate's corporeality, Jennifer Haytock writes that

“the sexualized power dynamics of the military have literally rewritten her body” (“Women’s / War Stories” 9). Even her gait, the very movement of her body, has been marked: “She knows her walk looks weird – half a swagger like a man, half a hobble like an old lady. She forgot how to walk normally in the Army because if you look at all feminine when you walk, the guys won’t leave you alone. That, and the injuries” (Benedict 260). And those physical – not psychological – injuries compose the image of Kate we are left with as *Sand Queen* draws to its close: “Two cracked vertebrae and a bunch of wrenched muscles . . . Spine compressed from the weight I had to carry day and night. Neck fucked from jolting around in the Humvee, banging my head on its goddamn roof. Brain injury from the mortars. Dehydration, malnourishment” (298).

Hoffman similarly emphasizes the war’s effects upon Lauren’s body in *BSILY*. The traumatic stress from her involvement in the deaths of the Iraqi family and her two junior officers is gradually and subtextually revealed over the course of the novel. But descriptions of her physical body – and the changes wrought upon it by the war – are prominent from beginning to end. This is first presented via homecoming contrasts. When the cab drops her off in Watertown after she’s been gone for more than a year, she relishes the rain that greets her:

It was lovely after all the dust and heat, after the feeling of ash in the air settling on skin; the hot granulated ground turned to powder kicked up and blown against lips, into her mouth and nose and anyplace sweat-soaked and exposed, whipping in a sharp crackling static against her glasses and the heavy ceramic plate strapped high and tight across her breasts, there to protect the soft flesh of organs beneath



her rib cage and to keep the estuaries of blood inside of her, instead of bursting and pouring over the dry ground. Rain was a relief. To shiver a luxury. (15)

Unlike abstractly worded psychological effects that are difficult for civilian readers to relate to, this concrete imagery of various parts of Lauren's anatomy promotes sensory empathy. The overt emphasis on her physical form draws our attention, yet the passage simultaneously de-sexualizes her figure. The mention of her breasts, for example, is couched in a utilitarian language of survival rather than being a focal point or curvaceous protuberance. Moreover, the image of her external breasts is immediately followed by the image of internal organs and blood, aspects of anatomy not typically considered erotic. Unlike the Master Chief's eyes upon O'Neill's uniformed breasts in *G.I. Jane*, this passage does not linger upon Lauren's.

*BSILY* differs from *Sand Queen* and *Wolf Season* in that it does not include scenes of rape or any other form of sexual assault or harassment of the female soldier character, which suggests that Hoffman is less concerned with pushing a social agenda of military reform in her works of fiction. But, unlike Benedict's novels, *BSILY* does feature consensual sexual intercourse – and Lauren is the one who initiates it. The novel's sole sex scene is important to the narrative because it facilitates Lauren's self-awareness of how the war has physically changed her. Despite Shane's presence, the description of her "war body" is not from his perspective – narratorial male gaze is absent here just as it was in *Sand Queen* – but from her own. Through the juxtaposition of her naked form with his – hers altered, his the same as before – she realizes that "her body had changed. Her skin was tanned, taut, her shoulders and back, her hips. And she could feel just how different she was built now that he was seeing her, touching her" (17). Strikingly, even

though the act of sex occurs here, the female form is not sexualized in terms of objectification or exploitation. The tone of the scene does not invite what Kelly Oliver calls the “pornographic way of looking” (14). Lauren’s sexuality is neither put on display for Shane’s pleasure, nor is it used to justify her violence (since this early in the narrative we aren’t even aware that she has committed any violence, and there is no hint of violence in this sex scene). Hoffman makes two points here: a “hard” female soldier *is* capable of heterosexual lovemaking, and it *is* possible to imagine a war-novel sex scene that does not reinforce phallic power at the cost of female exploitation.

Beyond her body’s changes in musculature and tone, the war has also left indelible marks upon her skin—though unlike Kate’s, these markings were inscribed by Lauren’s own choosing. In the opening sentences of the Prologue, readers are given a glimpse of the novel’s closing scene, which depicts Lauren’s nude form in repose, her “biceps and thighs banded with black tattoos” (3) which stand out starkly against the blistering white snow surrounding her. Why she’s lying naked in the snow is not revealed until near novel’s end, but this tattooed contrast of dark and light remains with the reader as the narrative progresses. During the aforementioned sex scene with Shane, as he runs his fingers over her tattoos, “she felt the difference between her inked and bare skin, the desensitized numbness of the black bands on her shoulders, biceps, forearms, thighs” (17).<sup>88</sup> Trying on outfits in a dressing room at the mall, Lauren’s best friend Holly “seemed shocked” to see the tattoos, and she comments that “they’re kinda ugly” (148). When her brother Danny notices them, he thinks they “made her look like some kind of

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<sup>88</sup> Notably, “she” felt the difference, rather than him feeling it. This pronoun choice further indicates that her body is perceived by *her*, rather than represented to us from the viewpoint of the male (Shane’s) gaze.

strange warrior from a different time . . . black bands, wide blank rings of ink encircling either arm just below her shoulders . . . he realized they were black armbands. Permanent mourning, a part of her skin” (229). In each of these perceptions by people who knew pre-war Lauren, the ink on her body indicates a change that they recognize as being more than just skin-deep.

Danny’s impression of the tattoos’ seeming anachrony and signification of mourning is actually rooted in cultural history. Tattoo anthropologist Lars Krutak explains that “tattoos and other permanent forms of body modification have been paramount in establishing the status and reputation of warriors for hundreds, if not thousands, of years” (“A Short History”).<sup>89</sup> In a 2017 *Military Times* article, William Robert Ferrer explains that veterans’ tattoos are often “a reminder of sacrifice . . . expressing a dedication words perhaps cannot.” The veterans he interviewed consider each of their tattoos a “bodily remembrance,” “a sign of respect,” “something that will live with you forever,” “a constant reminder” of those who didn’t make it home, and for some, “a critique of war.”

Near the end of *BSILY*, Lauren explains why she got her tattoos. After the tragedy that left Daryl and the Iraqi mother and child dead, “she’d gotten her first tattoo. A wide

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<sup>89</sup> For example, Roman soldiers used tattooed dots to display rank, and later they were worn by soldiers and sailors as tribal identification throughout the British Isles, New Zealand, Gallipoli, Malta, and France, until Pope Hadrian I outlawed tattooing in 787 AD. The custom was reintroduced in western Europe in the 1700s, prompted by Captain James Cook’s expeditions to the Far East. Tattooing was brought to the U.S. in the mid-1800s by German immigrant Martin Hildebrand, who opened the first tattoo shop in New York City and traveled the country tattooing Civil War soldiers with “patriotic emblems.” According to *VFW*, “In 2009, the Army reported that some 90% of combat soldiers had at least one tattoo – a much higher percentage than the one in five people in the general population with a tattoo. Themes typically include pride in service, patriotism, unit identification, and memorials” (“A Short History”).

black armband. Black blank ink suited her skin just fine. She'd gotten two more bands out of respect and so she wouldn't forget who she was" (243). Via permanent ink, she has adopted a custom originating in Ancient Egypt, wherein "the public display of the black arm band [signifies] mourning, grief, and irretrievable loss" (McKenna). According to this symbology and her own testimony, Lauren's first black armband tattoo commemorates Daryl's death, while the "two more bands" were "out of respect" for the Iraqi mother and child's lives she had taken. Therefore, her tattoos are more than just permanent souvenirs brought home from the war. They reify war's effects upon her body and serve a memory function, forcing her to integrate what she did with who she is. They are also a constant reminder that she is a perpetrator of violence, not a victim of it.

In addition to these literal inscriptions upon her skin, Lauren uses her body in other ways to try to come to terms with her time at war. At first, she exhibits light tendencies of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI),<sup>90</sup> which foreshadow her later suicide attempt. The evening she gets home from Iraq, after she exchanges Christmas gifts with her family, her father hands her "a steaming mug of black tea" which she takes "without touching the handle so it would burn her hand" (24). Waking up early the next morning, she goes out into the yard to survey her fog-enshrouded surroundings. With no

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<sup>90</sup>According to Carol Chu's 2018 study published in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, NSSI is defined as "self-directed, deliberate behaviors that result in actual or potential injury to oneself without concomitant suicidal intent," which are "not enacted with a desire or intent to die." Chu points out that there is a significantly higher occurrence of NSSI among military servicemembers and veterans than among the general population, and that "soldiers with a history of NSSI were more than two times more likely to attempt suicide within a 2-year period, even after controlling for baseline symptom severity." NSSI is used by some veterans as a coping mechanism for traumatic stress and by others (like Lauren) as an outlet for survivor's guilt or perpetrator pain. It is distinct from masochism because pleasure is not the purpose of inflicting pain upon oneself in NSSI.

explanation for her actions, “she went down to the end of the driveway and stood in the garage kicking little holes into the gravel . . . She picked up a handful of the small smooth gray stones and whipped them hard against the wall, then did it again. And again. And again. Hard enough for them to ricochet back and hit her. But not hard enough at all” (46). Throughout the following weeks, she continues to expose herself to tactile extremes, especially of freezing and burning. This motif of submitting the body to pain and dangerous temperatures ultimately converges with the novel’s geographic themes of fire and ice, culminating in her suicide attempt in the frozen Canadian forest.

Benedict continues a thematic focus on the body in *Wolf Season* through both Rin and Naema. As with her depiction of Kate in *Sand Queen*, the women’s bodies are emphasized without being sexualized or objectified. Rin is “boxy and muscular” (54). Her long hair had been “thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war” (20); now it is “short and scrubby as a nailbrush” (54). Her face has been “roughened by sun and wind;” her figure is a “square of muscle” (224). These changes are less a result of her deployment (which was several years prior) and more from operating a farm by herself, one that had been passed down from her late husband’s family. Her ability to do this on her own, and to adapt her once “slight” form to hard manual labor, might be interpreted as a positive effect of the war: it gave her something that she didn’t have before, even as it took her husband away from her. In a way, the hard work of running the farm occupies her body in a way similar to – but arguably healthier than – Lauren’s self-injury. The laborious and tactile tasks of “hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse” (16) keep her body busy and productive, and by psychosomatic extension might help her cope with residual traumatic stress. When viewed alongside

descriptions of Kate's war-ravaged body, the description of Rin's as now physically strong and self-sustaining emphasizes resilience and recovery. Another physical manifestation of recovery is the "tattoo on her forearm so badly lasered out that Naema can see exactly what it was: a bayonet encircled by a wreath." Naema's work at the V.A. clinic has enabled her to "recognize an army Combat Action Badge when she sees one" (224). Two things are at work here. First, we see that Rin had chosen at some point in the past to inscribe the experience of war upon her body visually, and later attempted to erase or void out said inscription, suggesting regret at having been involved in the war – a salient anti-war argument in itself. Secondly, Naema's ability to "read" the tattoo, to understand what it stands for, signifies not only that Rin's attempt to get the war off of her body was in vain – the trace of it stays on her like memories do for those psychologically "marked" by war – but also that others can identify her as a veteran because of it.

Naema, though not a soldier, experienced the war firsthand as an Iraqi civilian, who (in *Sand Queen*) lost her father and her younger brother Zaki when they died at Camp Bucca while falsely detained. Like Lauren's and Rin's tattoos, Naema bears her own physical mark from the war: a "splattered white scar on her right cheekbone" (28). It is a reminder of her life's greatest tragedy, for "her husband had been killed by the same car bomb that had mutilated her son and scarred her face" (70). While for her this visual injury is tertiary to the sudden death of her beloved Khalil and the crippling of Tariq, it is the first feature other people notice when they see her. It is as identificatory as Lauren's tattoos. When Rin first encounters Naema – after the fear had already set in upon hearing her Iraqi-sounding surname – she can read the war upon Naema's face just as Naema is

later able to read it upon Rin's forearm. And even though Rin immediately dislikes the doctor solely because of her Iraqi ethnicity, through their war wounds she is able to relate to the Iraqi woman. Of Naema's facial scar, she assumes: "Most likely a shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself" (28). Later, when Rin's daughter Juney and Naema's son Tariq become friends and Rin drives Tariq home on a rainy night, she is shocked to realize that this is the same woman she assaulted to get herself and Juney out of the clinic during the hurricane. Recognition is immediate due to "that shrapnel scar Rin remembers only too well, a star of fire and metal right there on her cheekbone" (228). War's visible mark upon Naema's face, like Lauren's tattoos and Kate's gait and bruises, serves as a *souvenir* (from the French "to remember") not only of her own experience, but also as a symbol of identification tying her to Rin.

More striking than her depiction of war's effects upon the women's bodies is Benedict's inclusion of children disabled by war. Though the narrative is told from the perspective of the mothers, their children remain at center focus. We know that Tariq's leg was blown off when he was three, in the car bombing that killed his father, and now, at age ten, he wears a prosthetic. But the reason for Juney's blindness is less clear. Rin believes it was an effect of conceiving her at war and then being raped by their fellow soldiers after her husband Jay died. She too often remembers "leaving the war in a medevac case because of what those men had done to her. Nearly miscarrying. Juney born blind as a cavefish, both the V.A. and the military refusing to help or even to research what took her sight and how" (84). Tariq's missing limb and Juney's blindness are physical manifestations of what psychologists call "secondary traumatization."

Clinical studies by Rachel Dekel and Hadass Goldblatt, Yula Dishtein, and Jacob Stein explore the possibility of “intergenerational transmission” of post-traumatic stress. Alison M. Johnson analyzes the way this “second generation trauma” is staged in literature through the character of Sam Hughes, protagonist of Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* (1985). Sam becomes the ward of her Uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran, after her own father was killed in the war. According to Johnson, *In Country* “shows how war’s trauma transverses boundaries of gender and generational experience.” She argues that Sam is “psychologically a product of the war, its inheritor” (1). In *Wolf Season*, Benedict builds upon this concept of inheritance by portraying the traumatic wounds visibly—that is, by rendering them as physical disabilities.

Much like physical injury, physical disability has taken a back burner to psychological disorders in war literature. In an article about the “relatively little consideration” given to physically disabled veterans in post-9/11 war fiction, Peter Molin points out that “in neither our national consciousness nor our national literature have we paid nearly as much attention to maimed veterans, be they amputees, badly burned or disfigured, or blinded. The discrepancy is interesting because in past postwar periods [pre-Vietnam], it has been the physically disabled veteran who has most compellingly represented the war’s lingering costs” (2). Brenda Sanfilippo concurs with Molin in her article for *Modern Fiction Studies*’ 2017 special issue on “The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.” She laments that “representations of physical disability in contemporary war fiction are overlooked. Many texts depict psychologically traumatized veterans . . . [but] visible wounds have received less literary or filmic attention despite the fact that improvements in medical care have raised the ratio of wounded to killed from less than 3 to 1 during the



Vietnam War to a remarkable 16 to 1 since 9/11” (228). Underlying this lack of representation of war’s physical disabling is the cultural misconception that contemporary warfare creates less bodily harm because of advances in weapons technology. Instead, contemporary warfare causes fewer deaths (than, say, the World Wars and Vietnam) because of advances in *medical* technology, but modernized weapons are capable of inflicting more injuries than ever before. Perhaps the representational absence of physical disabilities noted by these and other scholars is due not just to the increased focus on PTSD and other “invisible wounds” in popular culture and in the medical community, but also to attempts by government bureaucracy and the military-industrial complex to sanitize war by downplaying the gore.

By showing *children* (rather than just veterans) affected by war, Benedict incorporates a sense of pathos that reminds us that war’s effects continue on past its present participants. While some previous war fiction alludes to war’s effects on loved ones via the traumatized veteran’s troubled homecoming and reintegration, those mostly show the effects on adults. As Benedict explains in an interview with her publisher, “The juxtaposition of children and war is particularly poignant, for their very frankness and innocence strips away the glamorizing lies that so often cloak our discussion of war. Valor and strength, weaponry and heroism—what do these matter to a boy who has lost his father and his leg, or to a girl who has lost her sight?” (316). *Wolf Season* presents a new kind of anti-war narrative that enables us to see, through the vulnerability of children, how close to home the “foreign war” can actually get.

## “MY MOM WAS IN A WAR”: THE SOLDIER AS MOTHER

War fiction tends to exclude or marginalize family relationships. In combat narratives (set during the protagonist’s experience at war), camaraderie among soldiers or “brotherhood-in-arms” is a substitute for biological, life-long, or dependence-based familial relationships. In trauma narratives (set upon or after the protagonist’s return from war), the relationship between the protagonist and his parents or significant other is used to highlight the struggle of reintegration. Or sometimes, the protagonist comes home alone to no support system and no human responsibilities beyond his own immediate existence. Rarely do our culture’s representations of war feature the soldier returning home to a child or children of his or her own. One would be hard-pressed to compose a list of war novels featuring small children—even harder pressed that the children would actually be developed characters. Perhaps this is because our culture prefers to keep the battlefield separate from the domestic space, the places where children are traditionally raised. However, this separation has become more contrived as military demographics have changed significantly since the end of the draft in 1973. The average age of a U.S. infantry soldier in the Vietnam War was 22 years, and the average age of an officer was 28. In the Iraq War those ages averaged at 27 and 35 years respectively, meaning that it’s more likely for American soldiers who fought in the Iraq War to have mothered or fathered children before they deployed than it was for soldiers going to Vietnam. During the post-9/11 conflicts, the U.S. military deployed a higher percentage of parents than in any previous conflict: 43% (Glod). That’s almost *half* of the soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan who had children waiting for them at home. It’s surprising that we don’t see more representations of war’s effects on soldiers’ children. Despite the convenience of

the disassociation, it's time we realized that right here in the United States, where politicians continue to preach "family values" and orate grandiosely about "future generations," our children – not to mention children in our rival countries – are affected by the wars we continue to wage.

One of the myriad ways that Benedict's and Hoffman's narratives are more than just an "add women and stir" or "sub a G.I. Jane" approach is in their representations of children and how the war is brought home to them. In addition to emphasizing war's costs by featuring Tariq and Juney's physical disabilities, the inclusion of children in *Wolf Season* reminds us that Rin the combat veteran and Naema the war refugee are also mothers. Similarly, Lauren is a mother-figure to Danny in *BSILY*, and Kate is a nurturing role model to her younger sister April in *Sand Queen*. The maternal relationships at the center of all three novels differ from the bonding trope that characterizes most other war fiction: that between the soldier and his brothers-at-arms.

Some veterans claim that the closeness they feel among their fellow soldiers is more intense than that which they share with their wife and family when they get home. This homosocial intimacy is the primary positive relationship emphasized in male-authored and male-charactered war fiction, while the positive relationships highlighted in Benedict's and Hoffman's novels are between mother (or mother-figure) and child. And these mothers – Rin, Lauren, and Kate – are soldiers who have engaged in combat. This veers sharply from a long cultural tradition that places motherhood and war in opposition. Susan Gubar provides a plethora of examples from World War II literature illustrating that "the mothers in a number of war novels and poems represent humanistic values at odds with the dehumanizing technology of death" (247). Other critics see war and

motherhood as analogous counterpart roles performed by their culturally assigned gender (war is to man as motherhood is to woman), and thereby constitutive of stereotypical gender roles. Nancy Huston argues that there is a “striking equivalence between maternal and military service” (153), in that “aggressiveness for males” is often seen “as an equivalent to motherhood” (166). While “the act of giving birth is considered to be profoundly incompatible with the act of dealing death” (162), she says, each of these acts is considered the primary contribution to society by women and men, respectively. Harkening back to the lifetaker/lifegiver dichotomy discussed earlier in this chapter, such expectations are ingrained at an early age: “The children of both sexes must prepare themselves, through some form of violence, for the fulfillment of their respective adult ‘destinies.’ Girls are taught that only motherhood can make women out of them; boys are taught that only war can make men of them” (Huston 166). This is made evident by the toys marketed to children (baby dolls for little girls, tin soldiers or G.I. Joes for little boys) and in their traditional helper roles or family chores during youth (girls help clean house or take care of their younger siblings, boys chop wood or hunt with their fathers). On a broader political level, centuries of war-making and nation-building discourse have honed the motherhood/war analogy. Huston asks, “How many times have we read that a nation which never makes war becomes ‘sterile’ and that blood must be shed in order for it to recover its ‘fertility?’ How many revolutions have been compared to ‘labor pains,’ violent convulsions preceding the ‘birth’ of a new society?” (167). German sociologist Klaus Theweleit verbalizes this paradoxical sense of equivalence most memorably: “War ranks high among the male ways to give birth” (284).

Of course, this idea that “women are required to breed, just as men are required to brawl” (Huston 168) is deeply problematic, because it establishes the “perception of war as something ‘natural,’ a ‘given’ of human experience on par with procreation” (169). Yet I argue that violence and bloodshed are not “natural” among human beings, and decidedly not necessary for the survival of the human species, while procreation obviously is. Despite the rhetorical and ideological parallels drawn between the experiences of giving birth and waging war, they remain a dichotomy in performance. Women have been excluded from combat *on the basis of* their potential maternity,<sup>91</sup> as if possessing the biological equipment for making babies automatically precludes them from war-waging capability.<sup>92</sup> Ah, but the tools of war – unlike the anatomical tools of reproduction and lactation – are external. Guns and swords may be phallic in form, but their use does not require an actual phallus.

In *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (2007), Sjoberg and Gentry argue that as far back as the mythological Medea, literature’s few

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<sup>91</sup> One explanation for this maternity-based exclusion from military service is the link between nationalism and pronatalism. Sonya Michel explains that during World War II, “Official pronouncements drew on and simultaneously reinforced conventional views of the family.” Public officials administrating the war (such as Paul McNutt, chairman of the War Manpower Commission, and Brigadier-General Lewis B. Hershey, director of Selective Services) “stressed the importance of motherhood . . . Women *as mothers* were charged with perpetuating the culture that men were fighting for; abandoning this role in wartime would not only upset the gender balance but undermine the very core of American society” (Michel 159-160).

<sup>92</sup> The “biological” argument against women serving in combat positions is, at its essentialist extreme, best (or worst) represented by Newt Gingrich’s egregiously regressive comment to the history class he was teaching at Reinhardt College in 1995. Revealing his ignorance about female anatomy, he informed them that women couldn’t engage in combat if it involved trench warfare because “females have biological problems staying in a ditch for 30 days because they get *infections*, and they don’t have upper body strength” (emphasis added). But he then admitted, digging his own ditch even deeper, that if combat involved “being on an Aegis class cruiser managing the computer controls for 12 ships and their rockets, a female may be dramatically better than a male who gets very, very frustrated sitting in a chair all the time because males are biologically driven to go out and hunt giraffes” (Seelye).

women who exhibit violence are portrayed as either aberrant in some way (the “monsters” and “whores” from their title), or as avenging their husbands or sons (the “mothers”). Of the three types of violent women, only the latter’s actions are rationalized because their violence is performed for the sake of men. So, although Medea is considered “one of history’s greatest villainesses,” even she lacks agency, for she “is not credited with her own violent choices. Instead, her violence is characterized as reliant on her role as a wife and mother, and thus not of her own doing” (30). The point is that women, according to cultural representations and assumptions, are not typically (or “naturally”) violent, but when they are, the violence is performed as a wifely or motherly duty – unless they’ve succumbed to hysteria or depravity, as in the “monster” and “whore” roles. Sjoberg and Gentry go on to explain how “blaming women’s intense and desperate link to motherhood for their violence is not limited to the Greeks, but is a persistent narrative across time, place, and culture in history” (31). For example, Lynndie England’s pregnancy featured prominently in media representations of her participation in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, as if her brutality were somehow linked to her gravidity. Lieutenant Emma Fowler (nicknamed “Family Values Fowler”) in *The Good Lieutenant* serves a surrogate mother role, and her violence is committed on behalf of the men in her platoon whom she has taken under her maternal protection: she shoots Ayad because she mistakenly believes he is responsible for Pulowski, Crawford, and McWilliams’s deaths.

On the contrary, the violent actions performed by Kate, Rin, and Lauren have nothing to do with maternal care or with children. Kate doesn’t have kids and is not at all motherly toward the men in her platoon, though she is nurturing toward and protective of

her sister April. Rin does not have a child until after she is out of the war – in fact, she committed violence against a child *during* the war. Lauren, while nurturing toward her brother, does not commit any acts of violence while he is nearby, or in his name. Therefore, these three female-soldier protagonists commit violence of their own agency, defying the “mother-narrative” that has explained women’s anomalous violence since Medea and has therewith helped to sustain the male/female dichotomy of war/motherhood. With these characterizations, Benedict and Hoffman break what some critics call the “conspiracy of silence” – that is, “the distinct under-representation of female perpetrators in feminist and conventional war literatures” (Sunbuloglu 13). They show that war and motherhood are not mutually exclusive. Just as previous generations of women sought to prove that it was possible to maintain both a career and a household, these authors undermine the patriarchal exclusivity of war by illustrating that serving in combat roles is not incompatible with characteristics of motherhood like nurture.

By most societal standards, Rin is a “good mother” to Juney. She is loving and compassionate, but also sets firm boundaries for her daughter’s well-being. Her concern and empathy for Juney are intense to a visceral degree. For example, she wants to protect Juney from other children who lack tact about her blindness: “Kids usually gape when they first meet Juney, pull faces to test if she truly can’t see. It slices into Rin every time” (47). She describes “the mama worry that won’t stop boring into her bones” (104) when Juney is away from her at school: “The ache begins the minute the school bus picks Juney up in the morning and spirits her away. . . bringing her back only after Rin has had way too many hours to fret and imagine” (152). As much as Rin protects and takes care of Juney, she is also dependent upon her daughter for emotional support. She contrasts

“the quietude that accompanies her when she knows Juney is nearby” with the “ache [that] walks around with her” in Juney’s absence. She refuses the prescription pills the V.A. doctor prescribes for her occasional flashbacks and nightmares because she doesn’t want to be a “zombied-out headcase” of a mother (153). But usually, such as when they walk into the clinic the day of the hurricane, Juney can sense Rin’s fear – “the glaring white of her mother’s alarm” (25) – and knows how to calm her nerves by placing her small hand in Rin’s, or using a certain vocal tone, as when Rin hesitates to allow Tariq to stay and play outside with Juney for the first time: “‘Okay, Mommy?’ Juney urges, and in her voice Rin can hear her saying, *Don’t worry, I’m safe and so are you*” (48).

Rin’s apprehensions about Tariq reflect the xenophobia she acquired during military training and OIF deployment, the same fear she felt when discovering that her daughter’s doctor had an Iraqi surname. When he first befriends Juney, Rin does not know Tariq is Dr. Naema Jassim’s son. The boy’s Middle-Eastern appearance and Muslim first name are enough to make Rin want him to stay away from her daughter. But then he takes off his prosthetic leg, and her anxiety begins to ease at this demonstration of his vulnerability. He tends to do this often and unselfconsciously, just pulls off the plastic leg and casts it aside so he can plop down and sit, first to help Juney bury a kitten they found drowned by the storm, later to help her weed the garden or do homework together, his math problems and her braille practice. As Tariq visits more frequently, Rin gradually warms to him. She stops referring to him as “half-pint Hajji” and “that Hajji kid” after Juney reprimands her: “Don’t call him that. He’s got a name” (103).

While Rin’s experiences during the war taint her view of this ten-year-old boy, Juney and Tariq’s friendship is forged through their shared knowledge of the war. During



their first conversation, upon discovering what happened to his leg, Juney commiserates, “My mom was in a war” (48). They are fascinated with each other’s disabilities, both of which are effects of the conflict. Tariq acquiesces when Juney asks if she can “feel where your leg was” (49), and he lets her tactilely explore the prosthetic, too. He is just as curious about her blindness, thinking of it as an asset that makes her unique rather than a deficit. He asks, “What do you see behind your eyes?” and she replies, “Try seeing out of your elbow” (157). Despite his determination, of course he can’t “see” out of his elbow; he realizes that “just as she will never see what he sees, he will never see what she doesn’t” (158). Neither of them is ashamed about their handicap, and they build a bond of solidarity against kids at school who gawk. Juney asks him, “Are kids mean about your leg?” He replies, “They used to be,” then he “takes her hand and brings it to his own face, wanting her to see him as he can see her. ‘What about you? Do kids tease you?’” (50). She responds, “Sometimes kids are mean, yeah. But soldiers don’t care about that kind of thing.” He is astonished at her self-identification: “You’re a soldier?” “Yup, me and my mom both.” And then these innocents share another tragedy of war: Tariq tells her, “My dad was a soldier, too” (51).

Rin’s attitude toward Tariq transforms based on the children’s bonds of war – their lost fathers and their missing abilities. Earlier the same evening she discovers who his mother is, she watches the children do homework together and realizes that, “with his one leg and his name, he has Outsider stamped all over him, just like Juney” (211). She feels a warm sense of pride that her daughter is such a caring friend to this solemn young boy: “It touches Rin that her daughter so wants the people she loves to be happy.” And she ponders what her late husband would have thought of their daughter’s first real

friend: “Jay would have liked this friendship . . . She wonders if he would have found [it] as ironic as she does. Their daughter, the only kid in town born of two OIF parents, and her best buddy is Iraqi. God’s joke? Or perhaps she should say Allah’s” (211). But, like the hurricane that devastated their sleepy little town, this calm (Rin’s acceptance of Tariq into her house and into her daughter’s life) precedes a storm.

The climax of Rin’s narrative arrives later than evening, when she offers to drive Tariq home because it is storming, rather than letting him walk home as usual. Conversationally, she asks what his mom does. “She’s a pediatrician,” he replies, not realizing the impact of this revelation; “She used to work at the V.A. clinic till the storm wrecked it” (212). Now Rin realizes that this kid is the son of the Iraqi doctor she knocked unconscious and nearly drowned in her panicked haste to flee the hurricane-blasted clinic. It stuns her, not with regret, but with fear, as if Naema might find her and seek revenge. The militarily-ingrained fear of the Iraqi Other rises like bile in her throat, “her veins filling with sand” (212). As Rin drives Tariq home, this panic combines with the relentless torrents of rain to trigger hallucinatory flashbacks of her deployment: “Sure enough, hard as she strives against it, up it begins again. That little girl . . . blood running from her eyes. Rin starts and looks away, sweat springing out of her every pore, drenching her lower back” (218). She barely manages to keep her car on the slick road. As they get closer to Naema’s house, her plan to cut and run is undermined by the children:

“I’ll just drop you off, so we can get back home for dinner,” she tells him.

Juney stops singing. “Mommy, that’s rude! Anyhow, I want to meet Tariq’s mom. She’s a hero, like you and Daddy.”

*Oh god of war, let me weep.*

“Yeah, I want my mom to meet you, too,” Tariq chimes in.  
The girl with the bloodied eyes rises in Rin’s mind again, the one she shot like a rat in Sadr City. The girl opens her mouth, teeth knocked out, tongue torn and bleeding. The girl is laughing. (221)

Thus we discover that Rin’s actions during the war were not the stereotypical female-soldier duties like having tea with Iraqi women, distributing supplies at Iraqi grade schools, or searching female civilians as they passed security checkpoints.<sup>93</sup> On the contrary, she killed an Iraqi child. This other child may be interpreted as a foil for Juney (or Juney as a foil for her), particularly in regards to the effects of war upon both mother and child. The few brief mentions of this “little girl” starkly contrast the continued emphasis upon Juney in Rin’s chapters of the novel. While thinking about Juney and being near her helps Rin maintain calm, she has suppressed the memory of the Iraqi girl until her panic upon facing Naema brings it back in a hallucinatory flashback. Thoughts of the Iraqi girl unsettle her to the point that she begins to lose self-control. Moreover, each time this girl appears in her visions, she is described as having “bloodied eyes” (221) or “blood running from her eyes” (218), which suggests that Rin connects her wartime act of violence to her daughter’s own eyes. She subconsciously blames herself for Juney’s blindness, believing that it is punishment for her killing the Iraqi girl: the sins of the mother visited upon the daughter.

While the connection between the Iraqi girl and Juney is implicit, Rin more explicitly associates the girl with Naema. This is evidenced by the timing of the hallucination: it is triggered by Rin’s discovery that Naema is Tariq’s mother and that she

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<sup>93</sup> Jennifer Greenburg discusses duties performed by female soldiers in the Iraq War before the combat ban was lifted, particularly in the Marines’ Lioness program launched in 2003, their FETs (female engagement teams) created in 2009, and the Army’s all-female CSTs (cultural support teams) established in 2010, which were attached to Ranger and Green Beret units.

must face her when she takes him home that evening. Perhaps Rin's association of the two individuals is due to both Naema and the girl with the "bloodied eyes" being Iraqi, or perhaps it is an association by guilt: she was responsible for the hospitalization of the former and the murder of the latter. Yet something changes within her during their short, nervous duration in Naema's home. Naema welcomes them inside, thanks Rin graciously for allowing Tariq to spend so much time at the farm with her and Juney, and makes her some hot tea in a traditional gesture of goodwill. Yet when she tells Rin, "I must now repay you with some Iraqi hospitality" (223), this sets the veteran even more at edge, for "in her platoon, 'Iraqi hospitality' meant being captured and tortured" (224). Maintaining her calm façade only because the children are there, Rin wonders if the doctor recognizes her from the day of the hurricane, "or is she only biding her time until she can take revenge?" (226). As they sit and chat about Tariq, Juney, and the town's recent meteorological tumult, small details via omniscient narration indicate Rin's gradual easing. She observes the furniture and décor, noting familiarities in style and concluding that there's "nothing to be scared of" (226). She notices what Naema is wearing, relieved that there is "no hijab, abaya, burqua, or anything like that. Thank god" (229). Fortunately, Naema does not recognize her as the attacker from that day at the clinic, and by the end of the visit Rin swears to herself that "she will never, ever go near Tariq's mother again" (229). Yet the subtle foreshadowing throughout the description of their communing over tea anticipates a transformation that begins later that very evening.

After they leave Naema's house, she doesn't "see" the Iraqi girl again: "Later, as she drives home . . . Rin is in such a snarl of relief, confusion, and what possibly might be regret that she scarcely pays any notice to her usual nighttime visitations. Even the shot-

up girl leaves her alone” (230). That the girl is present *before* she meets Naema and absent *after* their visit suggests that Naema’s failure to recognize Rin has somehow also concealed Rin from the girl, as if she is conflating the Iraqi doctor and the Iraqi child through psychological transference. But there is more at work here than Rin’s psyche. As they make their way back to the cocoon of safety that is their farm, Juney asks her mother if she will become friends with Tariq’s mother now. When Rin answers No, Juney demands a reason, and her trademark beyond-her-age shrewdness is not satisfied until her mother tells the truth: “It’s just hard when you’ve been trained to see Iraqi people as your enemy, when you’ve seen them kill . . . [she hesitates] . . . People you love.” Knowingly, Juney presses, “You mean Daddy, don’t you?” The dialogue that ensues is an astonishing exemplar of kid-logic:

“Mommy, I want you to listen . . . Tariq and his mom didn’t kill Daddy. Did they?”

“Not exactly. I mean no, of course not.”

“And Americans kill people too, right?”

“Yes. I am afraid we do.”

“And we kill not just enemy people but other Americans. I heard about it at school. Kids even shoot other kids right in their own schools. Don’t they?”

“Yes,” Rin replies reluctantly. “But it’s rare.”

“Still, they’ve done it. Right?”

She sighs. “Right.”

“So does that mean you can’t ever be friends with a kid?”

Rin has no answer to that.

“Well, does it, Mommy?”

“No, little bean,” she whispers. “No, it doesn’t.” (231)

Because of this conversation with her wise young daughter, added to her realization that she has nothing to fear from Naema, Rin is stricken with guilt and grief the next time Tariq visits and gives her a big hug: “God, why did she do that to his mother?” she thinks with shame, holding tightly both of “these fatherless kids in her arms” (248). And towards the end of the novel, when Rin herself is hospitalized (and likely to serve time in prison thereafter) due to a misunderstanding involving law enforcement trespassing her territory to seize her wolves, Naema takes Juney in to keep her out of the foster care system, becoming a surrogate mother in Rin’s time of need. Rin has learned to accept and even to trust Naema only through the children. This transformation represents her letting go of the fear and bitterness associated with her time at war and turning her back on the xenophobic mindset with which military training indoctrinated her.

The presence and needs of the children thus facilitate Rin’s cultivation of tolerance and, by extension, her healing. At no time depicted as a weak or less-than-capable character because she is a woman, a mother, a victim, or a traumatized veteran, instead her strength changes. Once known as “Dragon Drummond,” who was “tough as a boot strap and mean as a rattrap” in order to “get any respect as a female NCO” (126), this gruff disavowal of conventional femininity metamorphoses into a maternal strength, a different kind of self-sacrifice, with the acceptance that she cannot raise Juney alone – that the old adage “It takes a village to raise a child” carries some weight. After Jay’s death, she’d started motherhood alone, just her and Juney, fearful of letting anyone else in because the men she had trusted in her platoon betrayed her with a gross violation of her self and her widowhood. But now she has a family. While male-authored war novels

often feature veterans wanting to redeploy, to go back to war and rejoin the “family” they’ve constructed with their fellow soldiers, *Wolf Season* shows that bonds of community can be created without returning to the killing, and that even those we once thought of as the “enemy” (in this case, Iraqis) can become our strongest allies. Benedict suggests that something positive can emerge from thinking about children alongside war – an association our culture tries hard to avoid – through the novel’s revelation of how children are affected by war (even when they are geographically far removed from it, like Juney) and how they can help heal the ravages of war through forging a sense of community where one might not otherwise develop.

Cara Hoffman also gets us thinking about children in conjunction with war, but in a different way. In *BSILY*, the protagonist Lauren is not biologically a mother like Rin, but she did raise her younger brother Danny after their mother’s abandonment and father’s depression. She recalls the screaming matches her parents would get into before their mother left, when Lauren would shield her then-toddler brother Danny from the fighting by playing make-believe. She has a recurring memory of the day she took him to a parade held at nearby Fort Drum to welcome troops home from the first Gulf War. The sight that day of “Danny’s face and his baby-fine curly hair keep her company” during her long deployment. The intimate bond suggested by her memories is not typical of a sibling relationship, but more of a motherly sense that her entire world revolves around the child.

Before taking on the responsibilities of becoming a soldier, Lauren ran the household, including paying the bills and putting food on the table. These are stressors for many adult parents, but Lauren managed to keep their lights on and bellies full even

as a middle- and high-schooler. Money-saving extremes became the norm: “toothpaste tubes flattened paper thin,” unscrewing lightbulbs “from fixtures at other people’s houses” to replace their own, stealing condiment packets, plastic silverware, napkins, and toilet paper from the school cafeteria and restrooms. She learned that “the incidentals for an entire household can be obtained through stealth, an underground economy, items paid for in good grades and track medals and All State choir” (96). Every week she walked to the grocery store for “that ten-for-two-dollar ramen” before she was old enough to drive (97). She kept a wad of gum in her mouth all the time because it helped stave off her hunger so Danny could eat more. When she finally graduated high school and was approached by military recruiters, she enlisted (instead of accepting a scholarship to music school) in order to keep her brother fed and clothed, a roof over his head. Even after she left for Iraq, she continued to care for him, sending money home. She might not have been a mother literally, but she performed more provider/guardian duties than most. She was not only a mother figure before and during the war, there was also a child – by then a thirteen-year-old – waiting for her when she got home.

Lauren’s maternal relationship with Danny further destabilizes the motherhood-versus-war opposition identified by Huston and other scholars, proving that violence – even against other children – is not incompatible with nurturing. Like Benedict’s juxtaposition of Juney with the Iraqi girl Rin shot during the war, Hoffman’s revelation of Lauren’s wartime killing of the pregnant woman and her son is all the more startling because of her relationship with Danny. It is no coincidence that the Iraqi boy was described as “maybe twelve years old” (260), the same age Danny was at the time. The scene not only deconstructs the motherhood/violence dichotomy, but also demystifies the



U.S.-soldier-as-trauma-hero assumption by showing Lauren as perpetrator rather than victim. And, like Rin's act of violence, Lauren's cannot be explained by Sjoberg and Gentry's Medea-inspired "mother narrative," since she did not pull the trigger in defense of Danny or to avenge him in any way.

Hoffman also revises the traditional war story by showing the effects upon a child wrought by their guardian's combat trauma. Children are typically absent from veteran trauma narratives,<sup>94</sup> despite emphasis on the protagonist's return to domestic space, the milieu of offspring. Often, as in Vietnam War literature and both first- and second-wave Iraq War novels (including those discussed in my second chapter), the soldiers who go off to war are still youths themselves and do not yet have children of their own. Their traumatic injury upon returning home might affect a high-school or college girlfriend, or even a wife, but rarely do children figure into the veteran's reintegration into civilian society and domestic life. Lauren is one of these straight-out-of-high-school enlistees, but her situation as family provider enables insights about the responsibilities that await those soldiers we don't always hear about in the media – the ones who do have children waiting on them to return from the battlefield. In *BSILY*, the psychological effects of Lauren's time at war become most apparent when she takes Danny on a hiking and camping trip into the glacial forest in nearby Canada.

Knowing Danny's aspirations and dreams perhaps more than she knows her own, and sharing with him a childhood love of *National Geographic* magazines, Lauren reflects that Danny has always been fascinated by natural disasters, especially the idea of

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<sup>94</sup> A notable exception is Hemingway's classic World War I story "Soldier's Home" (1925), in which protagonist Harold Krebs returns home from trench warfare to his parents and two younger (unnamed) sisters.

a coming ice age. He'd lecture her about "what happened to the woolly mammoth and what would inevitably happen to humanity." Even after he found out about global warming sometime in the third grade, he'd still read everything he could find about "glaciers . . . hypothermia, treating frostbite, and snowshoeing . . . [and] William Parry's fearless expedition to the North Pole" (26). She arrives home from Iraq on Christmas Day with gifts that play into his survivalist interests: "a SEAL pup knife . . . Swedish mittens with liners, a first-aid kit, six silver emergency survival blankets, waterproof matches, a box of twelve sure-pak MREs, a mess kit, a flask, a compass, and a crank flashlight that didn't require batteries" (26). He thinks all this paraphernalia is interesting to collect, but she believes he should have an opportunity to use it, to experience what it is like to survive the elements. A few days into her homecoming, she realizes he spends "all his days inside on his computer staring into nothing." She feels that he needs to "see things that were beautiful, feel the snow and cold instead of dreaming about it. Be able to leave his chair and run and leap and burst forward instead of living in a flat world." Her time at war has made her see the world in a different way, and through some kind of vicarious attempt at salvation or redemption, she wants him to experience it differently, too. She makes her decision: "She could fix it," his flat-world, uninspired living, for they "had more than enough cold-weather gear for both of them" (47). So she drives him from their hometown near Fort Drum in New York up to Canada, to the Jeanne d'Arc basin.

What begins as an adventurous hiking trip becomes increasingly dangerous. A steady snowfall begins soon after they cross the Canadian border. Lauren tosses Danny's cell phone out of the car window while he's taking a nap so the distractions of modernity won't interrupt their experience. They drive deeper and deeper, hours and hours, toward

the oil fields and the ocean until there is no longer any road, then they park on an overlook and proceed on foot, into a “pristine landscape” where “no footprints or tire tracks marked the snow” (200). They come across the rubble of lean-to huts and long-extinguished campfires, what appears to have been a hunter’s outpost, and – to Danny’s surprise – they make a fire, set up the sub-zero sleeping bags he hadn’t realized she’d brought, and make camp for the night. She plans to take him further toward the ocean the next day, to the “edge of the continent,” in order to “show him what he needed to see” (205), as if this were some vision quest or rite of passage and she his spiritual guide.

At first Danny enjoys the adventure: “This was the furthest from home he’s ever been, and it felt amazing, like they could just keep going. They had broken free from some gravitational pull and could keep going forever. They could be weightless” (196). As night approaches and the temperatures plummet lower and lower, Danny becomes concerned. Lauren had told him they were just making a quick stop to see the basin, and that their end destination was to visit their mother. Eventually, it dawns on him that Lauren has no intent of taking him to their mother, that she instead intends for them to take up extended residence in this freezing forest with the provisions she’s brought in the trunk of her car. He begins to express his fear, asking, “Are we going to freeze to death?” (205), which she brushes aside with a laugh of reassurance. She views his anxiety and discomfort as part of a necessary process, and she relates it to her war experience: “She remembered the sensation well. The fact of your animal being is exposed when you are solitary, unsure, terrified. It’s almost a cellular desire, a surge in every aspect of your being to live no matter what that living was going to be like. She wanted to regain that feeling, the instinct to stay alive at all costs” (207). In addition to getting back something

she felt she'd lost when she left the war, she is confident that this experience is for her brother's own good: "As uncomfortable as Danny would be this one night, he would be twice as confident in the morning and he'd understand . . . She was happy to get [him] away from staring at a screen, filling his ears with noise. Living through his fucking phone. He'd be afraid to begin with and then he would be better than ever" (207). She believes that taking him through this trial-by-fire (by ice), akin to a parent throwing a child into the pool to teach him how to swim, is her duty as his guardian. What she doesn't realize (but which, through dramatic irony, is becoming clear to Hoffman's readers) is that her experience of war has affected her in such a way that she is actually subjecting her beloved brother – and herself – to grave danger.

A sibling relationship also leans toward the maternal in *Sand Queen*. Haytock points out that "by focusing the trauma hero narrative on a female soldier, Benedict breaks new ground" ("Reframing War Stories" 341). As the first of this chapter's three novels to be published (2011) – and, according to Peter Molin, the first Iraq War novel, period – *Sand Queen* also "breaks new ground" as the first Iraq War novel to feature a child's relationship with a soldier. Whenever Kate is having a particularly rough time at the checkpoint or in her guard tower, she escapes her present reality by reminiscing about the camping trips she used to take with her boyfriend Tyler and her little sister April. Though April is Kate's sister, not her daughter, and they live with two parents in a relatively sheltered nuclear family (unlike Lauren and Danny), the descriptions in these flashbacks have a domestic quality as if the three of them are "playing house." They take April on these trips in the Catskills several times a year, roasting hot dogs and s'mores over a campfire, creating a Rockwellian scene of domestic bliss: "After we eat, Tyler

plays guitar and sings while I clean up, April curled in her sleeping bag close by, little and lucky . . . We wait for her to fall asleep, then Tyler slides into my sleeping bag and we lie there together, cuddle up tight, looking at the stars flickering through the trees and talking softly about whatever comes into our heads” (58). In addition to these memories, the happiest points of Kate’s deployment are when she gets care packages, phone calls, and emails from April. These too evoke a bond more maternal than sisterly. For example, she is touched when April sends her a red and pink drawing of “a little stick girl holding the hand of a big stick girl, the two of them standing inside a heart” (206). These, among other examples, establish Kate as a nurturing and compassionate character, a foil to the “bitch” or “whore” Yvette has told her she must become to survive. Nevertheless, her four major wartime experiences (the sexual assault, the IED explosion on her first Humvee convoy, the mortar attack in which Yvette is killed, and Kate’s own retaliatory shooting of the jerking-off, feces-throwing male prisoner) change the way she relates to April.

After the events that send her back to the U.S. to a hospital bed, maternal affection turns into fierce protection. Ironically, Kate wants to protect her sister from herself, and the only way she knows how to do this is to keep her at a distance. This is revealed throughout the fifteen brief sections interspersed between the Camp Bucca chapters narrated alternately by Naema and Kate. These sections feature a patient known only as “the soldier” in a V.A. hospital room, who wakes up one day not knowing how she got there. We gradually realize that this is Kate, though she narrates all of the Camp Bucca chapters from first-person point of view. These untitled hospital sections are flash-forwards to Kate post-deployment, and we don’t learn what happened to hospitalize her

until the end of the novel. April is mentioned in about half of these sections, with Kate's attitude toward her markedly different than in the Camp Bucca chapters. At first, she refuses to see April, despite Tyler bringing Kate a tiny sparkly-pink cardboard box April made for her and telling her, "She misses you real bad. She says to please get well and come home in time for her birthday. Eight years old, can you believe it? She's growing up so fast" (64). She worries that her new war self is too dangerous to expose to the fragility of a child. Later, when she is alone, she holds April's box, "but she's afraid to open it. She's afraid the innocence inside will fly out forever" (81). A few weeks later, still hospitalized, April calls her hospital room and speaks to her on the phone. Kate is horrified to learn that for Halloween, April doesn't want to be a "princess," but instead, "a soldier like you" (213). That's when she remembers "how she came home from war broken and hurting, unable to stop the faces and the blood. How she took her dad's gun from its sacred place in the sideboard and shot out the dining room windows because those faces were staring in . . . How April huddled in the corner, screaming, because she didn't understand that her sister was only trying to protect her. How the dad threw the soldier in the car to take her here" (213). As with Lauren's well-intended hiking trip into sub-zero temperatures with Danny, Kate believes she is doing what is in April's best interest. Nevertheless, through the mother figure, the war's effects reach the child at home.

While Lauren's and Kate's actions seem to suggest that veterans – even female veterans – are dangerous around children, or should not be trusted alone with them, I argue that these novels do not signify that war is incompatible with nurturing. Instead, they emphasize war's effects on those who wage it – regardless of gender – and its effects

upon individuals (especially children, like Juney, Danny, and April) who don't participate in it and are not anywhere near the field of combat. The effects seem amplified to most readers because we are not accustomed to imagining women in these situations – or in the realm of warfare at all – and further, because these novels situate something familiar to domestic life (children) in an unfamiliar context (war).

The effects of war upon children are also illuminated through Naema's perspective. These passages do similar cultural work to that of the Iraqi-authored novels discussed in Chapter Three: they humanize the Iraqi Other for an American audience. *Sand Queen* is all the more successful in this endeavor of pathos because it describes war's effects on Iraqi *children*. Not only is her little brother Zaki – strikingly reminiscent of Tariq in *Wolf Season* – taken away to Camp Bucca by American soldiers, Naema cannot leave her house without seeing the weapons of war and considering the deadly dangers they pose to neighborhood children:

I cannot think of those cluster bombs without outrage. It is forbidden by international law to use them in urban areas, yet the Americans and British rain them down on us without compunction. Cluster bombs are filled with small, colorful tin balls, many of which do not explode on first impact. Instead, they lie in the streets looking as harmless as toys, waiting for a passing vibration to detonate. Thus the child who picks one up with delight or the young mother who walks by innocently pushing a pram are turned into suicidal murderers, setting off an explosion that shreds themselves and all around them to pieces. This is one of the reasons our hospitals are filled with babies without arms and our graveyards

with disembodied heads and limbs. What sort of a demon invents a weapon like this? And what sort of a population allows its armies to use it? (115)

Images of a child eagerly grabbing what he thinks is a toy, a mother passing by with an infant, and armless babies present a very different portrait of the war than that which appeared on the evening news in American households during so-called Operation Iraqi Freedom. One might assume from our media that Iraq was populated solely by middle-aged men in turbans – easier to justify waging war against than defenseless children. The few representations of Iraqi children as potentially dangerous themselves<sup>95</sup> (and thus, to our military, justifiably killable) contrast sharply with the pathetic scene Naema sees going into the city:

Children stand by the side of the road, their bellies distended with malnutrition and hunger, their legs scabbed and spindly, their clothes ragged, begging the soldiers for food. Some even run right up to the American trucks, so close I fear for their lives. Are these the people the Americans have come to help? If so, how

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<sup>95</sup> A memorable example is the opening scene of *American Sniper*, in which Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper) shoots down a young Iraqi boy who approaches them holding a grenade, then kills the boy's mother, too, when she picks up the grenade herself. The memoir upon which the film was based reveals the film's discrepancy: in the actual event, Kyle shot the mother but not the child. Perhaps the screenwriter / director added the killing of the child to further sensationalize the scene and to emphasize the ethical dilemma. But Kyle shrugs off that moral quandary in a *Time* interview in 2013, stating "I had to do it to protect the Marines, so do you want to lose your own guys or would you rather take one of them out?" (Dockterman). Portraying Iraqi children as potential Marine-killers is not the only culturally insensitive misstep in this award-winning, widely-viewed film. Lorraine Ali of *LA Times* points out that "the Iraqis in Eastwood's production are mere props, grizzled monsters who torture children with drills, swarthy insurgents who proliferate like cockroaches . . . Its Arabs can't even sip tea without looking like Satan's henchmen . . . By the time our on-screen hero refers to the Iraqis as 'savages,' the film has already made that point about 10 times over." Shortly after the movie came out, Army sniper Garrett Reppenhagen released a statement protesting that the views of American soldiers as portrayed in *American Sniper* were not shared by all servicemembers: "During my combat tour, I never saw the Iraqis as 'savages.' They were a friendly culture who believed in hospitality . . . I met some incredible Iraqis during and after my deployment, and it is shameful to know that the movie has furthered ignorance that might put them in danger."



does it help to drop bombs on their houses and imprison their sons and fathers?  
To destroy their villages, already so poor, and slaughter their babies? To murder  
them and not even know their names? Is this the way to liberate a people from a  
dictator? (218)

These passages about Iraqi children emphasize the central problem with the trauma hero narrative as our society's dominant understanding of war: it victimizes and sanctifies American soldiers – those same individuals Naema sees driving the big trucks and destroying her country's villages – through what Scranton calls a “scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy.” War representations for over a century have focused on the experiences, the voices, and the psyches of American soldiers, such that our gratitude and sympathy toward them distracts us from the real victims of American warfare.

Naema's observations of the malnourished, ragged children, like other passages throughout Benedict and Hoffman's novels, present a counternarrative to the trauma-hero myth by illustrating the consequences on Iraqi families. But, notably, they resist holding only male soldiers culpable by presenting their female soldier-protagonists as perpetrators, too. The United States' imperialist approach to the Middle East is not a “man” problem, they suggest, but an “American” problem. Women war writers aren't trying to substitute female soldiers as the new “victim” in place of the trauma hero they attempt to topple from his pedestal. Nor are they attempting to capitalize on the recent gendered military reforms to draw a larger female readership to war fiction by simply adding female characters to the genre's pre-existing tropes. Instead, by defamiliarizing those conventions, they provoke a different way of thinking about war, rousing us from

decades – nay, centuries – of status-quo complacency wherein we believe that it is cycle-of-life common sense for women to replenish our stock and men to do the dirty work of war, as if it is something that *has* to be done. By re-writing *who* is engaged in American violence, Benedict and Hoffman provoke a rethinking of *how* and *why* America engages in violence.

#### PLACE AND SPACE IN WOMEN'S IRAQ WAR WRITING

A final thematic element in Benedict's and Hoffman's novels which adds something new and important to the cultural narrative of war is the way they stage a sense of space and place. All three novels critically highlight war's deleterious effects upon the environment (landscape, nature, and animals), focusing on the devastation wrought by battle on the places where wars are fought and weapons are made. In line with the ideology of environmental feminism,<sup>96</sup> these novels' attention to the ecological effects of warfare contrasts with previous male-authored war narratives that often situate the jungle (Vietnam) or the desert (Iraq, Afghanistan) as another foe to be conquered. In *Sand Queen* and *Wolf Season*, the colloquial "rape of the land" is juxtaposed with passages describing the rape of a woman, reminding us that the domination of nature has occurred alongside the domination of women for centuries.

Americanist literary scholar Melanie Dawson defines an environmentally-feminist text as one that "investigates the earth's health and future in the context of women's life

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<sup>96</sup> A movement / school of thought called "ecofeminism" rose to prominence in the 1980s and hit its peak in the early '90s, but according to Greta Gaard, it "was critiqued as essentialist and effectively discarded." Today, scholars who explore the intersections of feminism and ecology / the environment use different wording to distance themselves (out of "fear of contamination-by-association") from "the charges of gender essentialism" (27). However, some of the original ideas of the so-called "ecofeminists" have *not* been discredited by contemporary feminists and thus remain useful to an examination of gender and natural space. Except in the case of direct quotes, I will use the term "environmental feminism."

experiences, focusing on women's perceived responsibilities as caretakers of the land and the limitations imposed upon them as owners and managers of the land" (335). Writer-activist Jytte Nhanenge's explanation of environmental feminism recalls the male/female binaries of war/peace and violence/nature discussed earlier in this chapter. She points out that "in order to control society, the patriarchy formed an interconnected web of dominance, expressed in dualised absolute forms," namely, the belief that "superior men are rational, and relating to culture, while inferior women are emotional, and belonging to the realm of nature" (Nhanenge 104). Rather than any essentialist connection, there is a longstanding, culturally-constructed association of womanhood with the natural environment; for example, we often personify nature as female, even "Mother."

How does war enter the conversation of feminism and the environment? Rachel Carson's landmark *Silent Spring* – considered the ur-text of feminist environmentalism because it reveals the consequences pesticides and other man-made chemicals can have upon fertility and reproduction – specifically locates the origins of chemical manufacturing in twentieth-century warfare: "This industry is a child of the Second World War."<sup>97</sup> Moving forward a few decades, feminist environmental philosopher Karen J. Warren connects military rape of women (an action that is "routinely viewed as a privilege of the victors of war, a way of showing who won") to the military's violent domination of nature, stressing that "military action makes life unmanageable for both human and ecological communities by releasing toxins, pollutants, and radioactive materials into the air, water, and food" (209). While no major studies have yet been conducted on the Iraq War's specific damage to the environment, Warren addresses two

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<sup>97</sup> Carson cites the specific example of the 1943 contamination controversy regarding the Rocky Mountain Arsenal of the Army Chemical Corps.

other late-twentieth century conflicts involving the U.S. military. The 1991 Gulf War wrought long-term “destruction of urban water and sewage systems, massive air pollution, oil ‘lakes’ caused by oil fires, damage to marine wildlife, coral reefs, and coastal wetland caused by oil spills at sea, and damage to deserts by land mines. Similar military environmental damage occurred in Serbia as a result of NATO bombings in 1999” (209). The military’s destruction of natural resources is further emphasized by science journalist Seth Shulman’s evidence that the Pentagon puts out more toxic waste per year than the top five U.S. chemical companies combined, with no checks, since “the military branch of the federal government has for decades operated entirely unrestricted by environmental law” (xiii). The military thus contributes exponentially to a problem that threatens our very existence on this earth and depletes the resources we take most for granted. What’s worse, perhaps, is the knowledge that we have the budge – and the power – to solve this crisis. Environmentalist Janis Birkeland reveals that “15 percent of the amount spent on weapons in the world could eradicate most of the immediate causes of war and environmental destruction . . . [but] the United States spends less than one percent of its military budget on either peace making or environmental protection” (39). These ecological tragedies are justified through gendered pseudo-logic. As feminist literary scholar Margaret Higonnet puts it, “viewing military technology as masculine permits the domination and ordering of a nature and territory perceived as female” (38). The concerns of these critics and theorists from various fields of study are echoed in passages throughout women’s war literature, but are conspicuously absent from male-authored war narratives. Considering environmental feminist themes in war literature thus illuminates a level of consequence beyond the human. In addition to the cost of

people's lives, war-waging continues to destroy plant and animal life, deplete natural resources, and damage, often irrevocably, the ecology of planet Earth.

In *Sand Queen*, Benedict uses an environmental feminist approach that emphasizes a sense of place by contrasting Kate's memories of camping in the lush Catskills with her surroundings in Iraq. She is struck by visual effects of war upon the landscape, which the male soldiers around her seem not to notice: "When we drove through Basra on the way here from Kuwait in March, right after Shock and Awe started the war, it was flattened. Nothing but smoldering rubble" (8). The shock accompanying this observation is not something to which she grows immune, for near the novel's end, as she gazes out from her beleaguered guard tower, she is saddened by the damage of war upon the environment: "The desert stretches out in a haze on either side of us, littered with garbage . . . Pieces of abandoned military equipment are poking out of the desert, too: shards of rusting metal, shells of old tanks and bombs, bits of airplane left over from the last war" (243). Her recognition of some of the detritus being "left over" from the first Gulf War emphasizes the continued wreckage upon nature by war. What she sees isn't new, and the environmental destruction probably won't end with this war, either.

Fond of bird-watching with her family back home, before deployment Kate had researched the kinds of birds she could expect to see in Iraq. She'd eagerly anticipated seeing the "Eurasian hoopoe . . . larks and ibis, eagles and storks—the kinds of birds you only see in zoos back home, never in the wild" (62). But after months of being in the desert, she hasn't seen a single bird. She wonders about their absence, "Where the hell do birds go in war, anyway? Do they fly away someplace else? Do they hide? Do they catch fire and fall, black and smoking, to the ground? Or do they breathe in the bomb smoke

and depleted uranium and burning bodies and oil and shit, like we do, and crawl away somewhere to die?” (62). Her inner monologue reflects the connection between living things and their suffering caused by war. The repeated pronoun “they” merges into the first-person plural “we,” suggesting what Nhanenge calls “the interdependence of life” (98). The connection intensifies during her near-rape sexual assault, when the pain of the attack sends her mind elsewhere: “All I can do is taste my own spit and blood . . . And then I’m not me anymore. I’m a wing. One ragged blue wing, zigzagging torn and crooked across the long, black sky” (80). That she *becomes* a bird here, in her panicked imagination, suggests a desire to transcend her human form, yet the “ragged” wing flying “crooked” indicates her recognition of the universality of war’s harmful effects upon life, human and otherwise.

Furthermore, Kate is comforted more by a non-human character, Marvin the tree, than by any of her fellow human soldiers. She expresses empathy toward this representative of nature, a living anomaly in the Iraqi desert, which she anthropomorphizes as a coping mechanism and to alleviate her sense of isolation among all the men surrounding her: “There’s nothing out here but an endless gray blur. And a tree. I like that tree, standing outside the wire all by itself in the middle of the desert. I call it Marvin. I spend so many hours staring at Marvin that I know every twist of his wiry little branches, every pinpoint of his needle leaves. I talk to him sometimes, compare notes about how we’re doing” (6). When referring to her limited access to necessary facilities (when “nature” calls), she also hints at the way Marvin has been endangered by the war: “It isn’t like there are any bushes or trees to squat behind either, except for Marvin, and Marvin’s no wider than my leg. Anyhow, he’s beyond the wire,

surrounded by toe poppers, for all I know, the landmines left over from the last war” (38). Her “friendship” with Marvin continues, and she turns to him whenever the going gets tough: “The morning after Third Eye tells me what happened to her [she is raped by the same men who assaulted Kate], I have a little talk with Marvin. ‘How you doing today?’ I ask him from the top of my tower . . . ‘As for me, I’m not so good’” (144). Benedict’s inclusion of Marvin as both part of the landscape and as a sentient living thing – particularly one so tenacious of life in the face of destruction – underscores Kate’s own will to live despite her surroundings and war’s threat to her life.

Because *Wolf Season* takes place after Rin has returned from war, it lacks the charred-landscape depiction of the combat zone found in *Sand Queen*. However, war’s effects upon the environment are nonetheless foregrounded, as Rin relates the threatened ecology of her little farm – her safe haven – to what she’s experienced in Iraq. The hurricane’s devastation upon the farm’s ecosystem parallels the war’s havoc upon her sense of self. For example, her despair upon coming home that day to find that a huge oak tree had been felled by the storm leads to a stream-of-consciousness elegy for both the tree and Rin’s war-self. As Kate had empathized with spindly Marvin in the Iraqi desert, Rin expresses sorrow not only that the oak is dead, but that it has had to witness the destruction wrought by humans upon themselves and upon their natural environment. In a passage of anti-war sentiment spanning decades, she considers:

. . . all the wars the oak has lived through: World War I and the second one, too. Korea and Vietnam. CambodiaLebanonIran. And the long string of U.S.-infested wars in just the past thirty-one years since Rin was born:  
GrenadaSalvadorHondurasNicaragua PanamaGulfOneTheBalkansAfghanistan.

And of course her very own war with its looking-glass name: OIF, Operation Insane Fuckers. Yes, quite an achievement, all those wars, not to mention the many little ones the U.S. fostered in between. Ah, what a waging of death upon the soil of others this American oak has seen. (Benedict, *Wolf Season* 76)

By momentarily imbuing the tree with sight and memory through Rin's imaginative personification thereof, Benedict uniquely perspectivalizes America's wars throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. By imagining the point of view of this non-human denizen of nature and presenting us, albeit briefly, with an object-oriented ontology, she delves even further than the already-rare vantage of the female soldier/veteran voiced by Rin and Kate, presenting yet another counter-perspective to that of the all-too-familiar male trauma hero. This passage also emphasizes the imperialistic manner of "all the wars the oak has lived through" by using the compound adjective "U.S.-infested," which connotes a pestilent invasion, and by calling the series of wars "a waging of death upon the soil of others," reminding us of the shock-and-awe campaigns America has visited upon foreign nations like Iraq without the war's ravages being brought home to bear upon our physical landscape. Notably, too, Benedict chooses to use the ecologically-relevant term "soil" in that phrase, rather than more human-oriented terms like "population" or "people." The scene in which Rin mourns the fallen oak thus functions as an example of environmental feminism at work in the novel, as well as a challenge to American exceptionalism through her indictment of imperialism and unseating of the primacy of the trauma-hero perspective of war.

The central narrative conflict in Rin's strand of *Wolf Season* also revolves around conservation issues. Local law enforcement is trying to confiscate the three wolves Rin



keeps in the woods behind her farm because they deem the animals dangerous to the community, despite the clear WARNING signs Rin has posted and the electric fence she has installed.<sup>98</sup> Rin raises the wolves because it had been Jay's plan to do so "together, once they were done soldiering – he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission" (21). But as she cares for them over the years, she comes to need them as much as they need her. This symbiosis is threatened the day after the hurricane, when Beth's son Flanner – with Tariq in reluctant tow – trespasses into Rin's woods, having heard rumors about the wolves and planning to go "hunt" them with sharpened sticks. As she works to clean up the hurricane's mess, she catches them nosing about her chain link fence and deliberately scares them off with her shotgun. Flanner runs home to his mother and amplifies the story as ten-year-olds tend to do, so Beth calls the cops and demands that action be taken. Tariq returns to Rin's place alone later, this time not so sneakily, and develops his friendship with Juney, remaining respectful of the wolves and their territory.

After Beth's complaint, a local police officer begins calling Rin and questioning her about whether she has a license to keep the wolves, eventually threatening to send the DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation, but basically the equivalent of the "pound" for wildlife) to her home. Rin researches what it would take to secure a license, but the first words she sees are "*Illegal to keep wolves as pets*" (155). As she reads

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<sup>98</sup> Benedict's choice of wolves as Rin's postwar rescue mission is not unfounded. Some animal rescue organizations have established programs that pair returning veterans with wolves that have been brought in due to threats of poaching or that have been injured or abused at breeder-farms (like "puppy mills"). The Lockwood Animal Rescue Center's (LARC) "Warriors and Wolves" program, for instance, hires veterans to work with the wolves in what Dr. Lorin Lindner theorizes is a "therapeutic work environment" in which "the veterans and wolves help heal each other."

further, she discovers that there are exceptions for three purposes: “*Scientific, Educational, Exhibition*” (156). But none of these options would allow the wolves to continue living in the relative wild, unbothered by humans and at peace. All three of these exceptions to the illegality of wolves would in some way subject them to control and domination by man.

By the end of the novel, Rin’s attempts to protect the wolves and the rest of her property from invasion by male officers of the law end with her shot up in a hospital, to serve probable prison time thereafter. In the final image of Rin, she is confined, handcuffed to a bed, while the penultimate scene of the novel, a brief chapter simply titled “Howl,” shows her wolves similarly confined and confused, far from home, penned in by hurricane fence that separates them from each other, “left alone to prowl, wait, and to mourn” (306). These paralleled confinements symbolize the continued (il)logic of domination by the patriarchal hegemony. Our conviction, derived through the narrative’s tone, that this is morally wrong, that neither confinement is justified and both are exploitative, establishes Benedict’s novel as not only anti-war in its stance, but anti-patriarchy.

Despite the regrettable captivity of Rin and her wolves, *Wolf Season* does offer a redemptive hope – through Tariq, a boy born in war and maimed by it. His curiosity about the wolves spurs him to read Jack London’s *White Fang*, a novel that ultimately disappoints him because it represents wolves in a cold, emotionless way, different from the sense of warm respect he’s acquired from his encounters with Rin’s wolves. He reflects that, in London’s novel,

. . . its wolves don't think or feel at all. They are no more than bundles of instincts and rote behaviors, living out the brutal laws of *kill or be killed* and *oppress the weak and obey the strong* . . . Even White Fang himself fails to feel anything beyond anger, fear, pain, and hunger. He certainly possesses nothing like what Tariq would call a soul . . . This book is all wrong. This isn't what wolves are like . . . When he gazes into Gray's<sup>99</sup> amber eyes, he sees much more than raw instinct and aggression. He sees a rich and complicated being in there, a being with whom he can speak his secret language, boy to wolf, wolf to boy. (Benedict, *Wolf Season* 159)

He perseveres with the novel, hoping to gain some insight by reading to the very end, but finishes it “in disgust – he couldn't bear the way the wolf succumbed to servile dependence on that white man at the end” (179). John P. Bruni echoes this criticism of London's classic novel, arguing that it “connects civilization with masculine force” pitted against the feminine wilderness (190). The wolf, representative of nature or that which is “wild,” ultimately surrenders to man, representative of patriarchal domination. But Tariq recognizes the constructedness of London's underlying ideology, for he has learned about wolves through Rin. Her perspective of the wolves is not one of ownership; her intent is not to use or master them. Historically, men tamed and trained wolves and other canines to use as tools of war, creating a chain of oppression and exploitation.<sup>100</sup> Benedict

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<sup>99</sup> Gray is the alpha of Rin's three wolves, with whom Tariq shares a silent bond through the fence.

<sup>100</sup> Examples span centuries, from their use as “lethal guided weapons and instruments of terror in the European conquest of the Americas” (Haraway 13), to messengers, first-aid dogs, guard dogs, the Devil Dogs (the USMC's Doberman Pinscher mascots), the Nazi/SS war-dog detachments of German Shepherds used to prevent prisoners' escape from the camps, and Soviet dog mines used against German tanks (Cashner).

juxtaposes wolves with a warrior to suggest a difference in gendered attitudes toward nature and animals: Rin's desire is to maintain a peaceful sanctuary for them rather than use them for violent ends. Benedict thus critiques masculinist exploitation of nature by contrasting Rin's relationship to the wolves with man's relationship to the animals as represented in Jack London's *White Fang*.

In *BSILY*, Hoffman presents a similar critique featuring natural resources instead of animals. Upon returning home, Lauren realizes that her involvement in the war has made her part of a long tradition of environmental destruction. Several passages conveying her inner thoughts and her conversations with Danny draw connections between war and the use of oil, and between war and global warming. For example, her deployment experiences have altered her view of her hometown:

Everything was different now. As if the heat of Amarah reached through time and erased her childhood. The future she'd been destined to live had caused this somehow. Her future. Her decisions. It was nearly warm in Watertown on December 26 because of the things they were fighting for. The things they were unearthing that would see them all burn. It was hard not to think of oil as blood, real blood, not the trite symbol of soldier or civilian blood. But some deep blank coursing system, meaningless on its own. The cellular history of great bodies long devoured by the land and resurrected, an obsidian fat made from corpses. Winter had been stolen from the future. Like everything else, the past had risen up and taken it away. (Hoffman 47)

Like many skeptics of the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, Lauren believes that it was done for oil rather than to stop terrorism or advance humanitarian efforts. Like the passage from *Wolf Season* in which Rin imagines the history of American warfare through which the oak has lived, Lauren situates herself as part of the line of “decisions” in a “past” that has detrimentally affected the future. The disappearance of winter in Watertown is synecdochic of the global phenomenon of climate change, which is more closely related to our wars in the Middle East than we might realize.<sup>101</sup> In addition to admitting to herself that her involvement as a soldier in the Iraq War makes her complicit in irreversible environmental destruction – thus accepting responsibility rather than claiming victimhood – Lauren’s above reflection further challenges trauma-hero ideology by calling soldiers’ blood a “trite symbol.” Even she, a veteran herself, recognizes the myth’s dangers and limitations. The sacrificial blood shed by American soldiers is used to justify and uphold American exceptionalism. As Scranton puts it, the American soldier “pays the ‘price’ for our bloodguilt.” But the “real blood,” Lauren muses – the deeper symbolism – is that of the future that has been eaten away.

In addition to addressing a sense of ecological *place* in their attention to war’s effects upon nonhuman others, these novels also address cultural *space* in their critique of spatialized gender constructions. History textbooks often situate separate-spheres ideology within the nineteenth century, as if it were a Victorian relic that no longer exists

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<sup>101</sup> The connection between global warming and violence – whether the former causes the latter, and vice versa – has been hypothesized by cultural theorists (including Roy Scranton in his 2018 essay collection *We’re Doomed. Now What?*), public policy experts (like Solomon Hsiang in his 2013 study published in *Science* titled “Quantifying the Influence of Climate on Human Conflict”), and environmental scientists (such as Colin P. Kelley, Senior Research Fellow with the Center for Climate and Security, who published a 2015 study explaining how the 2007-2010 droughts in Syria – caused by climate change – led to the current conflict there.)

today. Popular culture representations locate it in the mid-twentieth-century, with well-known gender-normative couples of the 1950s and '60s performing the roles of career husband and housewife of the nuclear family – from Ward and June Cleaver to Don and Betty Draper – and signal its end with alleged proof of society's progress as evidenced by satires such as *The Stepford Wives* (1972, 1975) and legislative moves such as congressional passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (1972). By the end of the twentieth century, some feminists considered the military – specifically combat positions therein – the last remaining sphere of exclusion. This would indicate that the residual traces of separate-spheres segregation evaporated with Panetta's 2015 opening of all military occupation specialties to women. Yet women are still mostly absent from spaces of war in male-authored war fiction. Reading Benedict and Hoffman's novels through the lens of feminist cultural geography illuminates the persistence of the separate spheres into the present.

The Women and Geography Study Group of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG), one of the first academic entities to theorize Feminist Geography, explains that this field of inquiry is primarily focused on “the way in which the carrying out of particular activities, and the associated use of particular places and spaces, come to be regarded as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine.’” They recognize that, through ongoing processes of cultural construction bolstered by dominant discourse over decades and even centuries, “certain activities and spaces have come to symbolize femininity, others masculinity” (37). In representations of war, this is manifest in a set of spatial dualities: the battlefield (and its activities) is man's arena, while the domestic home-front (and its responsibilities) is woman's. These spaces are physically distinct yet ideologically interrelated, for,

according Higonnet, “The masculine struggle for geographic territory [one reason for war] is motivated by the symbol of a feminine nation populated by faithful women” (37). This extension of the public/domestic separation of spheres into a wartime front-line/home-front duality is both literal (mothers and wives at home awaiting their “boys” return) and metaphorical (America becomes the waiting woman whose honor the men must defend on the battlefield before they return home to her). In either interpretation, the masculine is “away” and the feminine is “home.” *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *BSILY* disrupt those expectations by explicitly placing female protagonists in traditionally male spaces.

Kate, for example, spends her deployment bunking with thirty-three men, sharing a tent that bears no resemblance to the domestic comforts of home. It is “always hot and dusty because we have no floor but sand and no air-conditioning but tent flaps.” The living situation is exacerbated for her as one of only three women in the “overcrowded” tent so packed with men that it “reeks of them. Sweat and farts, beards and balls” (52). The man-cave atmosphere is present both night and day; she describes it as being “noisy as a frat house” (155) with corresponding visual imagery of “rows of guys sprawled on their cots in their underwear, reading porn or playing video games, scratching their balls and belching. . . The stink of unwashed bodies, dirty socks, cooked air” (176). In addition to the conspicuity of a woman in what is clearly a “man’s” space, on exhibit here is the dilemma of military housing, particularly in remote desert deployments like Camp Bucca in *Sand Queen*, where there are no pre-existing buildings (like Saddam’s palaces in David Abrams’s *Fobbit*) to be taken over by the U.S. military. Should the military designate separate tents and facilities for female servicemembers? If so, wouldn’t this just further

perpetuate male/female segregation? According to Kirsten Holmstedt, journalist and editor of *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*, the “women warriors” she’s interviewed “insist they are no different from their male counterparts and they don’t want to be treated as such . . . they don’t want to stand out” (xxi-xxii).

Benedict also flips assumptions of gendered space in *Wolf Season* with Rin’s homecoming, suggesting that when returning home after exiting the arena of war, the female soldier does not necessarily revert to domestic femininity. This is shown by contrasting the interior of Rin’s farmhouse with its exterior, and with the interior of military wife Beth’s home. The latter’s carefully matching furniture, fashionable décor, and meticulous tidiness contrasts strikingly with the former’s living space, with its “mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that won’t open and trapdoors that will.” Rin’s home is more functional than decorative, both because she eschews materialist luxuries and because it is important for her to “keep unexpected objects out of [Juney’s] way” (16). Later, Rin’s home is described in terms comparable to that of the outdoors or a hunting lodge: its walls are “paneled in dark, rough-hewn wood,” and it emanates “musky scents of earth and birch” (212). Her activities pertaining to the exterior of the house are those most often considered masculine chores: “hauling feed, chopping wood” (16). The property’s exterior also highlights Rin’s territoriality, bringing a militant aspect back home with her with its terrain of “half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship” (17). Rather than a warm cozy welcome to gentlemen callers in the manner of the Wingfields’ home in *The Glass Menagerie*, Rin has installed “NO ENTRY, GO AWAY signs” all around the premises



up to the gate, “which she has secured along the top with a coil of army-strength razor wire” (52), deterring the type of social home-gathering that was once prevalent among practitioners of the cult of true womanhood. Rin’s voluntary isolation and struggle to maintain territorial defenses is a performance that blends her unique domesticity with militancy, a combination the men in the community refuse to accept.

The climactic scene of her encounter with the law as she defends her property is portrayed as a battle itself. The police pull up to her front gate; their “doors open and a phalanx of armed men in uniform tumbles out and stands there,” then “a fat, round-faced cop in front yanks out his pistol and aims it right at Betty,” Rin’s service dog. From her front porch, rifle defensively in hand, Rin then watches as “three other cops drop down by their cars. And the one in front lifts his pistol, training it dead on her.” At that moment, war-space converges on home-space as Rin is thrust into a flashback: “*Convoy to Tikrit, moondust storm in our eyes, scarves over our mouths . . . gust of wind, sudden clearing . . . heads poking above a berm, black scarves over their own faces . . . RPG . . . incoming*” (279). Stricken with fear and confusion, she fires a warning shot over the cop’s head and he shoots back. She wakes up in the hospital.

In addition to blurring the spaces of war and home, Rin’s untimely flashback emphasizes the temporal conflation of the two spheres. When *Sand Queen*’s Kate awakes in the V.A. hospital, the last thing she remembers is being at war. Likewise, when Rin regains consciousness, her thoughts immediately go back to her own most recent battle, that night on the porch. Though the events of *Wolf Season* are set after Rin’s deployment in Iraq, her continued embattlement functions as a microcosm of Laura Sjoberg’s “continuum” of war. She explains that “gender lenses see war(s) as a continuum or a war

system, wherein war(s) do not neatly start and end in a way that causes them to be conveniently fileable in neat history books. Instead, wars begin before the first shot is fired and end days, weeks, months, years, and even decades after the cease-fire is signed. War is cyclical, but it is also enduring” (Sjoberg 285). Benedict analogizes war’s continuity in *Wolf Season* by casting the hurricane’s destruction of their small town parallel to the war’s destruction of Iraq, by emphasizing Rin’s irrational unease around the Iraqi character Naema, and by continuing “battle” via her conflict with law enforcement regarding the wolves. This temporal continuation of conflict (carrying the during-war into the post-war by other means) is highlighted by her spatially-triggered flashbacks; the qualities of certain spaces take her mind back to a previous time.

Beyond home-front versus front-line, a second spatial duality persists in cultural representations of war: American military power (Us over “here,” in western civilization) as masculine versus the wartime enemy/Other (Them over “there,” out East) as feminine. Warren argues that “patriarchal thinking is supported by sexist language” to the extent that “the ultimate insult is to be womanlike; insulting men as womanlike has been used throughout history against the vanquished” (208). This becomes embarrassingly apparent when cataloging nomenclature of weapons and operations. For example, throughout her tenure as director of the Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights, Carol Cohn has attended lectures given by defense intellectuals, which she recalls as being “filled with discussion of vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration, and the comparative advantages of protracted versus spasm attacks – or what one military adviser to the National Security Council has called ‘releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump’” (Cohn 693). These words used by

military experts to describe their tools and methods of destruction – what they use to dominate the wartime Other – are the same words sometimes used to describe man’s sexual conquest of woman, up to and including rape. Thus the relationship between the belligerents is both spatialized and sexualized.

In the media, however, spatial distinction is used to downplay violence and atrocity by referring to war’s participants in the collective, as “states” rather than as people: “Us over Here” versus “Them over There.” Among other obvious reasons (such as neo-Orientalism), that rhetoric is problematic because spatial distancing tends to remove the reality of war from civilian comprehension, as Jennifer Hyndman explains in her analysis of the Iraqi Body Count.<sup>102</sup> She suggests that feminist geopolitics “provides more accountable, embodied ways of seeing and understanding the intersection of power and space” than a paradoxically disembodied body count (numbers) can achieve. Further, she demonstrates how the mindset of feminist geography can be applied to the Iraq War to “more effectively convey the loss and suffering of people affected by it” (Hyndman 36), and “to invoke proximity and familiarity” (43).

In alignment with feminist geography, Benedict evokes such “proximity and familiarity” by crafting parallels between similar spaces: those associated with Kate’s culture and experience alongside those associated with Naema’s. Yet Benedict simultaneously concretizes and individualizes the effects of the war by augmenting the spatial parallelism with details of difference. These revelatory particulars highlight the

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<sup>102</sup> The Iraq Body Count (IBC) was a nonprofit organization established in 2006 “to verify reported deaths in Iraq due to the violence of the occupation and to keep a record of Iraqi deaths. IBC relies on secondary sources from reputable media who use mortuary stats, health ministry numbers, and police reports; it is run by twenty volunteers from the United States and Britain” (Hyndman 39).

fact that war is fought between and against people, not just faceless states. For example, scenes in *Sand Queen* juxtapose an American hospital with an Iraqi hospital. In the novel's flash-forward intermediary sections, the V.A. hospital at which Kate is a patient is described as clean, with "white everywhere" (28), a room to herself, a nurse to "plump your pillow for you" (81), and a vase at her bedside displaying a "big yellow bouquet" (131). In stark contrast, the hospital to which Naema takes her dying grandmother in Umm Qasr (Southern Iraq) is described as chaotic: its "corridors are swarming with people. A few blood-spattered nurses are trying to restore order . . . it is filthy . . . In one corner a cluster of people is drinking out of an oil drum [and] the water is covered with slimy, gray scum" (250). An aid worker tells Naema that this once-major hospital now has only "twelve beds, no electricity, and no water" (251). Because of her medical training, Naema stays to help, even though her grandmother died shortly after their arrival. She must send away "those who are merely sick or diseased" in order to perform life-saving feats such as "pull[ing] out shrapnel with no anesthetic, waving away swarms of blood-thirsty flies, [and] bind[ing] up legs with shreds of material torn from my own dusty skirt, legs that are little more than a mush of flesh and bone" (252), imagery which eerily foreshadows her future son's own mutilated limb. The conditions in this Umm Qasr hospital loom in striking contrast to Kate's, and also to the sterile, white clinic in *Wolf Season* where Naema works as a pediatrician after leaving Iraq as a refugee. These paralleled yet contrasting spaces emphasize the effect of war on real people. As Hyndman puts it, attention to space/place provides a "more embodied way" of understanding the toll.

Even before those hospital scenes revealing the lack of a basic necessity – a clean, safe medical facility – the lens of feminist geography illustrates that, due in one way or another to the patriarchal American military, both Naema and Kate have limited access to facilities because they are women. Naema’s education and career are on hold because she could not go to her medical classes, or even leave her house alone, without fear of rape (because the occupation had caused unemployment that put thugs on the street) and official punishment (because Iraqi religious leaders had renewed their vigilant, sexist restrictions on women since the occupation began). Though Kate’s situation is somewhat less extreme, her mobility is nonetheless hindered because of her sex. This is demonstrated via the aforementioned mandate of same-sex “battle-buddies” so that women could protect each other, though the threat was still not completely eliminated. As Kate notes upon walking to the base’s store: “The PX is a good twenty minutes from here across the base, and since the walk is dangerous for females, we hold up our rifles and keep our eyes peeled” (220). The threat is not from the Iraqi prisoners, who are heavily guarded at all times, but from their own fellow American soldiers. This fear can lead to health problems, as described earlier in the novel when Kate experiences discomfort and multiple urinary tract infections because she has to endure entire nights without relieving herself whenever a battle-buddy was not available to walk with her to the latrines. Her renal system was compromised because she was afraid – and not allowed – to leave the tent alone at night.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Kate’s fears are grounded in reality. At the Bush Crime Commission Hearings in 2006, Colonel Janis Karpinski reported that in 2003, three female soldiers died of dehydration in Iraq because they would not drink liquids late in the day. According to testimony gathered through interviews, “They were afraid of being raped by male soldiers if they walked to the latrines after dark. The Army has called her charges unsubstantiated, but Karpinski told me she sticks by them” (Benedict, “The Private War”).

For both Naema and Kate, then, simply being female presents a danger within that interim space, to the extent that it immobilizes them with fear of what might lie in wait for them between departure and destination. In *Geography and Gender*, the IBG identifies limited access to facilities and the associated constraints to mobility as major tools of patriarchal oppression and its continued control over “the socially created structure of society” (21). These accessibility issues are of major concern to feminist geographers. Through the spaces Naema can and cannot enter, Benedict illustrates the oppressive power of Iraqi culture (personified by the male imams) over its own female citizens. And through Kate’s cautious navigation of spaces on the base at Camp Bucca, a similar cultural oppression is carried out by the U.S. military upon its own female soldiers.

The consideration of gendered space is a fitting place to close this chapter’s extended exploration of women’s Iraq War writing, for the critical work of feminist geography knits together Benedict and Hoffman’s various thematic commonalities. Greenburg explains that feminist geography “identifies the corporeal, the familial, and biological reproduction as key sites to examine geopolitical violence” (1109), and, as I have argued heretofore, they are also key sites to investigate the intersections of war, power, and gender construction. These novels emphasize “the corporeal” in their attention to war’s effects upon the body, and they focus on “the familial” and “biological reproduction” by characterizing their protagonists as mothers or mother-figures. With these same thematic threads, the novels demonstrate how memory and identity are bound

up with place. Like landmarks, monuments, and memorials, the body and the family are important sites of memory.

*Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *Be Safe I Love You* are unique, genre-bending texts because they are so far the only works in novel form written by women about female soldiers and female veterans of the U.S. military. Their cultural importance lies in their challenge to the largely masculinist narrative of contemporary American warfare and their contribution to a more inclusive cultural memory of the Iraq War through female perspectives. With their characters Kate, Rin, and Lauren, Benedict and Hoffman destabilize assumptions created by traditional war stories. They achieve this feat by deconstructing the gendered dichotomy that associates men with war and women with peace, by demonstrating multiple female war-roles rather than perpetuating extant stereotypes, and by emphasizing important thematic elements that are missing or marginalized in male-focused novels of the war. It is the hope that, going forward, our cultural memory of war becomes less rigidly gendered and more inclusive of female perspectives and the concerns raised by women's war writing.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION: PERPETUAL WAR AND OUR DYSTOPIAN REALITY

We treated Iraq as a blank slate and discarded any lessons from past experience . . . Hubris stalked us; we suffered from arrogance, and we embraced ignorance.

– Peter Van Buren, *We Meant Well*

This country has a long history of defining its generations by the conflicts that should have killed them, and my generation is no exception . . . We have a habit in this country of deciding the wisdom of our wars only after we're done fighting them, and I guess we decided the war I'd been sent to fight wasn't a very good idea after all.

– Omar El Akkad, *American War*

Born during World War II while her own father was fighting on the European front, my grandmother remembers the Vietnam War's impact on her early adulthood. Her younger brother was drafted into the Marines in 1966, where he served as an Armed Amphibian Crew Chief and machine gunner. He came home with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart, and, according to family rumors, a several-weeks-long refusal to take off his combat boots or to sleep anywhere other than in his parents' bed. More than fifty years later, he still won't talk about his time in war. As teenagers becoming curious about family history, we were quietly warned not to bring up the topic of war around him. Thus, for us, it became shrouded in mystery. I grew up with the sense that, if only he would tell us what happened over there, we would know the secrets the history textbooks left out: what that war was really like. The mythology of combat gnosticism therefore influenced my interest in American history and in my own family's secret past.



Just as the Vietnam War was the defining conflict of my grandmother's generation, the early twenty-first century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have defined my own. Despite the end of the compulsory draft, I knew several young men – and a few women – who joined our all-volunteer force after 9/11 and were quickly shipped off to the Middle East, my brother-in-law among them. The jungle has been replaced by the desert, but how much has really changed? And with Trump's sanctions on Iran and our continued military presence throughout the region, is there yet another war on our horizon? Individuals born since the year 2000 – many of the undergraduates we teach – have known only an America at war. As of 2019, the United States has been directly involved in some kind of war for an estimated 226 of its 243 years as a nation. *The Washington Post* calculates that, for average Americans born in 1920, our country was at war for approximately 35% of their lifetime. By the birth year of 1950, that number jumps to 44%. By 1990, 62%. And for individuals born in 2001 and after, the United States has been at war 100% of their life (Bump). Invasion, occupation, and our reputation as the world's police have become standard operating procedure for America of the twenty-first century. It is time to pay more attention to what our military is doing on foreign soil – and to consider how that energy and those billions of dollars might be better spent here at home, on our failing public education system, for example.

Beyond the sociohistorical immediacy of the Iraq War to my generation, with this project I enter ongoing academic conversations. My critical examination of the novels throughout my three core dissertation chapters represent several scholarly contributions: to post-trauma-theory war and memory studies, to postcolonial studies, to feminist theory. These contributions augment the various debates about conflict in our culture and

about the power of narrative to sustain – and yet also to challenge – national mythologies. I opened this dissertation by mapping the trajectory of American war narratives over the long twentieth century, with the Civil War as my starting point and the Iraq War as my culminating focus for the subsequent chapters. I demonstrated how, throughout that literary tradition, the twin myths of the trauma hero and combat gnosticism intensify, reaching their peak in Vietnam War literature and continuing into the twenty-first century. I then argued, in Chapter Two, that what I label “second-wave” Iraq War fiction marks a representational shift in war storytelling. These works provide counter-perspectives to previous representations that situate the American veteran atop a sanctified pedestal and privilege his experience to the extent of obscuring other experiences of war. The new narrative, which we see emerging in novels like Scranton’s *War Porn*, Terrell’s *The Good Lieutenant*, and Abrams’ *Brave Deeds*, insists that not all soldiers are heroic or even well-intentioned, and that war – even contemporary war – has a significant impact upon many other individuals than just those who participate in combat. These writers achieve their critique of conventional war narratives and construction of counter-narratives through 1) the satirical intertextualizing of previous cultural representations of war (by which they subvert commonplaces like symbols of bravery, redirect tropes like that of the “long walk,” and challenge societal assumptions of masculinity embedded in generational military service); 2) the development of American characters who resist stereotypical categorization like the PTSD-vet or the good-guy GI; and 3) the treatment of Iraqi characters in a way that evokes empathy and humanizes, rather than marginalizing, dehumanizing, or vilifying the wartime Other as is the propensity in previous war literature. Therefore, in Chapter Two I proved that, as a

burgeoning sub-genre, second-wave Iraq War fiction undermines American exceptionalist ideology and forces us to recognize that, by perpetuating the myth of the trauma hero, we are willfully blind to the work he does as a representative for this nation and, further, we are complicit in the violence wrought in the name of democracy and on our behalf.

In Chapter Three, I continued my exploration of counternarratives to popular culture representations of war by questioning the predominantly white American authorship and character identity throughout war fiction of the long twentieth century. While the second-wave Iraq War novels I discussed in Chapter Two do develop the characters of the wartime ethnocultural Other unlike most of their literary forebears, and they even incorporate passages of polyvocality in attempts to present the occupation from an Iraqi point of view, something new and different emerges in fiction about the Iraq War written by Iraqis or Iraqi Americans and featuring Iraqi protagonists. A counternarrative to the Great [White] American War Story is conveyed in works such as *Zubaida's Window*, *The Corpse Washer*, *The Rope*, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: the Americans were not saviors but intruders, not heroes but bumbling villains. In this way, they reverse the conventional American narrative of war by challenging the humanitarian ethos that has long been embedded in the public's view of the exceptionalist mythos. And instead of focalizing the U.S. veteran's homecoming PTSD (the trauma hero's trauma), novels like these by Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi draw attention to the individual Iraqi trauma that persists long after U.S. troops have withdrawn, as well as the deeper Iraqi cultural trauma that American interference over the past few decades has only exacerbated. The Iraqi and Iraqi American writers I examine in Chapter Three achieve

this focal correction and critique of American war w[h]riting through 1) character role reversals in which Americans are depicted as the Other and the novels' protagonists are Iraqi, which allows for a fuller re-perspectivalization of the occupation and war than is expressed through the polyvocality in the aforementioned second-wave novels; 2) plot threads of Iraqi history that contribute to the future-forward cultural work of reasserting a unified Iraqi national and literary identity and sense of self-determination, and also serve to remind American audiences that the cultural memory of this war goes beyond our nation's own limited narratives; and 3) a double-voiced transcultural intertextuality in which a profound Arabic literary tradition with origins in what is now Iraq (Baghdad via *1001 Nights* and Mesopotamia via *Gilgamesh*) is interwoven with strands of Euro-American literature, creating a conversation that collapses the Orientalist assumption of an East-West culture clash and simultaneously revealing the trans-hemispheric universality of human suffering, especially as an effect of war and oppression. Therefore, in Chapter Three I proved that Iraqi-authored fiction about the Iraq War undermines the exceptionalist rhetoric of heroism and humanitarianism found in traditional American war narratives, while simultaneously strengthening Iraqi national identity and cultural heritage.

While Chapter Two responds to the trauma-hero perspective-problem by looking toward second-wave Iraq War novels that reinvent the U.S. soldier-protagonist, and Chapter Three responds to the trauma-hero myth's tendency to overshadow and obscure the voices and experiences of those on the receiving end of the bloody work these soldiers perform, my Chapter Four suggests that trauma-hero ideology is symptomatic of our society's toxic constructions of masculinity. My examination of female-authored,

female-charactered Iraq War novels reveals that they offer alternative lenses to a long tradition of war literature populated by male authors and male characters. *Sand Queen*, *Wolf Season*, and *Be Safe I Love You* are on the front lines of post-combat-exclusion fiction featuring women at war. They challenge the patriarchal American war narrative by destabilizing the culturally constructed (and no longer viable) gender dichotomy that has long linked men with war or violence and women with peace or nurture. Their representations move beyond the genre's stock female figures of the nurse or the woman-in-waiting at home; instead they demonstrate a broader variety of female wartime roles, even defying the once-progressive characterizations of television and Hollywood female military figures like *M\*A\*S\*H*'s Major Hoolihan, Private Benjamin, and GI Jane, who were depicted with an overt sexuality that demeaned any potential political message about gender equality in the ranks. Helen Benedict and Cara Hoffman achieve these critiques through four themes that are marginalized, ignored, or downright contradicted in male-dominated contemporary war novels: 1) war's effects on the physical body (rather than primarily upon the psyche, as has been the proclivity since Vietnam War fiction); 2) war's effects on familial – especially maternal – relationships (in place of the trope of masculine bonds of camaraderie among soldiers in representations dating at least as far back as the Civil War); 3) war's effects on the natural environment (rather than a Cranean conflict between man versus nature wherein the landscape is personified as an enemy); and 4) the transformative effects that the gendered integration of the military could have upon a cultural sense of space (as opposed to the perpetuation of separate spheres ideology and cult of domesticity which are still present in male-centric war literature). Therefore, in Chapter Four I proved that Iraq War fiction authored by female writers and

populated by female protagonists exposes the patriarchal exigencies inherent in the ideology of American exceptionalism, especially as it is performed in and by the U.S. military establishment. Further, these female-focused representations of contemporary war make us see war and its consequences in a new light.

The relationship between the United States and Iraq remains unsettled. According to former Foreign Service officer and leader of two Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq, Peter van Buren, in his 2011 book-length exposé *We Meant Well*, efforts to rebuild Iraq (which have cost the U.S. taxpayers over \$60 billion) “were characterized from the beginning by pervasive waste and inefficiency, mistaken judgments, flawed policies, and structural weaknesses” (3).<sup>104</sup> Ignorance about Iraqi culture and basic infrastructure necessities, disorganized bureaucracy, incompetent communication among various U.S. departments, and flooding the country with American money resulted in more harm than help. The proud publicity of humanitarian missions like helping widows start up beekeeping businesses and handing out tee-shirts to teens was a smokescreen for the U.S. State Department’s failure to meet more “crushing needs for essential services such as water and power” (252). American news reports depicting social, political, and economic progress in Iraq concealed the reality of the situation. “Like the rest of the war,” van Buren reflects, “it was a great narrative, albeit untrue” (119).

This year, as we approach the end of the decade in which the war ended, 5,200 U.S. troops are still stationed in Iraq. This January (2019), Secretary of State Mike

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<sup>104</sup> van Buren’s numbers and multiple instances of fraudulent overspending are corroborated by the final congressional report of Stuart Bowen, Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, who announced in an understatement that “Not enough was accomplished for the size of the funds expended” (“Much of \$60B”).

Pompeo visited with Iraqi leaders to show continued U.S. support two weeks after President Trump snubbed them in his visit to American troops in western Iraq the day after Christmas. Tamer El-Ghobashy of *The Washington Post* explains that “Trump’s visit [was] criticized as undermining Iraq’s sovereignty” by both “supporters and opponents of the U.S. presence in Iraq.” This presidential lack of consideration in his foreign diplomacy, along with the sanctions he imposed on Iran last year (given the decision-making weight of Iraqi parliament’s pro-Iranian bloc) may signal more conflict to come, while the war the U.S. started in Afghanistan two years before we occupied Iraq continues on, now in its eighteenth year.

The past decade has also been marked by conflict domestically. Notwithstanding claims of a “millennial” American populace oblivious or indifferent to foreign affairs (the alleged military-civilian divide) due in part to our all-volunteer force (as opposed to a compulsory draft), American culture has undergone increasing militarization at home. At the level of discourse, war-talk pervades our contemporary rhetoric. Patrick Deer enumerates:

Militarized uses of language permeate a staggering array of fields: in medicine and health, where patients are routinely in a “battle” against obesity or depression, or can find themselves locked into “losing the battle” with cancer; in business, where the *Harvard Business Review* recently urged corporate leaders to scale back on their use of war metaphors[;] in policing, where the War on Drugs rages on; in sports, where the routine use of war metaphors converged with the battlefield as the NFL and the US military recently joined forces to “combat” the source of concussion and Traumatic Brain Injury; or in politics, where the

campaign “battleground” sees candidates emerge from their “war rooms” to “take the fight” to their political “foes.” (“Mapping” 54)

Metaphors of combat and violence have seeped into noncombatant spheres to such an extent that I recently overheard a colleague jokingly refer to her first-world grind of waking up early and going to work every day as “fighting the good fight.” It seems that, as a society, we have become desensitized to the point that we fail to consider the very real origins of our colloquial speech patterns.

In addition to the sprawling ubiquity of war rhetoric throughout the civilian sector, American law enforcement has become increasingly militaristic. As troops have been trickling home from the Middle East throughout the past decade, “the former tools of combat – M-16 rifles, grenade launchers, silencers and more – are ending up in local police departments, often with little public notice,” leaving citizens to wonder “whether the post-9/11 era had obscured the lines between soldier and police officer” (Apuzzo). One heavily publicized incident illustrating this increased police militarism was the reaction to the protest in Ferguson, Missouri, demanding justice for Michael Brown, the young man killed by a police officer in August 2014. In fact, many critics link police brutality in the African American community in general to the aggressive militarization of law enforcement. Deer writes that “one highly visible locus of contemporary militarization has been the explosive growth in the use of paramilitary tactics and military hardware by local police forces against communities of color.” He argues that what is “often referred to as a ‘war’ waged against urban black communities [has] drawn attention to the ways that this crisis combines long-standing histories of oppression and the decay of the political with new levels of militarized policing and surveillance” (54).



Continuing racial and socioeconomic conflicts within the United States – and civilian authorities’ responses to them – increasingly parallel our military’s interactions with foreign countries.

In their recent book, *In/visible War: The Culture of War in Twenty-First Century America*, John Louis Lucaites and Jon Simons point out the paradox that, although “those born in the United States in the twenty-first century have never known a time at which the nation was not at war,” nevertheless, “for most U.S. citizens, most of the time, there is no clear recognition that the country is involved in all-out warfare,” and that “the national sacrifice has been minimal, ritualistically recognized at sporting events or on designated holidays, but hardly shared across the citizenry as one might expect in a national crisis” (1). They point out other ways, however, that the “invisible” war becomes visible, as through “displacements” such as TSA security checks at the airport, and, more recently, Trump’s wall:

Does the United States need a wall on the Mexican border to keep immigrants out or because terrorists might sneak in? The two possibilities become conflated in demands to secure the borders. Immigrants become potential terrorists, and domestic terrorists are perceived as immigrants who should have been screened out before admission. (Lucaites and Simons 2)

These examples – issues we hear and read about regularly in the news – are just a few of the ways that our nation’s behavior “over there” (in the Middle East and elsewhere U.S. troops are stationed) actually manifests here at home. Despite our best efforts and desires to leave it to the professionals (i.e., soldiers and officers in our AVF), our identity as a society is nonetheless marked by our military’s engagement in international conflict –

whether through propagandistic fear-mongering, racial profiling linked to alleged terrorism, or reinforcement of exceptionalist ideology.

Beyond the rhetorical and sociopolitical appropriations of war-speak and -symbolism, the increasing militarization of American culture is also apparent in our entertainment industry. Echoing Laura Sjoberg's conception of war as a cyclical continuum and adapting Paul K. Saint-Amour's term "perpetual interwar," Aaron DeRosa and Stacey Peebles similarly reject the notion of contemporary war as a binary of wartime versus peacetime. They identify the twenty-first century "superhero movie boom" of cinematic universes with continuous storylines that hinge on apocalyptic battles as a reflection of our "condition of late modernity" in which there's a "sense that another war is always coming and another war is always here" (208). Indeed, Marvel's aptly-titled blockbuster film *Avengers: Infinity War*, released one year after DeRosa and Peeble's 2017 *MFS* special edition on Iraq War literature from which I quoted above, has since been slated for a follow-up, *Avengers: Endgame*, in theaters April 2019. Despite the finality suggested by its title, fans know better than to expect an end to the MCU, just as many of our cultural critics and political pundits find it hard to believe that the U.S. will ever extricate itself from conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and South America.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to the Iraq War novels analyzed in this dissertation, popular literature of the past decade mirrors the aforementioned assertions of war's continuity, while

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<sup>105</sup> Historian Andrew Bacevich confirms this public acceptance of perpetual conflict, stating in *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (2010) that "over the course of George W. Bush's presidency, open-ended war became accepted policy, hardly more controversial than the practice of stationing U.S. troops abroad ... More extraordinary still [is] the extent to which the country's military leaders, and the American people more generally, accommodate themselves to this prospect" (182-183).

simultaneously staging the internalized militarization of American culture. Dystopian apocalyptic narratives such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy of young adult novels and *The Walking Dead* comic book series (the former adapted to film, the latter to television, both to wild success) reflect anxieties about domestic conflict through their depictions of government-sanctioned battle royales and feral militias roving across anarchic landscapes, foregrounding internecine conflict. Emily St. John Mandel's more literary novel, *Station Eleven* (2014), imagines a post-technological society in which a flu pandemic has wiped out much of the global population, and marauding cults of violent religious extremists prevent the settlement and maintenance of peaceful communities. Several other recent works of fiction<sup>106</sup> similarly address themes of political and social unrest, often pertaining to a government or military gone wrong or gone period, with tropes and allegories reflecting culture-wide apprehensions.

Of this contemporary dystopian genre of speculative fiction, Omar El Akkad's 2017 novel *American War* is particularly striking not only because it brings the fighting to the home front with biological warfare, drones, suicide bombings, and refugee camps, but also because it ironically reverses perceived East/West roles in the global socioeconomic landscape. Set during the last decades of the twenty-first century, *American War* imagines a Second Civil War fought between the Union and secessionist Southern states over fossil fuel. The Sustainable Future Act has prohibited the use of fossil fuels in the U.S. due to advanced climate change, but the South refuses to comply.

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<sup>106</sup> Notable examples include Clare Vaye Watkins' "cli-fi" novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015); the speculative-fiction collection *A People's Future of the United States* (2019, edited by Charlie Jane Anders, Lesley Nneka Arimah, and Charles Yu); the web television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present), based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name; and Atwood's sequel to it, *The Testaments*, slated for publication in September 2019.

Their resistance to giving up oil in this imagined future echoes their historic refusal to give up slavery in the American Civil War. The flow of immigration across the Mexican border has reversed, Texas has been annexed by Mexico, most of Florida and Louisiana are under water, and the nation's capital has been moved to Columbus, Ohio because much of the southeastern coast has eroded. The novel's plot follows the education-in-vengeance of young Sarat, born in a Southern state, who grows up in a refugee camp after her father is killed in a suicide bombing as he's attempting to get the family papers to migrate northward. After her mother is killed during a raid on the camp, a wealthy, worldly older gentleman takes her under his wing and uses her grief and rage to initiate what would be a fitting subtitle for this novel, or the title of a crime documentary series: *The Making of a Terrorist*. Sarat becomes a guerrilla fighter against the North, a skilled sniper insurgent, and ultimately a human tool of biological warfare when she agrees to carry a deadly man-made virus into the post-Civil-War Reunification Ceremony, which sets off a plague that wipes out 110 million Americans.

El Akkad was asked about his intentions with the character of Sarat in an interview with NPR: Are readers meant to sympathize with her, despite her violent acts? He replies,

No. I don't think you're supposed to have sympathy for her. My only hope is that you understand why she did it. I think one of the things that's been lost in this incredibly polarized world we live in is the idea that it's possible to understand without taking somebody's side. So my only hope is that when you get to the end of the book, you're not on her side, you don't support her, you're not willing to

apologize for her — but you understand how she got to the place where she is.

(Garcia-Navarro)

El Akkad's construction of empathy for an ideological Other echoes that which is evoked in the Iraqi- and Iraqi American- authored novels I discussed in Chapter Three, especially *The Rope*'s unnamed protagonist. Through the narratives' unfolding, we come to understand how an individual reaches such a position, lending legitimacy to *American War*'s assertion that "the universal slogan of war" is "If it had been you, you'd have done no different" (226). The key difference between Sarat and Makiya's militiaman is that the former is an *American* who is driven to violence by her loss and rage, cultivated by the militarization of the once-United States, which in our current sociopolitical climate does not seem that fictional.

El Akkad's other twist of irony is the role of the Middle East in this novel. Herein known as the "Bouazizi Empire,"<sup>107</sup> through the "Fifth Spring" revolution in the mid-twenty-first century the Arabic people had finally "forced out the kings and forced out the generals and formed a republic, a democracy" (169).<sup>108</sup> By the time the Second American Civil War began in the 2070s, the Bouazizi Empire has become the world's greatest superpower, and now (in the novel's 2090s present) *they* regularly send aid to the disadvantaged and war-torn in North America. In this perspectively-utopian future, the

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<sup>107</sup> El Akkad may have named the empire after Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in protest in December 2010, setting off the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring.

<sup>108</sup> El Akkad's fictional creation of this empire also recalls (and fulfills) Said's theories about the power of Arabic prose to birth a "unified, collective Arab identity," which I discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Born in Egypt and raised in Qatar, El Akkad joins Al-Qazwini, Antoon, Makiya, and Saadawi as one of the newer generation of "Arab writers" Said mentions in his 1974 essay "Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction after 1948," who "forg[es] a historic possibility;" that is, a unified future of Arabic culture (*Reflections on Exile* 48).

humanitarian relief organization Red Cross has been replaced by the Red Crescent in a switch of symbology suggesting that Islam has overtaken Christianity.

Moreover, through his characters' views of the far-off, paternalistically benevolent Bouazizi Empire, El Akkad satirizes the sense of cultural detachment present in the U.S.'s own real-life aid-supplying. Explaining the excess of blankets received by the Southern States refugees, "more blankets than anyone knew what to do with" despite the heat, thus even "useless as bartering currency," Sarat's mother wonders why "the anonymous benefactors across the ocean . . . kept sending more. For the life of her, Martina could not imagine what the foreigners thought the weather was like in the Red, but then she couldn't even imagine the benefactors as people. They existed in another universe" (97-98). This disconnect parallels the ignorance that has frequently accompanied American aid to Iraq, which van Buren reveals in *We Meant Well*. He reflects, for example, that "spending money on plays and beekeeping kits must have seemed like insanity, or stupidity, or corruption, or all three. As one Iraqi said, 'It is like I am standing naked in a room with a big hat on my head. Everyone comes in and helps put flowers and ribbons on my hat, but no one seems to notice that I am naked'" (van Buren 252). In El Akkad's dystopian satire, these perspectives are inverted, making it hit even closer to home when the novel reveals that the Second American Civil War and the plague that followed it had been orchestrated by intelligence agents from the Bouazizi Empire in a grand conspiratorial power-grab eerily reminiscent of certain administrations ploys to acquire Middle Eastern oil. The novel's intertextualization of the 2003-2011 Iraq War is furthered with Northern rhetoric about the Southern States that is reminiscent of Bush's orations about Iraq. An excerpt from a historical biography of a Northern general

(one of several historiographic/verisimilitudinous/multigenreic excerpts situated between the chapters of *American War*) declares that, despite its capture of many Southern fighters who were ultimately found innocent, “the surge nonetheless helped pave the way for the eventual eradication of the rebel menace” (238).

Like Orwell’s mid-20<sup>th</sup> century satires *1984* and *Animal Farm*, contemporary dystopian fiction is a symptom of and response to a particular moment in American culture and a particular set of problems in our society, such as the aforementioned militarization of the interior. El Akkad raises an additional warning, one that another prescient mid-century thinker Rachel Carson launched with *Silent Spring*, a text credited with the movement that led to the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In the speculative fictional world of *American War*, the Second Civil War has come about as a result of climate change; it is “a bloody fight over their [the Southern secessionist states’] stubborn commitment to a ruinous fuel” (346). Echoing Carson’s admonitions nearly sixty years ago, pointed barbs of criticism punctuate El Akkad’s imaginative representations of the future United States. The frame story’s narrator describes his favorite postcards, which are “from the 2030s and 2040s, the last decades before . . . the country turned on itself.” These mementos are “a visual reminder of America as it exists in the first half of the twentieth century: soaring, roaring, oblivious” (3). Here, El Akkad indicts our oblivion, despite our having been confronted with scientific evidence of global warming. He also cleverly encapsulates the “not I” collective American mindset through six-year-old Sarat, who believes that “The water would never eat their home. Maybe the rest of Louisiana, maybe the rest of the world, but never *their* home. Their home would remain on dry land, because that was the way it had

always been” (24). Here, El Akkad indicts our naivete. He later depicts an American economy eroded due to the international abandonment of oil in the face of climatological ravages: “Once, fossil fuels were a worthwhile currency, valuable enough to keep the Louisiana ports and Texas refineries economically viable . . . But as the rest of the world learned to live off the sun and the wind and the splitting and crashing of atoms, the old fuel became archaic and nearly worthless” (31). Here, El Akkad indicts American arrogance, the foundation of exceptionalism – the same “might is right” philosophy behind the trauma-hero myth, now crumbling under the interrogative weight of counternarratives like those discussed in my three core chapters.

El Akkad is onto something with his novel’s linkage of contemporary war and climate change, and it opens up an intriguing avenue for further research. Alfred McCoy, University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of History, predicts that the Washington World Order sustaining America’s position as dominant global super-power is nearing an end and will be replaced by Beijing. Having studied more than 200 empires that have fallen over the course of history, McCoy notes the trend that “old orders die and new ones arise when a cataclysm, marked by mass death or a maelstrom of destruction, coincides with some slower yet sweeping social transformation.” He identifies climate change as that catalyst for our time, citing amongst various other compelling evidence the October 2018 “doomsday report” published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that gave humanity a mere twelve years to cut carbon emissions before an onslaught of irreversible damages that will impact our day-to-day living. El Akkad’s America of the late twenty-first century shows us that future: flooding, drought, famine, heat waves, and the civil unrest and biological instability that accompanies those



climatological shifts.<sup>109</sup> As I posited in my opening to Chapter Three, the United States is an empire, and our military interactions with foreign countries – especially the Middle East – are definitively imperialistic. Like the Roman, Spanish, British, and Russian empires before it, the sun is setting for the American empire – but this time, literally.

The relationship between contemporary war and climate change is reciprocal, a conflict-climate feedback loop. Scientists as varied in their fields as Solomon Hsiang (UC Berkeley environmentalist and professor of public policy), Colin P. Kelley (Columbia University climate scientist), and Michael Oppenheimer (Professors of Geosciences and International Affairs at Princeton) provide convincing proof that environmental changes such as global warming are causing more violence and war, and, as I argued near the end of Chapter Four, our ways of waging war are likewise causing further damage to the environment. Moving forward, then, it seems that a logical lens through which to study war and its representations is an ecological one – like the theories of environmental feminism I employed in my close reading of Benedict and Hoffman’s war novels. In addition to diversifying our study of the cultural representations of war beyond the still-dominant white-male canon to include female authors and protagonists, as well as considering voices of those we consider the wartime Other, future literary scholarship would also benefit from inquiries into the representational intersections of war and climate change. If our nation’s investment in myths like that of the trauma hero represents what Scranton calls “a politics of forgetting that actively elides the question of what US soldiers were fighting for and the bigger problem of who they were killing,”

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<sup>109</sup> For example, climate scientists have shown that the 2007-2010 drought in Syria contributed significantly to its civil war that began there in 2011 (Kelley, et al.). A few months after the publication of Kelley’s article for the National Academy of Scientists, Bernie Sanders famously declared, “climate change is directly related to the growth of terrorism” (Meyer).

then perhaps the continuing dramas of violence that characterize our international relations distract us from another “bigger problem” – the global threat that is becoming more and more difficult to deny.

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