

BEYOND THE TRAUMA HERO: THE DISCOURSE OF
AMERICAN WAR FICTION FROM THE GLOBAL WAR ON
TERROR

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather Colonel Chaplain Billy R. Lord 26NOV1935-15OCT2021. Pop, thank you for teaching me the importance of service to others and that all people are more than equal, we are all the same. Without our conversations "standing in a river waving a stick," this thesis would never have been written, and I wouldn't be where and who I am today. I am deeply saddened that I did finish this in time for you to read it and for us to talk about it.

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Michael Weiss

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ABSTRACT

The recent US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the last major theatre of war for post 9/11 veterans, marks a turning point for the United States. This new period of relative warlessness allows the nation to reflect on its collective experiences of the last 20 years of war and think critically about our actions and policies that governed the Global War on Terror. An essential first step in understanding our nation's actions during the Global War on Terror is understanding the people who fought the war and the "others"¹ we fight. One approach that may provide valuable insight into our national understanding of veterans and the people we go to war with is studying veterans' stories about their time in service. This paper examines the characterization of both American military service members and the characters portrayed as enemies, non-American, and generally, as other within war fiction written by American veterans who have served from 11 Sept. 2001 to the present day. I argue that the authors attempt to create a new narrative of what it means to be a veteran, what it means to go to war, and new ways to understand people categorized as the enemy. Specifically, I believe that these new narratives from veterans are attempting to, as Robert Young argues in *Postcolonial Remains*, deconstruct the category of the other and offer alternative approaches to the understanding of themselves and the enemy to create a "mutual understanding and universal equality" (39).

¹ The term "other" describes non-American characters and characters depicted as enemy combatants.

The recent US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the last major theatre of war for post 9/11 veterans, marks a turning point for the United States. This new period of relative warlessness allows the nation to reflect on its collective experiences of the last 20 years of war and think critically about our actions and policies that governed the Global War on Terror. An essential first step in understanding our nation's actions during the Global War on Terror is understanding the people who fought the war and the "others"¹ we fought. One approach that may provide valuable insight into our national understanding of veterans and the people we go to war with is studying veterans' stories about their time in service. This paper examines the characterization of both American military service members and the characters portrayed as enemies, non-American, and generally, as other within war fiction written by American veterans who have served from 11 Sept. 2001 to the present day. I intend to examine these characterizations to discover how service members see themselves and how the United States sees and thinks about the "others" we choose to go to war against. My research methodology consists of close readings of two novels and a collection of short stories written by American military veterans. I argue that the authors attempt to create a new narrative of what it means to be a veteran, what it means to go to war, and new ways to understand people categorized as the enemy. Specifically, I believe that these new narratives from veterans are attempting to, as Robert Young argues in *Postcolonial Remains*, deconstruct the category of the other and offer alternative approaches to the understanding of themselves and the enemy to create a "mutual understanding and universal equality" (39).

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Popular post 9/11 American war narratives such as *Lone Survivor*, *The Hurt Locker*, and *American Sniper* emphasize the enemy's social, political, religious, and physical differences creating a sense of distance between the American protagonists and the characters viewed as an enemy or "other." This issue of separation is generally a construct of narrative framing. While creating face-to-face encounters from the American protagonist's perspective is a typical trope of American war fiction, this framing of narrative forces non-American characters to comply with the narrative rules set by the American protagonist. Many contemporary American-centered war texts contain narrative structures that reinforce negative stereotypes of the non-American and create new jingoistic and nationalist narratives that separate characters, on both sides of the conflict, from their humanity. This narrative structure leaves scholars wondering if American-centered war narratives can move readers towards an empathetic understanding of people on opposing sides of a conflict.

Answering the call for a more humanistic framing of non-American and representing war in more ethical ways proves to be challenging for American authors for several reasons. As Brian Williams points out in his article "Trauma Heroes and Grievable Others" following the Vietnam war, Americans have overemphasized their focus on the support-the-troops movement. While the support-the-troops movement has helped service members stay connected with the American civilian population, it has also led many Americans away from critiquing America's participation in war and armed conflict worldwide. The cultural swing to the support-the-troops movement has shifted American focus away from the purpose of a conflict, the conflict's geopolitical importance or unimportance, and the impact of the conflict on the humans involved.

Additionally, this movement has led many Americans to overvalue narratives that emphasize what the conflict is like or what trauma the conflict caused to American service members. This movement frames the non-American as the root cause for all trauma experienced by an American soldier, places the non-American character as an irredeemable villain, and fixes the American soldier as a trauma hero. This narrative position creates little space to see non-American characters as anything more than the opposite of "American ." This thesis explores ways to understand American military veterans and the non-American characters in veteran authored post 9/11 Iraq War fiction. Specifically, I look at three texts that depict elements of this social-political milieu. Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood*, Brian Van Reet's *Spoils*, and a collection of short stories from Phil Klay titled *Redeployment*. These three texts offer unique perspectives on the issue of otherness for both American military veterans vs. American civilians and American military veterans vs. non-American characters. All three authors are American military veterans who draw upon their time in service to write novels in the second wave of Iraq War fiction. In their form, all three authors argue against the lack of an Iraqi voice in earlier Iraq War fiction. All three texts have deep investments in creating characterizations of Americans and non-Americans that are both realist depictions of people who may have fought in Iraq and offer a social discourse on how Americans position themselves in relation to non-Americans. By studying these texts in conversation, we can see new, and hopefully more humanistic, ways to understand non-American people.

In the novel *Youngblood*, Matt Gallagher creates a traditional trauma hero narrative following a young American Army Officer through a deployment in Iraq. While

continuing the trauma hero narrative, Gallagher pushes against its typical form by forcing the protagonist to interact with Iraqi characters and the history of the American invasion of Iraq. Brian Van Reet completely inverts the trauma hero narrative in his novel *Spoils*. He creates a female protagonist following traditional hero tropes typically embodied by male characters. Van Reet also creates an Arab character that mirrors the hero tropes traditionally embodied by American characters. Phil Klay's work approaches the characterizations of veterans and non-Americans from a different angle; he creates American characters that constantly face complex moral and ethical problems, often choosing the easy wrong over the hard right. These characterizations remove the moral superiority and implied righteousness of the support-the-troops narratives and offer readers a more complex look into what it is like to be a soldier, a civilian in Iraq, or a veteran in America after their time in Iraq is over.

While literary critics are one factor driving the production of texts that humanize the enemy, the drive from veterans has also helped push text into the mainstream. In her book *Welcome to the Suck*, Stacy Peebles asserts that many soldiers "arrive in Iraq ready to reach across national and ethnic divides and make a difference" (3). Other scholars, such as Jennifer Haycock, see the drive for various representational changes tied with more significant national multicultural and multiracial identity trends. Haycock recognizes "increasing attention to the importance of knowing and listening to the other, particularly nonwhite others who are the victims of American military aggression" (336). These critics suggest that veteran authors see the racist, jingoistic, and xenophobic practices in war fiction and, in that light, seek new ways to wage war against the non-American while resisting the social desire to other the enemy. One theory in this

movement is Judith Butler's concept of grievability, placed in relation to war and representation in *Frames of War*. Butler argues how changing the way America frames war holds the potential to challenge the systems that make war by transforming the enemy into a grievable being. Butler writes, "if war is to be opposed, we have to understand how popular assent to war is cultivated and maintained, in other words, war waging acts upon the senses so that war is thought to be an inevitability, something good, or even a source for moral satisfaction" (ix).

Butler's theory suggests that Americans must deconstruct the frames of our war texts and see the structures that construct enemy lives, non-American lives, and some undesirable American lives as invaluable or ungrievable. Butler claims that lives categorized as non-American are ungrievable and "cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone, they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed" (xix).

Popular American war narratives regularly portray American service members embodying the liberator, saving people who could not save themselves. While that notion may have roots in historical realities, this narrative may not fit our contemporary reality. While many war narratives embrace the notion that America is a shining city on a hill, most American war fictions also include language that dehumanizes our enemies. Racist, nationalistic, and jingoistic terms can be found all over American discourse on the war in Iraq, from the speeches of President Bush to the mouths of American soldiers, scholars, and everyday citizens. This othering language has become so common that it is usually overlooked completely. This style of language is so prevalent in America's discourse on

war that it has seeped into the texts of veteran authors. These terms serve as representational placeholders for the real human beings that America goes to war with and create false separations between societies through othering. Additionally, this dehumanizing language is used to justify wars and creates an ethical mist over a conflict enabling combatants to justify their actions.

Butler's work provides an alternate approach to understanding the enemy. She argues that America must not only recognize the individual lives of the non-Americans but also "understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence" (28). The three texts in this thesis offer the reader precisely that type of critique of veteran authored war fiction.

While Butler's critique is one way to frame Iraq war texts, the trauma hero narrative² can be seen as the antithesis of Butler's argument. This phrase comes from Roy Scranton, an Iraq war veteran, who defines the myth³ of the trauma hero as a repeating story of innocence, loss, trauma, and the need to tell the awful truths about war to people who do not want to listen. Scranton argues that this "myth informs our politics, shapes our news reports, and underwrites our history. It dominates critical and scholarly interpretations of war literature, war movies, and the visual culture of war". Scranton continues, "Like all myths, this story frames, and filters out perceptions of reality through

² While trauma narration can serve as a way for veterans to cope with the innate traumatic nature of warfare, for this text, I examine the downside of trauma narrative and its impact on civil society.

³ Scranton argues that the Trauma Hero is a mythological characterization of veterans that has no basis in reality. Scranton does not argue that veterans do not experience trauma from their war experience. Instead, he argues that creating characters whose entire identity is trauma is a problematic interpretation of veterans.

a set of recognizable and confronting conventions" (Trauma Hero). In *Total Mobilization*, Scranton expands on this idea by arguing:

Cultural narratives about ways that highlight the status of combatants as victims sanctify combat experiences as a revelation of transcendental truth and disavow the recognition of the complicity in favor of moralistic denunciation serve and have served to obscure serious consideration of the responsibilities of power, efface and marginalize the suffering of others. (222)

The trauma hero myth has permeated into criticism and the American psyche. Patrick Deer points out that this myth, when paired with the support-the-troops mentality, hinders empathy instead of facilitating it. Deer argues that in American contemporary war texts, public "sacralization and isolation of the

figure of the veteran is clearly at the core of the militarization of American culture". Deer views the trauma hero as "like the colonial agent of old, returning transformed from an exotic and savage land to an indifferent imperial metropolis" (63). Like Deer's argument concerning trauma hero narration, Jim Holstun compares the trauma hero to his theory termed the "shoot and cry" narrative. In Holstun's view, contemporary American war fiction brings the emotional guilt and suffering American combatants feel when they kill Iraqis to the foreground of the narrative. Holstun claims that this narrative structuring of American guilt carrying more weight than Iraqi death "provides US readers with heightened affect and a political alibi" (3). Holstun also argues that the "shoot and cry" narrative differs from traditional colonial narratives of imperialism or orientalism. He argues that his theory:

differs from simple racism or the colonial "othering" familiar from Edward Said's analysis of orientalism, for it denies responsibility for the others suffering while appropriating it as an authenticating experience. This detached moment of isolation, and ostensibly uncaused traumatic affect form an alibi for the colonial narrative they compromise (5-6).

Holston continues his critique of the trauma hero myth by arguing that the "Trauma narrative in the era of high modernism offered an alternative to the critique of triumphant nationalism. But in late modernist American war fiction, it serves that very nationalism" (22). While this is a striking critique of veteran trauma writing, I do not believe Holston intends to argue for the elimination of all trauma narratives from war fiction. Instead, I believe his work suggests moderating the trope in practical and mindful ways and for trauma narration to be a sub-theme instead of the primary message of the writing.

There are other issues with trauma narratives besides Holston's concern for its nationalistic tendencies. The model of a trauma hero itself is limited in its ability to generate empathy for veterans because it juxtaposes the "good" American vs. the implied "bad" non-American. In contrast to Butler's argument, Veronica Austen argues that "an awareness of one's own precarity does not necessarily motivate an empathetic connection to another person. Instead, one's knowledge of another's precarity competes with one's own experience of vulnerability, thus compromising one's willingness to forge an unconditional empathetic bond" (36). According to Austen, Butler's narrative framing should move the American veteran closer to the non-American they fight because they share the same precarity. However, this is rarely the case in contemporary war fiction. Instead, it appears to do the opposite and increase hostility towards non-American

characters. Jennifer Haytock also addresses the limitations of trauma narration. Haytock points out that veteran characters "rarely connect more than momentarily with native individuals, yet the reader is positioned as an insider able to understand more than the soldiers" (340). In other words, Haytock argues that by being outside the diegesis of the novel, readers are removed from the threats of combat and afforded a better vantage point to view and orient grievability.

If we apply these theories to Gallagher, Van Reet, and Klay's work, we can decenter American characters from war fiction and examine the possibility of an empathetic non-trauma hero. All three works share significant similarities: they all consider the social and cultural perspectives of non-American characters in the narratives as a critical component. All three authors explore the limits of precarity and offer new ways to view grievability and understanding of the non-American. Gallagher focuses his work on the battlefield, bringing to the foreground the notion that attempting to empathize with the non-American may traumatize American veterans. In contrast, Van Reet changes the trauma hero narrative in several substantive ways. First, he shifts the gender of the typically male-driven genre to a female, creating possibilities for new characterization of female service members. Second, Van Reet creates an Egyptian mujahedeen fighter whose narrative follows the tropes typically associated with a white American military Officer. I acknowledge that it is problematic for a white American author to speak for an Egyptian mujahedeen fighter. However, by creating a "terrorist" that behaves in ways that readers can identify as "American" Van Reet creates space for the reader to examine their personal or racial biases. Finally, while both Gallagher and Van Reet's works are located in fictional towns in Iraq, Klay brings the trauma hero back

to the United States. By separating the narration from the combat zone, Klay challenges the conventions of othering and trauma hero narration through interaction with American civilian characters. Klay's move to bring the protagonists back to the US forces the reader to examine their perspectives on viewing veterans as trauma heroes and may realign their overemphasis on the support-the-troops movement.

Matt Gallagher's, *Youngblood*

Gallagher's novel *Youngblood* approaches the Iraqi war from a specific although fictional city in Western Iraq, Ashuriyah, like the actual Western Iraq Ashuriya, in more than just name, near the end of the American occupation in 2011. This specific placement in both time and space increases the complexity of Gallagher's novel by lending the story to the historicity of the region and the war. The protagonist, Lieutenant (LT) Jack Porter, struggles to confront and understand his unique position as an outsider to Ashuriyah and a newcomer to the already seven-year-old war. Porter's "late" arrival in the occupation means that the war has its history and memory for all the Iraqi characters and some of his soldiers. The novel is driven by LT Porter's attempt to navigate the complexities of this history. What is war like for the American soldiers and Iraqis before his arrival? Where is the war heading, and how will LT Porter navigate the challenges life as an occupier brings?

LT Porter also struggles with the sheer unwarlike nature of the American occupation. We start the novel five months into a 12-month deployment where Porter's unit is tasked to "Clear and hold. Then build" (Gallagher 16). Over the first five months, Porter and his soldiers do little to no activity that fits into the traditional tropes of war fiction. Gallagher creates a war with no fighting or hero-building moments, such as

dramatic rescue missions or intense combat scenes filled with bravery. Instead, Gallagher's war in Iraq mimics the colonial occupation and fills the first months of LT Porter's deployment with civil policing patrols and bureaucratic colonial activities. LT Porter and his soldiers are described as young and naive and as bored and complacent. This is an unusual way to begin a war novel; it lacks the instant grab of violence and resolute purpose typical of war fiction. However, Gallagher's use of slow violence allows more space in the narrative for the characters to change dramatically. Aside from the craft aspect of the slowness of the novel, this setting also accurately depicts what the war in Iraq was like for many American service members.

By depicting the American occupation of Iraq as a war of policing and colonialism, Gallagher places the soldiers in an unusual position for war fiction. Many soldiers believe they embody the liberating heroes from war stories from WWII. Instead, the soldiers serve as colonial police, monitoring the population, attempting to build new western infrastructure, and shifting local political and social practices to fit American standards. This position is problematic for a soldier, as soldiers generally form their identity in opposition to their enemy. However, there appears to be no enemy to compare themselves to in this case. This depiction of the soldiers creates blurred lines for who is a civilian or a potential enemy, allowing the soldiers to make the mental step that all Iraqi are potential enemies and, therefore other. Since the soldiers are tasked with policing but see all civilians as possible enemies, they see their work as serving and protecting the enemy.

By constructing identity issues for the soldiers, Gallagher creates opportunities for LT Porter and the reader to see a more complex engagement with the non-American. LT

Porter can now redefine the war in Iraq to his soldiers, engage with the population in more empathetic and humanistic ways, and walk in the town as both historian and soldier. This position is possible because the knowledge of the population, the history of the war, and the town's history are requirements for accomplishing his mission. While struggling to learn the town's history, Porter realizes that the people of Ashuriyah are mitigating their responses to him based on their knowledge of Americans and of the American occupation. In other words, LT Porter's role as a combatant and a colonizer blends his identity into a new form of a soldier. LT Porter becomes a hybrid soldier who must engage with Iraq as a historically specific place and with the people of Iraq as individuals with their histories. While this movement does not balance the inequity of power between the Iraqi people and LT Porter, as LT Porter is carrying a weapon most Iraqi are not, it does force him to move beyond seeing all Iraqi as potential enemies and see the people as potentially grievable.

Another essential aspect of Gallagher's framing of LT Porter is his relative youth and inexperience with the war in Iraq. LT Porter is portrayed as an idealistic youth who joins the Army to, as he puts it, "joined to believe in something" (93). His motivations follow typical trauma hero tropes, that of a misguided and uninformed youth. He arrives in Iraq with little to no historical knowledge of what happened in Iraq before his arrival or the political purpose for the occupation. Again, this position forces LT Porter to search for the historical meaning and purpose that led him to Ashuriyah. LT Porter interacts with an Iraqi army officer who shares a photo album with him during this search for historical significance. Porter views the photo album as "a flipbook of the entire fucking war" and "a yearbook of a school I dreamed about" (36-37). He spends large sections of the novel

reading old patrol reports, sworn statements, and other military documents. This shows clear and purposeful attempts understand what happened in Ashuriyah before his arrival. His search for meaning alludes to the real-world issues military veterans face, struggling to understand their position in reference to Iraq and America once they return from the war. Gallagher's creation of a trauma hero who does not understand why he is fighting complicates the trauma hero myth. Many civilian readers assume that all service members completely know and understand the purpose of a conflict and trust that the reasons are just. By placing trust in the soldier, the civilian can justify their lack of knowledge about a war and place all the burden of responsibility on the participants. Gallagher shows us that this may not be a reality for all service members. Often the soldier is just as unaware as the average American. It may be difficult for a civilian reader to continue to follow the support-the-troops movement if their assumption of the informed soldier is corrupted.⁴

During one of these searches, LT Porter learns the story of Sergeant (SGT) Elijah Rios. SGT Rios is a fellow American soldier who served in Ashuriyah before LT Porter's arrival. SGT Rios is characterized as a hero-like figure breaking through the boundaries of the self/other divide by falling in love with the daughter of a local Sheik. LT Porter learns of SGT Rios' narrative transformation from a soldier narrative to a love story between himself and the Sheik's daughter Rana. Learning of this new complexity in Ashuriyah, LT Porter realizes he must engage with the multiplicity of the competing

⁴ For this work, the support-the-troops movement is defined as the American social practice of offering personal thanks and trust to American service members while at the same time generally ignoring the political, ethical, and moral issues with a conflict.

narratives of the past of Ashuriyah bound to but also independent from the American occupation.

LT Porter serves as both the protagonist for the novel's narrative and a historian articulating the narrative that Gallagher creates. To further elaborate on the competing narratives inside of this history, Gallagher introduces a new problem for LT Porter to navigate. This new problem is embodied by a new member of LT Porter's Platoon, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Chambers. SSG Chambers embodies all the tropes of the grizzly, tattoo-covered, war-hardened noncommissioned officer (NCO) typical in American war narratives. He is quick to violence, tough on his soldiers, and seems to disdain the concept of authority while simultaneously commanding respect from everyone in the unit. SSG Chambers arrives in Ashuriyah on his fourth deployment, this being his third deployment to the town of Ashuriyah and one other deployment to an unknown location in Afghanistan. Initially, SSG Chambers' arrival to the unit and his historical knowledge of the local area seemed like a gift for LT Porter. However, he quickly realizes that SSG Chambers has an extreme hatred for the Iraqi people and a deep distrust of anyone non-American. SSG Chambers longs for America to return to "Real combat. None of this counterinsurgency handholding bullshit. Just kill or be killed" (23). SSG Chambers' attitude is a significant issue for LT Porter.

On the one hand, it is oppositional to his mission of assisting the Iraqi people in rebuilding and stabilizing Ashuriyah. On the other, SSG Chambers' attitude as a hardened veteran places LT Porter in the "youngblood" position, one who has no experience and needs help from the veteran. This pairing of LT Porter, the humanitarian and historian, viewing the Iraqi people as people first possible enemy second, and SSG Chambers, the

killer and racist, viewing Iraqi as the enemy first and people second allows Gallagher to juxtapose two distinct models of othering. LT Porter embodies introspective humanism, attempting to find the bridge between his identity, both personal and national, and that of the people of Ashuriyah. LT Porter represents an interesting perspective for the civilian reader, a soldier who is attempting to reach a position of understanding a war zone, much like the reader.

In contrast, Gallagher's characterization of SSG Chambers embodies a more traditional combatant model, creating his identity as the opposite of the Iraqi. SSG Chambers never attempts to identify with the non-American characters in substantive ways. His view of the Iraqi people removes his ability to feel any empathy for them, creating the Iraqi people as permanently ungrievable. Both characters seem to diverge intellectually and morally, but they remain the same in their representations as soldiers. This representation brings an essential problem to light. LT Porter's desire to know the enemy seems to fail here. His desire to understand the non-American is stuck in the self-preservation motive of the soldier. Gallagher suggests that soldiers still feel the risk to their mortal self during warfare regardless of the intensity of the conflict and cannot empathize with the non-American. By remaining stuck in the position of a soldier, Gallagher suggests that a soldier cannot understand the non-American as anything more than an enemy. Gallagher is likely correct in this assumption. The soldier remains in a powerful position over the Iraqis. They are forcing mitigated responses, suggesting by his armament and uniform that he has the power to take Iraqi life at his will. It may be unreasonable to assume that characters in an oppressed or suppressed position will honestly and wholly reveal their identities to soldier characters.

Being the intellectual he is, LT Porter sees the tension created by these negative power differentials but continues to attempt to connect more deeply with the Iraqi people. He attempts to learn Arabic, fasts during Ramadan and spends most of his time on patrol talking to the locals. Going through this transformative process LT Porter muses that "In theory, I wanted to empathize with these men who'd lost a loved one to an ignorant, violent occupation they called the Collapse" (68). LT Porter sees the American occupation as foolish, but we also see his new empathic understanding of the occupation from the eyes of the Iraqi people. He calls the occupation the Collapse as the people of Ashuriyah do. Even with these new understandings, LT Porter remains a soldier and occupier whose profession seemingly requires opposition with the Iraqi people. After speaking with a local Iraqi militia Lieutenant, he openly voices this problem, "He was still a them. I was still a them. No amount of Chai could change that" (146). This assertion coming from the humanistic voice in the novel is a cause for question and concern. A reader may ask, is it possible for a colonial soldier or occupier to understand the non-American? Gallagher's novel argues that American soldiers can and should struggle to bridge the self/other divide and attempt to understand the non-American. However, their precarity as soldiers will always prevent them from truly knowing the non-American.

Gallagher's implied impossibility of deep connection with the non-American can partially be attributed to Gallagher's use of the trauma hero narrative. Gallagher sets the novel up as a flashback that LT Porter writes after the events in the novel take place. This flashback is revealed to the reader in the novel's prologue, where Porter is now out of the Army and living as an expatriate in Beirut. Porter's motivations for writing his story seem

to be one part catharsis and one part an attempt to tell the reader what the War in Iraq was like for an American soldier. By laying out his trauma from the war, LT Porter sets himself as a trauma hero giving his narrative the validity of lived experience and moving the empathy away from the people of Ashuriyah onto himself. As a result, Porter becomes the character that the American reader can most connect with and creates a more significant gap between the reader and the Iraqi characters. Gallagher's use of the trauma hero myth in this way alludes to the impossibility for the trauma hero to explain a war to civilians. If the trauma hero cannot bridge the self/other divide and cannot unother the enemy, they cannot explain what war is like for an American or a non-American. The trauma hero can best layout a one-sided, introspective, biased narrative of lived experience. However, this experience will only represent one experience amid millions of lived experiences. This singular experience will never fully explain what war is like.

Gallagher ends the novel with an open end to the question, is it even possible to bridge the self/other divide? While this is not a hopeful ending that perpetuates the use of the trauma hero narrative, Gallagher suggests that the desire to bridge the self/other divide is possible, just not from a character portrayed as a soldier. Through his real-world lived experiences and profession Gallagher shows the reader that the work of unothering the non-American extends beyond soldier and civilian, scholar and novelist, and the novel's diegesis.

Brian Van Reet's, *Spoils*

While Gallagher's novel moves us closer to understanding American military veterans and the non-American people we go to war against, it is necessary to look to more than one text for these answers. Brian Van Reet's novel *Spoils* takes the next step in

understanding veterans and non-Americans by alternating the position of the narrative voice from the American perspective and the non-American perspective. Van Reet also disrupts traditional understandings of American veterans by changing the gender of characters whose tropes are typically embodied by men in American war fiction. This gender shift and narrative voice change allow the readers to see new and exciting representations of what it means to be a veteran and to read new possibilities of what it means to be another.

Minimal scholarship has been done that covers Van Reet's novel. However, the consensus of critical reviews of *Spoils* is that Van Reet's ability to weave together time, character, and events to show the unstoppable destructive nature of war is beyond reproach. While these critical reviews are accurate, the most interesting thing I found from *Spoils* is its ability to deconstruct real-world ideologies and demonstrate the possible outcomes when those ideologies collide. Van Reet creates a tripartite narrative structure following three clusters of characters from the close first-person perspective. Van Reet pulls the reader inside the characters' ideological perspectives and fictionalized characterization.

The first cluster of characters is a three-person crew in a High Mobility Multi Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) guarding a three-way road intersection. This cluster contains the primary main character, Specialist (SPC) Cassandra Wigheard, a young female soldier and the American protagonist of the novel. Van Reet's opening lines set the stage for how he wants the readers to view Cassandra for the rest of the novel. He writes, "She is the most dangerous thing around" (3). Van Reet immediately sets Cassandra as the Achilles in his narrative. Cassandra's characterization follows war

fiction's narrative structures typically assigned to male characters. Cassandra is portrayed as fearless, aggressive, and embodying a deep desire to find and kill the enemy. We learn that Cassandra is from a small homestead in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where she grew up poor in a family that seemed to be going nowhere. Looking for a different life, Cassandra enlists in the Army soon after high school "To train to fight, kill, prove, defy the small domestic compassions of kith and home" (37). It does not take much narrative space for her to act on these desires. Van Reet plunges Cassandra into her first combat in the first 20 pages of the novel. In this first contact with a nameless and faceless enemy, Cassandra is the only person in her unit to stay at her weapon and fight; all the other American soldiers leave their positions and hide behind a berm. Even after being wounded, Cassandra stays and fights before being forcefully pulled from her position by another soldier. Cassandra's actions mirror the real-world heroics of people like Medal of Honor recipients Audie Murphy and Paul Ray Smith, both men remaining behind on their vehicle-mounted weapons to allow other soldiers to find cover. Having Cassandra act in the same manner as real-world male Medal of Honor recipients, Van Reet lets the reader see new possibilities for female characters. He shows that female characters can embody hero tropes and behave in ways traditionally only characterized by male characters. While Cassandra is the main character and the voice for the action in her chapters, her cluster has two other characters.

The second character in Cassandra's cluster is her NCO, SGT McGinnis. Van Reet creates a middle-aged NCO who forgoes the easy middle-class American life of his upbringing and volunteers for the Army. He is described as a kind but undisciplined NCO who allows his soldiers to sleep on guard and seek comfort in physically uncomfortable

situations. SGT McGinnis' major quality is his empathy, but only towards characters, he identifies with. Cassandra describes him as a good man and a protector who tries his best to shield Cassandra from the incessant sexism and sexual assault in Van Reet's novel. While Cassandra appreciates his approach, she would prefer if he treated her precisely like any soldier, regardless of her sex. We can read SGT McGinnis as the gray man in the novel; he does little direct harm but is complicit in all the problems of the war and the sexism and sexual assault in the Army. SGT McGinnis hides from his complicity by invoking a mantra familiar to NCOs in war fiction; the ubiquitous "My main job in this thing is to bring us home safe. Everything I do, every decision I make, that's it" (47). This seemingly simple remark has serious connotations. This statement shields characters from their responsibilities. SGT McGinnis becomes a hero to his soldiers and American readers by invoking this mantra. However, his mantra creates cognitive distance between himself and all non-Americans in the text. By imagining that the only thing he is doing is protecting "his" American soldiers SGT McGinnis makes all non-American characters unknowable and thus ungrievable. The mantra does more than create cognitive distance; it places the Americans as defenders even when they are invaders. This logical shift to "I'm just protecting my friends" lets soldiers pretend they are not invading another country and lets them identify only with other Americans. It removes all responsibility for the lives of the non-American. This shift is the ultimate form of othering because it does not invoke racist, nationalist, or jingoistic language that is easy to recognize and guard against. This thought process hides in the polite, caring language of the white knight while doing just as much harm, if not more than the openly racist remarks common to othering and war fiction.

On the opposite side of the othering spectrum is the third member of Cassandra's cluster, Private (PVT) Crump. He is a character with little or no redeeming moral qualities. PVT Crump's dialogue is full of othering language. He is racist, jingoistic, and does not care about anything or anyone in Iraq. In a short conversation between Cassandra and PVT Crump, Van Reet clearly outlines who PVT Crump is and what his thoughts on the people of Iraq are. PVT Crump says:

I'm serious. Forget camping by this trash heap all fucking night in the wind and rain. Forget Humvees and dirt kids and moo-juh-huh-deens and all the rest of this shit. We got to start showing these hajjis who's boss. 'Oh, you wanna blow up the World Trade?' Errrr—wrong—nuke your ass. Tell you what. There's one thing that wins a fight. Punching harder than the other guy. (12)

PVT Crump is a character in whom we can see examples of American extremism. He is an extreme American exceptionalist; he is extremely aware of the Iraqi characters as non-American, extremely unaware of the impact of his actions, remarkably unaware of the realities of the global war on terror, and is extremely racist. PVT Crump's personification of American extremism is repeated repeatedly in *Spoils*. By portraying an American soldier in this way, Van Reet demonstrates the possibility that not all American soldiers are heroes and ensures that PVT Crump can never fit into the trauma hero mold. PVT Crump refuses to adjust his thinking or behaviors, remaining close-minded when offered alternative ways to view the world. His steadfastness toward a flawed thought process eventually leads to his death at the hands of the second cluster of characters in the novel.

The second cluster of characters in the novel contains the "others" for the American characters, two elder mujahadeen fighters and one young recruit. Van Reet

chooses the narrative voice to come from Abu Al-Hool or the Father of Dread when translated. Abu Al-Hool is an Egyptian-born mujahideen fighter who forsook his father's wealth and social status in Egypt to fight the Russians in Afghanistan, then the Russians in Chechnya, and now has journeyed to Iraq from Afghanistan to fight the Americans. We first see Abu Al-Hool in a training camp in Afghanistan prior to the 9/11 attacks. Here Abu Al-Hool is the leader of a small group of fighters from all over the world, training to fight and studying Islam. Van Reet never names their organization but does show the reader that Abu Al-Hool's organization is opposed to the Taliban and does not support Osama Bin Laden or Al-Qaeda. By separating Abu Al-Hool and his men from the real-world narrative of terrorism and the big names that many Americans know, he can show a picture of a mujahideen fighter that is less tainted by American media stereotypes, legends, and bias. Van Reet makes an interesting move with the characterization of Abu Al-Hool. He sets him up as an intelligent, purposeful, and thoughtful man with clear ethical lines grounded in philosophy, economics, and religious texts. Abu Al-Hool's characterization could be summarized as following tropes typically assigned to honorable American military officers. By portraying the "terrorist" in the text this way, Van Reet directly confronts the traditional stereotypes of the enemy. He allows readers to see the possibility that non-American characters in war fiction are not the embodiment of evil but humans with a full range of emotions and desires, like themselves.

Like Cassandra's cluster, Abu Al-Hool has accompanying characters that provide the reader with other examples of what mujahadeen fighters might be like. The first of these characters is Dr. Walid. Dr. Walid is another veteran of the wars in Afghanistan

against the Russians and of the Chechen wars. He embodies the typical tropes of what Americans would call a terrorist. He is vicious, calculated, power-driven, and sees no issues with using violence against innocents if it meets his goals.

Dr. Walid and Abu Al-Hool struggle for leadership of the other fighters, with Dr. Walid eventually taking control of the organization. The struggle between Dr. Walid and Abu Al-Hool creates a subplot in *Spoils* that is insightful in many ways. Van Reet's creation of an ununified organization splitting along ideological and methodological lines shows the reader a more profound and complex view of what "terrorists" or mujahedeen fighters are typically presented. Other framings for Arab fighters or mujahedeen fighters lack ideological depth and embody a singular purpose with no ideological splits or complications. They are generally depicted as lacking the humanistic qualities of empathy, hope, or love and are shown as blood-thirsty villains who, as former President Bush put it, hate us for our freedoms. Van Reet's creation shows the reader a possibility that those framings may not be truly representative of real-world mujahedeen organizations. This shift to complicated characterizations of the non-American characters hopefully problematizes many readers' biases of the evil villain tropes of terrorism. Van Reet also complicates the American exceptionalism seen in PVT Crump by creating complex antagonists. The characters Van Reet create have nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks; in fact, they oppose them. Van Reet's representation of the "terrorist" highlights the issues with America's understanding of the global war on terror by reframing the American as the invader and the Mujahadeen as the characters striving for freedom and fighting on the side of justice.

Another important character in this cluster in terms of understanding the non-American characters that America chooses to fight is Abu Hafs. Abu Hafs (Father of A Lion Cub) is a young mujahadeen fighter who traveled from his home in Yemen to join Abu Al-Hool's organization in Afghanistan. Abu Hafs is first portrayed as young and naive with no apparent reason for joining the mujahadeen other than he had nowhere else to go. Abu Hafs, while embodied as a terrorist and Yemeni national, is characterized similarly to the typical junior enlisted American soldier. There is no vital ideological purpose for serving in a fighting organization other than the economic need for a job and the social prestige of being a soldier. By creating Abu Hafs' underlying motivations that mirror the motivations of American soldiers, Van Reet narrows the distance between the non-American and the American. This portrayal may allow readers to see the enemy in the text as sharing the same type of precarity as Cassandra. Both characters are similar in that neither has good prospects in their life at home but seeks advancement economically and socially through military service. Cassandra and Abu Hafs share many similarities, which I will discuss later in this text.

The final cluster of characters in Van Reet's tripartite construction is narrated through the eyes of SPC Sled. Sled is a young American male soldier assigned as a tank crewman in a unit near Cassandra's. While Sled is not specifically essential to the story, he does provide an alternate view of how to view American soldiers. We have Cassandra, the purposeful soldier seeking to serve and fight on one side of the narrative. On the other, we have Sled. His characterization represents the average person in the military, unsure of their reasons for joining, unmotivated, and seemingly lost in the chaos of the war. SPC Sled and his fellow tank crew members embody the same "what is it

like" narrative that Gallagher uses in *Youngblood*. In SPC Slead's case, his actions in the novel show the readers an unheroic and unfavorable view of American behavior in Iraq. SPC Slead and his tank crew steal, ignore their responsibilities, are racist, they make decisions that get people killed. At their lowest point in the novel, they blindly follow questionable orders and murder an Iraqi family. Van Reet removes all the heroes from the trauma hero narrative in this cluster of characters. Nothing Slead and his crew do in the novel are heroic. It is all trauma for both Iraqi and American characters. Throughout the novel, Slead's inner monologue constantly battles with himself about his actions. He continually talks about what he will tell people at home about his actions in Iraq. In one monologue, SPC Slead openly ponders what he will say when someone asks him what it is like:

People always want to know what it feels like to do that, and when it's happening, the answer is simple, and usually disappointing like fear and adrenaline and not much else, like winning at Russian roulette and having the taste of gunmetal forever on your tongue because even if you win, you lose. The man with the green sash in Fallujah was the first and only person I ever killed that I'm sure about and meant to. The rest were accidents. Except you can't really call them that. They're not accidents. (224-225)

This monologue informs the reader that not all actions in war are hero building and that most of the stories told about a character's time in war are "disappointing". The use of the word disappointing by Van Reet is interesting; it implies that the receiver of war stories has high expectations that true war stories rarely live up to. Van Reet also problematizes American perspectives on Iraqi civilian deaths in this monologue. His

assertion that "They're not accidents" leaves the reader to assume they were murdered. Van Reet leaves this section open, letting the reader place their conclusion to what happened to the "other" people Sled killed. This opened-ended position is strikingly different from other narratives of civilian deaths. It is common in war fiction and real-world war reporting to downplay civilian murders or deaths by disguising them as "casualties" or "accidents". Instead of following that tradition, Van Reet breaks away and alludes to the death of civilians as something more than an accident but fails to complete the message by calling the deaths murders.

The remainder of the characters in SPC Sled's cluster serves a minor role in the storyline but offer quick snapshots of American bad behavior in Iraq. The first of these characters is SPC Sled's tank commander Galvan. Galvan is introduced in the first few pages of SPC Sled's first chapter titled Trophies. In this section, Galvan and the rest of the tank crew are more interested in bringing home war trophies to show their unborn grandchildren than their actual reasons for being in Iraq. Galvan and the crew go so far as to seek out taking pictures of dead Iraqi army soldiers to serve as placeholders for tangible items like Iraqi army bayonets or helmets. With the obvious Geneva Convention issues of taking photos of dead soldiers or collecting war trophies in general aside, Galvan's and the crew's obsession with collecting war trophies serves as a characterization and motivational tool for Van Reet. By creating American characters more interested in the material world of Iraq, the reader may see the similarities to traditional extractive colonialism or, at best, adventure tourism.

To a reader unfamiliar with extractive colonialism or the concepts of adventure tourism, the tank crew's general bad behavior allows the reader to see the other side of the

trauma hero narrative. The side generally not discussed that not all soldiers are heroes. Some are criminals taking advantage of their position of power to do more than physical harm to the Iraqi people. By bringing in the tank crew's criminal behavior, Van Reet can balance the narrative of the whole novel. The good in Cassandra vs. the bad of the tank crew with the gray of Al-Hool's in the middle.

Van Reet sets the stage for all three-character clusters to converge in a fictional Iraqi town named Triangletown. The town got its name from the Americans because it is at the center of a three-way intersection of major roads from Baghdad and Fallujah. Van Reet's metaphor of intersection allows the reader to converge his characters in physical combat and ideological discourse. The first of these intersections occurs during Cassandra's first combat experience. Most of the novel takes place following Cassandra's heroic stand, where she and the remainder of her HMMWV crew are captured by the Mujahadeen fighters and taken to an improvised prison. Here we can witness the intersection of ideologies between Cassandra and her crew and the Mujahadeen fighters.

In this section of the novel, Van Reet creates a dialogue between Cassandra, Dr. Walid, Abu Hafs, and a few other characters that are not germane to my research. The first example of a collision between the character clusters can be seen when Cassandra, the character most closely resembling a hero stereotype, is taken captive by the mujahadeen fighters and stripped of all her agency. This is an interesting move for Van Reet, taking the character whose traits typically drive a war narrative and stripping them of the one component they need to move the war story forward, her agency. The reader could assume that the novel will turn into a prisoner of war narrative with a dramatic rescue from American Special Operations soldiers or SEAL Team 6, but that reading

would be a mistake. In my reading, Van Reet uses Cassandra's captivity to explore how similar the captive soldiers are to the mujahadeen fighters. In terms of narrative construction, by placing the non-American, in the position of control over the American characters, Van Reet enables an inversion of typical American war narratives where the American is nearly always in control of their environment and leading the action in the storyline. Here, Van Reet's imprisonment of Cassandra, PVT Crump, and SGT McGinnis allows for direct dialogue between opposing characterizations, some hopeful and generative, others less so.

One of the most interesting interactions between the American soldiers and the Mujahadeen fighters is the growing relationship between Cassandra and Abu Hafs. While serving as one of the primary guards for Cassandra during her captivity, Abu Hafs opens up to Cassandra. Both characters reveal their desires outside the war zone and share an interest in practicing each other's language. Her captivity may taint Cassandra's motivations, but she willfully opts to read the Koran and practice her Arabic with Abu Hafs. While still part of war fiction, their conversations do not resemble traditional narratives of American soldiers in captivity. Cassandra and Abu Hafs are never seen as argumentative, hostile, or fearful of one another. Instead, Abu Hafs consistently tells Cassandra that she will be okay and does all he can to make sure she is comfortable and safe. At one point in the narrative, when Cassandra informs Abu Hafs that another of the mujahadeen fighters is sexually assaulting her, he sides with Cassandra. He then informs Dr. Walid, preventing further assaults. By having Abu Hafs take action to prevent sexual assault, Van Reet moves Abu Hafs morally and ethically above other American characters in the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, as Cassandra is in Kuwait preparing to invade Iraq, a female NCO is raped at gunpoint by an unknown American character. As gossip about the rape circulates through the pre-invasion base, Cassandra overhears two American soldiers discussing the rape. Their conversation is full of othering language to female soldiers, rife with victim-blaming and open doubting if the rape even happened. The soldiers show no interest in supporting the female NCO and assume she is fabricating the rape to get out of the upcoming invasion, questioning her courage because she is a woman. In contrast to the unnamed soldiers, Abu Haf's actions and attitude toward Cassandra fit into the model that Americans want to believe about American service members. American portrayals of soldiers often show strong male figures rescuing female characters. Here Van Reet inverts that narrative and shows the reader that being moral and ethical does not stop at the American border. It often does not exist inside the military. This example of Americans misbehaving complicates the support-the-troops narrative as well. Is it possible for Americans to be so reliant on the support-the-troops movement if the troops are portrayed as sexist and indifferent to sexual assaults? What does it mean that one of the villains in the text does more to prevent rape than American soldiers? Van Reet leaves the answers to the reader but offers more examples of how the non-American in the narrative complicates the bias of American exceptionalism.

Abu Haf's also extends religious support to Cassandra and offers to help her convert to Islam, which would completely unother Cassandra from the mujahadeen fighters and effectively make her one of their sisters. Abu Haf's is not alone in his attempts to unother his opposite. Cassandra actively moves to connect with Abu Haf's, possibly to save her own life, but she never says that is her motivation. In one critical

moment in her captivity, Abu Hafs grows so comfortable with Cassandra that he accidentally leaves his loaded rifle in her cell. Here Cassandra could have taken the traditional route of an American captive and tried to shoot her way out of her prison, rescue her friends, and be welcomed back to an American base to a hero's welcome. Instead, Cassandra uses Abu Hafs' mistake to further her human connection with him, allowing him to take back the rifle without telling anyone of his mistake and without trying to kill him. Van Reet's decision to break away from traditional narratives here lets the reader explore other options for Americans when faced with the possibility of killing non-American. Just because you might have the ability to kill someone does not mean you have to. It is likely not even the best option for a character. In a more nuanced way, Abu Hafs' comfort with Cassandra addresses Gallagher's notion that a soldier cannot connect with the non-American. Here Van Reet suggests that a soldier, regardless of nationality, may be able to bridge the gap but only through trust and communication from both sides of a conflict.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the discourse between Dr. Walid and PVT Crump. From the outset of the novel, PVT Crump and Dr. Walid are unyielding in their position to create an enemy of their opposites. Neither character's position changes once Dr. Walid and his men capture Cassandra's cluster. Once PVT Crump realizes he is in captivity, he self-implodes, his position as the superior American has been dismantled, and he distances himself from Cassandra and SGT McGinnis. PVT Crump continues to attempt to fight the mujahadeen fighters, slams himself against his cell door, and screams at Dr. Walid and the other fighters to kill him already. His self-made identity as superior and exceptional cannot cope with the idea that he is not in the power position and would

rather die than connect with their opposite and discover what is required of him to survive. Van Reet's creation of PVT Crump as an unmoving American exceptionalist and racist leaves no room for him to further advance the character, and nearly all the dialogue from PVT Crump is cut off. We learn later that Dr. Walid has ordered and filmed the beheading of PVT Crump and sent the video to news agencies for release for propaganda purposes.

In traditional American war narratives, PVT Crump's behavior as stalwart and unmoving is praised and typically leads to the soldier's survival over that of characters who attempt to connect with their captors. By ending PVT Crump's storyline, Van Reet confronts traditional American war narratives. By doing so, he shows the reader a different possible outcome for characters who insist on creating their identity as oppositional to their opposite. Van Reet suggests that death is the only place to take a character who embodies this identity and that while it may seem heroic, it is juvenile and obtuse. PVT Crump lacks the depth of character, not moral courage. The storyline may justify his indignation towards Dr. Walid; he was wounded and captured by a declared enemy. However, remaining stalwart in his hatred did not get him back to America as a hero. Instead, he is now used as a propaganda piece for anti-American forces.

Van Reet follows a similar character model for Dr. Walid, albeit from a more educated and informed position. Dr. Walid is a European-trained medical doctor who initially joined the mujahadeen in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation as a noncombatant. He helped the wounded and injured Afghans before participating in combat and medical care. While like PVT Crump in his unwillingness to bridge the self/other divide, Dr. Walid's characterization is dissimilar in that he is calculated in his

viciousness toward the American characters. Dr. Walid uses his medical skills to first treat the American's wounds from the initial combat before murdering PVT Crump for propaganda purposes. While Dr. Walid's viciousness mirrors that of a traditional terrorist, his characterization as highly educated complicates that characterization. In many American war narratives, the terrorist or enemy is an uneducated villain who does not understand how good America is or has a vendetta against a specific American character that drives the narrative. It is unusual to have a terrorist portrayed with so much clarity of purpose, with clear ideological convictions that they are willing to kill for. By creating a highly educated and intelligent villain, Van Reet complicates the terrorist model of characterization for the American reader. Dr. Walid is not someone who hates us for our freedom. His motivations are far more complicated than that.

Van Reet shows the full spectrum of othering by creating two strikingly different character interactions. Cassandra and Abu Hafs and Dr. Walid and PVT Crump, from both sides of the ideological perspectives. That is to say, from the American perspective and the mujahadeen fighters' perspective. Van Reet's work enables American readers to see how American othering of the mujahadeen operates and functions and see what it is like to be othered by the mujahadeen fighters.

Phil Klay's Redeployment

The final works that I think are helpful when attempting to understand American veterans and the non-Americans we choose to fight is Phil Klay's 2014 collection of short stories *Redeployment*, winner of the 2014 National Book Award for Fiction. In this collection, Klay creates interesting characterizations of American military veterans and does excellent work explaining to the reader "what it is like" for veterans in combat, in

non-combat military jobs, and once they return home. Klay's characters are generally depicted in the close first-person, detailing their experiences and thoughts in vivid detail. Critics have approached *Redeployment* in numerous ways. For example, Lucas Thompson, in his article "PsyOps Works Best When You Mean It": Literary Manipulation in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*" suggests that Klay is attempting to show the linguistic manipulation in contemporary war narration. Thompson also suggests that Klay offers the reader examples of how veterans manipulate stories through lying and self-embellishment.

Similarly, in her article "Thank You for Your Service: Negotiating the Civilian-Military Divide in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*" Allyson Booth argues that Klay's stories disrupt the common American social phrase "thank you for your service" by showing the complex and differentiated experiences unique to individual service members. Following in line with Booth and Thompson, I see Klay's work as a creation that allows readers to break down their bias and stereotypes of service members and non-Americans by demonstrating what traditional veteran stereotypes look like and how they do not fit into all narratives. Additionally, I see *Redeployment* as an example of how to approach telling war stories that more closely approach the realities of the global war on terror and the individual experiences of service members who served in the wars.

The first of Klay's stories that may offer insight into understanding veterans is "War Stories". This narrative follows two former Marines discussing how to approach telling their war stories. To work through this issue, Klay gives us four characters. The first character and the center of the narrative is Jenks, a wounded male Marine with severe burn scars over most of his body, disfiguring his face. The second character is the

unnamed narrator, a non-wounded male former Marine who served with Jenks when he was wounded. The next character is Jessie, a wounded former female Marine accompanied by Sarah, her nonveteran friend who wants to meet and interview Jenks. The four characters meet in a bar under the auspice of Sarah interviewing Jenks for research about a play covering the Global War on Terror.

Klay begins the narrative with Jenks and the unnamed narrator sitting at a bar discussing the value their war stories give them socially; they settle that their value is only for impressing drunk women in bars near closing time. This short piece of dialogue reads exactly like idle small talk. However, this conclusion offers the reader a deep understanding of what Klay thinks the value of war stories is to the general American civilian. While it may seem strange to read that type of conclusion from a veteran author inside a short story titled *War Stories*, what Klay is doing is framing relationships between veterans and American civilians. Klay envisions this relationship as exchange-based. Service members go to war and come back with stories that have some value, depending on the setting and quality of the story, to the civilian. The civilian recipient of the war story gives something back to the veteran, ranging from catharsis, a book deal, or as the first conversation in the story alludes to sex.

Sarah and Jessie arrive following this short introductory dialogue between Jenks and the narrator. Sarah explains to Jenks that she wants to use his war story to help her write a play for an organization called "veterans against the war". Sarah continues that his story will be used to tell people what the war is really like. Here we see Klay's exchange-based relationship between the veteran character Jenks and the civilian Sarah. This time we see the civilian using the "what is it like to go to war" question for a political or

ideological purpose. Sarah wants to use Jenks story, his war trauma, to convince other civilians not to support the war. In this way, Jenks and his wounds become the other, a value-based commodity for civilian use. Although it is possible that Jenks does not see the relationship this way or has no issue with this type of relationship, Klay offers no insight from Jenks on the issue. Jenks begins to tell his story by pulling out sheets of paper.

Through the narrator, we learn that Jenks has been formulating his narrative of his wartime wounds for several years, piecing together fragmented memories with stories from other marines who were there, his medical providers, and his family. By having Jenks write out his story and explaining the problems with remembering war stories, Klay can show the reader how many war stories are problematic near fabrications, objects of disconnected traumatic memory, and frequently inaccurate representations of reality. Klay spends a large section of the short story explaining the problems with war stories, primarily through stories relating to combat wounds. Klay details the speed at which war wounds happen, the neurological response, and the medications fragmenting the memory of the wounded service member. Jenks begins his narrative by describing the process of remembering and then writing his experiences:

He'd remember the IED better than I would" Jenks says, looking at me. I look at Sarah and know for a certified fact I'm not telling this girl shit. "I can't even tell you that much after" he continues. "Scraps and pieces, at best. I've been working for a long time to put them together". He taps the paper but doesn't unfold it. I know what's in there. I've read it. I've read the draft before and the draft before that.

"I know I was in a lot of pain" Jenks says. "Pain like you can't imagine. But pain like I can't imagine either, because—he reaches up and rubs a hand over his fucked-up scalp—a lot of the memories are gone. Nothing. Like, system overload. Which is okay. I don't need the memories. Plus, they had me on a cycle of morphine, an epidural drip, IV Dilaudid, Versed. (223-224)

Even with framing his story in this way, Sarah, whom we assume is looking for a true war story, pushes Jenks to continue by asking Jenks to describe the first thing he remembers about the attack that wounded him. Jenks is not trying to tell a combat story. He attempts to explain to Sarah what it is really like, not combat but the lived experience of being wounded. Here Klay shows another tension in the veteran/civilian exchange-based relationship. Sarah wants an emotionally catching movie story with an unforgettable action sequence for the opening scene. Jenks wants or needs to tell a version of the truth as close to reality as he can. Jenks ignores Sarah's plea for violence and action and answers her question by saying the first thing he remembers is seeing his family in the hospital after being evacuated back to America. This is an unacceptable answer for Sarah, and she attempts to take the pages from Jenks to read for herself, feeling that she is not getting the story she expected from Jenks. Klay again shows the civilian vs. veteran tension. Sarah wants Jenks to get to the "good" parts of his story that she assumes he has. The action movie fight scenes and dramatic helicopter rescue missions. The narrative she is seeking does not match the reality of Jenks' story. Klay repeats this insistence from Sarah a few more times in the narrative, where Sarah interrupts Jenks telling his story with leading questions seeking the stereotypical war story. She asks, "Do you remember the explosion itself?" (225) and even attempts to

convince the narrator to move the story in the direction she wants by asking, "What do you remember?" Sarah turns to me. So does Jessie. "Do you remember screaming?" (226). Sarah's insistence that Jenks' story fit into the stereotypes does not stop with the combat story; she wants Jenks to be a trauma hero.

Jenks, seeing that Sarah is not paying much attention to his actual lived experience and keeps pushing him to jump around to the "good parts" attempts to convince Sarah to listen to his story by offering:

"It helps to put things in order," Jenks says, one palm resting on his paper.

"Helps with what?" Sarah says.

Jenks shrugs. He has been doing that a lot. "Nightmares," he says. "Weird reactions when you hear something, smell something."

"PTSD," she says.

"No," Jenks says matter-of-factly. "Explosions don't startle me. I'm all good. Fireworks, light and sound, it's all fine. Everybody thought the Fourth of July would freak me out, but it doesn't unless there are too many smells. And I don't lose it or anything. Just . . . weird reactions."

"So you try to remember—"

"This way, it's me remembering what happened," Jenks says. "I'd rather that than be walking down the street and I smell something and the day remembers itself for me."

"PTSD," she says.

"No," he says, his voice sharp, "I'm fine. Who wouldn't have a few weird reactions? It doesn't mess with my life" (226-227).

Again, we see Sarah attempting to manipulate Jenks' narrative to fit into the trauma hero narrative. She wants Jenks to play the wounded hero destroyed by his physical wounds and unseen mental wounds. However, Jenks remains focused on telling his story in the best way possible and offers his sincere perspective on his life:

Whether I'm a poor, disfigured vet who got exactly what he volunteered for... or the luckiest man on earth, surrounded by love and care at what is unquestionably the worst period of my life, is really a matter of perspective. There's no upside to bitterness, so why be bitter? Perhaps I've sacrificed more for my country than most, but I've sacrificed far, far less than some. I have good friends. I have all my limbs. I have my brain and my soul and hope for the future. What sort of fool would I have to be, to not accept these gifts with the joy they deserve? (230)

Hearing this, Sarah barely registers Jenks' statement of truth and responds, "Okay, great. . . So you get back, your family is there. You can't talk. You're happy to be alive. But you've got fifty-four surgeries ahead of you, right? Can you take me through those?" (230). Again, Klay shows the reader an example of the exchange-based relationship between veterans and civilians; this is not the kind of story Sarah needs for her narrative to succeed. Instead, she needs drama, trauma, and stereotypes to convince her audience of her political and ideological goals. With this final flippant remark from Sarah, the unnamed narrator interjects and recommends that they all take a break from the storytelling and go outside.

Klay ends the veteran to civilian storytelling section here and begins another veteran-to-veteran discussion of war stories dialogue. Here Jessie and the narrator discuss the various social, political, and ethical impacts of veterans telling war stories. Their

ideas range from their experiences turning into propaganda convincing other people to fight, increasing esprit de corps for currently serving service members, and as a simple tool to show the public the truth behind the propaganda. Focusing most of their discussion on the last point, Jessie tells a story that her grandfather, who served in Korea, told her about how to tell a true war story. She explains that:

And last Thanksgiving we were talking with my grandpa about how nobody remembers Korea, and he said the only way to do it right wasn't to do a film about the war. Do a film about a kid, growing up. About the girl he falls in love with and breaks his heart and how he joins the Army after World War Two. Then he starts a family and his first kid is born, and it teaches him what it means to value life and to have something to live for and how to care for other people. And then Korea happens and he's sent over there and he's excited and scared and he wonders if he'll be courageous and he's kind of proud and then in the last sixty seconds of the film they put them in boats to go to Inchon and he's shot in the water and drowns in three feet of surf and the movie doesn't even give him a close-up, it just ends. That'd be a war film. (234)

This dramatic shift in representation of war stories completely deconstructs the self/other divide of the Jenks and Sarah narrative. It also removes the value-based relationship between veterans and civilians. Here Klay offers a humanistic way to tell a war story by showing what is lost by what was built and taken away instead of telling a war story set in the war. By showing less trauma, the reader experiences the loss by connecting with the soldier on a human level instead of connecting with the soldier on a sympathetic level. In this way, Klay shows the reader a new and possibly more hopeful

way for a civilian to interact with a veteran and a better way for veterans to tell their war stories. Klay suggests that as tellers of war stories, veterans can show their humanity more than just identifying as victims of combat trauma, full of the same complexities as every other person. Klay also offers a new way for readers to receive war stories. Instead of asking to see the trauma, seek to see the human as something like yourself, seek to know the people who choose to fight and what they fight for, not what the fights were like.

Klay offers another perspective on American veterans and the non-American in the short story "After Action Report". In contrast to the previous short story where Klay focuses on veteran interactions with civilians in "After Action Report", Klay brings the focus of the narration back into a combat Marine's perspective. In this case, we follow two military police Marines: Ozzie, the narrator, and his friend and fellow Marine, Timhead. While there are several interesting aspects of character development and styles of telling war stories, I am most interested in how Klay creates two characters attempting to empathize with Iraqi civilians. In this short story, Timhead and Ozzie's vehicle is struck by an improvised explosive device (IED) and in the confusion of the blast, an Iraqi boy of about 14 years old attempts but fails to shoot Timhead and Ozzie. In response, Timhead shoots and kills the boy. This is a tragedy without question, and Klay shows the reader the grief of the event through Timhead's response. Instead of the bravado and chest-thumping typical of killing in traditional war fiction, Timhead's first response is to shout no, grieve, and regret being forced to kill the Iraqi child. His actions shake Timhead; he asks Ozzie to tell everyone in his unit that he did it instead of Timhead. Ozzie reluctantly accepts, and in the rest of the narrative, we follow Ozzie attempting to

understand why Timhead does not want everyone to know he killed the boy. Despite initial direct questioning from Ozzie, Timhead remains laconic about the incident, and the two pass the time avoiding further conversation about it.

Refusing to let it go, Ozzie embraces what he thinks Timhead must be feeling and embodies the story as if it were his own. He goes so far as to tell the unit Chaplain about the incident hoping that the Chaplain will help him empathize with Timhead. Later in the narration, after Ozzie may have killed two Iraqi insurgents placing an IED, Timhead opens up about the realities of his emotions towards the killing of the Iraqi boy. Timhead explains to Ozzie that:

“For me,” he said, "it's not that I killed a guy."

"Yeah?"

"It's like, his family was there. Right there."

"I know, man."

"Brothers and sisters in the window."

I didn't remember them. I'd seen all sorts of people around, eyes out of windows.

But I hadn't focused in."

“They saw me,” he said. "There was a little girl, like nine years old. I got a kid sister."

I definitely didn't remember that. I thought maybe Timhead had imagined it. I

said, "It's a fucked-up country, man."

“Yeah,” he said (47-48).

Through this conversation between Ozzie and Timhead, we see that Timhead is not displacing his guilt as Holstun suggests but empathizing with the Iraqi people.

Timhead seems unconcerned with the Iraqi attempting to kill him. He is much more concerned with the impact of his actions on the rest of the Iraqi boy's family. Timhead's position of empathy towards the family of a person who tried to kill him shows the readers another way to view the non-American. Klay's creation of a character who can be both a combat Marine and empathetic to the emotions of the enemy and his family show strong contrast to traditional war narratives where the soldier hates the enemy and only wants to finish the job and get back to America. Timhead's perspective is further solidified by the opposing position depicted in a conversation between Ozzie and Timhead's NCO, known only as Staff Sergeant.

After Timhead reveals his empathy for the Iraqi people, Ozzie seeks to understand how a seasoned combat Marine copes with issues like these. Still unsure of how to handle the killing, Ozzie goes to speak with Staff Sergeant. In this interaction, Klay shows the reader the opposite of empathy for the non-American. Klay's narrative builds Staff Sergeant following similarly flawed logic as Gallagher's SSG Chambers in *Youngblood* and SGT McGinnis in *Spoils*. While SGT McGinnis masked his responsibility for the horrible nature of war behind the mantra "I'm just looking out for my soldiers" Klay's Staff Sergeant chooses not to hide but instead downplayed the problems of the war and normalized the suffering of the Iraqi people. In his eyes, they are accustomed to the horrors at this point of the war. When Ozzie tells Staff Sergeant about Timhead's empathy, Staff Sergeant replies, "this might not even be the most fucked-up thing she's seen" (49). Staff Sergeant amplifies the othering language even more by downplaying the killing of her brother to just a typical day for her:

Look, this isn't even the wildest Fallujah's been. Al-Qaeda used to leave bodies in the street, cut off people's fingers for smoking. They ran torture houses in every district, all kinds of crazy shit, and you don't think the kids see? When I was a kid, I knew about all the shit that was going on in my neighborhood. When I was ten this one guy raped a girl and the girl's brother was in a gang and they spread him out over the hood of a car and cut his balls off. That's what my brother said, anyway. It was all we talked about that summer. And Fallujah's way crazier than Newark. . . . Shit. There's explosions in this city every fucking day. There are firefights in this city every fucking day. That's her home. That's in the streets where she plays. This girl is probably fucked up in ways we can't even imagine. She's not your sister. She's just not. She's seen it before. (49-50)

While Staff Sergeant may be saying this to try and make his soldier feel better, the language moves Ozzie and himself further away from Butler's concept of grievability by creating a false reality for the Iraqi people. As if they feel no pain and that death and the destruction of their city and lives is something a person can grow accustomed to. For Klay, this othering position serves two functions. First, it moves Ozzie further from seeing Iraqi people as human and doing his job guilt-free. Second, it allows Staff Sergeant to see the work he is doing as less destructive than what Al-Qaeda did and therefore justify any actions he or his soldiers make.

Conclusion

While these texts offer the reader new or diverse ways to view American veterans and the non-American when read together, these three texts show a more complex way to view veterans and the non-American. Gallagher shows us a trauma hero trying but failing

to understand the non-American. Van Reet inverts traditional narrative structures to show the reader new ways to view the non-American and the veteran. Finally, Klay details how American civilians often view and treat veterans after returning from Iraq. Looking at the diverse types of characterization in these three works, we can see how single characterizations fail to answer the "what is it like" question. These texts also attempt to answer a more profound, more meaningful question; what does it mean to be American? These authors show the reader that the non-Americans we choose to fight are not the stereotypes of the evil terrorist; they are not objects for American manipulation or steppingstones for the American soldier's enlightenment and character progression. Instead, we can see the non-American through a more meaningful lens. The non-American is now another human with differing ideological, political, or religious practices, but all seek to find stable, safe ground to live their lives. We can see the humanity in Abu Hafs, seeking a lifestyle not different from the "American Dream" an education, a safe home, and a family. We can also see the flaws in our collective humanity through Abu Al-Hool's, placing one idea above another's to the point that it requires both your death and the death of people with different ideas.

Gallagher and Van Reet create characters deeply embedded in their military identity but seeking something other than war. LT Porter comes to Iraq seeking understanding and social empowerment; Van Reet's Abu Hafs joins the mujahadeen seeking a better material life outside of Yemen and stable and safe family life. Gallagher shows us how American readers can approach attempting to understand the non-American through LT Porter. However, if we pair LT Porter with Van Reet's Abu Hafs instead of SSG Chambers, we can read a more complete attempt at understanding the

non-American. If a reader could imagine what would happen if LT Porter were to meet Abu Hafs in Iraq instead of SSG Chambers, the reader may be able to bridge the self/other divide and connect with the Iraqi character in more meaningful ways. As Gallagher suggests, it may be too optimistic to assume that any two combatant characters can escape their identity as warriors in a combat zone. However, it is at least interesting to think through what possibilities open when we pair two characters seeking peace and understanding from opposite combatant positions. For example, what kinds of humanistic understanding would the pairing of LT Porter and Abu Hafs create? Pairing these two characters together into a text may allow the reader to know the non-American as more than an enemy combatant but as an individual seeking life. The reader can ask what the war is like for an Iraqi instead of what is it like for an American soldier. This inversion of questioning is a critical step in bridging the self/other divide.

Another interesting pairing of characters from different texts that help Americans understand US veterans and the non-American we fight may be PVT Crump and Jenks. While all three texts show both the heroic and the racist in American soldiers, none of the texts bluntly confront how American civilians approach a racist or jingoistic American veteran who has returned from the war. An interesting example of this pairing could be removing the trauma hero from Klay's short story *War Stories* and replacing Jenks with a character like PVT Crump. This pairing of characters and storyline creates problems for the American overreliance on the support-the-troops movement. PVT Crump's racism, jingoism, and American exceptionalism do not fit into the support-the-troops narrative where all service members are heroes, and he does not fit into the trauma hero narrative. PVT Crump's beliefs prevent many American readers from empathizing with veterans

and may even drive more meaningful questions about the use of the military. What kind of questions would the American reader arrive at if, for example, PVT Crump tells Sarah how the "backwards dirt people" should just be nuked instead of Jenks explaining to her the aftermath of a combat wound? This type of narration may create a thoughtful conversation between PVT Crump and the interviewer that attempts to get the reader to see the errors in his thinking and empathize with the Iraqi people instead of PVT Crump.

With these pairings, we are still left with questions. What do we do with characters like Dr. Walid and SSG Chambers? Is there an optimistic approach to understanding by reading characters who are pushed so far into the category of the other that they are irredeemable? One way to approach these characterizations is to know and understand that these irredeemable characters provide space for more open characterizations. It is challenging to create a Cassandra without a Dr. Walid. It is also challenging to do the inverse. It is not easy to create a SSG Chambers without a LT Porter. The juxtaposition of the more extreme characters helps the hopeful protagonists advance into the more humanistic ground by confronting their positions against the extremes on the other side. That is not to say that extremism is required for a protagonist's advancement. I intend to say here that in the setting of war fiction, it is difficult for an author to create a protagonist who can move to understanding while being a combatant if there is no antagonist to position themselves against. It would be difficult to position Cassandra as an example of a non-trauma heroine without Dr. Walid pushing her to extremes in captivity. It would also be challenging to move LT Porter through the trauma hero narrative without the history of Ashuriyah embedded in SSG Chambers.

Another valuable aspect of the irredeemable characters in this corpus is their ability to show the reader the harm of racist, jingoistic, and nationalistic language. Take, for example, PVT Crump's extremism. This characterization offers insight into the darker side of American veteran characterizations that do not fit into the trauma hero narrative or the support-the-troops movement. These depictions of veterans allow the reader to detach their support from the American perspective and empathize with the non-American characters in the narrative. For example, PVT Crump's dialogue with a young Iraqi boy named Haider. In their interaction, PVT Crump describes Iraqi children as "Little mutant fucktard, fucking dirt kid—you're the only Ali Baba around here" (90), and "Little bastard might be a spy for al-Qaeda or some shit. Can't trust these dirt kids for nothing" (88). PVT Crump's language toward Haider and to Iraqi people generally is vicious and unacceptable, especially in the setting where Haider is risking his life and the lives of his family to warn the Americans about a possible ambush. There is nowhere for the reader to go here besides empathize with Haider and move away from connecting with PVT Crump. Van Reet's use of racism and American exceptionalism inverts the traditional goal of American exceptionalism. He pulls the reader away from nationalism and towards understanding and empathy towards the non-American.

By reading collections of veteran-authored Iraq war texts together, we can move closer to understanding American war veterans and the non-Americans we choose to fight. We can also see optimistic possibilities for understanding American service members and non-American by reading war fiction. Additionally, these texts move us closer to bridging the self/other divide by paring characterizations from different texts to see depictions of people from more than one narrative and thematic position.

While this is a limited cross-section of the growing canon of Iraq War fiction when read together, these texts display the American veterans' attempt to cross the self/other divide and to empathize and connect with the non-American. All three texts recognize the non-American as a grievable being, something of value, like themselves. Together these works force the readers to approach new ways of understanding the non-American and the American veteran. In short, these works expose the problems of traditional othering language common to American war fiction and seek new ways to understand what it means to be an American veteran and new ways for American civilians to understand the "enemy".

It can be argued that examining American and Iraqi characterizations from only American veteran authors' perspectives is problematic because it does not allow the non-American to speak for themselves. However, this study shows that American veteran authors are attempting to move beyond approaches that use the trauma hero narratives, othering language, and the traditional stereotypes of American war fiction. The next step for this study of unothering the non-American must include texts from the people of Iraq, adding their voices to the dialogue. Texts such as Hasan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition*, Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, or the poetry collection by Iraqi authors *Flowers of Flame Unheard Voices of Iraq*. Adding these texts and other texts by Iraqi writers to a study of the people America goes to war against and of American veterans would broaden the scope and perspective of the research and possibly offer new insights on veteran characterizations. While Gallagher, Klay, and Van Reet's texts challenge the characterizations common in American war fiction, specifically the concept of American exceptionalism seen through the lens of the support-the-troops movement and trauma

hero narratives, more authors must use their approach if we are to see any substantive change in America's discourse on warfare and othering.

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