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Gender and Trauma from World War I to the War in Iraq:
Narrative in the Aftermath of Loss

by

Jenny Kijowski

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

Gender and Trauma from World War I to the War in Iraq:

Narrative in the Aftermath of Loss

by

Jenny Kijowski

Director: Professor Nancy K. Miller

Trauma Studies is predicated on the idea of unspeakability: events that are experienced as deep psychic wounds break the frameworks for understanding, resulting in an inability to translate the experience into language. Scholars who study the literature of trauma are thus faced with this central paradox: how do writers speak the unspeakable? Trauma literature is generally regarded as texts that not only are thematically centered on a traumatic event or series of traumatic events, but also structurally reflect the symptoms of trauma. Thus the formal qualities of trauma narratives include fragmentation, contradiction, repetition, circularity, and intrusion, such that these texts come to embody trauma itself. The structure, then, does some of the work of silently speaking traumatic aftermath.

What is missing from most analytical approaches to trauma literature, however, is a consideration of how subject positions contribute to traumatic experience. Issues of gender, race, sexuality, class, and other culturally constructed categories of identity—factors that are critical to the politics of speaking and silencing—have been suppressed in favor of a unifying and universal theory of trauma. Gender, in particular, is a key element not only in what kinds of trauma one might be vulnerable to, but in the very notion of trauma itself. This dissertation examines the historical development of trauma and PTSD in conjunction with shifting notions of gender in

order to construct a framework with which to analyze the literature of trauma. With a focus on war narratives, this dissertation investigates how gender roles position subjects as victims of trauma, how gender ideology influences the ways in which trauma is internalized, how gender norms determine the ways in which trauma is externalized in narrative, and how the subject's gendered identity is produced through traumatic experience. Thus, this project's investigation will go beyond an examination of the similarities and differences between men's and women's stories, in order to analyze the role of gender difference in the very *process* of bearing witness.

The texts selected for this investigation represent some of the major wars of the 20th and 21st centuries, wars that also ushered in radical changes in the ways that gender has been configured. Beginning with World War I and the emergence of shell shock, I begin my analysis with Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. From there, I examine Elie Wiesel's *Day*, the third and final installment of his Holocaust trilogy. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is the central text for my analysis of Vietnam War literature. For my final chapter, I examine two works written by female veterans of the war in Iraq: *Love My Rifle More Than You* by Kayla Williams and *Shade It Black* by Jess Goodell. These works are just a few examples of texts in which gender and trauma work with and against each other in the task of speaking the unspeakable.

This dissertation is dedicated to
Nico and Luca, who make everything possible.

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Introduction

At length, resolv'd, his shining steel he drew,
 And struck the tree, when (dreadful to his view!)
 The wounded bark a sanguine current shed,
 And stain'd the grassy turf with streaming red.
 With horror chill'd, yet fix'd th' event to know,
 Again his arm renew'd the forceful blow:
 When from the trunk was heard a human groan,
 And plaintive accents in a female tone.

Too much on me before thy rage was bent,
 O! cruel Tancred! cease—at last relent!
 By thee from life's delightful seat I fell,
 Driven from the breast where once I us'd to dwell.
 Why do'st thou still pursue with ruthless hate,
 This trunk, to which I now am fix'd by fate?
 Ah! cruel!—shall not death th' unhappy save?
 And would'st thou reach thy foes within the grave?
 Clorinda once was I!

—Torquato Tasso

In the introduction to *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth recalls Freud's invocation of the 16th-century story of Tancred, a Crusader who accidentally kills his beloved Clorinda. Later, lashing out at a tree that, unbeknownst to Tancred, imprisons Clorinda's soul, he hears her cry out from the wound. The tree begins to bleed, and Tancred discovers, to his horror, that he has slain his beloved again. Freud evokes Torquato Tasso's story in order to illustrate how even "normal," mentally healthy people are compelled to compulsively reenact painful events. But as Ruth Leys points out in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Caruth appropriates Freud's use of the Tancred story in order to illustrate *traumatic* reenactment. Caruth is specifically interested in the voice that cries out from the wound:

Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries out to him to see what he has done. The voice of his beloved addresses him and,

in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as *the enigma of the otherness* of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.

(2-3, my emphasis)

For Caruth, Tasso's story is a parable for how we come to know trauma: that is, belatedly, through compulsory reenactments, through the haunting voice of its wounded victims.

What will be most relevant to this dissertation, however, is "the enigma of the otherness," an evocative and puzzling phrase that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It can refer to what Caruth calls the "unassimilated nature" (4) of trauma, the way the event remains externalized outside of the self, held apart from one's personal history. Caruth herself offers two ways to understand "the voice of the other": one way is to understand it as "the other within the self" (8) still crying out from the past; alternatively, it can refer to "the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8).¹ There is an entirely different reading of "the enigma of the otherness," however, that Caruth fails to address, one that takes into consideration the crucial play of gender in war narratives such as Tasso's epic poem.

Leys' critique of Caruth's interpretation of the Tasso story reveals the many discrepancies contained in her reading, including the fact that "the gender implications of her analysis remain unexplored" (296). Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, rightly questions Caruth's identification of Tancred as, at different times, perpetrator, victim, and

¹ Caruth pursues this interpretation further in her chapter on *Hiroshima mon amour*.

audience, without addressing the complexity of these unstable positions within the parable (182). Yet what is clear is that between Tancred and Clorinda, it is Tancred who is established by Caruth as the traumatized one. He is identified as the victim because his knowledge of the traumatic event is belated, hinging on his unwitting reenactment of his original trauma (that of killing his lover), behavior that adheres to Caruth's description of the traumatic process. Clorinda, meanwhile, is relegated to an abstraction, a voice whose poignancy lies less in its expression of its own status as victim, and more in its articulation of Tancred's horror when he discovers what he has done.² *Her* wound, in other words, speaks *his* loss. Moreover, the sexual imagery of Tancred penetrating the tree with his sword, leaving behind a bleeding female wound, suggests his phallic empowerment through her articulation of his pain. Indeed, it is only by wounding her that Tancred is finally able to tell his own narrative of loss: "The warrior, thus subdu'd, no longer strove, / But left th' attempt, and issu'd from the grove. / His sword regaining, to the chief he came, / And thus at length began his tale to frame" (XIII.335-338). Tancred finds his voice through violent communion with a feminized body, which confirms his possession of the phallus ("His sword regaining") and his mastery over language.

The gendered aspects of this story make sense in light of Jurij Lotman's theory of plot typology, in which "characters can be divided into those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space, and those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space" (176). In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis reads Lotman's typology in terms of binary gender, arguing that the questing hero is necessarily male:

² Clorinda, moreover, was killed in combat while masquerading as a male soldier, which can be read as punishment for transgressing gendered boundaries.

the obstacle, whatever its personification (sphinx or dragon, sorceress or villain), is morphologically female—and indeed, simply, the womb, the earth, the space of his movement. As he crosses the boundary and “penetrates” the other space, the mythical subject is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. (43)

According to this plot typology, Tancred is the mobile male hero, while Clorinda is a function of the space through which he moves, an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve masculine authority. It is only after penetrating Clorinda, who has literally been transformed into an element of space, that Tancred is equipped with language, through which he becomes “the active principle of culture.”

Gender, it turns out, is a critical component in the configuration of many trauma narratives, where the questing hero (not always male)³ searches for authority in the form of resolution, or at least comprehension of one’s experience. Just as Clorinda provides both the source of original trauma and the means through which Tancred is equipped with the language to speak about his trauma, so characters are often deployed in trauma stories for their symbolic value, a value that resides in their gendered bodies. In such trauma narratives, gender becomes a literary device, a means to an end, a way to achieve meaning out of chaos.

This dissertation investigates similarly gendered structures of traumatic articulation, which, I argue, have been present in Western war narratives since at least the Great War.

³ de Lauretis’s argument that the questing hero is always-already male, and that narrative is implicitly constructed along a binary gender configuration, is too rigid and universalizing, leaving little room for agency, subversion and multiple subject positions. As an example, Joseph Allen Boone, in *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*, convincingly argues that the older daughter Louie in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* “has become a quester par excellence, replacing Oedipus’s anxieties—the male origin of narrativity—with the pleasures of female narratability” (347).

Sometimes involving the deployment of female archetypes to embody male trauma, other times involving the articulation of trauma through gendered language, the stories I investigate use gendered bodies as mediators of narratives that are otherwise incomprehensible and unspeakable. Thus, this project's investigation will go beyond an examination of the similarities and differences between men's and women's stories, in order to analyze the role of gender difference in the very *process* of bearing witness. What role(s), in other words, do gendered bodies play in the telling of a traumatic story? What sanctioned forms of telling are available to the gendered subject? And how is the subject's gendered identity informed by traumatic experience?

A History of Trauma and Gender

The history of trauma in the West can be divided into five main eras, beginning with the rise of psychoanalysis, continuing through World War I, World War II, the Vietnam War and the women's rights movement, and ending in our current trauma-saturated culture. Trauma discourse has thus moved from the specialized realm of mental health out to the general population, having become a common feature of contemporary literature, film, television, and other cultural products. Recently, scholars and psychologists alike have begun to consider the role of gender in both trauma narratives and in the diagnosis, symptomology and treatment of what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. However, a survey of the history of trauma reveals that gender has been a critical factor in the development of trauma theories from the very beginning.

The terms "trauma" and "gender" have gone hand-in-hand since the 19th century, when Freud and his contemporaries theorized hysteria as a dissociative disorder affecting women who have suffered through a traumatic event, the memory of which is repressed and becomes

symptomatic in the present. As clinical psychiatrist Judith Herman notes, however, the high frequency of hysterical cases implied a pervasiveness of domestic abuse that threatened bourgeois notions of civility and indicted the patriarchal structures of power and dominance that undergirded spousal abuse (14-20). Thus, Freud, and the field of psychoanalysis with him, ultimately disavowed the idea that hysteria originates in (mostly sexual) traumatic events. With the famous Dora case, Freud instead put forth the theory that hysteria stems not from real trauma, but from abstract wishes and id-driven urges that are actively repressed. This revised theory allowed the blame for the disorder to be removed from patriarchy and placed squarely on the shoulders of overly imaginative women, who were believed to be naturally more emotional and weak-minded.

The next diagnostic era of trauma came during World War I, when victims of what was then called “shell-shock”⁴ were described as presenting symptoms similar to those of hysterics: depression, loss of memory, dissociation, paralysis, tremors, twitching, stammering, uncontrollable weeping, nightmares, hallucinations, blindness, dumbness, and deafness, among others. According to an article in the *New York Tribune* from October 5, 1919, doctors “saw in the nerve-wrecked soldiers the same troubles, the same symptoms that nervous women have been complaining of for years.” If “war was a test of manhood” (Sir Michael Howard, qtd. in Shephard 18), then sufferers of shell-shock failed miserably; chastised for being weak and cowardly, accused of malingering, these soldiers were either ignored, labeled insane, subjected to strict disciplinary action, or, in a few cases, shot. Many also suffered from impotence as a side-

⁴ The term “shell-shock” was derived from the belief that the concussive blows of exploding shells were physiologically affecting soldiers. Even after this theory and the term that went along with it were discredited by the medical community, “shell-shock” persisted in public discourse, in spite of the dizzying number of attempts to find a suitable substitute, among them: neurasthenia, war neurosis, functional nervous disorder, nervous shock, combat fatigue, and combat neurosis. I will attempt to match my terminology to that of the era under discussion.

effect (Shephard 148), exacerbating the emasculated identity of war neurotics who came home to newly empowered women. As Sandra Gilbert writes in “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,” “the war to which so many men had gone in hope of becoming heroes ended up emasculating them, depriving them of autonomy, confining them as closely as any Victorian women had been confined” (447-448). And, in spite of historian Ben Shephard’s obvious disdain for certain kinds of cultural critics such as feminists, “garrulous literary folk” (145) and “modern historians” (146), he too recognizes the importance of shell shock on conceptions of gender:

The real point about shell-shock—in the culture of the 1920s—was that it undermined men's authority, and with it the traditional roles of the sexes in the family: men, supposed to be strong, self-controlled, the providers to the household, were reduced to being weak, self-pitying, dependent creatures. Women, hitherto the main sufferers from mental illness, now became carers. For both sexes that was hard to handle. (149)

Shell shock delivered a blow to traditional gender roles that intensified the disorientation, depression, and alienation felt by returning veterans.

Ironically, it took the denunciation of the war by a closeted gay soldier, Siegfried Sassoon, to prove that “combat neurosis,” as it would be renamed, affects even the most heroic of men. Sassoon, or “Mad Jack” as he was known in the army, had a proven record of bravery that helped deflect accusations of cowardice when he was admitted into a military psychiatric facility. His case was evidence that war neurosis is not the result of moral degeneracy affecting only the weak willed. Rather, psychological damage is a predictable, indeed expected effect of prolonged exposure to violence.

Sassoon was just one of the most famous of tens of thousands who suffered from war-related mental breakdowns. The Battle of the Somme, in particular, yielded an unprecedented number of neurasthenics, adding to the growing evidence that debilitating psychological damage was not confined to an effeminate minority. Doctors, whose duty was to “‘conserve the fighting strength’ to help win the war” (Shephard xviii) and who were under enormous pressure to find effective treatment and prevention measures, were ultimately compelled to recognize this fact. By the end of the war, doctors in England had a much better understanding of shell shock, a term actually abandoned by the medical community (if not by the public) by 1916. Doctors understood the psychological nature of the disorder and designed their treatments accordingly. Clinics were set up on the front and in the interior, while treatment centers for returning soldiers were established to make the adjustment back to civilian life easier.

Meanwhile, the American medical community paid close attention to what was happening to British soldiers. According to Shephard, “the Americans drew hardly at all on their own rich writings in this field” (124), dismissing both the literature and the research produced during the Civil War as outdated in the face of a new kind of war. Tom Salmon, head of the National Committee for Mental Health, was convinced that the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers must be primarily psychological rather than neurological. He also understood the importance of both preexisting mental health conditions that might be exasperated by war, and the importance of expedient treatment. He was therefore able to successfully implement measures that both reduced the number of mentally handicapped infantry entering the ranks and expedited front-line treatment to those in combat.

The military and mental health professionals carried what they had learned about war neurosis from the Great War into WWII, which yielded a much lower rate of psychiatric

disorders in England's soldiers. In spite of progress in the areas of prevention and treatment, however, stereotypes about the moral character of war neurasthenics persisted. This was at least partly due to the fact that WWI veterans who continued to suffer from war neurosis even after combat ended exasperated doctors, raised the suspicions of government officials responsible for the distribution of pensions, and frustrated the public, who just wanted to move on. Neurasthenia was thus once again associated with malingering, discouraging sufferers from seeking help from medical practitioners (Shephard 179), and perhaps contributing to the lower rate of cases. Moreover, the association between war neurosis and effeminacy was reaffirmed during the Blitz, when "Concerns about absenteeism in industry caused by neurotic illness, especially among women workers, led to the creation of a 'neurosis survey'" (Shephard 179), the results of which are telling: "Psychiatrists became familiar with certain vulnerable types: women in their thirties in loveless marriages; menopausal women plunged into confusion or florid psychosis, like the lady who denounced her neighbours as the Gestapo" (Shephard 180). As Elaine Showalter discusses in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*, whether lonely and hormonal ladies, or cowardly, unmanly men, those vulnerable to traumatic neurosis continued to be gendered feminine.

While the rate of war neurosis in England was relatively low, the United States Army saw up to three times more incidents of mental breakdowns in WWII than in WWI (Shephard 327), causing widespread public discussion about how best to reintegrate returning soldiers:

the psychological problems of "the returning veteran" were explicitly discussed in innumerable novels, magazine articles, movies and radio plays. It was generally agreed that women had a "primary role in the social aspects of demobilization" and an army of "experts" and commentators told them how to play it. Wives should rebuild their

husbands' egos by giving them "lavish and undemanding affection" while expecting "no immediate return"; be tolerant of wartime infidelity; and surrender "some of their newly found competence and economic independence". A generation of women was happy to comply. (Shephard 329)

The enthusiasm with which Shephard claims that women shouldered these expectations is doubtful. What is certain is that American women became responsible for the rehabilitation of their men, and by extension American culture, and they could presumably only do so by "surrendering" their power and independence. Women must be women, in other words, so that returning soldiers could once again become men.

Thus, although by the end of World War II the prevention and treatment of war neurosis had advanced by leaps and bounds, the gendered notions underlying it remained the same. Having initially believed shell shock to be the physiological result of soldiers' proximity to the concussive blows of exploding shells, doctors now understood combat neurosis to be a common, predictable psychological response to prolonged exposure to war. Yet the stigma associated with neurasthenia persisted. Those prone to the disorder were still considered to be malingerers, cowards, weak minded, and/or mentally handicapped—characteristics antithetical to masculinity. Thus, to be traumatized was ultimately to be a woman, and the best remedy for that was immersion in a domestic environment that promoted the veteran's identity as a husband and breadwinner, as implied in this study cited by Shephard: "The most important factors in promoting a good readjustment were a warm, tolerant, helpful attitude on the part of a wife or other family member, satisfactory work situation, and success in school and social contacts" (330).

Two decades later, it would be precisely the active resistance of women to adhere to traditional gender roles that would become one of the biggest sore spots for traumatized veterans of the Vietnam War. It is during and after this war that, as a result of the women's rights movement and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, "trauma and gender" comes to indicate a *differentiation* of trauma experiences depending on one's sex. As Cathy Caruth notes in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, the Vietnam War played a large role in the official acknowledgement of PTSD by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980. The profusion of Vietnam veterans who not only exhibited signs of combat neurosis but who also gave public testimony of their trauma put pressure on the APA, who somewhat loosely defined PTSD originally as "a response to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience'" (Caruth 3). The significance of this moment in the history of Trauma Studies cannot be overstated. As Shephard states, "More than any other war in the twentieth century, Vietnam redefined the social role of psychiatry and society's perception of mental health. [...] Vietnam helped create a new 'consciousness of trauma' in Western society" (355).

That PTSD was formally identified as a response to the experience of male veterans is critical to our understanding of how trauma has been gendered, as clinical psychologist Laura Brown points out in "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma":

"Human experience" as referred to in our diagnostic manuals, and as the subject for much of the important writing on trauma, often means "male human experience" or, at the least, an experience common to both women and men. The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that

which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas. (101)

Brown is highlighting the implications of delineating “experience” along gendered lines, bringing to bear on trauma what Joan Scott discusses in “The Evidence of Experience”: “What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (797). Brown and other women’s rights advocates, such as Judith Herman, have fought for the public and institutional recognition that “the most common post-traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life” (28). Herman’s groundbreaking book *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*, which she says “owes its existence to the women’s liberation movement” (ix), is an effort to reorient the discussion of trauma to include experiences that are typically suffered by women. Explaining her book’s structure, she says, “I have tried to unify an apparently divergent body of knowledge and to develop concepts that apply equally to the experiences of domestic and sexual life, the traditional sphere of women, and to the experiences of war and political life, the traditional sphere of men” (4). In “Gender, Trauma Themes, and PTSD,” Elizabeth D. Krause, Ruth R. DeRosa, and Susan Roth likewise note that “theoretical accounts of trauma themes are based on the experiences of men (i.e., combat veterans) and women (i.e., sexual abuse)” (352).

These quotes typify how trauma is bifurcated along gendered lines. The efforts of veterans’ organizations and women’s rights movements, working in isolation from each other, have resulted in differentiated trauma. Whereas the paradigm of traumatic experience for men is considered to be war, the primary realm of traumatic experience for women is domestic abuse and rape, leaving very little room for consideration of trauma suffered by women as a result of

war or by men as a result of sexual assault. Rachel Kimerling, co-editor of *Gender and PTSD*, one of the only books to consider these two topics together, confirms the critical role of gender in the development of medical approaches to PTSD:

Current conceptualizations of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arose from two major groups of clinical observations. Terms such as “war neurosis” and “shellshock” were derived to describe the stress reactions observed among veterans of combat, while the constellation of symptoms known as “rape trauma syndrome” developed from mental health and advocacy work with survivors of sexual assault. Because most combat veterans have been male, and sexual assault survivors presenting in treatment settings have been predominantly female, these early conceptualizations of what we now call PTSD resulted with inherently gendered concepts. In other words, the construct of PTSD has been shaped by judgments regarding gender from the very beginning [...] (xi)

Beginning with Freud’s identification of hysteria as a disorder that affects only women, followed by the comparisons between hysterical women and shell-shocked men, which then led to the characterization of shell-shock victims as weak-willed malingerers and cowards, which evolved into the image of the broken, impotent, and emasculated neurasthenic—trauma has always been defined in terms of gender. And in terms of public health, it has traditionally been the male subject who has been the primary object of concern. Female sufferers, after all, are just being women. But men who fail in masculinity are a threat to society as a whole.

Trauma Studies and Gender

Thus, in spite of the efforts by feminist mental health professionals such as Brown and Herman, it is the war-related trauma typically experienced by men that has served as the baseline

for Trauma Studies in America. The privileging of male experience in the formal study of trauma narratives can be traced back to the popularization of survivor narratives that was ushered into culture by the Vietnam War. The public testimony given by veterans at the Winter Soldier Investigation and by John Kerry at the Fulbright Hearings contributed not only to the APAs recognition of PTSD as a medically legitimate condition, but also to the awareness of trauma in American culture at large. James Berger, in *After the End: Representations of the Apocalypse*, notes that it is in the 1970s that social upheaval and the Vietnam War sparked the public's fascination with the survivor figure (47-50) and saw a "'boom' in representations of the Holocaust" (67)⁵. By the late 1980s, the discourse of trauma was no longer constrained to clinical circles (Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 3), having entered the public sphere through news outlets, literature, film and television.

Growing popular interest in first-person accounts of survival over several decades has coalesced into the genre of Trauma Literature, accompanied by the development in the 1990s of Trauma Studies, which incorporates psychoanalytical theories of trauma into textual analyses of trauma narratives (Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 1). Accordingly, Laurie Vickroy has characterized trauma narratives as those "that 'go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterisation; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works'" (qtd. in Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 2). Thus the formal qualities of trauma narratives include fragmentation, contradiction, repetition, circularity, and intrusion—symptoms of PTSD that are also symptomatic of trauma literature.

⁵ Berger attributes this sudden proliferation of Holocaust publications in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the fact that survivors began to age and die, depleting the availability of first-person witnesses and causing an acute need to preserve their testimony (67-68).

Among these symptoms, perhaps none is more foundational than unspeakability. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry begins her elegant meditation on the politics and psychology of inflicting pain on the human body by first discussing “the inexpressibility of physical pain” (3):

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves it in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language. [...] Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (4)

She goes on to describe “the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (5). Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* has served as a guide for the way literary theorists have come to understand not only textual trauma, but the personal and political repercussions of speaking (or silencing) trauma. She, too, begins by stating, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*” (1). In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, which serves as a kind of model for critical readings of representations of trauma, psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor Dori Laub likewise discusses the horror of this “impossibility of speaking” (“Bearing Witness” 65): “no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion [to be heard]. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech* (“Bearing Witness” 78).

The speechlessness associated with trauma has neurocognitive roots, according to Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, who base their work on that of Pierre Janet. They claim that the inability to organize an experience on a linguistic level reverts the subject to somatosensory or iconic mental processes (172). Caruth similarly focuses on the reception of trauma, or the “structure of its experience” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4), shifting the discussion away from the events-based theories of Scarry and Herman. This structure is characterized by a delayed experience of the event, an event that then “possesses” the victim belatedly via uncontrollable and literal flashbacks, dreams, and hallucinations, re-experiences that produce, precisely because of this immediacy, uncertainty. Thus “it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (8), a temporal inversion that, for Caruth, not only obstructs trauma’s telling, but destabilizes history itself.

Laub similarly discusses the phenomenon of being unable to internalize one’s own experiences and the implications for history. Because the horrors of the Holocaust were so traumatic, so incomprehensible, so alien to human experience, so utterly unbelievable, survivors were rendered unreliable by their very status as witness, their memories contaminated by the very event they were called on to remember:

The Nazi system turned out therefore to be foolproof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their “otherness” and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore perhaps never took place. (“An Event Without a Witness” 82)

The Holocaust thus produced what Laub and Shoshana Felman call “a radical historical crisis of witnessing” (xvii). When the most extreme of human experiences withholds itself from its survivors, when events are so horrific that they cast doubt on their own reality, what, then, happens to history? According to Felman, in order for history to narrate the Holocaust, it was made to rely on the testimony of the witness, thus transforming history itself into an act of bearing witness. Speaking specifically about the implications of the Holocaust on epistemology, Felman and Laub declare that there is an “ongoing, as yet unresolved *crisis of history*, a crisis which in turn is translated into a *crisis of literature* insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself (xviii).

That literature becomes a witness to something that “cannot be articulated” points to the central paradox for scholars of trauma literature. Trauma is characterized by speechlessness, its resistance to language. The result of this unsharability is a radical, immediate, and insurmountable “split” between self and other, resulting in a profound isolation that is itself traumatizing. Yet most clinicians agree that in order to work through trauma, one must be able to communicate the experience, to situate it in a narrative—that of one’s personal life history, and in so doing rebuild the connections between self and other. For Scarry, Herman, Laub, and others, the path to healing, on both a personal and political level, can only be found by overcoming this unspeakability, by reengaging with another who can bear witness to your testimony. And while they discuss the importance of talking through trauma in the context of therapy, the same is true of literature. Indeed, for Felman and Caruth, trauma *demand*s a narrative; unspeakable horror implicitly challenges history and leads to an epistemological and

existential crisis that can only be adequately addressed by literature, which facilitates the self's reengagement with the other.

This dialectic between witness (author) and listener (audience) provides keen insight into the narrative strategies deployed against the silencing forces of trauma. Trauma theory suggests that trauma not only demands a different mode of storytelling than the traditional chronological, cause-effect narrative, but also demands a different mode of listening than the traditional one-way, non-participatory mode. The literature of trauma can thus be described as that which not only relates traumatic experiences, but also that which is expressive of traumatic symptoms in the very structure of its telling: circular storytelling, multiple voices, contradictory narratives, fragmented sentences, nonsensical language, repeated images/phrases/words, gaps in knowledge, metafictional techniques, nonlinear temporality, and intrusive images. Trauma narratives are moreover often concerned with the reader's reception of the narrative and express anxieties about the inability to understand on the part of others.

As the preceding discussion of Trauma Studies indicates, issues of gender, race, sexuality, and other identity markers—factors that are critical to the politics of speaking and silencing—have generally been neglected or suppressed in favor of a unifying and universal theory of trauma. This is at least partly due to the fact that trauma theory is based, to a large extent, on the literature of the Holocaust. As Michael Rothberg notes in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Theodor Adorno set the parameters of Holocaust discourse and, by extension, that of Trauma Studies, with a series of texts written during and immediately after the war, including the essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1951). It is here that Adorno's most famous declaration on the Holocaust first appeared: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” he stated, and with that, it seemed that a gauntlet had been thrown down.

According to Rothberg, Adorno's statement is not a proclamation about the end of art, nor is it an indictment of art's failure to represent life in the face of overwhelming atrocity, as many have believed. Rather, it is a condemnation of the ideology of Enlightenment that informs modern culture, the same culture that produced the material conditions in which Auschwitz was born. To write poetry is to contribute to that culture, to engage in the façade of free self-expression and turn a blind eye to "an objective and objectifying social process that tends toward the liquidation of the individual" (Rothberg 36). It is ultimately to set the stage for another Shoah. Such a statement is not a call for silence, however; rather, it is a call for new forms of representation, for art that emphasizes ideological rifts and enacts the horror of the modern age. As Rothberg explains, "Art's role is its 'afunctionality,' and thus its success lies in its very failure (although not *any* failure). Hence the *proximity* to silence of the art Adorno values. This proximity is not an abdication but an articulation of suffering" (46).

Rothberg's close reading of Adorno's statement provides some context for the unspeakability that is associated with trauma and that is characteristic of the literature of witness since the emergence of Holocaust testimony. In their foreword to *Testimony*, Felman and Laub note that most of the texts under consideration "were all written and produced consequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War, a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times" (xiv). In *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw acknowledge that "Most retrospective views of twentieth-century history assign the Holocaust a privileged place as the paradigmatic event of unspeakable human suffering" (3), such that the Holocaust "has produced a discourse—a set of terms and debates about the nature of trauma, testimony, witness, and community" (4). Indeed, Shephard points out that it was in fact the work

conducted by psychiatrists on Holocaust survivors in the 1950s that provided the framework for doctors working with Vietnam veterans (359-368).

The repercussions of Trauma Studies being rooted in the Vietnam War and the Holocaust has meant that not only is trauma understood as the trauma of men, as Laura Brown has criticized, but it has meant that discussion of issues regarding other markers of identity have sometimes been actively suppressed. In “Gendered Translations: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*” Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer describe the suppression of gender, in particular, as a category of identity in the discourse of the Holocaust:

There are moments when gender does not impose itself as a category of analysis, when, displaced by other factors, it virtually disappears from view. The Holocaust is such a moment. While the experience and the representation of war generally places women and men in radically different positions—on the home- and battlefronts, for example—the Holocaust, at least for its victims, seems to be a moment that recognizes no gender differences, that erases gender as a category. (3)

Hirsch and Spitzer go on to argue that this supposed erasure of gender nevertheless tends to privilege the male perspective, at least in the case of *Shoah*.

Hirsch and Spitzer’s reading of gender in Lanzmann’s documentary was part of a larger shift in the late 1990s towards considerations of gender in Holocaust studies. In their introduction to *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro credit two books as pioneering this field of inquiry: *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* by editors Renita Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan in 1984, and *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* by Marlene Heinemann in 1986 (3). It wasn’t until a decade later, however, that questions regarding

gender and the Holocaust began to pick up momentum. Immediately following the 1997 publication of Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, three edited volumes appeared that specifically addressed women's experiences during the Holocaust: *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* by editors Carol Rittner and John Roth (1998), *Women in the Holocaust* by editors Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (1998), and S. Lillian Kremer's *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination* (1999). In "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," Goldenberg examines the differences between men's and women's experiences during the Holocaust. In *Different Voices*, Rittner and Roth make the point that Jewish women—targeted for sterilization and rape, forced into prostitution, subject to covert abortions, commanded to decide the fates of their children—were victimized *as women*, "for they were the only ones who would finally be able to ensure the continuity of Jewish life" (2). Yet, as Sara R. Horowitz argues in "Women in Holocaust Literature: Engendering Trauma Memory," Jewish men, too, were targeted *as men*, made identifiable by their circumcised genitalia and feminized by anti-Semitic ideology (375-376). Meanwhile, Lawrence L. Langer cautions against "the danger of overstating the importance of a biologically unique experience" (361). Goldenberg, Horowitz and others have spoken eloquently about the resultant similarities and differences between the Holocaust experiences of men and those of women, shedding new light on the voices of women's testimonies such as those of Charlotte Delbo, Ida Fink, and Gertrude Kolmar.

Considerations of sex and gender are part of a larger shift toward a more nuanced understanding of trauma that takes into consideration not only how social positioning may make certain groups prone to specific kinds of violence, but also how gender conditioning affects the internalization and processing of traumatic experience. As Rachel Kimerling states, "Gender is

[...] a major factor in the type of trauma exposure experienced by the individual, the social relationships that mediate the impact of exposure, and the systems of meaning into which the traumatic event is encoded” (xi). It is this last element, trauma’s encoding into systems of meaning, that will be of particular interest here.

Trauma Literature and Gender

In “Gender, Trauma Themes, and PTSD,” researchers Elizabeth D. Krause, Ruth R. DeRosa, and Susan Roth examine the effect of gender role socialization on patients’ responses to traumatic events, particularly in how they narrate the event(s) in therapy. They found that “Traumatic events may introduce such novel circumstances that individuals may turn to external social cues, as well as internalized stereotypes and social scripts, to determine how to cope and make sense of their experiences” (358). Their work is based on the theories of Mardi J. Horowitz, whose book *Stress Response Syndromes: PTSD, Grief, Adjustment, and Dissociative Disorders* was “the first to link interruptions in meaningful symbolization and cognitive assimilation to the development and maintenance of PTSD” (Krause, DeRosa, and Roth 351). Horowitz believes that we are programmed to fit new information and experiences into cognitive “schemas,” defined as “internal representations of the world and self that have both conscious and unconscious aspects. A traumatic event presents an individual with information that is discrepant with these schemas” (Krause, DeRosa, and Roth 351). Thus, patients faced with such discrepancies tend to fall back on familiar epistemic frameworks, a concept that Krause, DeRosa, and Roth extend to include normative gender ideologies.

Although their study is limited to trauma accounts communicated in the context of psychoanalytic treatment, the schemas, stereotypes, and scripts they describe applies to literature

as well. It would not be the first time that literature has been described as an analog to therapy. Suzette A. Henke, for instance, calls the therapeutic function of writing “scriptotherapy,” which she defines as ““The process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment. ... Autobiography could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis that life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder”” (qtd. in Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 3). As Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín note in *Trauma Narratives and Herstory*, “the psychologists Laura S. Brown (1995) and Maria P. Root (1992) have emphasized the importance of the interplay between internal and external factors in the construction of gender and trauma, an interplay that can be analysed in cultural productions such as textual and artistic representations of women's lives and experiences at different moments in history” (4).

Gender role socialization, in other words, affects not only what kinds of violence one may experience, but also how one might situate that experience within narrative, and what forms of telling might be sanctioned. Krause, DeRosa, and Roth go a step further, arguing that “How survivors respond to their traumas is likely shaped by their gender role socialization, and likewise, their gender identity may be influenced by the experience of trauma” (349). To put this in terms of literary analysis, not only does gender affect how the unspeakable is transformed into narrative, which may be constructed along familiar epistemic frameworks such as normative gender, but destabilized gendered identities expose the constructedness of normative gender, and potentially marks the traumatized as traumatized.

Considering the politics of identity and discourse, the implications of gender on the issue of unspeakability, so central to Trauma Studies, become clear. In a Lacanian analysis, for instance, the unspeakability induced by trauma would be particularly devastating for the male

ego, whose masculinity is conferred only by the mastery of language. According to Jacques Lacan's theory of the symbolic order, a family is a set of symbolic relations in which titles such as "mother" and "father" signify cultural positions rather than biological realities (Silverman 182). The "symbolic father" is differentiated from the "symbolic mother" by his possession of the phallus, the "privileged signifier" (Lacan 82) of male privilege and authority. Father is thus set up in opposition to Mother and the lack (of privilege and power) she represents (Silverman 182). It is upon these familial symbolic relationships that the successful resolution of the Oedipus complex depends. As in Freud's conception, the boy will achieve masculinity by identifying with the father. Yet the Freudian super-ego that embodies the authority of the father is replaced in Lacanian thought by the Law of the Father, which serves the same prohibitory functions as the super-ego. By internalizing the Law of the Father, the boy enters the symbolic order, "the order of language, discourse, narrative" (Silverman 162). Deprived of language, discourse, and narrative by the silencing power of trauma, a man would no longer possess the phallus, and would thus be marked by lack.

In spite of the intersections between gender, narrative, and trauma, however, literary analysis of trauma texts that consider the implications of gender and sexuality remain marginalized. Attention to gender is central to analyses of women's stories of sexual abuse, but the same cannot be said of war stories, traditionally a sphere of traumatic male experience. The obvious reason is that, while the majority of cases of domestic abuse involve male perpetrators whose violence against women is institutionalized by a patriarchal system of male dominance, war-related cases of PTSD seemingly occur outside of gendered power relations due to the relative absence of women in combat.

Where there exists analysis of gender in war narratives, discussion usually focuses on the traditional *bildungsroman* in which the eradication of feminine traits is required to turn boys into men, as in *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*. Common, too, are post-colonial analyses that point to the Orientalist tendencies in war narratives that feminize both the landscape and the people of the enemy Other. Neither of these approaches takes trauma as its central area of inquiry, however. In analyses where war, gender, and trauma *are* the focus, they often tend to follow Myrna Goldenberg's "same hell, different horrors" model, examining the *experiential* differences between men and women, but often failing to consider the impact of gender on the processes of internalization and the politics of externalization, or the reciprocal impact of trauma on gendered identities. The collection of essays in *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* by editors Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín takes the analysis of gender in trauma stories a step further than most, surveying the plurality of narrative techniques deployed by women to express trauma. Yet by confining its inquiry to primarily women writing⁶ about domestic traumas, Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín—while privileging the female perspective—also inadvertently reinforce the notion that gender is a women's issue, and that gender and trauma, in particular, is a domestic abuse issue.

On the contrary, analysis of gender and trauma is relevant to the narratives of both men and women, and is often critical to an understanding of war trauma, as this dissertation will show. In order to move the discussion of gender and trauma beyond a comparison of men's and women's experiences and into the gendered politics of writing itself, this project will operate according to the understanding that gender has the power not only to influence the experience of trauma—the source of trauma, how it is inflicted, how it is internalized—but also the mediation

⁶ Of the thirteen essays, only two considered works were by men: Dan Jacobson's *Her Story* and *The God-Fearer* and Keisuke Kinoshita's film *Twenty-Four Eyes*.

of traumatic experience via textual practice—what narrative forms it takes, what audiences are available, how sociocultural factors make an impact. When we speak of “trauma and gender” in literature, then, we must consider not just the types of trauma one’s gender makes one susceptible to. It is not simply that men’s trauma is typically related to combat experience and women’s trauma is typically related to sexual assault. We must also consider how internalized gender norms affect how individuals process traumatic experience, what kinds of familiar epistemic structures may be used to rehabilitate meaning out of the incomprehensible events that break mental schemas, what sanctioned forms of telling differentially delineate what men and women can and cannot say, and how traumatic experience affects gendered identities.

Indeed, experience itself cannot be taken for granted as eternal and pure, as a pre-gender, pre-discursive moment unaffected by hegemonic forces that shape constructions of selfhood. In “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott makes the compelling argument that experience is in fact a cultural construction. Because of the constructedness of experience, Scott insists, “we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (779). Scott wrote her article in response to the recent turn by many historians to the evidence of experience, in opposition to stark empiricism. Reliance on experience as truth, however, presumes a fixed and eternal individual and is ultimately a fundamental return to foundationalist discourse. Although such an approach is designed to empower minority groups who have been rendered invisible and voiceless, it problematically elides the fact of discursive subjectivity and “avoid(s) examining the relationships between discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge” (783).

When it comes to traumatic experiences, the same considerations must also apply. As Ruth Leys discusses in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, “trauma” is a historically situated construct, as is our understanding of PTSD. As Laura Brown first argued, what is considered “traumatic experience” has been influenced by gender ideology, as well as other markers of difference. Gender ideology is also responsible for positioning individuals as vulnerable to certain kinds of trauma. Thus it is because of men’s supposed mental strength and bravery that they are sent off to battle. And it is because of women’s perceived weakness and objectification that they are targeted for sexual violence. Conceptions of gender also influence what kinds of experiences can be deemed traumatic, which explains why sexual harassment has always been considered an acceptable form of social interaction. Moreover, internalized gender norms impact the ways in which traumatic experience is processed. As researchers Elizabeth D. Krause, Ruth R. DeRosa, and Susan Roth found, those suffering from PTSD often experience crises in gender identity, resulting in either detachment from or overidentification with norms of masculinity or femininity (350). The gender-dependent processes for internalizing traumatic events is also relevant to how one externalizes painful experiences, dependent as it is on sanctioned forms of telling that are differentiated according to gender, among other cultural identity constructs. Finally, the avenues of recovery from trauma are also differentially available depending on whether you are a man or a woman, and often involves, at least in part, the rehabilitation of a gendered identity lost or broken through traumatic experience. Narratives of trauma are thus the products of all these factors. The texts selected for analysis in this dissertation illuminate this complex relationship between gender, traumatic experience, and narrative.

It must be acknowledged, however, that gender is in no way the only ideological force to leave its mark upon trauma. The unspeakability it produces is differentiated not only by gender,

but sexuality, race, religion, class, ethnicity, and other cultural constructs. Indeed, an investigation into the ways gendered identities are both informed and transformed by traumatic experience opens up new avenues of inquiry for scholars working at the intersection of Trauma Studies and identity politics.

For the sake of clarity, this dissertation will confine its study of trauma narratives to considerations of gender in selected European and American texts that correspond to some of the West's major traumatic events of the last century. Accordingly, we will begin our analysis with World War I, during which "shell shock" emerged as a term used both in medical circles and in the popular imagination. Our case study will be Vera Brittain's classic war memoir, *Testament of Youth*, a text that manages to bear witness to Brittain's shell shock within a highly gender-differentiated Victorian culture that does not recognize female war trauma. *Testament* illustrates how Brittain's traumatic experiences are formed within the boundaries of gendered spaces, that of the medical facilities on the front, and how gender conventions affect Brittain's narration of that trauma. Forced to frame her experience within the masculine language of trench warfare, Brittain also finds that her gendered identity is destabilized as a result, which demonstrates the reciprocal nature of trauma and gender that Krause, DeRosa, and Roth describe.

Chapter 2 examines Elie Wiesel's short novel, *Day*, the third and final installment of the Holocaust trilogy that began with his memoir *Night* in 1960. In *Day*, Wiesel engages with the unbearable nature of survival after Auschwitz by infusing his real-life experiences with imagined ones. The imaginary aspects give Wiesel a framework within which he can explore memories of a past that remain submerged by incomprehensibility but that nevertheless maintain a stranglehold on his present life. Central to the imaginary layer are the female characters, the mother and grandmother who were killed in the camps and who haunt the faces of all the women

that he meets, and the prostitute and the lover on whose bodies are written the obscenity of the past and who both offer and withhold his entrance into masculine self-possession. *Day* thus contains two archetypes of women: saints and sinners. Eliezer's mother and grandmother represent the primal loss of the maternal ideal, a loss of origins, innocence, and selfhood. Sarah and Kathleen, on the other hand, are both highly eroticized women who reveal Eliezer's inability to attain the kind of virile masculinity represented by the hulking figure of his friend Gyula. Eliezer is suspended between these two poles of meaning, bereft of the innocence of boyhood and unable to consummate with Sarah or to establish a meaningful relationship with Kathleen. He is in a traumatic limbo, neither alive nor dead, wandering the spaces in between the women in the text who are withheld from him yet haunt him, women who are both reminders of the Holocaust and bodies on which to inscribe his unspeakable story. This mapping of Eliezer's trauma onto women furthermore depends on female characters who conform to the familiar norms of femininity, and are therefore recognizable within the phallogocentric economy.

It is exactly women's refusal to adhere to their roles that disrupts the male quest for restoration and helps illustrate the persistence of trauma in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the focus of Chapter 3. In this metafictional collection of vignettes from members of a platoon stationed in Vietnam, stories based on his own experience as a soldier in the 23rd Infantry Division, O'Brien attempts to bear witness to the stark carnage and unspeakable loss that brutalize the members of Alpha Company long after the war is over. Similar to the role that imaginary women play in *Day*, the female characters carry the burden of unspeakability in *The Things They Carried*, and can be categorized into "real" and "ideal" women who come to embody trauma itself. The real women embody all that is lost to these soldiers—life, happiness, domestic bliss, understanding, family, sexual validation, and reintegration into civilized society.

The real women of this text have moved on without these men, and refuse to take their place as listeners of their trauma. The ideal women, on the other hand, exist within the male imagination and are thus without boundaries of time or place, and provide the kinds of understanding and acceptance that are otherwise unavailable in the real world. Yet they are always out of reach, representing the unattainable fantasy, the impossible that further traumatizes, and ultimately the ideal masculinity that the soldiers will never attain. This analysis is further contextualized by a consideration of the impact of shifting notions of gender on traumatized masculine identities during the Vietnam War.

My reading of these two male-authored texts suggests that normative gender can be deployed against the incomprehensibility of trauma. According to Kristiaan Versluys, “If trauma is the collapse of the network of significations, a narrative is needed to restore the broken link” (4). By putting woman in her place as mother/whore (*Day*) or as symbol of domestic bliss/monstrous femininity (*Things*), these narratives help restore the network of significations according to patriarchal notions of comprehensibility. Similar to the way Clorinda is positioned as a wound through which to speak Tancred’s pain—an element of plot space Tancred must penetrate in order to find his male voice—so the women in *Day* and *The Things They Carried* are positioned as vehicles for stories of male trauma.

After the close readings of two texts written by men in which women are, like Tancred’s Clorinda, not so much fully developed characters as they are symbolic of male trauma, the fourth and final chapter will explore two war memoirs written by women. An unprecedented number of female soldiers have served in our recent wars in the Middle East, challenging trauma theory’s gendered division between what is considered female and male trauma. If women have traditionally been placed in the role of caretaker, if women have been charged with the

responsibility of rehabilitating traumatized male soldiers, if women have played a critical role in the articulation of male war trauma, then what happens to these gendered dynamics when the soldiers are women? Writing by female veterans are few, but I will offer an analysis of two recently published works, Kayla Williams's memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* and Jess Goodell's *Shade It Black: Death and After in Iraq*. While Williams's memoir reveals the absence of a language with which to speak war trauma that includes sexual harassment and assault, Goodell's memoir bears witness to the horror of bodies brutalized by both combat and gendered ideology.

Both *Love My Rifle More Than You* and *Shade It Black* testify to the traumatizing impact of a military institution built on the denigration of femininity and the idealization of masculinity. They illustrate Nancy K. Miller's statement that "the ideology governing female publicity—what women may do and say in public—that records the brutal effects the regulation of women's sexuality has on bodily lives—has shaped and coded the accounts of their experience" ("Representing Others" 5), which is one reason why there are "crucially important differences between the experiences and identity narratives of male and female autobiographers" (5). Their testimony, in conjunction with O'Brien's text, furthermore suggests that the strict enforcement of highly differentiated gender behavior, so integral to a soldier's training and so foundational to the identity of the soldier, yet so impossibly idealized and oftentimes conflicting, may in fact be one of the underlying causes of war-related PTSD for men and women alike. Such a reading has implications not only for the military's training procedures, but for veteran care and the future treatment of PTSD.

In order to make sense, the topologies of *Day* and *The Things They Carried* depend on stereotypes of femininity that delimit the female body as womb, home, object, child, Other—as

bearer of meaning. As such, they are the anchors of coherence within otherwise chaotic narratives. Male bodies, on the other hand, are not coded in the same way. They are not offered up as symbolic objects available for appropriation by women's stories. We therefore do not see similar structures of articulation in *Testament of Youth*, *Love My Gun More Than You*, or *Shade It Black*. Instead, what we see is the traumatizing impact of the kind of delimitation women are subject to. For our women writers, the unspeakability of trauma is written on their own bodies, resulting in a conception of self that is estranged from a feminine identity that has been degraded. Vera Brittain, denied the soldier's experience because she is a woman, uses the language of combat to convey the hardships of nursing but not the language of shell shock to describe the aftermath. Kayla Williams, a victim of attempted rape and sexual harassment, learns to denigrate femininity like her male counterparts and adopts a misogynist persona as body armor against sexual and verbal assault. Jess Goodell, confronted with bodily annihilation and targeted for discrimination because of her own body, attempts to cope with her trauma by recuperating the female bodily ideal. Meanwhile, she conveys her underlying estrangement from a feminine identity through her neutral, and thus male, authorial voice.

Trauma's impact on gendered identities reveals the constructedness and destructiveness of gender itself. Teresa de Lauretis describes trauma as an implicit outcome of gender and of representation, saying "gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contained, any representation" (*Technologies of Gender* 3). The texts under discussion in this dissertation are not only about trauma, they are about gender, and they furthermore participate in the construction of gender to ameliorate trauma and deconstruct naturalized conceptions of gender that traumatize.

Testament of Youth, *Day*, *The Things They Carried*, *Love My Rifle More Than You*, and *Shade It Black* are just a few examples of texts in which gender and trauma work with and against each other in the task of speaking the unspeakable. And, by considering the work of both men and women, this dissertation proves that gender is not relevant only to the trauma narratives of women. Moreover, Wiesel and O'Brien, both canonical writers heavily invested in the act of writing trauma, show that gender is furthermore not marginal, obscure, or irrelevant to the practice of writing trauma. On the other side of the canonical spectrum, the wars in the Middle East have not yet produced a set of writing against which all other texts are measured⁷. Thus, my decision to write about memoirs by women writers is partly political. Literary studies in this country has a long history of first examining, and then canonizing, the writing of men. And it is only later, after the (white, male, heterosexual) bar has been set by the arbiters of taste, that we can begin to consider the contributions by women, people of color, and other marginalized voices. We do not have to wait for the male writers of war to set the mold. Williams and Goodell are writing from an important moment in American history, a time of transition in which women's roles in war and their positions in the military are shifting, bringing the centrality of gender to the experience of war trauma—for men as well as women—radically into focus. And although the memoirs of Williams and Goodell allow us to revisit some of the themes and issues that first emerged in our discussion of Vera Brittain, they will hopefully not suffer the same tokenism as she did during World War I. By discussing the contributions of women to the emerging genre of Iraq War literature at the outset, I hope that voices such as theirs will not only

⁷ However, *Redeployment* by Phil Klay has recently garnered much critical acclaim, winning the 2014 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2014 John Leonard Award from the National Book Critics Circle. It was also included on the *New York Times*' list of "Ten Best Books of 2014," making *Redeployment* a good candidate for canonization.

help shape the discourse about our involvement in the Middle East, but will help guide the development of Trauma Studies into an area of inquiry that considers the critical role of gender and other identity markers on the ways writers speak the unspeakable.

Chapter 1

Shell Shock:

Trauma and Gendered Identity in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*

“Women get all the dreariness of war & none of its exhilaration.”
—Vera Brittain (*Letters*)

“what could be more profoundly gendered than a space said to contain
nothing but men, than an activity described as performed by men only?”
—Miriam Cooke

During World War I, war trauma first entered into the realm of public discourse when shell-shocked soldiers began appearing, first on the battlefields and later on the home front. Because diagnostic methods were inconsistent and often influenced by military pressure to downplay the issue, reliable statistics are hard to come by. But according to historian Ben Shephard, in England alone there was an estimated 24,000 cases by April 1916 (73), while the Somme itself produced at least 16,000 cases, a number that Shephard claims should be at least tripled (41). By the end of the war, combat neuroses had become enough of a pervasive issue to prompt British Prime Minister Lloyd George to proclaim, ““The world is suffering from shell-shock”” (qtd. in Shephard 143).

For those who were unfit to be returned to the front, the rehabilitation and reintegration of these shell-shocked men back into society became a matter of national concern, at least during the war years. And where the doctor's duty ended, that of women began—which is perhaps why some of the most famous British women writing about WWI were centrally concerned with the woman's role in rehabilitating shell-shocked men. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* is less a story about the soldier than it is about the effect of shell shock on the women who

surround him, and likewise their effect on his neurosis. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is doing her part for the moral rebuilding of post-war high society, while Rezia is almost entirely consumed by her concerns about Septimus, a shell-shocked veteran wracked by guilt. And in *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain describes how she considered marrying a platonic friend wounded in the war in order to be his "perpetual nurse" (344), just as other women, likewise bereft of their fiancées, were reportedly doing. All three of these major works by women provide evidence of a culture in which women were increasingly expected to become the mediators of male trauma. But it is Brittain's memoir that offers the most complex illustration of trauma's effect on gender roles, and gender's effect on traumatic experience.

Hysteria and Shell Shock

Testament of Youth was published in 1933 and documents Brittain's experience as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) in London, Malta, and France during the First World War. In a 1931 letter to friend Winifred Holtby, Brittain expresses her belief that her psychological well-being depended on writing the book, saying, "I shall become hysterical if I am prevented from getting down to it very much longer" (qtd. in Bostridge vii). Her use of the word "hysterical" is significant, connected as it still was with female mental disorders that were believed to originate from the uterus. Indeed, Brittain cites "children and house" (qtd. in Bostridge vii) as obstacles to her work, making the adherence to prescribed gender roles an explicit part of the problem. And although Brittain's statement may seem like nothing more than a bit of hyperbole, she struggled for years with hallucinations, night terrors, insomnia, and the mysterious, recurring "Malta germ," forcing her to be bedridden for long stretches of time.

At the risk of pathologizing her, I think it's fair to say that Brittain, in other words, was suffering from shell shock, a neurosis that at the time was believed to affect only men who had been in combat. Consistent with this misconception, Brittain herself never uses the phrase "shell shock" or "war neurosis" in reference to her own mental health issues, in spite of the fact that she clearly identified with other war vets: "During the next two years I was far from being the only lost soul who wandered around Boar's Hill and Christ Church Meadows, haunted by the war" (qtd. in Stewart 28). In fact, although she wrote *Testament of Youth* in order "to set down the sorrows of the First War" (qtd. in Stewart 26), she says surprisingly little about her emotional trauma as such. This is not to say that Brittain does not bear witness to her loss; the deaths of her fiancé Roland Leighton, her brother Edward, and her two friends Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, are critical to her experience. However, in spite of being "handicapped, harassed and oppressed by recurrent memories of the first World War" (qtd. in Stewart 26), Brittain offers surprisingly few glimpses into this aspect of her mental state.

Readers of Brittain would probably object at this point. *Testament of Youth* is, after all, considered one of the greatest works about war in English literature. The fact that Brittain lost, not one, but four close personal friends seems to automatically place her in the annals of women bereaved by war. And she does indeed relate feelings of emptiness, disillusionment, and alienation at times after the war. We know that after Roland's death, she suffers from recurring dreams in which Roland is mutilated or found to be alive but mentally damaged. Yet although she mentions having these dreams "at frequent intervals for nearly ten years" (273), she mentions them again only a couple of times, once to illustrate her anxiety over marrying G., and once in order to downplay their significance. We also know that when Brittain returns to Oxford after the war, and after the sudden death of her friend Nina to pneumonia, she begins to hallucinate that

she is growing a beard. I will return to the particular manifestations of this hallucination later, but for now, suffice it to say that although Brittain goes into some detail about this “borderland of craziness” (496), it still remains a tiny blip in her massive memoir. Brittain mentions feeling like an automaton after Edward’s death, feeling empty and disillusioned by the time the war ended, and feeling alienated when she goes back to Oxford. Yet these feelings are briefly reported and then abandoned for such topics as her working conditions, whether as a VAD, as an Oxford student, or as a speaker for the League of Nations.

I would argue that the reason for this silence around her trauma is due to the gendered expectations of women during the war. In the war-torn culture of England, rocked by an epidemic of shell shock yet still entrenched in Victorian views regarding female frailty, there was little room or tolerance for what were considered the self-indulgent problems of weak-minded women. For although women were “allowed,” and indeed expected to weep for the nation’s lost men, they were not considered susceptible to war neurosis themselves. Faced with such intolerance for women’s war-related neuroses, yet compelled to bear witness to her traumatic personal losses and horrifying experiences near the front lines, Brittain must find a way to speak the unspeakable, and to do so in a culture that not only lacks the language to conceptualize women’s war trauma, but also fails to recognize the impact of gender norms that compound her trauma.

Brittain indicates an acute awareness of the cultural attitude towards women’s mental health even before the war. She begins her memoir with a brief but significant side note about the “intermittent terrors” (24) she experienced as a child:

Far more disturbing to my peace of mind was the strange medley of irrational fears which were always waiting to torment me [...] Parents and nurses had by that time outgrown the

stage of putting children into dark cupboards as a “cure” for this type of “tiresomeness”—an atrocity once perpetrated on my mother which adversely affected her psychology for ever afterwards—but such terrors did appear to them to have no other origin than a perverse unreasonableness, and I was expostulated with and even scolded for thus “giving way.” (24)

Women were treated in much the same way as children were, and her description of being admonished for “perverse unreasonableness” is uncannily similar to the attitude extended towards soldiers suffering from shell shock, especially early on in the war.

This bit of personal history foreshadows her future struggles with “irrational fears,” and goes a long way towards explaining her reticence when it comes to the state of her own mental crises. She goes on to say of her childhood terrors:

There seemed to be no one to whom I could appeal for understanding of such humiliating cowardice, nobody whom I instinctively felt to be on my side against the mysterious phenomena which so alarmed me. Since I thus grew up without having my fears rationalized by explanation, I carried them with me, thrust inward but very little transformed, into adulthood, and was later to have only too good reason to regret that I never learnt to conquer them while still a child. (24)

Not only was she taught from an early age that her terrors were “tiresome” and a form of weakness, but she was also painfully aware of how detrimental the absence of a listener can be. This issue would be extended and compounded during the war years, when the epidemic of shell shock cases in men left little room for the war trauma of women. As an adult, Brittain feels “humiliated” by any sign of physical or emotional faltering on her own part, as if she was once again “giving way,” indicating an internalization of the attitude perpetrated by her family and her

culture. And as a VAD, Brittain's duty is to take care of the broken men of the war; her own mental and physical health would have to wait.

The lack of a sympathetic audience becomes critical for Brittain during the war, as with each new death she laments the loss of a listener. She says of Victor, "I was always the talker and he the patient, untiring listener" (250). And Brittain is careful to note that even as a child, Edward "was always a good listener" (27). When he is killed, she says, "I knew no one in the world to whom I could speak spontaneously, or utter one sentence completely expressive of what I really thought or felt" (445). By the end of the war, she feels completely isolated, saying "All those with whom I had really been intimate were gone; not one remained to share with me the heights and the depths of my memories" (579). After the war, Brittain returns to Oxford, where biographers Paul Berry and Mark Bostridge say "She was both pained and angered by the way in which her war experience appeared to be ignored [...] but she alienated her fellow Somervillians by talking constantly about her war service, of nursing the mutilated and dying, and about the deaths of her fiancé, brother and friends" (145). This tension between her desire to bear witness to her war trauma and the lack of empathy among her peers ultimately culminates in a humiliating debate, during which she is heckled for trying to use her wartime experiences as an argument for experience over education. "After that," she says, "until I left college, I never publicly mentioned the War again" (*Testament* 493).

Although she remained silent in public, however, she wrote prolifically in private. As Bostridge describes in his introduction, *Testament* began as a diary, which she then tried to turn into an autobiography, and then into fiction, after which she came back to the autobiographical form. Brittain's writing and rewriting of her experience, and her anxiety over making her work both "readable" and beyond reproach—she includes documentary "evidence" to remove any

doubt about the validity of her testimony—makes *Testament* a candidate for a particular form of narrative psychopathology called “hypernarrativia,” which Paul Eakin describes as “a consciousness working overtime to make experience read like a story in a book” (131). Scarred by the rejection of her peers, Brittain worked overtime to ensure her memoir fell on empathetic ears, in spite of the sanctioned forms of telling that restricted what she could say and how she could say it.

As previously discussed, the ability of a traumatized person to communicate her experiences to an empathetic and engaged listener is critical to obtaining knowledge about an event that is otherwise incomprehensible. This “‘knowing’ of the event” through successful testimony to a listener is not curative, according to Dori Laub, but is “a process of facing loss [...] that allows perhaps a certain repossession of it” (“An Event Without a Witness” 91). Brittain’s own description of the effects of writing *Testament* is consistent with the theory that writing can help relieve some of the aftereffects of trauma by transforming the incomprehensible and unspeakable into a rational narrative form: “‘By enabling me to set down the sorrows of the First War and thus remove their bitterness, *Testament of Youth* became the final instrument of a return to life from the abyss of emotional death’” (qtd. in Stewart 26).

This attempt to “know” the events of her loss is critical for Brittain, for all of the men in her life died without her being able to witness it first hand. Roland is killed in France, and Brittain is only able to piece together his last moments out of letters from a few men who were there. Brittain, in fact, is forever embittered by the absence of a final letter from Roland himself. Geoffrey is killed a few months later, his body never to be found. Edward is killed in Italy, and the only person who could have offered a description of his death is his colonel, who refuses to give Brittain any details about what really happened, presumably because she is a woman whose

delicate sensibilities would be overwhelmed by the gruesome realities of war. It was due to this perception of women's frailty, both physical and emotional, that women were restricted from military service and thus withheld from "knowing" the war in general.

The Language of War

In order to come to a place of knowing, Brittain must first establish an audience—an enormous challenge for women writers in the post-war period. As Berry and Bostridge note, ten years after the Armistice, and after an initial postwar period of disinterest in war books, there was a spate of successful trench memoirs, including Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (239). Yet Brittain was dissatisfied with the existing representations of women's war experiences:

In the flood of war literature by men [...] Vera found little acknowledgement of the role of women in the war, and what reference was made was all too often belittling and insulting. Either women did not appear at all, or they were portrayed as passive, sentimentalized creatures, "giving their husbands and sons and weeping unavailing tears." (Berry and Bostridge 239)

Brittain, scarred by the rejection of her peers in school, was thus faced with the challenge of bearing witness to her own war trauma without being regarded as yet another weeping widow, of laying a claim to psychological wounds reserved for male soldiers.

How to make a woman's story readable to an audience interested only in the trench memoirs so popular at the time? Write it like a man. One of the main strategies deployed by Brittain is to compare her experience with that of men in war. Brittain's descriptions of her war

work make it clear that she becomes a nurse to memorialize Roland's perceived suffering in her own body, turning herself into a living memorial to male suffering. When a friend doubts Brittain's understanding of what she's in for as a nurse, she says in her diary, "He has to face far worse things than any sight or act I could come across; he can bear it—and so can I" (154). And when describing her arduous first experience as a nurse, she says, "[I] felt perpetually as if I had just returned from a series of long route marches" (164). She goes on to say that her "one desire [is] to emulate Roland's endurance" (166), and she believes that her experience trudging through the rain allows her "to understand just a little what winter meant to the men in the trenches" (208). She even goes so far as to compare her own first experience with death with that of Roland's: "I put into the writing of my diary that evening an emotion comparable to the feeling of shock and impotent pity that had seized Roland when he found the first dead man from his platoon at the bottom of the trench" (176). She also describes writing letters to her mother from France "in language not so different from that used by Roland to describe the preparations for the first of those large-scale massacres" (387). And after Roland is killed, Brittain loses all motivation for nursing; as Bostridge says, "No longer was there the thought of Roland's hardships to spur her on" (*A Life* 100).

Brittain's tendency to use the language of combat to describe her nursing experiences is also evident in her descriptions of her mysteriously recurring illness. Perhaps not coincidentally, Brittain contracts the "Malta germ" in 1916, soon after the Battle of the Somme, during which she "had seen men without faces, without eyes, without limbs, men almost disemboweled, men with hideous truncated stumps of bodies" (339). It is never quite clear what, exactly, this "germ" really is, but by her own description it "involves a good deal of discomfort and is supposed to be accompanied by colossal depression" (536)—a description that indicates she was suffering from

war neurosis, but under another name. She comes down with the illness again twice more, calling it “the invader” (302), comparing it to trench fever and calling it “that old enemy” (402) that had “assailed” (402) her before.

By valorizing her experiences in the masculine, heroic mode, Brittain is attempting to bridge a gap of gendered experience, which she describes as “a new fear that the War would come between us—as indeed, with time, the War always did, putting a barrier of indescribable experience between men and the women whom they loved” (143). By doing so, she is elevating women’s war work to that of men and staking a claim for the legitimacy of the physical and emotional turmoil she suffered. She is also effectively making her narrative more “readable,” a quality that Brittain emphasizes as critical to her writing goals in *Testament of Experience*. The appeal of her masculinized narrative is true for contemporary readers as well. Brittain’s work is often the only work by a woman author in studies about World War I literature, and seems to be granted that honor because of its perceived masculine voice. In his introduction to the text, Bostridge claims that “much of the confidence and assurance of her autobiographical voice emanates from her passionate identification with her young male contemporaries and her experience of living vicariously through them” (ix), and later notes approvingly that she strives to write like Edmund Blunden (xi). And in *Vera Brittain: A Life*, Bostridge and fellow biographer Paul Berry tout the fact that “*Testament of Youth* has taken its place on the shelf alongside Blunden’s *Undertones of War*, Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*” (Preface 2). As Victoria Stewart points out in her book on women’s autobiographies, however, Brittain’s inclusion in this canon only highlights the dearth of women’s writing in the canon of World War I literature: “Brittain is either the token woman or the honorary man” (26). In order to be taken seriously, Brittain aligns her traumatic experiences

with those of men in combat, whose heroism she ceaselessly valorized, without ever explicitly claiming to be shell-shocked herself.

As Stewart further notes, Brittain's retention of "a residual faith in a 'chivalric' ideal" (27) is just one of the many contradictions to feminism at tension in her memoir. Indeed, Brittain's tendency to frame her traumatic experiences as masculine does not come without a cost, as her facial hallucinations suggest. When Brittain returns to Oxford after the war, and after the sudden death of her friend Nina to pneumonia, she begins to hallucinate that she is growing a beard:

I looked one evening into my bedroom glass and thought, with a sense of incommunicable horror, that I detected in my face the signs of some sinister and peculiar change. A dark shadow seemed to lie across my chin; was I beginning to grow a beard, like a witch? Thereafter my hand began, at regular intervals, to steal towards my face.
(484)

In *A Life*, Bostridge suggests that Brittain's hallucinations were a result of survivor's guilt, saying the beard "may symbolize the guilt that Vera felt in seizing the intellectual and professional opportunities that could no longer be taken by her dead male contemporaries" (139-140). Yet such a reading suggests that Brittain would not have achieved success as a writer were it not for the absence of superior male minds. It also suppresses the fact that Brittain always had ambitions to become a writer and intellectual, in spite of the fact such a career was traditionally reserved for men.

Bostridge also fails to recognize the significance of the fact that Brittain's hallucinations are both facial and masculine, particularities that draw a direct line between her trauma and that suffered by her male companions, all of whom had facial trauma, either real or imagined. One of

her recurring dreams is of Roland “purposely hiding his identity because facially mutilated” (496). Before being killed, Geoffrey “had escaped with shell-shock and a slight face wound” (257). And when Brittain learns that Victor has been blinded, she thinks, “He’s blind. His eyes are gone. I wonder if his face is gone too?” (341). Facial disfigurement is, for Brittain, the ur-form of loss, the primordial mark of trauma. Faced with the retraumatizing loss of Nina, Brittain suddenly sees herself inscribed as an amalgam of Geoffrey, Victor, and Roland, whose disfigured male visages she sees reflected in the mirror are the only legitimate faces of war trauma. She is the reflection of loss, the embodiment of trauma itself.

As I suggested earlier, gendered identification has the potential to mark the traumatized as traumatized. In this moment of self-(mis)recognition, Brittain is defaced by a trauma that is reserved for men only. Embittered by the restrictions placed on women’s involvement in the war, Brittain is nevertheless exposed to brutal experiences that are not considered war trauma, and thus never named nor treated as such. Deprived of a language with which to describe her psychological damage and denied access to a sympathetic audience because she is a woman, Brittain describes her experiences as a soldier would, which simultaneously aligns her memoir with that of her male contemporaries and elevates her experience to the heroism of soldiers. This strategy allows her to report her personal losses without the threat of being dismissed as a weeping, wallowing woman.

Constructions of gender, for Brittain, have an enormous impact on what kinds of trauma she experiences, how that experience is internalized, and what modes of testimony are available to her. Moreover, Brittain’s memoir illustrates the impact that trauma can have on how one experiences gendered identities. Trauma and gender can thus be understood as reciprocal in nature, a relationship that must also be situated within the larger social and political context that

circumscribes the construction of selfhood itself. Autobiographical writing, as both social and political engagement, participates in this process of self-construction. In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin states that “even though [...] there is a legitimate sense in which autobiographies testify to the individual’s experience of selfhood, that testimony is necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed” (4). In Brittain’s post-war culture, the available modes of identity and discourse were severely restricted by gender. Drawing a parallel between therapy and life-writing, Eakin refers to psychologist John Shotter:

“what we talk of *as* our experience of our reality is constituted for us very largely by the *already established* ways in which we *must* talk in our attempts to *account* for ourselves—and for it—to the others around us....And only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate.” So pervasive is this discursive discipline that not only our talking but “our understanding, and apparently our experience of ourselves, *will be constrained also*.” (qtd. in Eakin 62)

Eakin also cites Kenneth J. Gergen, who “argues aggressively for ‘social constructivism’ as the most appropriate perspective through which to approach the phenomena of autobiographical memory: ‘To report on one’s memories is not so much a matter of consulting mental images as it is engaging in a sanctioned form of telling’” (110). For Vera Brittain, whose legitimacy as one who could speak from the position of the war wounded was under constant scrutiny, the sanctioned forms of telling were highly restrictive and dictated the form and manner in which she was able to deliver her memoir.

Testament of Youth for a Modern Audience

In 2015, a film adaptation of Brittain's memoir was released. Although still restricted by the sanctioned forms of telling that dictate all public forms of testimony, Brittain's story no longer faces the same challenge of finding a receptive audience⁸. The moviegoers of today are familiar with female war heroines. As at least two film critics⁹ have pointed out, Director James Kent makes a direct reference to one of the most famous scenes in *Gone With the Wind*. As Brittain and the other VADs scramble to cope with the sea of injured and dying men lying in the mud outside the medical facilities at Étaples, the camera lifts up and pans out to give us a God's-eye view of the devastation. This crane shot evokes the scene in which Scarlett O'Hara attends to the injured soldiers of the Confederacy.

According to *NY Times* film critic Stephen Holden, this visual comparison "reminds you of the degree to which Hollywood molded our ideas of conflict and places 'Testament of Youth' in a continuum of commercial high-minded war movies." Holden's reading goes some of the way towards understanding Kent's tip of the hat towards Victor Fleming, director of *Gone With the Wind*. Indeed, our recognition of the scene encourages us to think about the need for remembrance in the face of endless war. More to the point, however, is Tim Robey's observation about the parallels between Scarlett and Vera:

In Brittain, [Kent] finds something of a Scarlett: single-minded, rebellious in her ambitions, and the object of many men's covetous love, whether it's her father (Dominic West), who resists Vera's desire to sit the Oxford entrance exam; her hearty brother, Edward (Taron Egerton); or two of his most handsome contemporaries, Roland (Kit

⁸ BoxOfficeMojo.com places *Testament of Youth* at the respectable position of 36 in the quarterly box office comparison chart at

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/quarterly/?chart=&quarter=Q2&yr=2015&view=releasedate>

⁹ Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* and Tim Robey of *The Telegraph*.

Harington) and Victor (Colin Morgan, a subtle standout), who quietly vie for her hand before they, like Edward, are shipped off to the Western Front.

The main difference between Vera and Scarlett, however, is that Vera rejects the attempt by her overwhelmingly male company to turn her into an object of desire. By evoking the image of Scarlett O'Hara and the Civil War, Kent not only pays homage to *Gone With the Wind*, but he effectively emphasizes the difference between these two heroines. While Scarlett worked within the gender system, using her feminine wiles to survive the Civil War, Vera never conformed to the gender norms that dictated what women could and could not do. Kent and screenwriter Juliette Towhidi thankfully uphold Brittain's rejection of such boundaries. Although it would have been easy to emphasize the stunning beauty of Alicia Vikander, the actress who plays Brittain, Kent and Towhidi avoid participating in the kind of "covetous love" that others submit her to.

In addition to being familiar with female war heroines, today's modern audience is used to seeing war films on the big screen, and is well versed in stories of trauma. Yet in these aspects, too, Kent and Towhidi diverge from the "commercial high-minded war movies" that came before it. As Holden points out, "The movie is also the stronger for having no battle sequences or scenes depicting acts of courage, though you hear about such heroics after the fact." By resisting the imperative of so many contemporary directors to create the most horrific and bloody scenes of combat imaginable, Kent and Towhidi preserve the fact that this war story is from Brittain's perspective, one limited to the aftermath of battle.

In spite of the limited battle scenes, it is the war that makes up the crux of this film. Towhidi takes on the considerable challenge of condensing approximately 650 pages into a feature-length film, requiring a significant amount of omission. Unsurprisingly, the filmmakers

focus on Brittain's experience as a VAD and her appalling succession of personal losses during the war. Notwithstanding this attention to the emotionally wrenching war years, Kent and Towhidi preserve Brittain's sense of dignity throughout, highlighting the feminist inclinations that strengthened her resolve and showcasing her development into an anti-war activist. Indeed, what one comes away with is the sense that Brittain became a Woman as a result of her experience, in much the same way that boys presumably become men through war—ironic, considering that this is the myth that motivates Edward, Roland, Victor, and Geoffrey to enlist in a war that ultimately destroys them in the prime of their youth. Downplayed is the sense of long-term trauma suffered by Brittain. The Malta germ is relegated to a brief fever, the recurring nightmares are reduced to a few bad nights at Oxford, and the hallucinations are completely removed.

The last scene we see is of Brittain revisiting the lake in which she swam with her brother and Victor before the war. As Brittain removes her clothes and submerges into the water, the carefree young woman she once was is transformed into the experienced woman she is now, a scene of baptism that confirms her development into Womanhood. One might even describe the film version of Brittain as having experienced not PTSD, but PTG—Posttraumatic Growth. A new and controversial term, PTG is a concept developed in 1996 by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, both of whom also co-edited the *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth: Research and Practice*. Dr. Darlene Powell Garlington¹⁰ defines PTG in the following way:

¹⁰ Dr. Garlington works for the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE), a division of the Department of Defense. Given the DoD's history of downplaying the issue of PTSD and their responsibility to veterans with long-term mental health issues as a result of military service, their support and promotion of PTG must be viewed with suspicion.

the positive psychological change experienced as a result of a struggle with challenging life circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual and/or an individual's way of understanding the world and one's their [sic] place in it. It is an experience of improvement that for some is deeply profound.

Kent and Towhidi's version of Vera Brittain certainly seems fit this description. Having begun as a naïve, carefree young girl who convinced her father to allow her brother to enlist, Vera ends the film as a mature, wise woman who, we are told by these final on-screen words, leaves a political legacy through her writing and activism:

“Testament of Youth” was published in 1933, to immediate acclaim. The first print-run sold out in a day, and the book became the voice of a generation. It remains in print to this day, as one of the most powerful war memoirs ever written.

Vera became a life-long pacifist and campaigner for women's rights, and a successful novelist and journalist.

She and George married and had two children. Their daughter, Shirley Williams, became a leading force in British politics, and now sits in the House of Lords.

As burdened by loss as she is, she will not drown, nor will she forget—a resolution whose significance is amplified for the audience sitting in the movie theater, bearing witness to her loss almost a century later.

Conclusion

The film version of *Testament of Youth* illustrates how sanctioned forms of telling are, then, differentiated according to time and place, among other factors. This is not to say, however, that women are no longer restrained by gender norms in what they can say about war. Although

the restrictions on women's writing are not as rigid as they were in Brittain's time, women are still subject to sanctioned forms of telling, especially when it comes to war writing, a genre still dominated by men. As my chapter on women writing about the war in Iraq will demonstrate, although the realm of traumatic experience for women has expanded to combat situations, the kinds of trauma American female soldiers experience are very much dictated by their embodied identities, which in turn influences how they process trauma, and how they externalize their traumas. The imperative to write in a masculine voice, in particular, is a narrative strategy that will rematerialize in another memoir by an American translator in the U.S. Army. And the effect of trauma on gendered identities, briefly hinted at in Brittain's facial hallucinations, will become a primary theme for many of the women soldiers scarred by their experience in the military.

Chapter 2

Obscene Testimony:

Consummation and Communion in Elie Wiesel's *Day*

“Once the death-world has existed, it continues to exist, for eternity as it were; it becomes part of the sediment of an irrevocable past, without which contemporary experience is incomprehensible.”

—Edith Wyschogrod

“Gender analysis is indispensable in any effort to understand Nazi constructions of ‘race’ and ‘blood’ because systems of gender are so central to how people organize and give meaning to their world.”

—Doris L. Bergen

Elie Wiesel's second novel, *Day* (1961), is perhaps best known as the concluding text of the trilogy that begins with *Night* (1958), Wiesel's most famous and devastating account of his experience at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Unlike *Night*, *Day* is not a memoir, and does not deal directly with Wiesel's experience of the Holocaust. However the protagonist of *Day* is named Eliezer, who, like Wiesel, is a writer and Holocaust survivor who is struck and nearly killed by a taxi cab in New York City. What follows is the story of his struggle with recovery—from the car accident, and, more crucially, from the camps.

Day thus engages with questions of memory and survival that are similar to the trauma narratives Cathy Caruth describes in *Unclaimed Experience*, stories that participate in “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Years after the Holocaust, Eliezer is a successful journalist living in New York City with his beautiful girlfriend, Kathleen. Yet he walks around in a fog, alienated from others,

oppressed by the suffocating heat, appalled by what he sees as decaying old men all around him. In some ways, he is still there, in the concentration camps. His body responds with revulsion while attempting to eat a bloody hamburger because it reminds him of the man in the camps who was caught eating the flesh of a dead man. The neon lights and the careless laughter of the people populating Times Square are affronts to his lingering memories of the camps. Survival, it turns out, is unbearable, and Eliezer tries to escape by stepping out in front of an oncoming cab. In the hospital, plagued by fever and immobilized by pain, Eliezer must choose between life and death, between the commitments of his present life and a devotion to his past and all he has lost. As Caruth notes in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*” (9). It is this crisis of survival that we witness in this story.

The titles of the trilogy—*Night*, *Dawn*, *Day*—suggest an arc from darkness to light, from trauma to renewal. Whether or not that promise is actually fulfilled by the conclusion of *Day* is, however, up for debate. Without going into a detailed analysis, Susan Rubin Suleiman states that “the actual movement in this trilogy is from night to a day whose most salient characteristic is that it is bearable only to the extent it refuses to put the night behind it” (565). She claims that to concur with Harry James Cargas’ suggestion that *Day* is uplifting, one would have to “ignore a great deal” (574, note 3), neglecting to specify what that would be. Unfortunately, and perhaps due to the sheer magnitude of its predecessor *Night*, *Day* has attracted little more than cursory comments such as those by Suleiman and Cargas.

Wiesel’s meditation on the possibility of recovery in *Day* is indeed complex, and defies the easy closure one might expect from its title. The ending is deliberately vague, which indicates Wiesel’s prioritization of the narrative process over meaning or message. Or, to put it

in Claude Lanzmann's words, "There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. [...] the act of transmitting is the only thing that matters" (204). Indeed, it is this very idea of obscenity that will be central to Wiesel's act of transmitting. Disgusting, repulsive, offensive, abhorrent—these are the words that describe the obscene, making it perhaps the only word one could adequately use in relation to the Holocaust.

In her work on obscenity law and literature, Florence W. Dore notes that "'obscene' means precisely that which cannot be articulated" (82). Obscenity is that which is *out-of-scene*, out of place. It is that which exists outside the boundaries of representation, making it a fitting framework within which to render traumatic experience, which is likewise marked with unspeakability. Dori Laub, a survivor of the Holocaust himself, puts it this way:

What do I mean by the notion of a witness from inside? To understand it one has to conceive of the world of the Holocaust as a world in which the very imagination of the *Other* was no longer possible. There was no longer an other to which one could say "Thou" in the hope of being heard, of being recognized as a subject, of being answered. The historical reality of the Holocaust became, thus, a reality which extinguished philosophically the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another. But when one cannot turn to a "you" one cannot say "thou" even to oneself.

The Holocaust created in this way a world in which one *could not bear witness to oneself*. ("An Event Without a Witness" 81-82)

Events that defy comprehension take us to the limits of language, thereby rendering its victims unable to seek out understanding and empathy, or "the very possibility of address" in Laub's words.

The implications of this loss of language on one's sense of selfhood are profound when one considers the role of language in subject production. According to the logic of Laub's statement, self and Other are mutually constitutive through language; one is "recognized as a subject" through communion with an Other. This discursively produced subjectivity echoes the theories of Emile Benveniste, who "describes discourse as a signifying transaction between two persons, one of whom addresses the other, and in the process defines him or herself" (Silverman 48). In fact, according to Kaja Silverman, "without language there would be no subjectivity. Benveniste insists that the individual finds his or her cultural identity only within discourse, by means of the pronouns 'I' and 'you'" (45). And in *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby applies the concept of the discursive subject specifically to life writing, declaring "the self as the product of 'signifying practices,' especially 'narrative constructions or stories'" (qtd. in Eakin 21). Kerby's model thus empowers the subject by promoting the idea that "self narration is the defining act of the human subject, an act which is not only 'descriptive of the self' but *'fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject'*" (qtd. in Eakin 21). Given the critical role of language in the realization of selfhood and subjectivity, the stakes of trauma's impact on language becomes quite clear. When one is deprived of the ability to speak about one's self or "bear witness to oneself," then, the I is ruptured, lost, and broken.

It then follows that to return to language, to recover the power of narration, is to recover the I of selfhood, to make a claim of agency. Is Wiesel's act of writing—or Eliezer's act of narrating—a triumph over his past and an assertion of himself as subject? Such a process would fall under what James Dawes calls the "emancipatory model" of violence and discourse, whereby speech acts as a counterforce to the language-shattering effects of violence:

Insofar as violence-as-coercion is an assault upon free agency, and the act of speaking is conceived of as the fundamental sign and application of our free agency, then the volitional use of language is miraculously an assault upon violence, a contradiction of its felt coercion through the assertion of the will. (2)

This language-based model of recovery from trauma is what Freud and his contemporaries based their original “talking cure” treatment methods on, wherein patients were encouraged to assert their mastery over their past by choosing to recall and reenact original scenes of violence. Indeed, the importance of bearing witness to one’s self is still a critical component in the treatment of traumatized individuals and communities.

The logic outlined above is, however, problematized by *Day*, as it has been elsewhere by Wiesel. In opposition to the emancipatory model, Dawes describes the “disciplinary model” in which language and violence are understood as “mutually constitutive” (1), whereby “War initiated, executed, and remembered [...] is an example of massive, organized violence that is precisely dependent upon speech” (14). There exists no other example more illustrative of this model than the Holocaust, which came into existence partly through the systematic deployment of officialese and euphemistic language and which, on the other hand, stands as “the quintessential example of violence’s quest for pure and total silence” (Dawes 158).

Wiesel implicitly understands this relationship. In his Preface to the New Translation of *Night* in 2006, Wiesel questions himself as to why he wrote his memoir, saying finally that he had “a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory” (6). Yet he despairs over language’s capacity to be complicit with violence, saying, “how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these

words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else” (7). This sense of helplessness before the enormity and incomprehensibility of the Holocaust follows him to the writing of *Day*, in whose Preface Wiesel states, “As I have said elsewhere, I feel unable to tell the story of this event, much less imagine it. A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel—or else it is not about Auschwitz” (230).

Testimony, for Wiesel, is thus not a triumphant assertion of free will or an assault upon violence. Rather, it is a declaration of history, a way to keep the obscenity of the Holocaust before our eyes, a way to make the unspeakable speak. And it is only in this way that he can approximate a connection to another. In order to do so, Wiesel found that “it would be necessary to invent a new language” (*Night* 7), saying that he “trusted the silence that envelops and transcends words” (*Night* 8). Although these comments were made in reference to *Night*, the same holds true in *Day*, though his narrative strategy is vastly different. As I said earlier, *Day* is not a memoir, and it does not recount his experience in the camps directly. The story only hints that he is a survivor through the brief memory of the man eating human flesh in the barracks, the story of Shmuel the slaughterer, and through a few other suggestive memories. In fact, we never hear his testimony directly—we only see the aftershocks of his experience, the effect of his confessions on others, and the impact of others’ testimony on him. Wiesel’s strategy is similar to what Caruth describes in *Unclaimed Experience* as “the locus of referentiality” (6) whereby the “understanding of trauma [is] in terms of its indirect relation to reference” (7). In other words, we can often only know trauma obliquely. We cannot see the event, but only evidence that it happened—indicators pointing to the thing but not the thing itself.

Wiesel’s “new language” operates in a similar way, speaking to us through the evidence it leaves behind—the excess or residual waste of trauma. Moreover, it is on the bodies of *women*

that this residue is inscribed, a specifically gendered strategy of storytelling that taps into the multiple ways women are coded. As Simone de Beauvoir discusses in *The Second Sex*, of all the myths constructed around Femininity, “none is more anchored in masculine hearts than the feminine ‘mystery’” (268). Building off of Beauvoir, Judith Butler says, “to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men” (*Gender Trouble* xxvii). Woman, in other words, is always-already coded as unrepresentable, as *obscene*. Thus the unspeakable experiences that Eliezer suffered in the concentration camps are communicated through the women who populate the text and whose unknowability serves to speak his story. We can understand this kind of displaced form of storytelling through Paul John Eakin’s theory of “the relational life, the self’s story viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover, but most often a parent—we might call such an individual the *proximate other* to signify the intimate tie to the relational autobiographer” (86). In *Day*, Eliezer’s story is told through multiple proximate others whose *ruptured* relationships with Eliezer indicate his profound isolation in the absence of an Other of address.

Sarah

On the first day of his accident, Eliezer cries out for “Sarah,” his mother’s name. He explains to Kathleen that ““It is a serious thing to forget your mother’s name. It is like forgetting your own origin. Remember: ‘Eliezer, the son of Sarah, the son of Sarah, Sarah, Sarah...’” (303). As his explanation to Kathleen indicates, the memory of his mother is intimately tied to Eliezer’s fundamental sense of self, making the stakes of memory explicit. But if to forget your mother’s name is to forget your origin, to remember is, for Eliezer, also to remain haunted by the past.

Sarah was killed in the camps, but because he didn't witness her death, he reflects internally that "sometimes I look for my mother. She's not dead. Not really. Here and there I see one of her features in some woman on the subway, on a bus, in a café. And these women, I love and hate them at the same time" (319). Sarah's present absence is inscribed on the faces of the women he sees, turning them into relics of the past and animating his loss. Her absence is especially imprinted on Kathleen, who, like the other women he meets, both reminds him of Sarah and is profoundly *not* Sarah:

Kathleen. Tears were coming to her eyes. My mother didn't cry. At least not when other people were there. She only offered her tears to God.

Kathleen looked a little like my mother; she had her high forehead, and her chin had the same pure lines. But Kathleen wasn't dead. And she was crying. (319)

Kathleen, as a living, embodied woman, is both a reminder of his mother and an affront to her memory. Where Sarah is saintly, stern, and sacred, Kathleen is emotional, embodied, and guilty of being alive when his mother is not.

For Eliezer to evoke the name "Sarah" at the brink of death is to call out to the womb and recall his origins, yet it is also to return to the scene of another transformative moment. What he doesn't tell Kathleen is that "Sarah" is also the name of a young prostitute, whom he met in Paris after the war. Like his mother, Sarah was also in the concentration camps, and although she survived, her experience was so horrifying that she, too, was essentially lost there. And just as the memory of his mother haunts the faces of the women he sees, so Sarah would tell Eliezer "something terrible, abominable, words that [he] would always hear whenever [he] tried to find happiness in a woman's body" (317). She, too, will be inscribed on the bodies of the women who will come after, a residue of the Holocaust that will haunt all of Eliezer's relationships with

women. But before he subjects himself to Sarah's story, he has one last imaginary dialogue with the maternal Sarah in a kind of Oedipal substitution of the whore for the lost mother: "*have you forgotten that a man has no right to marry a woman who bears his own mother's name? Have you forgotten that this brings bad luck? That a mother dies from this?*" (311). His mother's objection to the incestuous implications of sharing her name with his "bride" casts the shadow of obscenity upon the entire scene. To become engaged with this Sarah is to symbolically kill his mother, the horror of which is ultimately dismissed by the horror of reality: "*No, Mother. I haven't forgotten. But you can no longer die. You are already dead*" (311).

By confirming her death, Eliezer clears the way for a kind of rebirth through this Sarah's story. In her room, about to engage in the male rite of passage that would confirm his masculine status, he remembers being "afraid of afterward: I would never be the same anymore" (307). Believing his transformation will be through sex, young Eliezer attempts to hide his inexperience and nervousness by assuming a dominant male posture: "In the movies the man always kisses the woman before making love to her. I stepped toward her, looked at her intensely, then harshly pulled her toward me and kissed her on the mouth for a long time" (308). And in the movies, the woman usually responds erotically to such passionate behavior, at once confirming the male lead's dominance and her own status as object. Instead of responding favorably to Eliezer's performance, however, Sarah reacts to the threat of rape inherent in such a sexually aggressive act, staring at him with "animal-like terror" (308) and momentarily lapsing into a distant, catatonic state. Eliezer's kiss "set in motion an unknown mechanism" (309) in Sarah, similar to the effect Kathleen's kisses will have on him later, when he says "Every kiss reopened an old wound. And I was aware that I was still capable of suffering. That I was still answering the calls of the past" (284). The lingering residue of this kiss, the kiss that inaugurates Sarah's traumatic

and traumatizing story, will haunt Eliezer, insinuating itself into all future interactions with women.

With this kiss, the promise of consummation is replaced by that of confession, a shift prompted by Eliezer, who claims he “only wanted to understand” (309). As Lanzmann has indicated, however, the pursuit of understanding is never simple and never innocent. Indeed, Eliezer’s initial quest to understand is as much an exertion of masculine privilege as is his sexual advances, a parallel framework of gendered power relations that is illuminated by Roland Barthes’ claim that “The pleasure of the text is...an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)” (10). Sarah, as text, likewise holds the promise of pleasure through an unveiling. Described as “inscrutable,” “elusive,” the “girl with the strange smile” (306), she is sphinxlike, a riddle to be deciphered, an element of plot-space, in Jurij Lotman’s terminology. Seen in this light, his desire to understand is akin to the desire of the camp officers, who made Sarah ““The “special present” that they all wanted to give themselves”” (317). Whether prodded to open up to Eliezer or forced to open her legs for the camp officers, Sarah is positioned as an object to be revealed, that alluring “source of mystery and unknowability” that Beauvoir and Butler refer to.

Rather than passively expose herself to satisfy the curiosity of Eliezer, however, Sarah suddenly transforms from a demure, enigmatic girl to a cold and hardened figure: ““You really want to know who I am?” Her voice had become hard, pitiless. ‘Of course,’ I answered, hiding my fear. ‘In that case...’” (311). This moment when Sarah transforms from the object of Eliezer’s curiosity to the speaking subject in a position of power might be described as a moment of “anamorphosis,” an optical term used by Jacques Lacan to clarify his distinction between reality and the Real. As Louis Sass explains:

The key element for Lacan is the shift of perspective that occurs when something that had once seemed to be merely a potential *object* of the subject's attentive gaze is suddenly revealed to be itself a *subject*, typically a threatening subject who takes the first subject as its own object. This is the moment when "Reality" turns into "the Real." (163)

To put this dynamic in gendered terms, she becomes an example of what Butler describes as a "female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position" (*Gender Trouble* xxvii-xviii). Sarah challenges Eliezer's position of privilege and his patronizing endeavor "to denude, to know" by revealing a story in which he becomes a member of the accused. She transforms into a speaking subject whose story will not so much be presented to Eliezer, but inflicted.

Sarah was just twelve years old when she was sent to the barracks that served as a brothel for the camp's officers. One night a drunk officer decided to take her virginity as his birthday present, in spite of the efforts by the other women to protect her by offering up themselves instead. After that night, Sarah becomes the "'special present' of the barracks [...] more popular than all the other women combined" (317). All the men came to her, as Eliezer comes to her now—an indictment of masculine desire that refuses to allow him to sit passively by as listener:

"Did you ever sleep with a twelve-year-old woman?" she asked me.

Her voice was calm, composed, naked. I tried not to scream. I couldn't justify myself. It would have been too easy.

"But you have felt like it, haven't you?" she asked when she noticed I kept quiet.

"All men feel like it."

[...] "Tell me," she went on in a somewhat soft voice. "Is that why you're not making love to me? Because I'm no longer twelve?" (313)

She picks up this line of accusation again later: “‘Men like to make love to women who are twelve.’ Again she turned her head toward me and the vise tightened around my throat with renewed vigor. ‘You too,’ she said. ‘If I were twelve, you would have made love to me’” (315). Just as Eliezer sees his mother in the women on the streets, so Sarah sees her perpetrators in every man she meets; for both of them, the horrors of the Holocaust are very much still alive, and still happening. Sarah repeatedly aims her accusations at Eliezer, indicting all heterosexual male desire as perverse and violent. Eliezer admits to the reader that he “knew there had been Sarahs in the concentration camps” (312), suggesting that camp brothels were quite commonplace. Indeed, Sarah describes herself as “A girl, a girl like many others” (310), a statement that extends her history of sexual assault and commodification to that of the female experience in general.

Sarah’s testimony, and her accusations against Eliezer as a symbolic participant, as one of many who would assault her, has a physical effect on Eliezer, who repeatedly describes the act of listening as having a vise tightening around his throat: “I am going to die, I thought. And my fingers, clenched around my throat, kept pressing harder and harder, against my will” (313). Eliezer’s response to Sarah’s story illustrates how “language can be a form of physical violence, not simply analogous to physical injury but rather an actual though distinctive form of injury itself” (Dawes 18). By showing Eliezer choking himself in response to Sarah’s story, Wiesel stages the mutually constitutive relationship between language and violence that helped facilitate the extermination of six million Jews. On the other hand, Eliezer’s response also enacts the fantasy of the effect of testimony on the listener. In “Why I Write,” Wiesel reflects on the sense of impotency he has felt in his writing, saying “All words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish,

lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing” (23). In this scene, Sarah’s words materialize into a physical assault on her listener, threatening his very life.

Eliezer’s self-choking moreover illustrates the involuntary silence often imposed upon the witness to horror. Placed in the role of silent witness, deprived of speech, Eliezer is powerless and emasculated, a position of subjugation that he attempts to deflect by reassuming the role of male lover: “I couldn’t listen to her anymore. I had reached the end of my strength, and I thought: One more word and I’ll die. [...] For a brief moment I had the idea that perhaps I should take her right away. Abruptly. Without gestures, without useless words” (315). Eliezer’s attempt to wrest control of the situation by turning her back into object only incites Sarah’s derision: “She laughed. She was trying to laugh like the other one, like the drunkard in the barracks. But she didn’t succeed. She wasn’t drunk. There was nothing obscene in her hands, or in her voice. She was as pure as one could be” (316). Sarah is not obscene; rather, she is inscribed with obscenity. With the laugh of the drunken officer, she is performing obscenity, acting out the obscenity of the horrors inflicted on her body.

Unable to use her as a whore, Eliezer calls her a “saint,” a label that aligns Sarah with his mother and Grandmother. It is a common response to victims of atrocity that sacralizes survivors in an attempt to displace horror with the divine,¹¹ a title she vehemently rejects. “‘Didn’t I tell you how old I was when I had my first man? How old I was when I embarked on my career?’ She stressed the word ‘career,’ looking defiant as she asked her question” (316). By using the

¹¹ In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra touches on this relationship between the traumatic and the sublime, saying “trauma may itself be sacralized as a catastrophic revelation or, in more secular terms, be transvalued as the radical other or the sublime. [...] The difficulty is that this frame of reference may either foreclose any attempt to work through problems or immediately conflate the latter with a necessarily Pollyanna or redemptive dialectical *Aufhebung*” (108, note 20).

word “career,” Sarah defies Eliezer’s attempt to label her a martyr, a label that would make her and her abuse intelligible within a traditional field of morality.

Yet what Tadeusz Borowski called the concentration camp universe¹² is not a world where understanding is possible, or even permissible. This is not a world that abides by the conventional notions of perpetrator and victim, pleasure and pain, life and death—and this is where the obscenity of Sarah’s testimony lies. Everything up to this point has been narrative foreplay. Her story is slowly building to a climax:

Sarah, in her black underwear, one leg slightly bent, suddenly stopped laughing. I felt the final blow was coming. Instinctively, I started moving back toward the door. That’s where I heard her scream.

“You’re mad!”

“Be quiet! For heaven’s sake, be quiet!” I shouted.

I knew she would talk, that she would tell me something terrible, abominable, words that I would always hear whenever I tried to find happiness in a woman’s body.

“Be still!” I begged.

“A saint, me?” she screamed like a madwoman. “I want you to know this and remember it: Sometimes I felt pleasure with them...I hated myself afterward and even while it lasted, but my body sometimes loved them...And my body is me...Me, a saint? Do you know what I really am? I was telling you, I am—” (317-318)

Eliezer flees before she declares herself, leaving Sarah to occupy the space of that abortive “—”, the space of obscenity.

¹² According to *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, Borowski, a writer and survivor of Auschwitz, “limited his language and metaphors to those of the camps realities, thus sealing both his and the readers’ minds into the concentration camp universe—from which he allowed no literary escape” (Baumel 395).

By figuring the dialogue between Eliezer and Sarah as a sexual act, Wiesel preserves the tension aroused by Eliezer's foray into manhood through the body of a woman while simultaneously eliciting the symbolic potential of intercourse. According to Robert Scholes, "The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. [...] For what connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgiastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation" (qtd. in *Alice Doesn't* 108).¹³ Eliezer's escape is an act of castration at the point of climax. The ending—and with it, understanding—is withheld, making Sarah, represented by the "—", a stand-in for obscenity itself, an impenetrable, unknowable body that represents the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. James Berger's description of the relationship between sex and apocalypse helps further explain how Sarah comes to embody the obscenity of the Holocaust:

Sex, *jouissance*, the impossible and forbidden discourses of sexuality, can figure apocalypse, the place beyond the limits of language. So can waste, refuse, excrement: the ultimate, most worthless remainders. What is there left after the end? Paradise or shit. Or some condition in which these two opposites have become indistinguishable. [...] The most valuable and most worthless, most precious and most despised, take the same sign; both are "priceless," beyond the possibility of measurement or evaluation. In post-apocalyptic representation, dirt, excrement, the wound, the corpse all can be symptoms of catastrophe and instruments of revelation. (17)

Sarah embodies all of this: purity and perversion, redemption and condemnation, past and present.

¹³ See Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* for a discussion of "the specifically erotic nature of the tension of writing" (103).

Sarah occupies the same symbolic space as his mother, whose death he did not bear witness to. And like his mother, this Sarah exists only in his memory, having disappeared from the hotel and from the memories of all potential witnesses when Eliezer returns to look for her. “Sometimes I think I’m still looking for her” (318), he says, just as he still looks for his mother, an indication of the profound effect her story has on him. As Laub states, “By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (“Bearing Witness” 57). Similarly, Eliezer says “To listen to a story under such circumstances is to play a part in it, to take sides, to say yes or no, to move one way or the other. From then on there is a before and an after. And even to forget becomes a cowardly acceptance” (311). Her story becomes part of his narrative, her trauma a cipher for his.

Grandmother and Kathleen

The deployment of Sarah’s story in the interest of telling Eliezer’s own trauma narrative aligns with Eakin’s theory of the relational life. Yet Eliezer’s most significant proximate other is neither Sarah the prostitute, nor Sarah his mother. Rather, it is his grandmother who figures as the key to Eliezer’s story and to his relationship with Kathleen. As with the two Sarahs, his grandmother is described as saintly and bears an even more oppressive presence in his life, as symbolized by the “enormous black shawl which she never seemed able to part with” (255), and which hangs over him, “as black as the cloud above the cemetery” (327). The influence of his grandmother on his identity is revealed in his reticence to talk about himself to Kathleen: “To talk about myself, really talk about myself, I would have had to tell the story of my grandmother.

I didn't feel like expressing it in words: Grandmother could only be expressed in prayers" (263-264). He thinks of her again when he wakes from his coma in a feverish delirium:

I thought: Grandmother would have understood. It was hot in the airless, waterless chambers. It was hot in the room where her livid body was crushed by other livid bodies. Like me, she must have opened her mouth to drink air, to drink water. But there was no water where she was, there was no air. She was only drinking death, as you drink water or air, mouth open, eyes closed, fingers clenched.

Suddenly I felt a strange need to speak out loud. To tell the story of Grandmother's life and death, to describe her black shawl that used to frighten me until I was reassured by her kind, simple expression. Grandmother was my refuge. Every time my father scolded me, she would intervene: fathers are like that, she'd explain smilingly. They get angry over nothing. (258-259)

Eliezer's grandmother represents to him the maternal ideal, a warm bosom on which to weep, in stark contrast to the authoritarian figure of his father. "I could tell her the whole truth" (259), he writes. Even in the most extreme of physical pain, she would have understood. His own bodily pain allows him to now reciprocate that understanding as he imagines his grandmother's experience in the gas chamber, a moment of communion that suddenly compels him to speak. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). By imagining a shared pain with his dying grandmother, by communing with her bodily agony, Eliezer is struck by an urge to speak. And although he is compelled to tell her story, the story he would really be telling is of himself, a *relational* life story.

As with his mother, to forget her, then, would be to forget a critical part of himself. And as with his mother and Sarah the prostitute, he is reminded of her absence through the women he sees and on whose bodies are inscribed his loss: “when I look at a woman, it is always the image of my grandmother that I see” (270). Appropriately, his grandmother makes her first ghostly appearance when he meets Kathleen. While taking a silent walk along the Seine, during which Eliezer commands her not to talk so he can think about death, Kathleen touches his arm, jolting him out of his reverie. “‘Don’t touch me,’ I told her. I was thinking of my grandmother and you cannot truly remember a dead grandmother if you aren’t alone, if a girl with black hair—black like my grandmother’s shawl—touches your arm” (255). Kathleen reminds Eliezer of his mother and his grandmother, and this recognition may be the source of his attraction to her—“we already know each other” (252), he tells the couple who introduces them. “With her,” he thinks, “there could be real communication” (252), echoing his sentiments toward his grandmother.

Yet Kathleen is neither his mother nor his grandmother. She is a living woman, sensuous in her materiality, a body offering distraction. As he walks along the snowy Seine with Kathleen, he guiltily imagines that “it was her body—my grandmother’s white and black body—that whipped my face, as if to punish me for having forgotten. No, Grandmother! No! I haven’t forgotten. Every time I’m cold, I think of you, I think only of you” (256). Just as the prostitute invokes the imagined wrath of his mother, so Kathleen’s touch invokes shame, a shame he counters with thoughts of his grandmother’s stark, desexualized body.

The scene in which Eliezer meets Sarah echoes the scene in which Eliezer meets Kathleen, and this parallel reinforces Kathleen’s place as sexualized object. She is a fully embodied entity, introduced to us as an object of desire, catcalled by men in the street and ogled in the restaurant where they lunch before the accident. Eliezer reinforces Kathleen’s bodily

identity by repeatedly describing her as “beautiful” and focusing on her hair and the features of her face. By thus establishing Kathleen as object, Wiesel positions her body as a readable surface, intelligible in all her feminine manifestations. And when Eliezer reveals his past, he does so through her body. What we hear is not the story of his traumatic experience, but the effect of his story on her:

“More! Go on! More!”

She was saying “more” in the eager voice of a woman who wants her pleasure to last, who asks the man she loves not to stop, not to leave her, not to disappoint her, not to abandon her halfway between ecstasy and nothing. “More...More...”

I kept looking at her and holding her. I wanted to get rid of all the filth that was in me and graft it onto her pupils and her lips, which were so pure, so innocent, so beautiful.

I bared my soul. My most contemptible thoughts and desires, my most painful betrayals, my vaguest lies, I tore them from inside me and placed them in front of her, like an impure offering, so she could see them and smell their stench.

But Kathleen was drinking in every one of my words as if she wanted to punish herself for not having suffered before. From time to time she insisted in the same eager voice that sounded so much like the old prostitute’s, “More...More...”

Finally I stopped, exhausted. (272)

Consummation, confession, communion, contamination—all of these terms come together in this scene of testimony. Eliezer never actually tells the reader what he has experienced. Rather, he “grafts” his story onto Kathleen’s innocent body, whose obscene response translates the “filth” of his past. Wiesel stages what Cathy Caruth describes as the risk of listening to testimony: “to be able to listen to the impossible [...] is also to have been *chosen* by it, *before* the possibility of

mastering it with knowledge. This is its danger—the danger, as some have put it, of the trauma’s ‘contagion,’ of the traumatization of the ones who listen” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 10). Kathleen’s body becomes a vessel for his pain, a physical expression of the unspeakable. It is an act of sadistic defloration, a discursive kind of foreplay that will be followed by a violent consummation: “I took her brutally, trying to hurt her. She bit her lips and didn’t cry out” (274). Like Sarah did to him, Eliezer inflicts his story on Kathleen, a story that can only find expression in the pre-linguistic sounds common to both sex and pain. In “Why I Write,” Wiesel says that “The language of night was not human, it was primitive, almost animal—hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sound of beating. [...] This was the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place” (23). It is the language of obscenity, here inscribed on the body of Kathleen. Eliezer’s story—and with it, understanding—remains submerged beneath the skin of the text.

“From then on there is a before and an after,” Eliezer says of listening to Sarah’s story, and so it is with Kathleen. This scene in which Kathleen is brutalized by Eliezer’s testimony is a kind of rude initiation into suffering that will indicate what will be required of her. After a year together, they separate, and Kathleen enters into a loveless marriage with a wealthy man:

She had agreed to marry him precisely because she did not care about him. What she wanted was to suffer, to pay. Finally her husband understood: Kathleen saw in him not a companion but a kind of judge. She didn’t expect happiness from him, however limited, but punishment. [...] Their life became a torture chamber. (300)

Just as she submitted to Eliezer’s story as if she “wanted to punish herself for not having suffered before,” she submits to marriage as a form of masochism, as if to pay her dues, ultimately enabling Kathleen to present herself to him as a broken woman.

After her divorce, she returns to him and he thinks, “Kathleen the proud, Kathleen the untamable, Kathleen the queen—here she is. A beaten woman. A drowning woman” (299). The accident will be the final blow:

Poor Kathleen, I thought. Poor Kathleen. I have changed her. Kathleen so proud, Kathleen whose will was stronger than others’, Kathleen whose strength was pure and who was truly tough, Kathleen against whom men with character, strong-minded men, liked to pit themselves; now Kathleen didn’t even have the strength to hold back her tears, her words. I had transformed her. (283)

Kathleen’s post-marital decline is, like her erotic response to his confession, only meaningful as an expression of Eliezer’s trauma. And the more traumatized she becomes, the more attractive she is to Eliezer, who says, “Kathleen was beautiful when she suffered; her eyes were deeper, her voice warmer, fuller; her dark beauty was simpler and more human. Her suffering had a quality of saintliness. It was her way of offering herself” (239). He takes a kind of sadistic pleasure in her brokenness; her suffering eroticizes her, and it is only because Kathleen has completely lost her selfhood that Eliezer accepts her back into his life: “I thought: She must have suffered a lot. It is my turn to try to repair the damage. I have to treat her as if she were ill. I know. To do this is to insult her other self. But the other self doesn’t exist. No longer exists. And this one is broken” (322). Her lack of selfhood, her brokenness, mirrors that of Eliezer who, after the war, said, “I knew I no longer existed, that my real self had stayed *there*, that my present self had nothing in common with the other, the real one. I was like the skin shed by a snake” (270). It is only when she can act as a mirror, reflecting his own suffering, that he can accept her.

Speaking the Language of Men

In spite of her self-punishment, however, Kathleen never fully understands. She remains a “charming” girl to whom Eliezer feels he will need to lie in order to make happy. Although her body enacts the obscenity of his testimony, she remains incapable of moving beyond a kind of feminine naiveté about the power of love to heal all. In contrast, Eliezer’s conversations with men take place on a higher intellectual plane, strikingly distanced from the obscenity associated with women’s bodies. Soon after the war ended, Eliezer found himself on the deck of a ship at night, contemplating suicide. He is saved when a stranger appears, to whom he impulsively tells everything. Enveloped in darkness, “motionless and silent” (268), this man is anonymous, faceless, and disembodied—exactly the opposite of Kathleen. And in spite of Eliezer’s fragmented testimony, “The stranger didn’t ask for explanations” and stayed with him “lucidly to the end” (269), even saying he hated him for what he said—unlike Kathleen, who called him a saint. Eliezer has a similarly transcendent interchange with Dr. Paul Russel, who is described as all-knowing, almost God-like: “An indefinable bond had grown between us. We were speaking the mature language of men who are in direct contact with death” (245). His best friend, Gyula, also has a kind of otherworldly understanding with Eliezer that seems to be the prerogative of men only.

Ultimately, however, it is only Gyula who intuits Eliezer’s suicidal intentions. A Hungarian artist who may also be a camp survivor, Gyula is the picture of phallic power, “A giant in every sense of the word. Tall, robust, gray and rebellious hair, mocking and burning eyes; he pushed aside everything around: altars, ideas, mountains. Everything trembled, vibrated, at his touch, at the sight of him” (330). Hulking and brash, he “detested sentimentality” (330), had a “firm and decided voice” (331) and once told a woman he loved her by calling her “a dirty

little bitch” (336). It is this misogynistic bravado that endears him to Eliezer, and it is perhaps because Gyula is a fellow camp survivor that he is the one person to whom Eliezer wants to confess the suicidal nature of his accident. Gyula, however, rejects Eliezer’s confession, preferring instead to arrive at this knowledge through art. In so doing, Gyula echoes Wiesel in his strategy of speaking through silence rather than words. Gyula allows the truth to emerge through careful observation and artistic discovery, inscribing Eliezer’s story on his own face:

I was there, facing me. My whole past was there, facing me. It was a painting in which black, interspersed with a few red spots, dominated. The sky was a thick black. The sun, a dark gray. My eyes were a beating red, like Soutine’s. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgivable crime: to kill without a reason.

“You see,” Gyula said. “You don’t know how to speak; you are yourself only when you are silent.” (336)

It is only through a silent, embodied language that Eliezer is able to communicate his experience, and it takes the father-figure of Gyula to allow him to finally bear witness to himself. What he sees is not only himself, but all those who have died, especially his grandmother: “I looked at the portrait and hidden in its eyes I saw Grandmother with her black shawl” (338). Gyula then sets the portrait on fire, forcing him to symbolically bear witness to the death of his grandmother. “‘No!’ I exclaimed in despair. ‘Don’t do that! Gyula, don’t do it! Don’t burn Grandmother a second time! Stop, Gyula, stop!’” (339). Gyula, we are told in the last line of the novel, “had forgotten to take along the ashes” (339), symbolizing the residue of trauma that remains.

The trauma of the Holocaust is ultimately written on his own body, which he attempted to destroy when he stepped in front of the taxi. In a state of suspended animation, immobilized by

crippling pain, Eliezer undergoes another trauma that bears witness to the first. As Laub says, “The ‘second holocaust’ thus turns out to be itself a testimony to a history of repetition. Through its uncanny reoccurrence, the trauma of the second holocaust bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but, specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, *does not end*” (“Bearing Witness” 67). Similarly, Eliezer says, “What happened will happen again. The same causes bring about the same effects, the same hatreds. Repetition is a decisive factor in the tragic aspect of our condition” (265). In *Day*, this compulsory repetition is enacted through the bodies of women who reenact and reanimate the absence of his mother, grandmother, and even Sarah the prostitute, all of whom come together to form one lost maternal entity. Disembodied, idealized, sacralized, they haunt the present and keep Eliezer in the past, obstructing his ability to relate to others, preventing him from accepting Kathleen and the future she promises. Kathleen, for her part, is the totem of his trauma; her story of suffering maps to his. It is his inability to truly connect with her that signifies his enduring trauma, and marks his lack of connection within this post-holocaust world.

Conclusion

Although *Day* is identified as a novel, Wiesel admits that “certain episodes here are true—that is, taken from life” (230). Yet besides the fact of the accident, which actually happened to Wiesel in 1956, it is impossible to know what else was “taken from life.” In particular, it is unclear whether or not the female characters who figure so prominently in the text—Kathleen and Sarah the camp-survivor-turned-prostitute—are based on real-life people, and whether the real-life people—his grandmother and Sarah his mother—are realistically depicted in the book.

What we can say is that they are strategically constructed in this narrative for their symbolic potential. Freud's Dark Continent, the Bible's Eve, Oedipus' Sphinx, Perseus' Medusa—the female body has long been designated as the site of the sacred and profane, as that which is indecipherable, unknowable. As Teresa de Lauretis argues in *Technologies of Gender*, “woman, as subject of desire or of signification, is unrepresentable; or, better, that in the phallic order of patriarchal culture and in its theory, woman is unrepresentable except as representation” (20). Wiesel taps into this symbolic potential, whereby unutterable loss—loss of innocence, of the saintly, of the maternal ideal, and ultimately loss of selfhood—is transmitted through obscene female bodies.

If we look back through the trilogy as a whole, moreover, we can see a movement from a male-centric memoir to a more gender-inclusive text. *Night*, as a record of his time in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, is necessarily male-centric, since the men were separated from the women. It is where Wiesel witnessed the death of his father and of his faith in a paternal God, and where his contact with women was limited to a brief exchange with a French prisoner whom he would run into again years later. Wiesel begins to explore the role of women in *Dawn*, in which the protagonist's co-conspirator Llana, his teenage crush Catherine, and his mother blend into one sympathetic female voice that calls him “poor boy” as he undergoes transformative experiences in his life. In *Day*, a novel about the aftermath of trauma and the possibility (or lack thereof) of redemption, the women finally move from the margins of the narrative to the center. The further in time Wiesel moves from the Holocaust, the further he moves into the world of women and domestic normalcy, all of which is depicted as threatening to the sacred memories of all he has lost.

The deployment of the gendered other in the pursuit of intelligibility is not unfounded within Holocaust discourse. One reading of the epic Holocaust documentary *Shoah* may shed some light on Wiesel's approach. In "Gendered Translations: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer begin with the notion that "the Holocaust, at least for its victims, seems to be a moment that erases gender as a category. Nazism would exterminate all Jews, regardless of gender, class, nationality, professional, or economic status" (3). They go on to note that "For Lanzmann, gender is irrelevant to the death machinery on which he focuses with such relentless energy: a machinery that is designed to render subject into object, to degender, to declass, to dehumanize, to exterminate, and to destroy the traces" (5). In spite of the death machine's indifference to gender, however, *Shoah* ultimately privileges the accounts of male witnesses, while women's testimonies are marginalized. Using their theory of "gendered translation," Hirsch and Spitzer argue that gender differences are ultimately reinscribed in the film, with women becoming mediators of male testimony that would otherwise be incomprehensible.

Women serve a similar purpose in *Day*, whose protagonist is confined to a hospital bed, physically and symbolically immobilized between death and life. On the side of death lie the ashen memories of his grandmother and mother; on the side of life, his lover Kathleen. And paralleling his state of limbo, straddling both sides, is Sarah, the camp survivor and prostitute who shares his mother's name and who, like Eliezer, lives somewhere between the past and the present. Wiesel transmits his story through the bodies of these women, women who are themselves lost and broken and whose gendered bodies—both sacred and profane—express both the profound loss of origins and selfhood, and the obscenity of that loss.

Chapter 3

“You Dumb Cooze”:

Gendering Trauma in Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam War

“there can finally be no adequate understanding of that war and its place in American culture without an understanding of its gendered relations.”

—Susan Jeffords

“it was America that was castrated on the sexualized battlefield of Vietnam.”

—Milton J. Bates

Much has been written about the singularity of the Vietnam War, which Fredric Jameson called the “first terrible postmodernist war” (25). Following Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism as both a historical period as well as an ideological and stylistic change, Miriam Cooke notes that postmodern wars are those that take place after World War II, and “are the products as well as the consumers of the technological revolution” (179). She goes on to note that her definition of postmodern warfare “does not claim so much a substantive as a representational difference from earlier wars. [...] Postmodern wars are fought by the media but also, in a very important way, *for* the media” (181). Not only was Vietnam America’s first televised war—a fact that immeasurably affected its outcome and forever changed the public’s perception of war in general—but it was a war that wasn’t technically a war¹⁴. It was a war without a clear beginning or end, without a clear purpose, without a clear enemy, without a clear battleground, without unified support from home. It was a war that also engaged with the

¹⁴ A declaration of war was never made by the United States, prompting some to call it a “conflict.” Today, however, that distinction is all but forgotten, and “the Vietnam War” stands as the accepted title.

ideological battles that raged at home under the banners of antiwar protests, the civil rights movement, and the women's rights movement.

Not only did the women's rights movement radically alter sexual politics, but the Vietnam War emotionally ravaged a generation of young men raised on the expectation of John Wayne heroism, only to be drafted into the crushing reality of America's first failed war. Thus, in addition to the list of distinctions mentioned above, the Vietnam conflict is also considered by many to be America's era of emasculation, notable for the large role it played in the official acknowledgement of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For the first time in American history, a profusion of veterans mobilized against the mantle of shame associated with combat neurosis and went public with their testimony of war atrocities, both committed and witnessed. With the added support of prominent analysts such as Chaim Shatan and Robert Jay Lifton, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) finally recognized PTSD in 1980.¹⁵ According to a study published in 1990, approximately half of the 3.14 million people who served in Vietnam reported having experienced PTSD symptoms (Bates 264), making "Vietnam" synonymous with traumatized masculinity, on both an individual and national level.

Due to the unspeakable nature of trauma, moreover, the number of veterans suffering from PTSD is probably much higher. For those who suffer in silence, there is little opportunity to cope with the trauma. For Dori Laub, it is the testimony itself that begets the event: "the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being

¹⁵ The definition of PTSD has changed dramatically in the past three decades. In 2013, the APA released their fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), in which PTSD is now classified under trauma- or stressor-related disorders resulting from "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation" (American Psychiatric Association).

listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (“Bearing Witness” 57). For Laub, then, recovery is possible through the dialectical relationship between witness and listener.

As his use of the words “narrative” and “birth” implies, this is a (pro)creative process in which meaning is *produced* rather than uncovered. Or, to put it another way, “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (*The Things They Carried* 179). Tim O’Brien, author of this quote, is also a veteran of the Vietnam War, and has been trying to make the war meaningful since the publication of his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* in 1973, three years after his tour ended. He has made a career out of this attempt to narrate the unspeakable, to deploy art and the imagination against the void of meaning left in the wake of trauma. Known for his metafictional writing, O’Brien explores the failure of language to represent traumatic experience, often undermining narrative authority and destabilizing any claims to truth that may be made. His works ride the line between fiction and non-fiction, often mixing personal history, faux autobiographical elements, and fiction into hyperreal narratives that demand a reevaluation of epistemological frameworks and official histories.

Mark A. Heberle makes a convincing argument that O’Brien is in fact not a war writer, but a “trauma artist” who uses his memories of Vietnam as a source for exploring the tensions between trauma and redemption, truth and storytelling, and authenticity and memory. According to Heberle, O’Brien’s oeuvre can be understood as traumatized both in form and subject, as each story recalls and rewrites elements of previous stories (sometimes within the same piece): traumatized characters echo and revise their precursors, traumatic events recur and transform, and narrative form itself enacts the circularity, repetition and fragmentation characteristic of

traumatic aftermath. For O'Brien, it seems, traditional linear narrative is inadequate to represent trauma, which breaks the experiential frames that normally give coherence to experience.

O'Brien's prioritizing of trauma and its effect on storytelling distinguishes his work from the majority of popular Vietnam War literature, as does his aversion to the kind of hypermasculine discourse criticized by Susan Jeffords in her seminal work, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Focusing on film and literature produced between 1968-1987, Jeffords argues that these post-war narratives are configured in such a way as to reinforce gender divisions¹⁶ that were disrupted by America's first failed war, as well as by the women's and civil rights movements. The thrust of these representations, according to Jeffords, is to revive a national sense of masculine power by such narrative mechanisms as the valorization of performance, the fetishization and technologization of the male soldier's body, and the feminization of bureaucratic institutions and officials that are ultimately held responsible for the lost war. In Jeffords' analysis, men are represented as victimized by everything from the Viet Cong, to anti-war protesters, to the government—all of which are pointedly feminized entities in these representations. Offering a reading of such popular films as *First Blood* and *Platoon*, she shows how the soldier/veteran—and, by extension, the American male—is recuperated as manly through the mythologization of homosocial bonding and the concurrent elimination of corrupting feminine influences.

O'Brien's protagonists—vulnerable, ashamed, cruel, unhinged—are a far cry from the likes of John Rambo. This is not to say, however, that O'Brien's narratives do not participate in the gendering practices that are endemic to war literature. As Kalí Tal points out in her essay "The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans," most female

¹⁶ Jeffords argues that, moreover, the reinforcement of gender reinforces hegemonic racial and class domination.

characters imagined by Vietnam veteran writers exist as projections of their combat-induced alienation—including Wan, the imaginary Vietnamese lover dreamed up by Paul Berlin in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*. Accounting for the additional layer of racial Othering, Tal distinguishes Asian from American women, locating the former at “the most extreme category of objectified images” (77), whose purpose is to signify male desire and to fulfill phallogentric fantasies. American women, on the other hand, “do not seem to be able to obey, fuck enthusiastically, and otherwise leave their men alone” and thus “represent the anger and frustration of men whose needs and desires are not met” (85).

It is this last category of women that will be the focus of my inquiry in O'Brien's most famous book, *The Things They Carried*, a text that relies heavily on its female characters to give the traumas of its male protagonists emotional currency and weight. Tal's general description of how American women fare in veteran narratives is accurate and can certainly be applied to O'Brien's female characters in general. Yet beyond surveying several Vietnam War narratives that provide ample evidence of such women, and in spite of her introductory remarks about the importance of “retelling” in a combat veteran's ability to recover from traumatic war experiences, Tal fails to fully investigate the *function* of gendering in these trauma narratives. How, in other words, do such representations of women help combat veterans retell their stories of traumatic war events, experiences that are, by definition, unspeakable?

The answer to this question lies in the altogether conventional configuration of gender that provides structure to this otherwise unconventional collection of stories. O'Brien has been widely praised for his non-traditional war narratives: his anti-heroes, his experimental form, his politically subversive themes. What Jameson says about Michael Herr's *Dispatches* could just as easily be applied to *The Things They Carried*:

[The Vietnam War] cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms of the war novel or movie—indeed that breakdown of all previous narrative paradigms is, along with the breakdown of any shared language through which a veteran might convey such experience, among the principal subjects of the book and may be said to open up the place of a whole new reflexivity. (25)

The “breakdown of any shared language” is indeed central to O’Brien’s work. Yet in spite of O’Brien’s innovations in narrative form, he tends to fall back on traditional paradigms of gender.

In *The Things They Carried*, the female characters are marked as Other to the male soldier/veteran by their position on the opposite end of the experiential spectrum, as far removed from war as one can get. Representing the civilian world from which these men have been severed due to their unspeakable war trauma, these women—unwilling and unable to comprehend what the soldiers themselves cannot understand—amplify the unspeakability of trauma and, in so doing, ironically speak the unspeakable.

Traumatized Masculinity as Lost Language

The Things They Carried, published in 1990, is a collection of short stories that has become one of the most successful books to emerge from the Vietnam War. Based on O’Brien’s own experience as a soldier from 1969 to 1970, *Things* has garnered acclaim for radically blending memoir with fiction, and for challenging our readerly assumptions about authorship, truth, memory and meaning. Populated with the emotionally brutalized soldiers from Alpha Company, including a soldier alternately called “Tim” and “O’Brien,” *Things* attempts to tell the stories that cannot be told.

Part of what makes this possible is the text's narrative form, which, as Heberle says, "mimics the phenomena of constriction, intrusion, hyperarousal, and the like that are characteristic of traumatized survivors and the experiences they have lived through" (xxi). O'Brien's circular, fractured narrative structure and shifting perspectives and voices *speaks* the trauma of Vietnam; the confusing, backwards, self-negating text is the very stuff of trauma itself, embodying the destructive force of trauma on language. O'Brien wants the audience not simply to read about trauma, but to experience it themselves—bodily—through the body of the text.

The importance of the reader's reception of the stories cannot be overestimated, for as narratives of trauma, they require the participation of an active listener to become meaningful. As Laub explains, "The listener [...] is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" ("Bearing Witness" 57). O'Brien places a particular emphasis on the importance of listening, making the dialectic between witness and listener a central motif in many of his books. *Things*, especially, is a work centrally concerned with how "stories can save us" (225), pointing to the redemptive promise that the communication of trauma to a receptive listener may hold. Thus Heberle says that O'Brien's narratives "function as therapy for their subjects and provide some redemption for what has been suffered; in short, they replicate trauma therapy, which relies on an attempt to communicate to others an ineffable wounding so that the posttraumatic survivor's life can be repaired and resumed" (xxi).

Yet within *Things*, the attempt to access the redemptive potential of communication is an exercise in disappointment, and ultimately itself becomes a source of retraumatization. For the men of Alpha Company, the attempt to tell stories, and thus to be saved, is consistently cut off in one form or another. And, significantly, the culprits are those very same willfully ignorant,

uncomprehending, castrating American women that Kalí Tal describes. The gendered dynamics of this communication failure are discussed by Lorrie Smith, who argues that O'Brien's *Esquire* stories, which were published in the 1980s and later appeared in the book *The Things They Carried*, participate in the very same process of remasculinization that Jeffords theorizes. According to Smith, in spite of the fact that O'Brien's male characters show a vulnerability and complexity lacking in most Vietnam War protagonists, ultimately his stories reinscribe traditional gender roles by glorifying male soldiers as the only ones who hold the privilege and power to authentically imagine, tell, and understand war stories. The female characters, meanwhile, function only to solidify the closed circle of male bonding, achieved through storytelling, and from which they are excluded.

While Smith is astute in her observation that "the female reader, in particular, is rendered marginal and mute" (18) and "women pointedly won't, don't, or can't understand war stories" (19), her insistence that "male powerlessness is *overcome* through the repulsion of femininity" (29, my emphasis) is overly simplistic, ignoring the glaring fact that resolution is, for O'Brien, a fiction. Indeed, Smith's statement that "recuperation of masculinity is *achieved* through the third-party mediation of a woman outside the war zone" (30, my emphasis) is an attempt to neatly fit O'Brien's stories into Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's triangulation paradigm:

If we transfer Sedgwick's paradigm from the realm of class struggle to the current cultural contest over the meaning, communicability, and "gaps and failures" of the Vietnam War, we can understand how O'Brien's representations of "contemptible" femininity strengthen male bonds and deflect the contemporaneous assaults of an emasculating lost war, the woman's movement, and feminist theory. We might even place the female reader at one corner of the triangle, her exclusion facilitating the bond

between male writer and reader. Anxiety over the general incommunicability of trauma is thus greatly eased by the shared language of patriarchy. (19)

Although O'Brien's female characters in *Things* are certainly problematic from a feminist perspective, Smith too easily accepts that O'Brien's attempt "to quell threats to masculinity and to re-assert patriarchal order" (19) is a success, with male bonding firmly solidified "by the shared language of patriarchy" (19).

As discussed further below, the patriarchal order is anything but restored. Rather, patriarchal power is continually withheld, which in itself becomes another form of traumatization. Moreover, the idea of an easy exchange even between veterans who were part of the same platoon is problematic, as revealed in the scenes in which the narrator reflects on his post-war dialogues with his former comrades. In "Notes," the narrator tells us about a letter he received from Norman Bowker, who accuses him of misrepresenting their Vietnam experience in O'Brien's first novel, *Going After Cacciato*. Bowker subsequently kills himself. And in "Love," the narrator recalls a visit from Jimmy Cross, who gives his approval to write the story that would ultimately become "The Things They Carried," the piece that begins the novel. He asks the narrator to write a story that might make his lost love Martha "come begging" (29). He goes on to say, "Make me out to be a good guy, okay? Brave and handsome, all that stuff. Best platoon leader ever [...] And do me a favor. Don't mention anything about—" (30). Not only does the narrator break his promise of portraying Cross as a traditional heroic soldier, he makes Ted Lavender—the man who is killed under Cross's command and is presumably the subject of the dash—central to his story. These dialogues reveal the gap between memory and storytelling that corrodes whatever potential for community they had in shared experiences or any "shared language of patriarchy."

In contrast to Smith's argument that "these stories seem to warn women readers away from any empathetic grasp of 'the things men do'" (38), Pamela Smiley makes the case that *Things* "departs radically" (603) from conventional war narratives that reassert the masculine identity and instead "de-genders war, constructs an ideal (female) reader, and re-defines American masculinity" (602). Certainly, O'Brien's text diverges from the overt Rambo-esque kind of violent attitude that Jeffords criticizes as endemic to popular Vietnam War literature. However, contrary to Smiley's theory that O'Brien's novel subverts the conventions of gender usually found in Vietnam War narratives, *The Things They Carried* points to the *absence* of an idealized female reader in any realm but the imaginary—an important distinction. And in so doing, the text ultimately confirms sexual difference by locating the site of trauma on the female body that fails to offer absolution to the wounded hero.

To read *Things* as subverting traditional notions of gender roles is to ignore the overwhelming failure of the female listeners to understand the stories of these soldiers. Yet neither is *Things* just another Vietnam War text that valorizes the same old male bonding and patriarchal dominance that Jeffords criticizes. Although the recuperation of a kind of masculinity is indeed desired, it is neither achieved nor sought out through the Sedgwickian schema of triangulation that relies on the rejection of femininity. Rather, the traumatized male subjects of *Things* are ultimately attempting to recover a masculine identity through their mastery of language, through the storytelling process that relies on, rather than excludes, the female listener. It is only when a woman submits to being a receptacle for men's stories that these men may reenter the world assured of their position as makers of meaning.

Consistent with the paradigm that trauma is an unspeakable experience, O'Brien establishes early on the catastrophic effects of traumatic experience on language:

Now and then, however, there were times of panic. When they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them. (19)

Trauma reduces these men to an animalistic, infantile, pre-linguistic state, a condition that is furthermore *unmanly*, as revealed in their attempts to recover: "Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies, feeling shame, then quickly hiding it. They would force themselves to stand" (19). Because the body and feelings of vulnerability are associated with femininity, these men are quick to assume the correct posture of masculinity as a first step towards recovering from a traumatic experience. As O'Brien implies, war is traumatic not only because of the incomprehensible, language-shattering terror soldiers experience, but also because of what such terror does to their gendered identities.

Gender and language are, in fact, inseparable, according to Lacan's theory of the symbolic order, "the order of language, discourse, narrative" (Silverman 162). According to the Lacanian economy, power is reserved for those who possess the phallus, the "privileged signifier" (Lacan 82) of male privilege and authority, and those who possess the phallus are marked by their command of language. Having been reduced to a pre-linguistic state, the men of Alpha Company have been furthermore symbolically castrated before their comrades, and now share "the common secret of cowardice barely restrained" (*Things* 21). Their masculinity then

becomes self-conscious performance: slowly, they would assume their male postures, “they would repair the leaks in their eyes” (19), they would “spit and begin cleaning their weapons” (19), all in the process of “becoming soldiers again” (19). As Brenda M. Boyle argues in her discussion of masculinities in Vietnam War narratives, the equation of manhood and masculinity “mitigates the incoherence of war; it tries to provide certainty in an uncertain environment” (4). To borrow Judith Butler’s term, these men are performing gender, which is “produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence” (*Gender Trouble* 32-33). Such coherent masculinity is deployed against the incomprehensibility of traumatic experience.

Yet in order to fully become men again, these soldiers must not only perform the gestures of men, they must accomplish the more difficult, possibly impossible task of recovering language, of molding their squeals and sobs into some comprehensible form in spite of the fact that a war story is often “just beyond telling” (71). It is only when they can articulate their experiences to a receptive listener that they can become agents of their own stories, and thus ease the burden of trauma. Within the Lacanian economy, the role of listener would fall to Mother, who signifies lack (of the phallus, of language, of power) and whose loss exists as the original site of trauma that language will ultimately remedy. Likewise, within *Things*, woman is set up as the idealized enabler of testimony. It is through women, who represent the domestic, civilized world, that their animalistic squealing might be translated into language, thus transforming them back into men.

We can understand this process through Laura Mulvey’s description of the role of women in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”:

Woman [...] stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic

command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning. (35)

Mulvey's argument, focused as it is on women in film, on women as *silent image*, may seem out of place in a literary analysis. Yet, as we will see, the women in O'Brien's text are likewise silent images, present only as photographs, writers and recipients of letters, mythical figures in second-hand stories, composite figures, and ghostly memories. These women, too, are bearers, not makers, of meaning. Placed in the position of listener, they are silenced and become the gateway through which the male narrator might pass through trauma.

What the men in *The Things They Carried* find, however, is the trauma of original castration by women who reject their stories, misunderstand their meaning, and disable their testimony. The women characters in this novel can be divided into two categories: "real" women and "ideal" women. In the first category are Martha, Sally Kramer, Curt Lemon's sister, an older woman in a crowd, and nine-year-old Kathleen. These characters are "real" not in the sense that they are real people, but inasmuch as they exist within the reality of the narrative's world. Belonging to the latter category are Mary Anne, Linda and a grown-up Kathleen, all of whom exist only in the fantasy realm of the male imagination. The ideal female listener is either lost in the jungles of Vietnam, dead, or not yet available. Either way, the ideal female listener is an impossibility, and the result is the circle of endlessly reiterated stories we see in *Things*, where the trauma is relived again and again in the unending retelling of stories that are forever searching for the ear of the ideal female listener who does not exist.

Real Women

The Things They Carried starts with the line, “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha” (1). So begins the chapter in which the narrator lists all the things that the soldiers carry while serving their time in Vietnam, things as mundane as chewing gum to things as weighty as the 4-ounce finger cut from the corpse of a young VC boy. Yet among all the numerous things listed, all of which in their own way provoke “a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried” (7), the presence of Martha is the heaviest. The primacy of Martha is significant, for it indicates the importance and persistent presence of the female listener, whose “terrible power” will manifest again and again in different guises.

We learn that Martha is not his girlfriend, but rather the woman he fantasizes about. In Cross’s imagination, Martha is idealized as both virgin and whore. He is preoccupied with her virgin status: he spends his nights wondering if she is a virgin, and upon looking at the volleyball picture he carries, he thinks “Her legs [...] were almost certainly the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair” (4). He sees her as practically prepubescent in her sexual innocence. Yet although he would like to *believe* she is a virgin—“She was a virgin, he was almost sure” (1)—there is doubt. He wonders who took the Kodacolor snapshot of her “because he knew she had boyfriends” (4), an accusatory statement that implies promiscuity and brings him back to the real Martha. He also notes that when he kissed her during the film *Bonnie and Clyde*, “she received the kiss without returning it, her eyes wide open, not afraid, not a virgin’s eyes, just flat and uninvolved” (12). Rather than upset him, however, this suspicion of her non-virgin status only seems to provoke his desire.

Indeed, “He wanted her to be a virgin and not a virgin, all at once” (11), a desire best illustrated in his semi-rape fantasy:

He remembered kissing her good night at the dorm door. Right then, he thought, he should've done something brave. He should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed and touched that knee all night long. He should've risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should've done. (5)

Clearly, Cross equates bravery with sexual domination, and in this scenario, he is able to force himself onto her body without the actual penetration that would corrupt her virgin status.

Whatever the “new things” he thinks of doing to her are, they serve the ominous purpose of marking Cross as possessor of the phallus, while in his imagination, Martha is literally tied to her place as bearer of meaning.

Significantly, the sexualization of Martha's body is located specifically in her mouth. The image of Martha as passive recipient in the movie theater is repeated in her snapshot, in which “Her eyes were gray and neutral, her lips slightly open as she stared straight-on at the camera” (4). He licks the envelope flaps of her letters, “knowing her tongue had been there” (1). In her volleyball picture, “Martha was bent horizontal to the floor, reaching, the palms of her hands in sharp focus, the tongue taut” (4). This fetishization of her mouth and tongue points us to Jimmy Cross's true desire behind the virgin/whore fantasy: that of communion.

The desire for sexual consummation with Martha is the physical manifestation of a deeper desire for communion through verbal communication. The word “communion” here is used in all its Christian underpinnings. Martha sends Cross (note the reference to Christ) a pebble that is “a milky white color with flecks of orange and violet, oval-shaped, like a miniature egg” (8). The egg shape of the pebble represents the possibility of rebirth and renewal by communion with Martha, whose name connects her to the biblical Martha. This allusion is relevant on two levels: first, the Martha that is described in Luke 10:38-42 is notable by her unwillingness to put

aside her own concerns in order to listen to Jesus's teachings, unlike her more virtuous sister Mary, "who sat down at the feet of the Lord and listened" (*Good News Bible*). Cross's Martha is similarly distinguished by her preoccupation with her own life. She sends letters in which she talks about "professors and roommates and midterm exams, about her respect for Chaucer and her great affection for Virginia Woolf" (1), but "she never mentioned the war" (1), and thus never offers herself as an audience to his stories.

Second, the biblical Martha, along with her sister Mary, bears witness to the resurrection of her brother Lazarus. Jimmy Cross similarly imagines that with his Martha, "He would feel himself rising" (9) from the weight of Vietnam, a phrase that connotes both spiritual resurrection and physical erection. His desire for communion through communication and consummation—the linguistic and physical means through which a man claims phallic power within the symbolic order—comes together in the scene in which Cross examines a VC tunnel. As he peers into the darkness, thoughts of Martha intrude, and the tunnel becomes a "hole" that makes him think about her virginity. He then imagines being buried with Martha under white sand, where, "pressed together [...] the pebble in his mouth was her tongue" (12). In this image of communion, the Eucharistic pebble is a stand-in for her body through which he hopes to achieve salvation. Unlike the unreturned kiss during *Bonnie and Clyde*, in this fantasy, Martha's tongue reciprocates—or, in other words, she *mentions the war*, and thus offers herself as listener.

This act can be understood as absolution. In the Christian ritual, communion can only occur after confession, at the end of which the priest, having heard and understood the sinner's testimony, grants forgiveness, which absolves the confessor of his or her sin and guilt, and thus "restores him to a state of grace" (Hanna). The redemptive promise of confession is described in a later chapter by the narrator, who tells a story he's never told before, "hoping to relieve at least

some of the pressure on [his] dreams” (39). If the unreturned kiss and her silence on the war symbolize unheard testimony, then the presence of Martha’s tongue in his mouth would indicate a shared experience, a shared *language*, making her the ideal listener that Smiley refers to.

As an idealized woman, however, this Martha does not exist. When he runs into her years later, he faces the “real” Martha. She again rejects his advances, this time by passively allowing him to take her hand without returning pressure. While denying him bodily, she simultaneously rejects the role of listener: “when he told her he still loved her, she kept walking and didn’t answer” (29). She rejects this role again when he tells her what he almost did to her. Her reaction is to close her eyes and cross her arms, shutting him out. Rather than give him absolution, she rejects his confession and increases his guilt by pointing out the sexual violence inherent in his impulse: “She didn’t understand how men could do those things. What things? he asked, and Martha said, The things men do. Then he nodded. It began to form. Oh, he said, those things” (29). Because Cross only thinks of Martha as an object of his desire, without agency or feelings of her own, he is unable to recognize the violent implications of his fantasy. To Cross, sexually violating her has nothing to do with *her*, per say, but everything to do with his own masculine identity, with being “brave.” Moreover, he is unable to put into words even “those things” that exist only in his mind, further indicating his emasculated condition.

Martha’s rejection of his physical advances is a manifestation of her unwillingness to speak about the war, evident in her reticence in talking about “the things men do.” Rather than a sympathetic ear through which Cross can unburden himself, Martha instead becomes the very embodiment of trauma itself. Consistent with the tradition of blaming a soldier’s weakness on his persistent ties to women, Martha becomes the scapegoat for the death of Ted Lavender, a soldier under his command who is shot immediately after his reverie about Martha: “he loved her more

than anything, more than his men, and now Ted Lavender was dead because he loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her” (7). In an effort to purge her from his thoughts, Cross burns her letters and pictures the morning after Lavender is killed, but it is no use for “even now, without photographs, Lieutenant Cross could see Martha playing volleyball in her white gym shorts and yellow T-shirt. He could see her moving in the rain” (23). His failure to protect his men and his failure to consummate with Martha both amount to the same thing: he is not a man.

Cross locates his guilt and failed masculinity in the body of Martha, and in so doing turns Martha into the ghost of Lavender. Her simplicity and carefree life only serves to amplify the horror of war and Lavender’s death. While Martha carries a pebble that “seemed weightless” (8), Ted Lavender “went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus the unweighed fear” (6). The Kodacolor snapshot in which “Her eyes were gray and neutral, her lips slightly open as she stared straight-on at the camera” (4) takes on ghostly qualities as the image of Ted Lavender’s corpse emerges: “He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye” (12). Cross’s memory of “Martha’s smooth young face” (6) contrasts sharply with the image of Ted Lavender’s missing cheekbone. Juxtaposed with the world of atrocity in which Jimmy Cross finds himself, her academic preoccupations seem ridiculous, if not cruel. Indeed, later, after Ted Lavender is killed and his love has temporarily turned to hate, Cross spitefully thinks about how “This was not Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (24). She represents the

ordinary, domestic world that has no place for Cross's trauma, a world he desires to return to but that is not available to him, thus ensuring the continuation of his trauma.

Ted Lavender's death becomes associated with Martha through Jimmy Cross's feelings of guilt, just as later, Kiowa's death is associated with a young soldier's ex-girlfriend. The young boy had shown Kiowa a picture of Billie, and "for a second the flashlight had made Billie's face sparkle, and [...] right then the field had exploded all around them" (177). Similarly, Cross blames his preoccupation with Martha for distracting him from the war: "He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war [...] he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing" (9). He uses these daydreams as attempts to escape from the war and to disavow his place in it. Right before Lavender's death, he tells himself that "he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it" (12). Looking at Martha allows him to indulge in the fantasy of being in her world and not his, to see himself as an innocent young boy uninvolved in the atrocity around him.

Yet this illusion comes crashing down when Ted Lavender is shot in the head, much in the same way that Jimmy Cross's kiss is rejected while "the sound of the gunfire that killed Bonnie and Clyde" (4) plays in the background. Cross cries, not for Lavender, but "for Martha, and for himself, because she belonged to another world, which was not quite real, and because she was a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey, a poet and a virgin and uninvolved, and because he realized she did not love him and never would" (17). Being "uninvolved" and not loving him collapses into the same thing; her refusal to love him is the same as her refusal to listen to him.

It is because of Martha, because of his love for her, that Lavender's death is "something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (16). The ideal female reader is shattered, and the void left by her absence is filled by trauma embodied in Martha. "Everything seemed part of everything else, the fog and Martha and the deepening rain" (24)—Martha becomes Vietnam itself, and he takes out his shame by slashing a hole into the land with his ax, a symbolic act of rape. At this point, "Virginity was no longer an issue" (24) because she no longer represents the vessel of consummation/communion/communication. The weightless, egg-like pebble that represented the possible regenerative powers of the womb has transformed into a heavy stone of guilt and shame in the male gut.

Jimmy Cross realizes that "Imagination was a killer" (11) and resolves "to be a man about it" (25), as if redemption could be found in male posturing. He turns away from the image of Martha in the rain, burns her letters and pictures, and decides to adopt "a calm, impersonal tone of voice, a lieutenant's voice" (25), and to "show strength" (25). Like the soldiers who attempt to disavow the evidence of their being unmanned by wiping their eyes and spit-cleaning their weapons, Cross resolves to "simply tighten his lips and arrange his shoulders in the correct command posture" (26), à la John Wayne, for "he was a soldier, after all" (24). He decides to get rid of the pebble and, without an authentic masculine identity, to adopt the simulacrum of one.

The persistence of trauma due to rejection by a potential female listener is rendered as cyclic in the chapter "Speaking of Courage." It is the fourth of July, and veteran Norman Bowker loops around his hometown twelve times, thinking about Kiowa's death and his inability to tell the story. Here, Martha appears as Sally Kramer, Bowker's high school sweetheart. Just as Jimmy Cross carried pictures of Martha, so Norman Bowker carried pictures of Sally. When Bowker sees Sally out mowing the lawn, she is "still pretty in a lacy red blouse and white shorts"

(139), just as Martha wears white shorts in her volleyball picture. And, just as Martha represents a world to which Jimmy Cross cannot return, so Sally embodies the town that “could not talk, and would not listen” (143). Bowker considers stopping, “just to talk” (139), but decides against it because, after all, “She looked happy. She had her house and her new husband, and there was really nothing he could say to her” (139). He imagines trying to tell her about the shit field in which Kiowa dies, and he sees her closing her eyes, just as Martha closed her eyes to Cross’s confession. She would have stopped him at the word “shit,” as would the town, which “did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know” (143).

Women, in *Things*, occupy an important place in the recuperation of traumatized masculinity because they act as the gatekeepers to civilized society, the world of lawn mowers and Chaucer from which these men have been alienated. Echoing the description of Sally and the willfully ignorant town that she and the other women in this text represent, O’Brien expresses his frustration with his hometown and others like it in an interview with Tobey C. Herzog: “I had and still have mixed feelings about the place. Not just the town itself but what it represents: all the towns like it, or the values across America that the town embodies—a kind of ‘know-nothingness’ and ‘not-caringness’ about big, important issues” (89). If the women of *Things* are guilty of anything, they are guilty of not caring enough, of not caring enough to want to know.

Bowker’s inability to share his war guilt with the town, as embodied in Sally, best illustrates what Kali Tal describes as the plight of the returning veteran:

the order of war cannot be assimilated into the order of civilian life, and combat soldiers returning home cannot recall their wartime experiences without negating the national myth. Soldiers who desire to bear witness against their own crimes in war and against the

crimes of their nation speak to a community that does not wish to hear their story.

(“Speaking the Language of Pain” 240)

Just as Martha represents civilian society through her preoccupations with school, so Sally embodies the town that is characterized by its willful oblivion to the war. Bowker’s inability to tell his story and find absolution traps him in a loop of trauma that eventually leads to his symbolic castration: suicide by hanging.

Martha again reemerges later in the novel as Curt Lemon’s sister in “How to Tell a True War Story.” In this chapter, the narrator illustrates the impossibility of telling a true war story by relating the “true” story of Rat Kiley’s letter to Lemon’s sister, a story that the narrator later claims to be invented. When Curt Lemon is killed, Rat Kiley writes a letter to his sister in which he describes Lemon as “A real soldier’s soldier” (67). He characterizes Lemon as overtly masculine, a “badass” (67) with “Stainless steel balls” (67). He then goes on to give increasingly gory details of Lemon’s “daredevil” (67) antics, including the “twenty zillion dead gook fish” (68) that Lemon killed while fishing with grenades and the naked trick-or-treating he does on Halloween, “just boots and balls and an M-16” (68). The content and language of the letter is strikingly inappropriate for its intended audience, indicating that the letter is less about Lemon’s sister and more about Rat Kiley. By touting the masculinity of Lemon, he is effectively asserting his own virility, for “They were like soul mates [...] like twins or something, they had a whole lot in common” (68). The letter is about his need to tell the story of his own manhood to a female reader.

Yet just as Martha refuses to be Jimmy Cross’s confessor, Curt Lemon’s sister is just a “dumb cooze [who] never writes back” (68). The narrator focuses on the word “cooze,” telling us to “Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say

woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares” (69). The narrator points to his use of “cooze” in his story as a mark of a “true” war story because he does not substitute it with another, more recognizable or civilized word, just as Rat Kiley does not hide Lemon’s atrocities. A true war story is not, in other words, for the reader. A true war story “does not instruct, nor encourage, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done” (68). Rather, the stories are for the narrator, and the female listener is to act as a silent vessel—or “blank screen”—for the stories. Thus we can understand the role of Martha, Sally Kramer and Curt Lemon’s sister through this statement by film director Budd Boetticher:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.

(qtd. in Mulvey 40)

By refusing to take their place as audience to the male narrative, these “real” women reveal the absence of the ideal female listener. The woman back home is always just a dumb cooze who doesn’t write back.

The audience who does not listen is *always* gendered feminine. The narrator makes this generalization explicit when he says, “Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will always come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It’s always a woman” (84). This older woman who prompts this comment is Martha in another form, and her inability to “understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore” (84) echoes Martha’s inability to understand “the things men do” (29). Just as Martha’s rejection of Cross’s amorous advances is the same as her refusal to talk about the war, so the older woman’s failure to listen derives from her lack of understanding that “It *wasn’t* a war story. It was a *love* story” (85). By missing the point of the

story, by failing to listen, she rejects love. When she advises the narrator to move on, he says, “I’ll picture Rat Kiley’s face, his grief, and I’ll think, *You dumb cooze*. Because she wasn’t listening” (85)—she is Martha, Curt Lemon’s sister, Sally Kramer, and every female reader who fails to understand. And it is she—the real female reader—who embodies the trauma, for a true war story is really “about sisters who never write back and people who never listen” (85). Read in this way, O’Brien’s stories become instructive for the readers of *Things*, who are cautioned against rejecting or misunderstanding what are ultimately love stories.

Ideal Women

Mitchell Sanders follows his fabulous story about a listening-post operation gone bad with a statement that confirms the femininity of those who do not listen:

Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin’. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend. What they need is to go out on LP. The vapors, man. Trees and rocks—you got to *listen* to your enemy. (76)

As Jeffords has argued, Vietnam War narratives of the 1980s established government officials as effeminate bureaucrats whose inability to understand war inhibited the real men who were fighting on the ground. Thus Sanders’s inclusion of the “fatass colonel” and politicians only confirms that those who don’t listen are all feminine entities.

Almost as if in response to this claim, O’Brien offers up Mary Anne, the sweet little girlfriend of Mark Fossie who actually does go out on missions and listens. In opposition to the real female listeners, Mary Anne is the ideal woman who is able to fully experience and understand Vietnam. Seventeen, fresh out of high school, blond and with “long white legs and

blue eyes and a complexion like strawberry ice cream” (93), Mary Anne is the image of the all-American girl. She also arrives in Vietnam wearing “White culottes and this sexy pink sweater” (90), which invites comparisons with Martha and Sally. Indeed, before she goes to Vietnam, she is on her way to becoming Sally Kramer: she plans to marry, have children, and live in a house on Lake Erie. Unlike Sally Kramer, however, she would not be offended by the word “shit” and instead “wasn’t afraid to get her hands bloody” (98). And unlike Martha, Mary Anne “wasn’t no virgin” (106). She is instead “coy and flirtatious” (95), intentionally drawing attention from the other men for Fossie’s pleasure. More important, she is curious about the war, and actively seeks out involvement in it.

Little by little, Mary Anne is transformed by the war and the land. She stops wearing makeup and jewelry, stops caring about personal hygiene, and cuts her hair short. She speaks in a lower pitch, loses her bubblyness, and rarely laughs. She takes on the masculine qualities of “a new confidence in her voice, a new authority in the way she carried herself” (98) and her body loses its feminine softness. And, unlike the aforementioned dumb coozes who don’t listen, Mary Anne is specifically *not dumb*. As Rat Kiley points out, she undergoes the same transformation as all the other guys:

“She *wasn’t* dumb,” he’d snap. “I never said that. Young, that’s all I said. Like you and me. A *girl*, that’s the only difference, and I’ll tell you something: it didn’t amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Anne.” (97)

The effects of Vietnam are not gender specific, according to Rat Kiley. Pamela Smiley interprets his statement as “O’Brien’s argument that the kinder, gentler world of the feminine is nothing but an illusion” (603), claiming that Mary Anne illustrates what women can become when freed

from cultural restraints and challenges “[cultural] definitions of what it means to be a woman” (605).

What, however, does Mary Anne become? As Smiley herself notes, Mary Anne’s transformation is described “in terms of appetite and carnal excitement, of being absolutely in the body” (604): “When I’m out there at night, I feel close to my own body. I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything. It’s like I’m full of electricity and I’m glowing in the dark—I’m on fire almost” (111). Men, on the other hand, describe their experience as a disembodied aliveness that puts more emphasis on their surrounding environment than on their own bodies. As the emphasis on her body shows, Mary Anne is far from transcending gender, in spite of the fact that she has short hair and no longer wears makeup. Rather, she is nothing if not a sexualized body. The explanation for her first disappearance is immediately blamed on a sexual affair, though in reality she had only lain with the Greenies in the posture of ambush. Fossie then tries to reverse Mary Anne’s psychological transformation by changing her physical appearance into the bride-to-be, complete with freshly shampooed hair and conservative feminine attire. And when Rat Kiley sees her coming back from a three-week mission with the Greenies, he notices that “She cradled her weapon” (106) as a mother cradles a child.

At this point in the story, Fossie charges into the hootch in which Mary Anne camps out with the Greenies. When Rat and Eddie follow him in, they find him “bent down on one knee. He wasn’t moving” (109). Rat goes on to describe the overwhelming smell of incense and something else—“a mix of blood and scorched hair and excrement and the sweet-sour odor of moldering flesh—the stink of the kill” (110). The stench is so powerful that “It paralyzed your lungs” (109). The paralysis Fossie and Rat experience is reminiscent of Jimmy Cross’s paralysis in the tunnel, and echoes Freud’s interpretation of the Medusa myth:

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.

The hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.

This sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact. ("Medusa's Head" 212-213)

Mary Ann, like Medusa, both terrorizes and turns on; she is both the threat of castration and the confirmation of male potency.

To complete the tableaux is the severed head of a leopard, signifying Mary Anne's power to castrate. When Fossie attempts to get up, he "stiffened" (110) at the site of Mary Anne, who "seemed to be the same pretty young girl who had arrived a few weeks earlier. [...] She wore her pink sweater and a white blouse and a simple cotton skirt" (110). She is still coded as female by

her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (40), which Mulvey describes as the role of women within the phallogocentric symbolic order:

Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father.

Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.

(“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 42)

In spite of Rat Kiley’s insistence that Mary Ann underwent the same transformation as all the other guys, she is not just one of the guys. Her mystical qualities are rooted in the fact that she is a *girl*, a fact that we are reminded of at the climax of the story, at the height of her transformation. Mary Anne’s sexual difference, which had once evoked pleasure by the male gaze, now induces fear. At her throat is a necklace of human tongues that replace Medusa’s snakes and makes the connection between language and masculine formation clear. Mary Anne’s castrating power is in her ability to cut off the tongue, to disable speech.

Yet rather than silence the male experience as Martha, Sally Kramer, Curt Lemon’s sister, and the older woman do, Mary Anne herself becomes the mouth through which the dead tongues find voice. She is, to reiterate, *not dumb*. She becomes the grotesque embodiment of language and her mouth takes on monstrous proportions as she describes the effect of Vietnam: ““Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to eat it and have it there inside me. That’s how I feel. It’s like...this appetite”” (111). Unlike Martha, whose tongue is unresponsive, Mary Anne not only understands Vietnam, she gives voice to it.

Moreover, she understands it bodily, which is one of the requirements of an ideal female reader. “A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (78), the narrator tells us. Upon relating his near draft-dodging experience, he says, “Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it” (56). Mitchell Sanders “wanted [the narrator] to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling” (74). There is a desperation throughout the novel that the audience not only understand the stories, but feels them viscerally.

Mary Anne succeeds in knowing Vietnam bodily, and in so doing she becomes the bridge between the world of war and the world back home. It is due to this attribute that she becomes the object of love for all the men in Song Tra Bong:

“You know,” [Rat Kiley] said abruptly, “I loved her.”

“Say again?”

“A lot. We all did, I guess. The way she looked, Mary Anne made you think about those girls back home, how clean and innocent they all are, how they’ll never understand any of this, not in a billion years. Try to tell them about it, they’ll just stare at you with those big round candy eyes. They won’t understand zip. It’s like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like.”

Mitchell Sanders nodded. “Or shit.”

“There it is, you got to taste it, and that’s the thing with Mary Anne. She was *there*. She was up to her eyeballs in it. After the war, man, I promise you, you won’t find nobody like her.” (113)

Martha, Sally Kramer, Curt Lemon’s sister and the older woman all fall under the category of “those girls back home” who will never understand. Mary Anne, however, is an object of love because she remains codified as woman by her *to-be-looked-at-ness* while placing herself as a

mouthpiece for the male narrative, having tasted the shit for herself only to find that she wants more.

I place Mary Anne in the category of “ideal women” because there is much suspicion as to whether or not this story is “true.” The chapter begins with a lengthy description of Rat Kiley as an unreliable narrator who has a “reputation for exaggeration and overstatement” (89). In light of his reputation, it is surprising that “the one thing he could not tolerate was disbelief” (97). But, as the narrator says, “It wasn’t a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he felt” (89). Like the narrator and Mitchell Sanders, Rat Kiley wants his audience to feel it bodily—this sensation is more important and “truer” than truth. Indeed, in “How to Tell a True War Story,” the narrator instructs us that a true war story can often not be believed, and even if the thing did happen, “even then you know it can’t be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (83). The focus on Rat Kiley’s unreliability only serves to reinforce the point that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). Whether or not these things actually occurred is beside the point; she exists eternally within the male imagination, “still somewhere out there in the dark [...] wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues” (115-116). She in herself has not the slightest importance; her meaning is derived by what she represents to the male hero.

Linda is another ideal female listener who exists only within the male imagination. As Timmy’s first love at nine years old, Linda represents the ultimate in understanding. She appears when the narrator sees his first corpse in Vietnam and is reminded of her. This scene of recognition is reminiscent of what occurs in the first chapter. There, memories of Martha carry

the trauma of Ted Lavender's death; here, memories of Linda distract Tim from the trauma of seeing the old man's corpse. There are, in fact, numerous parallels between the two stories that set up the opposition between the real and the ideal. In the first chapter, Jimmy deludes himself into believing that his love for Martha is prepubescent and innocent, that "He was just a kid at war, in love" (12), and that there was hope for reciprocation. Here, Tim really is a kid, and theirs is a love that needs no words: "It was pure knowing [...] we understood with a clarity beyond language that we were sharing something huge and permanent" (230). He goes on to say that "Even then, at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones—*that kind of love*" (228). The reader has already been familiarized with "*that kind of love*" in the first chapter, when Jimmy feels that "his love was too much for him, he felt paralyzed, he wanted to sleep inside her lungs and breathe her blood and be smothered" (11). The difference here is that Tim finds life inside the body of Linda, whereas Jimmy finds in Martha only blood and death. Their first dates are also similar: Jimmy and Martha see the film *Bonnie and Clyde*, representing doomed love, after which Jimmy walks her to her dorm room. Likewise, Timmy and Linda see the film *The Man Who Never Was*, a parallel to Linda who would later have "a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was" (245), after which Timmy walks her to her front door. Whereas Jimmy wishes he was brave by having his way with Martha, Timmy wishes he was brave by protecting Linda from the humiliation of being de-capped.

The parallel stories of Jimmy and Timmy act as bookends to the novel, and one could reasonably argue that out of all the characters in the novel not referred to as Tim, Timmy or O'Brien, Jimmy Cross is closest to representing the author. By bracketing the novel between these parallel stories, O'Brien brings the narrative full circle. It begins with the emasculating figure of Martha who does not listen to the testimony of war and thus comes to embody trauma

itself, and ends with the restorative figure of Linda whose love transcends language and who offers the possibility of healing. It substitutes the ideal for the real.

Linda, having died of a brain tumor soon after their first date, now exists purely in Tim's dreams. In his imagination, "Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch [his] wrist, and say, 'Timmy, stop crying'" (236)—she exists by and for Tim. The insignificance of Linda as a person is revealed when Tim explains that he is "still dreaming Linda alive in exactly the same way. She's not the embodied Linda; she's mostly made up, with a new identity and a new name, like the man who never was. Her real name doesn't matter" (245). Whether we call her Linda or Mary Anne, she is preserved and idealized as the perfect listener, the one whose meaning is framed by her subjugation to the male narrative.

Linda exists as evidence of how "stories can save us" (225): testimony, revealed to an idealized female listener, gives birth to the "knowing" of trauma and recovery from its feminizing effects. According to Lacan, ego formation occurs in the mirror stage, when a child sees his own image and recognizes an idealized self. In O'Brien's novel, Linda is the mirror through which the narrator is able to see his idealized self:

A nine-year-old girl, just a kid, and yet there was something ageless in her eyes—not a child, not an adult—just a bright ongoing everness, that same pinprick of absolute lasting light that I see today in my own eyes as Timmy smiles at Tim from the graying photographs of that time. (238)

She exists as the mirror not only for Timmy, but for all the "kids" who found themselves in the war: Jimmy Cross is "just a kid at war" (12), Azar blows away Lavender's puppy because he is "just a *boy*" (37), the narrator in "On the Rainy River" is just "a kid in trouble" (48), and Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon "were kids; they just didn't know" (69). In contrast to Martha, who

carries the traumatic image of Ted Lavender's corpse, Linda reflects the image of eternal innocence and youth for the heroes of the novel:

I can still see her as if through ice, as if I'm gazing into some other world, a place where there are no brain tumors and no funeral homes, where there are no bodies at all. I can see Kiowa, too, and Ted Lavender and Curt Lemon, and sometimes I can even see Timmy skating with Linda under the yellow floodlights. (245-246)

If trauma is located on the female body, then the ghostly female body—without subjectivity, existing solely for the male narrative—marks the end of trauma and recovery of the male identity.

According to Smiley, “instead of an act of uncompromised masculinity signaling the boy is now a man, O'Brien's character appropriates the feminine, becoming an androgynous fusion of preadolescent Timmy and Linda” (603). However, what we arrive at in the end is not a merging of genders as the result of shared testimony; rather, gender roles are confirmed and idealized as Linda takes her place as the mirror through which the men in the novel can see their better selves. When she's not being imagined alive by Timmy, “it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading” (245). This imagery indicates not only the importance of an audience, but also the lack of her own language: in order for her to exist, she must await the narrative of Tim to be written on her body.

Elroy Berdahl

The only “real” person who plays the silent listener is Elroy Berdahl. When the narrator learns he is to be drafted to the war, he flees for Canada and ends up on the banks of the Rainy River at the Tip Top Lodge where Berdahl is the proprietor. Similar to the role played by Dr.

Paul Russel and the man on the ship in *Day*, Berdahl is characterized as a father figure with almost mystical powers of silent understanding:

The man who opened the door that day is the hero of my life. How do I say this without sounding sappy? Blurt it out—the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time—a silent, watchful presence. (48)

The narrator returns to Berdahl's wordless understanding again and again, saying "there was never any talk about it. Just the opposite. What I remember more than anything is the man's willful, almost ferocious silence [...] If Elroy was curious about any of this, he was careful never to put it into words" (49). Berdahl "understood that words were insufficient. The problem had gone beyond discussion" (51). He just knows without the narrator having to explain. "He was a witness, like God, or like the gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as we make our choices or fail to make them" (60).

Berdahl's presence as "the true audience" (60), however, does not gender the ideal listener as male. Berdahl offered entrance to Vietnam but he cannot help the narrator back to the civilian world, and cannot offer confirmation of masculinity. Rather, Berdahl exists as an admonishment against a feminized, judgmental reader who might question his decision to go to Vietnam in the first place:

What would you do?

Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you're leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did? (56)

These questions are shouted out into the void that is left in the absence of the ideal female listener, and find no answer in return.

Kathleen

One final female character deserves mention: Kathleen. She is the narrator's daughter who acts as a kind of mediator between the real and ideal women. When the narrator takes her to Vietnam for her birthday, he is attempting to make her understand viscerally, to see "the Vietnam that kept [him] awake at night" (184). He takes her to the shit field where Kiowa died, where she comments on the rotten smell of the place. Yet in spite of the fact that she is in the place that "had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror" (185), she does not understand: "The war was as remote to her as cavemen and dinosaurs" (183). Like the older woman who tells the narrator to "put it all behind [him]. Find new stories to tell" (84), Kathleen disparages his obsession with writing war stories, advising him to "write about a little girl who finds a million dollars and spends it all on a Shetland pony" (34).

O'Brien, however, shows a little more tolerance for Kathleen than he does for the older woman. She is not a "dumb cooze"; rather, her naivety and lack of understanding is chalked up to her age. She is nine years old, the same age that Linda was when she died. As such, she offers the promise of growing up into a real woman who will understand, who will enable the narrator's testimony. When Kathleen asks if he has ever killed anyone, he does what Rat Kiley failed to do in his letter to Curt Lemon's sister: he gives the answer appropriate for the listener, and says no. However he looks forward to the time when she is grown up, when he can "tell her exactly what happened, or what [he remembers] happening" (131).

Yet Kathleen is an ideal woman masquerading as a real woman, seemingly even more real than the Marthas of the text. Because it is easy to collapse the narrator Tim with the writer Tim O'Brien, Kathleen seems to be a ray of hope, the real-life daughter of the writer who will some day turn into an ideal listener. There is no call to suspicion, as there is with Mary Anne. Although never revealed in *Things*, however, Kathleen does not exist. Tim O'Brien, the writer, has no daughter named Kathleen, a fact that a reader wouldn't know without additional research. She, too, exists only within the male imagination.

The Kathleen character will make at least two more appearances in O'Brien's work. His next book, *In the Lake of the Woods*, was published four years later and its proximity to *Things* is evident in the numerous similarities they share. Like *Things*, *Lake* is also narrated by a Vietnam veteran who bears striking similarities to O'Brien, the author. Meanwhile, the protagonist, a Vietnam veteran named John Wade, shares personality traits and experiences with Jimmy Cross. Most significant for this discussion, however, is that the Kathleen character in *Things* appears here as John's wife, Kathy, whom Heberle claims is actually a version of Linda (xxiii), but who also bears significant traces of Martha.

As Heberle notes, the repetition of characters, scenes and experiences within and across works is typical of O'Brien's oeuvre, which enacts the symptoms of traumatic aftermath: "Besides the merging of O'Brien with his own characters, many distinctive episodes and even details in later books are revisions of earlier ones [...] such recursive scenes mimic the intrusion of past experiences that is one of the symptoms of continued traumatization" (7). One important element of this recursive narrative enactment of trauma that Heberle does not investigate is the critical role of women. Similar to how the female characters in *Things* embody the persistent unspeakability of trauma in gendered terms, Kathy, who mysteriously disappears one night

during John's climactic post-traumatic breakdown, symbolizes the black hole of understanding that defines traumatic experience itself.

Heberle describes *Lake* as “hopelessly bleak in its outlook, the redemptive possibilities of the earlier books effaced by endless trauma” (238). If the young Kathleen of *Things* holds a thread of hope in her young hand, then that hope is obliterated in the grown-up Kathy of *Lake*, whose incomprehensible, irresolvable disappearance (and possible murder) destroys all possibility for redemption. In the final pages, John disappears into the tangle of Lake of the Woods in a suicidal and futile search for Kathy. Just before he does so, he sends out one final broadcast in which “He offered a number of rambling incantations to the atmosphere, apologies and regrets, quiet declarations of sorrow” (302)—a jumble of traumatized emotions that ends with the words, “Where *are* you?” (302). His final question is directed at a woman who no longer exists and has no answer, and thus expresses the profound impossibility of connecting with the world in the aftermath of trauma.

Another Kathleen character will appear almost concurrently with the release of *Lake*. Appearing in the *New York Times* in October of 1994, “The Vietnam in Me” is O'Brien's account of his recent trip back to Vietnam with his girlfriend, Kate Phillips, and their subsequent devastating breakup. Although this short work is positioned as a “confessional” piece and presumed autobiographical, Heberle notes that the structure of the piece reveals how “this personal testimony is carefully contrived” (4), reminding us that O'Brien's work must always be regarded as story-truth. Like Kathleen of *Things* and Kathy of *Lake*, in other words, this Kate is also artfully constructed in order to serve the narrative purpose of making a male veteran's war trauma meaningful.

That Kate is a character more so than a person is evident in the similarities between her and the Kathleen of *Things*. Just as the narrator in *Things* takes his too-young daughter to Vietnam in order to communicate something of his experience there to her, so O'Brien takes Kate—who, we are told, was 3 years old when he was deployed in 1969—to Vietnam in order to reconnect with his past. Both women are too young and new to the world to grasp the gravity of history and horror that occurred there to men like O'Brien. Kathleen's disgust with the smells of Vietnam is here echoed in Kate's rejection of its tastes as she spits out the humble food that is offered to her by survivors of the My Lai massacre: "Kate has the good fortune to find a Kleenex. She's a pro. She executes a polite wiping motion and it's over for her [...] she never tasted the dishes. She does not know ice cream from Brussels sprouts." Unlike Mary Anne, who wanted to *eat* this place, to swallow it whole, Kate doesn't chew, she doesn't swallow, she doesn't internalize anything. Meanwhile, O'Brien swallows everything in an act of penance. The disparity between O'Brien's war-wearied humility and Kate's collegiate naivety (similar to that of Martha) is again emphasized later:

Kate's in the shower, I'm in history [...] I look up from my book briefly, listen to Kate singing in the shower. A doctoral candidate at Harvard University, smart and sophisticated, but she's also fluent in joy, attuned to the pleasures and beauty of the world. She knows the lyrics to "Hotel California," start to finish, while here at the air-conditioner I can barely pick out the simplest melodies of Vietnam, the most basic chords of history.

While she's washing it all off, he's immersing himself in it. Like Martha, Sally Kramer, and Curt Lemon's sister, Kate is gendered feminine and as Other by her inexperience, by her association with college, by her preoccupation with petty civilian concerns. Kate acts as a foil to the O'Brien

character, deployed in the service of communicating the unspeakability and unknowability of his trauma.

Yet whereas the narrator of *Things* can hope things will be different in the future, when his daughter grows up, there is no future with Kate. A few months after their trip, Kate leaves him for another man, and he becomes suicidal. It is at this point that Kate comes into alignment with the Kathleen of *Lake*, who also may have left John for another man, and whose disappearance may have driven John to suicide. Both Kate and Kathleen symbolize a kind of catastrophic personal loss that revives, compounds and extends the traumatic impact of Vietnam. Significantly, O'Brien intuitively senses the end of their relationship during their trip to My Lai, the place where Kate spits out the food, and the place that holds the most traumatic significance of the war:

After a time, Kate walks up, hooks my arm, doesn't say anything, doesn't have to, leads me into a future that I know will hold misery for both of us. Different hemispheres, different scales of atrocity. I don't want it to happen. I want to tell her things and be understood and live happily ever after. I want a miracle. That's the final emotion. The terror at this ditch, the certain doom, the need for God's intervention.

The disparity between O'Brien and Kate is there, in the Kleenex filled with spit-up food. Happiness, for O'Brien's male subjects, resides in the understanding of women, whose very femininity ironically precludes them from understanding.

Conclusion

In *The Things They Carried*, trauma takes the male hero out of the symbolic order, where he is deprived of language, the very thing that confirms his masculine identity. In order to move

towards recovery, the traumatized male hero demands an ideal listener gendered feminine, for it is only within the space of her silence that the male narrative and masculine identity can emerge. What the men of *Things* find, however, is that the ideal female listener exists only in the male imagination. Women such as Mary Anne, Linda and a grown-up Kathleen do not exist in the “real” world. There, they only find variations of Martha, women who fold their arms and shut their eyes to the testimony of male trauma. Their bodies subsequently become the carriers of trauma, the landscape on which the male narrator repeatedly returns in an attempt to tell his story. It is in this way that, as Heberle says, “Storytelling [...] becomes a vehicle for the endless reproduction of trauma, revealing *and* covering it up” (203).

O’Brien’s tendency to locate male trauma in female bodies is part of a long history of scapegoating women for the unmaning of men in war. American women who “do not seem to be able to obey, fuck enthusiastically, and otherwise leave their men alone” is in fact part of a long legacy of blaming the mental illnesses of soldiers on women. Beginning in World War I, military doctors, faced with an epidemic of shell-shocked men who could no longer soldier on, conveniently found that women were to blame at all points in the process of war-induced trauma. A wife’s faithfulness has been pointed to as a determining factor in a man’s ability to resist “succumbing” to a breakdown since at least World War I (Shephard xviii). In 1917, Dr. John Collie bemoaned the infantilizing influence of women on patients, declaring ““Nothing retards recovery so much as the flying visits of unthinking, but kindly intentioned, philanthropic lady visitors”” (qtd. in Shephard 74). Sentimental women, who indulged these men and offered relaxation and distraction, were accused of hindering the real work of (male) doctors, who were trying to transform these patients back into battle-ready soldiers.

In spite of the vilification of “unthinking, but kindly intentioned” women during World War I in England, it was the compassion of women that was considered critical to the task of remasculinizing returning American veterans of World War II. According to Brenda M. Boyle, at the end of the Great War, the VA issued literature advising women of their critical role in helping returning soldiers to reintegrate back into society, and thus reclaim their masculinity (102-103). Postwar films contributed to the notion that women were responsible for a veteran’s recovery, such that “mental disability is depicted as temporary and overcome with the love and attention of a ‘good’ woman” (Boyle 107). This reliance on women, however, did not come without some caveats about the dangers of overreaching women: “Advice literature to wives and mothers, said Marine Sergeant David Dempsey, was ‘in danger of turning them into kitchen psychologists determined to “cure” the veteran—even at the cost of his sanity’” (Shepherd 329). The old suspicions against “unthinking, but kindly intentioned” women persisted. Thus women were both the key to the successful reintegration of men back into their positions of privilege and power, and the scapegoats should the reintegration fail.

The medical and entertainment communities placed the responsibility of recuperating veterans, and thus post-war society as a whole, into the laps of women, who were expected to bolster the masculine identities of returning soldiers by giving up any advances gained in their absence. In fact, in all war eras since the early 1900s, changes in women’s social roles are pointed to as exacerbating combat-related neuroses in men who, already emasculated by their inability to buck up and take war like a man, came home to liberated women who had taken their jobs and were either unable or unwilling to listen and understand.

If, according to postwar films, the “good” women of World War II were able to reintegrate wounded soldiers back into society by giving up their newly empowered roles in

society, then the women of Vietnam War films and literature are often “bad,” depicted “as unresponsive to the expectation that they remasculinize the disabled men, as they are unwilling to forgo their masculine perquisites gained, not as a result of the men’s absence, but as a result of durable social change” (Boyle 103). Shepherd also points to the empowerment of women as one of the factors of the Vietnam era that “aggravated the usual difficulties” (358): “The arrival of feminism and the unpopularity of the war left middle-class women reluctant to provide the mothering they had so readily given in the 1940s; the warm, supportive, female embrace was no longer as easily available” (358-359). The persistence of trauma in a veteran’s post-war life, implies Shepherd, can thus be blamed on the women’s rights movement, which turned potential nurturers into cold-hearted feminists. Not only are women identified as the causes of traumatic affliction, they are also the effect. A common motif in Vietnam War narratives is the veteran whose PTSD is most strikingly symptomatic in his inability to be intimate with women, a motif that finds its roots in Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, the most famously impotent character to emerge from World War I.

This tradition of holding women accountable for the mental wellbeing of soldiers emerges forcefully in *The Things They Carried* as the gendering of trauma as feminine. Indeed, O’Brien’s narrative worlds are frequently populated by women who are virtually indistinguishable from each other, whose commonality stems from their being dumb coozes. Even *Tomcat in Love* (1998), considered a comedic departure for O’Brien, includes a scene in which two college students leave protagonist Thomas Chippering bound and gagged when he tries to tell them about a Vietnam War experience. Yet unlike the male characters from his more serious texts, Chippering, a linguistics professor, is a bombast whose volubility actually seems to poke fun at the male prerogative to language. And while the imagined reader of the book is,

predictably, a woman, this woman has a history of her own, unlike Martha and Kathleen.

Considered by Heberle to be “a *female* counterpart to Chippering, traumatized by her husband’s having abandoned her for a younger woman” (264), this woman has her own traumatic past, and as such, has been promoted, just slightly, from dumb cooze to the aptly named Mrs. Kooshof.

Chapter 4

Bitch/Whore/Dyke:

Military Sexual Trauma in Memoirs by Female Veterans of Iraq

“When women defy the boundaries of gendered space, all manner of male hysteria can be unleashed.”

—Stephen J. Ducat

“it is possession of a body image that anchors and sustains our sense of identity.”

—Paul John Eakin

In “~~WO~~-man, Retelling the War Myth,” Miriam Cooke makes a passionate argument about the politics at stake in acknowledging the history of women in the military, saying “Recording women’s presence and engagement at the front is crucial in order to counteract some of the distortions that have always been necessary to construct the age-old story of war as men’s business” (177). Indeed, in spite of the notion that war is the realm of men, women in the United States have always been active participants. Beginning with the American Revolution, women have served as laundresses, cooks, nurses, and spies. Less recognized, however, are the women who fought alongside men as combatants. Deborah Sampson enlisted as a man for the colonial army and performed well enough to be promoted to the rank of corporal. Meanwhile, Margaret Corbin and Mary Ludwig Hays both followed their husbands to battle and assumed their spouse’s military duties when they were injured. During the Mexican-American war, Elizabeth Newcom enlisted in the Missouri Volunteer Infantry under the name “Bill Newcom” and was discovered and discharged only after marching 600 miles to Pueblo, Colorado. And in the Civil

War, it is estimated that there were over 400 women who fought, masquerading as men (Righthand).

There is less evidence for American women engaging in direct combat during World War I and World War II, probably due to the fact that physical examinations had become much more rigorous and thorough.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is during this time that women's contributions to military efforts were officially recognized by the establishment of several women's military units: the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1942, which became the Women's Army Corps (WAC) a year later; the Navy's Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) in 1942 and the Coast Guard's women's reserve unit, SPARs (Semper Paratus – Always Ready) that same year; the Women's Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) and the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, both in 1943. And in 1948, the Women's Armed Services Integration Act granted women permanent status in all of the military's branches.

As this brief history of women in the United States military shows, “Women's inclusion as participants in wars of this century has blurred distinctions between gender roles in peace and in war. War has become a terrain in which gender is negotiated” (Cooke and Woollacott xi). This fact, however, has been undermined, denied and repressed in the male-dominated literature of war. Traditionally, the subject of women and war narratives has referred to female characters in secondary roles in men's stories. They are the love interests: the nurses on the front, the girlfriends back home, or the whores in the brothels. They are the villains: the sexy assassins, the cheating wives, or, again, the whores in the brothels. They are the victims: the grieving mothers, the raped virgins, or the civilian casualties. Even when it has been a woman's war story, there is

¹⁷ In *Female Tommies: The Frontline Women of the First World War*, Elisabeth Shipton claims that many British women donned men's uniforms and made their way to the front lines, including Flora Sandes, who enlisted in the Serbian army and is the only known woman to serve as a soldier during World War I.

typically a very clear, very gendered division between “the world” and “the war” that is rooted not only in a patriarchal military culture, but, more specifically, in the (recently lifted) prohibition against women in combat.

As a result of this marginalization of women as mere elements of plot-space in men’s war stories, literary analyses of gender have focused on the construction of masculinity, which is often built on the backs of feminized entities such as the enemy Other. Susan Jeffords is one of the most established theorists in this vein. In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Jeffords argues that popular representations of the Vietnam War are configured in such a way as to reinforce gendered divisions that were disrupted by the war and the women’s and civil rights movements. Yet Jeffords gives surprisingly little attention to the women that actually populate these narratives, focusing rather on the male body, masculine bonding, and a feminized government that prevented manly men from doing their jobs.

Milton J. Bates, in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*, another foundational text on Vietnam War narratives, rightly criticizes Jeffords for dismissing female war experiences as “the instruments of patriarchy” (167). He argues against Jeffords’ notion that war stories are always-already narrated from “a metaphysical category that she calls the ‘masculine point of view’” (171). Bates points out that “In one respect women’s experience does differ from men’s in military as well as civilian life: outside prison, men usually do not live in fear of rape. Thus the women’s narratives differ from the men’s in their attention to forms of harassment that could and occasionally did lead to sexual assault” (165). Sexual assault, as we shall see, is more than just an “occasional” occurrence, but Bates’ point that the threat of rape radically changes the narrative’s perspective recognizes the particularly feminine point of view of women writers.

He finds, however, that the two women-centered texts he analyzes, *Coming Home* and *In Country*, ultimately reinforce the status quo (which is its own kind of dismissal), while his discussion of testimonies by women veterans tends towards generalizations, giving the impression that these narratives are clichéd and offer little literary value in comparison to their male counterparts. Thus, the novels that successfully subvert gender norms are, according to Bates, authored by male writers such as Tim O'Brien, Phillip Caputo and Donald Pfarrer. Although Bates fails to acknowledge the pattern within his own analysis, this achievement seems to hinge on whether the female characters in their novels are successfully masculinized in some way, marking their ability to inhabit, and thus understand, the male hero's war experience. As my analysis in Chapter 3 of *The Things They Carried* shows, this understanding, in turn, becomes the lynchpin for the male characters to move beyond the trauma of war.

It has been forty years since the end of the Vietnam War, and much has changed. Today, women comprise more than 14% of the military, according to a 2011 Department of Veteran Affairs report. And, in spite of the prohibition against women in combat units that was only recently lifted, the lack of front lines made the reality on the ground much different. According to author Helen Benedict, "Women are fighting in ground combat because there is no choice. This is a war with no front lines or safe zones, no hiding from in-flying mortars, car and roadside bombs, and not enough soldiers. As a result, women are coming home with missing limbs, mutilating wounds and severe trauma, just like the men" ("The Private War of Women Soldiers"). Benedict's article was published in 2010, and at that time, she reported the following statistics:

More than 160,500 American female soldiers have served in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East since the war began in 2003, which means one in seven soldiers is a woman

[...] At least 450 women have been wounded in Iraq, and 71 have died—more female casualties and deaths than in the Korean, Vietnam and first Gulf Wars combined. (“The Private War of Women Soldiers”)

Increased exposure to combat situations means that female soldiers are as prone to war-related PTSD as their male counterparts.¹⁸ Furthermore, studies suggest that women may be even more at risk, due to their vulnerability to sexual harassment and assault, the rate of which is estimated by the Defense Department to be double that of civilians (Risen)¹⁹. War and sexual violence against women have always gone hand in hand, but assault against women who are serving on our side is a growing problem, according to Benedict:

as the visibility of women combat soldiers is increasing in Iraq, so, it seems, is the hostility of their male comrades against them. [...] War always fosters an increase in the sexual violence of soldiers. Many men resent women for usurping the masculine role of warrior. And the military is still permeated with stereotypes of women as weak, passive sex objects who have no business fighting and cannot be relied upon in battle. (*Lonely Soldier* 4-5)²⁰

¹⁸ According to Benedict, the *New England Journal of Medicine* estimates the rate of PTSD for newly returned Iraq War veterans to be 30%. Yet the study “A Dynamic Model for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among U.S. Troops in Operation Iraqi Freedom” estimates that percentage will rise to 35%, due to the unusually frequent and fast redeployment cycle and the often delayed onset of symptoms.

¹⁹ Also, Benedict notes that “some scholars suggest that in America a disproportionate number of sexually violent men may be volunteering for the military as well. This is probably because such men are attracted to the aggressive role of soldier, but it could also be because half of male recruits, like females, enlist to escape abusive families, and childhood abuse often turns men into abusers” (*Lonely Soldier* 224).

²⁰ That such stereotypes endure can be at least partially blamed on the advertising arm of the military, which has, from the very beginning of women’s participation in war, focused on women’s bodies, and how their status as objects of desire would be affected by enlisting. According to Melissa Herbert in *Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat*, the Office of Emergency Management during World War II called for marketing aimed at men “which shows that the

Indeed, boot-camp training methods oftentimes actively encourage such sexist attitudes, while military policies reflect a deeply entrenched culture of sexism. Sexual abuse, in other words, is not a problem of rogue individuals, but an issue of the institutionalized denigration of femininity. As literary scholar Jacqueline E. Lawson so eloquently puts it, “war is the sine qua non of maleness, the agency of legitimized violence and the stronghold of undisputed male power where men are free to exercise/exorcise the thinly veiled fear of women that lurks beneath the surface of patriarchal culture” (17).

Thus, women who are victims of sexual discrimination, harassment and assault are further traumatized by the institutional failure—by the military and by the VA—to address or even acknowledge these issues. In spite of a legacy of sex scandals affecting every branch of the military—the Navy’s Tailhook scandal of 1991, the Army’s Aberdeen scandal in 1996, the Marines’ Fort Leonard Wood scandal in 2008, and the Lackland Air Force Base scandal in 2013, to name just the most famous cases—and in spite of the “zero-tolerance” claims, task force investigations, and promises for policy reform that follow these scandals, a recent Reuters article about the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) reports that “No evidence exists that the Department of Defense office mandated to oversee military sexual assault investigations does so, according to a Government Accountability Office report” (O’Toole). Indeed, Jeffrey Krusinski, the officer in charge of the Air Force’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program, was himself recently charged with sexual assault. Another journalist sums up the pattern of abuse in more human terms:

services increase, rather than detract from, desirable female characteristics” (qtd. in Herbert 3), believing that in order for women to want to enlist, they needed to know that men would find them even more desirable for doing so.

Rapes and sexual assaults [...] are ignored and if not ignored so callously prosecuted within the Military Code of Justice as to suggest that rape is nothing more than a minor infraction deserving of little punishment, if any. [This is] A system set up to hide evidence, encourage victims to recant, and when the victim tries to receive some semblance of justice they are generally rewarded with demotions, harassment, and shockingly further rapes and sexual assaults as punishment. Victims are warned to stay quiet or face dire consequences. The brave victims are blamed—the women in particular were just asking for it. (Bonsignore)

Because of this institutional complicity, incidents of rape²¹ and sexual assault continue to rise; the Department of Defense conservatively estimates the number of assaults in 2012 to be 26,000, up from 19,000 in 2011. Abuse of female soldiers is so rampant that Congresswoman Jane Harman has called military sexual assault an “epidemic,” citing the disturbing fact that “Women serving in the U.S. military today are more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire in Iraq” (“Sexual assault in military”). As army specialist Chantelle Henneberry says, “The mortar rounds that came in daily did less damage to me than the men with whom I shared my food” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 4). Rape has become so commonplace that women are instructed not to visit the latrines or walk around at night without another woman, or “battle buddy,” for protection, a rape-prevention tactic that ultimately places the responsibility and blame for assault on the women themselves (*Lonely Soldier* 89, 94; *The Invisible War*). As Benedict notes, “Even after forty years of research debunking the notion that rape is caused by

²¹ According to Benedict, “Under military law, any soldier who uses his rank to coerce a junior into sexual intercourse, whether with threats or bribes, is guilty of rape, yet this is the most common type of assault in the military. In the army, nearly 90 percent of rape victims are junior ranking women, average age twenty-one, while most of the assailants are noncommissioned officers or junior men, average age twenty-eight” (*The Lonely Soldier* 6).

pent-up lust, the military still promotes it, for to do so is useful: it keeps women fearful and blames them for provoking rape, thus letting men off the hook” (*Lonely Soldier* 167).²²

Indeed, sexual abuse amongst soldiers is so rampant that a new form of PTSD has emerged: Military Sexual Trauma (MST). According to the National Center for PTSD, MST is defined as ““psychological trauma, which in the judgment of a VA mental health professional, resulted from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the Veteran was serving on active duty or active duty for training”” (Federal law, Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D, qtd. in “Military Sexual Trauma”).²³ The creation of a separate category for sexual trauma that occurs *specifically* in the military suggests that this context has particular consequences for the victim.

Kirby Dick’s recent documentary, *The Invisible War* (2012), supports this suggestion, showing how the trauma of sexual assault is compounded in a military context, where women are subjected to a hierarchy of predominantly male power, are isolated from other women, and are marginalized from the brotherhood that is so essential to a soldier’s sense of security.²⁴ In this

²² Recent evidence of the pervasiveness of this attitude is surprisingly easy to find. Osaka’s Mayor Hashimoto recently made inflammatory statements that the “Comfort Women” of World War II—sex slaves captured from across Asia, but mostly from Korea—were necessary to the mental health of “war-crazed” Japanese soldiers. And in the ongoing Senate Armed Services Committee on sexual assault in the military, Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss naturalized rape as the logical outcome of horny young boys who are placed in the proximity of women: ““The young folks coming in to each of your services are anywhere from 17 to 22 or 23. Gee whiz, the hormone level created by nature sets in place the possibility for these types of things to occur. So we’ve got to be very careful how we address it on our side”” (qtd. in Marcotte).

²³ “Sexual harassment is further defined as ‘repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character’” (Federal law, Title 38 U.S. Code 1720D, qtd. in “Military Sexual Trauma”). Affecting around 1 in 5 women and 1 in 100 men, MST is described as “an experience. It is not a diagnosis or a mental health condition in and of itself” (“Military Sexual Trauma”).

²⁴ According to Benedict, “Because the military is so hierarchical, and more than 88 percent of officers are male, it is packed with men who have power over women. Many of them abuse it,

film, journalist Amy Herdy suggests that sexual assault that occurs within the military is possibly more damaging than those in the civilian world: “I have interviewed women in the civilian world, and...and rape is a very very traumatizing thing to have happen. But I’ve never seen trauma like I’ve seen from women who are veterans, who have suffered Military Sexual Trauma.” Because the assaults are perpetrated by those whom the victims consider to be “brothers,” Brigadier General Loree Sutton, a psychiatrist in the US Army, says “It’s akin to what happens in a family with incest.” Not only are the victims assaulted by their brothers-in-arms, but there is no impartial police or judicial system to turn to for justice. There is only the victim’s male-dominated chain of command, whose first priority is to maintain the appearance of order, and which may be populated with the perpetrators themselves or their friends. Thus only 10 percent of cases go to trial, and of those convicted, one in three remain in the service (Steinhauer). There is nowhere to go, and no one to tell.

This inability to tell is an issue for all sexual assault victims but perhaps more so for those in uniform because of the particularly closed nature of the military. As Benedict succinctly puts it, “The prevailing attitude in the military, from women as well as men, is to regard a woman who reports sexual assault as a traitor, a weakling, a slut, or a liar, and soldiers often punish such a woman by ostracizing her” (*Lonely Soldier* 81). Such isolation can not only exasperate the trauma, but it can lead to further targeting and abuse, which may hold the key to why MST is both necessary as a clinical diagnosis, requiring unique treatment options and institutional reforms, and essentially unknown to potential victims. Considering the pressure to keep silent, it is unsurprising that there exists little writing published by soldiers who have been victims of sexual assault. However there is a growing body of work from women veterans,

either by using their rank to coerce women into sex or by punishing those who reject their advances” (*Lonely Soldier* 68).

stories that testify to the pervasiveness of traumatizing sexual abuse, ranging from multiple rapes and murder to harassment. And it is important to keep in mind that, according to Benedict, “[sexual] harassment is often dismissed as mere teasing, but studies have found it can cause the same rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in women as combat does in men” (*Lonely Soldier* 5).

Two memoirs in particular, Kayla Williams’s *Love My Rifle More Than You* and Jess Goodell’s *Shade It Black*, illustrate the traumatic effect of what sociologist and Army veteran Melissa Herbert calls “doing gender” in the military. In *Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military*, Herbert examines the gendered dynamics that women experience in the military. By using the term “doing gender,” she is referring to what Judith Butler describes as the performative nature of gender: “within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 33). The designations “male” and “female” are thus cultural constructions rather than biological destinies.

Herbert further notes that the way in which gender is enacted depends on the context: “the way in which we do gender is very much shaped by the situation. A woman in a male-dominated setting may do gender in a very different way from a woman in a setting that is not structured by ideas rooted in masculine ideology” (13). Her survey of almost three hundred female service members reveals a pervasively misogynist environment in which “female soldiers may be accountable not only as women but as soldiers/pseudomen” (13). This expectation makes it impossible for women to do gender correctly in the military, an institution built on the

opposition of male and female. Once again, we can use Butler to shed some light on how this process operates:

The notion that there might be a “truth” of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.” (*Gender Trouble* 23)

The theater of war is a unique space in which these gender binaries are constantly challenged and reinforced. On the one hand, “A culturally produced activity that is as rigidly defined by sex differentiation and as committed to sexual exclusion as is war points to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced, and circulated back into society” (Cooke and Woollacott ix). The military, as perhaps the *prime* instance of a phallogentric cultural institution, is built on the concept of masculine aggression and power. On the other hand, this dependency on such a narrowly defined, rigidly gendered identity makes the military highly vulnerable to destabilization by anything that threatens the status quo. And there is nothing more antithetical to the American military than the idea of a woman soldier. The threat to the military’s masculine identity is clear in the common argument against women in the military: that they will present a dangerous distraction to the male soldiers, and will denigrate the integrity and rigor of any given military program.

Women soldiers are left in a kind of vacuum of acceptable behavior, required to “do gender” in a context where they are set up to fail, to simultaneously perform the roles of femininity and of masculinity, culturally constructed roles that not only oppose each other, but

that contain within themselves contradictions. And to complicate an already complex web of gender norms, female soldiers are not only expected to perform these gender roles, but they are often criticized and/or punished when they act *too* feminine or masculine. Williams and Goodell both bear witness to the traumatic impact of trying to navigate gender in the military, where adherence to gender roles is both demanded and impossible. Unlike traditional narratives of war written by men, in which young, feminized boys successfully develop into heroic men and traumatic events seemingly occur externally, impersonally, without regard to who they are as people, these memoirs testify to a war experience in which trauma is located within their embodied selves as women. Being female thus becomes a central part of the constellation of traumatic war experience, resulting in the use of gendered language to speak that trauma. Thus both writers, but Goodell especially, belong to the category of women's writing that Teresa de Lauretis describes as "at the same time inside *and* outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision" (*Technologies of Gender* 10).

Manning Up: Gendered Voices in Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*

Kayla Williams, who served as an Army interpreter during the initial invasion of Iraq, begins her book with a refrain from a marching cadence, revealing the source for her memoir's title: "Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou / Love my rifle more than you / You used to be my beauty queen / Now I love my M-16." Such outdated staples of basic training often come up in memoirs by female soldiers because, while they so aptly illustrate the more mundane side of the military's

male chauvinism, they also reveal how deeply entrenched the anti-feminine mentality is. Herbert points out that misogyny is, in fact, part of what it means to be a soldier:

Prior to the elimination of the draft, the military represented a part of traditional sex-role identity for American men, as well as a primary socialization agent for this identity [...] Much of the strategy [for establishing one's masculinity and status as soldier] seems to rely on being that which is not feminine and, taking this one step further, denigrating that which is feminine. (8-9)

Jacqueline E. Lawson notes that the military exploits the fear of emasculation beginning with their recruiting ads, saying "Few forces in our society so openly encourage misogyny as the U.S. military" (19). This cadence, in particular, is an example of how boot camp trains soldiers to sublimate their presumably masculine, heterosexual desire for women into a desire for weapons and violence. Yet it is unclear why and how Williams is using it here. Certainly, she is foregrounding the gendered dynamics of the military, but does she mean to point out the absurdity of having to speak from this hetero-masculinist position?

Apparently, not quite. "I do love my M-4, the smell of it, of cleaning fluid, of gunpowder: the feeling of strength" (15), she writes. It seems she is attempting to appropriate the phrase "love my rifle more than you" as a statement of empowerment, reclaiming subjectivity and agency for herself. "The guys are there for the taking too. And we took. I took" (21), she defiantly states later while describing her sexual encounters. Yet this assertion of agency, relying as it does on the complex and shifting territories of power and desire, is unsteady, as she acknowledges in her prologue: "Sometimes, even now, I wake up before dawn and forget I am not a slut" (13). So begins her memoir. Williams attempts to assert herself as an empowered woman who defies the Army's expectations of what it means to be a female soldier. Yet the

hyper-masculine language she uses as proof of her empowerment reveals the limitations to female agency when it is sought within the Lacanian symbolic order, “the order of language, discourse, narrative” (Silverman 162). According to this phallogocentric system, power is *phallic* power, and language—the power to make meaning, the power to define selfhood—is reserved for man. Without a language of her own, Williams appropriates the discourse of military machismo in an effort to lay claim to selfhood, illustrating what Andrea Dworkin argues in *Intercourse*:

“We know only the language of these folks who enter and occupy us: they keep telling us that we are different from them; yet we speak only their language and have none, or none that we remember, of our own; and we do not dare, it seems invent one, even in signs and gestures. Our bodies speak their language. Our minds think in it. The men are inside us through and through.” (qtd. in Lawson 233).

Yet this is the same lexicon that defines her as a slut, the same language that targets her womanhood and is the source of the traumatic experiences that are central to her memoir. Rather than a story of empowerment, Williams’s memoir illustrates the problem of representation posed by traumatic experience; more specifically, this text reveals the failure of patriarchal language to represent trauma that is gendered.

The tendency for female soldiers to “emulate the men, even to the point of assuming the loud, curt male Marine voice, language, and gestures” (Goodell 27) is a common way to insert oneself into the brotherhood of the military. All soldiers, regardless of sex, dress, act and talk like men, at least outside of the female tents. It is a way of verifying that you are, indeed, a Marine, in the same way that Demi Moore’s character, Jordan O’Neil, shouts “Suck my dick!” in the film *G.I. Jane*, having just survived a particularly brutal training exercise—thus signaling to

her male cohorts, and the audience, that she is now a soldier. Yet more than just a way of fitting in, behaving like a man is a response to relentless sexual harassment—fittingly, O’Neil shirks off the mantle of womanhood only when she successfully thwarts the threat of rape.

Likewise, Benedict’s collection of stories is filled with testimony by women who responded to sexual persecution by behaving more manly. One of the women she interviewed “had to change her personality to cope with harassment, which is why she said the army robbed her of her femininity. She altered the way she talked, and even the way she walked. ‘There’s so many guys watching you walk, so I had to learn to do it with no girlyness at all’” (*Lonely Soldier* 48). Another woman “knew that fear, along with the relentless sexual harassment from the prisoners and her fellow soldiers alike, was turning her into someone she could not even recognize” (*Lonely Soldier* 117). Abbie similarly laments the need to “front,” or act tough, to avoid sexual assault, prompting Benedict to make the observation that “the soldierly identity [women] have to assume is an antifemale, male-defined identity. When Abbie talked about fronting, she was talking about being divided from herself as a female” (*Lonely Soldier* 141).

Williams also rejects her female self in favor of a “male-defined identity,” as is evident in her authorial voice, which adopts the language, tone and point of view of male soldiers. This is not to say that Williams isn’t sufficiently feminine, as if there existed one appropriate kind of femininity. Rather, it is to argue that this hypermasculine mode of speaking effectively acts as a discursive defense against the threat of sexual assault. According to Herbert, one of the main strategies of “manning up” is to swear, which is considered a masculine way of speaking (94). Williams, who wrote her memoir a few years after the war, curses in a kind of impersonation of heterosexual male toughness, revealing the long-term effects of gendered trauma. For example, she describes her friend Zoe, one of the few women she got close to, in these terms: “Beautiful

and amazing Zoe. Crazy and wild. Small tits. Great ass” (49). And as if to explain why she divorced her husband, she recalls being “freaked” because he cried, publicly, during the film *Black Hawk Down*. “There were people I knew in the audience. It made him look like a big pussy” (51). She later disparages a gift from him for being too feminine: “I had a pathetic Leatherman. It was very girly—my ex-husband gave it to me, and the gift may have contributed to our divorce. [...] I called it my ‘chick Leatherman’ or ‘fag Leatherman’” (126-127). Williams appropriates what Benedict describes as “the everyday speech of ordinary soldiers [which] is still riddled with sexist and homophobic insults” (*Lonely Soldier* 50). Indeed, the military is one of the few institutions left where such language is not only tolerated, but expected—which says something about the military as a stronghold of patriarchal entitlement. Benedict goes on to note that “This misogynist language is so deeply engrained in military culture as to be reflexive. Yet it serves as a constant reminder to women that, even as they are winning honors and advancing in numbers and positions in the military, when it comes to the group, they are alone” (*Lonely Soldier* 51). For Williams, to use such language is to defy this exclusion, to insist on one’s membership in the brotherhood.

However, as Carol Cohn says in “Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War,” “While we can choose a position in a discourse [...] it means something different for a woman to ‘speak like a man’ than for a man to do so. It is heard differently” (230). It is because Williams is a woman that reviewer Alan Moores of *Booklist* panderingly describes her as “Whip smart, sassy, with a mouth as foul as a sailor’s.” What Moores apparently finds cute is Williams’s tough-guy act, but what he does not recognize is that, ironically enough, she appropriates the overtly sexist remarks commonly associated with male soldiers in an effort to deflect the sexism she receives for being a woman. This coping strategy is best illustrated while

she is posted in a remote, mountainous region, the only woman among a small group of hardened male soldiers and perhaps the most vulnerable to assault. When they obtain some vodka one night, the conversation becomes sexual and the men turn their attention to Williams, alternately calling her “Boobs” and “hatchet wound,” talk that gives her “a nasty shiver” (168). So, when one of the men attempts to tell a sexist joke—“What’s the difference between a hooker and an onion?”—Williams one-ups him, saying “Ah, that’s my joke [...] No one ever cried when they cut a hooker. Hey. What’s the first thing a woman does when she gets back from a battered women’s shelter? [...] The dishes, if she’s smart” (168). Williams defuses the threat of assault underlying their nicknames, jokes and obscene gestures by ramping up her own sexist remarks. It is an effort to be one of the guys, and she even goes so far as to place herself alongside them when addressing the reader: “It’s easy to judge our adolescent behavior [...] Understand: There is *nothing* for us to do” (168). Williams quickly retreats from the implied threats that gave her a “nasty shiver,” denying the mark of difference her female body represents to these men by substituting it with an “us” (soldiers) / “you” (civilian reader) dichotomy.

In a striking reversal of attitude, however, she later recalls “the day some of the guys—tossing a football—told rape jokes. (Are there any jokes about rape that are funny?) My blood—how else to put this?—‘froze’” (212). Jokes about domestic battery and stabbing prostitutes are understandable when one is bored, according to Williams’s code of ethics, but *rape* is never funny. This hypocrisy may be at least partially explained by the fact that Williams had just experienced an attempted rape by a soldier named Rivers, a brutal reminder that—in spite of her hard drinking and hooker jokes—she is not just one of the guys. And this is part of what is so traumatizing—the fact that the attempted rape *feminizes* her: “At least on some level, I know I can yell...The shame of being in a position where you might have to do that. Yell for help. Like

some damn damsel in distress” (207-208). She is not only traumatized by the assault itself, but she is also humiliated by being put in the position of *a woman*. So Williams, like so many other sexually assaulted soldiers, declines to report the assault, a choice of silence that is coded in the military as another way of manning up, of reversing the feminizing effects of being assaulted.

Significantly, Williams’s PTSD symptoms begin immediately after Rivers’ friend confronts her with rumors that she propositioned him, yet the “intrusive images” (212) that begin to plague her are of the violence she has seen in combat. What may seem like a disparity between the trigger event and the symptoms that follow is, in fact, indicative of the often multifaceted and sometimes “mundane” nature of the trauma experienced by female soldiers. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich argues that trauma can be “connected to the textures of everyday experiences” (3-4), challenging the notion that traumatic events exist only at the extreme limits of experience. Cvetkovich echoes the feminist concept of trauma first put forth by Laura Brown:

[there is a] gender divide within trauma discourse that allows sexual trauma to slip out of the picture. Sometimes the impact of sexual trauma doesn’t seem to measure up to that of collectively experienced historical events, such as war and genocide [...] Sometimes it doesn’t appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn’t produce dead bodies or even, necessarily, damaged ones. (3)

And sometimes, as Benedict notes, sexual assault and exposure to war become part of the same constellation of trauma:

there are women soldiers in Iraq who have been abused as children, who are abused again by their fellow soldiers, who are harassed by their comrades, who are serving with the men who attacked them, and who are enduring mortar and fire attacks, seeing the

wounded and the dead, fighting in combat, and living in constant fear for their lives.

Every one of these experiences is a trigger for PTSD, and many women are enduring them all at once. (*Lonely Soldier* 210)

Williams, who was also sexually assaulted at 13, fits this description exactly.

Although Cvetkovich comes dangerously close to reinscribing the gender divide she describes (war and genocide are experienced by men, sexual trauma is experienced by women), she makes an important argument that trauma can be experienced by the everyday events that make up a life, especially among those whose very identities are considered deviant or Other. Female soldiers, an extraordinarily marginalized group, are oftentimes sexually harassed so constantly that this kind of abuse becomes invisible. For Williams, the absence of one easily identifiable catastrophic event that can be pointed to as The Traumatic Moment compounds her shame for breaking down: “Me? What’s my excuse? I watched some guy die once. Still felt guilt about it. Like I contributed to his death. And now the guys I considered my friends were treating me like a *girl*. I was tits, a piece of ass, a bitch or a slut or whatever, but never really a *person*. *Bros before hos*” (214). Significantly, Williams does not identify the attempted rape, per say, as a source of her breakdown; rather, she chalks it up to being treated “like a girl.” Williams is persecuted for allegedly being a “a big whore” (175), routinely called a “bitch,” nicknamed “Boobs,” repeatedly propositioned, cajoled on a daily basis to expose herself for the pleasure of the men she worked with, fondled, almost raped, and isolated when she refused. To be treated “like a girl” is to be objectified and dehumanized, yet because such abuse is cliché “or whatever,” such experiences are outside the range of what is considered legitimate traumatic experience. Indeed, a book reviewer from *Bookmarks Magazine* makes sure to note that “As one of only 15 percent of women employed by the Army, Williams possibly overplays the sexual

harassment she suffered—or so claim a few of the more suspect male reviewers.”²⁵ Thus, while Williams writes to bear witness to the sources of her trauma, she does so disparagingly, nonchalantly (“Understand: There is *nothing* for us to do,” she tells us)—trying, still, to exude that toughness that never quite seems to work.

Women in the military often feel like they are fighting wars on multiple fronts, so that their trauma can be traced back to both the violence of war and the brutality of sexism. Williams describes it as being in “a separate bloodless war within the larger deadly one” (22), though for some women soldiers, the sex war is not so bloodless, and just as deadly. As one woman testifies to Benedict, ““People worry about their loved ones’ encounters with the enemy, but for females, sometimes the enemy eats, sleeps, and works right next to them”” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 5). Similarly, Williams identifies the sources of danger as related to both combat and sexual harassment: “A woman soldier has to toughen herself up. Not just for the enemy, for battle, or for death. I mean toughen herself to spend months awash in a sea of nervy, hyped-up guys who, when they’re not thinking about getting killed, are thinking about getting laid. Their eyes on you *all the time*, your breasts, your ass” (13, my emphasis). And it is the constant, relentless, almost mundane nature of the sexual harassment that is so damaging, as the testimony of other female veterans attests to. Jen Spranger says that ““The harassment got to be so commonplace that I didn’t even think it was wrong. Anyway, it went up so high in the ranks there was nobody to tell”” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 107). Abbie Pickett similarly says, ““It happens so much you get

²⁵ Although *Bookmarks Magazine* is an obscure, independently published periodical, its review is cited on the book’s Amazon.com purchase page, under Editorial Reviews, right underneath the review from Publisher’s Weekly. Such placement gives this review enormous influence over the reception of Williams’s memoir, which, the review implies, should be considered an object of suspicion.

numb...it wears away at you without you being aware of it because it's so constant” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 129).

Not only are many women soldiers victimized by constant sexual harassment, they are often manipulated into deriving pleasure and a false sense of power from the objectification, in spite of themselves. Williams admits that “Their eyes, their hunger: yes, they’re shaming—but they also make you special. I don’t like to say it—it cuts inside—but the attention, the admiration, the *need*: they make you powerful” (14). Williams pursues this paradox further in her first chapter, “Queen for a Year,” the derogatory term for “a female soldier who becomes stuck-up during her deployment due to an exponential increase in male attention” (18), as she defines it. This description is telling, for although her memoir purports to foreground the sexual harassment and gender biases in the military, this chapter is less a critique of the Army’s misogynistic culture and more a condemnation of girls who “succumbed to temptation” (20).

“Take this one girl. I heard from reliable sources in Iraq she gave head to every guy in her unit. I mean, I heard it from guys who were there. Participants. No rumor. Truth” (18), she says. Her insistence that this is a true story is odd, considering that she is also accused of being a slut for sexual acts she never performed, also by a man who claimed to be a “participant.” Williams challenges neither the veracity of the story, nor the culture of male power that might coerce a woman into performing such acts. Similarly, she points her finger at younger enlistees as being “the most susceptible” (20), not because of their vulnerability, but because of their gullibility. She goes on to express the commonplace lament by female soldiers against other women: “meanwhile, she’s making my life tons more difficult. [...] It made it easy for guys over there to treat females as if we were less reliable” (18-19). In spite of her proud admission that she took advantage of the availability of sex (“And we took. I took”), Williams places the blame for

sexism squarely on the shoulders of so-called “sluts,” rather than on a patriarchal culture of male power that encourages such sexism. As Benedict notes, this attitude is common: “I heard many stories about those women who ‘bring us all down’ by being sexually promiscuous, but the stories are hard to verify. [...] Rumors of promiscuity are also a way of blaming the victims of rape and denigrating women in general” (*Lonely Soldier* 168).

This attitude is just part of a larger problem in which women soldiers end up internalizing the same kind of misogynist attitude that is used against them by male soldiers. Williams makes sure early on to distance herself from the two most famous female soldiers of the war in Iraq: Jessica Lynch, the hostage who was cast as the damsel in distress and rescued by her heroic male comrades, and Lynndie England, the infamous woman convicted of conspiracy and the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. (It is significant that the only two recognizable names of women soldiers also represent two of the most common female stereotypes: the weak woman who needs saving, and the monstrous torturer of men.) Williams also reflects on her general distaste for the other female soldiers, saying “I did not see girls bond at boot camp [...] Forced into close quarters, we just got catty. Very catty. I really hated living with females” (46). Jessica Goodell, discussed at length below, also comments on the lack of bonding between women, as well as the pressure from other women to conform to gender norms:

It’s unlikely that a female Marine will find much solace or safety or strength among the other females, as so many of them have given into the pressure and have accepted the label [...] and they’ll find additional evidence of her deviance in her unwillingness to color her hair, to do her nails, or even to apply make-up at 4:30 a.m.—while holding a flashlight in the darkness of the tent. (*Shade It Black* 58)

Most of the women Benedict interviews concur with these accounts. Army Sergeant Miriam Barton observes that ““most of the hostile treatment I ever received was from other females. And every time a female runs into another female, it’s like, “Oh, are you one of those that brings us all down?””” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 168). This attitude is echoed by Tammy Duckworth, Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans’ Affairs. Recalling her time as a woman in the military, she says that there were some women who used their gender to their advantage: “This latter group’s actions made life very difficult for the women in my generation. Their over-reliance on their gender to pave the way left a negative impression of female Soldiers in their male counterparts” (Holmstedt viii), men who would go on to become leaders and decision makers with biases against women in the military. Like Williams, Duckworth places the blame for discrimination against women soldiers on promiscuous women, rather than on the patriarchal culture of the military.

The internalization of misogynist attitudes may be the reason why Williams begins to self-destruct, saying “I felt this powerful desire to be even thinner and thinner. Until I could simply slip away. Disappear. Eat less and less and less... It was around this time that I contemplated offing myself. It could all be over in a moment. It would be too easy” (215). She turns against her own body, the same body that made her a target of sexual abuse. Goodell would also experience drastic weight loss during her time in Iraq, indicating what Cvetkovich describes as “the pleasures of sensory embodiment that trauma destroys” (1). Both women attempt to cope with their abusive experiences by diminishing the very bodies that are turned into sources of pain. And Benedict reports that such self-destructive coping mechanisms are particular to female soldiers, who “are more likely to turn their anger and blame in on themselves rather than

becoming violent toward others, especially if they have been sexually assaulted” (*Lonely Soldier* 204).

Williams continues to struggle with gender roles when she returns home. Her description of life after war includes the stark separation of civilians and domesticity versus soldiers and combat, a separation that is very clearly gendered. Like many veterans, she finds the adjustment back to “the world” difficult.²⁶ What is significant about Williams’s memoir is that the things she deplores about civilian life are generally associated with women: “How was I willing to go and die for these fucking people who wear sweatshirts with little kittens on them? Or these people with sequins who bump into me with their carts at the supermarket and then look at me like I’m an asshole?” (275). The hostility Williams feels for the other women in the military is now carried over to things in the civilian world that are typically considered female interests and activities—fad diets, celebrity gossip, and shopping.

Meanwhile, the “brothers” she left behind are doing the real work, doing things that matter. In spite of the sexual harassment, attempted rape, and isolation she received from almost every male soldier she encountered in her memoir, Williams recalls them with admiration and respect: “These guys, they’re your husband, they’re your father, your brother, your lover—your life” (14). Critical to every soldier’s training is the development of a deep sense of membership with one’s unit in order to sublimate one’s individuality to the collective Army identity. Yet Williams only develops this sense of bonding with the men, while all things related to women and femininity are rejected.

Williams’s memoir testifies to the debilitating effects of combating a misogyny so entrenched in the soldier’s identity that it becomes internalized. Whether through casual sex,

²⁶ As a matter of fact, female veterans have a harder time adjusting to civilian life, according to a report by Time.com (Thompson).

wrestling, drinking, cursing or sexist jokes and remarks, she resists the role of “the weaker sex” throughout her time in Iraq and after. Yet her memoir reveals the deeply entrenched gender binaries that dictate what avenues of self-empowerment are available to her. In the Army, where power is the antithesis of femininity, Williams—sexually harassed and assaulted because she is a woman—attempts to find agency by manning up. Trapped within the matrix of the phallogentric symbolic order, bound by the language of male power, she has little recourse outside the lexicon of gendered voices. Williams’s narrative leaves us with an important question: If subjectivity is discursively produced, and the discourse is dictated by male power, then how does a woman reclaim language for self-empowerment? As *Gendering War Talk* editors Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott state, “Language used to describe or discuss war becomes itself the vehicle of, as well as the potential challenge to, assumptions about appropriate gender roles in relation to war. Language transforms experience into consciousness” (xii). Whereas the language Williams uses to describe her war experience is both symptomatic of the gendered nature of her trauma, as well as a reinforcement of the gender binary that is the source of her pain, fellow memoirist and Iraq veteran Jessica Goodell deploys gendered language in a highly self-conscious way that is designed to combat the discursive construction of gendered identities.

What Remains: Re-Membering Bodies in Jess Goodell’s *Shade It Black*

Jess Goodell enlisted in the Marines in 2001 after graduating from high school, and served in the Mortuary Affairs unit in Iraq for eight months in 2004. It was the job of Goodell and the other members of her unit to recover and process the remains of soldiers and civilian casualties. The title of her memoir, *Shade It Black*, refers to the practice of shading black missing body parts and wounds on a diagram of a human body. Yet it also refers to what is personally

lost for those who are traumatized by their experience in war. As Goodell writes, “friends and family members and spouses, good memories, sleep, fun, food, and clarity would all have to be shaded black [...] for several of us, our former lives would be shaded black [...] for a couple of us, hope would be shaded black” (131).

For Goodell, organizing her war memories into narrative form is akin to processing body parts: just as she “tried to sort out and organize the body parts and bits and pieces into coherent wholes” (108), so she thought she could “exert greater control over [her] thoughts if [she] arranged them into a coherent narrative” (188). Indeed, writing this memoir is part of Goodell’s process of piecing together the bodies destroyed by war, bodies that include her own. For not only is Goodell haunted by the remains of the people she had to process, she is further traumatized by the objectification and denigration she experienced for inhabiting a female body. Her body, in other words, speaks the trauma of war as much as the bodies she processes. Unlike traditional war stories written by male authors, Goodell’s memoir of war is explicitly about gender. Her story of trauma, like that of Williams and other women veterans, is simultaneously a story about war and about womanhood. For Goodell, the two cannot be separated. Using the body to map the constellation of trauma she experiences, Goodell re-members a past in which the bodies of soldiers damaged and destroyed by war are inextricably linked to the gendered bodies that engage in a different kind of battle, one that produces its own casualties.

The memoir begins with images of bodily unity that suggest that the author and the other Marines are a unified team. Goodell’s description of the flight to Iraq heightens the reader’s sense of bodily awareness:

We were packed into [the plane’s] fuselage as though we were stuffing, sitting shoulder to shoulder, with the entire side of the body of one person touching the entire side of the

body of the next, from shoulders to feet [...] Our knees were touching the knees of the person facing us, so we were boxed in on three sides by strangers [...] For the eighteen-hour flight, we sat there, against each other. (14)

If this closeness is awkward at first, it soon becomes second nature as the boundaries between bodies disappear, and individuals become a unit of Marines: “We worked together, like fingers on a hand [...] we are parts of a single organism, each carrying out a particular set of responsibilities that allow for the vehicle and its occupants to arrive at its destination in one piece. We are a single organism” (18-19).

As Goodell’s use of the pronoun “we” indicates, there is, at first, no gender—which is to say, all references to sex are male and, in the context of a war story, invisible. As Butler says, summarizing Simone de Beauvoir, “only the feminine gender is marked [...] the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood” (*Gender Trouble* 13-14). “In other words,” Butler says later, “only men are ‘persons,’ and there is no gender but the feminine” (*Gender Trouble* 26). Similarly, in this memoir there are variations of age and size and race, but the soldiers are presumed to be male, even as Goodell points out the performative nature of masculinity:

Young men who worked out every day puffed out their chests and positioned their arms in ways that made their biceps bulge. Smaller men held their M-16s in the same way they had seen Rambo hold his weapon in long ago movies. The Hispanic and Black kids assumed threatening facial expressions and thugged-up their gait [...] The White guys clenched their jaws and narrowed their eyes. Every Marine’s head swiveled continuously. (14-15)

Whatever differences exist are rendered moot in the homogeneity of their maleness; these men are positioning their bodies for battle, rehearsing masculinity as they prepare to enter the theater of war.

There is no indication of what the women were doing. In fact, there is hardly any indication that there are any women at all until the second chapter. Here we learn that the women are *women* above all else, and are thus viewed as objects, without agency: “The women were assigned nicknames by the men who reminded them of how they were perceived, what they were seen as, names like Legs and Dolly, names that were unshakable [...] She’s always a female first and a Marine second” (25). This sentiment is repeatedly found in the testimonials of female Marines. More than just a pejorative attitude, the prioritizing of gender in a female soldier’s identity is particular to the Marines. As one of Herbert’s respondents nostalgically laments, the mission for female Marines had been, until recently, “to free a man to fight” (37), a term left over from World War II. Herbert goes on to note that “Evidence of the value placed on this feminine image is the fact that, until quite recently, women recruits in the Marine Corps were required to attend makeup and etiquette classes as part of their training” (38).²⁷ In *Gender Differences at Work*, Christine Williams suggests that the emphasis placed on maintaining the femininity of female recruits in the Marine Corps, the military branch most associated with masculinity, is due to an intense insecurity over losing the men’s own gendered identity (63-64). Psychologist and author Stephen J. Ducat similarly notes that “Paradoxically, but perhaps not unexpectedly, it has been the men who are the most macho in appearance and behavior who have manifested the greatest fear of being feminine” (5). Both on an institutional level and an

²⁷ See blogger Cam Brown’s post “I Was a Woman Marine Trailblazer” at <http://americanwomenveterans.org/home/2010/12/i-was-a-woman-marine-trailblazer/> for a personal reflection on this dynamic.

individual level, the higher the femiphobia, the more tenuous the masculinity. This theory finds traction in Goodell's memoir, where it is the female body that first introduces a crack in the unit's bodily integrity; it is femininity that is the mark of difference. As Goodell says, "The males remind the females and one another all the time that the females are, well, female" (27).

She also says, "That's just the way it was" (25). Goodell's indifferent attitude is misleading; specifically, it leads us away from the fact that she is herself a woman. Like Williams, Goodell's narrative voice can be described as masculine, but in a much less aggressive, more self-conscious way. As Carol Cohn states, there are ways of speaking that are coded as masculine and feminine, and likewise coded as legitimate and prohibited. Feminine ways of speaking are "impulsive, uncontrolled, emotional, concrete, and attentive to human bodies" (231). Whereas "A speaking style that is identified as cool, dispassionate, and distanced is required [in order to be considered valid]. One that vibrates with the intensity of emotion almost always disqualifies the speaker, who is heard to sound like 'a hysterical housewife'" (232). Like Vera Brittain in *Testament of Youth*, Goodell recalls even the most disturbing images of war with a calmness and control that confers upon her memoir the legitimacy granted to traditional (male) war-weary veterans.

Goodell deliberately withholds her sex until chapter 8, an omission that is particularly noteworthy when she is discussing the gendered dynamics within the Marines:

The first thing The Sir had us do was run, and right away I noticed that Ro was keeping up with the rest of us. I saw that as a good sign. Maybe she wasn't going to fall into that typical female Marine role in which she'd slack off, not pull her weight, and expect special favors from the guys. A lot of the women did that and you could tell which ones would just by watching them run. (26)

Goodell casts herself as spectator, a position of power traditionally reserved for men. This is not to say, however, that she is trying to trick the reader into thinking she is a man. Rather, because the male gender and universal personhood are, according to Beauvoir, one in the same, this perspective contributes to her gender neutrality.

Throughout the first half of the narrative, Goodell avoids identifying herself as a woman, distancing herself from other women soldiers with the pronouns “they” and “them,” preferring the designations “the females” or “the women” to “we” or “us.” And it is particularly when discussing the rampant sexism she experiences that Goodell chooses to maintain a disembodied 3rd-person perspective. This distancing may be a symptom of her PTSD, of what Cathy Caruth calls the “unassimilated nature” (4) of trauma, the way it remains externalized outside of the self, held apart from one’s personal history. Indeed, Goodell even suppresses her sex when “the female” she is referring to is herself: “Because there were only two females in Mortuary Affairs, they lived in Tent City with the general population. They had to deal not only with the stigma of being in Mortuary Affairs, but with the many challenges of being a female too” (57).

Considering Goodell was one of these two females, her distancing maneuvers draw attention to her sense of being other to herself, a strategy that evokes Simone de Beauvoir’s criticism of the lack of solidarity between women in *The Second Sex*: “Women—except in certain abstract gatherings such as conferences—do not use ‘we’; men say ‘women,’ and women adopt this word to refer to themselves; but they do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects” (Beauvoir 8). By avoiding the “we” pronoun, Goodell highlights how women soldiers are not only kept apart from each other, but alienated from themselves.

At the same time, Goodell draws attention to the system of naming that is a part of the discursive production of self. She goes by the nom de plume of “Jess,” while elsewhere—the

afterword, the short bio on the back flap—she is identified by the decidedly more feminine name of “Jessica.” One explanation for this elision of her sex, even while she points out the sexism endemic to the Marines, can be found in the above excerpt about Ro, the other woman in her unit. To be a woman in the Marines is to be scorned and stigmatized, even—or especially so—by your fellow female soldiers. As a female soldier, Goodell’s womanhood has been turned against her, her feminine attributes turned into targets for derision and objectification. To be a woman in the Marines is also, as we will discover later in the memoir, to have your experience disregarded, to have your testimony delegitimized and silenced. For Williams, to be a woman is to be accused of exaggerating the sexual harassment one experiences. It is as though Goodell only feels able to point out the sexism endemic to the culture of the Marines when she is not, first, identified as a woman. Indeed, up to this point, Goodell reverses the “woman first, Marine second” designation, identifying herself first and foremost as a Marine.

Once gender is introduced into the narrative as the first crack in the “single organism” façade, the image of bodily cohesion and efficiency rapidly deteriorates. When the first body comes in to be processed, the members of Mortuary Affairs find that their own bodies cease to be responsive: “several of us froze [...] We became inept and couldn’t do anything, really [...] you stand there, motionless” (36). Although they eventually overcome this initial paralysis, the bodies that they must process become, at first, fragmented, and, eventually, unrecognizable. First, a few missing fingers. Then, a boot...which turns out to be a boot with a foot in it. Then a charred torso. Body parts that “smelled like meat left too long on a grill” (56). Later, testicles so water-logged they resembled cantaloupes. And skin that slides around on a dead body after too many hours in the sun. A bag of heads. Then, this:

Some of the remains had to be scooped up by putting our hands together as though we were cupping water. We put the body parts and pieces [...] into a body bag, then scooped up the liquidy remains and poured them in too. When we finished, the contents—the clumps and chunks and pieces and parts—didn't resemble a human body.

(Shade It Black 51-52)

A body that one must scoop up is not a body at all. She repeats this image later—“On occasion, we would scoop the remains by hand, scoop the flesh, handfuls of flesh, and place it into a body bag” (108). She also repeats this image in multiple interviews, including one by NPR: “Sometimes the remains, because they had exploded, we would have to scoop them with our hands.” This compulsive repetition indicates her inability to comprehend this experience and points to the body's central place in Goodell's testimony of war. If a traumatic experience can be described as one that defies comprehension, then these confrontations with the unrecognizable, unreadable body, with what remains after a body ceases to be a body, are central to Goodell's testimony.

The military body—once unified, mechanized, regimented, supreme —has become fluid, grotesque, incomplete. An analysis of Goodell's memoir shows how this unreadable, unthinkable body has implications for the gendered body, too, for its intelligibility, so fiercely policed, is used as a bulwark against the ontological crisis brought on by the soldier's body in ruins. Butler's discussion of the subversive effect of drag on naturalized conceptions of gender are useful here:

The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or woman [...] When such categories

come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. (*Gender Trouble* xxii-xxiii)

The encounter with bodily remains stripped of the “stabilizing concepts” (23) of identity, nationality, sexuality, and sex similarly disrupts the field of intelligibility and is often at the core of traumatic war experience.

Butler’s theory may help explain why the femininity of women soldiers is so excessively monitored, measured, enforced and staged within the military apparatus. Although more women have been wounded or killed in Iraq than in Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf combined, it is still primarily men who are the victims, a statistical reality reflected in the fact that most, if not all, of the bodies Goodell describes processing are identified as male. If, as Herbert claims, “The military is a ‘gendered institution’ because soldiering has been about not only war, but being ‘a man’” (7), then a male soldier wounded, killed, or reduced to “handfuls of flesh” is a catastrophic threat against masculinity itself. Indeed, Goodell’s descriptions of the men she processed are generic, idealized visions of the American male:

There were pictures. A man and his wife and daughter [...] A high school student with his football teammates. A young man in a sleeveless t-shirt leaning against a 1983 Camero. A letter in which a Marine tells his widow that he is now dead, but that he loves her still, and he wants her to give their daughter a kiss from him. (37-38)

Goodell remembers these images because they represent what is lost when a soldier is killed—it is “a son, husband, brother, father, hero” (37). It is always male. In the face of such catastrophic castration, the affirmation of femininity takes on exaggerated importance.

One way to restore coherence to the male identity is by producing—and punishing—its Other, the female. Women in the service are given very few roles to play, and the category to

which they are assigned depends entirely on their willingness to be sex objects, perfectly illustrating Beauvoir's theory that "The identification of women with 'sex,' [...] is a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies [...] sex [...] has, through a misogynist gesture of synecdoche, come to take the place of the person, the self-determining *cogito*" (*Gender Trouble* 26). Accordingly, Goodell recalls that women are labeled either "a 'bitch' or 'dyke' or a 'prude' or a 'religious nut'" (58).

Far from an exaggeration, this description of how women are identified is repeated almost verbatim in numerous testimonials from female veterans: Williams is awakened at night not by visions of war, but by a word: "Slut. The only other choice is bitch. If you're a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get" (13); one woman from *The Lonely Soldier* recalls, "There are only three things the guys let you be if you're a girl in the military—a bitch, a ho, or a dyke" (5); a journalist, quoted in *Shade It Black*, reports that "women entering boot camp are told that 'there are only three kinds of female Marines: 'bitches, lesbians, and whores.'" Both men and women say that male Marines regularly call female Marines 'bags of nasties,' or use the semi-official designation for women Marines, 'WM,' to mean 'walking mattress'" (85).

These labels distill women down to their willingness to sleep with the men who surround them, an over-simplification of womanhood that ensures its intelligibility and thus that of manhood. They furthermore define women as objects of desire while paradoxically denigrating that very quality. The designation "bags of nasties" is particularly significant, recalling, as it does, the handfuls of flesh scooped into body bags. Appearing in Goodell's memoir just a few pages apart, these descriptions recall each other, and become part of the same constellation of trauma. Goodell explains that this term is used for women who fail to meet the Corp's body composition regulations: "Female Marines who don't make regs [...] They're called 'typical

female Marines.’ They’re called ‘bags of nasties.’ [...] They are the embodiment of flaws. They are bags of nasties” (46). Just as the body bags filled with liquidity remains are unrecognizable as human, so women who fail to conform to the norms of a desirable body are simultaneously unrecognizable as women and “typical” of women. As Mary Russo explains in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, the female form has long been associated with the grotesque as a way of relegating femininity to surface and spectacle: “For the modern spectator/interpreter, woman as the object of critical scrutiny has no longer anything to hide or to reveal” (Introduction). Similarly, the women in Goodell’s memoir are produced as both desirable and repulsive, an act that cancels out the threat contained in the desirable body to the autonomy of the desiring subject, ensuring that women are objects for both male pleasure and disgust, to be taken or discarded at whim.

One strategy around the bitch/whore/dyke trap is to acquire a boyfriend or husband in the service, which effectively confirms a woman’s heterosexuality while simultaneously making her “off limits” to other servicemen. Goodell testifies that she “knew several female Marines who tried to navigate their way through this tangle of derogatory labels and differential treatment by faking having a boyfriend [...] [one woman] found an actual boyfriend, more or less, a Marine, one who was fairly close by, was big, tough, and Hispanic” (59). It isn’t until much later in the memoir that we learn that once again, Goodell has distanced herself from her own story. “Miguel” was Goodell’s boyfriend at the time, a Marine, “6’2’ [sic] and 230 pounds of solid ox muscle” (134) whose picture she showed to men who propositioned her, and whose Hispanic ethnicity presumably added to his threatening bulk. It is a common strategy deployed by servicewomen who are looking for a way out of the sexual harassment and abuse. Brigadier General Janis Karpinski laments in her memoir that “Many of the women felt besieged. They

couldn't take a step without the wolves closing in. All too typically, a young woman would settle on one guy as a way to deflect all the others'" (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 174). As Herbert notes, however, this practice of acquiring a male protector is potentially damaging, often exposing women to domestic abuse (89), as in the case of Goodell. It also reinforces the stereotype of women as property, as weak and in need of male protection.

Labeling is just one example of the regulatory practices in action throughout Goodell's memoir, practices which also include the imperative to wear makeup, the pressure to sleep with male soldiers, and the expectation that women underperform and seek out the protection and guidance of her male companions—behaviors that are, again, simultaneously expected and penalized. Herbert discusses at length the narrow field of acceptable behavior for women in the military, noting that "The contradiction between the idea of soldiering and cultural conceptions of femininity insures that it will be difficult for the two to coexist. It also insures that hyperfemininity, or perception thereof, is available as a 'marker' for women's difference" (72). Femininity is literally staged for the male soldiers during various training sessions in which Goodell is given a near impossible task while the men watch and wait for her to fail. As she explains, "If the female doesn't perform in the same way the men had, the audience's view of the world and the assumptions upon which it's based are reinforced" (87). Masculine supremacy, in other words, is restored and confirmed.

In a war zone, where the presence of women and the threat of injury, dismemberment and death effectively endanger the stability of masculinity as a concept, the pressure to adhere to gender roles becomes intensified to a fever pitch. Ironically, in order for the female body to achieve coherence in the predominantly masculine world of the military, it must itself be violently partitioned into parts—legs, tits, ass—a kind of metaphorical violence that presents a

chilling counterpoint to the severed heads, torsos and limbs of the male soldiers that collect on Goodell's table. According to Butler, "the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms [...] establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real,' they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression" (*Gender Trouble* xxiii). In Goodell's world, women must be violently compartmentalized into discreet and highly fetishized body parts in order to be recognized as "real" and, ironically, in order to suture together a concept of masculinity ripped apart by war.

Perpetually objectified, constantly harassed, reduced to a series of body parts, women in the military such as Goodell are often traumatized by the sheer fact of their sex. Moreover, women suffer from gender-induced marginalization, isolation from the brotherhood that provides crucial mental and emotional support for soldiers. As Goodell says in her typically detached way, "A woman might be the only female in her platoon, and that fact alone makes her popular [...] she wants to give in even though doing so leads to problems. Every day she wants to give in [...]. They are her platoon, her Marines, and they are all going out together. A deep loneliness flows through her and not giving into it is hard. It is a terrible pain, an awful existence" (58-59). Goodell and other female soldiers may be understood as victims of "insidious trauma," a concept developed by therapist Maria Root to describe "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (L. Brown 107).

Goodell's memoir testifies to a traumatic war experience that stems as much from sexual persecution as it does from her experience as a Mortuary Affairs member. This fact is reflected in her initial attempt to cope with her PTSD, symptoms of which included nightmares,

flashbacks, agoraphobia, alcoholism, and drug abuse. When she returns home from her time in Iraq, she rekindles her relationship with Miguel, and attempts to find normalcy within the circumscribed reality of a domestic existence with traditional gender roles firmly in place—complete with an abusive boyfriend. She recalls cheering on Miguel in a steak-eating contest, a moment that crystallizes the intersection of both sources of her trauma: “I was sitting in a nearby booth rooting him on, trying not to look at the four-and-a-half-pound slab of charred meat, but wanting to be the dutiful girlfriend-cheerleader” (142).

Similar to the way male soldiers perform masculinity in the immediate aftermath of combat trauma in *The Things They Carried*, Goodell attempts to block out her memories of the bodies she processed ironically by performing the same compulsory kind of femininity that was used against her while she was in the Marines. Just as the discursive practice of objectifying female Marines as “walking mattresses” and “bags of nasties” defends the male ego against the threat of women and of death, so Goodell attempts to use normative femininity—ontologically intelligible, according to Butler—as a buffer against traumatic memories that defy intelligibility. Thus, though she scoffed at the pressure to put makeup on while at the front, wanting to be taken seriously as a Marine, in civilian life she wants nothing more than to be looked at as a woman: “To hide the past from myself, I dressed in as feminine a way as I could: tight clothes—with lace and flowers—that fit the form of my body, and high heels. My hair was done and my eyebrows waxed” (163). As described in “Gender, Trauma Themes, and PTSD,” the suppression or expression of gendered behavior can indeed be a byproduct trauma:

male survivors suffering from PTSD symptoms often report a lack of identification with their own gender and/or hypermasculine behavior [...] Female survivors seeking treatment for PTSD symptoms have described feeling disconnected from other women,

having difficulty identifying as female, and/or overidentifying with many of the negative attributes associated with femininity. (Krause, DeRosa, and Roth 350)

The performance of femininity thus becomes a symptom of Goodell's trauma, just as Williams's performance of masculinity is an indication of the gendered trauma she experienced in Iraq.

Ultimately, however, this attempt to embrace normative femininity as a defense against her traumatized past fails to work. As discussed throughout this dissertation, it is critical to those recovering from trauma to find an empathetic listener who will assist in the construction of a narrative around the painful event(s). Thus veterans often seek the company of other veterans, whom they feel are the only ones who can really understand them. Women veterans, however, are often left bereft of a supportive community of other vets (*Lonely Soldier* 210), and Goodell is no exception. Her relationship with Miguel proves, in fact, to be counterproductive; she writes, "Whenever I tried talking to Miguel about my Iraqi experiences, he refused to listen. He'd point out that because I wasn't part of the initial invasion, I didn't participate in the 'real' war. My time in Iraq wasn't even 'war-like,' so I should just stop complaining" (135).

Miguel's response is just part of the network of silencing forces that Goodell faces, and that serves to extend the traumatic experience. Her attempts to bear witness are repeatedly shut down, by Miguel, and by other Marines who are not only trained to keep their experiences to themselves, but who also preferred not to know what happened in the Mortuary Affairs unit. As Goodell concisely puts it, "Our platoon was to the Marines what the Marines are to much of America: we did things that had to be done but that no one wanted to know about" (39). And, in spite of the advances in attitudes towards the emotionally traumatized, there still exists a sharp stigma of cowardliness and malingering associated with PTSD. As Benedict notes, "the stigma is so strong against admitting to being traumatized that most soldiers either refuse to seek help, or

cannot get the time or permission to receive it” (152). As a member of the Mortuary Affairs unit, Goodell—who had suicidal thoughts of her own—had to process the remains of soldiers who killed themselves. She recalls that “when these Marines commit suicide, we are trained to think of them as cowards [...] we’re told that suicide is for cowards and it’s the weak way out. A First Sergeant walks in—he’s a high ranking man—to lecture us about suicide, and he tells us that the Corp is better off without those cowards” (45).

Not only is Goodell subjected to the same pressure to keep silent that all soldiers are prone to, she is further silenced by her status as a woman. As Benedict explains, “because military culture demands that all soldiers keep their pain and distress to themselves, reporting an assault will make her look weak and cowardly. For all these reasons, some 80 percent of military rapes are never reported at all” (7). Gender is thus also critical to the network of silencing forces that extends the traumatic experience. Goodell is silenced by other women soldiers who preferred to keep quiet about or give in to the sexual harassment. She is silenced by the male military psychologist who seemed uninterested in what she had to say, a problem that Benedict claims to be an institutional issue: “many who do seek help are either ignored by military therapists who are dismissive of PTSD and sexual assault, or find VA treatment inadequate or harmful” (*Lonely Soldier* 200). She is silenced by the non-military female counselor who, though she could understand the pain of sexual harassment, couldn’t understand what it was like to be a woman in the Marines, “when the assessments are crude and explicit and unending and the men are a horde and you are alone” (166). And she is silenced by civilians who don’t recognize her as a war veteran because she is a woman.

Civilian ignorance of the role of women in war is a common complaint, a problem perpetuated by the absence of women in media coverage of the war (*Lonely Soldier* 228). As one

female veteran put it, ““I was in Iraq getting bombed and shot at, but people won’t even listen when I say I was at war because I’m a female”” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 2). Another vet says, ““I don’t even tell people about seeing death and being shot at anymore, ‘cause they don’t believe me. They assume all I did was office work”” (qtd. in *Lonely Soldier* 198). Indeed, the most well-known woman of the Iraq War is Jessica Lynch, who became famous “not because she was hurt but because the U.S. Army staged a dramatic ‘rescue’ of her from an Iraqi hospital. In fact, the Iraqi doctors, who were initially portrayed in the press as captors, rapists, and torturers, had actually done their best to tend to her wounds and return her to the Americans” (*Lonely Soldier* 100). As Susan Faludi explains in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, the Pentagon and the media cast Lynch as a damsel in distress, in danger of rape by uncivilized Iraqis, in order to not only reinforce the righteousness of the American mission, but also to shore up the masculinity of the American military and simultaneously downplay the active role of women in the military. Finally, Goodell is silenced by a military system that denies there is a problem, discourages women from reporting abuse, and protects the behavior of predatory men.

In spite of the multiple forces that silence her, however, Goodell ultimately manages to tell her story. Somehow, she manages to overcome the self-perpetuating muteness that Kali Tal describes in “Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma”: “A trauma victim who perceives himself or herself as suffering alone, who has no sense of belonging to a community of victims, will remain silent, imagining that his or her pain has no relevance to the larger society” (235). Goodell articulates her narrative of war trauma in terms of the gendered body, bearing witness to a culture of sexual abuse that is tacitly condoned by the military, an institution whose very identity rests on the notion of masculine supremacy. At first whole, masculine, ideal, the military body disassembles into fractured,

dismembered, and corrupted individuals when the female body introduces the mark of difference. In order to neutralize the threat contained in the introduction of women into this institution of phallic power, normative femininity is then deployed and enforced through a matrix of regulating agencies that includes discursive practice. For Goodell, the result is psychologically damaging; she is alienated from her sense of self as a woman, an estrangement from her embodied identity that is reflected in her detached narrative tone. Unlike many female veterans, Goodell was fortunate to eventually find a sympathetic writing professor who became the active listener Dori Laub says is crucial to coming to terms with one's traumatic past. Through her memoir, one littered with the body parts of so many men, she is able to re-member her past and discursively produce her sense of self. In doing so, Goodell also offers up a critique of the body politic that engenders the military's hysterical masculinity.

Conclusion

Women such as Williams and Goodell often find themselves at the intersection of gendered expectations that are completely at odds with one another, and which can often cause a traumatic identity crisis, a split from one's embodied identity. Herbert puts it this way:

The military is a highly traditional, primarily conservative institution in which we may expect the expression, "men are men and women are women" to be taken seriously. Exactly how are women in the military supposed to "be women"? The integration of women into an institution *defined* by its association with masculinity has posed an interesting dilemma for military women. Can one truly be a soldier and a woman and not be viewed as deviating either from what it means to be a soldier or from what it means to be a woman? (10)

According to Kirsten A. Holmstedt's book, *Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq*, the answer to the last question is an emphatic "No." In the Forward by Major L. Tammy Duckworth, she says, "I will always place the mission first. I will never quit. I will never accept defeat. [...] They are gender-neutral statements that get at the heart of what it means to be an American Soldier today. I am not a big fan of being identified as a woman anything" (vii). Duckworth's denial of the role of gender in "what it means to be an American Soldier" sets the tone for the book, which attempts to prove that, in spite of its title, the sex of women soldiers has little bearing on their experience. "The ultimate message of this book," Duckworth tells us, "is that the stories are not about being women. They are about being tough and professional" (ix)—as if these qualities were at odds with femininity. We might even say that these stories are about being not-women. Indeed, Duckworth and Holmstedt's attempt to repress the role of sex in a woman's experience as a soldier involves proving how they are just as good as men—so good, in fact, that they aren't even really women.

Holmstedt downplays the differences between genders unless it is to argue that women are tougher and tolerate pain better. Women's mothering instincts even make them both more vicious in battle and more empathetic, thus making them better leaders (302). She also dismisses differential treatment as uncommon, saying "*Some* female Marines had to prove themselves to the male Marines. They had to show they could pull their own weight and wouldn't be a burden to others" (142, my emphasis). Such statements are suspect considering Herbert's study, which provides ample evidence that such tests of masculine toughness are both ubiquitous for female recruits and impossible to satisfy.

When it comes to sexual harassment and assault, Holmstedt is careful to avoid acknowledging that it is a pervasive, institutionalized problem. Any mention of sexist treatment

is framed in order to highlight how the woman's toughness won over the men and earned their respect—a necessary part of any new recruit's military experience. Meanwhile the male soldiers are described as merely hesitant to accept women, or harmlessly flirtatious: "Lillie may have gotten hit on a lot but it didn't get out of control and she never felt as though she was being harassed" (123). Irrelevant to the rest of Lillie's story, this tidbit is seemingly given out of obligation, and only serves to prove that "She was in control" (123)—once again implying that only women who fail to control the flirting become victims of assault. Holmstedt quickly dismisses the behavior as harmless, as the exception rather than the rule.

The only other mention of sexual harassment comes up in the story of Lieutenant Colonel Polly Montgomery of the United States Air Force, whose friend, a senior master sergeant, was charged with sexual harassment by a younger, junior-level woman:

Montgomery had heard in workshops that sexual harassment cases distract from the mission, but she wasn't convinced of that until the accusations surfaced in her squadron. Then she became a true believer as the episode took focus off the war and gave everyone something else to think and talk about. As commander, she had to move the squadron beyond what had happened. (198)

Holmstedt does not address the issue of assault, nor does she discuss the disturbing fact that a sexual harassment workshop focused on how distracting a charge of sexual misconduct can be to the mission. Instead, she chooses to highlight the importance of sweeping such issues under the rug, and commends Montgomery for doing so.

Holmstedt displays her alarming misunderstanding of the issues for women in the military when she says at the end of her book, "What more evidence do the American people need to prove that the experiment of women in combat has been a success? The military no

longer differentiates between male and female convoy commanders. When will the American people stop making a distinction?” (312). She relieves the military of all responsibility in both the exclusion of women in combat and incidents of sexual assault, which are supposedly minimal.

In direct conflict with Holmstedt’s book, which contains little discussion of research or statistics, is the evidence provided by Benedict: “The only way to accurately measure military sexual assault is to rely on veterans who are no longer afraid to report it, and those studies indicate that nearly one in three women soldiers is sexually attacked by her comrades, while harassment is virtually universal” (*Lonely Soldier* 8). Going further, it seems that the sexual assault of women serving is an essential part of the military apparatus itself, and has been for decades:

The sexual persecution of women has been going on in the armed forces for generations, as decades of studies have revealed. In 2003 a survey of female veterans from Vietnam through the first Gulf War found that 30 percent said they were raped in the military. A 2004 study of veterans from Vietnam and all the war since, who were seeking help for PTSD, found that 71 percent of the women said they were sexually assaulted or raped while serving. And a 1995 study of female veterans of the Gulf and earlier wars found that 90 percent had been sexually harassed. (*Lonely Soldier* 7)

And these statistics reflect only what has been reported by veterans, leaving out the numbers of reports by active-duty soldiers, as well as the vast number of women and men who remain silent.

These statistics also leave out the assaults that begin as early as the recruitment phase. A 2005 investigation discovered over a hundred cases of sexual misconduct perpetrated by approximately eighty recruiters from all branches of the military. “Some were raped in recruiting

offices, some assaulted in government cars as they were driven to military test sites, and others intimidated into sexual relationships” (*Lonely Soldier* 17). And *The Washington Post* recently reported a rash of sexual assaults over the past year involving military recruiters and their would-be recruits, most of whom are teenagers and young adults barely out of high school. As evidence of the failure of the Department of Defense to adequately address or even acknowledge the severity of the military’s sexual misconduct problem, officials claim that “Only a tiny percentage of recruiters engage in sexual misconduct [...] and there is no tolerance for those who do” (Whitlock). Yet at the same time, *The Washington Post* notes that “The extent of the problem is hard to ascertain because the Defense Department does not keep figures on recruiters accused of sex crimes” (Whitlock). By failing to keep adequate or uniform records of assaults perpetrated by military recruiters across all branches, while at the same time insisting on the low incidence rate, the DoD is exhibiting a willful ignorance of the problem that amounts to tacitly endorsing such behavior.

This is just one example of how sexual assault is institutionalized within the military apparatus. A female recruit may avoid the predatory advances of her recruiter only to find that she will then have to survive the gauntlet of sexual harassment in basic training:

When [female recruits] run the obstacle course, men line up to ogle their bodies. When they walk into the food hall, hundreds of eyes undress them. When they reach or bend to pick up something, men whistle, groan, and stare. This can go on every hour of every day, and creates an excruciating sense of oppression that few men ever experience.

(*Lonely Soldier* 47)

And as the testimonies of Williams, Goodell, and the female veterans interviewed by Benedict show, the harassment and abuse only becomes more insidious and traumatizing.

To say that sexual harassment is a baseline to women's experiences as soldiers is not to essentialize any one experience, or to say that all female soldiers are traumatized. But it is to recognize that discriminatory practice is institutionalized and that the military has procured an environment of hostility towards the women who serve, a hostility that harnesses its energy around producing female soldiers as women first—an identity that is antithetical to the defining character of the American soldier. Furthermore, to recognize the military's misogyny is not to make an argument against women in the military. Holmstedt mistakenly believes that in order to effectively argue the case for the inclusion of women in combat, she must suppress the very real epidemic of sexual misconduct and prove that female soldiers are as manly, if not more so, than the men. Similarly, Williams attempts to prove her value to her male comrades by manning up in both behavior and speech, a strategy that necessarily includes the internalization of misogynist attitudes that prove traumatizing when she's "treated like a girl."

Within the pervasively gendered environment of the military apparatus, women's modes of resistance to the incessant and insidious sexual abuse are predetermined as modes of gender performance, as illustrated by the testimonies of Goodell and Williams. The practice of doing gender in the military in response to sexual assault, however, is not exclusive to women. In fact, *The Washington Times* reports that victims of sexual assault in the military are mostly men, according to the recently released findings of a Pentagon survey (Scarborough). Yet the taboo surrounding male rape is so strong that male victims are even less likely to report abuse. Brian Lewis, who was raped while serving in the Navy, recently testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee on sexual assault in the military, and is one of the few men who has gone public with his ordeal. By way of explaining why men stay silent, he says, "A lot of it has to do with gender norms...that men cannot be victims" ("The Legacy of Tailhook"). Monique Plaza similarly

argues that “rape is sexual essentially because it rests on the very social difference between the sexes....It is *social sexing* which is latent in rape. If men rape women, it is precisely because they are women in a social sense’; and when a male is raped, he too is raped ‘as a woman’” (qtd. in *Technologies of Gender* 37). Just as Williams and Goodell, as women, face resistance to their war narratives, so male veterans are barred from writing about war experiences that detract from the ideal of the masculine soldier. As Cooke and Woollacott note, “Society censors those who write outside of what is considered to be their gender-specific experience: women should not write about the front as a lived experience; men should not describe threatened masculinity” (xii).

There are promising signs, however, that the resistance to discourse that challenges existing notions of the meaning war, especially in terms of gender and sexuality, is lifting, as the memoirs of Williams and Goodell attest to. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Claire McCaskill have recently proposed legislation to remove sexual assault cases from the chain of command, drawing media attention to the issue of policy reform.²⁸ Yet as Derrida notes, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (*Archive Fever* 4). Or, as Miriam Cooke states, “it is not enough for women to have been there; they have to write and interpret what it means to have been there. Such an activist discourse may become an agent of change beyond discourse” (178). In order to effect political change, it is critical that the victims of military sexual assault make their testimonies part of the archive that will determine how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

²⁸ See Benedict’s final chapter of *The Lonely Soldier*, “Fixing the Future,” for an extensive and thorough examination of current policies and suggestions for institutional improvements in both the DoD and VA.

will be remembered, and how war in general is understood as a primary space of highly contested notions of gender and sexuality.

Perhaps the most potentially radical modes of discourse exist outside of mainstream media. Brian Lewis is featured in an independent documentary on male victims of MST called *Justice Denied*. Another film, *War Zone/Comfort Zone*, documents the efforts to open up a halfway house for homeless female veterans, most of whom suffer from PTSD brought on by sexual assault in the military. And *The Invisible War*, nominated for an Academy Award, has given the issue cultural currency. In addition to memoirs and independent films, blogs and social media sites have enormous potential to broadcast and amplify the voices of veterans who have been sexually victimized within the military.

Such modes of discourse provide a critical counterpoint to productions like *The Hurt Locker* (2008), a commercially successful war movie that has emerged as the most culturally dominant portrayal of the war in Iraq. And although it was directed by Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to receive the Academy Award for Best Director, *The Hurt Locker* is in many ways a cliché war movie written from a male perspective²⁹. The inclusion of women in combat positions will inevitably change the experience of war, and will likely provide even more dissonant voices that offer up alternative visions of these wars. As Laura Brown says, “A feminist perspective on the trauma of war is different because it includes a knowledge of the social context and because it factors the presence of daily and insidious trauma into an analysis of what is now the only ‘real’ trauma” (110-111). Memoirs such as those of Williams and Goodell force us to rethink war

²⁹ “The Killing of Osama bin Laden,” an investigative reporting piece by Seymour Hersh recently published in the *London Review of Books*, prompted Salon.com’s Scott Timberg to question the implications of films masquerading as history, especially when director Katherine Bigelow’s films are possibly used for CIA propaganda.

trauma itself, which may always-already carry within it the insidious trauma generated from the pressures and failures of gender performance, for men and women alike.

Epilogue:

Technologies of Memory

“Just as today there is the impact of specific historical shocks like the holocaust and other genocides, but also the impact of electronic media on the feelings of viewers, especially the transmission of what Luc Boltanski has named ‘distance suffering’ (*souffrance à distance*).”

—Geoffrey Hartman

“Certainly I had not felt comfortable bringing a camera along. But, as soon as I got there, I bought a disposable camera and took pictures of the signs, of people holding them, of streets blocked, of the silent crowds at the vigil. I took pictures of pictures, of people looking at pictures, of people taking pictures. All the while I wondered about what I was doing—what was I after? What did this desire to snap the shutter—as uncomfortable as it was uncontrollable—mean?”

—Marianne Hirsch

I began this dissertation with a discussion of the unspeakability and the resultant belatedness of both experience and understanding that form the foundation of trauma theory. Yet 9/11 and the ensuing wars in the Middle East have coincided with radical developments in communication technologies that affect not only what we experience, but how we share experience, requiring a reassessment of the unspeakability and belatedness so central to our understanding of trauma. As suggested by my early discussion of the history of gender and trauma, and as Ruth Leys illuminates in *Trauma: A Genealogy*, “trauma” is a historically constructed concept, as is our clinical understanding of PTSD. As such, it is imperative that we critically examine our current approaches to trauma against the cultural changes that are altering experience itself.

Ours is a very different world from the one that attempted to hide away the horrors of the Holocaust. If that paradigm of unspeakable atrocity was an “event without a witness,” as Dori Laub describes it, then 9/11 was at the opposite end of the trauma spectrum—an event designed to be seen. Miriam Cooke’s use of the term “hyperrepresentation” to describe postmodern wars, distinguishable from other wars by their dependence on representation, applies here:

Even countries with little technological sophistication have learned to transform the media into sites for inserting their own, usually subversive, representations. Hostage taking and hijackings succeed because of the consistency of world media attention. Postmodern wars have become media events whose self-conscious manipulation of discourse is transparent. Violence has been theatricalized, so that its dramaturgical quality has come to supersede while, of course, not eliminating its injuring quality. (181)

A made-for-TV act of terrorism, the destruction of the Twin Towers and the concurrent killing of thousands of people was designed for an American audience eerily familiar with such images, perhaps making 9/11 the culminating trauma of the postmodern era. The event was mediated, memorialized, and narrativized the instant it happened,³⁰ prompting Jean Baudrillard to muse that “the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image” (28-29). Unlike the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and other events of large-scale devastation, the terrorist attack on New York’s Twin Towers was televised—almost in its entirety. Repeatedly. Endlessly. So that rather than the limits of representation, this event has been marked by an

³⁰ The all-inclusive “we” in CBS News’ 9/11 book, *What We Saw*, presumes to speak for “we” the people, providing a startling enactment of how the media reads back to us “what we saw,” freezing meaning into master narratives that serve to control memory and experience: “When the event happened, while it happened, we knew we were watching history unfold. We saw a line—a shadow. . . . We understood that we would remember. . . . If anything, television reduced the horrible images to a size that could be comprehended” (11).

excess of representation. Instead of unspeakability, belatedness, and delay, there was the instantaneous profusion of testimony.

9/11 heralded a revolutionary transformation in the “sanctioned forms of telling” that Kenneth J. Gergen describes as critical to the way we report memories, thanks to the proliferation of technologies that broadcast these tales of horror. No longer the prerogative of book publishing, a selective and lengthy process that can take years to complete and whose texts are usually read by a small audience, testimonials of traumatic experience are now transmitted instantaneously, by virtually anyone, anywhere. Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have become tools for spreading tragic news, broadcasting police brutality, and mobilizing political movements. They have become places of public mourning and potential haunting grounds for the deceased, whose profiles may remain active long after their deaths, providing friends and family with a way to connect to their lost loved ones³¹. Blogs have amplified the reach and scope of citizen journalism, exposing atrocities and giving people the ability to bear witness to their traumatic experiences in real-time, to potentially millions of viewers.

This is true even in the locked-down environment of the military. *The Blog of War* is a collection of stories from soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Described by publisher Simon & Schuster’s promotional page as “the first real-time history of a war,” the book originated as www.blackfive.net, one of the world’s first military blogs, or milBlogs. It was created by Matthew Currier Burden, an Army soldier who was attempting to cope with the loss of his friend, who was killed on duty in Iraq. According to Simon & Schuster’s author page, *The Blog*

³¹ I worked at a popular NY-based dating site when the Twin Towers were attacked. In the weeks that followed, we had to consider the fact that some of our members were potential victims. How we would deal with profiles that became inactive, and how we would respond to family members and friends who found the online profiles of their deceased, became a primary focus for our company for at least six months following 9/11.

of War is “the purest account of the many voices of this war,” presumably because the blogs from which it draws were written without the artistry, editors, and time that can distort “the truth.” *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* by Colby Buzzell likewise began as a popular milBlog at <http://cbftw.blogspot.com>, where “cbftw” stands for “Colby Buzzell Fuck the War.” Praise for Buzzell’s book is punctuated by words such as “raw,” “profane,” and “unfiltered,”³² terms that commend the book for its authenticity—historically the litmus test for important war writing. Blogs, once derided as the poorly written reflections of inexperienced writers, are now considered sources of unmediated (and thus authoritative) information and can be authored by established writers. Such far-reaching, unregulated, and independent modes of information dissemination posed a threat to military security, prompting the Department of Defense to hastily devise new policies about the broadcasting of information by military personnel on the Internet. Nevertheless, the popular blogs of Burden and Buzzell illustrate how the Internet has become a space in which traumatic experience is shared and discussed in real time, challenging the principle of unspeakability and delay so central to our conception of traumatic experience.

Moreover, to blog, tweet, or post about an event is not just to report or to share it, it is to memorialize it. Indeed, the Internet has essentially become an enormous, potentially limitless archive. The implications of this new archive are profound. On the one hand, one can make an argument for the democratizing benefits of an open, free, and accessible platform. The fact that Buzzell and Burden were able to challenge the official discourse of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with their blogs points to the empowering potential of the Internet.

Yet as open and free as it is, access to and participation in the Internet is not the same for everyone, and the Web thus contributes to the economic and social inequities that oppress along

³² <http://cbftw.blogspot.com/2009/06/my-war-killing-time-in-iraq.html#links>

gender, sexual, racial and economic lines. We must consider how the archive is not a passive receptacle of information, but an active agent of meaning and experience:

the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. [...] what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives. (Derrida 17-18)

In other words, changes in the ways we preserve memory alter the ways we experience the events themselves. Today, it is as if in order for things to exist in real life, they must first exist online. One need only think about our cultural obsession with “selfies” to understand that the imperative to document ourselves in even the most insignificant of life’s moments changes how we experience those moments, and how meaning is structured by apps such as Instagram and Snapchat. If our documentation and communication practices incrementally impact life’s mundane moments, how, then, are our experiences of profound trauma shaped by what I call *technologies of memory*?

Inspired by Derrida’s phrase, “the technical structure of the *archiving* archive,” “technologies of memory” include the various apparatuses involved in the production and recording of memory. Traditionally, cultural memory has been preserved in memorials, commemorative events, statues, books, magazines, photos and film, and has been largely controlled on an institutional level. Today, our technologies of memory include the digital devices, platforms, sites, and tools that are widely available, and are thus able to be controlled on an individual level. To be certain, our new communication technologies have offered up new means through which to be cruel. Tyler Clementi committed suicide after a sexual encounter

with another man was secretly videotaped and then streamed online by his roommate. A high school girl in Steubenville, Ohio learned of her own repeated rapes—which she herself did not remember—through social media sites, which were used by her multiple offenders to document and distribute images and video of the 6-hour attack. “Cyberbullying” is now part of our lexicon, creating a new kind of traumatic experience. The Internet is not only a narrative space in which to communicate traumatic events that happen elsewhere; it is also increasingly becoming a primary space in which people are traumatized.

Yet the Internet has also provided victims with the means to mobilize against their perpetrators. The most recent example is the case of Bill Cosby, who has been accused of rape for decades by women whose allegations have been largely ignored. As the *New York Magazine* article, “‘I’m No Longer Afraid’: 35 Women Tell Their Stories About Being Assaulted by Bill Cosby, and the Culture That Wouldn’t Listen” points out, it is the Internet that allowed his victims to unite against him. It was one viral video of comedian Hannibal Buress calling out Cosby for raping women that reignited the scandal, which could not be so easily controlled or quelled on social media. Outraged citizens refused to let the issue die down, and victim after victim stepped forward, empowered and emboldened by the growing community of other women who had eerily similar stories to tell. A new sexual assault reporting app called Calisto operates on the same principle of “information escrows,” whereby victims who register their assault on the system will be able to automatically submit their report to authorities if their perpetrator is accused of misconduct by someone else (Nyhan). Citing the Steubenville case among others, the *New York Magazine* article’s authors Noreen Malone and Amanda Demme argue that the young, web-savvy women of today are compelled to speak out against sexual assault, saying “This is a

generation that's been radicalized, in just the past few years, by horrific examples of rape and reactions to rape."

Clearly, our highly digitized culture that compels us to document, share, post, and comment on *everything everywhere at the moment of its happening* demands a reassessment of trauma theory that takes into account not only the new ways in which we speak about trauma, but also the new ways in which we experience trauma. And as the examples above indicate, a reassessment of trauma theory must furthermore consider the politics of gender and sexuality that are undoubtedly at work in these new modes of experience and textual practices.

Technologies of memory are intimately tied to "technologies of gender," a phrase used by Teresa de Lauretis, who uses the term "technology" to designate cultural forces that contribute to, or deploy, ideology, following the example of Michel Foucault. And although de Lauretis was specifically interested in cinema as a technology of gender, she did not expand her analysis to include other technologies. Today, the phrase "technology and gender" is much more specifically *technological*, and must take into account other media delivery systems that produce, maintain, and police gender and sexuality. How are our new technologies of gender also technologies of gender and sexuality? How are gendered identities constructed in the virtual realm? How does gender affect one's participation in online spaces? How do the Internet and social media sites work to maintain or refute, for instance, ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality or images of idealized beauty? How are individuals or groups of people targeted on the Internet based on gender and sexuality norms? And how do virtual communities emerge as bulwarks against traumatic experience?

Marianne Hirsch began to question the effect of media technology on trauma in her essay, "I Took Pictures: September 2001 and Beyond," from which the epigraph above was

taken. Finding herself caught between the impulse to photograph the aftermath of 9/11 and the sense of disrespect while doing so, Hirsch began to think about the impact of technological recording devices on our experience of trauma: “But what does it mean to take pictures at the sites of trauma? Is it disrespectful, voyeuristic, a form of gawking? Or is it our own contemporary form of witnessing or even mourning? [...] How has photography inflected the ethics and the politics of grief?” (71). Hirsch asked these questions specifically about film photography, saying “To photograph, we might say, is to look in a different way—to look without understanding. Understanding is deferred until we see the developed image. This deferral is as inherent to photography as it is to trauma” (72). Yet with today’s ubiquitous digital cameras, this inherent deferral is no longer the case. And the questions become much more complex.

Hirsch published that essay in 2003, before smartphones enabled people to not only see their pictures instantly, but to then upload their images to any number of social media sites for potentially millions of viewers, complete with quickly written captions and hashtags that frame the image’s meaning. Our ever-expanding universe of communication technologies and our increasingly digitized lives have dramatically changed the ways in which we inflict and experience trauma, the ways in which we talk and keep silent about trauma, and the ways in which we share trauma. Hirsch notes that in spite of some of the more troubling issues that arise with the ethics of photographing tragedy, there is one positive outcome: “Through photography I can become witness in my own right, a witness not so much of the event as of its aftermath, a witness to the other acts of witness all around me. In circulating my images, I can invite others to become co-witnesses” (79). Today, our ability to circulate our images and invite others to co-witness has increased exponentially, requiring a much more critical examination of the

repercussions of such virtual witnessing. Following Hirsch's lead, we need to ask, "How have *technologies of memory* inflected the ethics and the politics of grief?"

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