

Flanking Maneuvers: The Counternarratives of the Military Unconscious in Phil Klay’s “After Action Report” and “War Stories”¹

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***Abstract:** This article examines the ways in which Phil Klay’s short stories “After Action Report” and “War Stories” generate counternarratives that challenge and fragment populist representations of soldiering, war, and Americanness. In doing so, the analysis reveals new ways of approaching the contemporary American civilian-military disconnect. The article examines this disconnect in a framework based on Fredric Jameson’s theories that reveals the text’s underlying military unconscious: a type of political unconscious that rises from the lived-in social realities of veterans and active duty personnel. The military unconscious is complemented by what I term the hegemonic soldier: the ideological construct which informs the dominant cultural representations of soldiering and war, and which reinforces itself through representations in a fashion similar to the idea of nostalgic recreation.*

By applying these concepts, the analysis can uncover the counternarratives that stem from the texts’ military unconscious. The first case study examines the ways in which Klay’s “After Action Report” ruptures the military institution’s hegemonic discourse of killing by providing alternative discourses that allow the soldier subject to resist the hegemonic soldier, and reassert ownership over their experiences. The second case study examines how “War Stories” reveals and critiques the latent presence of the hegemonic soldier in contemporary American society. The hegemonic soldier is shown to be an omnipresent force that appears even in narratives that seek to subvert it. Together, the case studies demonstrate veteran literature’s unique potential in understanding the development of contemporary American culture.

1 This article is based on my MA thesis *Counterfire: The Military Unconscious, Counternarratives, and the Hegemonic Soldier in Phil Klay’s ‘Redeployment’* (2018).

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After a generation of continuous warfare, the American soldier has come to inhabit a peculiar position in the contemporary American cultural landscape. Unlike their Vietnam-era forebearers who became synonymous with a similarly unpopular war (Pease 572), and bore the brunt of public scorn, the contemporary American soldier's status, in fact, veers on the sacrosanct. One can oppose the war, but one must support the troops fighting it. This status is compounded by the commodification of war as entertainment, resulting in a dizzying array of cultural products starring soldiers or paramilitary figures who achieve their goals through liberal use of firepower. Recent years have also seen the elevation of Special Forces (SOF) troops and their equipment in video games (*Call of Duty* series) and cinema (*Zero Dark Thirty*). Simultaneously, as the War on Terror continues to its 18th year, the American homeland has also become increasingly militarized (DeRosa and Peebles 203). Yet, despite the seemingly hallowed status of the American soldier in contemporary United States, a closer look reveals a deep disconnect between rhetoric and reality, which is symptomatic of the disconnect between the U.S. military and the American public.

Returning veterans are 1.5 times more likely to commit suicide than similarly aged non-veterans, and as a result, an average of 16 veterans took their own life each day in 2016 (Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Suicide Prevention 4). The issue is further compounded by the dysfunction at the heart of the veteran healthcare system, which has been mired in scandal after scandal (Devi). The divide is further exacerbated by demographical factors—only 0.75% of the population of the United States “served in Iraq or Afghanistan at any point in the post-9/11 years, many of them more than once” (Fallows)—along with the geographical distance from the homeland to the theaters of war in Afghanistan and Middle East. Together, these developments have resulted in the peculiar status of the contemporary American soldier: a figure revered, yet simultaneously discarded, located at the nexus of a multiplicity of discourses that produce American culture.

The veteran literature of the Global War on Terror provides a crucial gateway to understanding how the American soldier subject navigates this terrain and negotiates their peculiar cultural status. In this article, I examine

how this process of navigation and negotiation in Phil Klay's short stories "After Action Report" and "War Stories" in *Redeployment* (2014) results in the generation of counternarratives that rupture populist representations of war and soldiering. In doing so, the counternarratives challenge the monolithic vision of the American hegemonic soldier—such as the grizzled combat veteran or the SOF operator—by foregrounding alternative and neglected military experiences. The rupture also destabilizes a central myth rooted in the country's westward expansion, which is the narrative of regenerative violence "whose structure drives insistently towards resolution in an all-encompassing ... purifying ... act of violence" (Slotkin 486). The dual acts of communal and national negation demonstrate the transgressive potential of veteran literature's counternarratives.

I begin with an overview of the characteristics of contemporary American veteran literature and the theoretical concepts of the military unconscious and the hegemonic soldier rooted in the work of Fredric Jameson. I then move on to examine two short stories found in *Redeployment*. In my analysis of "After Action Report", I look at how the text fragments dominant discourses and national myths by providing an alternative discourse of killing. The second analysis examines how "War Stories" demonstrates the latent and omnipresent nature of the hegemonic soldier in contemporary American culture. I end with a conclusion summing up my findings and explore the implications of contemporary American veteran literature in understanding contemporary U.S. culture and its development.

The analysis demonstrates the ways in which the soldier subject of veteran literature is able to assert their subjectivity in the face of reifying discourses, and destabilize mythic narratives that define "America". The fragmenting counternarratives are shown to rise from the texts' hidden military unconscious, a type of political unconscious, which is uncovered by the analysis. Klay's short stories are an ideal subject for this sort of analysis: as each short story has a different narrator, ranging from the traditional boots on the ground perspective of the infantry to non-combat support personnel, *Redeployment* provides a multiplicity of perspectives from which to approach the issues at hand. Lastly, Klay's background as a non-combat veteran author provides a departure from many veteran writers, allowing for the exploration of the dynamic between combat and non-combat veterans, and the role it plays in defining the "authenticity" of military experience.

Overview of Contemporary American Veteran Literature and Redeployment

The literature of America's post-9/11 wars has grown steadily as wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan have become the longest running continuous deployments in American history. This literature encompasses both veteran and non-veteran authors, emphasizing the central role that the American soldier has come to inhabit in contemporary American culture whose "literature has embraced the movement from post-9/11 culture to more holistically considering the weight, and human cost, of the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq" (Petrovic 2). Veterans of these wars have gone on to publish a multitude of memoirs, poetry, short stories, and novels detailing their experiences. In addition to Phil Klay, notable Iraq War veteran authors include such writers as Brian Turner (*My Life as a Foreign Country, Here, Bullet*) who served as an infantry leader in Iraq, Kevin Powers (*Yellow Birds, Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*) who served as a machine gunner during the occupation of Iraq, and David Abrams (*Fobbit*), a retired Army journalist.

Perhaps owing to the centrality of the soldier in contemporary American culture and the length of the latest wars, American Iraq veteran literature "has appeared ... contemporaneous with the combat experience" in contrast to "classics" of the Vietnam War literature which "appeared in the 1980s or later" (Ryan 2). Characteristic of the Iraq War literature is the lack of agency, the "guilt, helplessness, and frustration felt by soldiers fighting a war in which choices are impossible ... because often there is very little time or leeway to make a choice in the first place" (Peebles 164), paradoxically expressed by soldiers who were not drafted, but largely enlisted by their own choosing. The American literature on Global War on Terror is also markedly concentrated on the war(s) in Iraq: Peebles notes that the War in Afghanistan "has inspired fewer and less prominent works of literature and film than the wars in Iraq" (2). The focus on Iraq can be viewed as a reflection of the significant rupture the war caused in the national unconscious and the American desire to see the country as a force of good in the world.

This does not mean, however, that Afghanistan is missing entirely from the corpus of contemporary veteran literature. For instance, veteran author Elliot Ackerman's novel *Green on Blue* (2015) is written from the perspective of an Afghani civilian caught in the middle of US forces and local insurgents. Ackerman's novel is also demonstrative of the central distinction between contemporary veteran literature and previous veteran

literatures, which is the simultaneous alienation from home (Ryan 20) and identification with the Afghans and Iraqis. By refusing to dehumanize the enemy into a homogenous enemy Other, the veteran author is able to resist and reshape hegemonic discourses of war and Americanness (Najmi 57; Petrovic 2–3).

Previous studies on *Redeployment* have noted the ways in which these characteristics are visible in the text. Scholars such as McKay and Petrovic have focused on the ways in which *Redeployment* subverts previously established conventions of American war literature: McKay argues that Klay's "In Vietnam They Had Whores" displays "an increased willingness on the part of war writers to critique or dispense with old narrative stereotypes" (39). Petrovic notes that Klay's foregrounding of Coptic American subjectivity in "Psychological Operations" allows him to "contest" his "own autobiographical privilege" and deepen his "engagement with the colonized subject" (2). As such, *Redeployment* presents a uniquely suitable subject for this article's case study and a fertile ground for counternarratives.

Unearthing the Military Unconscious and the Hegemonic Soldier

It is in understanding this dichotomy of simultaneous alienation and identification that the concepts of what I have termed as the *military unconscious* and the *hegemonic soldier* find their use. The military unconscious is a concept based on Fredric Jameson's interpretive framework that prioritizes the political "as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 17), and emphasizes interpretation as a means of "access to the collective, political unconscious of the societies in which these literary works have been produced" (Kilpeläinen 31). The emphasis on the political is complemented by Jameson's view as History as a totalizing framework "that includes all things, the perimeter beyond which nothing else can exist" (Dowling 42-3).

For Jameson, history comes to us as not as a "text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause" (*The Political Unconscious* 35) that is instinctually suppressed and something which is accessible to us only via the interpretation of cultural texts. All interpretation must then occur with the totality of History in mind, revealing that "oral tales of tribal society, the fairy tales that are the irrepressible voice and expression of the underclasses of the great systems of domination ... and the popular or mass

culture of our own time are all syllables and broken fragments of some single immense story” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 105). In other words, history presents itself as an absent cause in the text, only detectable through the abstraction provided by narratives.

The unsolvable contradictions resulting from the “great systems of domination” go on to manifest themselves as contradictions, or antinomies in texts, which the narrative seeks to symbolically resolve (Kilpeläinen 37). These antinomies also play a key part in the way Jameson thinks about ideology in the context of interpretation: ideology does not function as a false consciousness, but rather as an ideological closure, an “approximation of some truth about the totality that ... stands in for the deeper truth it exists to deny” (Dowling 53). Furthermore, for Jameson, ideology and utopia are two fundamental and interdependent dimensions of cultural texts with the latter “imagining alternatives to the prevailing power structures” (Kilpeläinen 54) imposed by dominant ideologies. A similar dialectical dynamic of status quo and change is visible here in the concepts of hegemonic narratives and the counternarrative: the latter allows the soldier subject to reassert their individuality and agency in the face of a flattening and reifying discourse which reduces them to a symbol.

The military unconscious is a variant of the political unconscious in which the focus shifts from class towards examining military as a distinct social formation. It is part of the wider American political unconscious, with reified military symbols and signifiers entering the wider culture functioning as the bridge between the two structures. War stories, veteran literature, and war-time legends function in the same fashion as Jameson’s description of the oral tales as the voices of the underclasses against dominant systems.

The symbolic manifestations of the military unconscious layered within the narratives of veteran literature provide a vital glimpse into the subconscious anxieties of a social group at the intersection of multiple interacting and conflicting discourses. As such, it forms the substrate which gives rise to the counternarratives of veteran literature. They emerge from the military unconscious as Jameson’s proverbial symbolic acts — the “imaginary solution of a real contradiction” (Dowling 125)—a type of utopian impulse that seeks to unravel the ideological closure presented by the cultural status of the contemporary American soldier and the disconnect between the military and the American people.

The veteran author functions as a conduit to the counternarratives of the military unconscious through their narrative constructions. As such, the

role of the veteran author is that of the storyteller, a figure representing “communal rather than individual truths” and “driven to tell in order to retain the ‘memory’ of a story past, one that includes personal and communal histories” (Dragas 2, 29). This approach is also echoed by Jameson who states that “all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community” (*The Political Unconscious* 70). Personal and collective histories of communities form sedimented layers, each leaving their own mark on the continuous story of the military community, that become visible through interpretation. Thus, the counternarrative functions partly irrespective of authorial intent, surfacing instead in the coded symbolism of the texts’ military unconscious as attempts to open its ideological closures.

The normalization of war brought on by the War on Terror has given it a peculiar and mundane quality especially to those geographically separated from war zones, making the transference of military themes, symbols, and signifiers to popular culture a routine process. The transference of military jargon into everyday use as documented by Paul Fussell is a potent example of this process: “now attenuated and largely metaphorical, the diction of war resides everywhere just below the surface of modern experience” (189). The jargon of war is especially visible in American political discourse (Howe 94-98). This has led to incidents such as the infamous Republican election advertisement published in 2010 that showed a crosshair above, among other Democrat controlled electoral districts, Democrat congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords’ district. The following year, Giffords was shot and wounded during a public event in Tucson. While it was determined that the shooting was not motivated by the ad, the incident raised concern about the use of violent metaphors in politics (MacAskill).

The hegemonic soldier is the ideological construct that informs, reconstructs, and reinforces dominant representations of soldiers and the wars they fight in, and acts a dialectical counterpart to the military unconscious. The process in which the hegemonic soldier is constructed through intersecting cultural representations, political discourses, and historical factors is best understood through the application and slight modification of Jameson’s idea of the nostalgic recreation. According to Jameson, postmodern culture is characterized by its separation from the past, resulting in a temporality “reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers ... a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (“Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” 210). History has transformed into a series of perpetual presents, while the past has become something we can only access through

the lens ”of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” 208).

Jameson’s idea of nostalgic recreation provides a powerful tool in understanding the hegemonic soldier. Like postmodern culture losing its connection to History, American society appears to have lost its “real” connection to the military, leaving only the imagery of the simulacra filtered from the military unconscious by the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Like the non-existent referent of nostalgia films, the symbolic figure of the American soldier has been transformed into a reified and mythologized representation. As such, the central cultural status of the American soldier can be viewed as an ideological closure reflecting the repressed collective trauma of 9/11 resulting in the mythologization of the soldier subject.

In its reinforcement and repetition of hegemonic American ideology, the hegemonic soldier is, by necessity, characterized by an underlying tendency towards simplification, echoing Jameson’s description of postmodern culture exhibiting a “a kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality” (“Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” 196). The idealized American soldier resembles that of the “gunfighter”, a masculine professional who is “isolated, self-sufficient” and always capable of self-defense (Slotkin 438). The characteristics of the American hegemonic soldier can thus be viewed as the latest manifestation in the long line of violent American heroic male archetypes, such as the “individualistic detective, sheriff, or villain” whose solutions to problems did not arise “out of ratiocination ... but out of ready and ingenious violence” (Hofstadter). These characteristics are foregrounded in particular by the SOF operator’s primacy as the dominant representation of the contemporary American soldier.

The interaction between the military unconscious and the hegemonic soldier results in ruptures that emerge as counternarratives in veteran literature. Brian Turner’s poem “Ferris Wheel” begins with a seemingly mundane description of a military accident in Iraq: “A helicopter down in the river/last night, hitting a power line/slung a few feet off the water” (55). The poem continues describing how the helicopter was searching for American and Iraqi survivors of a capsized boat, and how the Navy divers do bring up bodies but not those from the boat but of an Iraqi policeman and a college student from Kirkuk. The poem’s final stanza opens with a blunt

assertion: “The history books will get it wrong” (Turner 55) and ends with lines describing the death of the two helicopter pilots, and how the other swam towards his friend instead of the shore, and “how both would drown/ in this cold unstoppable river” (Turner 55), seemingly forgotten by history alongside the scene.

Turner’s poem is a succinct example of the ways in which the counternarratives of veteran literature serve to fragment and challenge dominant cultural representations of war. By bringing “into focus the gestures, thoughts, and implied histories of ordinary individuals living in Iraq” (Najmi 62), Turner builds a representation of Iraq that includes the Iraqis themselves as active, living inhabitants of the war space, who live, work, and die alongside American soldiers. By doing so, the heterogeneous quality of Turner’s Iraq challenges the sanitized and homogenous spatiality of the hegemonic soldier.

The counternarrative found in Turner’s poem does not seek to glorify or mythologize the two pilots, but rather it expresses a melancholic desire to remember and care about both the pilots as well as the dead Iraqis as equal victims of a terrible war. Arguably, the hegemonic soldier does not facilitate similar remembering due to its nature as a simulacrum, which prevents genuine remembrance and caring. Veteran counternarratives also have the power to transform prevailing discourses. Pease notes that Vietnam war veterans who refused to “sacralize the nation’s military violence by effacing its signs, but bore witness to images of war ... that were utterly heterogeneous to the national narrative” (568) were instrumental in changing the official narrative of the war at home (572).

Implicit in this act of individualization is also the negation of the mythical narrative of purifying violence that informs American culture. By shifting the focus towards the unspeakable and the obscene, veteran counternarratives challenge the notion of purifying violence, as well as its tacit acceptance inherent to both the military institution and many of America’s foundational myths. In other words, they enable the soldier subject to resist the appropriation of their narratives and traumas to the service of national fictions.

It should be noted that not all veteran literature seeks to challenge the hegemonic soldier. Rather, some texts seek to reinforce reproduce existing ideological power structures. This dynamic is not limited to veteran literature but is visible in other cultural texts as well (Kilpeläinen 44). One such example is found in the book (2011) and film (2014) versions of the

American Sniper. The film based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle, a Navy SEAL sniper, who served several tours of duty in Iraq during the most tumultuous years of the occupation. The film depicts Kyle's path from a rodeo cowboy to a decorated Special Forces operative who survived multiple tours in Iraq, only to die at the hands of a traumatized veteran in the United States who killed him at a shooting range. What is presented here is a clean-cut and airbrushed version of Chris Kyle, who in his autobiography describes his experiences in terms that reinforce the Othering tendencies of the hegemonic soldier: "Everyone I shot was evil. I had a good cause on every shot. They all deserved to die" (Kyle, et al.184). The film adaptation also leaves out Kyle's widely disputed claims that he shot and killed looters during the storm Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 (Schmidle).

In Kyle's writing there emerges a veteran who embraces the fetishization of SOF troops and has fully internalized the logic and ideology of the American hegemonic soldier. In enacting its implicit ideology of American supremacy, the *American Sniper* transforms the chaotic nature of the Iraq War into a neatly organized narrative of the good Americans versus the faceless and evil Other of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, simultaneously constructing the war as a nostalgic World War 2-like "good war" and erasing the ideological ruptures caused by History. In this sense, these narratives can be seen as direct descendants of the television shows and movies of the 1980s that attempted to re-write the American trauma of Vietnam through narratives in which the war was figuratively re-fought and eventually won (Boose 589–90; Rowe 45–47).

The Discourse of Killing and Counternarratives in "After Action Report"

The discourse of killing in Klay's *Redeployment* provides an apt starting point for the exploration of the counternarratives that attempt to solve the ideological closure represented by the contemporary American hegemonic soldier. After all, as Joanna Bourke rightly points out, "the characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing" (Bourke 1). Klay's approach to narrating war is marked by the foregrounding of previously marginalized military experiences in war literature, such as the Foreign Service Officer (FSO) narrator of "Money as a Weapons System," or the artillery crew in "Ten Klinks South." While some of the stories do include the "traditional" viewpoint of the infantry, as in "Frago," most narrators in the stories are removed from combat in some manner.

Portrayals of combat are often marked by a high level of abstraction, such as in “OIF,” which presents an IED ambush and the death of a team member in the detached language of military jargon. These scenes are also frequently depersonalized through distance or technological mediation, such as in “Ten Kliks South” or “Psychological Operations,” or through the disorientation found in the beginning of “After Action Report”. The counternarrative created by an alternative discourse of killing is at the heart of the text. It allows the text to challenge and fragment not only the hegemonic soldier, but also challenges the mythical narrative of regenerative violence embedded in American culture.

The ambush which provides the narrative’s impetus is where the central antinomy of the text is first located: the clash between the hegemonic soldier’s discourse of cathartic violence and the soldier subject’s personal experience. The narrator, Suba, finds himself in a state of disorientation after an IED ambush which is heightened by a sudden burst of incoming fire, a “crack of rounds, like someone repeatedly snapping a bullwhip through the air” (“AAR” 31), to which he is unable to properly respond despite his best efforts. It is only after seeing the direction of Timhead’s fire that Suba is able to fire back: “Timhead fired from the front of the MRAP. I fired where he was firing, at the side of the building with the flickering light, and I saw my rounds impact in the wall” (“AAR” 31). Afterwards, when Suba approaches Timhead he realizes that their target was a fourteen-year-old boy, who now was “lying on the ground and bleeding out” (“AAR” 31) with his mother beside him:

“Holy shit,” I said. I saw an AK lying in the dust.
 Timhead didn’t say anything.
 “You got him,” I said.
 Timhead said, “No. No, man, no.”
 But he did. (31-2)

Rather than killing on purpose, the role of the killer is thrust upon Timhead through a reflexive action of returning fire without conscious thought: “Here’s what I see. Everything dust. And the flashes from the AK, going wild in circles” (“AAR” 41). By doing so, text strips the act of killing an enemy of any traditional sense of ‘heroism’ or ‘honor’ found in populist portrayals of war. The desire for heroic action in the American context is rooted in the mythologized Frontier of the Western, where the “moral and emotional resolution” is to be found “in a singular act of violence”

(Slotkin 352). By removing agency from Timhead's singular act of killing, the possibility of heroic action and a clear moral resolution provided by the death of an enemy is made impossible.

The text further challenges the hegemonic discourse on war and killing in its portrayal of Suba, a gunner who fires his .50 caliber machine gun several times towards targets throughout the text but, ironically, never kills anyone as far as he or the reader knows. Sometimes the enemy is hidden in houses ("AAR" 41) or disappears into the distance in the night: "The flash of the .50 going off killed my night vision. I couldn't see anything ... Maybe they were dead. Maybe they were body parts at the edge of the field ... Maybe they got away" ("AAR" 47). Similarly, the invisible IED triggerman, and the unseen sniper who later in the text kills a fellow platoon member, function as narrative devices that emphasize the lack of agency felt by "soldiers fighting a war in which choices are impossible ... because often there is very little time or leeway to make a choice" (Peebles 164). Rather than arriving at a definitive resolution to a conflict, such as the disarming of a bomb in *The Hurt Locker* (2009) or outwitting the enemy sniper in *American Sniper*, the soldiers of "After Action Report" are stuck in a repeating cycle where the enemy remains invisible, only making themselves known through regular patrol ambushes.

This approach presents a clear point of rupture against hegemonic cultural representations of war, such as *American Sniper*, where bloodshed provides a satisfying solution. Here, squeezing the trigger does not lead to a cathartic moment of victory. In doing so, "AAR" ruptures a fundamental tenet of American culture by negating the possibility of purification through killing. The enemy only appears in the form of a sniper's bullet or an impersonal IED by the side of the road, thus denying the possibility of a cathartic resolution through violence.

The text also points towards a rupture between the subjective experience of the individual soldier and the hegemonic military discourse that emphasizes the dehumanization of the enemy:

Harvey said, "It's okay, Timhead. You just ain't quick enough on the draw. Ka-pow." He made a pistol with his thumb and finger and mimed shooting us. "Man, I'd have been up there so fast, bam bam, shot his fuckin' hajji mom, too."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah, son. Ain't no more terrorist babies be poppin' out of that cunt."

Timhead was gripping the table. "Fuck you, Harvey." ("AAR" 38)

The abject dehumanization of the enemy is not particular to the modern American experience in Iraq. Rather, as Fussell notes, it is a “persisting imaginative habit of modern times, traceable ... to the actualities of the Great War” (75). Furthermore, stereotypes themselves are not simply signifiers of “casual bigotry”, but rather “symbols in which important ideological dilemmas about social, racial, and political relations are condensed” (Slotkin 486). By using the military slang term “hajji” to refer to Iraqis, the killed child and his mother are reduced to the Other of hegemonic military discourse, transforming them from individuals into a generalized and singular entity that exists simply as the “enemy”.

The enemy “hajji” of military discourse is characterized by the Orientalist stereotype of the “Eastern man as a violent primitive” (Steuter and Wills 24). The American military discourse of dehumanization is also inextricably linked to the mythologized Frontier as seen through the “ideologically loaded images of heroism and savagery” (Slotkin 485) that places the “civilized” whiteness against the “savage” non-white cultures. Furthermore, as Salaita notes, the Othered Arab functions as the icon against which contemporary American patriotic self-identification is often constructed (Salaita 110).

A similar oppositional pairing also applies to the construction of the contemporary American hegemonic soldier. Like the earlier American regimental hero that was often defined against the Native American “threat” (Slotkin 359), the contemporary American soldier is defined against an Arab “enemy”. As such, Timhead’s refusal to reduce the child into a racialized enemy generates a counternarrative which ruptures the process of reification by providing an alternative to dominant representations, and fragments American ideology in the process. Consequently, Timhead’s actions serve as an act of rebellion against the hegemonic soldier and, in a wider sense, demonstrative of the transgressive nature of contemporary American veteran literature.

The counternarrative discovered in “After Action Report” challenges the hegemonic soldier’s discourses and representations on multiple levels. It achieves this by rupturing the military’s representation of killing through the removal of agency from the act itself, thereby negating its cathartic potential. By doing so, the counternarrative challenges the central status regenerative violence holds in American culture and many of its foundational myths, such as the frontier experience (Slotkin 11). The text’s refusal to reduce the killed Iraqi child to an enemy Other also writes against

the role of the Arab as the designated enemy against which contemporary patriotic and militaristic Americanness is produced. Thus, "After Action Report" challenges both the military as well as the popular unconscious and demonstrates the fundamentally transgressive role that veteran literature can play in the deconstruction of the hegemonic soldier, and its ideology of American supremacy.

The Omnipresent Latency of the American Hegemonic Soldier in "War Stories"

The discourse of violence and its representations are the focal point of the second case study of Klay's "War Stories". The text presents a metafictional and self-aware critique of the notion of war as a narrative stage, where soldiers are assigned roles strictly defined by the hegemonic soldier, and which manifest even in supposedly subversive narratives. In doing this, the counternarrative highlights the hegemonic soldier's pervasive and internalized nature in American culture.

Presenting warfare in terms of theater is a common trope: phrases such as theatre of war abound in military jargon and the use of uniforms, as Fussell notes, is akin to actors assuming the role of a character (191). Critically, Fussell argues that viewing "warfare as theater provides a psychic escape for the participant" (192). In "War Stories", this analogy extends to cover not only soldiers, but to civilians as well. Like the soldier who frames warfare as theater to cope with the extremes of combat, so do the civilian characters of "War Stories" attempt to frame warfare in terms of cinematic and theatrical narratives as a strategy of containment against the rupture caused by a deeply unpopular war and the pervasive discourse that demands unconditional support for the soldiers fighting that war. This discourse forces the soldier into the mythologized representation of what Roy Scranton terms a "trauma hero": a soldier who has learned a supposed "truth beyond words, a truth that can only be known by having *been there*, an unspeakable truth he must bear for society" (Scranton; emphasis original).

The text achieves this by using the notion of a narrative stage rather literally, as the focal point of "War Stories" revolves around a play Sarah wants to write about Jenks, a veteran who was badly burned and disfigured in an IED ambush in Iraq. Three of the characters in the text are veterans, two of whom, Jess and Jenks, were wounded in Iraq while Wilson survived his tour without injury. Characteristic of all three is their fascination with

the possibility (and impossibility) of war as a redemptive or cathartic narrative setting. In doing so, all three express a desire to move beyond an identity which only allows the soldier subject to be defined by their war experiences. This desire to move beyond a reified veteran identity is apparent in Wilson's line that opens the story: "I'm tired of telling war stories," I say, not so much to Jenks as to the empty bar behind him" (211). The remark directed at an empty bar is reminiscent of Fussell's argument that no one is all that interested in what soldiers really have to say (170), but rather only in the exciting and titillating sensationalism of heroic war stories.

Through the act of storytelling, all three veteran characters come to resemble (albeit reluctantly in the case of Wilkins) a storyteller figure, who as Dragas notes "question[s] the grand narratives of history, religion and politics, as well as ideological constructs such as nationhood" and represents "communal rather than individual truths" (2). This enables the "soldier storyteller" to exist as an ideological strategy of containment for civilians such as Sarah: they help pave over the rupture caused by the Iraq War and the desire to see the nation as a force of good.

Furthermore, Jenks's role in the play comes not to represent him as an individual, but rather as yet another ideological signifier. He is the "trauma hero" mutilated by an unjust war who exists as solely defined by that singular experience: "Jenks isn't telling Sarah about growing up and the girl who broke his heart," I say. 'And even if he were, she wouldn't give a shit'" ("War Stories" 235). The pervasive nature of the American hegemonic soldier is made visible on multiple levels by the counternarrative, as characters, both military as well as civilian, end up repeating and reinforcing its narratives and representations. In other words, it is internalized to such an extent that even representations purporting to challenge it display signs of its latent influence.

The first counternarrative rupture is found in the descriptions of two characters, Jenks who was injured and disfigured in an IED attack, and Wilson who witnessed that ambush and functions as the narrator. The two served in Iraq as engineers, "paving roads. Building force pro. Repairing potholes" ("War Stories" 215). The text presents the two as parallels and emphasizes it throughout the story:

Jenks's story is pretty obvious, and that's another weird thing because Jenks used to be me, basically [...] Everybody always said we could be brothers. Now, looking at him is like looking at what I would have been if my vehicle had hit that pressure plate. He's me, but less lucky. ("War Stories" 213-14)

The parallel nature of the two functions as a way of revealing the ways in which the hegemonic soldier's discourse foregrounds certain experiences while simultaneously marginalizing others. In this case, it is Jenks whose experience is foregrounded due to his physical trauma, the "signature injuries of this war" ("War Stories" 222). He is the prototypical "wounded warrior" so often found in the dominant representations of veterans alongside those who suffer from mental trauma.

As a result, the latency of the hegemonic soldier is revealed as Wilson is left feeling like he is somehow less, and that Jenks's injuries make his Iraq more authentic, or as Wilson puts it "he's who I should have been" ("War Stories" 236). The reaction is symptomatic of a struggle with a discourse deeply marked by a disconnect between representation and reality. Here another site of marginalization is uncovered, as both struggle with an experience of a military role that is pushed to the background and silenced in favor of a more conventional representations:

"Exactly," I say. "Even the antiwar chicks—which in this city is all of them—want to hear you were in some shit."

Jenks points to his face. "Some shit."

"Right. Don't have to say anything. They'll start imagining all sorts of stuff."

"Black Hawk Down."

"The Hurt Locker." ("War Stories" 214-15)

The text's ironic allusions to *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *The Hurt Locker* are not accidental. The films function as significant historical markers in the commercial narrativization of the American soldier's experience and reflect their corresponding historical moments, thus contributing to the nostalgic recreation of the American soldier. In his analysis of the film, Alford notes that the depiction of the Battle of Mogadishu in *Black Hawk Down* "implies that the US military can literally do no wrong" (50). The film thus erases any semblance of possible nuance and historical accuracy within the narrative as the American soldier reigns supreme as an infallible enforcer of state power.

The Hurt Locker on the other hand was released eight years later in 2009, as the United States found itself deeply embroiled in the occupation of Iraq and presents a more nuanced narrative of American Explosive Ordnance Technicians (EOD Techs) whose job is to dismantle IEDs, the signature weapons of the war. While the film's portrayal of the American soldier as a fallible human being capable of mistakes stands in stark contrast with that of *Black Hawk Down*, the film highlights the impossible quandary critical war film narratives end up in: often, they end up reinforcing the status quo rather than subverting it. Peebles notes that "if at the end [of *Hurt Locker*] we move to the heavy beat of the soundtrack and cheer the handsome 'wild man,' we do so by overlooking the nuances of the portrait Boal and Bigelow give us" (173). The irony here is, that for Jenks and Wilson, their war was neither the heroic struggle for survival of *Black Hawk Down* nor the intense adrenaline trip of *The Hurt Locker*. Rather, their Iraq was characterized by the mundane nature of support functions punctured only by the IED ambush that maimed Jenks.

The text's self-aware emphasis on cinema constructs an important counternarrative that reveals the latent presence (and power) of the hegemonic soldier. The pervasiveness of its latent nature is further underscored by allusions to films that attempt to subvert them in a discussion between Wilson and Jessie:

"I bet more Marines have joined the Corps because of Full Metal Jacket than because of any fucking recruiting commercial."

"And that's an antiwar film."

"Nothing's an antiwar film," I say. "There's no such thing." (234)

Cinema is a visual medium that demands a certain sense of logical coherence with a clear beginning and an end. This strips away the chaos and fragmentation of combat and forces the viewer to focus the visual and aural spectacle unfolding in front of them. In "War Stories", the seductive spectacle of war is approached in a fashion similar to Tim O'Brien's classic short story "How to Tell a True War Story". In it, O'Brien posits that "for all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat ... You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not" (77). Like Peebles's example of *The Hurt Locker*'s handsome wild man, cinematic warfare unwittingly shifts the viewer's focus from nuance to the spectacle of combat unfolding before them and opens the possibility for the undoing of the narrative's transgressive aspects. Purportedly subversive films become anchored to the process

of nostalgic recreation and transform into cultural touchstones for potential recruits.

The criticism against cinema as a medium for war narratives presented by “War Stories” is further emphasized in its description of what a “proper” war film might look like. The film, ostensibly set in Korea, would start by “a kid growing up” who eventually joins the army after WW2, raises a family and then:

Korea happens and he’s sent over there and he’s excited and scared and he wonders if he’ll be courageous and he’s kind of proud and then in the last sixty seconds of the film they put them in boats to go to Inchon and he’s shot in the water and drowns in three feet of surf and the movie doesn’t even give him a close-up, it just ends (“War Stories” 234).

The narrative presented subverts the hegemonic soldier by refusing to reduce the soldier subject into the ghostly imaging of the heroic military dead defined by the singular circumstance of war. Rather, it makes “war the least little thing” (“War Stories” 234) and presents the soldier subject as a fully formed individual whose death is wholly unremarkable, denying the possibility of spiritual catharsis. Therefore, it opens the possibility for an authentic remembrance of the soldier subject, who is no longer restricted to a reified signifier of national heroism, but rather emerges as a fully formed individual.

The play itself presents a case study in the ways in which the hegemonic soldier’s latent properties are visible in even supposedly subversive narratives, and the dynamic between the military unconscious and the civilian populace. For Sarah the play is a part of a larger project with IAWW, or Iraq Veterans Against the War, whose name references a Vietnam-era organization bearing the similar name of “Vietnam Veterans Against the War”. Thus, Sarah’s assumption that the play “‘is different,’ ... ‘It’s not political’” (“War Stories” 222) seems naive at best, and ignorant at worst. Separating politics from a war story is impossible as Bates notes: “whatever the form of the war story or its narrative content it is politics ... by other means” (2). The text’s overt reference to an advocacy group with roots in the Vietnam War also demonstrates the way in which the military unconscious surfaces as a singular historical totality, connecting contemporary members of the military with their predecessors, and reveals the impossibility of Sarah’s apolitical viewpoint.

Sarah’s choice to make Jenks the subject of her play also reveals the latent qualities of the hegemonic soldier, as both Wilson and Jessie are put

aside in favor of Jenks who fits the more traditional representation of a “wounded warrior”. In particular, the rejection of Jessie, who served in Iraq as a Lioness “in some real war shit. Hanging with the grunts, doing female engagement, getting in firefights” (“War Stories” 221) is demonstrative of the latent omnipresence of the hegemonic soldier and its sidelining of “non-traditional” experiences. The anger towards this marginalization becomes apparent in Wilson’s remarks at the end of the short story:

He was like me, I think. But that’s not what I tell her. “He was a bit of an asshole,” I say, and I smile at Jenks, who stares back with one of those looks I can’t interpret. “To be perfectly honest, he was a worthless piece of shit. No subject for a play, that’s for sure.” I smile. “Good thing he caught on fire, right?” (“War Stories” 236)

In Wilson’s view, Jenks’ worth to Sarah is only due to his trauma that transforms him into a calcified representation of the “wounded warrior”, thereby reducing him into a singular traumatic event. For Sarah, Jenks plays the role of trauma hero who is expected to “play out” for the audience “the ritual *fort-da* of trauma and recovery, and to carry for them the collective guilt of war” (Scranton, emphasis original). Thus, Sarah’s purportedly subversive narrative striving for authenticity inadvertently ends up reinforcing the very discourse it sets out to subvert by making Jenks a vessel of personal catharsis.

By questioning the possibility of war as a spiritually purifying narrative stage, “War Stories” generates a counternarrative that challenges dominant representations of war. It reveals the ways in which the latent influence of the hegemonic soldier becomes visible also in narratives that seek to subvert it, testifying to its pervasive nature in contemporary U.S. culture. However, the rupture presented by the text’s counternarrative also opens the possibility for resistance by presenting alternatives to the dominant war narrative by allowing the soldier subject to transcend their reified status as a symbol singularly defined by war.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined through an analysis of Phil Klay’s “After Action Report” and “War Stories” the ways in which veteran literature’s military unconscious generates counternarratives that rupture American national myths rooted in the narrative of regenerative violence. I began by introducing general characteristics of contemporary American veteran

literature and introduced the theoretical pillars of my analytical framework: the military unconscious and the hegemonic soldier. In my analysis of “After Action Report”, I showed how the text ruptures the American hegemonic soldier by offering an alternative discourse of killing. Finally, my analysis of “War Stories” demonstrated how the text’s self-aware usage of metafictional elements unearths a counternarrative that exposes the latent and omnipresent nature of the hegemonic soldier in contemporary American culture.

As the United States nears the 20th anniversary marking the beginning of the Global War on Terror, taking stock of the immense costs of the conflict, both abroad and at home, is becoming an increasingly urgent task. Here, veteran literature provides a medium uniquely suited to understanding the impact of the “forever wars” have had on the United States and the world. Rather than searching for “some deeper truth” in combat, contemporary veteran literature is often firmly connected O’Brien’s assertion that “a true war story is never moral ... It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue” (65). Instead, many veteran authors, such as Phil Klay, display a remarkable awareness of the American soldier’s position as the enforcer of American power, and the power dynamic between them and the civilian populace of combat zones. The self-awareness also extends to the contradictory status of hero worship and neglect that the soldier figure inhabits in contemporary American culture. It is this self-awareness, rather than an ephemeral insight gained through a trial by fire, that provides the rupture that makes contemporary veteran literature a critical avenue in understanding the development and future of an increasingly militarized United States mired in seemingly never-ending conflicts at home and abroad.

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