

## On the Frontlines of Fiction: Authority and Fictionality in American Veteran Narratives of the War on Terror - abstract

Veteran narratives—much like other texts that promise a glimpse of otherwise inaccessible lives and activities—are highly valued on the contemporary truth-starved literary market. This, however, holds true for both nonfictional and fictional narratives, the latter of which are usually still presented as “truthful” accounts. This study focuses on the works of veterans of the Global War on Terrorism such as Phil Klay, Kevin Powers, Roy Scranton, Brian Van Reet, and David Abrams, whose books might be read as overtly fictionalized accounts of their time in-country. I argue that several of the fictional narratives of the GWOT produced by veterans are configured as *authofictions*, a distinct literary phenomenon that exploits the rhetorical power of fictional discourse while maintaining the authority of nonfiction through claims of truthfulness linked to the author’s identity. In this way, *authofictions* present themselves as a trustworthy tool to understand the past while they eliminate questions of factual accuracy.

Employing Paul Ricoeur’s concept of threefold mimesis, this dissertation highlights the process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration that intertwines narrative fiction and historiography in these texts, which combine fictional truth-telling with the epistemic primacy of testimony. Coherently with Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach, I stress that, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of these narratives, it is necessary to consider not only the texts themselves, but also the circumstances of their production and reception. In order to better describe the way in which *authofictions* interact with the real world, I read them with the aid of Richard Walsh’s rhetorical theory of fictionality, which sees fictional discourse as a distinct rhetorical resource that can be used to talk indirectly about reality, complicating veteran fiction’s place amongst the instruments of narrative-based historical understanding in the post-postmodern era.

Defining *authofiction* against adjacent genres like historiographic metafiction and autofiction, I contend that these veteran narratives utilize a weak autofictional mode to emphasize the connection between the author and the narrated events, thereby extending the authority that is customarily granted to veterans in their self-narrations to their fictional production. However, *authofictions* go beyond a simple authoritative furthering of their agenda, as they strategically employ their authority to showcase potential biases in a veteran’s single story, thereby destabilizing the blind trust with which veteran narratives are usually received, all the while raising ethical questions about the production and consumption of war narratives.

**Keywords:** American literature; war narratives; GWOT; autofiction; fictionality; veterans