SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA
IN KATOWICE

International PhD Programme
Studies in English Literatures, Language and Translation

Joint research doctoral thesis
Sapienza University of Rome and University of Silesia in Katowice

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

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Academic Year 2023-2024

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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.

Introduction

The longest war in the history of the United States formally ended on August 30th, 2021, after almost twenty years of military presence that followed the September 11 attacks in New York. As the last American flight left Kabul and Taliban forces regained control of most of Afghanistan, President Joe Biden explained his decision to bring American military involvement to an end by addressing the nation and saying that he refused to send another generation of Americans to fight a war that should have ended years prior. When mentioning the tremendous strain war was taking on the nation's finances and service members, he also noted that not enough civilians understood "how much we have asked of the 1 percent of this country who put that uniform on" and that they would carry the cost of this war "with them [for] their whole lives." (United States)

Footage of the airlift of hundreds of thousands of Americans and Afghans wishing to escape Taliban rule, together with remarks on veterans forever carrying with them the traumatic experience of war, makes the comparison between the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and the one in Vietnam extremely easy. Throughout the years, and as early as 2001, many have observed the similarities between the American involvement in Indochina and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, as both wars were fought on foreign lands against groups that used guerrilla warfare and could seemingly blend effortlessly with civilians, and both were conflicts that, remarkably, ended with Americans hastily leaving the country as their enemies swiftly took over. The Kabul airlift provided journalists with the perfect mirror image of the evacuation of American citizens by helicopter during the Fall of Saigon.

As often happens with extraordinary historical events, most American wars have been the subject of great works of (Anglo-American) literature, one need only look at the literary output of the conflicts in Vietnam, with works such as Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990) to name only a few. These and other works established a canon that continues to be expanded and engaged with some fifty years after the end of the conflict by books such as Karl Marlantes' *Matterhorn* (2009), Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) and *The Committed* (2021), not to mention works by Vietnamese authors like Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1987) and Duong Thu Huong's *A Novel Without a Name* (1991).

The same goes for the other wars that loom large in American memory, such as – to name only the ones associated with a substantial literary production – the Civil War, the First World War, and the Second World War. And yet, in 2012, Roger Luckhurst noted that the literature of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), a military endeavor that had already surpassed the duration of the aforementioned wars combined, did not seem to have produced any major work, as the "literary heavyweights" focused quite exclusively on the harrowing experience of the September 11th attacks in New York rather than the United States' involvement in Afghanistan and, later, Iraq. In his words, "one cannot say quite the same for the 2003 invasion of Iraq that followed as a far from logical consequence of 9/11. No defining literary texts have emerged from the overlapping contexts of the invasion, the Iraqi civil war, or the occupation" (713).

This is not surprising, especially if one takes into account the fact that many of the most influential works about the various wars in which the US have taken part were published years after the end of the conflict. Indeed, while wars saw no shortage of literary works being produced during the time troops were still on the ground, the books that eventually came to be seen as landmark texts of the respective wars unfailingly appeared *postbellum*. Apart from the war in Vietnam, as far as the other wars are concerned one could mention Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, serialized in 1894; John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, respectively published in 1921 and 1929; and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, published respectively in 1961, 1969, and 1973, well after the end of the conflict.

As fate would have it, however, 2012 was to be the year when one of the most successful books about GWOT would be published, Chris Kyle's *American Sniper*, written with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, which was later going to be the basis for the homonymous Clint Eastwood film (2014) starring Bradley Cooper. Probably not a literary masterpiece, the book is an autobiographical account of the author's deployment to Iraq and narrates the author's experience as a Navy SEAL sniper. Predictably, and just like *American Sniper*, some of the earliest literature of the Global War on Terrorism was written by soldiers: Gary Bernstein's *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda*, Jason Conroy and Ron Martz's *Heavy Metal: A Tank Company's Battle to Baghdad*, Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, Nathaniel Flick's *One Bullet Away* all came out in 2005, while Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* was published a year later and, like the other works, written by a US soldier who shared their experience on the battlefield.

As veterans were offering memoirs of their direct participation in combat operations, embedded journalists started producing other notable works based on their first-hand experience: Dexter Filkins, reporter for *The New York Times*, wrote *The Forever War* (2008), about his visit to the Middle East, while *The Good Soldiers* (2009) by David Finkel describes the time he spent in Baghdad for the *Washington Post* during "the surge," the major increase in the number of American soldiers deployed to Iraq as ordered by then President George W. Bush. Another embedded journalist, Mark Boal, used his experience on the field to write the scripts of *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), both films being directed by Kathryn Bigelow and depicting combat operations in Iraq and Pakistan. Since most service members did not have the same access to publishing as the aforementioned "star" journalists, many offered their story on personal blogs on the internet, a more easily accessible way to reach wide audiences: notable examples include Matt Gallagher's later deleted "Kaboom" and, outside of the American sphere, "Baghdad Burning," written in English and mainly intended for an international audience by an anonymous Iraqi woman under the pseudonym Riverbend.

Crucially, almost as an additional response to Luckhurst's doubts about the literary output of the war, 2012 also saw the publishing of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, one of the first critically successful *fictional* accounts of the war, in which the author, himself an Iraq veteran, tells the story of private Bartle both in war and at home, in a fragmented narrative that deals with the tragic death of Murph, one of the protagonist's closest colleagues, and the violent and highly problematic reaction of his unit, which retaliates with extreme violence. Indeed, another significant contribution to the veteran scene has been the award-winning collection of short stories *Redeployment* (2014), by Marine Public Affairs Officer Phil Klay. The collection contains a series of stories told from the perspective of U.S. soldiers and deals with a variety of situations, from traumatizing experiences on the battlefield to the problematic return home, as well as the perceived ignorance of civilians who mindlessly express their gratitude towards service members without being interested in their work and their problems.

It is therefore unsurprising that some of the most critically acclaimed literature of the Global War on Terrorism consists of fictional narratives produced by American veterans. In the long run, veteran writers like Phil Klay, Kevin Powers, Matt Gallagher, Brian Turner, Brian Van Reet, David Abrams, Roy Scranton, and Elliot Ackerman have formed what Scranton has jokingly called the "veteran-writer racket" (*We're Doomed, Now What?* "Back to Baghdad") in which authors continue to publish works that are based on their experiences as soldiers in the Global War on Terrorism or on adjacent themes such as American military operations around the world and speculative fiction on future wars. A clear example of this is the collection

of short stories *Fire and Forget* (2013), edited by Scranton and Gallagher, which contains short stories by, among other veterans, Klay, Turner, Van Reet, Abrams, as well as the editors'. All of the contributors—bar Siobhan Fallon, an army spouse—are American veterans who bring their direct experience as a marker of accurate storytelling. Another, analogous example is *The Road Ahead: Fiction from the Forever War* (2017), edited by Adriana Bonenberger and Brian Castner.

Some of these writers have also published books of nonfiction after their service, but as I have already mentioned, most of their works consist of fictional narratives even though their personal experience of war and their insight as eyewitnesses are frequently used as a selling point. A vast majority of the blurbs that introduce the authors of fiction written by veterans of the GWOT qualify them as former members of the armed forces, while the book summaries highlight the connection between the contents of the books and the experiences of the authors. For example, in the first UK hardcover edition of *Fobbit*, David Abrams is first and foremost defined by his service, as one who "served in the U.S. Army for twenty years, and was deployed to Iraq in 2005 as part of a public affairs team." The story follows a public affairs officer, and the front flap of the dust jacket reinforces this connection: "Based on the author's own experiences serving in Iraq, *Fobbit*, like *Catch-22* and *M*A*S*H*, fuses dark humour with pathos to create a brilliantly witty and profound work about life in the modern-day warzone." This is by no means an isolated example, as virtually all fictional narratives written by veterans benefit from the authority that is ascribed to veterans when narrating war stories.

This peculiarity suggests that these works of fiction constitute an interesting literary phenomenon that seems to be closely connected to an increased attention to (and proliferation of) personal narratives in the post-truth era, in which factual accuracy seems to have lost much of its authority in authenticating stories. In this study I will focus on a handful of texts that I take to be exemplary of this phenomenon, such as Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, David Abrams' *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*, Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, and Brian Van Reet's *Spoils*. I will refer to this group of works as *authofictions*, a portmanteau of the words "authority" (as well as "authorship") and "fiction" that conveniently constitutes a minimal pair with the already current word autofiction,[1] a genre whose mechanisms are similar but not quite identical to those that characterize *authofiction*.

[1] Throughout this study I will always italicize the term *authofiction*, so as to better differentiate it from "autofiction."

As the term suggests, these are works of fiction published by veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and clearly marketed as fictional but at the same time characterized by claims of authenticity and truthfulness (especially in the paratext) that are warranted by the writer's personal experience. In other words, these texts exist in a peculiar position within the discourse surrounding these wars because, in an era of decentralized authority, they purport to be the most authentic depictions of war as benefiting from their writer's authority, at the same time asserting their fictionality to dismiss any possible discussion about their accuracy.

These narratives usually strive to depict the full spectrum of the American military experience in the Middle East in an effort to supplement the impersonal and detached information provided by news outlets and historiography. Indeed, they usually embrace the perspective of the American soldier(s) to narrate "what it was really like" in Iraq or Afghanistan, imitating the function of war memoirs and offering a possible point of access for those lacking first-hand experience of the combat operations. Like memoirs, these works of fiction benefit from the authority of their veteran author, and this means that readers are introduced to a world of violence, fear, and hurt, but also excitement, joy, and comradery that is presented as the most authentic depiction of army life. American soldiers young and old are hurled into Boeing C-17s and catapulted from the excesses and gluttony of their home to the austerity and scarcity of the desert, while being forced to deal with enemies and potentially hostile locals. In keeping with other war literature, traumatic experiences are abundant. Soldiers are put through hell at bootcamp and eventually form meaningful relationships with other recruits only to see them die sudden horrible deaths on the battlefield. Explosions and other deadly occurrences are startling and to a certain extent unexpected, and serve as painful breaking points of the dullness and monotony of day-to-day military life.

In fact, violence and trauma are not the whole story, as these works certainly do not shy away from representing other less predictable aspects of war such as the utter boredom that characterizes a majority of the soldier's time in-country, cramped in small rooms and tormented by the desert heat. This does not mean, however, that American soldiers are entirely cut off from wealth and comfort, as some bases are equipped with gyms, movie theaters, and coffee shops which stand in stark contrast with the living conditions of the locals, who have to make do among the rubble of what once were their homes.

What these narratives have in common, other than the fact that they were written by American veterans, is that they all call attention to the truth value of first-hand experience while being overtly fictional. Oftentimes, they are marketed as works of "truth" which can offer readers a more *authentic* representation of the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan than

conventional historiographic documents, in a way occupying the same position as the many memoirs and works of nonfiction that have been written by reporters and other soldiers. Therefore, this study aims at exploring how these works clearly demand to be taken seriously as sources of information about the real world while at the same time avoiding the requirements that constrict nonfiction texts to factual accuracy and subject them to rigorous scrutiny.

In the first chapter, titled "The American War on Terror and Veteran Storytelling," I am going to illustrate where the fictional narratives created by veterans of the GWOT are situated in the current American literary landscape. Drawing attention on their affinity with post-postmodern phenomena as the one described by Adam Kelly as "The New Sincerity," I will show how veteran narratives fulfill the key function of trying to bridge what veterans perceive to be a divide between those who served in the United States' most recent wars, and those who have not. For this reason, I argue that the central concerns explored in contemporary veteran fiction are authority and authenticity, and that a group of narratives written by veterans who partially fictionalize their experience of war—*authofictions*—strategically assume an ideal position of authority in the post-truth era by deftly capitalizing on the experiential disparity that exists (and is perceived as existing) between veterans and civilians. This positioning is predicated upon their purported disclosure of first-hand information about an event that most American readers have only known through what are perceived to be highly mediated sources, such as the mainstream media.

In the second chapter, titled "Mimesis in Conflict: Representing the Reality of War," I will investigate how *authofictions* can help navigate the space between historical, autobiographical, and imaginative storytelling. Using Paul Ricoeur's concept of "threefold mimesis," I emphasize the way in which these texts are the result of the process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration linking both narrative fiction and historiography. In alignment with Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach, I argue that the most pertinent way to understand *authofictions* is by focusing not only on the texts themselves, but also on the circumstances of their production and reception and on how these texts have an impact in shaping the real world. Accordingly, I am going to emphasize the way in which these texts combine elements of fictional and historiographic truth-telling with the epistemic primacy of testimony, thereby becoming especially powerful contributors to the construction of cultural memory.

In the third chapter, titled "*Authofictions*: Veteran Narratives and Fictionality," I will further delve into the specific ways in which *authofictions* function as narrative texts. In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on the importance of the use of fictional discourse in texts

that are closely linked with an author's personal experience—using Richard Walsh's rhetorical theory of fictionality, this study will show how *authofictions* can be seen as speaking indirectly about the real world while at the same time dispelling any doubts regarding their authentic nature, thereby cementing their position as the most authentic and authoritative narratives to depict the Global War on Terrorism. In the second part of the chapter, I will move on to explore how this understanding of fictionality as a resource in an author's communicative rhetoric rather than as a feature of fiction enables the identification of autofictional characteristics inherent to *authofiction*s. Consequently, I will define authofiction against adjacent genres, such as historiographic metafiction and autofiction itself.

In the fourth and final chapter, titled "How to Write (and Read) an Authoritative War Story," I will provide a number of readings of the texts that I have selected as the most salient examples of *authofiction*. I argue that the author's *authofictional* strategy manifests itself in these texts in three main ways: firstly, through the inclusion of instances that foreground the questions of truthfulness and authenticity; secondly, through the display of the varying degrees of awareness of the narratives' profound impact in shaping real lives; thirdly, through the representation of multiple and often conflicting points of view. To conclude the chapter and the study, I will delve deeper in the ethical implications of the use of *authofictional* techniques, using Hanna Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics as the guiding framework for the analysis of the aforementioned texts. In the "Coda," I will look at some of the relevant texts of the GWOT that are excluded by my definition of *authofiction*—since *authofictions* are usually written by veterans who are granted a great deal of narrative authority, they are mostly authored by white males. Therefore, this last section will argue that, in order to engage productively with the various literary efforts to represent the GWOT, readers should not limit themselves to the perspectives of American veterans, but should instead engage with texts that originate from different sources.

At the time of writing, many if not all of the texts that I examine in this study could be thought of as part of a growing canon of literary works related to the GWOT, and are exemplary of the many ways in which American veterans have attempted to convey the experience of contemporary warfare through literary fiction. However famous and critically acclaimed—some more than others—these novels are not yet as well-known as other classics of American war literature, like the works of Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, or Tim O'Brien. For this reason, in the following paragraphs I will outline the plots of the novels and short stories that constitute the object of this study.

All of these texts are fictional reimaginings of the GWOT written by American veterans, but some are more faithful to the authors' lives than others. One of such cases is Nico Walker's *Cherry* (2018), in which the unnamed protagonist narrates his youth, his time in the Army, and his battle with drug-addiction, which leads him to a life of crime. Set in Cleveland, Ohio, around the beginning of the Iraq War, *Cherry* depicts the protagonist's life before, during, and after his experience of war. After the end of high school, the protagonist meets Emily, with whom he has a relationship, but her decision to go to college in Canada prompts him to decide to join the Army. After his enlistment and basic training, where he finds out that many of his companions were leading lives of petty crime before joining the armed forces, he marries Emily just before his deployment as an Army medic in Iraq. During this time, he grows increasingly disillusioned with the purpose of the war, and starts using drugs like he did occasionally before enlisting. Upon his return home, he learns that Emily has cheated on him numerous times, and he does the same shortly after, all the while developing an addiction to alcohol as well as opioids like OxyContin. After a series of relationships, he reunites with Emily, who has started using heroin. The two start abusing opioids as their lives spiral out of control. Eventually, the protagonists' drug debts catch up with him, and he resorts to robbing banks to enable his and his wife's heroin consumption.

Similarly, in *The Yellow Birds* (2012), Kevin Powers uses details from his own deployment—to a lesser extent—to construct the story of John Bartle and his friend Murph, both of them soldiers in Iraq at the beginning of the war. The novel is told in scattered fragments, alternating between the Bartle's time in the USA (both before and after the war), Germany, and Iraq. The pivotal event of the story coincides with Murph's death, which causes Bartle and his superior officer, Sgt. Sterling, to abandon his remains in the river Tigris to spare his mother the sight of his disfigured remains. In an attempt to comfort his mother, the two pretend have never found Murph's body, and Bartle even decides to write her a letter pretending to be her son. After his return home, their actions are uncovered by the military police and Bartle is arrested as he learns that Sterling has committed suicide.

Another case in which the author's real-life experiences are closely connected with fiction is David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012). The events of the novel are narrated through several vantage points, each focusing on a different character stationed at FOB Triumph in Iraq, and much of the plot revolves around the conflict between "fobbits"—those who are part of units that do not engage in armed conflict—and "regular" soldiers. One of the "fobbits," Chance Gooding, is a public affairs officer who, like Abrams himself used to, works in the Army's press office. Throughout the novel, Gooding considers the various angles from which war is

depicted, often finding that even though he writes official reports, others usually have better knowledge of the events, especially due to their presence on the battlefield. Partly due to this reason, then, the novel ends with Gooding running towards the gates of the Forward Operating Base, seemingly trying to finally have access to an unfiltered experience war. Abrams' second novel, *Brave Deeds* (2017), also focuses on a number of different American soldiers, but uses radically different techniques. While *Fobbit* is narrated in the third person or through artifacts such as emails, diary entries, and official reports, *Brave Deeds* follows its six protagonists using the pronoun "we" throughout the novel. The individualities of the various soldiers are thus intimately joined, even though their differences are never erased, highlighting the sense of community and brotherhood felt by most soldiers during times of war.

Like in Adams' novels, the short stories of Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) are populated with a wide-ranging array of military characters, each with their own unique perspective. Stories like "Psychological Operations," which narrates the protagonist's use and abuse of his veteran authority on a college campus, and "War Stories," in which two veterans discuss the merits of storytelling while recounting the incident that disfigured one of them are a testament to how Klay's collection reflects on the value and power of storytelling in the face of armed conflict. The same interest in storytelling and war pervades Klay's debut novel, *Missionaries* (2020), told through a variety of characters whose lives are affected by conflicts around the world. Set between Colombia, the United States, and Iraq, the novel follows both American and Colombian characters: an American journalist, a former Army medic in Iraq, a member of a Colombian guerrilla group, and a Lieutenant Colonel of the Colombian Army. Like other titles in this list, *Missionaries* plays with its narrating voices—initially told in the first person, the novel shifts to a heterodiegetic narrator for its final act, when the worlds of each character collide to produce the narrative's violent ending.

This interest in non-American voices is one of the peculiarities of GWOT fiction. Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016), for example, is another novel that works with several points of view: there is a group of friends having a barbecue in the USA, Wilson, a poet/soldier who participates in the war in Iraq, and Qasim, an Iraqi mathematician who experiences the fall of Baghdad in 2003. While they appear to be disjointed, the reader is led to gradually figure out that Qasim has become Wilson's interpreter, and that he is one of the victims of torture whose photos Aaron proudly showcases at the end of the barbecue. By showing Qasim's inner thoughts in the sections that are entirely dedicated to him, while he is later reduced to a side character and, finally, to an anguished figure on a computer screen, Scranton thematizes the tendency—seemingly prevalent in American war literature—to overlook the suffering of local

civilians in favor of a deeper focus on the individual lives of American soldiers, a propensity that he sharply criticizes in his essays and articles.

In a similar manner, Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* (2017) narrates the Iraq war from multiple points of view, featuring the points of view of two Americans and that of an old Afghan emir. The two American soldiers are remarkably different: Cassandra is competent and responsible, while Sleed, with little to no hesitation, starts participating in the looting of artifacts initiated by the soldiers in his company. When Cassandra's unit is attacked, Sleed is late to the rescue, ensuring the survivors' capture at the hands of the emir's men. The latter, named Abu al-Hool, far from being depicted as a bloodthirsty agent of evil, is described in his full complexity, and the reader is made aware of the traumatic events of his past, which partially explain his reluctance to continue his time at the helm of the jihadist group he leads. His substitute, Dr. Walid, is shown to be unnecessarily violent and sadistic, while Abu and his protégé are the only ones who can have meaningful and fruitful conversations with the captive Cassandra.

1. The American War on Terror and Veteran Storytelling

1.1 Bridging the Military-Civilian Gap

For better or for worse, American soldiers coming home from the so-called Global War on Terrorism carry around a label that is the direct consequence (at least in the US, a country whose armed forces are rarely spared real combat) of their decision to enlist – they are *veterans*. In a 2017 article titled "Epistemological Interference and the Trope of the Veteran" on the then recently founded *Journal of Veteran Studies*, Liam Corley notes how this "mark" means that civilians are prone to attribute certain characteristics to those who have served in a war, essentially painting everyone with the same brush and thus erasing personal differences (69). Notably, one of the salient features of veteran status is the authority with which veterans seem to be imbued when it comes to conveying the experience of war: "For many Americans, recognized veteran status confers authority on a person to speak to issues related to military service, foreign policy, and an array of tangential domestic policy issues. This authority to speak, however, comes with a host of expectations and constraints upon what veteran speech will contain" (Corley 69). This is apparent in the testimony of many veterans who recount their homecoming experience and the often tense way in which civilians engage with their war stories. As noted by Nicholas J. Mercurio, civilians often feel obligated to thank veterans for their service with the apparently harmless and even seemingly benign expression which has been, through years of repetition, condensed into the infamous acronym "TYFYS," or "thank you for your service": "To some, these ritualistic expressions have devolved into cultural performances wherein the sentiment is sabotaged by the saying" (2). This is one of the issues that has characterized the aftermath of the various deployments American soldiers have gone through during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and is exemplary of what has come to be known as, alternatively, the "Military-Civilian Divide," the "Civilian-Military Divide," the "Military-Civilian Gap," or the "Civil-Military Divide."[2]

[2] For more information on how these terms have been used, see "Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide," "The Civilian-Military Divide," U.S. Department of Defense, and Raghavan.

The idea of an opposition between civilians and those who are charged with fighting *for* them is not new. In his enormously influential book *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell described how a ridge quickly formed between those who fought in WW1 and those who had no direct experience of the war and seemed in fact rather uninterested: "even if those at home had wanted to know the realities of the war they couldn't have without experiencing them: its conditions were novel, its industrialized ghastliness too unprecedented. The war would have been simply unbelievable" (87). The idea that war might be incomprehensible for those who do not experience it due to the technological nature of its horrors, however, waned throughout the twentieth century.

Apparently—according to many veterans—as popular support for the wars in the Middle East progressively waned after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, civilians grew more and more disinterested in the war and in those fighting it. The reasons for this disinterest appear to be multiple,[3] but one of the favorite culprits among those who have studied the phenomenon seems to be the fact that, since the end of the war in Vietnam and the coincident end of conscription, the US military has been exclusively formed by professional soldiers. In *Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide* (2010), Bruce Fleming cites the period following World War II as the time when military-civilian relations were at their peak, while the mutual incomprehension is "certainly greater nowadays than it has been since the late 1960s and early 1970s" (1). The fact that Fleming chooses the Vietnam War era as a benchmark for contemporary events is significant because the conflict proved extremely divisive in the US, especially because the controversial nature of the war and the widespread protests that it sparked created a fracture between the military and its civilian leadership[4] that lasts to this day. As Owen W. Gilman Jr. points out in *The Hell of War Comes Home*, the war in Vietnam was an unavoidable subject in the public debates of those years:

> There were stand-uppers from reporters in the rice paddies or jungles of Vietnam on the evening national news most nights; the battlefield losses in killed and wounded were reckoned daily. There were militant hawks and pacifist doves wrangling in every election.

[3] Fleming's *Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide* opens with these words: "Everything conspires against civilians and the military having a clear view of each other in the United States of the third millennium. The military likes its secrecy and its sense of doing something beyond the civilian ken, and thinks itself more moral than the civilian world it's meant to serve. Civilians either praise or blame the military based on their political position, and in any case without actually understanding what they're reacting to" (1).

[4] As George C. Herring notes, the feeling of distrusts was mutual: "as part of its 'Vietnam hangover,'[…] the military retains deep-seated suspicions about a civilian leadership that allegedly betrayed it before and might do so again, suspicions that are being passed down to the post-Vietnam generation" (83).

> There were silent vigils by Post Office buildings, protest rallies in small towns and large cities, and marches on Washington (ch.1)

While the relationship between these groups appears less problematic for the time being, without major confrontations between the two sides, the real problem seems to be the impermeable nature of the line that divides US citizens from their military, so much so that as early as 2000 John T. Correll, editor in chief of the *Air Force Magazine*, wrote that "In this 27th year of the all-volunteer force, the vast majority of US citizens have no personal experience of military service. Less than a third of the members of Congress are veterans. The President is not a veteran, nor are the secretaries of Defense and State or the national security advisor" (4). This experiential gap—and especially the scarcity of prominent veterans in the federal government—quickly became a hotly debated issue in a nation that could boast the most powerful army on the planet.

Evidently, the issue was keeping researchers and analysts busy even before the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent start of the war in Afghanistan. In a 2000 article on *The National Interest,* Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn illustrated the results of a study directed at assessing the width of the supposed gap, and they found that while many of the perceived problems were exaggerated, "the gap and the tensions related to it are real, and they may have serious and lasting consequences for U.S. national security" (35). The study noted the uncharacteristic endurance of a standing Army at a time of relative peace after the end of the Cold War and pointed to the absence of an immediate threat as possibly exacerbating mutual misunderstandings. Of course, everything changed the following year, as more Americans than ever joined the military in response to 9/11, even though this zeal appeared to decrease in the first decade of the new millennium[5] and the overall number of people employed in the Armed Forces stagnated around the two million mark in the first twenty years of the GWOT.[6] Consequently, even though the initial response seemed to predict otherwise, a relatively small percentage of the US population went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. And yet, the switch to an all-volunteer force in 1974 was seen, at least in part, as a way of remedying the damages that the draft seemed to have caused to military-civilian relations, which were

[5] As a matter of fact, as reported by James Dao in the *New York Times* article "They Signed Up to Fight," "over the next year, and over the next decade, the work of war fell to a relative few, with less than 1 percent of the nation deploying in Iraq or Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011."

[6] As per USAFacts.org, the number of both civilians and active-duty personnel employed by the military was more or less constant between 2000 and 2020, a period of time in which the population of the United States grew by almost sixty million.

deeply impacted by the tumultuous protests of US civilians who had to say goodbye to their loved ones as they were unceremoniously sent to war without having any say on the matter (Gilman ch.1). The hostility of the '60s and '70s gave way to the growing indifference of the 2000s, as a professional army composed entirely of volunteers fought a long and chaotic war across the globe while its urgency and purpose were starting to be questioned by the general public.

Of course, this meant that going to war came with obligatory moral consequences that could not be mitigated by the involuntary nature of conscription. Veteran author Phil Klay addressed the issue of civil and military responsibility in a 2016 essay titled "Citizen-Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military":

> The difference, though, is that it's impossible for the veteran to pretend he has clean hands. No number of film dramatizations of commandos killing bad guys can move us past the simple reality that Iraq is destroyed, there is untold suffering overseas, and we as a country have even abandoned most of the translators who risked their lives for us. (84)

This gap in perceived responsibility is, in Klay's opinion, one of the major drivers of the divide between civilians and service members. Since the Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2001, a resolution that granted the president of the United States (and therefore the commander-in-chief of the US Armed Forces) unchecked power in waging war without the authorization of Congress, US civilians have been essentially cut-off from military decision making: "the American public remains insulated from considering the consequences. Even if they voted for the president ordering these strikes, there's seemingly little reason for citizens to feel personally culpable when they go wrong" (Klay 87). The inability to influence military operations (four different presidents have been elected for six terms during the war) understandably alienated civilians from direct engagement with military issues, so much so that any meeting with a veteran can easily turn into a tense moment in which both parties are unaware of how to effectively communicate with one another. In *War & Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation* (2022) Travis L. Martin describes the anger caused in him by a careless question ("Did you ever kill anyone?) from an unsuspecting civilian at a family gathering and the complex issues it brought up:

> I didn't know how to react to the question. 'No, I've never killed anyone.' I sat for a minute, nervous about more questions. […] The longer I sat, the angrier the question made me.

> […] a part of me felt like the anger I'd displayed didn't belong to me—like I was serving as proxy for my friends living with perpetrator's guilt. (3)

On the other hand, while it is true that veterans are unfairly stereotyped as possibly violent PTSD victims regardless of their actual condition and combat experience, civilians are understandably nervous about having interactions with veterans given that the Department of Veterans Affairs has historically struggled to provide adequate healthcare to soldiers coming home.

Even though these conversations seem difficult to have in these historical and social circumstances, this study is interested in one of the few areas in which a connection seems possible, that is to say, literature. Indeed, if direct confrontation seems unlikely, there have been attempts by both civilians and former soldiers at giving a voice to veterans whose stories would otherwise have disappeared without a trace. After all, as Martin points out, "all veterans are storytellers, but some haven't embraced their right to self-definition" (8). To combat the stereotypes that are imposed on veterans by the media and popular culture, he argues, soldiers coming home should engage in the act of storytelling in one way or another: "This act of sharing experiences and crafting self subverts stereotypes. Storytelling […] *should* instruct veterans on the topic of homecoming" (8).

However, it can be difficult to put one's story into words, and not all veterans are (or are interested in becoming) literary wonders, though many of their experiences have been collected in books that provide various inside perspectives into the military experience. One such book is, for example, *The Lonely Soldier: the Private war of Women serving in Iraq* (2009), by Helen Benedict, which addresses the issues faced by women as they were authorized to participate in combat operations for the first time in American history and includes several personal recollections of military experiences marked by discrimination and abuse. Another is *After Combat: True War Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan* (2018) by Marian Eide and Michael Gibler, which collects anonymous and "collectively" narrated stories of military life which span from the moment of enlistment to that of homecoming, the anonymity functioning as a marker of authenticity which frees veterans from repercussions and enables honest and "'ordinary' as opposed to 'sensational'" (xii) stories.

While veterans are obviously—and naturally—encouraged to read about the experiences of their fellow soldiers, these stories seem to be primarily directed at civilians who, in the opinion of the writers, lack fundamental knowledge about these wars. As Phil Klay noted in the aforementioned essay, civilians lack a particular kind of experience, one that can

seemingly implicate them in the events, and which can be found in the voices of those who have actually fought in the war: "It's that sense of a personal stake in war that the veteran experiences viscerally, and which is so hard for the civilian to feel" (87). The struggle to communicate what war *really* felt like is seemingly the main objective of many veteran texts, and in the following section I suggest that we should situate these examples of veteran storytelling within the wider frame of a post-postmodern search for authentic connection between storytellers and audiences. This move reveals the affinity between GWOT fiction produced by veterans and other forms of storytelling that negotiate authenticity along the fact/fiction line.

1.2 Post-war and Post-9/11: Authenticity at War

What are the defining characteristics of the literature of the Global War on Terrorism—or, as I will sometimes abbreviate it throughout this study, "GWOT Literature"? Conventionally used to refer to the series of interrelated conflicts in which the US was involved at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the phrase "war on terror" had already been in use before the September 11th attacks, but it became a staple expression for Americans and the rest of the world after president George Bush, along with his allies and their respective governments, started to characterize Operation Enduring Freedom (the invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of the Taliban government) as a war on terrorism. In this section, I will investigate the literature of the Global War on Terrorism[7]—and therefore, the veteran *authofictions* that are the focus of this study—within the larger context of current, post-9/11 American literature to highlight some of the similarities (and differences) it bears with more general literary trends as they developed at the turn of the millennium.

The first decade of the new century was deeply affected by the repercussions of the attacks on New York, so much so that "post-9/11" has gradually become a common descriptor for all manner of artistic productions, including of course literature. Indeed, a variety of books has been published on the matter, including *Literature After 9/11* (2008), edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011),

[7] I use the phrase "Literature of the Global War on Terrorism" as a thematic marker and not as a broader definition of the literature produced in the years following the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. Therefore, in this study, the use of the phrase is limited to the definition of literary works that make the wars waged across the world after 9/11 by the US and its allies their setting or focal point.

by Richard Gray, *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (2011), by Martin Randall, and *Transatlantic Literature and Culture After 9/11: The Wrong Side of Paradise* (2014), by Kristine A. Miller, only to name a few. Understandably, these studies are mainly concerned with works that address the event itself, as well as some of the long-term effects that the attacks had on the US and its population. This focus on the "home front," to put it in military terms, does not mean that the international ramifications of the attacks are forgotten—as the title of Miller's book alone testifies—but these scholarly works generally favored an examination of the works of fairly established authors (American or not) that explored post-9/11 life in the United States or abroad.

However, if 9/11 has been generally seen as a transitional moment for literature in general, it has to be noted that, as a major event in recent US history, it also resulted in works of literature that addressed the international conflict that it caused. The literature of the War on Terror—by which I mean the works that address the events itself—is necessarily and unambiguously included in the "post-9/11" category; not only is this corpus obviously defined by the "post-" prefix, but it is also configured as a reflection on the military response to an event that seemed to violently "change everything." Whether 9/11 actually had a definite impact on literary forms is a debatable issue, especially because it is difficult to ascribe momentous changes to single events. Nevertheless, the attacks on New York have been used as a watershed moment that lines up almost perfectly with the beginning of the new millennium. There is pre-9/11 literature, and there is post-9/11 literature.[8]

Thus, to understand where GWOT Literature stands, it is essential to contextualize it within the wider panorama of contemporary American literature. In order to do that, it will be necessary to engage with the concept of postmodernism and, crucially, with its aftermath—even though, indubitably, there seems to be no clear dividing line that indicates the beginning of a "post-postmodernism." As Andrew Hoberek notes in "After Postmodernism," his introduction to the Fall 2007 issue of *Twentieth Century Literature*, the fascination with

[8] Of course, the split is not categorical, but, as Richard Gray has suggested, 9/11 was such a monumental and traumatic event that its influence on culture cannot be understated: "These [events] are part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing" (129). Scholarship on post-9/11 literature tends to agree on the difficulty that writers encountered in addressing the trauma of 9/11. Indeed, as Paolo Simonetti has argued, the representation of 9/11 itself in literature was at first almost exclusively limited to nonfictional texts: "Fictional representations were feared to be disrespectful and likely to betray objective facts or trivialize intimate memories and experiences" (28). This phenomenon is shared with GWOT literature as I defined it in the previous pages, but it is notable that "9/11 literature" and "GWOT literature" have been frequently investigated separately.

moments of dramatic change (like 9/11) is a decidedly *postmodern* one, an adjective that has dominated the literary scene up to the end of the last century and which, unsurprisingly, was used to describe not only the latest additions to the American literary canon of works related to the Vietnam War (From Michael Herr to Tim O'Brien), but the conflict itself (Jameson 43). Postmodernism—whether considered as a "cultural logic" (Jameson xvii), a literary trend, or a specific style—is a notoriously difficult concept to define. What scholars seem to mostly agree on, however, is that postmodernism is "a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past" (5), as Linda Hutcheon put it in 2002 in "Postmodern Afterthoughts."

Taking its cue from Fredric Jameson's famous essay *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Hoberek notes that the attempts that have been made at defining what comes after postmodernism have mostly relied on the postmodern "gesture" of looking for a defining moment. Instead, he argues, "cultural sea changes only retroactively take the form of dramatic paradigm shifts, and appear in processes of gradual, uneven, cellular transformation" (239). According to Hoberek, such processes can only be observed *ex tempore* through what Jameson called "merely stylistic" (Jameson 45)—as opposed to historical—descriptions of postmodernism: "if we believe that stylistic shifts in works of literature presage, rather than merely symptomatize, larger cultural changes, then such shifts may have relevance beyond the aesthetic realm" (Hoberek 237). In other words, to look for signs of the exhaustion of the postmodern paradigm, at least in the literary world, it is necessary to look at the changes in formal devices, thematic choices, and rhetorical strategies that characterize contemporary literature.

Linda Hutcheon identified *irony* as perhaps *the* defining characteristic of the postmodern for its "subversive potential […] in contesting the universalizing pretensions of 'serious' art" (*A Poetics* 19). In contrast with Jameson's idea that postmodernism is pervaded by a reactionary "blank parody" (148), Hutcheon believes parody functions as a progressive force that, counterintuitively, reinforces the "seriousness" of postmodern art, and she goes as far as stating (borrowing from Umberto Eco) that "in fact irony may be the only way we can be serious today" (39). After 9/11, however, the usefulness of this ironic stance was immediately put into question in mainstream media, with Roger Rosenblatt's article "The Age of Irony Comes To An End" on *Time* magazine, in which the author announced the end the thirty-year period in which postmodernism supposedly achieved cultural dominance.

The fatigue of irony as a tool for dissent and critique has been, however, also associated with another seeming "watershed moment," that is to say the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. In fact, most of the scholars looking for what comes after postmodernism have focused on the

American fiction of the last decade of the twentieth century to trace the developments of literary forms. As Adam Kelly notes in *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (2013), the 1990s have been depicted as a brief transitional era "when postmodernism was on the wane" (5) and which embodied the first manifestations of "post-postmodernism(s)." Perhaps the most well-established of the terms that have been used to describe this era is "New Sincerity," used by Adam Kelly to describe David Foster Wallace's quest for the next "literary rebellion" in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction."

According to the ideas expressed by Kelly in his article "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics," "New Sincerity primarily names an aesthetic response by a generation of novelists to the challenge to older forms of expressive subjectivity that coalesced in the period during which they began writing" (5). As such, it "emerged not only as a response to postmodern irony and its commodification—Wallace's explicit targets—but also in a thorny relationship with the period of 'normative neoliberalism' and 'capitalist realism.'" ("Jennifer Egan" 157). In the wake of postmodernism and the pervasiveness of its suspicion towards grand narratives and its normative guarantors, New Sincerity writing "explored alternative sites of trust," chiefly among which is the "vital importance" of the writer-reader relationship (157). This attention to *authenticity* is coupled with (and linked to) an attention to the experiential nature of storytelling: according to Wolfgang Funk in *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (2017), New Sincerity literature renegotiates "the relationship between experience and its representation in an attempt to truthfully re-enact experience through representation" (1). As such, The New Sincerity places great importance on authentic (as opposed to ironic) representation, and therefore usually sheds postmodern features such as irony, the penchant for pastiche, and the use of metafiction to reveal the constructedness of literary works in its search for a meaningful and seemingly more transparent interaction with the reader.

Closely associated with a handful of writers that achieved mainstream success during the '90s (David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan, and George Saunders among others, New Sincerity literature is therefore, in a way, necessarily in conversation with (and sometimes in open opposition to) postmodern literature. Even though it seems to grow out of a dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the techniques that were so popular in the postwar period, The New Sincerity's attention to the reader is not an entirely new feature but, in fact, one that it shares with many postmodern texts. According to Hutcheon, postmodern texts also seek an engagement with the other side, one that "disturbs readers, forcing them to scrutinize

their own values and beliefs, rather than pandering to or satisfying them" (45). While postmodern works engage in destabilizing gestures, however, these post-postmodern texts (at least those that can be associated with The New Sincerity) seem to be in the business of repairing the relationship between language and experience that postmodernism has so thoroughly put into question.

However, this renewed interest in the way experience is communicated "authentically" between author and reader is not without its pitfalls. If, on the one hand, authors look for ways to sincerely interact with their audience, sincerity is a double-edged sword that is particularly difficult to effectively "deploy." In fact, especially when sincerity inevitably becomes a technique or an effect to be achieved, it likely risks being deprived of any meaning or efficacy. As Adam Kelly has noted, sincerity "has the same structure as the gift: it can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental" (140.) Sincerity can easily produce its opposite: a carefully constructed text that reassures its audience of its authenticity can certainly instill doubts in whoever reads it. This indeterminacy is an integral feature of the sincerity paradigm: "even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either" (Kelly 140). This means that many contemporary texts are evidently self-aware about the way in which they construct sincerity, while at the same time they still strive to achieve a sincere connection with the reader.

Since The New Sincerity places so much importance on the authentic transmission of experience, it necessarily has to deal with some of the long-standing aesthetic questions that accompany the representation of subjective experiences. Thus, it is unsurprising that it is almost coeval (and sometimes overlaps) with the Age of the Memoir: Miller, in her article "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir," quotes from the "Acknowledgements" section of Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius: A Memoir Based on a True Story*. The author's exhortation to "pretend it's fiction" in the middle of his lengthy ruminations about the authenticity of his book is indicative of the way authors seem to acknowledge reader expectations about genres such as memoir, autobiography, and the category of fiction. As Miller puts it, "the distinction between forms matters to readers" (541), as she demonstrates using Oprah Winfrey and her fellow readers' indignation at the discovery of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces'* fraudulent designation as an example. In this regard, GWOT literature is somewhat less daring compared to what could be described as "literary" fiction. What I mean by this is that—generally speaking—it does not display the same aptitude to veer away from classic realism and indulges in far fewer metafictional features than New Sincerity texts or, say, postmodern ones. Indeed, veteran narratives almost never play

with readerly expectations about genre explicitly, but they certainly do so implicitly, since they seem to highly value an authentic transmission of experience while presenting narratives as completely fictional, as the authors' biographical details are used to "authenticate" texts that could be read as fictional memoirs.[9]

Furthermore, different tendencies toward the representation of the real exist in the literary landscape that GWOT narratives currently inhabit. The first one is a sustained focus on the supposed rise of nonfictional texts at the expense of fiction. Indeed, while Miller has implied a general fascination with the real lives of strangers, hers is certainly not the only example of scholars within the context of academia or literary authors noticing this post-postmodern longing for the real. One year after Miller's article, in 2008, Christiane Schlote and Eckart Voigts-Virchow noted in "'The Creative Treatment of Actuality'—New Documentarism," their introduction to a *ZAA* issue on "new documentarism," this very desire which, unfortunately, seems impossible to fulfill: "On the one hand, the precious and desirable 'reality' is in great demand, but on the other hand, it is quite obvious that in the absence of reality we will have to make do with gestures of authentification" (108). According to the authors, this yearning coincides with a "crisis of fiction" (109), which they believe is being surpassed in popularity by creative nonfiction, by which they mean "genres from autobiography to the memoir to other forms of life-writing" (110).

Another example of a scholar observing this phenomenon is David Shields who, in his 2010 book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, creates a patchwork of quotations and original material in order to claim (or rather, to quote from Margo Jefferson's article "It's All in the Family, But Is That Enough?" since fragment #67 is one of the unattributed quotes) that "biography and autobiography are the lifeblood of art right now. We have claimed them the way earlier generations claimed the novel, the well-made play, the language of abstraction" (27). If nonfiction seems to be the preferred method of literary communication, however, fiction has not obviously vanished from the shelves.

Indeed, the other trend sees the literary market—and especially established authors of "literary" fiction—turning to easily recognizable categories. Bearing in mind that The New Sincerity is by no means the only notable literary development appearing after—or growing out of—postmodernism (Funk 3), Adam Kelly has argued that New Sincerity texts have been

[9] However, not all of the texts that I am addressing here are first person narratives that emulate post-war veteran memoirs. Notable exceptions include David Abrams' *Fobbit*, which features a heterodiegetic narrator, and Phil Klay's *Missionaries*, which uses a combination of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators to follow the various points of view from which the story is presented.

instrumental in bringing about this change in the literary scene of the early twenty-first century, one that is also unmistakably related to the concept of genre. As the name suggests, the "genre turn," a term that indicates the "embrace […] of popular genres" as a response to the "marginalization of genre fiction from the modernist-inflected postwar literary values (Kelly "Egan" 154), constitutes one of the latest developments that scholars have observed, one that, as Kelly notes in his article on Jennifer Egan, is tied to a return to realism (154). According to James Dorson—who popularized the term with his essay "Cormac McCarthy and the Genre Turn in Contemporary Literary Fiction"—the genre turn is "the formal response to this crisis of reality" (8). In other words, this turn to genre and conventions seems to be a direct response to the "reality hunger" that seems so pervasive in the new millennium, if we understand this desire for "the real" in fiction as a partial rejection of formal devices that tamper with the mimetic illusion.

All of these developments—coupled with the related advent of the post-truth era—are relevant to position the narratives of the Global War on Terrorism that are the subject of this study in a wider framework. While they arguably do not perfectly align with any of the aforementioned trends, these works certainly do not exist in a vacuum, and are in fact as much a product of their author's experience and storytelling talent as they are influenced by the "literary environment" in which they are produced and, in fact, they incorporate many of the characteristics of the literary trends that I have discussed so far. Moreover, it could be argued that it is not only their production that is influenced, but also their reception, because readerly expectations change according to the type of works with which they are accustomed.

The current literary scene is as heterogeneous as ever, but it does seem to exhibit a generalized preference for nonfictional writing, especially when readerly interests are concerned. In this sense, the initial literary response to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq—almost exclusively nonfiction—was a near perfect match for the demands of the literary market. When GWOT fiction started to emerge, most of these texts still struggled to satisfy the demands for realism and authenticity that contemporary readers seem to make of fictional texts, not to mention the fact that war fiction (in its variety) is obviously a heavily codified genre that can serve as a "neat package" in which these texts can be wrapped and subsequently sold. However, it would be hard to argue that GWOT veteran narratives are part of the turn to genre that Dorson and other scholars have observed—after all, many of them were not written by

established fiction writers who turned to the genre of war writing, but rather by former soldiers who took up the pen to have their say on the wars in which they participated.[10]

This intent is tangible in a number of narratives written by GWOT veterans. Faced with the feeling that Americans are growing increasingly disinterested in a historical event in which they participated "on their behalf," those who came home from the Middle East and decided to put their thoughts into words often did it with the hope to capture the attention of those who had no direct experience of the war. Authors like Phil Klay and Kevin Powers have frequently mentioned in interviews that one of the primary aims of their fiction is to answer the question "what was it like over there?": Powers has declared, for example, that he aims to give his readers a "10% example of what that might be like" (Lewis), while Klay has stressed the importance of having an honest interaction with his readers: "it's always important to question why you're telling the stories you do and how honest you're being with the person receiving them" (Ripatrazone). In other words, war literature has become one of the tools that these veterans have tried to use to bridge the Military-Civilian Gap or, at least, it has served as a way to hold up their end of an unsanctioned bargain. As such, these works force readers to confront the fact that they are not entirely disentangled from the (technically fictional) events described in most of these books—contemporary veteran writers have never hidden the dialogic aspirations of their fiction.

In a nutshell, many GWOT veteran narratives configure themselves as attempts by their authors at having a meaningful interaction with readers in a way reminiscent of (but noticeably not identical to) Kelly's New Sincerity. In fact, their trustworthiness as veterans, which effectively functions as a selling point for the work of fiction, is abundantly referenced on the front and back cover and is typically sprinkled here and there in the paratext. However, the authors' names conspicuously disappear when the reader enters the story itself, leaving space to happenings and characters that are (and are presented as) entirely fictional. This is in stark contrast with one of the most famous literary works associated with the previous generation of American veteran writers: Tim O'Brien's autobiographically inspired collection of short stories/novel *The Things They Carried*, a staple read in American high schools and an unquestionable source of inspiration for the current generation of *storytellers in arms*.

[10] It has to be noted that many of the authors of commercially and critically successful GWOT literature have become prolific writers, thereby becoming "established authors" themselves. Elliot Ackerman, for example, has published five novels and two memoirs in a seven-year span, from 2015 and 2022.

1.3 Tim O'Brien's Legacy and the Intersections of Fiction and Self in History

The last century has seen a wealth of terms coined to identify "hybrid" genres that blur the line between fiction and nonfiction. These include terms like autobiographical novel,[11] autobiographical (meta)fiction,[12] and autofiction,[13] as well genres that foreground the intersection of history and private experiences, like historiographic metafiction[14] and postmemorial narratives.[15] Naturally, the popularity of these works contributes to the development of the discussion while the works themselves, at times, contribute to the theorizing that is made *about* them (i.e., authotheory). Meanwhile, the cultural and literary developments that arguably emanated from—or at least followed—the sensibility that can be broadly identified with postmodernism have made it increasingly difficult to gauge the distance between the factual and the nonfactual, muddying the waters when it comes to discussions of truth, fact, fiction, and sheer lies.

Of course, the issue of "truth" in war stories is most famously associated, at least in American literature, with the works of Tim O'Brien. Himself a veteran of the Vietnam War, O'Brien has engaged with the idea extensively throughout his career, so much so that it is at the core of his collection of fictional short stories *The Things They Carried* (1990), which features a series of stories where the narrator, also named Tim O'Brien, recounts his war experience and carefully considers the way war stories are and *should* be told. In O'Brien's books one can easily find the tension between historiography and personal (often fictional) narratives that has characterized much of the second half of the twentieth century. A similar

[11] In her chapter on the autobiographical novel in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, Lut Missinne defines this genre as "a fictional text, in which the reader presumes a certain identity between the protagonist and the author of the text on the basis of resemblances he/she means to have seen (464).

[12] The term "autobiographical fiction" identifies essentially the same genre as "autobiographical novel" without relegating the use of personal experience to the long form of the novel. Robin Silbergleid uses "metafiction" to stress Tim O'Brien's use of his own name for the protagonist of *The Things They Carried*.

[13] In *The Story of "Me,"* Marjory Worthington claims that autofiction places greater importance on the possible identity between protagonist and author: "the primary defining trait of autofiction as I define it is the inclusion of a characterized version of the author, usually as the protagonist. I say characterized version of the author because as autofictional narratives unfold, it becomes patently clear that, although they share a name, the protagonists and the authors are not identical to one another" (11).

[14] Linda Hutcheon's famous theorization of historiographic metafiction in A Poetics of Postmodernism defines the narratives belonging to this genre as being "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5).

[15] Another term describing a genre that sits uncomfortably between fact and fiction, postmemory has been employed by Marianne Hirsch in *The Generation of Postmemory* to define her "'autobiographical readings' of works by second-generation writers and visual artists" (4), and it investigates the way second generations explore their "cultural trauma" through stories (5).

kind of distrust towards officially sanctioned information in favor of subjective perspectives seems to inspire GWOT narratives. O'Brien's collection of stories is specifically concerned with the perspective of a veteran carefully considering which *form*—a word that the narrator uses to describe the fictionalization of personal experience—to use when turning his memories into words. GWOT veteran narratives frequently depict veterans pondering how to tell their stories while they question the possible voyeuristic implications of the intersection of war and storytelling as well as how to negotiate their authority and weigh it against other sources. The title of Scranton's *War Porn* is a clear reference to one of these issues, while the conflict between the information-hungry civilian and the reluctant veteran storyteller featured in the book is a hint at the other (28). The need to serve as a counterpoint to the media is also explicitly stated in the preface to *Fire and Forget*, in which the editors[16] of the collection state: "We each knew the problem we altogether struggled with, which was how to say something true about an experience unreal, to a people fed and wadded about with lies" (xiii-xiv).

In this regard, the publication of *The Things They Carried* represents an important moment in the history of American war literature because the book comprehensively engages with nearly all of the most common tropes of war literature while further complicating the relationship between author and reader, fact, and fiction. Although it is structured as a collection of war stories, the book reads more like a disjointed and fragmented narrative that revolves around a series of characters (the men of the fictional Alpha company), among whom is the narrator, who shares many of the traits with the flesh-and-blood Tim O'Brien, like his deployment to Vietnam at the end of the sixties. Throughout much of the book, the narrator self-reflexively contemplates the implications and the representational difficulties that someone who approaches the subject of war as a writer might encounter. It is no surprise, then, that one of the central stories of the book is titled "How to Tell a True War Story" and that other, notable examples of metacommentary on war and storytelling are distributed in short pieces like "Good Form" and "Notes" as well as in other, more "plot-heavy" stories. In these, O'Brien negotiates the possibility of accurately describing (his own?) experience of war while, at the same time, playing with the reader's assumptions of what is real and what is invented. Although, of course, Tim (the character) would argue that "it's not a game. It's a Form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is" (179).

[16] Although this collection of short stories was formally edited by Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher, the preface ("On War Stories") is signed by five "editors": Scranton and Gallagher are joined by Jacob Siegel, Phil Klay, and Perry O'Brien (xvii).

The Things They Carried is not the first instance of American war literature that engages with these questions. Another text that famously embeds a character that shares many of the autobiographical details of the writer, albeit not with the same significance, is Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the narrator—after an introduction in which he states that he is writing a book partially based on his experience during World War II—mentions twice that he was present during the events with the words: "That was I. That was me" (103, 122). However, O'Brien does this to an even greater extent: his use of the given name Tim and of precise biographical details like the fact that the narrator has already published a book titled *Going After Cacciato* (157) effectively makes *The Things They Carried* an example of a highly metafictional and autobiographically inspired book.

As far as the nomenclature for such a literary work is concerned, many of the terms that I have mentioned at the beginning of this section could reasonably be used to describe *The Things They Carried*. Being a self-reflexive fictional narrative set in the (not so distant) past, in which fictional characters are involved in real historical events and which claims to be—more or less—true, Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction could be applied. However, the book's autobiographical features cannot be forgotten. In 2009, accordingly, Robin Silbergleid called it "autobiographical metafiction," stressing the fact that the inclusion of the writer's name is one of the most important features of the book: "the author's name, I should think, is more than a simple 'detail.' It is the central detail. Such a move necessarily raises two interrelated questions: why does O'Brien do this, and what are the effects?" (138). Silbergleid identifies autobiographical metafiction's distinctive move as "the staging of truth through its very utterance," a "performative gesture" (130) that changes the rhetorical force of O'Brien's writing. According to Silbergleid, the book ultimately "works to make a true observation about the complicated nature of truth as it pertains to the personal and historical traumas of Vietnam" (132). O'Brien's use of his own name for the protagonist of the stories in *The Things They Carried* is more than a "simple" postmodern trick, it serves an important ethical function, establishing a kind of personal culpability for the actions of all Americans in Vietnam.

And yet, "autofiction" could also serve as the right classification. The term is closely associated with the works of French author Serge Doubrovsky, who used it to define his novel *Fils* in 1977. As is often the case in literary studies, the definition of autofiction as a genre remains a highly debated topic, but most scholars agree that it defines a literary work that, although fictional, uses the first name of the author for one of its characters (usually the protagonist) to destabilize the reader's conception of fact and fiction and to question the

efficacy (or the very possibility) of completely nonfictional autobiographies. Akin to the autobiographical metafiction that Silbergleid theorized, autofiction depicts a character who shares the name with its writer in a fictional scenario. The onomastic correspondence of the two figures is seen as the most important detail by Marjorie Worthington, who argues in *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*, that autofiction "exerts a greatly different narrative influence than the so-called autobiographical novel, which features characters who resemble their authors but do not have an onomastic relationship with them" (13). A shared name is often the "detail" that sets the autofictional experiment in motion.

Apart from one (possible) exception—Nico Walker's novel *Cherry* (2018), in which the narrator is unnamed—as far as I am aware, none of the many fictional representations of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq can be classified as autofictional according to the traditional understanding of the term. While *The Things They Carried* clearly tries to blur the line between fiction and nonfiction with the inclusion of a fictionalized version of the author in the role of narrator, GWOT veteran fiction, to date, has generally limited itself to incorporating details of the author's experiences on the battlefield to seemingly paint a more accurate picture of recent American wars. In this sense, they do follow in the footsteps of Tim O'Brien's fiction, and are animated by similar concerns: they powerfully announce their visceral truthfulness in contrast with the cold facts printed in newspapers or broadcasted on endless news channels. The use of metafiction to call attention to the moment of the composition of the narrative, a prominent feature of O'Brien's book, however, is a lot scarcer in GWOT veteran fiction, which seems to favor—as I will argue in the next chapter—a more general metanarrative awareness.

Like in O'Brien's stories—and virtually any war story written by former soldiers— the protagonists of GWOT veteran narratives are almost inevitably American soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq who tell their stories in the first person, thereby creating a parallel between them and their authors. Some of the content of these books is also evidently taken directly from the authors' lived experience: much of Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* is set in Al Tafar, a simple anagram of Tal Afar, the city where Powers was stationed in Iraq, while the protagonist, like Powers, is afraid of becoming the thousandth American victim of the war. The connection between author and character is looser than the one that exists in the "standard" autofiction produced by Tim O'Brien, even though the occupation of the protagonist always suggests it.

These stories bear other similarities with works like *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*: they tread the fact/fiction line not only when it comes to the personal

dimension of memory and its possible "results" in fiction (as is the case in autofictional texts by authors like Ben Lerner or Karl Ove Knausgård). They also inhabit that hazy region in the context of the formation of collective memory. In other words, these works do not only destabilize (although in a subtler way) clear distinctions between fact and fiction in the private sphere, but also in the public. In a 2015 essay titled "Fact and Fiction," for example, when Phil Klay finds himself wondering about *authentic* depictions of war, he notes that he often thinks—perhaps subconsciously—of his stories as legitimate means of acquiring valuable, factual information about historical events. In the essay, he admits as much: "Sometimes in interviews I catch myself speaking of my book of short stories about the Iraq War as though it is a kind of literary journalism" (169). In this sense, these narratives keep alive the "old" skepticism towards traditional institutions such as newspapers, which is, according to Daniel Punday, one of the identifying features of the postmodern (21).

For these reasons, I argue that novels like *The Yellow Birds*, which include both autobiographical and historiographical material—while not categorizable as autofictions or historiographic metafiction per se—interrogate questions of memory, self-representation, and history in a comparable but distinct way that includes some of the strategies employed by the aforementioned genres. I have called this mode of expression *authofiction* because it heavily relies on the authority of the real author to authenticate its discourse, but this does not mean that *authofictions* only perform an authoritative function—as I will argue in the following chapters, the autofictional component of many *authofictional* narratives can work to undermine the trustworthy nature of these narratives.

1.4 The Reception of GWOT Literature by Readers and Critics

Book-length works of criticism analyzing the literary production of the Global War on Terrorism, perhaps delayed by the seeming reluctance of "literary heavyweights" to engage with the theme that Luckhurst noted in 2012, are a relatively recent development. The reaction to the works of soldiers and civilians alike has been patchy at best for years, and books that are entirely dedicated to this literature in particular are all fairly recent. What follows is a brief overview of the most significant studies that have been dedicated to the subject.

One of the first studies that took up the task was *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq* (2011), by Stacey Peebles, in which she focuses her attention on the experience of American soldiers in the Gulf War and the Global War on Terrorism, which she characterizes as strikingly different when compared to the war in

Vietnam. Trying to locate the condition of veterans who "return to the United States to discover the pain of being 'in between' war and home" and are "not able to fully exist in either state" (3), Peebles—perhaps because of the initial abundance of nonfiction that I have already mentioned—mainly analyzes autobiographies, memoirs, and films based on real events (like *In the Valley of Elah*). In doing so, she makes sure to let her readers know that, even though she takes into account some works about the Gulf War, things have changed a great deal after the last decade of the century and, crucially, the first nine months of the new millennium.

Accordingly, she mentions that many of the voices that have narrated the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have done so through what came to be known as "new media," a label that groups the great number of modes of expressions that grew out of the growing quantity of user-generated content on the Internet, a shift usually indicated by the use of the term "Web 2.0". Peebles mentions blogs, war video games, video sharing websites, social media, and even the by now relatively forgotten first attempt at the creation of an actual "metaverse," *Second Life*, and notes that this proliferation of content created by authors who would otherwise (especially in the past) remain inevitably obscure or even completely unknown to the public has contributed greatly to the variety of opinions and points of view that have transpired about the United States' most recent wars. Some of these voices, she notes, openly challenge the way in which the government and the American military would prefer to portray the war effort: "online videos can reveal U.S. soldiers participating in seemingly indiscriminate violence against Iraqis, verbally abusing Iraqi children, or physically abusing animals" (11). Hence, *Welcome to the Suck* ultimately offers a good window into the early phase of the narrative production associated with the war (especially on stories that revolve around the Iraq war) and shows how, for the first time, a wide array of voices—though most often veterans constitute the bulk of those writing from an American's perspective—challenged hegemonic discourses about the war.

Another of these books, dealing specifically with the *imaginative* responses to the war, is *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11* Novel, by Daniel O'Gorman, published in 2015. As the subtitle suggests, however, the study is mostly focused on post-9/11 fiction, and it highlights the variety of voices that have addressed creatively how the world was affected by the September 11th attacks and that fight the "us and them" rhetoric propagated by the Bush administration (O'Gorman 3). Like *Welcome to the Suck,* this study seems to be primarily concerned with the effects that war has on the literary production of identity.

However, if Peebles is concerned with the identity of soldiers (and, later, veterans), O'Gorman takes his cue from Ian McEwan's idea that literature, and fiction in particular, can help writers and readers empathize with others while one imagines to be someone else: "McEwan […] is capable of precisely the kind of empathic imagination that the hijackers were not, and that fiction […] can help catalyse a similar sense of empathic identification in its reader" (1-2). Drawing on Judith Butler's idea of the "derealization of loss" and the framing of violence after the start of the war, and particularly in their later books *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), in which Butler delves deeper in the way this framing impedes compassion in the West towards those whose lives have been lost or who have been displaced, O'Gorman strives to find ways in which the novels he chooses can help readers reach what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement" to adequately deal with the traumatic nature of the attack on the twin towers and its aftermath (17). As previously mentioned, however, O'Gorman's focus is decidedly on the aftermath of 9/11 and not on the Global War on Terrorism. The book mentions only one veteran author, Kevin Powers, whose *Yellow Birds* serves as the only example of a narrative firmly centered around the experience of an American soldier in the Middle East.

Owen W. Gilman's *The Hell of War Comes Home*, which I have already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, seems to be the first attempt at dealing predominantly with the production of narratives that are closely linked with the GWOT and the experience of those who have been affected by it. It is probably not by chance that this book, firmly anchored to an American perspective, is opened by an introductory chapter that addresses one of the main problems faced by veterans after the end of their deployment: the first section of the book, titled "Veterans Face the Challenge of American Fantasyland at War," individuates the civil-military gap as one of the most prominent themes of the stories it analyzes:

> Again and again, in one way or another, the imaginative texts explored in this study converge in representing feelings of anger, abandonment, and alienation by veterans as they face figurative burial beneath all the mindless distractions operating in American culture. Horrific pain that made ironic sense in the tumult of combat becomes utterly devoid of meaning against the backdrop of the superficial interests that dominate the American scene. ("A Brief Introduction")

Once again confirming the initial abundance of nonfiction and the relative scarcity of fictional texts, Gilman compares the timeframes of the GWOT to the war in Vietnam and, reacting to

doubts expressed by literary critics as early as the year following the invasion of Iraq, argues: "It is clear that 2004 would have been an absurd time frame for a serious work of fiction to emerge from the Iraq War. Even 2008 was pushing plausibility awfully hard" (ch.5).

Gilman's book argues that the texts it takes into consideration paint a dire picture of American veterans. Not only do these writers express their grievances about the difficult life of the battlefield, but they also convey the idea that the real torture is constituted by their return home, because "American culture currently bedevil[s] veterans, making their home a kind of hell" ("A Brief Introduction"). This is due to the fact, Gilman argues, that "our approach [presumably meaning the American public] to war is front-loaded with fantasy, and when a war draws to a close, our approach is back-loaded with fantasy," while in actual warfare and its imaginative reproductions, there is only confusion: "all we have is a muddle of long-lasting misunderstanding and anguish to be endured by veterans who ventured to war fueled by fantasy and returned betrayed by the implications of fantasy as played out in American culture at large" ("A Brief Introduction").

Gilman touches upon an important point: the "reality" of American everyday life is still saturated with performative lies and soothing narratives, and stands in stark contrast with the perceived "truth" and immediacy of the battlefield. Veterans have, to a certain extent, always lamented the relative unimportance of civilian concerns when compared to the urgent and immense practical and moral issues that exist in war. Still, the return to a civil society that seems to refuse to discuss any matter related to foreign policy in Southwest Asia and substitutes them with pure spectacle is perceived as unbearable. His reading of Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is exemplary, as the protagonist finds himself swallowed by and even infected with these practices: "When Billy is questioned about his war experience, his feelings, he realizes he's telling everyone what they want to hear. Please the audience!" ("A Brief Introduction").

After completing a roundup of the most significant works of fiction that seemed to come out of the blue after 2012, Gilman shows his preoccupation with the kind (and the quantity) of readers these books have apparently enthralled. Lamenting the average Joe's permanence in what he calls "Fantasyland," he pits literary fiction by Klay, Powers, Gallagher, and many others against better known—and decidedly more successful—bestsellers like E.L. James' *50 Shades of Grey* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, works that, according to him, certainly do not "come within a million light-years of the tough truths spun out in narrative after narrative in *Fire and Forget* and *Redeployment*" (ch.5). Gilman's admonishing tone (especially towards the "next generation"), as he criticizes the majority of Americans who

"have no taste for literary fiction, or even literary nonfiction" (ch.5) is probably too apprehensive and to a certain extent overblown, but it does bring Gilman remarkably close—even though his conclusions end up being hasty and somewhat trite—to some of the most interesting issues that concern the literary fiction of the Global War on Terrorism.

At the end of the chapter in which he demonstratively shows the existence of worthy GWOT fiction, he mentions two reasons why the aforementioned fiction has been often overlooked, namely that there is a "shift reflected in television programming away from created-script entertainments and toward 'reality'-based shows" (ch.5), and that young readers are nowadays only enticed by works which contain "huge doses of pure fantasy, wild imagining" and "cinematic adaptations of comic book superhero adventures" (ch.5). Although his observations are accurate enough, he fails to address the causes and implications of this "reality hunger," and he trivializes the issue to the point of stating that the real problem is that reality shows, with their exciting competitions and declarations of "happy winners," exclude the competition from "losers" (read, veterans who have "volunteered to get screwed") who have stories to tell.

1.5 Trauma Theory Approaches and the Issue of Moral Injury

Due to its veteran-centric approach, Gilman's study also addresses one of the issues usually associated with returning soldiers: trauma. Quoting psychologist Jonathan Shay, and specifically drawing on his work on PTSD in *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, he argues that a failure to deal with the trauma suffered by veterans will impede the public's ability to adequately approach the issue of war as a whole (ch.1). References to the traumatic nature of war are sprinkled around the book and, though they are not as developed as in *Welcome to the Suck*, which dedicates an entire chapter to the traumatic subjects of some Iraq War films,[17] their presence in all of the books mentioned above indicates a tendency to use trauma (and PTSD) as a framework to understand war narratives, often regardless of their content. In a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (ed. Davis, Meretoja), Patrick Deer has noted how trauma has been the principal framework through which US citizens have understood the invasion of Iraq and that this practice is not entirely unproblematic, since "narratives of trauma and recovery are often appropriated for

[17] Peebles briefly touches upon some of the concepts that will play a significant role in this study: she references the complex relationship between trauma, memory, and truth (ch.4) and how a traumatic experience creates a rift between those veterans who have experienced one and civilians at home.

nationalist and exceptionalist purposes" (419). Undoubtedly a product of the approach to the narratives of the war in Vietnam—and, in a certain way, an overcorrection to make up for the tardiness in dealing with the PTSD epidemic of the same era—trauma has become one of the most popular lenses through which narratives of *any* kind are read today, so much so that Parul Sehgal has openly criticized this overreliance in her article "The Case Against the Trauma Plot" which was published in *The New Yorker* at the end of 2021.

Another trauma-centered approach, even though it attempts to acknowledge trauma theory's potential pitfalls in war literature, is provided by Roy Scranton's *Total Mobilization: World War II and American Literature*. As the title gives away, this book is not entirely concerned with the GWOT. Still, through its pages Scranton traces a literary history that connects WWII to Vietnam and America's most recent wars through the figure of the "trauma hero," the psychologically wounded protagonist who is the thematic center of the story and whose wounds "erase" the suffering of the enemy. Scranton first developed the concept in a 2015 article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, aptly titled "The Trauma Hero: From Wilfred Owen to 'Redeployment' and 'American Sniper,'" in which he notes how much American war literature continues to rely on traumatized protagonists who promise to be the only bearers of a higher truth: "The truth of war, the veteran comes to learn, is a truth beyond words, a truth that can only be known by having been there, an unspeakable truth he must bear for society". This is not an entirely new approach, as much of Jim Neilson's criticism of the literature of the Vietnam War rested upon the overreliance on inherently solipsistic first-person narratives with American soldiers as protagonists (Neilson 204). This restricted vantage point results in an almost complete condemnation of those works that seem to erase the existence of the enemy as human beings. Such a perspective substitutes them with the chaotic experience of war seen through American eyes:

> To speak of the surreality and unreality of Vietnam is to mystify the war by confusing its perceptual experience with its material fact. True, from a soldier's viewpoint the chaos of battle was surreal [...] The problem with this perception is that it has dominated literary portrayals of the Vietnam War. To see Vietnam as resisting finality, as many critics have, is to see the war as inexplicable, therefore with no lesson to be learned. (195)

Scranton goes one step further as, in his opinion, the protagonist of the war narrative becomes the real victim of the war. As he explains in *Total Mobilization*, the impossibility of adequately

narrating the experience of war[18] is the first step towards the figure of the trauma hero which, coupled with the extraordinary nature of said experience, makes the veteran synonymous with their wound: "His testimony defies him, his work, and his speech. […] Every true war story is a story of trauma because the experience of war is essentially traumatic, because war itself is trauma, and we can only ever understand literature of and about war in these terms" (3). According to Scranton, the trauma hero responds to the "epistemological disorientation" (*Total Mobilization* 2) of war with something gained through the experience of the battlefield, namely, self-knowledge. Scranton goes on to assert that the "myth" of the trauma hero is the primary way in which Americans are inclined to approach the issue of returning veterans who bring with them unheeded questions of moral and material responsibility, by reducing them to their supposed—and often invisible—psychological wounds. This applies to both flesh-and-blood soldiers and those that serve as protagonists for novels, films, and other narrative media, as the myth "informs our politics, colors our news reports, and underwrites our history. It dominates critical and scholarly interpretation of war literature, war movies, and the visual culture of war. It shapes how children imagine war and how veterans remember it" (3).

Therefore, according to Scranton, not only does the myth of the trauma hero inform interpretations of real social phenomena and art, but it also has effects on the aspirations of the young Americans who decide to enlist, and it even has the power to reshape the very memories from which it apparently sprung. This polymorphic potential is the reason why Scranton is understandably wary of its popularity, especially since "it is predicated on the idea that the subjective feeling of having undergone an experience offers a more robust claim to truth and a greater moral authority than do history, eyewitnessing, or other kinds of accounts that rely on observable evidence or reasoned argument" (3-4). Since the inherently confusing nature of the war experience contributes to debates about the very possibility of narrating it truthfully, and the traumatic past of the subject renders memories hazy and unreliable while it reinforces the witness' authority, it is understandable why the myth has captivated both soldiers and civilians for so long: "Myths such as this sustain our sense of reality as coherent and meaningful. […] Such myths are social facts, collectively held beliefs, which serve to codify social norms, represent collective identity, and make concrete the metaphoric relations structuring thought" (4).

[18] Scranton explains this in the very first pages of his book: "Experiencing firsthand how war damages and exasperates our powers of description, sense making, intersubjective evaluation, self-narration, and even space-time itself, the veteran comes to understand that war's truth is a truth beyond words" (2).

But if the trauma framework fails in adequately accounting for the recent literature of the latest American wars—or rather, risks being complicit, rather than critically engaged, with the hegemonic discourses it can perpetrate—then it is legitimate to ask what else can help readers and critics in understanding these works. In this regard, Joshua Pederson's *Sin Sick: Moral Injury in War and Literature* (2021) seeks to (re)introduce the concept of *moral injury* to literary studies as an alternative to the much-debated concept of "perpetrator trauma," or the pain suffered by perpetrators of violence.

Although they are easily juxtaposed, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were obviously different from that in Vietnam in a way that is far from insignificant. While the United States used conscription during the Sixties and Seventies to fight its wars in Southeast Asia, those who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq were (and still are) exclusively professional, voluntary soldiers. In other words, no one is forced into the service anymore – although one could always argue that some factors like class and race may influence the decision to join the army. This, coupled with technologically advanced systems of weaponry that allow for greater separation between American soldiers and their targets, thereby reducing the possibility of undergoing traumatic events, has certainly caused different emotional reactions to the war. As shown by Tine Molendijk in *Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict: Political Practices and Public Perceptions* (2021), psychologists have noticed that some of the patients who were treated for PTSD did not actually report any traumatic events, but rather feelings of guilt related to their own actions on the field and started calling this phenomenon *moral injury* (5).

The term was actually coined by the same Jonathan Shay who served as a guiding voice on PTSD after the end of the war in Vietnam, and who is quoted in many of the studies here surveyed, and was first used in his *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002). Perhaps due to Shay's reluctance to use PTSD as a denominator, since it is "jargon […] which sounds like an ailment" (4), moral injury is not precisely defined as distinct or dissimilar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it is instead usually mentioned in combination with the term "psychological" to indicate more than one kind of invisible wound of war. The only time Shay addresses it on its own is when, towards the end of the book, he associates it to the loss of faith in military leadership: "When I speak of prevention of moral injury in military service, this Homeric episode is an example of what I want to prevent: betrayal of "what's right" in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds power" (240). As I have already mentioned, through the years, the term has seen an evolution that has helped define its qualities and limits. Pederson explains it as "the enduring psychic pain that might afflict someone who either commits or witnesses a significant moral transgression" (8), and in

his book, he offers it as an alternative to the trauma framework, especially for the works of veterans such as Powers, Klay, and Scranton. Following George Bataille, and specifically his work in *The Accursed Share*, he characterizes moral injury in terms of excess and contends that this has both a quantitative effect on the resulting texts, which contain an overflowing of words, and qualitative effects, which include a number of textual symptoms, among which are the constant use of hyperbolic language, representations of nature (or, in general, the outside world) as sublime, and what he calls "signs of solitude" (22).

While Pederson's work on moral injury in literature is certainly useful to disentangle GWOT veteran narratives from trauma-centric approaches that run the risk of focusing too narrowly on the traumatic experiences endured by perpetrators of violence, its approach to moral injury arguably runs the risk of simply substituting one psychological affliction for the other[19] while still partially overlooking the damage caused to the land where these wars have been fought and to the people that inhabit them. The issue of accountability, ostensibly crucial in moral injury narratives, is here diluted because—once again—the criticism dedicated to the literary treatment of the War on Terror ends up becoming a call for civilians to inform themselves on military matters through the consumption of "true" war stories. So much so that, in the chapter that deals with moral injury in recent GWOT works, Pederson states: "my hope is that attention to moral injury in these poems, stories, and novels shifts our focus from the putative responsibility of the authors writing OEF/OIF fiction to the responsibility of civilian readers" (154). This seems like a disingenuous attempt to resolve the civilian-military gap, with a critical blame-shifting exercise that exhausts the critical efficacy of the moral injury paradigm and exacerbates the possible misunderstandings between veterans and civilians in the literary field.

1.6 Veteran Scholars

This opposition—and search for points of interaction—between veterans and civilians is reflected in the fact that a number of veterans have decided not only to report their experience of the war in literary fiction and nonfiction but have also engaged in works of literary criticism and journalistic essays. Roy Scranton is one such veteran, and another notable example is Phil Klay. Like Scranton, Klay published spare articles as well as fiction before turning to book-

[19] In chapter 5 of this study, I will offer a more in-depth discussion of issues like trauma and moral injury in the narratives of the War on Terror authored by US veterans.

length prose works that address the longest American war. *Uncertain Ground: Citizenship in an Age of Endless, Invisible War* (2022) collects his essays throughout the years following his deployment to Iraq and deals primarily with the way the GWOT has profoundly affected—even though it seems to have done so while being almost always relegated to the background of sociopolitical discourse—American society and the very meaning of citizenship in the United States:

> Questions about what my experience of war meant for me personally, and what can be genuinely communicated about war across differences, steadily shifted into questions of what our wars say about us as Americans, how they have distorted our politics have shifted to shield our wars from our view. (XIX)

I have already mentioned one of the essays of the collection (namely "Citizen-Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military"), which dealt with the military-civilian divide. For the sake of my argument, I want to call attention to another one, "Left Behind," in which Klay addresses questions like identity building in the Marines and their declining morale following the sometimes-inconsistent policymaking that has been associated with various administrations that guided the nation through the GWOT. Given the long nature of the wars and the alternating enemy militias and federal administrations, it is unsurprising to learn that service members have ended up feeling like weapons pointed at a target on an as-needed basis (29). This has, in turn, meant that more and more soldiers have virtually no idea why or what they are fighting for, other than for each other as in a band of brothers (20).

These are all contributing factors, it seems, to the way veterans perceive themselves and, in turn, how they are perceived in American society. Moreover, this confusion in military circles and ignorance on the part of civilians determines the way these two groups interact and raises questions that, according to Travis L. Martin in *War & Homecoming*, will probably determine the evolution of the way in which veterans will feel compelled to behave. In his book on veteran identity, Martin shows how the perception of veterans changed after Vietnam and, specifically, he focuses on the fact that some veterans decide to reduce their identity to stereotypes like the "wounded warrior" or the "superficially praised hero," and laments that "these identities are not complete. They're not even identities as much as they are collections of rumors, misrepresentations, and expectations of conformity" (8). Accordingly, he borrows the idea of the "looking glass self" from Charles Cooley and maintains that "for veterans, self-perception is rooted in assumptions of others' assumptions about military service" (ix). This

assessment of the situation is coherent with the way Roy Scranton has theorized the *trauma hero* and, although it reduces veterans to the category of victims, this automatic "blanket-traumatization" of returning soldiers is a powerful myth that ends up portraying them in a somewhat favorable light. Martin, just like Scranton, thinks that this influences the way veterans think and behave, saying that they "must perform identity in a way that does not conflict with flattering narratives, such that it feels like one is under a constant state of surveillance" (18). At the same time, however, Martin claims that these stereotypes and preconceptions hinder personal growth in veterans and perpetuate gross generalizations about returning soldiers. As he puts it, "homecoming is impossible for veterans when their symbolic position relegates them to existing in the past" (18). While the way in which veterans are perceived in society is certainly a relevant issue for this study, Martin's point is not exactly innovative for an analysis of the narratives of the GWOT, as the trope of the struggling veteran who cannot truly return home dates back at least to Ernest Hemingway's 1925 short story "Soldier's Home."

While this temporal constriction is one of the most important problems that Martin highlights in the book, it is by no means the only one. Another one of his concerns that is present throughout the study and that contributes to the situation in which veterans find themselves when they approach self-narration and self-definition, is the difficulty of identity formation after spending an extended period of time in an institution which seeks to create a group of fighters that is as uniform as possible and in which any difference is almost necessarily frowned upon. Martin makes references to the double nature of veteran storytelling several times in his study: if individual acts of storytelling can help veterans escape from stereotypes and civilian preconceptions by defining "who they are intentionally in writing, on stages and canvases" (22), they also contribute to a collective form of storytelling: "My student authors […] told a collective story of homecoming; each contribution to the *Journal of Military Experience* was one in a chorus. […] sharing those stories was a social act" (117). Indeed, many of the works that have been produced by American veterans of the last wars strive to capture more than one point of view, thus aiming to achieve a more comprehensive outlook on veteran (as well as civilian) experiences of these conflicts.

And yet, as is evident from the studies that I have mentioned so far, the GWOT and its "literary consequences" do not seem to have yet produced a widely accepted analysis of either the war effort or the issue of returning soldiers from an incoherent conflict. The overreliance on trauma theory approaches has produced a selective focus on the suffering of returning soldiers and overemphasized the self-therapeutic function of post-war narratives, while the

recognition of the existence of a military-civilian divide has configured veteran texts (whether fictional or nonfictional) as a way to inform disinterested civilians about the war and its aftermath. From a purely literary standpoint, however, most scholarly works have overlooked the way in which the imaginative narratives written by the veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan interpret the facts/fiction divide and negotiate veteran authority.

However ephemeral, the power that these narratives have as a tool to understand historical events has not gone unnoticed, and their manifest ability to influence public opinion has been explored by Caleb S. Cage. Another veteran-critic like Martin, Scranton, and Klay, Cage has attempted to give an account of the way narratives, both fictional and nonfictional—meaning both imaginative works of art and the political messages of leading figures during the war years—have affected both the perception, but also the development of the war itself. Cage's main aim seems to be to show just how much these narratives, intended as "interpreting lenses," have been able to sway the perception of these wars:

> In examining these narratives individually, *War Narratives* aims to explore the stories of these wars in a way that will result in a more authentic and less manipulated way. […] *War Narratives* accepts that the information space is heavily mediated by narratives, yet one can achieve a more nuanced understanding of these wars by examining how these narratives interact with one another. (4)

There seems to be a great difference, however, between more "abstract" narratives that circulate through newspapers, television, or the Internet, and storytelling coming from veterans or civilians who want to achieve an improved understanding of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Cage characterizes—and who can blame him?—the first as the only kind that can have a considerable and often immediate impact on the real world, while he sees the second as being—quite ironically—less self-interested and more intent on discovering "deeper" truths. Indeed, he pits what he calls the "simplistic political narratives" that have been used to sway debates during the pivotal years of the war, or those that "have the ability to change the focus from real policy discussions and hard decisions where the stakes are high, and to reframe the debate in terms that are momentarily convenient and potentially meaningless in the long term" (116), against those that want to initiate an "honest discussion about these wars, or any war" (117). Cage here echoes Gilman's impression that the real "hard truths" of the wars can only be found in these texts: "it is interesting to see this [attempts at having an honest discussion about the war] undertaken almost exclusively by fiction writers" (117-118), in a way

reverberating the claims of authenticity and truthfulness that so frequently feature on these books' covers and opening pages.

Cage's focus on this set of fictional narratives is tightly linked to what he perceives as a lack of accurate information about the conflicts' evolution, a by-product of changing media and of the end of the draft. In his opinion, the all-volunteer force has ensured that only a marginal group of Americans have information about the war, while the rest "consume" information about it "in ways that serve to confirm the political, social, and ideological worldviews of specific segments of national audiences" (105). Once again, there seems to be a clear opposition between the hazy land of carefully-manufactured (and therefore possibly inauthentic) nonfiction accounts like newspaper articles or exposés, and the surprisingly reliable realm of fiction, so much so that Cage states—glaringly ignoring the performative nature of sincerity—that whoever wants to understand the reality of the war without the filters of "political, social, and cultural narratives," and instead is seeking something that is "told in an honest, forthright, nuanced, and sincere way, can turn to fiction for a largely unmediated variety of stories" (105). It would be hard to deny that fiction can indeed play a powerful role in the way people perceive real events, but it is somewhat counterintuitive to suggest that fiction *should* be the preferred method of understanding for these historical events. The literary fiction of the "Forever Wars" is obviously inextricably linked to the real events it includes in its representations, and it can certainly help its readers in making sense of the situation, but the same could be said of any other medium—using fictional or nonfictional modes—that aims at tackling the same topic.

Even more puzzling is the idea that these fictional works are "largely unmediated" pieces of storytelling that stand in stark opposition with the highly mediated narratives that circulate in political debates and through the news media. It is reasonable to assume that Cage here refers to the fact that politicians and political commentators might *need* to address the topic in a certain way in order to further their agenda, but it seems naïve to think that any fiction writer might not also be driven by the same purpose. After all, as Colum McCann writes in his foreword to *Fire and Forget*, "writing fiction is necessarily a political act. And writing war fiction, during a time of war, by veterans of the conflicts we are still fighting, is a fervent, and occasionally anguished, political act" (vii). Although Cage certainly does not see war writing as a veteran's prerogative—he also focuses on some civilian writing—much of his analysis of fiction is centered around veteran writing, but he somehow seems to overlook the fact that veterans, through their works, can hopefully alter society's perception of war. Writing in the aftermath of the one's participation in an armed conflict is not only a way of processing the

events, working through possible traumatic experiences, or negotiating guilt associated to morally injurious events, it is also a way to reach out to other veterans and, perhaps most importantly, civilians, and initiate a conversation about an exceptionally controversial war. In other words, veterans have extremely high stakes in the debate (that the public seems to largely ignore) on the causes, modalities, and effects of a war in which they participated only to be later pigeon-holed in a category that could be loosely described as reluctantly violent wounded heroes.

1.7 Veteran Exceptionality

While most veterans find it understandably disheartening to be reduced to stereotypes such as those that Martin describes in *War & Homecoming*, it is worth to once again stress the fact that veteran voices from the GWOT certainly do not seem to be lacking in credibility: their identity as veterans usually functions as an authenticating factor in their storytelling. As many scholars have noted, however, there seems to be a discrepancy between the perceived authority that veterans are granted, and the audience they are able to attract. That is to say, while veteran authorship in literary fiction seems to be broadly appreciated for its perceived ability to convey deeper truths about war when compared to other forms of storytelling, its popularity dwindles in comparison with, say, Hollywood blockbusters and—much to Owen Gilman's chagrin—fantasy sagas and romance novels. Such a situation is bound to be frustrating for those veterans who feel that the war in which they have participated is almost completely ignored among the civilians whose "way of life" they were supposedly protecting. This frustration is particularly pronounced because many decided to write about the war in an attempt to initiate a conversation not only with other veterans, but especially with civilians who have grown progressively distant and isolated from the war's unfolding as the years went by; their only knowledge about it probably consisting of the cold and aseptic daily update of the death count scrolling at the bottom of the screen on 24/7 news channels.

The experiential difference between veterans and civilians is perhaps the most immediate driver of the "authority-gap" that exists between writers who have been to war and those who have not, and yet many fictional narratives written by civilians who lack direct involvement in the conflict have, throughout the duration of these wars, achieved levels of success comparable (or even superior) to those penned by former soldiers. Some notable examples are Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011), a novel in which the author explores the

war from the perspective of two women on different sides (one is a US soldier, the other an Iraqi medical student), and the already-mentioned *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012), by Ben Fountain, which narrates a fictional victory tour for a group of veterans of the Iraq War and which was adapted into a movie in 2016 by Ang Lee. Compared to other wars then, civilians seem to have played a bigger role in the production of imaginative storytelling about these contemporary American conflicts, and Cage notes this development at the end of his final chapter on literary fiction: "An important aspect of the literary fiction from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that it has been effectively written by both writers who served in the military and by civilian authors," a feature that allows for "a broader national discussion of the wars" and that, according to Cage, challenges the "assumption and narratives" that misrepresent the war and its participants (106).

In his *Writing Wars* (2022), David Eisler, himself a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, notes the same phenomenon, and suggests that the long tradition of veteran authorship in the United States is actually declining for the first time in a century. In his own words:

> Cracks have formed in the genre's foundation, and the literary house built on the authority of experience has become outdated and unstable. A simple accounting of published works since 2001 reveals that the veteran-author's near monopoly over the literary representation of conflict in American memory culture, so dominant for nearly one hundred years, has all but vanished. (3)

To prove his point, at the end of his book, Eisler provides a list of the novels (excluding self-published ones) written by both veterans and civilians until 2020, and highlights that more than half of the works that he has located have been written by people who have not been involved in combat operations in the Middle East. Eisler argues that this shift in authorship, which he claims is happening after nearly a hundred years in which veteran authority has completely dominated the literary market, is closely linked to one of the most momentous changes in the structure of the US Armed Forces—the end of the draft. If Cage pinpointed this moment as the one event leading to civilians who have no involvement whatsoever in the war—either personally or through friends and family—passively consuming information about the war, Eisler argues that the pressure under which veterans have been put as the only group who can possibly convey the truth of war, has resulted in a sort of rejection of authority on their part. In Eisler's opinion, veterans have looked for ways to rectify the idea that "only those who choose

to serve are saddled with the burden of war's interpretation," and therefore, he argues that "the volunteer veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have rejected their own authority as the sole gatekeepers of war representations in American memory culture" (5).

As an example of this phenomenon, Eisler points to a 2016 article by Matt Gallagher on "Literary Hub," titled "You Don't Have to Be a Veteran to Write About War," and he uses it as the starting point of his argument which, like the article, tackles the compelling issue of veteran authority and its relationship with experience. Gallagher is very clear in his short piece, as he claims that it is "high-time that writers and readers of contemporary war literature alike recognize that experience is not the same thing as authority" and then proceeds to list notable authors of what could be considered war literature (among whom Homer, Shakespeare, and Stephen Crane). However, he acknowledges the existence of a rather persistent feeling that not only veterans are more trustworthy than others when it comes to war stories, but also that they are the only ones who are entitled to do so. He calls this an "ugly undercurrent of thought—usually unspoken but ever pervasive—that one shouldn't write about war unless one participated in it as a combatant or otherwise survived its destruction," one that, Gallagher claims, seems to be annoyingly still "in vogue" to this day.

In 1999, Joseph Campbell famously called this phenomenon "combat gnosticism" in an article in *New Literary History* that condemns how criticism of WW1 poetry, like the critical reception of literary Romanticism did according to Jerome McGann,[20] is "more concerned with promulgating the worldview of its topic than subjecting it to rigorous critique" (203). Campbell maintains that poets and critics alike subscribe to the ideology of combat gnosticism, or "the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience" (203), and suggests that the popularity of this attitude has contributed to the formation of a restricted canon of war literature that understands war only in terms of combat, essentially creating an idea of war literature that is "produced exclusively by combat experience," which becomes "a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows" (204).

Eisler acknowledges Campbell's study, but claims that this discrimination against writers who lack direct experience of the war is older than Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*—in Campbell's opinion, the most influential work that perpetuated the

[20] In *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (1983), McGann's stated objective is a critical rethinking of the Romantic period and, more specifically, its reception: "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (1).

ideology of combat gnosticism—and in fact dates back to the aftermath of the Great War, and specifically to the different critical reception of two war novels, John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers* (1921) and Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922). To prove his point, Eisler provides some figures regarding the number of novels published by veterans and civilians from the start of the war to the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, highlighting the fact that most authors had not seen combat during those years and that contemporary book reviewers did not seem to particularly value an author's status as eyewitness, instead chastising whoever failed to achieve remarkable literary results, regardless of their previous occupation. He then notes that after the publication of the novels by Dos Passos and Cather, the overall attitude towards storytellers seemed to change, and that an author's personal experience with the subject matter and the supposed corresponding authenticity of the narrated events became the most important metric to assess the quality of a war novel: "A critical shift was slowly unfolding that placed the war novel in a different category from traditional fiction, one in which style and language could become subordinate to narrative content" (34). Eisler argues that *Three Soldiers* became a turning point in American war writing because, after critics started to eventually praise Dos Passos' uncharacteristically bleak portrayal of the war experience for revealing harsh truths about war that were only available to those who fought, other novels—like Cather's, who unfortunately could not claim to have lived through the events of her book—started to be held to the same standards.

Furthermore, Eisler claims that veterans are, for the first time in a century, trying to get rid of this unquestionable authority by "avoiding the standard form of American war fiction" (13), by which Eisler means, among other things, adopting non-American perspectives and refusing to depict American soldiers as "saints" (14). While it is true that veterans of the GWOT consistently adopt other perspectives in their fiction, especially when compared to Vietnam veterans, who were generally criticized for the solipsism of their books, they are certainly not the first to depict American characters whose behavior is less than exemplary. After all, the script of one of the most famous movies of the war in Vietnam, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), was based on Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* (1979), a book that does not shy away from showing the dysfunctional and perverse ways in which the military breaks down recruits and the little care that some units demonstrated for the harm they caused to civilians, even including a passage in which a young Vietnamese girl is accidentally ran over by her American "saviors." A year before that, Jim Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978) had shown how "collateral damage" of any kind had soon become a routine occurrence in Vietnam, one that most soldiers simply accepted as inevitable: "Shot dogs and chickens and hogs. Accidental wounds and deaths of

civilians. They were a routine, almost boring occurrence" (ch.17). Published a few years later, Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1986) features the description of a unit gang raping and killing a Viet Cong girl over several pages, while Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) continued to add nuance to the portrayal of American soldiers with, for example, the episode in which Rat Kiley empties his magazine on a defenseless water buffalo to exact his revenge on the Viet Cong in the first of these books, or the protagonist's memory of the My Lai massacre in the second. All of the works quoted above were, of course, written by veterans of the Vietnam War, and therefore it would be hard to argue that a more nuanced approach to the morality of American soldiers is the exclusive prerogative of newer veteran fiction.

However, veterans of the GWOT have—in stark contrast with Vietnam veterans—frequently embraced perspectives other than their own, even though this practice could be construed as a way of appropriating someone else's experiences, thereby extending their authority even further, rather than doing away with it. American veterans, for all intents and purposes, have mostly retained this authority, and the texts analyzed in the studies that I have mentioned so far are a clear indicator of this point: even though the number of novels about the GWOT written by civilians surpasses the number of novels authored by veterans, critics of contemporary American war literature have continued to focus on books published by those who served. Eisler himself notes that "despite the steady campaign of veteran writers and scholars downplaying the authority of experience, it remains the genre's most widely assumed characteristic" (107), and that veteran literature is easy to sell, because "someone with the relevant experience is easier to market as authentic than someone with just a good story" (94).

While Eisler is right in claiming that veterans have—through their fiction, and in interviews and articles like Gallagher's—sought to capture the interest of civilians and asked them to share the responsibility[21] of representing war, there is still a persistent idea that their fiction is epistemologically different from civilian fiction. This is because, as Kate McLoughlin explains in *Authoring War* (2011), first-hand experience or, in her words, the trope of "autopsy," constitutes "the war reporter's ultimate credentials" (44), and even though Campbell, among others, criticizes this attitude for excluding certain groups from the

[21] Phil Klay has addressed this issue in a 2014 interview with Matthew Choate, noting that books are incomplete without a reader's interpretation, and therefore implying that veterans want civilians to "write back": "we're supposed to write back. In fact it's not complete unless you write back or respond, it's not a static thing. This notion of the reader authoring the text as disconnected from the author, I don't think that's the case; the text is a space that you inhabit together."

possibility of producing a supposedly credible representation of war (traditionally, women, for example), it is undeniable that the authority of experience remains the main authenticating device for war stories. As David Buchanan points out in *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture* (2016), the necessity of accurate representation has always been particularly important in war literature, and it remains a powerful demand today: "the demand for experienced truth and realism could be contestable elements of any genre, but with war, they somehow never fade into the critical background" (22).

The reason for the importance of authenticity is closely linked to another common trope of war literature, the extraordinary nature of combat and the resulting difficulty inherent in its representation. McLoughlin refers to this phenomenon as adynaton, a rhetorical figure that announces the teller's inadequacy to successfully address the topic at hand (152). War is understood as a serious matter that demands extreme accuracy in its telling, but its extremely complex and overwhelming nature ensures that such accurate reporting becomes effectively impossible. As McLoughlin explains, adynaton points to the sublime and ineffable nature of war, and she suggests that by "alluding to the scale of the catastrophe without explicitly delineating it" (155), it enhances the narrative efficacy of the storyteller and, I would argue, counterintuitively reinforces their authority.

Contemporary veteran writers are acutely aware of this issue, but their approach has hardly been consistent. Kevin Powers, for example, has noted the difficulty he was faced with at the beginning of his writing process: "as soon as the first words of the book were put down on the page, I realized I was unequal to the task of answering it, that if there is any true thing in this world it is that war is only like itself" (245) and, accordingly, it could be argued that *The Yellow Birds* tends to portray war as an almost supernatural entity intent on claiming as many victims as possible.[22] Roy Scranton, on the other hand, has forcefully defended literature's ability to represent conflicts: "how could a writer possibly communicate any experience without making it 'more intelligible than it really is'? Making experience intelligible is just what language does" ("The Trauma Hero"). In *War Porn*, Matt—a civilian—acts as a foil to the reluctant veteran Aaron when he relentlessly questions him on his service in Iraq: "I mean, all we know is what they show us on TV, right? I mean, we don't even know. I can't even imagine. We're totally ignorant of this situation, and I'm just wondering, is it really like how they say? Is it bad? Is it getting worse? Is it getting better?" (28)

[22] This is evident from the very first lines of *The Yellow Birds*, in which war is an external phenomenon that looms large over the protagonist: "The war tried to kill us in the spring" (3).

1.8 Authority in the Post-Truth Era

All of these issues have played and continue to play a central role in the way American veteran narratives are written and received today, but a few more issues are worth mentioning. Recent changes in audience interests and larger socio-cultural developments have also played their part in shaping the literary landscape of the Global War on Terrorism. The first of these developments is related to the field of reception: generally speaking, readers seem to be ever more fascinated with personal narratives that can grant them access to true stories that only "insiders" can deliver, a fascination that, according to Nancy K. Miller, has given rise to a phenomenon that she calls the "Age of the Memoir" (537). The second development is itself related to the concept of truth and, like the one I have mentioned before, is partially caused by a tension between personal and public knowledge. Here I am referring to the phenomenon of "post-truth," which was famously selected as word of the year in 2016 by the *Oxford Dictionary* and defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The term has frequently been used to illustrate the cultural and political climate of the twenty-first century, especially after the election of Donald Trump and Brexit—events that were both characterized by the spread of fake news and controversial phrases like "alternative facts."

In a 2021 article titled "Crisis of Authority: The Truth of Post-Truth," Henrik Enroth has criticized the notion that post-truth constitutes an epistemological crisis and, instead, claimed that the latter is "epiphenomenal to a more general crisis of authority" (180). Enroth argues that, in order to understand post-truth, it is helpful to go back to Hannah Arendt's account of authority in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1961), in which authority's communal aspect is explored. According to Arendt, who uses ancient Rome as an example, authority is not the same as power, but it nonetheless "begins with—both arises from and refers back to—this foundational form of power" (Enroth 187). Just like Rome expanded while constantly referring back to its original founding, authority works through "promises, covenants, and mutual pledges" (Enroth 187) that are progressively added to the ones made at the beginning, a fact that indeed highlights that the initial power on which it is built becomes authority only retroactively: "authority is supposed to be binding, yet it becomes binding—which is to say, authoritative—only if those for whom it is supposed to be binding make it so by binding themselves to it" (Enroth 187). To explain this "crisis of authority" Enroth points to the great number of promises on which postwar authority has been built,

listing, among others, the American Dream and the promises of the civil rights movement in the US, the welfare state in Western Europe, and the promise that the end of communism would usher in a new era of prosperity and democracy in Eastern Europe. When these aspirational promises are only partially kept (their complete fulfillment, Enroth notes, is likely impossible by nature), "the ties break and the allegiances dissipate" (189).

If the post-truth era is really the symptom of a crisis of authority that has exacerbated the distrust for supposedly factual information that individuals cannot directly access (especially when said factual information is provided by those who hold power), and if people are simultaneously—and somewhat counterintuitively—fascinated with the inaccessible experiences of other individuals, especially those of "insiders" who can relate knowledge about contexts whose internal mechanisms are normally not openly available to the public, then it could be argued that the *fictional* narratives of the GWOT authored by veterans situate themselves in an ideal position of authority among the many literary products of these wars. While Eisler correctly identifies authority as the most compelling aspect of these narratives, I believe that not enough attention has been paid to their use of fictional discourse and to the way these texts signal (or avoid signaling) their fictionality. Both Eisler (102) and Buchanan (15-19) have noted the "cyclical pattern" (Buchanan 15) of war literature, which consists of an initial propagation of nonfiction that almost gradually turns into fiction, but the significance and the implications of the use of fictionality by GWOT veterans has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

Some of the works that I would consider to be *authofictions* are written by veterans who have expressed their desire for more civilians to write about war, and while this means that they are effectively ceding part of their exclusive right to deal in literary combat, I do not believe that their authority is diminished in strength as a result of this enlargement of the field of production. On the contrary, according to Ernoth and the Arendtian understanding of authority,[23] it could constitute the exact opposite, since following authority "is not to blindly or reflexively submit but to join those who claim authority in order to partake in their enterprise" (188). In this sense, veteran *authofictions* can be enormously influential because, as I have already suggested, they harness the rhetorical power of fictionality, which, according

[23] In Enroth's article, the Arendtian concept of authority is described as a sort of communal initiative: "To follow authority, on this view, is not to blindly or reflexively submit but to join those who claim authority in order to partake in their enterprise, which is how their claims to authority become authoritative" (188). Therefore, by extending the hand and including civilians in the making of cultural memory about the war, veterans might actually be reinforcing their authority as opposed to giving it away.

to Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh in their influential article "Ten Theses About Fictionality," (2015) is not separated from reality and instead speaks *indirectly* of the real world, a feature that demands that the reader interpret the text differently:

> If we assume—rightly or wrongly— that a discourse is fictive, we read it as inviting us to assume (among other things) that it is not making referential claims, and that its relevance is indirect rather than direct. We also read it as inviting us to assume that its represented objects (whether characters, events, or other things) might be partly or wholly invented and, indeed, may even be impossible in the real world. The assumption of fictionality, like the assumption of irony, changes our interpretive activity and its outcomes. (68)

It is essential to note that the fictionality of GWOT veteran narratives enables what Nielsen et al. call "double exposure" (68)—that is, an invitation to "the reader or listener to map an engagement with representations of *what is not* onto *what is*" that can, in turn "substantially affect his or her sense and understanding of what is" (68). This, coupled with the obvious absence of direct referential claims, ensures that veteran "authofictions" can maintain their authority while at the same time dispelling any doubt about their sincerity. This seems like a near-perfect recipe to retain relevance in the contemporary cultural environment, even though, as critics have lamented, their texts seem to have limited reach and therefore lack the mass appeal that characterizes other popular genres. However, even though the actual capacity of these narratives to influence civilian readers in their understanding of the war is a relevant (but hard to assess) issue, the texts themselves—and the relevant paratexts—warrant closer attention to and further study of their representational strategies.

To understand the specificities of GWOT veteran narratives, it is necessary to first recognize the similarities between the structures of fictional and nonfictional storytelling—only then will it be possible to appreciate the distinctiveness and the interpretive demands that fictional discourse makes of the readers of *authofictions*. The first step in this process necessitates an evaluation of the nature of fictional works of literature. In order to accomplish this, it will be essential to firmly establish the theoretical relationship that exists between texts—especially fictional ones—and the actual world and, consequently, explore the nexus of experience, memory, and imagination that underlies texts that have a clear connection to an author's life. Crucially, this nexus produces both autobiographical and semi-autobiographical texts, as memory itself is a notoriously unreliable tool for the creation of wholly nonfictional

narratives.[24] The process of *poiesis*, the creation of a narrative that configures experience and eventually makes it available to an audience, cannot alone be used to account for the idiosyncrasies of fiction. In fact, as the next chapter will show, *mimesis*, or the imitation of reality,[25] is a tool that fiction and historiography share in the telling of real and/or imagined pasts. Fictional and nonfictional discourses are revealed to be alike not only in the method they employ to construct stories, but also in their source material and function: they both stem from real experience and both provide commentary on reality.

[24] As Helga Schwalm has argues, the study of autobiography has—throughout the years—focused extensively on the creative/warping powers of memory: "In the face of the inevitable subjectivity (or fallibility) of autobiographical recollection, the creative dimension of memory, and thus autobiography's quality as verbal/aesthetic fabrication, has come to the fore" (19).

[25] The term "mimesis" has a long critical history in literary studies. Arguably dating back to Plato's quite restrictive use of the term as the imitation of speech in the *Republic*, mimesis is—broadly speaking—traditionally understood as the "imitation of reality" in the arts (Morris 38).

2. Mimesis in Conflict: Representing the Reality of War

2.1 Mimesis and Fiction: Reality and/on the Written Page

As discussed in the first chapter, GWOT veteran narratives entail (and, in a way, demand of the reader) a nuanced discussion that undermines a clear distinction between fact, fiction, and lies. However, they do it through textual strategies that are different from the extremely innovative if conspicuous techniques that characterized a number of literary genres in the twentieth century. To fully grasp the complex position of these texts in the literary landscape and understand the rhetorical effects provided by the "trustworthy" presence of a veteran author, it is necessary to examine a number of theoretical concepts that are always relevant for fictional writing in general, but acquire additional significance when applied to narratives of this type. Therefore, in order to clarify my understanding of what I call *authofictions*, which I will fully develop in chapter three, in this chapter I will include a brief overview of the crucial issues relating to experience and the representation of war—with a focus on the Ricoeurian conception of threefold mimesis—before laying out the theoretical basis of my discussion of the literary fiction authored by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Before that, however, I will briefly outline the critical history of the term "mimesis," since it plays a crucial role in both Paul Ricoeur's and Richard Walsh's narrative theories.

Since it is a peculiar subgenre of fiction dealing with the representation of particularly traumatic experiences, war literature possesses a certain urgency that is rarely rivaled by other literary genres. As Kate McLoughlin has argued about Kien, the protagonist of Bao Ninh's The Sorrow of War (1991), "the nature of his compulsion is not that war must be written about, but that it cannot not be written about" ("War and Words"18). Extreme events are bound to demand a solemn effort to be accurately represented—accordingly, all narratives tackling violence, regardless of the tone, form, or genre which they employ to address the topic, are rarely treated as insignificant, and certainly not as trivial. However, the scale and the methodical and lawful way in which violence is inflicted is frequently what sets war narratives apart from other narratives of violence. After all, armed conflicts have, throughout history, impacted the lives of countless humans, even though the degree to which they have done so varies greatly based on different factors. Wars have killed—and continue to kill—not only countless common soldiers and innocent civilians, but also individuals who wield a great amount of power such as kings, presidents, dictators, or other heads of state. Their destructive power ensures that

people will continue to suffer in their aftermath, with future generations, although spared from direct experience, growing up while facing the material and psychological damage that conflicts have generated.

It is not surprising, then, that war has been one of the earliest subjects of literary representations and, more broadly, of written language itself, with the Homeric poems as some of the most cited and earliest examples of this seeming necessity to turn the experience of conflict into words. Their relevance as sources of (not only historical) truth, however, has never been out of the question. Indeed, even though Plato admires and respects them for their artistic achievements, in the *Republic* Socrates uses the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as examples to justify the complete exclusion of poets from his ideal city, because as imitations of action, and thus twice removed from truth, Homer's texts cannot have beneficial effects of their readers:

> "So the imitator will have neither knowledge nor correct opinion about
> the goodness or badness of the things he imitates."
> "Apparently not."
> "What a wonderful guide the poetic imitator must be, then, if we want wisdom on the subjects he writes about." (322)

As compelling as their theme might be, fictional narratives of war (epic poems, in this case) are, according to Plato, mere entertainment at best, and a serious danger to the integrity of the city at worst (327), because in appealing to the most irrational sides of humankind, imitative poetry moves people away from reason.[26] Plato's conception of the mimetic process, as well as his conception of truth in relation to poetry,[27] bring into relief some crucial concepts, the

[26] According to Paolo Pitari, this seemingly total repudiation of the possibility of truth in literature in Book 10 of the *Republic* has erroneously led many to present Plato as a crusader against poetry. In "The Problem of Literary Truth in Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Poetics," Pitari argues that Plato did in fact, believe "that fiction can contain truth—and in literary value as truth-value" and that "the value of a piece of literature depends, at least in large part, on whether its content is true." (16). He points out that Plato's remarks on literature are not entirely contained in Book 10, and that Books 2 and 3 provide irreconcilably different arguments that critics have apparently forgotten, but which nonetheless need to be accounted for to understand Plato's stance about literary truth. In fact, Books 2 and 3 seem to advocate for true as opposed to false poetry, the value of which appears to depend on its truth value. As Pitari argues (17), the basis for Plato's condemnation of poetry is metaphysical (and therefore, it rests entirely on the assumption that truth only exists in the world of Ideas). Its appearance *after* the moral and political obligations of poetry are listed in the previous books could point to a more forceful invective against *false* as opposed to *true* poetry. Therefore, Plato does not seem to argue for a complete rejection of poetry, but rather of certain kinds of poetry.[26]

[27] In the *Republic*, truth in poetry seems to be inextricably linked to the representation of good nature. In Book 3, Plato—through Socrates' voice—argues that poets, like craftsmen, must leave out of their works "what has the wrong nature, what is undisciplined, slavish or wanting in grace" (91). This is because Plato looks at this issue

understanding of which greatly influences how one can conceptualize the role of fiction as a genre and fictional discourse in general.

Mimesis, or the way in which art seems to imitate and represent the real world, has been the object of some of the most ancient debates in literary studies. In its most basic form, the concept of mimesis is a way of accounting for how literature works, by which I mean how texts seemingly try to imitate (or convey an idea of) reality. One of the most famous works of ancient literary criticism that are associated with the word is the *Poetics*, written by Aristotle—Plato's student—in the fourth century BCE, in which the Greek philosopher discusses imitative poetry and, more specifically, drama. Being one of the oldest treatises to tackle the issue of *mimesis*,[28] *Poetics* has been enormously influential in informing the understanding of mimetic art in the following centuries: while Plato, who addressed the topic in the *Republic*, inscribed mimesis in a larger debate about justice and politics, Aristotle firmly focuses on aesthetics.

Aristotle clearly states his purpose at the beginning of the treatise: his *Poetics* is meant to offer a comprehensive survey of the different kinds of representative arts while also informing its readers on the best ways to actually produce artistic works.[29] Generally thought to be incomplete,[30] the surviving text of *Poetics* is mainly concerned with what would now be considered theatrical art: issues like *muthos* (plot, story) and *ethos* (morality), as well as various neo-classical interpretations of Aristotle's argument for the play's *unity*—Anthony Kenny quotes Ludovico Castelvetro's three unities of time, place, and action in his introduction to Aristotle's treatise (xxxvi)—which influenced European playwrights and critics for generations. The enormous impact of *Poetics*, however, is not circumscribed to drama alone. As Stephen Halliwell argues in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*

primarily in terms of the effects that the practice would have on the citizens of his ideal city and would ban those craftsmen (and poets) who cannot put into their "representations of living things, or into buildings, or into any manufactured object" (92) only "the likeness of good nature" (91), because if they fail to do so, the guardians of the city would be exposed, while growing up, to "images of what is bad, like animals put out to graze on bad pasture" (92), thereby "accumulating a single large evil in their souls" (92).

[28] According to Stephen Halliwell in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, there is little surviving trace of the concept of mimesis before Plato's *Republic* (15).

[29] As Anthony Kenny maintains in his introduction to the *Poetics*, the term used by Aristotle in the title is particularly difficult to translate into the English language (xi) and could be misleading for modern readers. According to him, the word *poiesis* "has both a narrower and a wider scope than the English word 'poetry,'" and the best modern candidate to convey Aristotle's idea might be the German word "Dichtung," which contains the meanings of other, less elegant options that he regards as possible translations: "'imaginative writing' and 'creative writing' come close, but one expression is too clumsy and the other too academic for regular use" (ix).

[30] Umberto Eco famously made the lost second book of Aristotle's Poetics—the part of the treatise that supposedly addressed comedy—a pivotal plot point in his novel *The Name of the Rose*. According to Walter Watson in *The Lost Second Book of Aristotle's "Poetics,"* the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a possible summary of the second book, is a reliable approximation of its contents.

(2002), the discussion of *mimesis* offered in *Poetics*—along with Plato's earlier of the term—is of pivotal importance to the early history of aesthetics: "mimesis itself gave antiquity something much closer to a unified conception of 'art' (more specifically, of the mimetic or representational arts as a class)" (7). More importantly, Aristotle's work provides one of the earliest critical frameworks to cognize and investigate the relationship between works of art and reality. This does not mean, however, that mimetic theories reduce this relationship to the (deceptively) simple act of imitation: Aristotle, for example, dedicates much of *Poetics* to the functions of the representative arts and to their relationship with other "arts" like history and philosophy. As Halliwell puts it, these approaches did not crystallize into a monolithic system, but rather "kept open the relationship between 'life' and 'art' for serious debate and scrutiny" (12-13).

This is true even within the Aristotelian conception of *mimesis*. The complexity of its use in *Poetics* is demonstrated by the range of practices that Aristotle describes as mimetic—as Paul Woodruff notes in his essay "Aristotle on Mimēsis," "Aristotle is no clearer than his predecessors as to what place mimesis has in the family that includes likeness, image, sign, reproduction, impersonation, and the rest" (74). The nuance and variety with which Aristotle treats this concept, coupled with the indubitably large cultural gap that exists between Greece in the fourth century BCE and the modern world, has kept scholars busy for millennia. From its influence on theater to the debate over his treatment of morality[31] and its relationship with aesthetics, *Poetics* has inspired various critical threads, but for the purposes of this study Aristotle's treatise is extremely relevant for its discussion of the specificities of fictional and nonfictional writing as well as their relationship with reality and truth.

For the purposes of this study, which focuses on the specificities of fictional narratives produced by eyewitnesses, one of the most remarkable feats of *Poetics* is Aristotle's use of *mimesis* as a defining feature of the range of texts that we would now describe as belonging to the genre of fiction. In *Poetics*, Aristotle gauges the distance between poetry and history and puts them in relation to one another, famously arguing that poetry is more philosophical than history because "one relates what actually happened, and the other the kinds of events that would happen" (28). According to Halliwell, although Aristotle does not explicitly state this, this distinction "between mimesis, on the one hand, and 'science,' history, and declarative

[31] In his article "The Moral View of Aristotle's Poetics," Isaiah Smithson comments extensively on the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the matter (according to the latter, poetry has no responsibility to censor immorality), and claims that "not to realize the degree to which moral assumption underlie the *Poetics* is to misconstrue both Aristotle and the history of aesthetics" (3).

statements, on the other, generate[s] a strong presumption that he is staking out a case, with both negative and positive components, for treating artistic mimesis as equivalent to fiction" (166). In other words, Aristotle is the first to clearly draw the line between the fictional and the nonfictional and, more importantly, he does so without disqualifying the merits of fiction (as Plato seemingly did in his *Republic*) or relying on form. As he writes shortly after the passage in which he compares poetry and history:

> It is clear from all this that the poet must be a maker of stories rather than verses, in so far as it is representation that makes him a poet, and representation is of actions. Even if it turns out that he is writing about historical events he is no less a poet for that, since nothing prevents such events being the kind of thing that would happen. It is in that respect that he deals with them as a poet. (29)

In this passage, Aristotle gives poets considerable liberties with regard to their writing and (if we accept that he is indeed equating *mimesis* with fictionality), in a way, detaches the characterization of a text as fictional from its formal features alone—as he does at the beginning of *Poetics* (18)—but also ties it to its content.

This "freeing" of the representative arts, coupled with the idea that poetry deals with "universal truths" (28), leads Aristotle to consider the relationship between the "particulars" that are the actual objects of poetry and the truths that they stand for. Aristotle notes this apparent contradiction and uses proper names as an example: "the universal truths concern what befits a person of a certain kind to say or do in accordance with probability and necessity—and that is the aim of poetry, even if it makes use of proper names" (28). Despite the use of specific names (that could even refer to actual people), the representational arts are not concerned with the communication of historical information about real individuals but rather use "believable" names as a device to convey their valuable insights on human nature. In other words, poetry uses particulars from the real world because such elements are helpful in facilitating the reception of its universal truths—things that we know to be real are, after all, *realistic*: "In the case of tragedy they retain the traditional names. The reason for this is that what is possible is credible. If something has not happened we are inclined to disbelieve that it is possible; but it is obvious that what has happened is possible" (28).

In the Western tradition, the issue of *mimesis* and realism is also necessarily associated with the work of Erich Auerbach. His influential book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, published in 1946 and written during his "exile" in Istanbul during the Second World War, constitutes one of the cornerstones of the modern scholarship on *mimesis* and, as its title implies, its focus lies on the various ways in which texts have conveyed a sense of the real throughout the centuries. As Auerbach explains in the Epilogue of his book, he considers *mimesis* as synonymous with "the representation of reality through literary representation" (554), but the "reality" that Auerbach has in mind is obviously not a universally agreed-upon idea. As Linda Hutcheon argued in 1980, Auerbach "writes from the implied stance that nineteenth-century French realism is the true modern 'realism'" (44), and this inclination causes him to at least partially exclude examples of self-reflexive texts and metafiction: "when 'imitation of reality is imitation of the sensory experience of life on earth,' […] products alone, especially in their visual manifestations, will take precedence over the processes of imagining and writing" (44). In doing so, Auerbach's opinion seems to be coherent with Aristotle's ideas on the affective qualities of representational art, even though the latter has relatively little to say about style and focuses instead on plot. According to Halliwell, Aristotle "supposes that mimesis provides a formal equivalent of an imaginable reality, but also that it opens up the possibility of equivalence of experience, on the part of the audience, in relation to such reality" (163). Aristotle's *Poetics* states that the best tragedies evoke in the audience the same feelings that real events do: "The story should be put together in such a way that even without seeing the play a person hearing the series of events should feel dread and pity" (33). In order for fiction to achieve its results, the audience must actually experience "dread and pity" while being fully aware that they are not witnessing, reading, or listening to actual events.

Art has to facilitate this effect, but it is not meant to act alone—these statements bring into relief the presence of a second party that is active in the creation of the mimetic effect, namely, the audience. If mimesis is not meant to be a deceptive practice, in order to be successful in its efforts, fiction cannot be fully in control of the exchange. In other words, the audience must recognize a text as fictional but, in order to successfully enjoy it, should at the same time react to it as if the narrated events were real. Kendall Walton has referred to this paradox as the "central metaphysical problem concerning fiction" (6) in his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990).

Working towards defining mimesis as a (non-frivolous) game of make-believe, Walton interrogates the traditional, romantic idea of "willing suspension of disbelief" as formulated by

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, using as an example a possible readerly experience of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

> It is extraordinarily tempting to suppose that when one is caught up in a story, one loses touch with reality, temporarily, and actually believes in the fiction. The reader of Anna Karenina abandons himself to the novel and is convinced, momentarily and partially at least, of Anna's existence and of the truth of what the novel says about her. Otherwise why would he be moved by her predicament? Why would one even be interested enough to bother reading the novel? Yet it also seems that the normal appreciator does not (of course!) really believe in the fiction. (6)

To solve this dilemma, Walton describes the effects of fiction as "quasi emotion[s]" (250) that we experience when in the presence of what we believe to be "fictional truth[s]" (250), but his distinction is at times puzzling. While he stresses the separation between real emotions and quasi-emotions, he seems to ambivalently attribute the same functions of real emotions to the latter: "although they are distinct, there is substantial overlap between them. We do not actually grieve for Anna Karenina, feel disgust for Iago, or fear the slime when it is fictional that we do; but many other ways in which fictionally we think and feel are ways in which we really do so" (252). Ultimately, Walton concedes that some representations can cause actual emotions to arise, but seems to discount the possibility that such emotions can actually be directed at textual phenomena: "Some representations arouse actual sorrow or terror-sorrow for actual people they remind us of, terror of horrors we think we might actually face-or an objectless mood of anxiety" (256). Accounting for the manifest artificiality of representation and its corresponding real-life effects proves once again a difficult task, if only for the uncertain nature of the relationship between the textual and the extratextual.

2.2 Against Mimesis: Fiction and Possible Worlds

Since this study is concerned with the ways in which fictional war narratives authored by American veterans occupy the hazy space that exists between the fictional and the nonfictional, it is necessary to determine the kind of relationship that exists between texts and the real world, because—quite often—the interpretation of a certain text partially depends on the way this relationship is conceived. With regard to this issue, which has been at the center of the scholarly debate on mimesis and fiction in the twentieth century, Walton is clear in

asserting his position against one possible solution to the conundrum, namely, the introduction of the idea of possible worlds to literary studies (67). First used by Thomas Pavel in 1975[32] in an article titled "Possible Worlds in Literary Semantics," the concept of "possible worlds" is lifted from Saul Kripke's modal logic, and is used by Pavel to ultimately establish the "semantical autonomy of literary works" (Pavel 165). Kripke's possible worlds theory posits a "set K of elements, a well-designated member G of this set, and a relation R between the elements of the set" (165), in which K is a set of possible worlds, G is the "real" world, and R is the relation linking and G and other possible worlds contained in K. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains in "Possible Worlds in Recent Literary Theory," this is a way of accounting for reference in fiction where a correspondence theory of truth cannot. Possible worlds theory offers "a semantics for statements describing nonactual state of affairs" and "can account for the fact that the hearer may either agree or disagree with the statement even though none of its components describes an actual state of affairs" (529).

In Pavel's application, which focuses on "the relationship between the literary work and the real world" (165), possible worlds theory evaluates the validity of fictional propositions in the possible world, thus doing away with what Pavel calls the "naive realist" position that assesses their validity based on their truth value. Afterwards, Pavel tackles the issue of how readers make sense of the possible worlds that fiction creates. Rejecting a "reductionist outlook" in which "the actual world can play the role of a stable vantage point with respect to which literary worlds are grasped and evaluated" (172), Pavel argues that literary works, being constructed out of a series of propositions that are immaterial, cannot *actually* offer reliable information about the actual world and instead contain a series of "ersatz-propositions stripped of their mark of origin" (Ryan 531). As Pavel explains, the information conveyed by ersatz propositions is generally "equivalent to the information found in reliable sources such as truthful newspapers, scientific texts, etc." (170) *in* the fictional work, and readers are free to consider some of those propositions as also true in the actual world.

As Marie-Laure Ryan has argued, however, the relationship between a possible world and a fictional text poses philosophical problems: "according to philosophers, a PW is a complete state of affairs in which every conceivable proposition is either true or false. But a

[32] As Halliwell notes in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, the notion of possible worlds is not exclusive to post-Leibnizian philosophy, but could also be found in the *Poetics*: "unlike medicine or house building, then, mimetic works or performances of art render and communicate intelligible images of what it is reasonable, though not unproblematic, to term a 'possible world,' given Aristotle's famous remark in *Poetics* 9, when contrasting poetry with history, that the former is concerned with "things which could be the case and which are possible in terms of probability or necessity" (154).

fictional text is notoriously incomplete in its specification of facts" (532).[33] If fictional works are necessarily incomplete, how can they create full-fledged worlds? Thus, the necessity arises for account of the missing information and, more specifically, of how the reader may have access to it. To solve this problem, Ryan theorized the "principle of minimal departure": "when reconstructing a fictional world, fill in the blanks left by the text by assuming its similarity to the actual world. Do not make gratuitous changes—your experience of reality can only be overruled by the authority of the text" (533). According to Ryan in her (older) article "Fiction, Non-factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure," "It is by virtue of the principle of minimal departure that hearers are able to form reasonably comprehensive representations of the foreign worlds created through discourse, even though the verbal description of these worlds is always incomplete" (406). Therefore, the principle of minimal departure explains the "fill-in-the-blanks" exercise in which readers are engaged every time they are presented with fictional works that are contextualized in a possible world that resembles the actual world as closely as possible, even though Ryan acknowledges that this expedient is not without its problems, especially since it is difficult to determine *how* readers fill in the aforementioned blanks ("Possible Worlds" 533).

Crucially, the notion of possible worlds implies that literary works cannot be reduced to a simple mirror image to the real world, as Ryan explains in her analysis of Pavel's theory: "the assimilation of fictional worlds to the nonactualized possible worlds of an M-system makes it possible to evaluate the truth of the fictional propositions relative to AW without reducing fiction to a representation of AW ("Possible Worlds" 531).[34] Fictional worlds are seen as self-contained and ontologically autonomous or, as Pavel puts it:

> Each literary work contains its own ontological perspective. In this precise sense one can say that literary works are autonomous. This does not mean that a comparison between art and reality is illegitimate, nor that literary works are totally isolated one from another. Different ontological perspectives can and must be compared. But any such comparison is logically secondary to the exploration of the unique ontological perspective posited by the work. (175)

[33] Ryan uses PW and AW as abbreviations of, respectively, possible world and actual world ("Possible Worlds" 550).

[34] M-system is the name of Saul Kripke's model structure of a set K of elements used by Pavel in his theory ("Possible Worlds" 529).

This approach, characterized by Ryan as "the narratological tradition of French structuralism […] fertilized by a model inherited from the Anglo-Saxon school of analytical philosophy" ("Possible Worlds 528), did open up paths for the interpretation of literary works outside of the structuralist tradition that emphasized internal structure and intertextual relations between literary works.

Possible worlds approaches seem to be less effective, however, when they are used as methodological tools for the study of literary works that thread the line between the factual and the fictional. There is a sharp division between propositions that refer to the actual worlds in nonfiction and propositions that refer to the possible world that they themselves create, and it is categorical. As Lubomír Doležel argues in an article titled "Possible Worlds of Fiction and History": "fictional texts, liberated from truth-valuation, construct sovereign fictional worlds which satisfy the human need for imaginative expanse, emotional excitement, and aesthetic pleasure. Historical texts, constrained by the requirement of truth-valuation, construct historical worlds which are models of the actual world's past" (792). Quoting C. Behan McCullagh's critique of Hayden White's account of narrative and history, Doležel warns against a world in which such distinctions do not subsist: "we land in the ultimate dystopia, a world where we cannot make a distinction between what is fake and what is true, what happened and what did not happen, who is honest and who is a liar, who is guilty and who is innocent, what is genuine and what is fake" (792).

It almost seems as if time itself has worked to reify Doležel's dystopia, which, imagined in 1998, bears an uncanny resemblance to the sociocultural environment of the first decades of the twenty-first century—issues that I have stressed at the beginning of this chapter and in the previous one. These problems are reflected in many of the literary works that have been published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the fictional narratives produced by the veterans of the War on Terror are no exception. Being fictional texts, they could conceivably be analyzed with the tools provided by possible world theories, which, as Ryan puts it, should prove flexible enough to "infiltrate the treatment of a variety of cultural phenomena from a variety of points of view, in the same way, that concepts of the Genette school of narratology infiltrated most brands of criticism and eventually spread into interdisciplinary discourse studies" (550). However, while the theory of possible worlds applied to literary studies has indeed proved to be versatile, influential, and—importantly—intuitive, it arguably does not constitute the best way to deal with this group of texts.

Generally speaking, GWOT veteran fiction places great emphasis on the communicational act and raises questions about its production as well as its fictionality. Like

Genettian narratology, possible worlds theory is rather firmly focused on *intratextual* criticism, that is, on the text itself. "Details" such as authorship and historical context—so crucial to the writing and the reading of GOWT veteran fiction—are hardly relevant in possible worlds theories. As Sanford Scribner Ames states in his article "Structuralism, Language, and Literature," quoting Mikel Dufrenne's critique of structuralist criticism, according to structuralist criticism, "there is no fixed point of reference to which literature can be pinned, no truth that can plumb it. An author sets in motion a signifying dynamism, which is a question launched by his writing" (94). Earlier in his article, he expands on Dufrenne's appraisal of structuralism: "Dufrenne says that if the work is considered an autonomous, closed system, a discourse not spoken by anyone, the consequence is that a work is not to be explained by reference to its author, his life and intentions, or by the historical context" (94). While Ames uses this argument as a springboard to launch a defense of structuralism at the end of his article, Dufrenne's point is understandable, especially if one considers that in 1973—the year of Ames' article—structuralism was arguably on the wane (Ruegg 190) and that at the time, many authors were starting to openly violate[35] what Philippe Lejeune would call the autobiographical pact in *Le pacte autobiographique* in 1975, thereby compelling scholars to once again consider authorship both in fiction and nonfiction.[36]

If authors are not in control of meaning, then who is? At the end of "The Death of the Author," Barthes famously announced that the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148), lamenting that traditional criticism had been, until then, too narrowly focused on the tyrannical figure of the author. Reader-Response criticism, as popularized by scholars such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Norman Holland, generally

[35] Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils*, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, was published in 1977 and gave a "formal" start to the phenomenon of modern autofiction. On the other side of the Atlantic, Paul Auster published *City of Glass* in 1985, the first in a long series of works that merge fiction and the autobiographical, while Philip Roth—like Auster, an *aficionado* of autobiographical writing—started to veer towards openly autofictional works like his 1993 novel *Operation Shylock: A Confession*.

[36] This does not mean that scholars should necessarily embark on erratic quests in search of authorial intentions and predetermined intended meanings in these texts. As John Zilcosky argues in the appropriately titled article "The Revenge of the Author: Paul Auster's Challenge to Theory," the various alter-egos of the author in Paul Auster's series of novellas *The New York Trilogy* (1990), in which Auster inserts various aspects of his authorial persona, serve as a challenge (199) to Barthes' assertion in "The Death of the Author" that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). However, Auster's authorial insertions are not a reactionary avowal of authorship, but rather a sophistication of the idea: "By appearing and disappearing randomly throughout his three-volume text (in the guise of Quinn, Paul Auster, Fanshawe, and the Narrator), Auster disrupts the notion that an author "controls" his fiction" (204). Authors might not be in complete control of the works they produce and of the meaning that such texts convey, but they are certainly not immaterial.

focused on the reception of literary texts, but notably (and conspicuously) tended to ignore the socio-historical issues by positing such abstract concepts as the "implied reader" which sat well with formalist critics: "Iser's reception theory thus respected the text, reminiscent of 'objective' modes of criticism; it refused to transform or dissolve the text into the reader's subjectivity or the interpretive community's codes and conventions" (Leitch 53). On the other hand, claims Vincent B. Leitch in "Reader-Response Criticism," structuralist literary criticism itself did indeed produce a number of works focused on the reader, but also did so at the expense of "real" readers—as Leitch puts it, "the various readers posited by structuralists had this in common: they were impersonal, collective, theoretical constructs, not empirical or real readers" (62). Most criticism that focuses solely on reception (and does not employ empirical studies on subjective reading) cannot account for the unrecoverable and multiple nature of those "readings" that happen outside of literary criticism.

Needless to say, the importance of the act of reading and its contribution to meaning formation cannot be overstated, but at the same time, it is crucial to keep in mind questions such as authorship and the sociocultural and historical context of both production and reception. As Paul Ricoeur argues in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, "without the reader who accompanies it, there is no configuring act at work in the text; and without a reader to appropriate it, there is no world unfolded before the text. Yet the illusion is endlessly reborn that the text is a structure in itself and for itself and that reading happens to the text as some extrinsic and contingent event" (164).

Production, reception, and contextual information should all be accounted for in the interpretation of GWOT veteran narratives, especially because they are texts that cross many borders: they are subjective and yet deal with extremely significant public events; they are fictional, and yet they are closely intertwined with their author's real life; they are seemingly authoritative, and yet ask their readers to seriously questions received notions of veteran authority. Their positioning at the intersection of fiction, autobiography, and contemporary history, and their consequent versatility as tools for understanding reality, demands such a holistic approach.

First and foremost, then, it is essential to understand how these fictional narratives are situated with respect to "official" sources of knowledge about the (in this case, recent) past, the prime among which is historiography. The latter's positioning amongst other disciplines as an impartial tool to understand the past started to be put into question during roughly the same years in which the US was at war in Vietnam, a process that has influenced both historiography itself as well as other types of discourse—most notably for this study, fiction. In the United

States, the sudden moral uncertainty that the war produced stood in stark contrast with the apparent clarity of intent and the "ethical high-ground" that the nation seemed to possess during the Second World War. As I have already stressed, personal representations of war have frequently served as complementary to official records. However, the twentieth century—and especially the years between 1945 and the Vietnam War—saw an increase in literary fiction that overtly challenged a categorical distinction between fictional and historiographic narrations. This phenomenon, coupled with the wariness towards the totalizing systems of knowledge that Jean-François Lyotard traces back to the Hegelian tradition (*The Postmodern Condition* 34) and the recent memory of totalitarian regimes based on all-encompassing ideologies that dogmatically purported to explain the world, was fertile ground for a long-overdue redefinition of the boundaries between historical and fictional storytelling and the methods they employ to represent the world. In this respect, then, the next sections will focus on how Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur's theories of mimesis have bridged the gap between narrative fiction and historiography.

2.3 Representing the Past: History and Narrative

Throughout its critical history, the concept of *mimesis* has been closely associated with the study of the mechanisms underlying forms of representational art, and has been investigated—understandably, if one thinks of the subject matter of its earliest theorizations—especially in relation to literary texts. Most of the theories of *mimesis* that have been presented so far strongly favor analyses of fictional texts, and most of them imply that mimesis is one of the defining characteristics of fiction—in other words, the mimetic action seems to be indissolubly associated with imaginative rather than nonfictional texts. For example, as I have shown, Aristotle suggests a firm distinction between what poets and historians address in their works, while Walton considers *mimesis* a game of make-believe, one in which fictional texts function as props, whereas nonfictional ones "purport to describe the real world" (70).

Considerations about the referential relationship between reality and fiction are at the center of possible worlds theories, in which there is a similar distinction in the process of creation of fictional and nonfictional texts. Possible worlds theories emphasize the poietic function of fiction, and therefore are naturally prone to find alternatives to the concept of mimesis. Doležel, for example, proposes the replacement of mimetic semantics with the possible worlds model, and explains that the activity of *poiēsis* is one of the fundamental

differences between fictional and nonfictional texts. He clarifies this distinction by referring to Saul Kripke's understanding of possible worlds:

> In this explanation of the origins of fictional worlds, constructional texts are sharply differentiated from descriptive texts. Descriptive texts are representations of the actual world, of a world existing prior to any textual activity. In contrast, constructional texts are prior to their worlds; fictional worlds are dependent on, and determined by, constructional texts. As textually determined constructs, fictional worlds cannot be altered or cancelled, while the versions of the actual world provided by descriptive texts are subject to constant modifications and refutations. ("Mimesis and Possible Worlds" 489)

In other words, in Doležel's interpretation the problem of referentiality in fiction is solved with the realization that, even though possible worlds might resemble actual events, they are the result of a construction that can later be recovered by readers, and therefore are not an imitation of the real world. As in Pavel's case, the relationship of a fictional text with the real world is secondary to the interior ontological perspective of the literary text.

And yet, the definition of descriptive texts as "representations of the actual world" does point to a possible mimetic relationship between nonfictional texts, i.e., historiographic ones, and the actual world. According to Doležel, the treatment of literary texts as mimetic is one of the culprits in the short-sighted association of historiography and literature: "The identification of history with fiction-making is helped by a push from the other side, by treating literary fiction as mimesis" ("Possible Worlds" 791). At the beginning of his 2010 book that shares the title of the article I have just quoted, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*, Doležel acknowledges that historiography and fiction share the creation of possible worlds, but at the same time, he emphasizes that this does not align fictional and nonfictional texts in the way that "historical relativism" ("Possible Worlds" 796) claims: "The possible worlds framework enables us to reassert the status of historiography as an activity of *noesis*: its possible worlds are models of the actual past. Fiction making is an activity of *poiesis*: fictional worlds are imaginary possible alternatives to the actual world" (*Possible Worlds* xviii). Essentially, Doležel grants that there are similarities between fiction and historiography, but the essential difference between the two lies in historiography's function as an epistemic tool ("Possible Worlds" 802) that reinforces history's loyalty to truth and demonstrable knowledge.

The "postmodern metahistory" (*Possible Worlds* ix) that Doležel singles out as the cause of the conflation of historiography and fiction in the years following the Second World

War is predominantly identified with Hayden White's work, particularly with his groundbreaking book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973). In the essay, White explores the linguistic dimension of historiography, focusing in particular on its similarity to various literary genres.[37] In his own words, he treats "the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" (ix). The recognition of historiographical works as carefully constructed narratives brings White to discuss a poetics of history that considers the way in which historians select events and craft connections between them, thereby immediately introducing a degree of fictionality in the nonfictional genre of historiography. As he writes at the beginning of the first chapter of *Metahistory*,

> It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. (6-7)

White makes it immediately clear that historians are not scientists that simply note their findings in a completely objective manner. Rather, he methodically considers the way in which the products of their work exhibit characteristics that are usually reserved for fictional storytelling.

White's approach to the issue allows him to identify the various points in the construction of the historical account in which historians impose their own understanding and ideas on "data from the *unprocessed historical record*" (5). This data, first selected in "chronicles" that identify and organize the events diachronically and later contained in "stories" that have a proper beginning and end, is processed by the historian into a more discernible product of historical understanding with what White calls "emplotment," or the creation of the "'meaning' of a story" through the identification of the "*kind of story* that has

[37] When addressing the way historical events are narratively configured by the most influential historians of the nineteenth century, White refers to four archetypal story forms whose specificities influence the way historical narrative are given meaning: "Following the line indicated by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, I identify at least four different modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire. There may be others, such as the Epic, and a given historical account is likely to contain stories cast in one mode as aspects or phases of the whole set of stories emplotted in another mode. But a given historian is forced to emplot the whole set of stories making up his narrative in one comprehensive or archetypal story form" (7-8).

been told" (7). Through the configuration of a series of events that the historian deems important into an archetypal story form, the historian imposes his "explanatory affects" (10) on the past. The historiographic work cannot, then, be naively taken as an objective and unproblematic exemplification of past events, but rather as a representation of reality as mediated by the author's intervention, and most of these representations take the form of a prose narrative. White does not stop at the moment of emplotment to explain the way in which historians give meaning to a collection of events, and instead adds two more levels to his theory of the historical work, namely the mode of argument and the mode of ideological implication, which respectively identify the recognition of essential historical truths that can be gathered about particular historical facts (12) and the assumption of an ideological and ethical position (22) in historiographic storytelling.

While these additional modes are valuable for his philosophy of history, the issue of emplotment and the narrative configuration of historiography proved to be the most poignant of White's points, especially for literary theorists. The realization that most historiographic works are formally equivalent to fictional ones and that narrative is not a neutral form, but rather "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (*The Content* ix) put into question the position of a discipline that many considered to be impartial or even scientific (*Metahistory* 2). White's *Metahistory* appeared at the beginning of the seventies, a period of time that was characterized, according to Martin Kreiswirth, by an increasing interest in "narrative qua narrative" that would later turn into what he calls the "Narrativist Turn," or a "growing cross-disciplinary, theoretical concern with narrative as narrative" (633). Therefore, White's book was instrumental in ushering in an era of closer attention to narrativity outside of the strictly literary, a period of time that is also characterized by the cultural heyday of postmodernism, which Lyotard famously distilled into the adage "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Understandably cautious with regard to discourses that promised definitive and therefore totalizing views of the world, such as historiography as traditionally conceived, the age also saw the increasing popularity of fictional narratives that Linda Hutcheon defined "historiographic metafiction," or stories that, while being acutely self-aware in their gesturing towards their own artificiality, purport to represent the past through fictional discourse, in a way profiting from the coeval destabilization of historiographic authority.

Narrative itself proves to be one of the recurring issues here, the other being, of course, its treatment as a cross-media phenomenon and the consequent studies that have been dedicated to its study across disciplines throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. According to

Marie Laure-Ryan, White's insistence on the similarities between historiography and fiction exacerbated various postmodern claims of *panfictionality* based on the idea that "every meaning and form found in the textual description of presumably real events is ascribed to these events in a process of fictionalization" (177). In other words, White's narrative emplotment is *de facto* taken by many as fictionalization: any selection, rearrangement, or explanation of facts inevitably seems to lead any text to become, in a sense, fictional, because its meaning is externally imposed on it (Schaeffer 180). This is not to say that scholars who, like White, called attention to the narrative structuring of historiography necessarily equated the truth-claims of all fictional and nonfictional genres. Rather, as White maintains, historiography promises to make reality understandable by imposing a teleological fictional consistency upon it: "The historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition upon its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess" (*The Content* 20). However, this does not mean that historiography is exempted from factual accuracy, because "unless a historical discourse acceded to assessment in these terms, it would lose all justification for its claim to represent and provide explanations of specifically real events" (*The Content* 45). According to White, then, historiography is a meaning-making enterprise that imposes external connotations upon events, but this does not mean that rather strict adherence to facts is unwarranted—in fact, it is what justifies historiography's claims to represent reality.

Be that as it may, the acknowledgment of the formal similarities between historiography and fiction—and crucially, their sharing of the narrative form—can be pinpointed as the pivotal moment when fiction fully embraced not only its potential to represent possibilities instead of actuality, but also its ability to portray historical events in more personal perspectives compared to the historical novels of the nineteenth century. Unlike the latter, the postmodern historiographic metafictions that Hutcheon discusses in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* display a claim to historical knowledge that is highly mediated through subjective experience while they reject "any sure ground upon which to base representation and narration, in either historiography or fiction" (Hutcheon 92). More importantly, though, the postmodern literature that put the similarity of historiography and fiction into relief interrogated one important corollary of the question, namely how readers can legitimately come to understand past events.

Since historiography has lost its claim to pure objectivity, can fiction serve as a way to know the past by offering a personal yet overtly fictional alternative? Works of historiographic metafiction might appear to do so, but GWOT veteran narratives are produced and consumed in a decidedly different cultural environment, one in which audiences are both fascinated by

nonfictional personal narratives and yet cannot trust even the most authoritative sources for factually accurate narratives. The representation of contemporary historical events like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by active eyewitnesses implicitly challenges the way other media have depicted the wars, whether fictional (predominantly in film) or nonfictional (e.g., reportages and the daily news), but veteran fiction is unapologetically *fictional* in its narration of *authentic* veteran experiences. That is to say, it does not simply set nonfictional autobiographical accounts against fiction, or fictional stories against nonfictional reports, but rather it serves as a counterpoint to both authoritative nonfiction as well as fiction produced by those who have not directly experienced the Global War on Terrorism.

Since these stories are firmly based on (or, rather, derive their authority from) personal experiences of war, yet another account of *mimesis* proves useful here. *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur's *magnum opus*, published in three volumes between 1983 and 1985, aims at investigating the connection between the human experience of time and humanity's narrative endeavors. To do so, Ricoeur reformulates the traditional idea of mimesis by integrating it with a revised hermeneutic circle: the result is a circle of "narrative and temporality," as Ricoeur calls it, in which *mimesis* is divided into three distinct but interrelated moments: mimesis_1, mimesis_2, and mimesis_3, or prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. Ricoeur recognizes that the moment of mimesis_2 is the pivotal point of his account of fictionality: "mimesis_2 draws its intelligibility from its faculty of mediation, which is to conduct us from the one side of the text to the other, transfiguring one side into the other through its power of configuration" (53). Instead of imitating experience, mimesis_2 is a configuration of said experience that makes it intelligible, and that is why Ricoeur, like Hayden White, recognizes the common process that associates the process of creation of—or rather, configuration of experience in—fictional and nonfictional works: "historiography comes to be inscribed within that great mimetic circle which we traversed in the first part of this study" (92). Of course, Ricoeur does not claim that history and fiction have the same claim to truth, but does—importantly—point out that both of these narrative-based activities have real-world consequences in the moment of mimesis_3.

Mario J. Valdés explains that "the idea of literature Ricoeur holds is that of a tradition of texts with a maximum capacity to induce the redescription of the world in the reader, it follows that the game we play as readers of and commentators on literature is that of world-making" (26). The real-world significance of these fictional narratives can, therefore, be best understood through Ricoeur's concept of threefold mimesis and, more specifically, with the help of crucial concepts like mimesis_2 and mimesis_3. In the following sections, I will discuss the implications of the use of these theoretical tools for the interpretation of the works of fiction

produced by veterans of the GWOT, which, once seen in this light, are revealed to be serious and legitimate instruments of narrative-based historical understanding.

2.4 True Wartime Stories: Experience and Configuration

Claiming that fictional narratives can effectively serve the same function as historiographic ones is a controversial move. While White has pointed out the similarities between the two modes, even going as far as suggesting that a fictional element is always present in historiographic narratives, endowing fictional narratives with the same responsibility as historiography is problematic: fiction is, by its nature, under no obligation to represent real or even plausible events, as in the case of fantastical tales whose setting or characters do not resemble the actual world or its inhabitants. And yet, fiction that takes place in the midst of controversial historical events is often met with strong critical responses that often question the reliability of such fictional narratives as sources of information about actual history. One—extreme—example of this phenomenon is the reception of Holocaust fiction. Undoubtedly influenced by the ethical complexity of making and consuming art that revolves around senseless genocide, readers and critics have not traditionally looked kindly towards fiction (Franklin 6). As Ruth Franklin has noted, this attitude shifted at the end of the Nineties, partially thanks to the discovery of a series of literary hoaxes, towards a scrutinizing approach that finds fault in any nonfictional memoir that might contain events that are not entirely accurate: "Suddenly, the slightest hint that even a single passage in a memoir might not be literally true is enough to cast doubt on the entire enterprise" (11). War fiction and war memoirs are characterized by similar concerns—fiction always seems dangerously close to a trivialization of sorrow, while memoirs face the enormous (and, to a certain extent, unreasonable) responsibility of complete and utter accuracy.

Given this entanglement of intents—especially evident in fictional genres that foreground the historical past—it is unsurprising that readers can expect to learn information about real historical events from a work of fiction. Generally speaking, both historiography and fictional narratives tell stories about a past time. Most stories are, after all, usually told in the past tense, and even though present-tense narratives[38] have somewhat risen in popularity in

[38] As I will point out in the following chapters, veteran *authofictions* tend to stay away from devices that too overtly gesture towards their own artificiality. Since most of these texts are configured as personal narratives, the use of present-tense narration in GWOT veteran fiction is unlikely because, as Irmtraud Huber explains, "in a

recent years (Huber 2), it could be argued that all narrations are experienced by readers as past events—as Mark Currie argues in *About Time: Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (2006), reading "involves the passage of events from a world of future possibilities into the actuality of the reader's present, and onwards into the reader's memory" (17). The act of reading is, then, a way to enter non-actual time that precedes the reader's, an artificial way to know or experience events that are not taking place in the present. Historiography is a prime example of such a textual representation, one that can make past events available to its audience by recording, reorganizing, and connecting what are deemed to be noteworthy historical events. As scholars like Hayden White have noticed, however, the formal similarities between historiography and fictional forms of storytelling point to a certain indeterminacy as to the authority claims of fictional and nonfictional discourses.

GWOT veteran narratives indubitably depict fictional events, but they do so in the larger frame of a narration of the Global War on Terrorism. This effectively means that when readers pick up a book authored by an American veteran, they can reasonably expect to gain access to valuable information about a—remarkably contemporary—historical event. Novels like David Abrams' *Fobbit* (2012) and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, which depict fictional particulars in the midst of well-known historical events, are not revolutionary in this sense. According to Georg Lukács, novels have employed similar techniques for centuries, even though the "historical novels" that were published before the works of Walter Scott were, in his opinion, mere narratives *in costume*. In his opinion, what set Scott's novels apart was the fact that his characters embodied the historical peculiarities of the era in which his novels are set instead of being essentially "contemporary" characters with modern psychology and mannerisms that are inserted by the author in a historical setting (19). GWOT veteran narratives are essentially immune from such criticism, since their writers have lived through the historical events that they depict.

Is it fair to argue, however, that novels set in contemporary times are "historical" novels? Conventionally speaking, historical fiction depicts more or less distant eras, periods of time that a great portion (or the entirety) of the audience has never directly experienced, and necessarily never will in the future. Finding a conclusive definition of the historical novel based on the amount of time that separates the audience and the historical events that serve as the background of the story is, however, a hard task. In *The Historical Novel* (2009), after

mimetic framework which is based on the conditions of real-life communication, simultaneous first-person narration seems to be all but impossible" (7).

mentioning contrasting examples of scholars defining historical fiction (at least partially) by measuring the distance between its production and its temporal setting, Jerome de Groot notes that the historical genre is characterized by "diffusion," that is, its use as a generic category lends itself to many different types of fiction (50). According to de Groot, the historical mode has been closely associated with the history of the novel itself (11), and historical fiction seems to be best identified with those fictional texts that use historical facts and offer a glimpse of the past from a perspective that is different from historiography. In this understanding of historical fiction, "novelists are important for their ability to take dry facts and information and invest them with fictional life, to somehow attempt to communicate what the past was *like*" (103). In other words, historical fictions fill in the empty spots of official sources to create a feeling of the past that is—arguably—beneficial for an improved understanding of a certain historical period.

The events of GWOT narratives written in the first two decades of the twenty-first century are necessarily contemporary, but it is safe to assume that the vast majority of their readers has virtually no direct access to these events and, due to the much-lamented veteran-civilian divide that exists in the United States, is unlikely to have a meaningful conversation with people who have witnessed the war first-hand. There is, then, a considerable experiential gap between soldiers and civilians (that is civilians who do not live in active war zones) when it comes to the events of War on Terror, events that, by their sheer geopolitical importance, as well as cost in human lives, almost instantly qualify as historical. Therefore, the representation of the unique experience of soldiers during these particular wars effectively constitutes a quasi-historiographic reconstruction of actual historical events through fiction. The subject matter of this particular "branch" of fiction is the Global War on Terrorism as seen through the eyes of those who have been materially affected by it in the first person, and the various characters that feature in the fictional narratives produced by veterans like, say, Phil Klay and Roy Scranton often strive to cover multiple points of view to show the multifaceted "reality" of war. In this specific sense, then, these narratives are clearly configured as personal historical narratives of present events, texts that invite their readers to meditate upon what are perceived by their writers as sometimes-overlooked contemporary issues that are shaping American and global history in profound ways.

The essentially pedagogical nature of this impulse raises questions that are intrinsic to the very nature of historical fiction. Because of its liminal status (fictional, but strives to be historically accurate), it necessarily interrogates the truth claims of both history and fiction and,

by its very existence, it points to the shortcomings of historiography and positions itself as an—at least—complementary instrument of historical understanding. As de Groot argues:

> An historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past (4)

This is especially true for an experience—war—that is not only completely foreign for most American civilians, but is also notoriously difficult to accurately convey. The adynaton trope that McLoughlin sees as one of the salient features of most personal narratives of war also plays a part in the positioning of war fiction as competing with historiography: if the experience of war is so baffling and excessive that it cannot be described and veterans find it difficult to turn said experiences into words, historians—most of whom cannot boast about the same direct knowledge—and their works are doubly challenged in this respect.

Unlike many traditional historical novels, however, it is crucial to bear in mind that GWOT veteran fiction does not only base its authenticity claims on thorough historical research—after all, much of the appeal that these texts have as historically meaningful works is derived from the association that is made between the author's direct, visceral knowledge of war and the events of the stories they compose. This is true for both fictional and nonfictional texts authored by veterans, like in the case of Phil Klay's novel *Missionaries* (2020), in which Klay's personal experience in Iraq is coupled with the extensive, on field research that he performed in Colombia before writing a book that engages with the recent history of the nation, or in Elliot Ackerman's memoir *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning* (2019), written after several deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, but not before an extended period of research at the border between Turkey and Syria. These credentials are featured prominently all over the dust jackets of these works to establish the trustworthiness of these texts that are therefore presented as the result of both private experience as well as historical and journalistic investigation. Readers are, thus, regularly encouraged to think about veteran fiction as a tool for historical understanding, something that Klay, among others, has explicitly pinpointed as one of the goals of his fiction—in his own words: "I want people to think about their recent history, imagine the lives of soldiers, and get a sense of what it's like to go to war" (*Uncertain Ground* 169).

A certain "confusion" with regard to the purposes of fictional and nonfictional stories is, therefore, an essential component of GWOT fiction. Such willingness to blur boundaries must be, however, shared by the reader if the whole enterprise is to succeed: readers must be willing to consider the insights that these texts offer as valuable beyond the text itself. In this respect, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, which emphasizes the way in which texts redescribe the world, is an invaluable ally to understanding the way in which these texts invite such an interpreting effort, walking the fact/fiction line and leveraging the personal experience of the author as an authenticating device for their fictional content. The first order of business, however, is to understand how fictional and nonfictional narratives are brought together in Ricoeur's theory of mimesis. Indeed, at the beginning of the first volume of *Time and Narrative,* Ricoeur argues that not only are historiography and fictional narratives structurally identical, but also that there is a "deep kinship between the truth claims of these two narrative modes" (3), and that history and fiction, taken together, offer a response to the aporias of time (*TN3* 99).

Taking its cues from Augustine's *Confessions* and Aristotle's *Poetics,* Ricoeur builds, throughout the three volumes of *Time and Narrative,* a comprehensive revision of the concept of mimesis, articulated in a theory that dissects it into three distinct but interconnected parts. Accordingly, as I have pointed out in the previous pages, Ricoeur calls it "threefold mimesis" to indicate the three moments of mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$, and mimesis$_3$, or narrative prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. It is important to bear in mind that the scope of Ricoeur's work in these three volumes is vast, and it concerns both narrative *and* time. The intuition that leads to the development of his own concept of mimesis is, indeed, the realization that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative" and that, correspondingly, "narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (*TN1* 3). The temporal nature of human experience and an understanding of action and its significance are the prerequisites for the definition of mimesis$_1$, which describes the way in which humans naturally conceive of reality in narrative terms: "To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimetics" (*TN1* 64). In other words, mimesis$_1$ is what enables the mimetic process. Our ability to imitate human actions in the narrative form is only possible because not only do we naturally understand what actions are and how they happen in time, but we also comprehend their significance beyond apparent physical changes (55).

Ricoeur's conception of narrative is, therefore, manifestly human, and, accordingly, it places enormous importance on experience. The second step of the process is, therefore, an elaboration of events that bears the traits of human understanding: the moment of $mimesis_2$ is one of mediation as well as the first interpretation of events and constitutes, in Ricoeur's mind, a revision of the Aristotelian concept of *mûthos* described in the *Poetics*. He calls this part of mimesis *emplotment*, or configuration of action (*TN1* 65). $Mimesis_2$ is the pivotal point of Ricoeur's concept of mimesis, and it possesses the essential function of mediation: it stands between $mimesis_1$ and $mimesis_3$, prefiguration and refiguration, and literally transforms events into stories: the plot is a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (*TN1* 66) that combines linear time, with its sequence of events, and the whole of the story with its end point. Extracting "configuration from a succession" (*TN1* 66), emplotment makes the story *followable* to its conclusion and ordering principle, the "sense of an ending," a phrase that Ricoeur borrows from Frank Kermode's eponymous book.

This is not, however, the culmination of the theory of mimesis that Ricoeur puts forward. Without the final step of refiguration in which the text encounters its audience, $mimesis_3$, the process is—from a hermeneutical perspective—noticeably incomplete:

> Hermeneutics, however, is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers. It does not confine itself to setting $mimesis_2$ between $mimesis_1$ and $mimesis_3$. It wants to characterize $mimesis_2$ by its mediating function. What is at stake, therefore, is the concrete process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work. (*TN1* 53)

As Ricoeur explains in the passage quoted above, the scope of his investigation encompasses the whole process of creation and reception of narrative works, from action to recollection and, eventually, reception, so much so that, in the final volume of *Time and Narrative*, he advances a theory of reading that accounts for each moment of the communicative process that is intrinsic to every work of art: "(1) the strategy as concocted by the author and directed toward the reader; (2) the inscription of this strategy within a literary configuration; and (3) the response of the reader considered either as a reading subject or as the receiving public" (*TN3* 160).

While it is safe to affirm that almost every narrative text is inherently communicative,[39] some works tend to foreground this intent, emphasizing their effort to connect with the reader in an uncompromisingly authentic way—as I have shown, this is the case for some literature of the post-postmodern period and of many texts authored by the veterans of the Global War on Terrorism. In cases such as these, limiting oneself to the structural analysis of a certain text appears to be a misjudgment of their potential for—as Ricoeur would put it—refiguration. Mimesis$_3$ is the moment that "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" (*TN1* 71), and it constitutes the final step of this larger concept of mimesis. As part of a redescribed hermeneutic circle, however, mimesis$_3$ also has the power of "refiguring the world of action under the sign of the plot" (*TN1* 77), thus influencing the moment of mimesis$_1$ and, consequently, mimesis$_2$. In other words—and indubitably simplifying Ricoeur's overarching aim in *Time and Narrative*—narrative discourses (both fictional and nonfictional) possess the capacity to exert a tangible impact on the actual world while they reshape the primary moments of the mimetic process.

The circularity of this process is not tantamount to a simple equation between the results of mimesis$_3$ and mimesis$_1$, because experience possesses a "prenarrative quality" and since humans seem to be naturally prone to seeing untold stories in sequences of events (*TN1* 74). The circularity of mimesis, far from being a vicious cycle, is, according to Ricoeur, a "healthy circle" (*TN1* 76) that enables understanding. As David M. Kaplan puts it, "our lives are inchoate stories with a prenarrative structure that only becomes fully intelligible when transformed into a narrative" (47). The role that the creative element plays in mimesis is essential to this process because it is instrumental in creating the "matrix of rules" that underlies narrations: "The productive imagination fundamentally has a synthetic function. It connects understanding and intuition by engendering syntheses that are intellectual and intuitive at the same time" (*TN1* 68). Emplotment enables the Kantian "grasping together" of the "point" of the story and its particulars—this "mixed intelligibility" constitutes the "schematism of the narrative function" lends itself, Ricoeur argues, to the development of typologies organized through, for example, genres (*TN1* 68).

Unsurprisingly, there is a dynamic element to the way stories are developed through time because the conventions that exist in various narratives are the result of previous

[39] The communicative nature of all narrative texts has been put into question by—among other scholars interested in unnatural narratology—Henrik Skov Nielsen, who argues that some narratives contain instances of non-communication, using as an example the reported thoughts of the unconscious narrator of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, who, as such, cannot be the sender of any information (78).

innovations that are gradually accepted as guiding lines for future storytellers. Indeed, Ricoeur understands *tradition* as the result of the interaction of innovation and sedimentation of both literary forms and individual works: "These paradigms, themselves issuing from a previous innovation, furnish the rules for a subsequent experimentation within the narrative field" (*TN1* 69). Every individual work upsets the balance in some way (*TN1* 70), and innovation—though itself stemming from previous rules—has a varied potential for change, even though it can never constitute a complete upheaval of tradition: "These rules change under the pressure of new inventions, but they change slowly and even resist change, in virtue of the very process of sedimentation" (*TN1* 69). Change is a slow process, and it necessarily stems from the "progressive deposit" of change.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the way the recognition of the effects of combat trauma in writing has, in time, resulted in the production of war stories that emphasize this phenomenon, and which have produced an abundance of trauma-related interpretations of said texts. Indeed, Roy Scranton's concept of the trauma hero—an attempt at accounting for the rise of trauma criticism and its apparent monopolization of war narratives—effectively bears the characteristics of the Ricoeurian conception of mimesis. While Scranton advances the idea that the trauma hero is an "ideological solution" to the problem of "the role of the hero in totalized industrial war" (14), this does not mean that the notion was artificially imposed on literature and society. The "propagation" of trauma hero narratives and interpretations functions through narrative texts that, as such, are influenced by the interplay between the poles of sedimentation and innovation that underlie the making of tradition (*TN1* 69). Innovation is more often than not a measured and deliberate affair, and therefore it is unsurprising that narratives that lend themselves to trauma hero interpretations have dominated the American cultural environment for an extended period of time.

There is another way in which the trauma hero idea illustrates the workings of mimesis, and it is through its potential to shape both narrative works and the actual world. Narratives influence both reality and its representations—as Scranton puts it, "[the myth of the trauma hero] dominates critical and scholarly interpretations of war literature, war movies, and the visual culture of war," but it also "shapes how children imagine war and how veterans remember it" (3). Just as British WWI poets like Wilfred Owen bemoaned the use of an old (literary) lie—Horace's quote "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" from the *Odes*—for jingoistic purposes, GWOT veteran narratives show the way in which cultural artifacts that narrate war influence the way actual wars are fought. In Phil Klay's "War Stories," for example,

two former service members consider the way in which they were, in a way, conditioned to think about military service and war:

> "My dad thought – flag raising at Iwo Jima. D-Day and Audie Murphy. And when I went in—"
> "Platoon and *Full Metal Jacket*." [...]
> "I bet more Marines have joined the Corps because of *Full Metal Jacket* than because of any fucking recruiting commercial" (*Redeployment* 234)

War narratives, whether in the form of popular movies such as Stanley Kubrik's *Full Metal Jacket* or the war stories that surround the Allied invasion of Normandy in popular culture, are shown to be instrumental in the way people approach issues such as military duty and military upbringing. The mentioning of Audie Murphy, the famous WWII hero who later starred as the protagonist Henry Fleming in John Huston's film adaptation of what is arguably the quintessential American war novel, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, emphasizes the interplay that exists between experience, history, and fictional storytelling.

Ricoeur's conception of mimesis allows for a more nuanced approach to narrative fictions, especially those that include a good deal of historiographic content, and their potential to "refigure" the world of the reader without in turn subjugating historiography to the realm of fiction: "once the theory of reading has been presented […] the contribution of the fictional narrative to the refiguration of time [will] enter into opposition to and into composition with the capacity of historical narrative to speak of the actual past" (*TN2* 160). The use of the phrase "opposition to and into composition with" is extremely significant here, because historiography and fiction can both claim to speak truthfully in Ricoeur's theory, which "does not separate the claim to truth asserted by fictional narrative from that made by historical narrative but attempts to understand each in relation to the other" (*TN2* 160). GWOT fiction must be understood, then, as a fundamental contributor to the creation of cultural memory regarding the first two decades of the twenty-first century in both the United States as well as in a majority of—mostly western, culturally speaking—countries.

GWOT veteran fiction could then be broadly considered—like many groups of works authored by veterans of other wars—as a way to re-introduce personal experiences in collective memory, including perspectives that might not reflect the exact historical events as they occurred, but are nonetheless "true." As the narrator of Klay's "Psychological Operations" claims, in some cases the most consequential thing is perception, and not reality (*Redeployment*

177). This can conceivably be true for both personal accounts of real events as well as the fictional reimagining of said events, but this assertion does imply that *any* personal perspective expressed through fiction is necessarily true and does not need to satisfy any obligation. After all, as Ricoeur argues in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, fiction may not be bound by the same constraints that tie history to "documentary proof," but it is nonetheless constricted by "internal necessity": "the stringent law of creation, which is to render as perfectly as possible the vision of the world that inspires the artist, corresponds feature by feature to the debt of the historian and of the reader of history with respect to the dead" (*TN3* 177). However, works like Klay's *Redeployment*, formally fictional but set within recent historical events and manifestly authored by expert eyewitnesses and, in many cases, combat veterans, bear the traces of the truth claims of not only fiction, but of historiography and memory as well.

2.5 Memorializing the GWOT: History and Testimony in Veteran Narratives

The stories that American veterans tell regarding the Global War on Terrorism, whether fictional or nonfictional, then, contribute not only to the way in which this particular historical event is remembered, but also to the definition of the role that the United States has played—historically and politically speaking—in the unfolding of the events that shaped the Middle East and the rest of the world at the beginning of the new millennium. As James E. Young has argued, narratives are part of the process of memorialization that follows every historical event, and they share some of the functions typical of monuments: "there are memorial books, memorial activities, memorial days, memorial festivals, and memorial sculptures" (4). Some of the earliest forms of memorialization for the Holocaust, he notes, were indeed not structures of sculptures, but texts: "The Yizkor Bikher—memorial books—remembered both the lives and destruction of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media: words on paper" (7). Like monuments—which Young identifies as a subset of the greater category of memorials—narratives about particular historical events are sites of memory, and they help those who have not experienced said events to construct a shared memory of it or, as Young puts it, "at least the illusion of it" (6).

In this respect, narratives and other alternative forms of commemoration challenge the archival nature of the knowledge that historiography can offer while providing a more personal and emotionally complex response to past events. As an example of this, Jeanne-Marie Viljoen

highlights the commemorative function that narratives have in the face of extreme violence and trauma, as in the case of Joe Sacco's graphic reportage *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), which depicts the author's search for testimonies of the Khan Younis massacre of 1956 in the Gaza strip. As she argues, graphic narratives are particularly appropriate ways of moving beyond the preoccupation shared by both Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek that an overreliance on accuracy and documentary truth can obscure the essence of violent events: "Poised as it is between fiction and nonfiction, [the graphic narrative aesthetic] can well accommodate the permutations and traces of memory" (152). Narrative works that exist at the intersection of fiction and nonfiction and address historical events mediate between the past and the present: "fiction complements history as a commemorative act as the novels bridge the national and cultural differences and remind us of the lost human voices and stories" (Kemaloğlu 199). Fiction promises to provide a counter-voice to official records by reintroducing a human element into history and by offering possible versions of otherwise lost historical details.

In its effort to provide readers with different—and decidedly more personal and exclusive—perspectives about the Global War on Terrorism, veteran fiction fulfills precisely these promises. David Abrams' *Fobbit*, for example, portrays army life in a Forward Operating Base in Iraq in ways that most civilians would not expect, and in decidedly less serious terms than those employed by newspapers and news channels. The opening paragraph of the book completely subverts the expectations that readers might have about the kind of activities in which American soldiers are engaged by showing their comparatively comfortable living conditions:

> They were Fobbits because, at the core, they were nothing but marshmallow. Crack open their chests and in the space where their hearts should be beating with a warrior's courage and selfless regard, you'd find a pale, gooey center. They cowered like rabbits in their cubicles, busied themselves with PowerPoint briefings to avoid the hazard of Baghdad's bombs, and steadfastly clung white-knuckled to their desks at Forward Operating Base Triumph. If the FOB was a mother's skirt, then these soldiers were pressed against the pleats, too scared, to venture beyond her grasp. (1)

In this passage, readers are immediately introduced to the military lingo—*fobbit*, or someone who works in a Forward Operating Base and possesses the faintheartedness of J. R. R. Tolkien's hobbits—that describes soldiers who work in conditions that closely resemble those

of civilian office workers in the United States. These members of the armed forces are depicted as juvenile and frightened, the opposite of what a "real" soldier "should" be.

In its portrayal of the protagonist, Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding Jr., who works as a public affairs officer like the author, *Fobbit* also comments on the way official information about what goes on in Iraq is manipulated and issued to American news agencies by the U.S. Army with the complicity of regular soldiers: "His job was to turn the bomb attacks, the sniper kills, the sucking chest wounds, and the dismemberments into something palatable—ideally, something patriotic—that the American public could stomach as they browsed the morning newspaper with their toast and eggs" (2). Narratives that stem from personal experience take it upon themselves to supplement such distortions: *Fobbit* highlights the "unspoken truths" of the GWOT, describing both the curious absence of combat hazard for some of the soldiers in Iraq, who spend their days essentially like they would in the United States, and the extreme violence and gore to which others are exposed daily. These circumstances are configured as essentially absent from the usual discourses that surround the war, and therefore constitute the core of a novel that acts as an essential companion to sources of knowledge that base their authority claims on hard evidence.

In this way, fiction completes the workings of historiography in its function of refiguring time—as Ricoeur puts it, the two are joined in an "interwoven refiguration," a term that he uses to describe "the conjoint effects of history and fiction on the plane of human acting and suffering" (*TN3* 101). To achieve this common goal, the two narrative modes borrow from each other: while historiography necessarily employs imaginative thought to create its stories, fiction mirrors the ways in which history refers to the past: "the intentionality of fiction produces its effects of detecting and transforming acting and suffering only by symmetrically assuming the resources of historicization presented it by attempts to reconstruct the actual past" (*TN3* 101-102). It is in this way that fiction configures time and makes it human, by offering a "quasi-past" (*TN3* 190) that serves as the counterpart to the narrating voice's present.

Fiction does not, however, really claim to represent events that have actually taken place—it presents a narrative of past events in relation to the narrating voice or, at least, to the time of reading: "Fictional narrative is quasi-historical to the extent that the unreal events that it relates are past facts for the narrative voice that addresses itself to the reader. It is in this that they resemble past events and that fiction resembles history" (*TN3* 190). This is the way in which Ricoeur separates the specific ways in which the modes of historiography and fiction function: one intends to stand for the actual past (*TN3* 186), while the other recounts an imagined past. It is at the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative* that Ricoeur addresses

the question of verisimilitude, mentioning the realist fiction that shares its origins with the historical novel: "Verisimilitude is then confused with a mode of resemblance to the real that places fiction on the same plane as history" (*TN3* 191). The essence of mimesis, he argues, goes beyond a simple mirroring of the past in fictional narratives—it is its "pastlike" quality that defines it: "The true mimesis of action is to be found in the works of art least concerned with reflecting their epoch […] It is precisely when a work of art breaks with this sort of verisimilitude that it displays its true mimetic function" (*TN3* 191). Works of fiction do not need to carefully imitate the actual historical past to enact their mimesis, and in fact it is in those narratives that stray from the familiar and the purely historical that the workings of mimesis are more remarkable.

What of novels and other fictional works that, instead, make explicit references to the actual past and to specific historical circumstances, like those produced by the veterans of the Global War on Terrorism? Ricoeur admits that because of the way they are constructed, they are not to be discounted as important documents about the past: "In this respect, it is certainly true that the great novelists of the nineteenth century can be read as auxiliary historians or, better, as sociologists before the fact, as if the novel occupied a still vacant place in the realm of the human sciences" (*TN3* 191). But the usefulness of the fictional mode as a way to address past events reaches its zenith when such events are so despicable that historiography—with its ambition to stand for the past as objectively as possible—seems inadequate to do justice to those who have suffered: "The more we explain in historical terms, the more indignant we become" (*TN3* 188). In these cases, fiction can leverage its "capacity for provoking an illusion of presence" (*TN3* 188) to aid in the remembrance of unforgettable things—events that, due to the amount of human suffering produced, *cannot* be forgotten.

Therefore, veteran fiction—like fiction written by non-veterans—offers a way to address such a difficult topic as war, and more specifically the Global War on Terrorism, in a form that is not as "burdened" by documentary proof as history is and, at the same time, one that allows for a hopefully more empathic treatment of the past. Because of this declared lack of factual accuracy, of course, fiction should not be held to the same "standards" of history, but one of the defining features of the texts that are being examined in this study is that they were all written by authors that are (and are presented as) eyewitnesses, individuals who have, in one way or another, directly participated in the historical events that their books reference. This is where these texts seem to cross into the territory of testimony, because the paratexts that surround them insist on lending epistemic authority to the fictional content of the book by proclaiming its truthfulness and linking it to the testimonial authority of the authorial persona.

Even the books authored by Matt Gallagher—who wrote an article titled "You Don't Have to Be a Veteran to Write About War"—usually present the author as a former member of the armed forces first, and a writer second. This is true for most GWOT veteran fiction, even though Roy Scranton, for example, seems to have decided, through time, to downplay his military background. If the dust jacket of his first novel characterized him as the author of a couple of books of essays and the editor of *Fire and Forget* before mentioning his deployment to Iraq, in the paperback edition of *War Porn*, the author consciously decided, presumably in accordance with the editor, to completely erase his involvement with the US Army. Scranton's choice not to emphasize his past as a service member was repeated in the bio used for his second novel, *I Heart Oklahoma*, in which he is described as such: "Roy Scranton has been a dishwasher, truck driver, phone psychic, door-to-door canvasser, caregiver, telemarketer, fry cook, short-order cook, soldier, and journalist." Here, the author's past as a "soldier" goes almost unnoticed, lost among an abundance of regular—and certainly more "mundane"—jobs.

Still, there is a strong connection between the authority that is granted to veterans as truth-tellers about the experience of war, and the reimagined stories that can be found in books such as Klay's *Redeployment* or Abrams' *Brave Deeds*. Naturally, these credentials are coupled—in most if not all veteran fiction—with standard disclaimers about the fictionality of the books' content, but that is not the only part of the paratext that a potential audience can use to decide its reading stance. If both historiography and fiction are the result of a process of mimesis, a reader can reasonably assume that—as Ricoeur claims is the case with many realist novels of the nineteenth century—that novels about the Global War on Terrorism contain valuable historiographic information about this particular historical event. They are, by definition, the result of the emplotment of lived experience, in a way akin to the tales of those who survived terrible historical events, who feel compelled to pass on their knowledge about the unspeakable violence they have witnessed, admonishing their readers not to forget.

Fiction is an essential player in the creation of a communally shared version of the past. As Astrid Erll argues in *Memory in Culture* (2011)—making extensive use of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis—literature has the ability to construct (re)imagined versions of the past, particularly in those cases when historiography seems to present blind spots, as frequently happens in war: "Literature fills a niche in memory culture, because like arguably no other symbol system, it is characterized by its ability—and indeed tendency—to refer to the forgotten and repressed as well as the unnoticed, unconscious, and unintentional aspects of our dealings with the past" (153). In GWOT veteran narratives, this potential for influencing cultural

memory[40] is coupled with the authoritative voice of an eyewitness who reassures the reader as to the visceral truthfulness of their fiction. As vehicles of cultural memory, then, veteran fiction is especially powerful, because it lies at the intersection of at least three different truth claims: it combines elements of fictional and historiographic truth telling with the epistemic primacy of testimony.

As Ricoeur notes in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), the impartial archival labor of the historian comes only after the tales of eyewitnesses:

> Yet we must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of confidence in principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past, which someone attests having witnessed in person, and that the principal, and at times our only, recourse, when we lack other types of documentation, remains the confrontation among testimonies. (147)

As the first "product" of memory—its first narrative emplotment—testimony acts as the ultimate referent of human history.[41] It is the first step in historiography's search for documentary proof and it "constitutes the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history" (*Memory* 21). Crucially, testimony ties its truth-value to the identity of its producer: "the assertion of reality is inseparable from its being paired with the self-designation of the testifying subject" (*Memory* 163), a process that is easily recognizable in many GWOT veteran narratives. However, this authenticating device must be accepted by a receiver when the world of the (oral or written) text meets that of the reader: "The witness asks to be believed. He does not limit himself to saying 'I was there,' he adds 'believe me'" (*Memory* 164). By tethering the truth of the testimony to their identity, the witness implicitly asks to be trusted as a storyteller—their credentials entail a request for belief.

[40] As Astrid Erll explains, the term has a long and intricate history: "research on cultural memory takes its origin from two strands of tradition in particular, both of which have their roots in the 1920s: Maurice Halbwachs's sociological studies on *mémoire collective* and Aby Warburg's art-historical interest in a European memory of images (*Bildgedächtnis*). Halbwachs and Warburg were the first to give the phenomenon of cultural memory a name ('collective' and 'social' memory, respectively), and to study it systematically within the framework of a modern theory of culture" (13).

[41] Ricoeur acknowledges that of course there are other objects that offer historians non-verbal traces of the past. Borrowing from Marc Bloch, he talks about these "vestiges of the past" as "unwritten testimonies": "urns, tools, coins, painted or sculpted images, funerary objects, the remains of buildings, and so forth" (*Memory* 170).

Of course, veteran fiction does not strictly constitute testimony. As I have already pointed out, its fictional nature is never hidden, but it is problematized by the looming autobiographical details of the author as well as by the interviews and blurbs that attest to the reliability of a particular work of fiction as a source of information about the GWOT. While other works of fiction that address the same historical event (like Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*) are sometimes described as containing essential truths about the longest war in the history of the United States, their fictional status can hardly be put into question. Only fictional narratives that have been authored by veterans or other eyewitnesses possess both the capacity of fiction to seemingly uncover untold historical truths while—partially—benefitting from the actual historical trustworthiness that is granted to those who have experienced these events firsthand. In other words, many veteran narratives of the Global War on Terrorism seem to carry with them the promises of testimony while at the same time being overtly characterized as fictional, thereby giving up any official claim to actual historical accuracy.

Testimony itself is not, however, completely free from fictional content. As noted by Jacques Derrida, "there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature" (29). Derrida used these words in his lengthy commentary to Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (2000), in which the latter composes a brief story that narrates a young man's near execution in the final years of the Second World War, a biographical detail he shares with his author. Derrida admits that determining the mode in which the story is narrated is extremely difficult and that the text might in fact be calling into question the function of the categories that could help defining it: "I do not know whether this text belongs, purely and properly and strictly and rigorously speaking, to the space of literature, whether it is a fiction or a testimony, and, above all, to what extent it calls these distinctions into question or causes them all to tremble" (26). Noticing how Blanchot interweaves autobiographical and historical situations with literary and philosophical self-references that culminate in the "unexperienced experience" of death (67), Derrida hints at the possibility of bearing witness through the imagination, thus combining the two apparently irreconcilable modes expression:

> Here things seem very clear and the reality of the referent appears to be named deliberately beyond the perforated veil, the net or mesh of fiction. Literature serves as real testimony. Literature pretends, through an excess of fiction—others would say lie—to pass itself off as a real and responsible testimony about a historical reality—without, however, signing

> this testimony because it is literature and the narrator is not the author of an autobiography. (71)

The Instant of My Death seems to demonstrate, then, that the limits between testimony and fiction are permeable, and that fiction can indeed serve as an effective form of testimony without technically being one, at least in a metaphorical way. Indeed, Derrida emphasizes this "that is to say" nature of fiction, noticing the tension between the "I's" of author, narrator, and character: "No one will dare assume the right, because no one will ever have it, to say that these three I's are the same; no one will ever answer for this identity of compassion" (72). The possibility of fiction is always entailed in testimony, and testimony can always pierce through the "mesh" of fiction.

This is also—at least partially—the reader's choice. Derrida seems to agree with Ricoeur when he affirms that "before coming to writing, literature depends on reading and the right conferred on it by an experience of reading. One can read the same text—which thus never exists "in itself"—as a testimony that is said to be serious and authentic […] or as a work of literary fiction" (29). The moment of reading and refiguration, $mimesis_3$, influences the text's ability to construct meaning cooperatively with the reader. Ricoeur, for example, argues that "a history book can be read as a novel. In doing this, we enter into an implicit pact of reading and share in the complicity it establishes between the narrative voice and the implied reader. By virtue of this pact, the reader's guard is lowered. Mistrust is willingly suspended. Confidence reigns" (*TN3* 186). Thus, he stresses the importance of certain reading stances, highlighting that readers might have different expectations about—and therefore adopt different interpretive strategies for—a text depending on how it is treated.

This is one of the reasons why it is not the authors of GWOT veteran narratives that, alone, decide to place their texts in a somewhat awkward position between fiction and testimony. The reception of these books depends on a number of factors: an important role in preparing the audience to the reading of any narrative is played by the various texts (or the absence thereof) that surround the text itself, pieces of writing that are not necessarily the product of the author's pen and that will adorn not only the cover, back cover, or the dust jacket, but also fill the initial pages and, in some cases, even the final ones. Of course, authors are usually not in complete control of the publishing process. The editor(s) and the marketing department might indeed choose certain reviews and develop blurbs that can influence the way in which a reader approaches a specific text—for example, the "revelatory" power of such personal narratives can be (and usually is) emphasized while their imaginative nature is

downplayed. Ultimately, these additions to the work itself are crucial to sell it—veteran narratives have been in relatively high demand in the United States during the Global War on Terrorism, as Roy Scranton notes in *We're Doomed, Now What?*: "There was money to be made talking vet (not a lot, but some), a certain celebrity to be won […] We were veterans. And for a shiny dime, we'd sell you our story" ("Back to Baghdad"). Being a moderately remunerative business, the way veteran narratives are presented and advertised is not only tied to the will of the author/editor pair and to long-standing genre conventions, but also—to an extent—dictated by market demands.

Of course, these "guidelines" have to be picked up and put into practice by the audience, whose role comes into play in the third moment of the Ricoeurian process of mimesis. The way in which the public reacts to texts is invariably complex and governed by multiple factors, not least of which are the peculiarities and inclinations of individual readers. The reception of these stories as authoritative, yet fictional, yet somehow quasi-historical and quasi-autobiographical also depends, in part, on other related texts: there exists a long tradition of autobiographically inspired works of literary fiction about war, and texts that explicitly play with the boundaries of history, autobiography and fiction are especially linked to the United States' involvement in the last major conflict before the GWOT, the one in Vietnam, with examples such as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (published during the war in Vietnam) and O'Brien *The Things They Carried*. The cultural influence of these books—now part of many high-school curricula—necessarily has an effect not only on readerly expectations about veteran stories, but also on the way civilians and soldiers alike envision military service and the experience of war. The unnamed protagonist of Nico Walker's *Cherry*, for example, is shown during the last few days before basic training while he (presumably) reads war literature as if in preparation for war: "When she went to work I'd do jumping jacks and read Kurt Vonnegut books and chain-smoke" (56). Ricoeur's hermeneutic and mimetic circle is clearly at play here—the experience of reading fiction about war influences the way in which the subject will understand it and organize into a narrative which will—likely—keep the circle going by again having an effect on the actual world of action.

Part of the reason why veteran fiction can have such a potentially significant impact on the way the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are memorialized is due to the fact that many critically acclaimed works have been published during its unfolding. The prolonged nature of this series of conflicts in the Middle East has, indeed, understandably rendered problematic the development of a widely accepted or "definitive" narrative about the role that the United States played in them. As Patrick Deer has noted, "The Iraq War lacks stable official or historical

narratives, a cohesive popular memory or an adequate documentary archive, and those responsible for the terrible and vast social, economic and human costs of the US invasion and occupation have yet to be held accountable" (426). This statement refers to the Iraq War in particular, but it could easily be applied to the wider context of the Global War on Terrorism—as a result, the "competition" to offer new ways to understand it appears to be wide open, especially in the American cultural environment, where the "vigorous self-censorship of US media outlets which seldom showed graphic images of US and Iraqi dead and wounded" effectively acted as a protective layer that shielded audiences from the traumatic consequences of an armed conflict (Deer 424). The trope of autopsy, as theorized by Kate McLoughlin, works to rupture the veil and promises to offer a more authentic account for these events, even through fiction, by exploiting the "widespread perception by reporters and recipients of information about war that the signs of combat experience enhance their accounts" (43).

To be effective, the author's credentials as a trustworthy storyteller must be accepted by the audience, and whether that is the case depends—as I have already stated—on both objective and subjective elements. For example, a reader can be more or less inclined to grant veteran authors more authority than the one that is conceded to other eyewitnesses and/or writers who cannot claim to have direct experience of a theater of war. Reasonably, the opposite can also be true: since veterans have by definition fought for one side, they can be construed as unavoidably biased, and therefore their narratives could even be dismissed as unreliable or as mere propaganda. The fact remains, though, that the way in which information is authenticated in the contemporary socio-cultural landscape is generally hostile to officially sanctioned narratives and remarkably favorable towards personal accounts, provided that they originate from sources that are not objectively trustworthy, but affectively effective. As Michalinos Zambylas has argued, this affective grounding of truth is typical of the "contemporary zeitgeist in which individuals or groups have affective investments in a truth claim rather than to the proof of its truthfulness as such" (54). Polarizing events such as wars—and especially wars that have not yet resulted in a seemingly cohesive narrative that is in some way coherent with the nation's history—are naturally prone to producing politically charged interpretations. Therefore, every commentary about these events can easily be charged with various counts of partisanship. While, theoretically, eyewitnesses could also be accused of providing partial accounts, the narratives they produce bear the authenticating force of the testimony, the primary referent of historiography. The eyewitness produces knowledge that challenges the work of historiographers, as Ricoeur has argued: "With this sort of contemporary history, the archival work is still confronted with the testimony of the living,

who themselves are often survivors of the event considered" (*Memory* 336). This means that the truth value of narratives produced by eyewitnesses is inextricably tangled with the identity of their author.

In the contemporary United States, veteran writers are fully aware of the way in which veterans are treated, for better or for worse, and they understand that—as active participants in these historical events—they possess a great deal of authority even if they decide to communicate their experience through fiction. In the words of Roy Scranton, there is "a lot of support and respect from audiences, especially if you suggested you had PTSD. But the best part was that you got to keep being special" ("Back to Baghdad"). The exceptional nature of veteran authors is tied to their status as both survivors of extremely dangerous events and knowledgeable members of the armed forces and their internal mechanisms. Veteran narratives are "insider" stories constructed by people who have access to confidential information and knowledge that the majority of American civilians have no way of accessing. In the case of fiction, however, these credentials have to be highlighted to maintain their effect on the reader, who might otherwise not associate the author's military service with the fictional content of a book. As Scranton has argued, the "veteran" label acts as a bridge that connects the author to history and moral authority:

> The problem with being a veteran is that the aura you have coming home fades as soon as you do something else. Once you stop making your identity all about the war, you lose your connection to world-historical events. People quit asking you to explain the nature of human suffering, international politics, and the essence of truth. You lose your moral authority. ("Back to Baghdad")

The performance of a sort of veteran "identity" seems therefore essential to the persistence of the storytelling authority associated with surviving war—the connection between the individual author and the real-world conflict imbue narrative fiction with the legitimacy of testimony, strengthening its contribution to the formation of a collective memory of the Global War on Terrorism.

As Colum McCann writes in his preface to *Fire and Forget*, the writing of war is a much more personal affair for veterans: "for fifteen writers of this anthology, the war is not simply a sequence of unpleasant images or unremitting woes. By entering into the lives of their characters, they allow the reader access to the viscerally intense but morally ambiguous realities of war" (viii). The authors of the short stories seem not only to go into detail about the

minds and hearts of their characters, but they also appear to inhabit them, easily "entering into their lives" because they have actually lived extremely similar experiences. These are, however, imaginative retellings and not memoirs, which would fulfill a slightly different function. Nonfictional accounts were rather abundant in the first years of the GWOT, what was missing was the manifestly fictional element that can create for the reader an illusion of presence within the story. As McCann puts it in the same preface, "we don't yet have all the stories, the kind of reinterpretive truth-telling that fiction and poetry can offer" (viii). Many veteran stories are told in the fictional mode as if that were the only possible way to convey the surreal experience of war, but fictionalization is not only a necessity, but also a conceptually different mode of narration that seems to demand different reactions from its readers.

According to Ricoeur, the process of mimesis ultimately has the power to refigure the world of action, but fiction in particular displays qualities—surprising ones, if one defines fictional entities as "unreal"—of "revelation and transformation of life and customs" (*TN3* 101). Fictional narratives have, if understood in this way, a markedly rhetorical component to them. As Arne Melberg has argued, "Linguistic signs refer to a reality *beyond* their own reality; but literary language […] makes a problem of exactly this *beyond*, and of the relation between meaning and reference" (4). In other words, fiction inherently problematizes its claim to truth while at the same time being unfalsifiable: "The […] unstable relation between sign and signified makes way for the unpleasant experience of never knowing for sure" (Melberg 4). If understood through this lens, the fictional narratives produced by GWOT veterans present rather interesting characteristics: they are positioned on the literary market as imaginative yet authoritative reconfigurations of actual war experience, unburdened by factual accuracy but at the same time authenticated by virtue of their author's credentials. Simultaneously, however, they contain traces of their possibly misleading nature—if read carefully, they even contain several instances in which veterans are depicted while they use their authority as survivors for personal gain, and in doing so, they complicate the communicative act of narrating war.

Unlike the various memoirs that have been published since the beginning of these wars, narrative fiction retains the authority of testimony while removing the constraint of falsifiability. The legal dimension of testimony—emphasized by both Derrida in *Demeure* and Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*—is set aside. Trust is still requested, but there is no way to ascertain or question the truthfulness of the narrative, which exists beyond the possibility of questioning it. While this chapter has been aimed at analyzing the intricate ways in which fiction and nonfiction are intertwined, including their cooperation and/or competition, then, we now need to assess how these fictional narratives are different from the numerous

nonfictional accounts of the Global War on Terrorism. Accordingly, the next chapter will focus on exploring the mechanisms underlying *authofiction*, the term that I have been using to designate many of the fictional narratives about the GWOT produced by eyewitnesses and, specifically, those that emphasize their "truthful" or "authentic" nature of their content by foregrounding their authorship. To do so, I will underline the importance of a comprehensive interpretive framework that takes into account all of the three moments of mimesis that Ricoeur has described in *Time and Narrative*, starting with prefiguration, passing to configuration, and finally to refiguration. In keeping with this interpretive stance, my approach to the specific issue of fictionality in these texts is rhetorical—through the use of Richard Walsh's rhetorical theory of fictional discourse, I will show how these texts negotiate the fact/fiction divide and present themselves as serious interpretive tools for the real world. In this respect, I will also comment on how these narratives complicate the relation between lived experience and fictional recollection in a way that resembles autofictional narratives.

Of course, not all of the fiction written by veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can automatically be inserted into the "authofiction" category. Spanning more than twenty years, the GWOT has produced diverse and heterogeneous responses that have contributed (and continue to contribute) to a rich literary output. In this regard, the next chapter provides an exploration of the common characteristics of these works, which I have divided into two categories. I think it is crucial to differentiate between two sets of features, the first of which groups those that are useful to identify a narrative as *authofictional*, while the second comprises its textual developments—other characteristic traits that can be found in many of these stories, especially as far as theme and form are concerned. This does not mean that all of these texts are exactly alike, and it is in fact, crucial to keep in mind that they have intrinsic specificities because, even though they are all explicitly fictional, they are personal narratives of war written by those who have survived these wars, and as such each of them entertains a slightly different relationship with its author. That being said, despite the heterogeneity of these works of fiction, I believe it is critically necessary to have a clear overall picture of their similarities because they constitute a distinct literary phenomenon that provides invaluable insights into the cultural and literary history of the United States.

3. *Authofictions*: Veteran Narratives and Fictionality

3.1 "Flipping the Authenticity": Veteran Authorship and Authority

In a 2013 article for the *New York Times* titled "A Problematic Genre: The 'Kill Memoir,'" Brian Van Reet addressed the rise—at the end of the "first leg" on the war in Iraq—of a worrying amount of veteran nonfiction focused on the lone American soldier and his personal body count. Van Reet, himself a veteran and a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, calls this genre "The Kill Memoir," and describes its troubling yet simple mechanisms that promise an authentic—but suspiciously sensationalistic—account of war experiences:

> So far, the best-known books in this genre are "American Sniper" and "No Easy Day." They have sold millions of copies, and their subtitles tell the tales: "The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History"; "The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden." And now we can add "Carnivore's" vaguely superlative "A Memoir by One of the Deadliest American Soldiers of All Time."
>
> The two-part formula is apparent enough. First, the claim to authenticity (autobiography, memoir, firsthand). And second, the assurance that the reader will learn the intimate details of taking human life. ("A Problematic Genre")

The effectiveness of "Kill Memoirs," as Van Reet defines them, is predicated upon the authority that is granted to their authors as "authentic" (and "authorized") storytellers, similar to what I have been calling *authofictions*. In both cases, this authority needs to be projected by veteran authors as well as granted to them by civilian readers who, as regards kill memoirs, are cut off from the central topic of the books—the experience of war and combat.

In general, many books about the Global War on Terrorism initially followed a similar script. Indeed, autobiographies, memoirs, and nonfiction texts constituted the bulk of the earliest literary responses to the GWOT, a fact that—as I have shown—is coherent with the tendencies that the American literary market showed at the time. While not all of these texts could boast a veteran author, several could at least count on the authoritative presence of a different kind of eyewitness, such as an embedded journalist. For instance, this was the case for Evan Wright's *Generation Kill*, which narrates his involvement with the First Reconnaissance Battalion of the US Marine Corps in the early days of the Iraq War. In the first pages of the book, Wright characterizes those who have served immediately after 9/11 as the nation's first "disposable" (5) generation, highlighting their exceptional nature as the United States' tool for violent geopolitical action: "Since the 9/11 attacks, the weight of America's 'War on Terrorism' has fallen on their shoulders. […] few would be shaken to discover that they might actually be leading a grab for oil. In a way, they almost expect to be lied to" (6). His reportage shows him in close quarters with the marines, experiencing war alongside them without the burden of direct responsibility over the lives of Iraqi civilians—thus, the text can tap into the same aura of authority of those who took an active part in exceptional historical events.

However, these narratives forcefully maintain their allegiance to the idea of factual accuracy, and are therefore falsifiable. Indeed, Van Reet quotes in his article a few instances in which the factual accuracy of "kill memoirs" is put under scrutiny: "The claim has been widely questioned […] If Mr. Johnson actually killed the number of people attributed to him by his publisher, it would make him personally responsible for the deaths of about one in seven enemy combatants the American government reported killed in action during the first four years of the Iraq war" ("A Problematic Genre"). More importantly, nonfiction about the GWOT has been accused of failing to truly depict the most important issues underlying these wars, in a way covering them under a veil of sensationalism and inconsequential details: "Rather than complicate the question or subvert it or implicate the American public as a party to what was done in its name, these books simply answer in the most spectacularly affirmative way possible: 'Did I kill anybody? Hell, yeah. His name was Osama bin Laden. Maybe you heard of him.'" (Van Reet).

In a similar vein, Roy Scranton praises *Generation Kill*'s accuracy as a window into the life of those who materially initiated Operation Iraqi Freedom, but at the same time, he criticizes its excessive reliance on the experience of a few soldiers. While this particular criticism is primarily directed at the HBO miniseries adapted from the book—a series that, in

Scranton's opinion, *dramatizes* Wright's journalism ("Going outside" 558)—the limited scope of David Simon and Ed Burns' adaptation of *Generation Kill* seems inherited from the book itself:

> There is no question that *Generation Kill* is a 'realistic' portrayal, but in the narrowness of its scope and in its close identification with a mere handful of Marines, we only get a very limited view on 'reality', a view that happens, by its lack of any context or divergent perspective, to conform with an unexamined belief in American exceptionalism and imperial supremacy. ("Going outside" 563)

In other words, works like *Generation Kill* and the "kill memoirs" that Van Reet criticizes in his article may rely heavily on hard facts and firsthand experience, but they frequently do so at the expense of the possibility of offering a more meaningful (and somehow "truthful") "bigger picture" to the readers. Instead of helping them understand (and cope with) the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it could be argued that some of these books merely enable audiences to have a voyeuristic peek at the extreme violence of warfare while protecting them from the "real" and more controversial issues.[42]

Scranton argues that fiction fulfills an entirely different function, even when it is closely associated with real events: "Fiction, on the other hand, as much as it may reflect on the world, takes us that step into metaphor, into the imagined, into the shaped narrative that gives meaning to events" ("Going outside" 561). Seemingly agreeing with Scranton, Van Reet argues that some of the best texts that can help readers navigate the morally impervious territory of the GWOT are indeed works of fiction, especially because they can seemingly remove the barrier between eyewitness and audience by creating the illusion of presence: "Fiction, […] is truth through fable and story, highly empathetic and moral even when flouting conventional morality. Good fiction eradicates the barrier between self and other, while the kill memoir reinforces the military-civilian divide" ("A problematic Genre"). Truly enough, while many

[42] In *Wartime* (1989), Paul Fussell notes that many veterans of WW2 lamented the absence of gory details in the representation of war, something they were instead well accustomed to: "What annoyed the troops and augmented their sardonic, contemptuous attitude toward those who viewed them from afar was in large part this public innocence about the bizarre damage suffered by the human body in modern war" (270). While some veteran narratives promise to offer an "unfiltered" version of the events, one that includes all the unpleasant realities of combat, it must be noted that such an insistence on the painstaking representation of extreme violence can instead divert attention away from other issues dear to veterans.

memoirs and reportages dominated the sales charts in the first few years of the century, at the turn of its first decade, some of the most critically acclaimed literary works about the war were decidedly fictional.

These novels and short stories, Van Reet maintains, are in a way preferable to those nonfiction works that rely solely on facts for their efficacy. As he argues, fiction's ambiguous relationship with facts seems to have a liberating effect on it, making way for the creation of an aesthetic object that combines experience and imagination, and whose claim to truth is not dependent on reality: minute

> One benefit of war fiction is that it does not succeed or fail based on accurate body counts or who really fired the fatal shot into Bin Laden's skull. The fiction writer, and not facts, is the ultimate arbiter of truth, using his or her experience, along with interesting fabrications and a number of different tones not readily accessible through a memoir to create something greater and truer than the sum of its parts. ("A Problematic Genre")

This is the paradoxical nature of fictional authority—authors do not actually claim that the content of their work is faithful to real-world happenings, but at the same time the result of their work is beyond questioning and, as Van Reet says, "truer than the sum of its parts." In the fictional mode, the ultimate source of authority is, obviously, the author.

However, while Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2012) and Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) were among the first works of fiction authored by civilians to reach widespread acclaim, the same cannot be said about works like Abrams' *Fobbit* (2013), Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2012), and Klay's *Redeployment* (2014). If, in the first case, it could be argued that fiction works to let civilians partake in the telling of war stories, the situation changes when the fiction writer is also an eyewitness. In other words, even though fiction should level the playing field, granting every storyteller the same amount of authority over the particular subject they decide to address, veterans seem to retain their position as tellers of "higher truths" even, or especially, in fiction. Tackling the issue of the seemingly unavoidable transformation into an authoritative veteran storyteller in "Back to Baghdad," one of the stories/essays in *We're Doomed, Now What?* (2018), Scranton describes his personal experience in these terms: "I had wanted to use my experience, certainly, turn my war into a kind of cultural capital, an investment in my writing career just as the GI Bill was an investment in my education. […] So okay, I'd hustle, flipping the 'authenticity' of my war for a chance to keep writing" ("Back to Baghdad"). In the story, Scranton narrates his return to Baghdad about

ten years after his deployment, a tale that is interrupted by several ruminations about his responsibility as an American soldier as well as his subsequent life as an aspiring academic and somewhat reluctant "professional veteran" writer.

A sort of "great schism" in the veteran writer community is hinted at in the section of the story that addresses his duty as a veteran storyteller. While sitting in a pub with Matt Gallagher, with whom he has co-edited *Fire and Forget*, Scranton realizes that some of his colleagues seem to have started to be complacent with their success and with the authority that is being granted to them as storytellers. What is more, he recognizes that he himself is starting to become part of the problem:

> The focus shifted over time from trying to plumb the depths of experience to something else: trying to convey something to audiences, trying to relate something you knew to something they knew, trying to make a connection. As we'd gone on, we'd created our own set of conventions and expectations, shorthand tropes and easy frames that dulled questions and blurred complexity, because that's what's necessary for translating lived reality into language other people can comprehend. What I realized talking with Matt in Pete's Candy Store, over my last beer of the night, was that I had long ago stopped learning anything new about my war. I had gone from being someone who asked what it meant to being someone who explained what it was like. ("Back to Baghdad")

Here, Scranton laments the seemingly undesirable transition from the use of fiction as a tool for understanding war to an instrument of—rather simplistic—explanation from an experienced sender for an inexperienced receiver. Instead of complicating their involvement in the Global War on Terrorism, he argues, some of the writers in the group of veterans that contributed to *Fire and Forget* were starting to take on the mantle of the wounded veteran, acting as the only ones who could reveal special knowledge about the war to clueless civilians.

This is not to say that there exists a firm division between Scranton's fiction and the works of Klay, Abrams, Van Reet, and Gallagher. To be quite clear, the latter is well aware of the authority that comes with his role as a veteran storyteller—as I have already mentioned, he dedicated an entire article to the issue on *Literary Hub*, arguing that "war as a writing subject is not a mystical crucible for a chosen few who've stared into the Eye of the Beast to render understanding for the masses" ("You Don't Have to Be a Veteran"). However, Gallagher realizes, as Scranton does with the concept of the "trauma hero," that the issue is not only caused by veterans who boast about the unique perspective that they can offer after returning

home. Instead, he acknowledges that the belief that veterans are the only ones who can narrate war is "ever pervasive" in American society, as readers are often too ready to grant such authority to veterans even when they do not request it.

Veteran fiction about war is, therefore, often perceived as unavoidably different from fiction authored by civilians—after all, as Kristina Busse has suggested, the attention that readers and critics alike give to the authorial persona has steadily increased in recent years, reversing the efforts of literary criticism inspired by structuralist theory: "The concept of the author has returned with a vengeance as the author's persona, background, and credibility become the ultimate measuring stick for any critical approach" (49). It seems that not only have audiences mostly retained their interest in authors even throughout the years when structuralism was the dominant cultural force in academia, but they also found an ally in theory itself: "In fact, much of literary criticism of the 1980s and 1990s grappled with the question of how to combine identity politics with the theoretical insights of postmodernism and deconstruction" (55). Joining the influence of Foucauldian questions of power in the production of culture and the rise of identity politics, the importance of the figure of the author was rekindled, in the last decades of the century, as an ethical category: "It is here that I want to locate the return of the author, not as authorial intent maker but instead as the position of ethos, the place where the authorial identity gives the writing an ethical impetus, a moral authorial character" (Busse 55).

Contemporary readers are exceedingly mindful of the implications that arise when one picks up the pen, especially for marginalized groups that were—and in some cases still are—forcibly silenced: "Authorial identity remains a central concern for marginal subjects, that is, those that do not occupy upper middle class, white, male, straight, able-bodied, cisgendered, Western positions" (Busse 55). Therefore, certain works can be received by audiences in markedly different ways depending on the authorial personae associated with them—as various cases of literary hoaxes attest to, this also applies to testimonial narratives that are revealed to be fictional or, rather, inauthentic. The identity (or ideological position) of the author is, thus, among the many factors that readers have to consider when they decide how to interpret a specific text. Busse argues that it is not only a significant detail but, in fact, a necessary one: "Far from having dismissed authors and their intentions, current reading practices require authorial identities for their interpretive processes" (49). This means that a reader is likely going to take into account the fact that they are reading fiction produced by an eyewitness of a particular historical event as opposed to that which is created through imagination alone.

In this respect, one obvious problem is constituted by the fact that considering veterans as either a uniform or disadvantaged group is hardly an easy or even legitimate endeavor. As many veteran authors have stressed time and again, the professional armed forces of the United States are not simply composed of underprivileged people and ethnic minorities, people who—in the common imagination—have no other choice but to join the military to have a chance at a better life. As Phil Klay puts it:

> There continues to be a cynicism about the motives of those who volunteer for the military. I've been repeatedly told people don't really enlist because they want to , but because they have to […] all the veterans I know who are Ivy League graduates have had the unpleasant experience of people acting as though they'd made some sort of bizarre choice to spend time with the peons […] This is the "poverty draft"—the idea that with the elimination of the draft, we shifted the burden from the whole society to only the most poor and disadvantaged. (*Uncertain Ground* 74)

Although military service during the GWOT has been shown to result in "increased civilian wages for those who are at or below the median civilian wage" (Brown, Routon 564), Klay maintains that individuals who possess a low-income background actually constitute a minority in the armed forces: "The demographics of the military don't support the image—it's actually the middle class that's best represented in the military, and the numbers of high income and highly educated recruits rose to levels disproportionate to their percentage of the population after the War on Terror began" (*Uncertain Ground* 74). Klay further emphasizes that a majority of service members has consciously chosen to volunteer to dispute this transformation of service into a self-interested act, both because it is degrading and because it takes responsibility away from veterans as moral agents.

In *War & Homecoming*, Travis L. Martin chooses to employ, time and again, the term "intersectional" to describe the complex nature of the identity of veterans, even though he does not explicitly quote Kimberlé Crenshaw's coinage of the term in the process: "veteran identity is intersectional and nonmonolithic. No two veterans are the same: social identities ranging from gender to race, socioeconomic class, religion, and ability shape veterans' perspectives before, during, and after service" (141). While this appears like an appreciable effort, *War & Homecoming* seems to equate "veteran identity" to other social identities, apparently raising the self-perception of individuals as belonging to the veteran community to issues such as race, gender, and sexuality. As Rachel E. Luft has argued, the popularity of intersectionality has

resulted in its widespread use for a number of issues, even some that are not connected to the original aims of intersectional studies. As such, one of the risks of the nowadays common application of intersectional frameworks is "the appropriation of 'race, class, and gender' language for the progressive currency it brings, without attendant antiracist, anticlassist, and antisexist practices" (103). While they obviously constitute a minority of citizens in the United States, the "veteran" category is not generally perceived unfavorably in society—veterans are not usually discriminated against or silenced and can be, instead, quite vocal about their experience in war. While it is valuable to investigate the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect with the self-perception of veterans as belonging to a more or less defined community, it is important to bear in mind that being a veteran frequently amplifies one's authority instead of suppressing it.

To illustrate this point, it is worth pointing out that the New York-based "vet writer community" (Scranton "Back to Baghdad") of the early 2010s even received space in the "spotlight" section of the January 2015 issue of *Vanity Fair*, complete with a picture featuring Phil Klay, Elliot Ackerman, Kevin Powers, Matt Gallagher, Maurice Decaul, and Brandon Willits. The latter is the founder of Words After War, a literary nonprofit organization that aims at connecting veteran and civilian war writers, while Decaul is a black veteran poet. The report, authored by Lea Carpenter—writer of the war novel *Eleven Days*—describes the group as the heralds of "a new literature emerging from a new fight. Like their predecessors, these men are veterans […] They grew up in war, so it's no shock they've decided to try to understand what it means. Homer famously wrote of war that "it would take a god to tell the tale," though, of course, it only takes a writer with God-given gifts." Of the six, Klay, Ackerman, Powers, and Gallagher have become well-established authors: they had their work published by one of the "big five" publishing companies, in their case mainly working with Penguin Random House and the Simon & Schuster groups, and have regularly lent their pen to widely read periodicals like *Time*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*, as well as to national newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, among others. Some have, like Klay and Scranton, gone on to teach in academic institutions, while Gallagher has contributed to writing programs in collaboration with NYU, further legitimizing their voice as veteran fiction writers and academics.

What emerges from this overview is that some former members of the armed forces have, over time, combined their credentials as veterans of the GWOT with other additional markers of authority. Predominantly white and male, the most successful authors of veteran fiction have become expert truth-tellers that civilians can interrogate when in need of

clarification about the United States' military undertakings. As Scranton notes in *We're Doomed*: "Matt [Gallagher] […] had recently been interviewed in his Brooklyn apartment by CBS. They'd knocked on his door after the fall of Fallujah and wanted him to tell them what it meant. Did it change how you thought about our sacrifice? Had our soldiers died in vain?" ("Back to Baghdad"). Gallagher, seen by Scranton as one of his fellow veteran authors trying to make sense of their experience in the war through writing, has suddenly found himself turned into perhaps *the* most authoritative interpretive voice on matters of foreign policy, war, and personal sacrifice. Understandably, then, readers are heavily influenced in their interpretation of the texts produced by these veterans precisely because they had an active role in the extremely violent events that they witnessed. Veteran writers are acutely aware of the impact that they can have as agents of historical change—as Scranton articulates it in "Back to Baghdad": "Ten years ago, I'd been among history's actors, a bit role but nonetheless on the stage, a minor piece in a great game." Having been an active participant in the invasion of Iraq and therefore sharing the direct responsibility for the consequences of the event, Scranton ponders the reality-making power that he possesses, even as a small cog in the American military-industrial complex.

In the story, Scranton mentions a conversation quoted in Ron Suskind's article "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," usually attributed to the then-senior advisor to the president Karl Rove: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." The history-making power of the United States—intended both as geopolitical military strength as well as cultural hegemony that leads to "favorable" history writing—is shared, in small parts, by its citizen-soldiers who narrate their war stories, veterans that, in turn, create "new realities" of their own.

The recognition of such a power emphasizes the distortions, erasures, and perspective shifts that are inherent in any war story—issues that can, however, be strategically employed to mold the actual world to one's liking. Indeed, Suskind's article also quotes another expression used by the same aide to the president, namely the concept of a "reality-based community": "The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore.'" Suskind refers to Bush's tenure as a "faith-based presidency" that created an

environment in which factual information is sneered at in favor of "gut feelings"—a sort of ante-litteram post-truth era, the early years of the new millennium were characterized by abundant disinformation: the justification of Operation Iraqi Freedom famously relied on the allegations made by both the US and the UK that Iraq was stocking WMD (weapons of mass destruction), accusations that were almost immediately revealed to be based on faulty intelligence at best (U.S. Senate 14), if not utterly manufactured to mislead the public.

3.2 The Role of Fictionality in Veteran Narratives

So far, I have been exploring how veterans are granted a considerable amount of authority when speaking about war and other related issues in both fiction *and* nonfiction. The trustworthy nature of the veteran is, indeed, certified by the testimonial contract that exists between the survivor and their audience when they recount their lived experience, marking the globally nonfictional terms in which this transaction happens. As I have already touched upon, the GWOT was predominantly chronicled and commented upon in nonfiction, and some of the most popular texts associated with it are markedly nonfictional. In this respect, the ghostwritten accounts of Chris Kyle (*American Sniper*), Marcus Luttrell (*Lone Survivor*), and Mark Owen (*No Easy Day*) are—at the time of writing—some of the books related to the War on Terror with the highest number of ratings on Goodreads.com, with figures that far surpass those of Klay, Ackerman, Powers, etc.

Far from being purely objective texts, however, the aforementioned "kill memoirs"—to use Brian van Reet's definition—are ostensibly the product of a veteran's memory and, crucially, the expertise and the artistic skills of the ghostwriter. The human experience is, at the least, doubly mediated, and readers can rightly or wrongly assume that a ghostwritten memoir might contain a higher percentage of fictional content as opposed to one that was written entirely by one author. A certain degree of fictionality is to be expected—as Ricoeur and White argued, among others—in any kind of narrative text, even those that claim to be faithful representations of actual events. What texts claim to be is, indeed, one of the most important markers that readers have at their disposal to determine the narrative "mode" employed by the author(s). If such a label were absent, the reader would have to completely guess the author's intention as to how the text should be (or could be) "correctly" received. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains it:

> If […] we are presented with unknown texts and asked: "is this fiction or nonfiction," our answers will be right or wrong, because they will not be an assessment of what the text is all about, but a guess of the author's intent. Fictionality is indeed a type of game that authors invite readers to play with texts: a game variously described as make-believe, suspended disbelief, or immersion in an imaginary world. (32)

The recognition of a certain piece of writing as fictional or nonfictional is then—just like the identity of its author—another factor that influences the interpretive response of readers. The moment of mimesis$_3$, that of the encounter of the world of the text and that of the reader, continues to be a pivotal one, because it is here that the text can effectively change the world of action.

The fictional or nonfictional status of a text can, therefore, be partially determined by the readers themselves. Historical narratives can be treated as novels (*TN3* 186) and fictional narratives can serve as valuable sources of information about reality. As Mark Rowe has argued, this is especially true in the case of narratives that heavily reference real-world events: "In the case of historical novels and films, for instance, reading a historical novel because you want to find out what living in a certain era was like strikes me a perfectly reasonable literary reason for reading it" (340). But since nonfictional texts inevitably contain some fictional content, as Ricoeur has argued, and fictional texts can and frequently do contain references to real world objects or happenings, it is reasonable to ask *to what extent* a text might be fictional or nonfictional, and if texts can at times employ both fictional and nonfictional modes of narration. In fact, this seemingly variable nature of texts raises questions about the nature of fictionality and the specific ways in which imaginative narrative texts whose truthfulness is emphasized and certified by their author's identity function.

Traditional understandings of fictionality, like those that I have considered in the previous chapter, fail to account for the way in which what I called *authofictions* purport to be actually informative texts that speak seriously about the real world. In this respect, the issue of fictional reference poses ontological problems for those theories that tackle it, for example, in reference to possible worlds or games of make-believe: in these views, fiction can never truly address the real world because it references things that are external to it. Even Ricoeur, whose hermeneutical approach allows for the inscription of the problem of fictional reference in the larger issue of the relation between narrative and time (*TN3* 100), and which is resolved in the interwoven reference of fiction and history in refiguring human time, does not grant fiction the possibility to fully represent actual events. Commenting on the use of real historical events in

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Ricoeur remarks:

> All references to real historical events are divested of their function of standing for the historical past and are set on a par with the unreal status of the other events. More precisely, the reference to the past, and the very function of standing-for, are preserved but in a neutralized mode, similar to the one Husserl uses to characterize the imaginary. Or, to use a different vocabulary, borrowed this time from analytical philosophy, historical events are no longer denotated, they are simply mentioned. (*TN3* 129)

The mentioning of real—and easily recognizable—historical events that punctuate Proust's narrative do not fulfill, in this analysis, the same function as they would in a historical narrative, and are instead a mere allusion, a fictionalization of real events that is intended to produce a fictive experience of the passing of time.

There are, however, approaches to the problem of fictionality that allow for the recognition of the way in which fictional texts can and in fact do speak about the actual world and its past events. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007) Richard Walsh challenges the classical conceptions of fictionality based predominantly on semantic and syntactic perspectives with a theory that detaches fictionality from the generic category of fiction. To develop his theory, Walsh draws on Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's relevance theory and its effect on Paul Grice's pragmatic theory: since Sperber and Wilson argue that inference is at the core of any communicative exchange, they contend that the principle of relevance logically precedes that of quality: "Relevance theory advances the idea that, for the purposes of communication, the propositional criterion of truth is a subordinate consideration to the contextual, pragmatic criterion of relevance" (Walsh 27). Therefore, while receivers expect to be provided truthful information, they assume, first and foremost, that the information they will receive will be relevant.

In light of Sperber and Wilson's theory, Walsh proposes a radical re-thinking of the problem of fictionality, shifting the attention from the issue of truth to that of relevance. Since readers are primarily interested in relevant information, their considerations about the truthfulness of such information will necessarily come afterwards. It is the assumption of relevance, Walsh argues, that guides the reader in their interpretive process:

> The relevance theory model allows for a view of fiction in which fictionality is not a frame separating fictive discourse from ordinary or "serious" communication, but a contextual assumption: that is to say, in the comprehension of a fictive utterance, the assumption that it is fictive is itself manifest. The main contextual effect of this assumption is to subordinate implicatures that depend upon literal truthfulness to those that achieve relevance in more diffuse and cumulative ways. (30)

In other words—in recognizing that a certain text is using fictional discourse to represent an experience or to make a point—readers will adjust their interpretive efforts to match the author's presumed intention: the focus will not be on factually truthful information, but on larger and more general questions, such as social, political, and ethical issues. Walsh quotes the ending of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* to clarify this point—K's death is seen as the possible answer to the issues present in the narrative, such as questions of justice and of the power balance between state and individuals. According to this reasoning, then, fiction achieves relevance by providing possible answers to the questions it generates: "Such global, thematic relevance is by no means the only kind offered by narratives, nor is it necessarily the most important; though in fiction, such interpretative logic is likely to dominate over the kind of factual enrichment of the reader's cognitive environment for which nonfictional narratives are better suited" (31). Fictional and nonfictional discourses are therefore expected to fulfill different purposes, and the reader's recognition of the use of one as opposed to the other mode will influence their interpretive stance.

One of the most important consequences of this approach for GWOT narratives is that fictionality is treated not as the marker of a different ontological category; instead, it is described as a rhetorical resource that is still capable of serious (and not pretended) communication: "Fictionality is a rhetorical resource integral to the direct and serious use of language within a real-world communicative framework" (Walsh 15-16). If *authofictions* were to be stripped of this serious intention, the claims made about their authoritative stance regarding matters of war, personal sacrifice, and trauma would lose much of their strength. Another significant advantage that this framework provides is that—because it detaches fictionality from fiction as a generic category—it does not discount the possibility that fiction can provide factually accurate information about the world and the past. As Walsh explains:

> Nothing in this model excludes the possibility of gaining factual information from fiction: fictionality does not admit of degree as a rhetorical set, but fictions do as representations.

> This distinction, between mutually exclusive communicative intentions (the fictive and the assertive) and the relativity of informative intentions, can accommodate the range of borderline cases that vex definitions of fiction: historical novel, roman à clef, fictionalized memoir, historiographic metafiction, hoax. (36)

Although readers may not normally presuppose that fictional discourse is predominantly informative about the real world, the possibility always exists, especially in those genres where fact and fiction are most conspicuously interwoven—as in the case of imaginative war stories written by war veterans.

While Ricoeur's theory of mimesis allows for fiction to have an active role in the shaping of the world of action, fictional discourse is considered to be unable to actually represent real world events: they are simply re-imagined and constitute a feature in the quasi-past of fiction (*TN3* 191). In Walsh's rhetorical approach, fiction can indeed speak about the actual world, and readers can decide—grounding their decision on various contextual cues—whether to interpret parts of a text as using fictional or nonfictional discourse. This means that readers are not constrained by the text itself—their decisions may also take into account details that are external to it, including genre convention and the author's persona: "The rhetoric of fictionality is brought into play whenever a narrative is offered or taken as fiction, regardless of issues of form, style, or reference" (Walsh 44). Regardless of generic markers, then, readers can for example assume that parts of a narrative are to be taken as factual because of, say, the constraints of a genre like historical fiction, or they can assume that small parts of an autobiography or memoir are to be read as fictional because the author has decided not to disclose—for whatever reason—some of the *actual* events of their life, or simply because memory and recollection are expected to be aided by the imagination during the writing of a personal narrative.

In this way, not only do fictional and nonfictional communication cease to be diametrically opposed in their intents, but they are also shown to be often complementary in most communicative instances. As Gammelgard et al. explain in *Fictionality and Literature: Core Concepts Revised* (2022), a study that expands on Walsh's theory, fictionality is more common in communication than other theories would account for: it frequently occurs "in political speeches, in advertising, in legal and philosophical arguments, and in countless other contexts. Recognizing the pervasiveness of fictionality in turn calls attention to the frequent cross-border traffic between its rhetoric and that of nonfictionality. Global nonfictions often contain instances of local fictionality and global fictions contain instances of local

nonfictionality" (5). Fictional narratives are, therefore, thought to be perfectly capable of talking about the real world through fictional discourse, but they also do so through the multiple instances in which they employ nonfictional communication. A very apparent example of this can be found in *Fire and Forget*: the description of the rules of engagement of the US Army reported in Gavin Ford Kovite's "When Engaging Target, Remember," one of the short stories of the collection, is clearly separated from the rest of the text with the use of a gray background—most readers would assume, given the author's experience in the military, that this is an instance of nonfictional communication, notwithstanding its label of "fiction."

As Gammelgard et al. argue, a rhetorical approach to the issue of fictionality emphasizes the exchange between author and audience: "Our emphasis on an author's intentions and purposes means that we regard the actual author as the ultimate agent responsible for the communication" (10). Coherently with contemporary reading practices, then, the description of fictionality as a rhetorical device places great importance on the author's persona and their communicative intent, coupled with the reader's interpretive stance. Veteran fiction is, in this way, revealed to be a form of serious communication between a veteran writer and mostly civilian readers in which the first enters into a dialogue with the latter. Thus, this exchange entails the communication of both factually accurate information as well as more general truths about issues like sacrifice, the relationship between a nation and its military, and foreign policy. Formally "hidden" under the guise of their characters, the actual authors—in this case, veterans of the Global War on Terrorism—are the point of origin of fictive communication and are responsible for the fictional contents of their works.

Consequently, the authors of these texts—absent in their fictionalized stories—are thrust back in as their presumed intentions acquire new significance. In his focus on the actual author, Walsh goes as far as arguing that even the concept of an "implied author," developed by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), is not needed to accommodate both a certain degree of textual independence and the conception of a narrative work "as the product of a choosing, evaluating person" (Booth 74): "If we want to talk about intent in fiction, we should accept that in doing so we are necessarily invoking the author" (Walsh 84). This leads Walsh to completely discount the existence of extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators, arguing that narrative fiction is recounted by either characters or the authors themselves, as "fictions are narrated by their authors, or by characters. Extradiegetic homodiegetic narrators, being represented, are characters […] Extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, 'impersonal" and "authorial' narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors" (84). In this

framework, authors are understood to be communicating *fictionally* as opposed to creating a sort of fictional framing of nonfictional discourse produced by a narrator: "By insisting that fictional representation is an authorial activity, I keep the fictionality of the narrative always in view. My critical attention is always to the literary act, the representational activity that is fiction" (85). If authorial and impartial narrators are erased in favor of the actual author, characters are construed as subject to their aims—their acts of telling are "still governed by the author's communicative purposes" (Gammelgard et al. 10), and therefore are part of the fictionally offered authorial discourse.[43]

While I have mainly adopted Ricouer's hermeneutical approach to narrative and fiction throughout the course of the previous chapter, the incorporation of the tools offered by rhetorical narratology provides invaluable assistance in enhancing the depth and precision of my investigation of GWOT veteran fiction. It has to be noted, however, that hermeneutics and narratology have distinctly different critical histories. In Bo Pettersson's words:

> Structuralist narratology and twentieth-century hermeneutics, then, have different historical and theoretical foundations. The one has primarily formal interests, the other broadly interpretive ones. The one has positivist roots, the other ontological ones which—in part due to an emphasis on the historical situatedness of readers—were bound to lead to interpretive relativism. The one takes for the most part a synchronic, non-contextual view, the other a diachronic, contextual one. (12-13)

As Pettersson notes, classical structuralist narratology is inherently opposed to contextual explorations and intentionalist tendencies in narratives because it is first and foremost—or even exclusively—focused on the text itself, while hermeneutics emphasizes interpretation in a historically situated way, mindful of details that reside outside of the texts themselves. Although Pettersson argues that Ricoeur's efforts were mostly unsuccessful, he recognizes that it is precisely in his work that one can find the best attempt at joining the two approaches: "What Ricoeur did […] was to suggest how structuralist narratology and hermeneutics could

[43] This is a contested point among rhetorical narratologists. While Simona Zetterberg-Gjerlevsen and Henrik Zetterberg-Nielsen agree with Walsh on the necessity to abandon the concept of a narrator that is distinct from authors and characters, James Phelan argues that authors are "able to draw on resources of communication (such as the agent who tells the story) in a wide variety of ways in the service of different purposes […] authors, depending on their intentions and purposes, may choose to be the tellers of their fictional narratives or to construct noncharacter tellers different from themselves" (Gammelgard et al. 11). What is more immediately relevant for this study, however—the individuation of the actual author as the ultimate figure responsible for the telling of the story—is still applicable in this case.

be combined: both focus on the text and, by making the reader's experience of it 'objective' and 'intra-textual' and claiming that the reader's subjectivity is mainly triggered by the text, Ricoeur attempts to draw the two approaches closer together" (14). Therefore, Pettersson offers his own solution to "combine" the hermeneutics and narratology.

To forge a connection between the two approaches, Pettersson argues for the introduction of what he calls "contextual intention inference," which "constitutes the meaning-making of a literary work by a detailed study of it in relation to the intentional, textual, social and cultural dimensions of its context of origin" (20). Drawing on Friedrich Schleiermacher's holistic conception of interpretation as a combination of aspects that are "linguistic and psychological, subjective and objective, personal and social, historical and textual, intellectual and imaginative" (20), Pettersson seeks to integrate classical approaches to narratology with extratextual concerns: "What I have presented is a view of literary interpretation based on a contextual and moderately intentionalist view of the literary work. When joined with narratology, such a hermeneutic can help narratology outgrow its abidingly structuralist view of the literary text and its unidimensionally contextualized readings" (21). In other words, Pettersson tries to address what he perceives to be blind spots in the respective disciplines by integrating textual, contextual, and interpretive approaches.

This is precisely what rhetorical narratology promises to accomplish. As James Phelan puts it: "In interpreting a narrative, rhetorical narrative theory identifies a feedback loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response" (7). More than any "branch" of narratology, whether classical or postclassical, a rhetorical approach includes considerations about the origin, construction, and reception of texts, and does so while paying attention to contextual issues. Intertextual and author-audience relations are central to the discipline and are only possible through a historically-minded approach: "Rhetorical theory is not just compatible with but dependent on historical knowledge—and historical analysis—of all kinds: literary, cultural, social, political, and so on" (Phelan 9). Consequently, it can be argued that rhetorical narratology is perhaps *the* branch of narratology that most coherently aligns with the aims and the methods of literary hermeneutics, as the focus on both authorial intent and contextual reading assumptions matches Ricoeur's interest for the moments of mimesis that accompany a work of art from production to reception. Thus, Walsh's argument that fictional and factual discourse are conceptually detached from fictional and factual narratives, as well as his insight about the nature of fictional discourse itself, makes it possible to integrate Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach with a framework that focuses specifically on fiction and fictionality.

3.3 The Autofictional in GWOT Narratives

The previous sections of this chapter have discussed the way in which veterans maintain their authority as authentic storytellers even—and, arguably, especially—when they decide to fictionalize their life-happenings, offering their visceral truth about war in texts that reach out to their civilian readers in an attempt at a sincere and trustworthy exchange that can help reconcile two sides of a nation divided by the experience of military service. In doing so, I have argued that many GWOT veteran narratives share some of the characteristics of historiographic metafiction—for their ostensible role as historiography's competitors—and autofiction—for the ambiguous relationship between the narrated events and the author's autobiographical details. It will be useful, then, to compare the term that I have used so far—*authofiction*—to genres that similarly blur the line between fiction and public as well as private history. Specifically, since I have already considered the ways in which *authofiction* engages with historiography and testimony, I now want to focus on these texts as fictionalized personal narratives that are adjacent to the genre of autofiction.

The following sections will, therefore, be dedicated to the definition of what seems to be the most significant trend in recent American veteran fiction: by applying Walsh's rhetorical approach to fictionality to the issue of autofiction and other liminal genres that employ both fictional and nonfictional discourse, I will show how *authofictions* are situated in a position of authority that cannot easily be challenged because of their globally fictional status. Furthermore, I will explore how an autofictional narrative mode can be recovered in veteran *authofiction* thanks to a shift in attention from autofiction as a genre to the autofictional as a storytelling mode, a move that can help in individuating autofictional characteristics in literary works that would not otherwise be characterized as such. Afterwards, in the final section of this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which *authofictional* texts differ from typical autofictional ones.

Indeed, as I have already stated, aside from blurring fact and fiction in the realm of history, a majority of GWOT veteran fictions thin the line between personal narratives and fiction. However, they do so in ways that are similar but not identical to those of autofiction. Since they explicitly fictionalize the author's lived experience—and they do so in a literary market that primarily values nonfiction genres—these narratives make a point about the different aspirations (and corresponding expected reactions) of fiction when compared to

nonfiction. As Worthington has argued, autofictions "are primarily novels, but they straddle the line between fiction and nonfiction by concocting fictionalized versions of their authors. By doing so, autofiction demonstrates that a narrative has different valence depending upon whether it is perceived to construct a fictional world or whether it is directly connected to the extratextual one" (5). Like autofictions, *authofictions* are markedly fictional and yet promise a relevance that goes beyond the fictional content of the work.

While in the previous quotation Worthington uses the vocabulary of possible worlds theories, the point still stands if we approach these narratives with the tools of rhetorical narratology. In fact, the rhetorical theory of fictionality that Walsh puts forth allows for—or, rather, demands—the separation of the idea of fiction as a generic category and the concept of fictional discourse as a distinct rhetorical mode of communication. With this theoretical move, it is possible to differentiate between global and local fictionality: "Global fictions can contain passages of nonfictionality, and global nonfictions can contain passages of fictionality. Thus, non-fictionality can be subordinate to fictive purposes, and fictionality can be subordinate to nonfictive purposes" (Nielsen et al. 67). In this case, then, the referent of the text will not be the ultimate focus of attention: If for Worthington, autofiction "is distinct from traditional autobiography or memoir because, while autofiction is partially factual or, to use the narratological term of art, 'referential,' it is not entirely so" (4), with a rhetorical approach it will be the readers who will decide whether the discourse is to be understood as fictional or nonfictional based on contextual cues. Once they have determined how the text is to be interpreted globally, they will adopt the corresponding interpretive stance—at the same time, however, they will be mindful of the fact that generic nonfiction can contain instances of fictional discourse, and that generic fiction can and in fact often does contain nonfictional discourse.

Some of the first cues that are available to the reader are not part of the text per se. As Gérard Genette has argued, works of literature are rarely available to readers as bare texts—they are, instead, framed by a number of other, adjacent texts that sit between the work of art and its outside, presenting it to the world while guiding readerly expectations: "the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" ("Introduction" 261). Crucially, this liminal space is the reader's entrance into the world of the text, but its impact is not limited to the preliminary stages of reading—in fact, its importance in determining the way texts are received cannot be overstated: "Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a *threshold* […] or as Philippe Lejeune said, 'the fringe of the printed text which, in reality,

controls the whole reading'" ("Introduction" 261). Quoting Lejeune—perhaps the most authoritative voice on autobiography in French theory—Genette points to one of the ways in which the paratexts inform readers about authorial intentions: in autobiography, the exchange between author and audience is governed by a "pact" between writer and reader, and one of the requirements of the pact is the recognition that author and narrator share a given name and that this name refers to the author of the text (*On Autobiography* 4).

The term autofiction was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in reaction to the perceived rigidity of Lejeune's autobiographical pact (Wagner-Egelhaaf 32)—it is apparent, then, that autofiction's primary move indeed takes place outside of the text itself and goes on to govern its reading accordingly. It is through the contradictory information provided in both the text and the paratext that the autofictional game plays out: the reader is usually invited to consider the text as fictional (autofictions are typically novels) and yet the author's name is shared by one of the characters, usually the narrator, a detail that immediately causes the audience to question authorial intentions as well as their own expectations about fiction. Similarly, the paratext plays an extremely significant role in much GWOT veteran fiction, and it does so especially in those texts that emphasize the similarity between an author's experience of war and that of the main character(s) of the story, as in the case of—for example—*Fobbit* and *The Yellow Birds*.[44]

What are, then, the differences between autofiction and *authofiction*? To work my way towards the answer to this question, I will use yet another liminal case, a GWOT veteran narrative that exhibits characteristics that are extremely similar to those of "standard" autofictions, but that many would not consider exemplary because it lacks one of the defining traits of the genre, a shared name between author and narrator. Even though onomastic connection—this sharing of the same name by the author and one of the characters—is one of the most widely accepted criteria to describe a narrative as *autofictional*, the classification of a text as such has been subject to debate, as other markers may be considered. It could even be argued that a shared name is not a *sufficient* marker to confidently state that a text should be classified as autofiction. As Arnaud Schmitt has argued: "Indeed, a stronger case can be made for labeling a text as autofiction when there is a certain resemblance between narrator and author based on similar biographical features than when the only conjunction is the name. Without these 'identification operators,' the name remains empty" (88). Nevertheless,

[44] Of course, in these cases the similarities are limited to the protagonists' occupation and do not include major plot points, but this is also the case with autofiction: usually, autofictional characters are strikingly similar to their creators, but the events in which they are involved are mostly fictional.

onomastic correspondence is the most common marker, and a kind of a sine qua non when it comes to the definition of the genre. However, there is a loophole that even the most ardent supporters of onomastic correspondence would be hard pressed to negate, which is the presence of an unnamed protagonist. While this absence does not produce exactly the same effect as the use of the author's actual name, it does—over the time of reading, and especially if coupled with strong similarities between the fictional contents of the book and the author's actual life—point to an ambiguous use of the medium on the part of the author.

As I have already stated, there is one exception in the multitude of fiction by veterans of the War on Terror that satisfies this criterion—Nico Walker's *Cherry*. Walker's book, a novel about an Iraq veteran who ends up getting addicted to opioids and becomes a bank robber, was published while the author was still serving an eleven-year sentence for multiple bank robberies, and yet the disclaimer, whose inclusion was undoubtedly influenced by a variety of factors, reads "This book is a work of fiction. / These things didn't ever happen. / These people didn't ever exist." Although this is in many ways a standard practice, the way in which Walker includes it is not. First of all, works of fiction usually include the "all persons fictitious" disclaimer in the copyright page, as a simple way of avoiding lawsuits or, in the case of *Cherry*, to probably steer clear of the Son of Sam law, which is supposed to prevent criminals from benefiting from the publicity of their crimes. In *Cherry*, however, this disclaimer is part of the "Author's note," which is entirely dedicated to it. Second, these disclaimers are usually standard sentences that do not draw attention to themselves, while in this case the author's words are granted an entire page, and each sentence is on a new line.

A standard disclaimer of fictionality is—generally speaking—usually more subdued, formulaic, and understated. Gallagher's *Youngblood*, for example, features a fairly standard message in the copyright page: "This book is a work of fiction. Any reference to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously […] any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental." As Louise Brix Jacobsen has argued, a rhetorical account of fictionality challenges rigid distinctions not only in the texts themselves, but also in the paratext ("Paratext" 144). Specifically, when it comes to liminal genres like autofiction, the paratext—far from settling the question of fictionality/nonfictionality—contributes to the autofictional effect: "The 'paratext' does not untangle the equivocalities of the text, and it does not have the final say about the status of the text. Instead, text and paratext work together as part of a comprehensive authorial strategy" ("Paratext" 149). In *Cherry*, then, Walker seems to almost pull the reader's leg, a sort of reversal of the way in which the Coen brothers challenge their audience's generic expectations at the beginning of their 1996 film

Fargo with the famous disclaimer that proclaims, "This is a true story," which alerts their viewers as to the factuality of the story that is about to unfold when the story is, in fact, fictional.

This part of the book's paratext, coupled with the events depicted and the many interviews that Walker has given in which he stresses that the content of the book was almost dictated by his experiences helps in destabilizing the reader's approach to the text. The book is clearly marked as fiction by its subtitle, "A Novel," and the caustic lines of the author's note, and yet the author's words say otherwise, like in an interview with the *New York Times* in which he states: "Some of it is kind of ugly, but I didn't really have a choice in the material. I didn't want to romanticize it or exaggerate to make it more entertaining, I wanted to show it for what it really was" (Alter). Interviews are not, strictly speaking, considered to be part of the additional information that bears the traces of authorial approval, but they are still part of the paratext. Indeed, according to Genette, the texts that surround the text itself can be divided into two categories, the *peritext* and the *epitext*. While the first is constituted by the information contained within the confines of the book itself, the latter also informs readings, but does so at a distance: "Around the text again, but at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance, are the messages which are situate, at least originally, outside the book: generally with the backing of the media (interviews, conversations), or under the cover of private communication (correspondences, private journals, and the like)" ("Introduction" 264). The various interviews that veteran writers have given through the years are, then, extremely significant for the interpretation of their narratives, and Walker's words about the accuracy of his account are not an exception to this rule.

Akin to a memoir, *Cherry* presents the story of its unnamed protagonist in the first person. The narrator proceeds more or less chronologically in recounting his life: the book opens with a prologue that anticipates his heroin-addiction and his criminal life following his time in the armed forces. Cherry is, in fact, not only a "war novel," but also a narrative that describes drug-abuse as well as the bank-robberies that the narrator requires to fuel his and his partner's addiction. These are details that are coherent with the author's biography, as the many interviews that accompanied the publication of the book take time to point out—in August 2018, at roughly the same time as the novel was being published, *Cherry* was already predicted to be tremendously successful with audiences. Alter's interview, quoted in the previous paragraph, appeared on *The New York Times*, but it was not the only feature that Walker received on national media: for example, on August 13th Walker was interviewed on *NPR*, while the following day a review of the book appeared on *The Washington Post*. The latter interview, titled "Nico Walker is a convicted bank robber. 'Cherry' proves he's also a must-

read author," leans on the same arguments that render other veteran narrative "unmissable": the authenticity of the contents of the book is certified by the author's life story: "Walker served as an Army medic in Iraq […] Returning to civilian life depressed and traumatized, he became addicted to heroin, a habit he funded with extravagant success by robbing 10 banks in four months" (Charles).

The "details" of Walker's life are consistently placed at the beginning of these interviews and reviews, sometimes even finding place in the titles themselves. In other words, the probability that readers approaching *Cherry* lacked awareness of the similarities between the author and the narrator of the book has always been low, since both the peritext and epitext always placed an emphasis on the author's life story. Furthermore, the novel was almost immediately adapted into a movie by directors Anthony and Joseph Russo, which was released in theaters in 2021 and on the Apple TV+ streaming service shortly afterwards. Although the film did not receive particularly positive reviews from critics ("Cherry"), the theatrical release, coupled with the availability of the movie on a streaming platform, resulted in much greater public and, consequently, with more controversy over the fictional or nonfictional status of the narrated events. For example, *Bustle* magazine published a short article debating the true identity of Emily, the protagonist's wife (Lachenal), while Matt Gallagher heavily criticized one of the scenes in the movie adaptation for making the protagonist (and therefore Walker) a more likable perpetrator of violence.

Gallagher's article targets not only the movie but also the novel itself for its seemingly careless blending of truth and fiction in the face of violent crimes. To explain his point, Gallagher describes his interaction with one of the real-life counterparts of the characters in the movie, all the while explaining the reasons for his critique of one specific scene—towards the end of the movie—depicting the protagonist while he points a gun at a bank teller:

> This scene is drawn from a real-life event, though a lot was subverted. There was no final fix for heroin, for starters. There was no crowd-scattering gunshot, no final debt paid, no waiting around for the authorities. Instead, Nico Walker, an Army veteran-turned-bank robber and author of the autobiographical novel on which the film is based, got stuck in traffic. The police caught up to his getaway truck, and he crashed into an embankment next to a Burger King. The money he'd stolen was in a plastic bag in the passenger seat.
>
> There'd been no polite banter at the bank, no request for the teller to pull the alarm. Instead, in the real 2011 robbery, he'd said, "Give it to me now, you know what this is,"

according to an affidavit from an FBI agent. It'd just been a robbery, like the others Walker had gotten away with, until it wasn't.

There is at least one truth in the fiction. A bank teller was on the other end of that gun. In the film, she's referred to as Vanessa. In real life, her name is Rosa Foster, and she was pregnant at the time of the robbery. Until I contacted her last month, she had no idea that her story was no longer her own. Her role must've complicated the process of turning the events at the bank into one fit for public consumption and profit. So over time and interpretations, she was pretty much removed from it.

"He has Spider-Man portraying him," Foster told me. "Pardon me for saying this, but what the fuck?" ("Crime and Hollywood")

In the passage quoted above there is no confusion as to whether the book and the film should be categorized as fictional or nonfictional, but Gallagher makes it abundantly clear that the fictionalization of actual events is very much a sensitive topic—especially as far as victims are concerned. While the movie is of course a different product from Walker's book, the author is still identified with the protagonist of the film: Tom Holland, *Cherry*'s leading actor, also portrayed Spider-Man in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and is therefore probably associated—as Foster observes—with the positive characteristics that the young superhero possesses.

Indeed, the book itself contains clues that this process might be at work—while the narrator is involved in morally reprehensible acts, he is generally very upfront about it. Furthermore, his time as an Army medic individuates him as a "victim" of the GWOT—when he finally returns home after his deployment, he has no one waiting for him and, after a panic attack, gets drunk and calls Emily: "I was hurt as fuck that she wasn't there. I wanted her there so bad. I said I knew she'd fucked around on me. I said, 'You broke my heart, you fucking cunt.' She said, 'What are you talking about? Baby you sound like a psycho.' I said 'Why would you do that? What the fuck did I ever do to you?' She said she hadn't fucked around. It was a bad time" (188-189). While this portrayal makes it clear that the protagonist of the book is, like Walker himself, both a trauma victim and a perpetrator of violence, his actions are narrated in retrospect and with bitter awareness: "In these years I didn't sleep and when I slept I dreamt of violence. I dreamt of Iraq. I dreamt of movies I had seen. I would die in my dreams and then die some more, and when I woke up I was tired. No matter what else, I was unhappy" (260). In the "Acknowledgements" section at the end of the book, the author recognizes that the changes made to his manuscript by his editor, Tim O'Connell, had precisely this impact on

the way readers reacted to his narrator's misdeeds: "She said, When I read your version I thought the main character was an asshole, and when I read Tim's version I thought the main character was an asshole but I kind of liked him" (316-317).

According to Gallagher, *Cherry* is carefully positioned as a fascinating story about the experience of someone belonging to the underbelly of society that is particularly appealing for relatively well-off readers, who obtain a voyeuristic tour of postwar depression and addiction: "Walker's fictional rendering of his life and exploits had found lush pastures. Now it just needed to be tidied for presentation to the literary class — stuffy folks, in some ways, though also a group hungry for particular narratives of redemption. The unveiling of Walker and his story would require finesse. It would need to be apologetic yet victimless" ("Crime and Hollywood"). This process of victimization and recovery that the main character undergoes leads, however, not only to increased sales for both the book and the movie, but also—per Gallagher—to an erasure of the victims of Walker's crimes as he goes on to live a comfortable life: "That the underlying story at one point included real people and real victims: This was erased through careful, diligent inattention" ("Crime and Hollywood"). Although Walker seems to be keenly aware of the fact that he was a perpetrator of violence, and though he accordingly presents the autobiographically inspired narrator as such, the book (and consequently, the film) would have been essentially unsellable if the main character had been completely unrelatable.

The process of creating a semi-autofictional proxy, then, seems to be purposefully undertaken to create a safe distance from the real events of Walker's life. This move has been, however, not only approached with curious fascination, as is often the case with autofictional narratives, but also (and almost immediately) criticized for its supposedly distasteful treatment of actual crimes and for the trivialization of the victims' pain. While "traditional" autofictional narratives are primarily concerned with the intersection of art and personal lives, the plot of Walker's novel is clearly influenced by actual historical events. Like Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, *Cherry* blurs fact and fiction not only as far as the author's life is concerned, but it also fictionalizes the author's participation in a momentous event in US history—O'Brien's autofictional narrator "Tim" is, like him, a soldier in Vietnam, while the unnamed narrator in *Cherry* is, like Walker, an Army medic in Iraq. However, the intersections of art, private life, and public events are not limited to the combat that Walker has witnessed, but also to the crimes that he committed after returning from his deployment as a soldier in the GWOT. In this way, the "autofictional proxy" used by Walker raises even more ethical problems than his predecessor: if O'Brien includes a meditation on the narrator's responsibility as an agent of US

military power in Vietnam, Walker's novel seems to evade this questioning of the narrator's violent actions. When prompted by Gallagher to answer for the way in which his victims are fictionalized in his novel, Walker points out that their former occupation entailed the use of violence anyway:

> I asked Walker about this over email, if he thought that the bank tellers, particularly those of the armed robberies, deserve any financial compensation.
> "I wonder why you didn't ask this question about the Iraqis," he replied.
> That was the entirety of his answer. A pithy zinger, and he's certainly not the only soldier-turned-author to ponder the ethical maze of writing about war. ("Crime and Hollywood")

While Gallagher appropriately points out that this is an evasive answer, Walker raises an important point—why should his autobiographically inspired novel be criticized for the way it portrays the suffering created by the author, but only as long as the victims are American? More importantly, if fictionalizing the violence someone has inflicted upon others is morally reprehensible, why should any of the novels published by Gallagher or other veteran writers be considered ethically acceptable?

Both *The Things They Carried* and *Cherry* deal with violent events, but whereas O'Brien's short stories contain a large amount of metafictional commentary that ponders how these events should be represented—and even justifies its fictionality in stories like "Good Form"—the oscillating referentiality of the narrating I in *Cherry* can be perceived as a suspiciously useful "trick," because it can serve as a tool that allows authors to utilize controversial events in their fiction while at the same time avoiding responsibility for their actions. In other words, autofiction's metafictional game can easily break down if it is haphazardly applied to lives that intersect prominently with public events, especially if said public events are violent and/or politically charged. As Marjorie Worthington has noted, autofiction usually depicts "situations that are unmistakably and consciously fictional" (13), and the events narrated in *Cherry* are extremely similar to Walker's life-happenings as they are described in both the epitext (e.g., the various interviews that the author has given) and the peritext, since the reader is immediately informed, in the first edition of the book, that the author "has two more years to serve of an eleven-year sentence for bank robbery."

Whether *Cherry* is (or should be read as) an autofictional novel is, however, up for debate. As a genre, autofiction is notoriously hard to define—as Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor point out in the introduction to *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*

(2022), the category is so problematic that some would argue that its dismissal would be a desirable outcome of the conversations around it: "The impossibility of reaching a satisfactory consensus on the definition of autofiction prompts arguments that it is best to dispose of the term altogether, to replace it with 'life writing,' perhaps with the addition of a modifier such as 'experimental' or 'hybrid'" (2). The specificities of autofictional texts seem to have, however, permanently changed the way in which readers approach personal narratives. To explain this point, the editors of the volume quote an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* in which Alice Attlee argues that autofiction questions the function of fiction to the point that it calls for "if not a new, then a reconsidered, critical response" ("Fiction of Facts"). Thus, the popularity of the forms of writing associated with the term "autofiction," coupled with the impact that the genre has had on literary theory, renders its rejection unlikely.

One of the theoretical changes that are suggested in Effe and Lawlor's volume to overcome this confusion is akin to Walsh's treatment of the issue of fiction and fictionality. Indeed, the two call for a shift of attention from autofiction as a generic category to "autofictional" as a mode of expression and interpretation: "The shift from the noun and genre-descriptor 'autofiction' to the adjective 'autofictional,' in this study's title, creates the necessary flexibility for extending and revising our understanding of the concept" (3). Spearheaded by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf's chapter titled "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional," the book's focus on autofictionality as a *mode* allows for greater freedom in associating texts with the autofictional paradigm. Accordingly, her contribution "proposes conceiving of autofiction or—perhaps better—"the autofictional" as a conceptual matrix with scalable and interactive dimensions" (23). Since autobiography is understood to necessarily employ fictionality to some degree, and since the autofictional entails a mixture of fictional and nonfictional discourse, most autobiographically inspired texts can be placed on a spectrum: "It seems more appropriate to conceptualize the autofictional as an inherent dimension of autobiographical writing, that is, as a latent force that can be activated in different ways and to different degrees. The autofictional is scalable" (26). In other words, the autofictional is conceptualized here as a matter of degree—a text can be more or less autofictional than another one, and the autofictional dimension of the text can be activated in various ways.

However, the autofictional cannot be reduced solely to its textual manifestations—instead, one needs to carefully consider how contemporary reading practices and generic expectations have changed the reception of texts that are perceived to be at the intersection of fact and fiction. As Ricoeur has argued, the moment of reception (mimesis$_3$) is extremely

important for the "activation" of a text—it is, after all, the moment when the world of the text meets the world of the reader. However, these reading practices (which can vary slightly from person to person) cannot be easily construed unless one were to conduct empirical research on reader responses.[45] The same difficulties apply when the authorial intention is concerned—while some authors make these intentions explicit, some texts might be interpreted as "autofictional" based on their similarities with other autofictional texts alone. As far as tangible elements are concerned, then, other texts seem to be the only way in which the reception of a certain work as autofictional can be determined. This is coherent with the way in which Walsh treats the assumption of fictionality on the part of the reader, as readerly expectations about genre play a considerable part in shaping the reception of texts, but these expectations can only be estimated by studying the contextual evidence that accompanies every text. Thus, according to his theory of fictionality, the interpretation of a text as either fictional or nonfictional "depends on the concrete evidence of the several kinds of ancillary text, proximate and remote, that mediate between a narrative and its cultural context" (45-46).

The shift in focus from fiction to fictionality and from autofiction to the autofictional does not imply that genre classifications like autofiction, autobiographical fiction, or, for that matter, *authofiction*, cease to have any meaning or importance. As a matter of fact, these markers contribute significantly to the formation of reader expectations. As Kerstin W. Shands et al. put it in the introduction to *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction* (2015): "Genre becomes, through reception, a category of reading akin to what Hans Robert Jauss […] calls a horizon of expectations, a set of shared assumptions that can be attributed to a generation of readers" (8). It is in this way that even texts that are not actually part of the peritext or epitext of a particular work can influence its reception:

> In general, the reader makes an assumption about the type of text while reading. This hypothesis guides the reading; the reader will correct it if the text contradicts the assumption; in the reader's mind the thoughts that arise might be: no, this is not a non-fiction text, no, it is not an autobiography, etc. To classify a work, it must be read by making assumptions about its generic affiliation and revising these assumptions as it is read. These assumptions can only be verified and then accepted or rejected when the reader

[45] One example of empirical research in reader response criticism is provided by Maria-Angeles Martinez and Luc Herman in "Real readers reading Wasco's 'City': A storyworld possible selves approach," in which the authors apply the storyworld possible selves framework developed by Martinez to observe narrative engagement in the experiences of real readers.

> knows the intra-, extra-, or para-textual clues of a particular genre and is, as a detective or hunter, on the lookout for these indices. (Shands et al. 8)

In other words, genre expectations partially guide interpretation. For example, readers of American war narratives might expect current works to follow in the footsteps of a longstanding tradition that has Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, and Tim O'Brien among its cornerstones. Of course, however, as Ricoeur has argued in *Time and Narrative*, tradition is the result of both sedimentation and innovation (*TN1* 69), and therefore readers will expect these works to partially transform previous paradigms.

Therefore, given the paratextual clues available, GWOT veteran fictions that do not emphasize the connection between author and protagonist as much as *Cherry* does could plausibly be expected to be examples of autobiographical fiction. These two "genres" should not, however, be understood as being securely separated from one another—as Shands et al. put it, autofiction might even be considered as a sort of updated form of autobiographical fiction that is partly the result of recent changes in the reception of texts that straddle the fact/fiction line: "Autofiction follows the autobiographical novel, but transposed to our times in different ways partly because readers' text reception changed" (8). Readerly expectations are especially important for the definition of these genres because, most of the time, autobiographical novels and (especially) autofictions are not labeled as such—this means that readers have to autonomously determine that the text that they are facing is in fact supposed to be understood as such. They can do so with the help of paratextual information, but also from extratextual clues—for example, readers might assume that authors who have consistently employed autofictional techniques will continue to do so in the future, and might then initially (mis)label newer texts by basing their decision on such assumptions.

Thus, it is crucial to bear in mind that readers hold generic expectations about the narratives produced by veterans of the Global War on Terrorism, but at the same time it is essential to recognize that such categorizations are approximations that are geared towards the understanding of complex literary works that can present various features that apparently "belong" to more than one genre. As I have shown, for example, *authofictions* play with such genre expectations to present themselves as trustworthy, but not all of them do it in the same way and to the same degree. Therefore, alongside a definition of what *authofictions* are, the final section of this chapter will include a set of features that work to create *authofictional* effects in GWOT veteran narratives.

3.4 The Specificity of *Authofiction*

Generally speaking, I categorize as examples of *authofiction* all those fictional narratives produced by experienced authors—storytellers who bear the traces of experience in much the same way that trauma victims do—who also purport to disclose valuable, nonfictional information and general, visceral truths about environments that are generally inaccessible for most readers. *Authofictions* emphasize the authentic nature of their contents while maintaining an overtly fictional veneer that downplays questions of factual accuracy. In this way, *authofiction*'s factual relevance is counterintuitively secured through its fictionality. Yet, these narratives are authenticated by extratextual factors, prime among which the authority of those who possess "inside knowledge," and refer prominently to actual world events. Necessarily, then, the success of *authofiction* is tied to the narrator's—and, crucially, the author's—authority. The subjectivity of the author is, therefore, always at stake in *authofictions*, as it happens in genres that straddle the fact/fiction line, like autobiographical fiction and autofiction. Since they depict the author's area of expertise, *authofictions* are bound to create parallelisms between the real-life author of the text and the characters of the stories, but such similarities are rarely intended or received as strongly autofictional.

Indeed, most veteran *authofictions* are not easily identifiable as "traditional" autofictions. With the exception of *Cherry*—and even then Walker's novel is far from being the best example of autofiction—none of them could even be considered as such based on the absence of a clear correspondence between the name of the author and that of the narrator, or even one of the characters.[46] Nevertheless, it is precisely through the use of some autofictional techniques that *authofictions* achieve their effects as authoritative and authentic narratives about the US military and its combat operations. In other words, it is through a sort of "weak autofictionality" that *authofictions* establish their claim to offer visceral truths about war and its participants. However, even though they employ some of its tropes, texts that veer towards the *authofictional* do not achieve exactly the same results as autofictional ones, because their use of fictionalized experience is subordinated to the exploration of their subject matter—war, personal sacrifice, guilt, and trauma. For this reason, many of these texts do not only function

[46] Third-person autofictions, while as uncommon as autobiographies in the third person, do exist and, as Lorna Martens explains in "Autofiction in the Third Person, with a reading of Christine Brooke-rose's Remake," can even be more effective at blurring the line between author and text: "In third-person works that occupy the grey area between autobiography and fiction, regardless of what labels they bear, such blurring between narrator and character is particularly likely, seemingly on account of the fact that both narrator and character are versions of the author, who identifies with both of his creations" (52).

to produce what Wagner-Egelhaaf has called the "real-life effects" of autofiction—where autobiographical writing produces the merging of personal life and writing (31)—but also, in the case of former soldiers, to the redefinition of veteran-ness in the United States. The term *authofiction* could conceivably apply to any fictional text that leverages the authority of the actual author in the paratext to authenticate its content, but veteran *authofictions* specifically do so from the perspective of former members of an institution that emphasizes the collective over the individual.

Indeed, if the autofictional is to be understood as an underlying dimension of all autobiographically inspired writing, its presence should not only be identified in texts that are predominantly nonfictional, but also in works that are characterized as primarily fictional. In fact, a scalable understanding of autofictionality—as theorized by Wagner-Egelhaaf—allows for the downplaying of hard requirements like onomastic correspondence to identify texts that use autofictional techniques. In "The Pragmatics of Autofiction," Arnaud Schmitt identifies a set of primary and secondary features that can help defining a narrative work as autofictional, and he claims that "there are only two kinds of primary criteria: onomastic correspondence and similarities in biographical background between author and narrator. I claim that it is inconceivable to consider a work as autofictional if there is not at least one of these elements in place, as they constitute the necessary signal" (Schmitt 90). Notably, the second criterion is not constituted as a strict either/or paradigm, but rather accommodates for similarities that can vary greatly in degree and nuance. Secondary features aside, a text can be "strongly" or "weakly" autofictional from the very start.

The characters of *authofictional* texts do not generally present strong autofictional features—in fact, strong autofictionality might actually hinder an *authofictional* experiment. As the backlash against the deliberate mixture of fact and fiction in *Cherry* suggests, the prominent use of autofictional techniques can be controversial in some situations. Specifically, for example, in the case of GWOT narratives, readers might question the ethical efficacy of autofiction when wrongdoing on the part of American soldiers is depicted—a trend that has increased in recent years, with the development of terms such as moral injury to describe the psychological effects that such episodes have on the soldiers that perpetrate or witness unwarranted violence. Conventional autofiction is usually less caught up in public happenings, and the author's self-definition through fiction is typically one of the most prominent goals of the autofictional. As Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons argue, autofictionalization can have many aims:

> Potential goals of the intentional act of autofictionalization include those associated with fictional modes in general (e.g. aesthetic pleasure, indirect learning, general or indirect truth), but there are also goals particular to the autofictional mode. These include creative, explorative thinking in the pursuit of self-understanding, self-performance and self-creation, and readerly positioning (with the aim, for example, of anticipating objections or of inviting reader engagement). (66)

Although none of the aforementioned purposes are non-serious or trivial, and they are in fact often deeply connected with issues like trauma and self-healing, these seem very difficult to reconcile with depictions including despicable acts on the part of the characters that can be associated with the author for their biographical details. In the case of *Cherry*, the reception of the book as autofiction raises ethical concerns, since both highlighting or downplaying the connection between the crimes of the author and those committed by the protagonist can easily result in problematic readings of the novel—Roy Scranton's myth of the "trauma hero" being the most obvious suspect here.[47] The switch to an All-volunteer force could then be seen as one of the reasons why GWOT veterans, now unable (and unwilling) to reject personal responsibility for their actions on the grounds of a draft, seem to have decided not to adopt—so far—the (auto)fictional affordances that characterized the American response to the Vietnam War.[48]

In *authofictions*, the fact/fiction line is not so explicitly blurred. Rather, these narratives portray realistic events whose authenticity is guaranteed by the author, but the latter's self is seldom ostensibly at play. Regarding traditional autofictions, Worthington explains that they "grapple with contradictory textual and extratextual factors. On one hand, they are clearly novels: they are published, promoted, and categorized as fiction […] However, they also exhibit some undeniable nonfictional traits: their protagonists have an onomastic and biographical connection with the extratextual author" (13). *Authofictions* also present both fictional and nonfictional traits—they are published as novels, and yet they are characterized as a source of valuable, factual information about the GWOT from a trusted source, that is an

[47] However, as I will explain later, I would argue that the same ambiguity gives readers a particularly interesting access point to veteran writing because it provides them with an opportunity to adopt a skeptical reading strategy that carefully weighs the narrator's words against received notions of what a veteran is or does, thereby enabling a more ethically productive engagement with the novel that is less likely to result in a voyeuristic exercise.

[48] Here I am not only referring to Tim O'Brien's works, but also to the various texts that can be associated with both the Vietnam war and New Journalism. As Evelyn Cobley has argued, in Michael Herr's book "fantasy and experience tend to feed each other so that the narrator often finds it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction" (97).

American veteran. Unlike autofictions, *authofictions* do not always display "unmistakably" fictional happenings—in many cases, the events of these novels and short stories could conceivably be juxtaposed with those of the authors, primarily because even though the readers are informed that the writer has experienced similar events, specific incidents are rarely mentioned.

If one were to list requirements for the individuation of veteran *authofictions*, then, as Arnaud Schmitt does for autofiction in "The Pragmatics of Autofiction," onomastic correspondence would not be one of the core features—as I have shown, it might in fact endanger the *authofictional* effects of the narrative because it would excessively foreground the way in which reality is fictionalized and used for the author's purposes. Bearing in mind that generic definitions always run the risk of unduly pigeonholing works in narrow categories that (re)produce their own interpretive responses, I will suggest a set of three features that *veteran authofictions* exhibit, but that should not be considered as hard requirements whose presence necessarily defines a narrative as belonging to the *authofiction* genre and whose absence discounts their *authofictionality*. Rather, mindful of the focus on modality that Richard Walsh has applied to the fiction/fictionality nexus, as well as the similar treatment of autofiction and the autofictional operated by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, I would be inclined to offer these features as possible manifestations of the *authofictional*.

The first of these three features is tied to the author's identity. As I have shown in the previous pages, the real-world experience of these writers is important for two reasons: it qualifies their identity—which becomes an extratextual marker of authenticity—and is replicated in the text, where some of the characters are almost always soldiers or veterans that have returned home from Afghanistan and Iraq, a move that inevitably raises some questions as to the fictionality or factuality of the narrative's contents. Thus, veteran *authofictions* satisfy the first requirement of autofiction as expressed by Schmitt, but only as far as biographical similarities are concerned—therefore, *authofictions* employ a weak autofictional mode that links the characters and the author, whose past as a soldier becomes the defining feature of his identity.

Indeed, as I explained at length throughout this study, the identity of the author is the crucial detail that can influence how GWOT fiction is read. As Nancy K. Miller illustrates in "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," "a certain idea of the author has been rescued, especially in the 80s and 90s, in the case of marginalized groups," in which there are "asymmetrical demands generated by different writing identities, male and female, or, perhaps more usefully, canonical or hegemonic and noncanonical or margin" (105). In the

essay, Miller is primarily concerned with feminist theory's response to the death of the author, but, as the previous quotation shows, she includes other categories that are marginalized, and seems to think, like Cheryl Walker does in "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author" that "to erase a woman poet as the author of her poems in favor of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression" (571). This seems to be one of those cases in which postmodernism's unintended consequences can be blamed. As Colin Davis maintains in "Trauma, Poststructuralism and Ethics," poststructuralist critics, despite their political commitment, were criticized for "their interest in flux, slippages, ambiguities, ambivalence and indeterminacy, and their repudiation of absolute truth claims or immutable values could be portrayed as undermining the very foundations of ethics" (36). One egregious affair that sparked the so-called "Ethical turn" in critical theory, quoted by both Walker and Davis, is the discovery of Paul De Man's work for a collaborationist newspaper during World War II. Critics—especially in trauma studies, as De Man's work was very influential for Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman—were forced to re-read De Man's work in light of previously unknown biographical information. As Davis argues, trauma studies had to engage with such things as the identity of the subject, which "entailed the recovery of historical referentiality, however problematic it might be" (38).

It is within this context that demands historicity and pays close attention to the identity of the writer that the veterans of the war on terror produce their texts, in what Shoshana Felman has called the "Era of Testimony." Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, veterans are usually treated as trauma victims, and many of them seem to experience the effects of the military-civilian divide, which refers to the way the US Army consists entirely of professional, volunteer soldiers and to the fact that, since the end of the draft, civilians have not needed to think about the problems and challenges that are unique to veterans. This effectively seems to make veterans a "minority" group that is frequently the victim of traumatic experiences, thus making the "veteran identity" a defining feature of their testimony and literary works. However, there are of course implications in defining veterans as a minority or marginalized group, as said veterans were also the instrument of violence of a global superpower like the United States of America, and therefore their status as underprivileged is not entirely unproblematic. Nevertheless, the veteran-author is perhaps the most important feature of veteran *authofictions* because it facilitates the foregrounding of issues like authenticity and fictionality.

This feature is, of course, absent in other relevant literary texts of the GWOT. For example, I would not categorize as strongly *authofictional* a novel like Helen Benedict's *Sand*

Queen, a work that explores the life of a female soldier in the American Army after the author completed a study on women veterans and the challenges they face, titled *The Lonely Soldier* (2009), nor would I be inclined to include Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, another novel written by a civilian writer, which contains the PTSD-induced hallucinations of the titular character during the halftime show of a Dallas Cowboys football game. In light of what has been discussed so far, even though it is a fictional representation of the experience of an American veteran, a work like Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn* does not exhibit authofictional traits precisely because the reader cannot associate the real-world experiences of the author and the fictional ones of the characters, at least as far as the veteran experience is concerned.

The second common feature of *veteran authofictions* is thematic. Since *authofictions* promise to disclose exclusive information about secluded environments and inaccessible situations, *authofictional* stories created by war veterans have to be concerned with events happening in a war zone and/or deal with a veteran protagonist that struggles with their wartime experience once their service is over. Specifically, the stories are usually set in one of the American wars of the twentyfirst century—or, at least, they reference past events that have taken place in the context of American military operations in the Middle East. It goes without saying, then, that another related feature would be that the conflict being portrayed is factual and not fictional. While fictional conflicts can surely be indirect references to real-world wars, in order for the claims of truthfulness and veracity that characterize these texts to have any effect, these military narratives must represent actual historical events. For example, Matt Gallagher's uchronia *Empire City* (2020), which satirizes the GWOT through the representation of an alternate timeline in which enormous numbers of veterans are quite literally separated from civilian society and forced to live in rehabilitation colonies, obviously offers a commentary on real events, such as the perceived military-civilian divide and the isolation of veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the fictional nature of the conflict makes the *authofictional* claims of the narrative weaker, because the author's experiential knowledge is not as easily associable to the events of the novel.

Unlike these novels, veteran *authofictions* like *The Yellow Birds* or *Fobbit* connect the author's experience to real historical events. In this way, in addition to being similar to autofictional narratives, they are also akin to Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, and they even seem to combine the two modes. As Worthington has noted, historiographic metafiction and autofiction are themselves related: "While historiographic metafiction and autofiction both use the strategy of depicting nonfictional events and people in fictional narratives, the former does so to challenge received notions about historical discourse

and the latter does so in a simultaneous repudiation and defense of authorial authority" (13). Worthington's point about authority remains true for veteran *authofictions*, but with an amendment: in veteran *authofiction*, what is at stake is the reliability and the very possibility of veteran storytelling in the post-9/11, post-truth era. If historiographic metafiction "addresses the constructed nature of historical accounts" and autofiction "addresses the constructed and constantly changing nature of authorship" (Worthington 13), *authofictions* focus on the value of the authority that is granted to certain subjects as trustworthy (hi)storytellers and how the resulting fictional narratives differ from historical narrations or fiction produced by those who cannot claim experiential knowledge about the GWOT. Thus, although *authofictions* speak from a position of authority, they do not simply perpetuate the notion that veterans are the only ones who can provide the public with the most reliable version of the events, but rather they simultaneously reinforce and problematize the authorial authority of veteran writers.

The third feature regards the characterization of *authofictions* as overtly fictional. If this were not the case, readers would not be exposed to the inherent contradictions that arise from fictional accounts produced by eyewitnesses. Veteran *authofictions* are grounded in reality and seek to accurately represent recent conflicts from an informed point of view, but they are not memoirs or autobiographies. Yet, they forcefully proclaim their truthfulness, and in order to completely escape the uncertainty that characterizes the twenty-first century when it comes to authenticating knowledge and the extensive fact-checking to which nonfiction texts of all kinds are subjected, the authors of these narratives choose to offer them as overtly fictional. There are various reasons for this decision, which include necessity—many authors have declared that they perceived a need to fictionalize their own experience because of the inherently mystifying nature of war itself—as well as the opportunity to address a greater breadth of themes in fiction rather than in narrative nonfiction.

Indeed, there exists an apparent necessity to fictionalize and/or to alter wartime experiences in order for them to be "believable" or even "digestible" by civilians; many examples of this can be found in authors' interviews and in conversations that characters have within the stories. For example, in an interview with Damian Barr, Kevin Powers states that he tried to put his own war experience into words, but quickly realized that fiction would be a better fit for the story he wanted to tell: "If I'd tried to tell my own story I'm not sure how that would have turned out. For me, it's always more interesting to let the imagination do its work and to trust the process" (239). Likewise, in the prologue to Gallagher's *Youngblood* (2016), the narrator meditates on his memories of the war and considers his storytelling abilities. After trying and failing to narrate his story as he remembers it, he decides to essentially fictionalize

it: “What was it like? Hell if I know. But next time someone asks, I won’t answer straight and clean. I’ll answer crooked, and I’ll answer long. And when they get confused or angry, I’ll smile. Finally, I’ll think. Someone who understands” (2). Fictionalizing traumatic or otherwise extreme experiences is, therefore, often perceived by veterans as a necessity that is linked to both the nature of the events that they have witnessed and to possible issues with the receiving public, but can also fulfill a performative function—in the case of *Youngblood*, the narrator implies that the “crookedness” of his story is instrumental for the recreation of his own experience of war in readers.

However, fictionality is not simply a solution to bypass the inherent difficulty of narrating war. In fact, other than being a possible drawback, this decision also enables those that choose to narrate a war story while being conscious of the extremely difficult task that they are undertaking to have more authorial control over its content. The “fiction” label allows for the unrestricted use of both personal experience *as well as* imaginative content—writers can, therefore, greatly expand the range of experiences that are represented in their works, possibly exploring points of view that are different from their own. This has often been the case in GWOT veteran fiction, where authors have consistently decided to adopt the Other’s perspective instead of (and sometimes alongside) that of American soldiers. This expansion of narrative possibilities is possibly correlated with the promise of a more comprehensive narration of war that is distanced from the point of view of the single soldier, thus rendering the whole enterprise less partisan and seemingly more unbiased.

Fictionality is thus not only used to signal the purpose to which the text should be put to use, but also works to validate the author’s discourse. Fictional texts about war are not “simple” reportages or memoirs, but rather seek to use their rhetorical power to influence the reader’s understanding of and/or opinion about the narrated events, which, in the case of veteran *authofictions*, are heavily linked with real-world happenings. Crucially, unlike texts that mainly use nonfictional discourse and are presented as nonfictional, fictional texts that predominantly rely on fictional discourse are essentially indisputable. Indeed, as Nielsen et al. have argued, the use of fictional discourse is constitutive of the author’s ethos-building: “A speaker’s use of fictionality will tend to make her point irrefutable. Since the deployment of fictionality takes one’s discourse into the realm of the nonfactual, its assertions cannot be directly contradicted” (69). The use of fictional discourse is thus linked with greater narrative authority.

While nonfictional texts can of course argue for change and use rhetorical means to convince the reader, fictional discourse operates on a different level—according to Nielsen et

al., it works like irony, in that it is used by the sender and picked up by the receiver based on a contextual assumption, and the recognition of its use changes the reception of the information that is being conveyed (67-68). A message conveyed through fictional discourse is neither true nor false, but rather—quite simply—fictional; therefore, it cannot be judged based on its adherence to factual reality. Nielsen et al. explain the effectiveness of this process with an example from a nonfictional text in which a speaker uses fictional discourse to make a point—to respond to criticism by the Republican candidate Mitt Romney, the US president Barack Obama claims that Romney suffers from "Romnesia": "In saying that his opponent suffers from Romnesia, Obama presents Romney as such a flip-flopper that he suffers from a mental illness, and there is really nothing Romney can say to contradict the claim. Of course, Obama has not really accused Romney of being sick, which—as a nonfictive assertion—would be outrageous; but this is the very reason Romney cannot effectively counter Obama's attack" (69). The author of the speech is not actually making a claim about his adversary's health, but he nonetheless achieves his purpose in a way that shields him from serious challenges.

Thus, *authofictions* present information that is provided by a trusted source and that oscillates between direct and indirect relevance, with readers being encouraged to consider the contents of *authofictional* texts as both a visceral and faithful representation of reality and an imaginative rendition of it. This applies to both the personal and public dimensions of *authofictions*: the weak autofictional link between author and characters provides a window on veteran self-representation and self-construction, while the inherent challenge to historiographic narratives comments on the complex mechanisms underlying the construction of cultural memory about the Global War on Terrorism in the United States. However, while in this chapter I have limited my discussion of *authofiction* to what can effectively be considered mostly paratextual elements, these narratives exhibit other recurring features that enable readers to focus on issues such as veteran authority and the retelling of the past through imaginative (self?) representations.

Accordingly, the next chapter will explore the textual manifestations of veteran *authofictions*, which I have divided into three types. The first way in which *authofictions* invite readers to consider the role that fictional storytelling plays in the formation of cultural memory about the Global War on Terrorism is through what I call signposts of authenticity, which include the foregrounding of questions of truthfulness and authenticity in both the paratext and the text itself. The second is the display on the part of several characters of high metanarrative awareness, intended as the understanding of the importance that narratives (grand or not) have in the way humans comprehend reality. The third way through which veteran fiction achieves

its *authofictional* effects is multiperspectivity—by which I mean the configuration of many of these literary works as either heterogeneous collections of short stories or multi-voiced stories in which events are narrated from multiple points of view. However, it needs to be stressed that the various works of fiction created by American veterans of the GWOT are naturally not completely homogeneous—therefore, some of the works that I will survey in the following chapter will employ all of the techniques that I have described so far, while others will only employ some of them.

4. How to Write (and Read) an Authoritative War Story

4.1 Signposts of (In)authenticity

Veteran narratives that can be considered *authofictional* are situated in an awkwardly self-conscious position, one that, far from incapacitating them, seems to be geared towards the creation of productive interpretations of the experience of war, "awakening" a seemingly indifferent reading public and demanding its participation in an overdue conversation about democratic decision-making, foreign policy, and globalized war. The authors of these stories simultaneously accept and problematize the authority that is customarily granted to veterans through the interaction between the features that I have described in the previous chapter—the foregrounding of the author's experience, the GWOT setting, and fictionality—and other textual characteristics that work to cast doubt upon the possibility that only veteran narratives can communicate profound truths about war. In doing so, veteran *authofictions* could be construed as literary works that use their authority as veteran texts to undermine the very authority that sets them apart from other narrations of war. Necessarily, then, veteran *authofictions* raise ethical questions that are related to the representation of war from a specific point of view—most notably, that of the American soldier—especially if said point of view coincides with that of the author.

Accordingly, this chapter will provide an analysis of the ways in which veteran narratives achieve these *authofictional* effects, highlighting—through close readings of several literary works—the instances in which these texts foreground questions of truth, authority, and the influence that narratives have in shaping knowledge and beliefs. In addition, I will explore and comment on the various ethical questions and moral implications raised by these texts. Narrating the complexity of war through personal and fictional lenses necessarily produces heterogeneous responses that can be observed in my selection of case studies. Indeed, although all these authors are concerned with the problem of how to represent war ethically, it could be argued that in doing so each of their texts adheres to its own ethos, dealing with questions like trauma and moral injury through different strategies. Since the author's rhetoric highlights these issues, the first sections of this chapter will be dedicated to the *authofictional* strategies employed in these texts, to then move on to the ways in which veteran fiction negotiates the ethics of "military" storytelling.

To commence this inquiry, it is necessary to investigate the way in which veteran fiction treats the issue of authenticity in relation to veteran authority. In *authofictions*, the signaling of

the intention to communicate authentically—and therefore, the implicit admission that there is a possibility that a veteran's narration might not be authentic at all, or at least not entirely so—necessarily concerns both the text and its surroundings, and is, in fact, a result of the interplay between the "inside" and the "outside" of the text. While I have decided to call "signposts of authenticity" the frequent instances in which texts like Klay's *Redeployment* or Scranton's *War Porn* foreground the issue of authentic veteran storytelling, these works do not simply reaffirm their validity in the face of other war narratives, but rather typically combine the reassuring textual and paratextual proclamations of authenticity with instances designed to undermine the authority on which such claims rely. Therefore, even moments that describe the mystification of the experience of war are included in the category of signposts of authenticity, not only because declarations of authenticity necessarily invoke the chance of deceit, but also because, if nothing else, moments in which inauthenticity is patently depicted arguably expose it, and therefore point the reader back to authenticity itself.

David Abrams' *Fobbit*, for example, is generally presented as an extremely authentic text that can give readers factually accurate insights about the military's strategies for communicating information to the public—Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding is, after all, a public affairs officer like the author, and his role essentially revolves around the mediation of war stories that will eventually reach the public. In addition to featuring a biographical connection between author and protagonist, the novel is framed by several blurbs that highlight the author's experience in Iraq, and even part of a *Washington Post* review by Benjamin Busch that likens the book to other (nonfictional) genres, claiming that it is "both a clever study in anxiety and an unsettling exposé of how the military tells its truths." Obviously, while *Fobbit* cannot be actually described as a "study" or an "exposé," Abrams employs several formal devices that could be seen as lending it a partially nonfictional veneer. Voiced by a heterodiegetic extradiegetic narrator, the novel dedicates several pages to Gooding's personal diary and to the drafts of his press releases, as well as to the personal e-mails that his boss, Lieutenant Colonel Eustace Harkleroad, sends to his mother, and even to e-mail chains that involve many of those employed at the Forward Operating Base. By including these representations of private and semi-private writings—signaled through the use of different fonts and layouts—Abrams seems to offer some of the most genuine depictions of the specific experiences of war that American soldiers have.

By depicting characters that are essentially working through Ricoeur's second moment of mimesis—the configuration of experience—Abrams unveils the constructedness of officially sanctioned information that originates from the military and serves as a basis for most

nonfictional accounts of war. From the very first pages, Staff Sergeant Gooding is essentially described as an instrument of US propaganda:

> No one wanted to read: "A soldier was vaporized when his patrol hit an Improvised Explosive Device, his flesh thrown into a nearby tree where it draped like Spanish moss." But the generals and the colonels of the Seventh Armored Division all agreed that the folks back home *would* appreciate hearing: "A soldier paid the ultimate sacrifice while carrying out his duties in Operation Iraqi Freedom." Gooding's weapons were words, his sentences were missiles. (2)

Here Gooding is described as hard at work while constructing war stories and, accordingly, Abrams chooses to essentially translate what could be considered to be the central episode of Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story"—Curt Lemon's death—in modern war terms. In *The Things They Carried*, the description of Lemon's demise, so sudden and gruesome that it registers as absurd, punctuates the narrator's discussion over the possibility of truthfully representing war: "when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (69). In *Fobbit*, the Vietnam booby traps scattered through the jungle transform into the looming threat of IED devices that can be triggered at the passage of US vehicles through the Iraqi streets—in both cases, however, the victims' remains end up hanging from a tree, and the *truth* of their story is either lost or turned into a rhetorical device that legitimizes the American invasion of Iraq.

In *Fobbit*, however, the reader seems to have access to the "unfiltered" information that the characters use to create their stories. The previous quotation—in which Gooding describes the way information is conveyed in such a way as to create certain reactions in the audience—is an example of this apparent availability of the actual event. It needs to be noted, though, that most of the focalizers in the novel lack any combat experience, and therefore work with second-hand information themselves. Although they are soldiers of the United States Army that reside right next to Baghdad, and although civilians will probably treat them as such once they return home, "fobbits" are flawed storytellers according to whoever subscribes to the ideology of combat gnosticism theorized by James Campbell. Not only do Gooding and his co-workers lack experiential knowledge of most of the events they describe, but they are also even bypassed by members of the press who happen to be present when an incident happens. After multiple attempts at producing a press release about a suicide bomber that aligns with the

Army's interests, they discover, by watching the news on CNN, that their work has been essentially invalidated and that the US Army has been painted as a hindrance:

> "One shopkeeper told us it took Iraqi police nearly an hour to respond to the attack. Their excuse? They were in the middle of a training session with their U.S. counterparts at a base on the other side of Baghdad and couldn't get away. As you can imagine, this only adds more fuel to the fire of anti-coalition resentment building here in the streets. Back to you, Wolf." Lieutenant Colonel Harkleroad moaned. "Oh, good gravy!
> Where the heck did they get *that* information?"
> "They were there, sir," Gooding said, silently adding, *And we were not.* (75)

Other than not being able to experience events firsthand, Gooding cannot autonomously decide what to write in his reports—thinking back at the details of the accident, he determines that the insurgents are getting more ambitious with their attacks, but he is hesitant to use the term in official documents: "What were the words he used in his press release? *An isolated, desperate attack.* Which was bullshit, of course. Gooding wasn't allowed to use the words *cunning and calculated*" (90).

Other characters who participate in the war effort in more active roles such as Lieutenant Colonel Vic Duret look down on "fobbits" like Gooding because they are typically never in real danger: "These dicks never had to face the nut-shriveling terror of careening through traffic, never certain whether or not the car pulling up behind them was trunk-loaded with explosives or just carrying a beheaded corpse to be dumped in the Tigris" (96). With these remarks, soldiers who engage with the enemy like Duret disqualify the experience of war of those who have the luxury of following the combat operation from the comforts of their office. Characters like Gooding or Harkleroad may be in the business of crafting war stories, but they are accused of knowing nothing of the "real" war. And yet, those who work in the Command Operations Center, themselves members of what Duret calls the "Fobbit Club" (104), have access to countless sources of information about the combat operations: "Against one wall are three TV screens, each ten feet by fifteen feet, which are the eyes of the COC's brain. The main screen displays a battle map of Baghdad, red diamonds marking Items of Interest (IIs or 'Eyes') such as IEDs, small-arms fire, ambushes, enemy forces, friendly forces, and 'neverminds'" (105). Whereas the soldiers that are employed in active combat roles usually experience explosions and other traumatic events in ways that lead to confusion rather than understanding,

"fobbits" seem to have access to the same information with added context, arguably giving them a clearer idea of the war.

In fact, "fobbits" arguably retain more control over their storytelling and set the tone for the rest of the soldiers that participate in the same mission. The sections dedicated to Chance Gooding contain e-mails from Brigadier General Harold Gunderson, one of which urges public affairs teams to shift the narrative of Operation Iraqi Freedom by focusing on the efforts of the newly formed local government and downplaying the active role that the US Army has in Iraq: "Your young soldier-journalists are NOT exercising discretion in their choice of words […] there is 'sad news,' there is 'tragic news,' but there is NO 'bad news' coming out of Iraq. This negative slant is uncalled for and has no place in what is being released from our office" (247). Although public affairs officers are shown to be annoyed by such e-mails, mostly because they feel that they are being taught how to do their own job, but also because they are limited in what they can report, there is no denying that they are the agents tasked with the control of the war narrative. Gooding serves as the perfect example of this authority. Not only does he—sometimes reluctantly—"spin" the stories that come from the various battlefields to make them more palatable for an American audience, but he also trains soldiers who are about to be interviewed by the media. For example, after his R&R (rest and recuperation) leave in Qatar, he goes back to Forward Operating Base Triumph and instructs a wounded soldier on how to communicate with the media and the people at home. Constantly interrupted—or, rather, corrected—by Gooding, who keeps suggesting different phrasings and angles to the story, the soldier erupts:

> 'Who's telling the story anyway?' (Uh-oh, signs of strong personality emerging. Mental note, check on the guy's medical history.)
>
> 'You are, of course,' Gooding said, 'but we're encouraging you to use as many colorful details as possible. If you want to get a sound bite on TV, it needs to be vivid. Now, let's start at the beginning. It was a hot day—'
>
> 'Hot as hell. Am I allowed to say hell on TV?'
>
> 'We wouldn't encourage it. Try something like, 'It was so hot you could fry eggs on the hood of our Humvee.''
>
> 'That doesn't sound like me.' (210)

During this pre-interview session with Specialist Kyle Pilley, Goodman demonstrates considerable skill in the way he handles the young soldier, assuring him that he is in control of

his own story while he directs him as a filmmaker would with their star actor: "This is your story and you're going to tell it the way that feels most comfortable to you—with a little coaching from us, of course. We're here to help you smooth it out and make it sound more dramatic for the folks back home" (206). Much to Gooding and Harkleroad's chagrin, however, and in keeping with the darkly humorous tone of the novel, Specialist Pilley becomes shortly after one of the American victims of the war, rendering Gooding's work vain.

Even though he is aware that as a public affairs officer he retains the power of authoritative storytelling, and even though he seems content with his relatively safe role as a "fobbit," Gooding himself seems to be bothered by his inability to access additional information about what happens outside of the FOB. While trying to put into words an incident caused by Captain Abe Shrinkle—one of the focalizers of the novel—involving an Iraqi casualty, he starts wondering about the unidentified burnt remains of the victim: "he couldn't help thinking about that charred body under the truck and how it got there […] Maybe it was a woman who was raped by the GIs […] These were the dark alleys his imagination wandered, especially after sticky lingering situations like Abu Ghraib" (155). While Gooding deals with carefully assembled reconstructions of action on a daily basis, the incidents that plague his FOB and his colleagues—chief among which the death of Abe Shrinkle—threaten to bring the war inside of his safe space. As he writes in his diary while under mortar fire: "*The war is Out There; but on nights like tonight, it sounds like it's In Here. […] I may be a mere Fobbit, but I feel it—that blade against my neck. Honestly, I don't know how much more of this I can take*" (349). Confronted with his superior's indecision as to how to report Srhinkle's death, Gooding decides that he has had enough: "*Tell them* what, *sir?* […] *Tell them no matter how many words we put on pieces of paper, it's all useless in the end because those press releases just wind up as some editor's paper basketball arcing through the air into a wastebasket in a newsroom in South Dakota*?" (366). Torn between the apparent futility of his job and the real dangers of war encroaching on the American citadel in the middle of Iraq, Gooding decides to stop following the guidelines that limit his storytelling.

Finally facing the fact that he "was in the war, but he was not of the war" (366), he seems to definitively shed the public affairs uniform: "For the first time since entering this combat zone, he was himself and he knew exactly what he was doing" (368). In the heat of the moment, Gooding decides to impulsively leave the FOB: "before he could change his mind, Chance Gooding Jr. sprinted from the Seventh Armored Division Headquarters […] It was only when he was within sight of the Main Gate, the dark mystery of Baghdad lurking just beyond the bristle of concertina wire, that Chance Gooding realized he had no helmet, no flak

vest, no weapon" (368-369). Gooding's attempt at "escaping" the FOB coincides with the closing pages of the novel—it seemingly constitutes the culmination of his frustrating experience of truth-production in the public affairs office and the beginning of an extremely dangerous encounter with the *reality* of war.

Whether that is actually the case, however, Abrams decides to leave unsaid, cutting short Gooding's run towards the gate, with the guards trying to stop him. Taking into consideration how the experience of war is portrayed as complex and multifaceted in *Fobbit*, however, it would be difficult to argue that Abrams is a supporter of combat Gnosticism. Furthermore, the contradictory signposts of authenticity that are dotted throughout the novel necessarily interact with the paratextual information that surrounds the book to create its *authofictional* effects. Not only is the reader immediately made aware that Abrams himself was a public affairs officer in Iraq, but a quick internet search reveals that the author has declared in an interview that the Forward Operating Base where the novel is set is almost an exact copy of the one where he was station during his deployment:

> The funniest part about Abrams' book is that he isn't making it up. His fobbits live on 'FOB Triumph,' a name that seems Orwellian. But it's not so different from the name of the FOBs where Abrams worked in real life.
>
> 'FOB Triumph ... that's made up. But there are similarities to Camp Liberty and Camp Victory. I was on the Liberty-Victory complex,' he says. (Lawrence)

These biographical details make the comparison between Staff Sergeant Chance Gooding and the author of the novel rather obvious, but not exactly autofictional. Furthermore, *Fobbit* is one of the relatively few examples in which the author is further distanced from their semi-autofictional proxy—while most veteran fiction has a quasi-autobiographical quality, Abrams decides to distance himself from Gooding by choosing to narrate the various sections in the third person.

There are, however, clear indications that Gooding is constructed as an "Abrams-esque" figure. Not only does he keep a private diary in which he collects his thoughts, but he also demonstrates a penchant for literary fiction—multiple times during the novel, he is seen carrying a different book, often reading a different classic each week. Notably, other than holding a copy of one of the novel's declared inspirations (Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*), Gooding notes in the last entry of his diary, to which the readers have access that he is reading Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* while the FOB is under enemy fire:

> *I'm in the midst of highlighting a passage with a neon-yellow pen*—Fictional tales are better and more enjoyable the nearer they approach the truth or the semblance of truth—*when it happens. The sky splits with a scream and a bone-buzzing explosion shakes my trailer. The cheap wood-grain paneling cracks from the concussion and the sound is so loud and startling it's like someone punched my heart*. (346)

Almost a declaration of intent, the highlighted passage comments on just how close Fobbit is to the author's real experience. Readers can, therefore, expect to read the book not only as an imaginative text, but also—as some of the blurbs claim—as an exposé or a study of the methods of communication that the US armed forces employ in their relationship with the general public. The question of whether the fictional narrative at hand approaches truth itself or rather a semblance of it is a moot point—while the reader can reasonably assume that, for example, some of the most ridiculous details (e.g., the improbable names of many characters) are used to signal the use of fictional discourse, and while the many artifacts such as e-mails and diaries suggest instead the intention to communicate otherwise inaccessible experiences to the readers, the global fictionality of the novel, coupled with the experiential authority of the author, ensure that the contents of the book are received at least initially as viscerally true and credible beyond doubt.

This oscillation between authenticity and deceit is noticeable in several other veteran narratives of the GWOT. In Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, for example, there are two main veteran characters, Corporal Aaron Stojanowski and Specialist Wilson. The sections of the novel that focus on the latter are the only ones that are narrated in the first person, with Wilson describing both his time in Iraq as well as flashbacks to his life in the United States before the war. Once again, this is a semi-autofictional character, and Scranton himself admits that many of the details that are used in these sections are drawn from his own experience of war and that, more importantly, they are engineered to sound authentic, as war stories often aim to be: "So the Wilson sections, many of which are drawn from my own time in Iraq, are in this 'authentic' war-writing style, vivid, laconic, metonymic, with occasional flights into lyricism, which is the dominant style of writing in American war literature going back through O'Brien and Herr to Hemingway, even Crane" (Plum). Like Scranton (and Gooding), Wilson is somewhat of a military literatus—his involvement in the war constrains him into the role of a progressively hardened soldier. Still, his passion for literature and learning occasionally threatens to come out:

> My mouth full of chicken, I flushed with obscure yearning, loneliness, and the sudden desire for these people to see me as one of their own, to see how enlightened I really was beneath my salt-stiff DCUs. How different from the thugs I'd come with. I wanted to talk with these business-casual cosmopolitans about human rights and cultural programming, Michel Foucault and Zadie Smith. I wanted to corner the woman in the skirt, take her hands in mine, and convince her: I used to read Whitman. I used to read Joyce. (96-97)

Even though, as I have mentioned before, Scranton is usually hesitant about the foregrounding of his past as a soldier of the US Army, the reader still has access to that information (in the "Acknowledgments" section at the end of the book, for example) as well as to the fact that the author is an expert of storytelling and war not only because he used to be a soldier, but also because he holds a Ph.D. in English from Princeton.

While the reader is able to follow Wilson closely through the character's thoughts, including the instances in which he demonstrates his skepticism about the war effort, the same cannot be said about Aaron. When he enters the narrative, in a section narrated in the third person and dedicated to a Columbus Day barbecue in Utah, Aaron's figure appears immediately menacing and inscrutable: "Somebody watching: a lean man at the gate with black hair cut close, face taut and flat, lips compressed in a line like a trick of the fading light. The man stared with eyes so fierce, Matt's heart hung dry a beat, and he stepped back, fumbling his brush and dropping it. Say something" (16). Aaron's military look and demeanor make Matt (the barbecue's host, together with his girlfriend Dahlia) uneasy, as does his stereotypically masculine behavior. When asked about his experience in Iraq, the veteran is reluctant to speak, but when one of the other guests criticizes the way US soldiers have participated in a senseless war, Aaron becomes enraged: "Aaron stood up. 'I'm done here. Let's go, Wendy.' Mel stood to face him. 'I know you. I know what you are. I can see it.' Aaron's voice went cold. 'What the fuck do you want from me?' 'Admit what you did was evil.' 'It's called reality. You need to grow the fuck up, bitch.' (32). Although it is Mel who first raises her voice, many of the participants feel like Aaron is dangerous precisely because of his experience in Iraq.

This perceived threat becomes painfully real in the final pages of the book, which show Aaron raping Dahlia after having shown Matt the contents of a USB thumb drive photos of Iraqi nationals being tortured by American soldiers. While Aaron plays the traumatized veteran at the beginning of the barbecue, declaring ironically "Yeah, well, I'm all traumatized and shit. You know what it's like. You saw the movie" (29), he starts showing his true colors with Matt,

offering to show him pictures he took during his deployment—after Aaron explains how one of the prisoners in his internment camp was given special treatment in exchange for sexual favors, Matt starts expressing his disapproval: "'That's awful.' 'Oh, shit. You're totally right. I'll put it away, then." Aaron reached for his thumb drive. 'No, wait,' Matt said. 'It's awful, but I think I should see it. So I know what it's like. I should know what it's like.' 'Your call, Chief. You wanna click forward?' 'Yeah,' Matt said, then regretted it." (310). In this exchange, Aaron is forcing Matt (as well as civilian readers) to come to terms with the allure of violent narratives of war—even though Matt despises what he is seeing, he cannot look away.

Aaron's slideshow is almost inflicted upon Matt. After a few minutes, Aaron does not ask anymore whether Matt wants to continue the viewing, and his: "The naked and hooded man was on the ground, and Grimes's boot was slamming into his stomach […] 'That's fucked up. This is fucked up.' 'Yeah. You mentioned that. Next'" (317-318). In this particular instance, the authenticity of Aaron's narrations is never out of the question, except when he is later trying to take advantage of Dahlia. After having shown his "war porn" to Matt, Aaron tells Dahlia how hard it was to be in Iraq and not be able to save enough children, a detail that irritates Matt, who asks whether he has pictures of that, too (324). Downplaying his involvement in the perpetration of violence against innocent Iraqis, Aaron is shown while he takes advantage of his authority as a veteran storyteller for his personal gain.

In this way, Scranton shows the dangers of seemingly authentic veteran storytellers, thereby paradoxically including his own stories in the process. In his nonfiction, Scranton has periodically criticized the way in which veterans are configured as "trauma heroes" whose authority is based on the assumption that they are trauma victims. Aaron is a clear example of how veterans are not victims by definition and that often they have perpetrated horrific violence. In his case, he reveals his nature to Matt and tortures him with it, but he hides it to look his best for Dahlia—while he tells Matt "I'd apologize if I was a fucking pussy" (294), his tone changes a couple of minutes later when he is talking to Matt's partner: "'Tell you the truth, Dahlia, all I ever wanted was peace, love, and understanding.' Dahlia stared back. 'I don't know if I like you, soldier boy.' 'You don't have to.' Aaron smiled wide, suddenly all charm" (297). Other than being superficially charming, Aaron's remark ominously predicts the ending pages of the book, in which he presents a seemingly authentic façade as a wounded hero only to abandon it when, at the end, he forces Dahlia to have non-consensual sex with him.

Another example of a veteran that uses the authority that is commonly granted to former combatants in the United States can be found in "Psychological Operations," one of the short stories in Phil Klay's *Redeployment*. Like in Scranton's *War Porn*, the veteran on which this

story is focused is not sincere in his storytelling and instead uses his credentials as an alleged trauma victim for his own benefit. The narrator, Waguih, is an Iraq veteran of Egyptian Coptic origins who has enrolled at Amherst College after coming home, choosing a class named "Punishment, Politics, and Culture." From the start, Waguih demonstrates that he is aware of the intricacies of authenticity and identity politics. As the story starts, he immediately contrasts the appearance and demeanor of Zara—a smart and confident black woman in his class—with that of the rest of his classmates, who are all white and clad in expensive but otherwise unremarkable clothes. Understanding the potential advantage that performing his own identity can give him, Waguih decides to lean on his past in the military to back up his arguments:

> At the time, I tended to play the world-weary vet who'd seen something of life and could look at my fellow students' idealism with only the wistful sadness of a parent whose child is getting too old to believe in Santa Claus. It's amazing how well the veteran mystique plays, even at a school like Amherst, where I'd have thought the kids would be smart enough to know better. (170)

In other words, Waguih plays with the idea that he might be—indeed must be—one of those (at least psychologically) wounded heroes that have come back from Iraq or Afghanistan and are in possession of qualitatively superior truths about war and even other topics. Once again, the assumption is that combat essentially changes a person's ability to understand reality: "Everyone assumed I'd had some soul-scarring encounter with the Real: the harsh, unvarnished, violent world-as-it-actually-is, outside the bubble of America and Academia, a sojourn to the Heart of Darkness that either destroys you or leaves you sadder and wiser" (170). Whether Waguih has actually undergone such an experience is never directly addressed by the rest of the class, who tacitly believe that all veterans are similarly scarred.

Armed with his identity as a veteran, Waguih commands authority in the classroom, and—to his surprise—even the professor tends to defer to his authority when violence is concerned. However, the narrator himself does not believe that his experience in Iraq should make his insights any more reliable than anyone else's: "It's bullshit, of course. Overseas I learned mainly that, yes, even tough men will piss themselves if things get scary enough, and no, it's not pleasant to be shot at […] but other than that, the only thing I felt I really had on these kids was the knowledge of just how nasty and awful humans are" (170). Even though he admits that he can rely on some additional perspective on matters like war and extreme

violence, Waguih does not think that his veteran status actually helps him better understand any other subject, but he decides to use the authority that is granted to him anyway.

Zara, unimpressed with his opinion on the motivations of the invasion of Iraq, is clearly unaffected by the spell that Waguih seems to have cast on the rest of the students, and is quick to disparage his authority: "'Oh, come on,' Zara snapped. 'Who cares what the soldiers believe? It doesn't matter what the pawns on a chessboard think about how and why they're being played.' 'Pawns?' I said, indignant. 'You think I was a pawn?' 'Oh. Sorry.' Zara smiled. 'I'm sure you were a rook, at least. Same difference'" (171). Waguih is intrigued by Zara for both her confidence and her background, and in a way, he grants her the same authority that the rest of the class grants him as a combat veteran: "She was running her own game. As a black girl from Baltimore, she had a fair share of street cred […] Baltimore, everybody who's seen an episode of *The Wire* could tell you, was a rough city. My attitude was, she deserved the authority she took" (171).

Even though the two have some disagreements during the course, the situation does not precipitate until they meet months later, when Zara decides to convert to Islam and seeks out Waguih to confront him about his role in killing other Muslims in Iraq. Mistakenly assuming that the narrator is also Muslim, the two have an argument that escalates when Waguih says that since Muslisms have persecuted Copts, it could hardly be considered absurd that he would want to kill them in the war: "Shit, in my religion, that's how you help an angel get its wings" (174). This comment enrages Zara, who reports it to the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity—Waguih is therefore summoned to explain himself, with the prospect of being expelled and potentially losing his scholarships. Even though the Special Assistant informs him that Zara has not filed a formal complaint, Waguih decides to use his authority as a veteran—and the skills he used in the war—to get out of the situation: "In the Army I'd been a 37F, a specialist in Psychological Operations. If I couldn't PsyOps my way out of this, I wasn't worth a damn" (176). Accordingly, he decides to play the wounded veteran to get the upper hand with the Special Assistant: "'I got shot at,' I said, Kind of a lot. And I saw people, yes, gunned down. Blown up. Pieces of men. Women. Children.' I was laying it on thick" (177). Other than exaggerating the effect that the experience of war has had on his psyche, Waguih chooses to lie and theatrically enact the PTSD cliches: "'But…sometimes I can't sleep at night.' That wasn't true. Most nights I slept like a drunken baby. I noticed a slight look of panic on the Special Assistant's face and pushed forward, determined to get out of the corner they'd boxed me in. 'I see the dead,' I said, letting my voice quaver. 'I hear the explosions'" (178).

Unexpectedly, this strategy does not only work on the Special Assistant, but also on Zara, who apologizes after learning what Waguih supposedly had to experience in Iraq.

Zara's acceptance of his authority as a veteran surprises Waguih, who—disappointed in her for her apology—seeks her out to set the record straight. The narrator, repository of an authority that becomes a prison of his own making, forcefully suggests that he should not be reduced to his former occupation, and that his past in the military does not define him and does not endow him with special authority: "'You think the big bad war broke me,' I said, 'and it made me an asshole. That's why you think I said those things. But what if I'm just an asshole?" (180). To drive his point home, Waguih questions Zara's uncritical reception of his story: "'Did you believe that story in there?' I said. 'Poor me and my hard little war?'" (180). When they meet again to discuss his experience of war, Waguih explains that the way he experienced combat was different than what most civilians thought—as PsyOps expert, his duties included countering the messages that came from the minarets in order to save lives: "I told her how we used to go out in a Humvee strapped with speakers so we could spew our own propaganda. We'd dispense threats, promises, and a phone number for locals to call and report insurgent activity" (184). Unlike most American soldiers, Waguih explains that his engagement with the enemy was less conventional, in a way contradicting his performance in the Special Assistant's office.

During this exchange, however, the narrator considers whether to exploit again his status as a supposed trauma victim, because he was in fact involved in firefights: "We always got shot at. I didn't tell her what that felt like, hiding in a vehicle with nothing but your voice while you're taking fire, helpless and angry, depending on the grunts for safety" (184). Keenly aware of his power as a storyteller, Waguih seeks to be authentic with Zara during their private conversation: "'Gunfire was a part of daily life,' I started—but that sounded too hard-guy. I wanted to be honest, so I said, 'The truth is, it goosed me, hearing it that close and not being able to see anything, just the Marines'" (185). Even though the sound of firearms was in fact part of Waguih daily life in Iraq, he course-corrects his narrative in order not to sound like the stereotypical wounded warriors that most civilians think of when they meet veterans.

Like for the characters in *Fobbit* and *War Porn*, "Psychological Operations" enacts both the authentic storytelling that is expected of GWOT veterans, as well as the way in which said veterans can exploit that very same presumption of authenticity for their own benefit. Thus, these narratives highlight the authority that veterans wield in explaining war—and reality in general—even when they do not plan to maliciously use their veteran status to have the upper hand in an argument. Waguih, as a former PsyOps specialist, is aware that in his search for an

authentic connection with a civilian, he is still exerting some form of power: "I wasn't PsyOpsing her into it, so I didn't know how she'd react. Or if I was PsyOpsing her, since you're always exerting some kind of pressure even when you're laying yourself bare, then it was the least conscious maneuvering I could do" (181).

In laying bare the intentions of veterans—especially when they have to configure their experience in a way that is potentially misleading for others—these veteran writers call out the very authority and authenticity on which the success of their works is initially predicated upon. Through the signaling of the desire for authentic communication and the simultaneous description of just how much authority veteran storytellers are granted, veteran authors seem to invite readers to both listen to and question stories crafted by former soldiers, theirs included. This effect is enhanced by the many similarities that exist between these authors and their fictional counterparts—if, on the one hand, readers are encouraged to associate the author's experience with that of their characters, they are also asked to believe that a fictionalization of a soldier's experience might be the most viscerally true rendition of war. The liberties that veterans may take in conveying their experience are therefore presented as both productive and potentially harmful, creating authoritative narratives that promise to be true but might, in fact, be partial and biased approximations based on personal experience.

4.2 Metanarrative Awareness

Because of their emphasis on authentic and authoritative storytelling, veteran *authofictions* are not only acutely aware of the importance of narrative agency, but also mindful of the power that resides in narratives themselves—both fictional and nonfictional—which can and inevitably do shape beliefs about particular issues such as the Global War on Terrorism and the United States' role as a regulating force that is justified in using its military power to maintain socio-political stability on a global scale. Another of the ways in which veteran *authofictions* simultaneously accept narrative authority and reject their role as the sole true stories of the GWOT is, therefore, their focus on the many narratives that surround wars and those that fight them. This *metanarrative awareness* makes readers alert to the fact that they are reading yet another story—among countless others—about the United States' most recent conflicts, and that, as such, they might be exposed to only a small part of the "whole truth" about war.

As Hanna Meretoja notes in "Metanarrative Autofiction: Critical Engagement with Cultural Narrative Models," the term "metanarrative" has traditionally been associated with

both Lyotardian master narratives and self-reflexive narrative texts (122). According to Meretoja, these approaches fail to consider some of the most important aspects of self-reflexive narratives: "metanarrative fiction is characterized by critical reflection on, first, the *significance of cultural narratives* for individuals and communities and, second, the *functions of narratives* in our lives" (122). While Meretoja applies this concept to a series of autofictional narratives—which she sees as reflecting on "the role of narratives (both fictional and nonfictional) in the process in which we make sense of our lives" (122)—these reflections on the way narratives influence both life choices (and, in this case, policymaking) are also widespread in veteran *authofictions*. Not only do these narratives offer considerations about the importance of narrative understanding in relation to reality, but they also portray characters who are aware of the ways in which narratives contribute to self-interpretation and to the interpretation of historical events.

In Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, the protagonist and narrator John Bartle struggles to piece together the events that lead to and follow the death of his friend Murph. Since Bartle—under the command of Sergeant Sterling—has disposed of Murph's mutilated body in order to spare his mother the unbearable sight of her son's disfigured remains, he is investigated for the disappearance of his friend's body. In *The Yellow Birds*, the narration alternates between episodes that are set in Iraq and those that are set in the United States, in the aftermath of Bartle's deployment. During the latter moments, Bartle struggles to construct a coherent narrative that can help him in making sense of his role in the war and in Murph's demise—when faced with the investigator's reconstruction of the events, he discovers that not only does this version of the events not match his, but also that he lacks the capacity to reconstruct his own experience: "Everything I could recall about the war flashed kaleidoscopically, and I closed my eyes and I felt the weight of time wash over my body. I could not pattern it. None of it made sense. Nothing followed from anything else and I was required to answer for a story that did not exist" (182). As Powers' semi-autofictional proxy, Bartle plays the part of the struggling memoirist in search for truth in memory—during much of the novel, Bartle is busy trying to accurately remember his experience but acknowledges that, since it is a fallible instrument, memory alone is not enough to make sense of his experience: "I think maybe it was my fault, fuck, I did it, no it didn't happen, well, not like that, but it's hard to say sometimes: half of memory is imagination anyway" (186).

However, throughout the novel, Bartle remains particularly reluctant to connect the proverbial dots that span his deployment in Iraq, from his arrival to his departure after Murph's death. Like other works in which the narrator can be considered to be a trauma victim, Bartle's

narration is non-sequential and alienating for its own teller—in Cathy Caruth's words, "The peculiar temporality of trauma, and the sense that the past it foists upon one is not one's own, may perhaps from this perspective be understood in terms of a temporality of the other (or the other's potential death)" (143). Forced to impose a linear temporality upon his traumatic experience with his confession, Bartle experiences the power that a narrative has in shaping real lives, but he refuses to accept what seems like an oversimplification of his experience: "Eventually, I realized that the marks could not be assembled into any kind of pattern. They were fixed in place. Connecting them would be wrong. They fell where they had fallen. Marks representing the randomness of the war were made at whatever moment I remembered them: disorder predominated" (216).

Narratives not only contribute to one's self-understanding but also to the understanding of the war itself. In *War Porn*, Matt acts as a foil to Aaron's reluctance to narrate his war from his point of view, relentlessly questioning him on his service in Iraq: "I mean, all we know is what they show us on TV, right? I mean, we don't even know. I can't even imagine. We're totally ignorant of this situation, and I'm just wondering, is it really like how they say? Is it bad? Is it getting worse? Is it getting better?" (28). Assuming that the reports that are shown on news channels are qualitatively inferior, Matt seeks "truer" knowledge of the war in Aaron's story. At the same time, however, he acknowledges the power that these narratives (in this case, those perpetuated by news reports) have in shaping popular beliefs about the Global War on Terrorism—even though what is shown on TV is perceived as limited and flawed knowledge about the war, it is nonetheless the way through which most people understand it. In other words, immaterial things such as narratives have the power to change reality in profound ways. In "Psychological Operations," Waguih demonstrates that the Army—and especially his unit—is obviously aware of this:

> 'In the Army we had a saying,' I said. 'Perception is reality. In war, sometimes what matters isn't what's actually happening, but what people think is happening. The Southerners think Grant is winning Shiloh, so they break and run when he charges, and so he does, in fact, win. What you are doesn't always matter. After 9/11 my family got treated as potential terrorists. You get treated as you're seen. Perception is reality.' (177)

This passage highlights how reality and its representations are inextricably intertwined—since most events are witnessed by an extremely limited amount of people, what matters is often how

said events are configured into narratives that necessarily influence the way in which the events are perceived, shaping the collective perception of issues such as race and identity.

This is especially true in the case of soldiers and veterans, who are regularly identified as such and consequently treated accordingly by civilians. Indeed, the assumption that all veterans suffer from PTSD after having witnessed horrific violence on the battlefield is at least as powerful as the narrative that sees veterans as authentic storytellers. As exemplified by Waguih's answer to Zara's accusations, veterans are often perceived to be dangerous because of the combination of their traumatic experiences and combat training: "Of course they feel threatened,' I said to the Special Assistant, 'I'm a crazy vet, right? […]" (177). This idea of veterans as threatening remnants of ill-conceived wars is well-established in American popular culture, as Wilson reminds the readers in Scranton's *War Porn* in a passage that precedes his deployment:

> *We had prepared our whole lives for this. Bombed little brown people, helicopters swooping low, the familiar sight of American machinery carving death from a Third World wasteland. We expected nothing less than shell shock and trauma, we lusted for thousand-yard stares-lifelong connoisseurs of hallucinatory violence, we already knew everything, felt everything. We saw it through a blood-spattered lens, handheld tracking shot pitting figure against ground. We were the camera, we were the audience, we were the actors and film and screen: cowboys and killer angels, the lost patrol, the cavalry charge, America's proud and bloody soldier boys.* (54-55)

Here, Wilson's summoning of cinematic language, with the use of words such as "camera," "tracking shot," and "actors" is not casual, but reflects the way in which war has been narrated to Americans (and the rest of the world) through film in the past decades. Soldiers who joined after 9/11, Wilson seems to imply, expect their deployment to be not unlike those shown in movies such as *Full Metal Jacket* or Platoon, including war's catastrophic aftermath for their psyche.

Scranton also includes references to conventional war narratives in some of *War Porn*'s "babylon" sections—half lyric poems and half cacophonous information overload about the recent history of the US military: "This is the story of a long-haired half-crazed Vietnam vet, harassed by small-town lawmen, lost on his one-man mission of vengeance. Back in the war, he was part of a ragtag team of misfit soldiers, hand-picked for a suicide mission to kill Hitler. Good and evil. He's a downed fighter pilot. He's red and white and blue" (229). These snippets

resemble movie blurbs for war and action movies, especially those set in Vietnam or during the Second World War. Through the ceaseless repetition of similar passages, Scranton mimics how American audiences are always exposed to fictional narratives that seem to domesticate war and that reduce it to themes like youth, brotherhood, and typically American values: "A tale of courage and honor, loyalty, grace under pressure and the will to win. He's a young, dedicated soldier sent up the river to kill a rogue agent. He's a drunk, grizzled vet sergeant fighting bureaucratic bullshit to transform a ragtag band of misfits into a steely band of killers" (230).

By showing the quantity and variety of competing narratives that surround war, veteran *authofictions* unmask themselves as embodying only one of the possible perspectives from which the event is narrated. However, this does not mean that fictional war tales are an obstacle towards the understanding of war—in fact, masterful war narratives are shown to be able to provide a different outlook on reality, fighting against dominant narratives that are constructed to render war an unproblematic patriotic effort against evil forces. In *Fobbit*, Abe Shrinkle meets Gooding during their period of rest and relaxation in Qatar, and is surprised to see that a soldier is reading an antiwar novel:

> 'What's wrong with *Catch-22*?' Abe's pool companion said. 'It's a classic.'
> 'Yeah, classic antiwar rhetoric.' Abe had never read the novel but remembered how, during office hours, one of his West Point professors had gone on a vein- throbbing rant against 'that ass-clown Yossarian,' who spent the entire book trying to weasel his way out of his patriotic war.
> 'Why in the world,' he asked the other soldier, 'would you want to read that book at a time like *this*? (194)

Faithful to his portrayal as a stubborn and incompetent soldier, Shrinkle is disgusted at the very idea of giving credit to a narrative that strays from the standard discourses about courage and honor that unsurprisingly dominate Army rhetoric. Chance Gooding, on the other hand, accustomed as he is to the way in which his own job demands the use of real events for rhetorical purposes, places enormous importance on literary texts about war such as *Catch-22*, going as far as equating Heller's novel to an "owner's manual" for the Global War on Terrorism.

4.3 Multiperspectivity

Gooding's need for perspective is reflected in most of veteran *authofictions*, as these narratives tend to offer stories narrated from multiple points of view. As Marcus Hartner has argued, multiperspectivity can serve various purposes, but the use of a diverse array of viewpoints works to "highlight the perceptually, epistemologically or ideologically restricted nature of individual perspectives and/or draw attention to various kinds of differences and similarities between the points of view presented therein. In this way, multiperspectivity frequently serves to portray the relative character of personal viewpoints or perspectivity in general" (353). This tendency of GWOT narratives is extremely noteworthy, since stories authored by American veterans have traditionally been associated with solipsism and a general disinterest in the Other (Neilson 204).

As Jennifer Haytock has noted, this has not necessarily been the case for the fictional narratives authored by veterans of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan (338). Although the use of multiple perspectives can obviously be found in collections of short stories written by various authors like *Fire and Forget* and *The Road Ahead*, the representation of war from viewpoints that diverge from the author's also appears in numerous other works, such as Phil Klay's *Redeployment* and *Missionaries*, Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, David Abrams' *Fobbit*, Brian Van Reet's *Spoils*, and Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives*. In all of the aforementioned texts, the multiple perspectives employed invite the reader to question individual narratives, thereby diminishing the authority of American veterans (as Eisler argues in *Writing Wars*) and other narrators alike, while at the same time giving the impression that a multi-voiced work of fiction produced by a veteran can be even more authoritative if it includes civilian and enemy standpoints.

In *Fobbit*, the multiple voices that compose the narrative all belong to American soldiers, but their perspectives and backgrounds are markedly different. Among the characters are Chance Gooding, who is a good-natured if unimpressive "fobbit;" Eustace Harkleroad, a comically inept mama's boy in charge of Gooding's office; Abe Shrinkle, a West Point graduate that demonstrates an alarming talent for the mismanagement of tense situations; and Vic Duret, a fobbit-hating Lieutenant Colonel who has to regrettably deal with Shrinkle's ineptitude. Through this array of viewpoints, Abrams shows the drastically different ways in which American soldiers experience war—while some are lucky enough to spend their entire deployment in the Forward Operating Base, cradled by most of the comforts one would expect

to find in any small town in the United States, the "grunts" like Shrinkle and Duret face (and administer) violence on a daily basis.

In the novel, the opposition between "fobbits" and other military personnel is shown through multiple characters—Sergeant Lumley, one of the grunts, sharply criticizes the differences in treatment that they receive: "While headquarters staff soldiers who worked in the palace were given air-conditioned trailers to call home, the infantry took its lumps with living in something akin to a Dumpster. The softies got cushy quarters, but the ones doing the *real* work of Operation Iraqi Freedom suffered the indignity of cleaning out the packing material […]" (137). Fobbits, on the other hand, seem to approach war as a mild inconvenience—Gooding's first time in the field is even compared to a camping trip: "Like the majority of Fobbits, this filled him with equal parts dread and annoyance—fear of being killed at any moment, yes; but also irritation at the fact that he was now on what felt like a yearlong camping trip with all the comforts of home […] stripped away" (3).

In a similar way, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* also presents a collection of characters (all of whom are first-person narrators) who have different roles in the military or adjacent sectors. For instance, Sergeant Price, the protagonist of "Redeployment," the first story of the collection, is an "ordinary" Marine who has seen combat in Iraq, while Nathan, the protagonist of "Money as a Weapons System" is a civilian—a Foreign Service Officer tasked with the reconstruction of local infrastructure. Other protagonists include the aforementioned Waguih, one of the few narrators who is described as not white, and even a military chaplain, who narrates "Prayer in the Furnace." However, while this group of characters is impressive for its variety, they all offer perspectives that are internal to the United States Armed Forces. In *Missionaries,* on the other hand, Klay expands his repertoire of characters whose lives have been touched by the wars that the United States has waged around the world in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first two of the twenty-first. In the novel there are for major characters that serve as focalizers and narrators of their own stories—since *Missionaries* is mainly set in Colombia, two of them are locals: Abel is a Colombian paramilitary fighter, Lisette an American war reporter, Mason is an Army medic turned Special Forces liaison who has served in Iraq, and Juan Pablo a lieutenant colonel in the Colombian Army. In *Missionaries*, the points of view start as separate stories that eventually intersect—as a consequence, the intimate feeling of first-person narration is replaced mid-book by a third person narrator that describes the final events of the story.

The fluctuation between first and third person narrators is also one of the features of Scranton's *War Porn,* in which Wilson is the only character who narrates his own story, while

a third person narrator recounts the barbecue at Dahlia and Matt's place as well as Qasim's story. The latter is an Iraqi mathematician who is forced to stop working in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq, and who ends up being one of Wilson's interpreters. At first appearing to be decidedly separate, the stories that form *War Porn*, like those in *Missionaries*, are eventually threaded together. When Aaron is showing Matt the pictures showing the torture of Iraqi prisoners, the reader meets again Qasim, who was last seen bidding farewell to Wilson before returning to his hometown. If seeing the series of prisoner pictures is almost unbearable for Matt, the horrific revelation that Qasim has been captured, imprisoned, and tortured by the US Army while he was being employed as an interpreter for the same institution is even more appalling for the reader.

Through their multi-voiced novels, American veterans have sought to supplement the restricted point of view of the single soldier with other perspectives, embracing a more comprehensive view on the Global War on Terrorism and its effects. One of the most apparent consequences of the adoption of these multiple viewpoints is that the autofictional tendencies of war fiction written by veterans have been "spread out" to cover a wider range of individuals. This is not surprising if one remembers that the Armed Forces naturally place a greater emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and that many veterans in the United States perceive that there exists a gap between the military and the general public that needs to be bridged. In this way, veteran *authofictions* can often be seen as collective, fictional autobiographies written on behalf of all veterans—this is evident especially in David Abrams' *Brave Deeds*, in which the narrators are multiple, and yet also fundamentally one. Mostly narrated through a first-person-plural point-of-view, *Brave Deeds* depicts its six protagonists almost as a humanoid centipede:

> We are six men—Arrow, Park, Drew, O, Cheever, and Fish. And we are moving through the most dangerous sectors of Baghdad […] We are on our way to FOB Saro to attend the memorial service for Sergeant Rafe Morgan and we are determined to make it there before sundown, alive, intact, all twelve arms and legs still attached. One team, one fight, one brotherhood. Just like the poster in our recruiter's office" (7)

As the title of the first chapter—"We"—makes abundantly clear, the six are inseparable, and even though some chapters may focus on single soldiers, whose individuality and peculiarities are by no means erased, the pronoun "we" always dominates the narration. Individuals shift in

and out of this collective identity, alternating diverging opinions and intimate anecdotes to communal effort.

At the beginning of their *Going After Cacciato*-esque adventure through Baghdad, the six men are shown to be extremely different in many respects. For example, they have different opinions on the war that they are fighting and even on the late Sergeant Morgan, whose funeral they are about to crash while going AWOL and crossing Baghdad on foot:

> We did this for Sergeant Morgan, after all.
>
> At least most of us did.
>
> Okay, *some* of us. We'd like to think we're all in this together, but we'd be kidding ourselves. Like our opinions of the war itself, we are divided.
>
> Some of us loved Staff Sergeant Morgan, some thought he was just okay, and some thought he was a total dick.
>
> Likewise, some of us believe in this war, worship at the First Church of Bush, and have faith we'll find those weapons of mass destruction sooner or later. To them, Rafe's death was one of glory: he went out a hero, one more martyr fighting the good fight against evil.
>
> Others think that's bullshit. To them, this is a job. Nothing more, nothing less. The starched suits at the Pentagon tell us to go *here*, we go here; they change their minds and tell us to go *there*, we go there. As long as we get a paycheck, we could give two shits about history and heroes. (25)

Abrams frequently decides to single out one of the protagonists, but their individuality is always fluctuating, never really separated from the group—in the passage quoted above, the author does not even bother specifying who are the men who belong to either side of the debate. Even though during their adventure they are occasionally at each other's throats, the "we" never disappears. In fact, the sense of commitment to each other produced by their common situation constantly proves stronger. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned passage is concluded by yet another affirmation of their collective intent: "But now we're truly out here, off the grid, on this illegal mission and the Pentagon wonks can go fuck themselves sideways. This is our game now—no rules. There's no telling what will happen before this day is through" (25). Through this fluctuation between individuality and collectivity, Abrams illustrates the inherent contradictions that arise when one tries to narrate war as a single soldier when so many members of the Armed Forces tie their identity to those of their siblings in arms.

This is perhaps one of the reasons why so many veteran *authofictions* choose not to use a single character as a focalizer, but it has to be noted that this phenomenon is also tied to the issue of metanarrative awareness. Since veteran authors are aware of the narrative authority with which they are imbued, and since their characters are shown to be conscious of the power that narratives have in shaping beliefs, veteran fiction that focuses exclusively on the point of view of a single American soldier run the risk of As Roy Scranton has argued in the not-so-subtly-titled article "Narrative in the Anthropocene is the Enemy: Stories Won't Save You From Ecological Destruction," the power of a single narrative can hinder understanding instead of promoting it. While Scranton's article is primarily about the existential threat of climate change, he has time and again—especially in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* and *We're Doomed, Now What?*—treated war and climate change together. At the beginning of his essay, Scranton warns against the seductive power of the narrative form: "Narrative is the enemy. Narrative is a trick to seduce the mind into making sense of reality, a way of structuring the unknown that presumes we already know how things will end: two sides to any debate, the hero's quest, the marriage plot, trauma and recovery, struggle and overcoming, triumph of the will, the journey, the road, there and back again. Narrative is how we reassure ourselves everything's going to be ok." Customarily considered to be an invaluable tool for understanding, narrative is here singled-out as the literal enemy by a former soldier because of its suspicious power of imposing meaning on events that do not inherently possess it.

However, Scranton concedes that narrative is a deeply human activity, and that—although it quickly becomes problematic in the face of enormously complex events like war and climate change—it can serve as a tool to undermine deep-seated beliefs: "Narrative […] has many uses, deception being only one of them. Narrative may be used to pose riddles, weave masks, interrupt, digress, perhaps make space for silence. Narrative may be deployed against itself in order to knock holes in the plasterboard of cheap belief, undermine our faith in reality, unground our prejudiced senses of justice and truth." Narrative's totalizing force is especially dangerous when such truths and beliefs are reinforced—In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Scranton points his finger at the inadequacy of a "single narrative" ("Introduction: Coming Home") that cannot possibly escape failure in the face of planetary destruction. To avoid this, one needs to abandon limited vantage points to embrace variety:

> We need to give up defending and protecting our truth, our perspective, our Western values, and understand that truth is found not in one perspective but in its multiplication, not in one point of view but in the aggregate, not in opposition but in the whole. We need

> to learn to see not just with Western eyes but with Islamic eyes and Inuit eyes, not just with human eyes but with golden-cheeked warbler eyes, coho salmon eyes, and polar bear eyes, and not even just with eyes but with the wild, barely articulate being of clouds and seas and rocks and trees and stars. ("We're Doomed, Now What?")

Most of the *authofictions* that I have surveyed in this study seem to take this lesson to heart—their inclusion of seemingly opposite perspectives often reveals the imbalance that exists between invading soldiers and local civilians when it comes to both actual and storytelling power: Qasim's story ends as soon as the American invasion begins, and his story does not have an ending, as his last appearances are seen through the eyes of Wilson and, later, encapsulated in the few photos shown to Matt by Aaron, who does not disclose Qasim's fate and, with his final words on the matter, ominously predicts the ending of the novel: "It's a weird thrill, having that much physical control over somebody, knowing what you're doing. Its…" (322).

Representing the experience of characters that exist beyond enemy lines does not only show difference, but also affinity. In *Spoils*, Brian Van Reet alternates the narration between Sleed, the customary semi-autobiographical character, Cassandra Wigheard, another American soldier, and Abu al-Hool, an Egyptian jihadist who has fought in Afghanistan and is now fighting in Iraq. While Sleed, the young soldier who shares his name with another of Van Reet's characters, one of the protagonists of the *Fire and Forget* short story "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek,"[49] provides the reader with a window on indifferent American soldiers intent on collecting the titular spoils of war, the perspectives that are furthest from Van Reet's own experience—a female soldier and an Islamic fighter—are the driving force of the narrative. Cassandra, the only character to be narrated in the third person, joined the Army shortly before 9/11, in the summer of 2001, and is eager to prove herself, while Abu al-Hool has been fighting in the mujaheddin since the Soviet-Afghan War, and has even lost a son in battle in Chechnya. One could reasonably expect their perspectives on war to be opposite, but the novel reveals them to be quite similar. In his first chapter, Abu al-Hool's immediately described his jihad in terms that would suit the professed objectives of Operation Iraqi Freedom: "Jihad here is like jihad in Eritrea, Chechnya, or anywhere else. The battle is always the same: to restore peace in the war-torn, hope in the downtrodden, tenacity in the meek, and zeal for life in the minds of those who have lost any sense of vitality" (21). Far from resembling the usual depictions of

[49] The title is of course a reference to Hemingway's famous short story "Big Two-Hearted River," dealing with veteran Nick Adams coming back from WWI.

Islamist fighters, the reader is exposed to Abu al-Hool's memory of his relatively comfortable childhood in Cairo, his travels around Europe, and his complex thoughts on the way war is waged, including his disgust when hearing of 9/11—"'You call this justice,' I said chidingly. 'To kill women and children'" (27)—and his initial unwillingness to leave Afghanistan to fight in Iraq. Abu al-Hool's conflicted thoughts on the war mirror Cassandra's who, while on patrol on the Iraqi streets, questions the role that the United States Army is playing in the lives of Iraqi civilians.

Van Reet's novel revolves around Cassandra and her teammates' capture after a firefight with Abu al-Hool's men, by then under the command of al-Hool's former right-hand man, Dr. Walid. The ending of the novel, narrated in its unfolding through Cassandra's perspective and corroborated by a few words from Sleed after the end of the battle against the men that Abu al-Hool used to lead, exemplifies Cassandra's closeness with some of her captors, especially in the face of the ostensibly indiscriminate use of American violence. After parting ways, disguised as a local farmer, Abu discloses the location of Dr. Walid's hideout to the nearby American FOB, seemingly paving the way for Cassandra's liberation. Instead, Sleed's final chapter, gloomily titled "Spoil," confirms that Cassandra is amongst the victims, struck by friendly fire:

> The mission was on a tip from a farmer. Bunch of us, on the ground and in the air, heading to this old water treatment plant when a drone that was spotting for us caught the heat signature from a mortar. We took a detour and let them have it. When there was no more movement in the thermals, we fanned out to search for bodies, leaving a guard on the tanks because it was too wet to drive them any closer to the river without getting mired. We crossed a ditch where black mud pulled at our boots, into a field of tall green grass, where we found a blood trail that led the rest of the way. It was a woman. That was the first thing wrong. They had to use DNA to make the ID for sure, but Blornsbaum was the one to notice the hair. Hard to see with all the dust and blood, but there it was, strands of blond in the field. That was when we knew. She was lying right next to this teenager, like side to side, one facing the other. We found a Yemeni passport on him and a camera back in the grass. I picked it up. It was still recording.

Sleed finds Cassandra's body as it faces Abu Hafs, Abu al-Hool's mild-mannered protégé, who had confided his doubts about the war to al-Hool. During their exchange just outside Cassandra's cell, the former emir had demonstrated his appreciation of the way in which Hafs

demonstrated to be different from the new emir and "madman" Walid and his sadistic methods of torture:

> 'It's about them. Her and the other prisoners. Sometimes I wonder if what we're doing is right.'
> 'Yes. I see. Well, it's good to think this way, to examine one's self. But remember, whatever the nuances of our situation, they are completely in the wrong. They chose to come here. They brought this on themselves.'
> He nods thoughtfully at what I've said, but the rest of his body betrays his disagreement with it, his mouth contorted, shoulders hunched; biting his bottom lip, he grasps for a way to express what he's feeling and finds himself at a loss, reduced to uttering childlike truths.
> 'I always had an idea of what the Americans would be like. But they are different than I thought. They're just people' (166).

As is often the case in the novel, conscious of his duties, al-Hool struggles to appear more austere than he actually is, but he also narrates an anecdote from the Soviet-Afghan War about a dying Russian soldier, remembering his humanity in the face of death: "There comes a time for each of us when we realize the truth about the enemy Which is that he is not an idea, or some faceless demon. He is a man. And every man is much like ourselves" (167).

4.4 The Ethics of Veteran Storytelling: Writing Fiction about Iraq and Afghanistan

What I described as the textual manifestations of *authofiction*—signposts of authenticity, metanarrative awareness, and multiperspectivity—all contribute to the creation of authoritative works of fiction that simultaneously alert readers to the dangers of adopting (and blindly trusting) the limited vantage point of a single observer. While some of these works try to accomplish this through the depiction of a single viewpoint (e.g., *The Yellow Birds*) most *authofictions* pair their semi-autofictional characters with several other viewpoints and with constant reminders of the ways in which competing narratives interpret reality. However, this does not mean that these literary works simply wish to undermine their own authority—as I have already argued, the use of fictionality in these novels and short stories should not be seen as a way to signal a non-serious intent in the communication with readers. On the contrary,

authofictions fulfill what is generally perceived to be an enormously important objective in the veteran community—bridging the gap between them and the civilian population.

This intent is evident in Phil Klay's "Psychological Operations," in which Waguih expresses his need to share his story with Zara even after several conversations about the same topic, including the one in front of the Special Assistant—an instance in which the narrator of the story demonstrates his ability in crafting stories that can influence people by leveraging his authority as a veteran. When the two are alone and Zara offers a snarky remark in response to Waguih's story, continuing to tell his story authentically becomes an imperative:

> She didn't seem to realize how this conversation was different from class, where we bullshitted over political theory. This mattered. And every time she contradicted me with her smug little assumptions about who I was and why I did what I'd done, it grated. It made me want to shut my mouth and hate her. Hate her for her ignorance when she was wrong, and hate her for her arrogance when she was right. But if you're going to be understood, you have to keep talking. And that was the mission. Make her understand me. (197)

Going as far as equating understanding to his mission, the narrator signals his communicative intent aimed at those who do not share his experience of war. Even though Waguih is aware of the fact that his is only a limited perspective on the matter, he perceives his experience to be qualitatively exceptional, and therefore significant for someone who has not had access to similar events.

The exceptional nature of war quickly extends to those who fight it and then decide—and often *need*—to communicate their experience to others, but the fact that audiences are generally willing to treat veteran storytelling differently increases the already hefty ethical concerns that come with such a difficult theme as war. In *We're Doomed*, Scranton describes his reasons for joining the Army after 9/11, and cites the possibility of offering a peek into the Lacanian Real:

> "I wanted the concrete names of villages. I wanted the shuddering opening to unknown vistas of the soul, truth in sudden flashes, something transformative and maybe crippling that would give me, like Edmund Wilson's Philoctetes, power in my very wound. I wanted to cut through the buzzing anomie of our feckless consumer society and see through to the realm of the real, even if it meant suffering from it the rest of my life. I wanted to cross

> over from innocence to experience, like all those heroes of literature, and come back with a novel." ("War and the City")

Scranton describes his expectations regarding the authority he would have gained as almost messianic, and his literary aspirations at the time seem to be based almost solely on the experiences and authority that he would have found after leaving the battlefield. Once home, however, he realizes that the experience of war does not guarantee an unfiltered contact with something more "real" than ordinary reality:

> I got my war stories, but I didn't find any authentic bedrock I could stand on and say, 'This is real.' I found no soldier's faith, no concrete names of villages. How we understand and account for violence, death, and destruction seems just as contingent and convention-ridden as any other aspect of human culture, and the notion that there's another "really real reality" somehow reachable beyond the physical, mental, and cultural constructs shaping our being in the world seems wholly naive. We find in war what we want to, what we expect, what we've been trained to see. ("War and the City")

The awareness that asserting a genuine and unfiltered encounter with something truly authentic in war, while the authority that is customarily ascribed to veterans endures, exposes the problematic position of the veteran storyteller: "Equally troubling, I've found the moral authority imputed to me as a veteran gratifying and am reluctant to give it up, even though it depends on this very idea of an encounter with truth I don't wholly believe in." ("War and the City"). This realization is palpable in *authofictions*. Their authors are all willing—to varying degrees—to initially accept veteran authority, but they are also aware that such authority, coupled with the imperative to depict war accurately, corresponds to an increased moral responsibility. Thus, veteran *authofictions* do not simply represent war, but also implicitly questions *how* war should be represented. More specifically, though, these narratives confront the specific challenges inherent in the representation of war as someone who has actively participated in the conflict they portray through fiction.

As the final step in this study of war fiction authored by veterans, then, it is necessary to consider the ethical implications of both producing and consuming such narratives. Indeed, not only are the authors of works like *War Porn* and *Redeployment* essentially forced to consider the ethical dimensions of veteran storytelling—something that is reflected in their

stories—but readers are also invited to carefully examine their interest and engagement with this discourse.

In this regard, *War Porn* constitutes an obvious example of how a veteran author can question both civilian interest and disinterest in war stories—Aaron almost forces Matt to look at his photos, but the latter also continues to view them of his own volition—but Van Reet's *Spoils* also illustrates this tendency. After hearing about one of her colleagues being raped, Cassandra reflects the appropriateness of her reaction: "It makes her sick with rage, makes her want to reach out to Williams, but the fragment of a history renders that thought too uncomfortable. When dealing with other people's tragedies, there's the risk of taking on more grief than is appropriate, of lapsing into benevolent voyeurism, of making it all about you" (36). In this case, hearing about Williams' traumatic experience, she has to grapple with the possibility of appropriating someone else's trauma, a prospect faced by both civilian readers and veteran writers who decide to write fiction about categories other than their own. In the same novel, towards the end of her imprisonment, Cassandra has to witness the horrific death of one of her teammates, Crump, who is beheaded by Dr. Walid while being filmed. "The ultimate mutilation. Only later does she recover enough to think about anything else. Like Hafs taping it. What that means. […] To set the manner of remembrance is the highest form of ownership" (189). The use of Crump's death as a future method of propaganda is made possible by Dr. Walid's decision to tape it, giving him power over how the American soldier will be remembered—the same question of ownership and remembrance, enlarged to encompass the war as whole could be asked of anyone who decides to put pen to paper, especially those who are habitually recognized as trustworthy storytellers.

As James Phelan has stated, narrative ethics "explores the intersections between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values. [Narrative ethics] regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling because narratives themselves implicitly or explicitly ask the question, 'How should one think, judge, and act—as author, narrator, character, or audience—for the greater good?'" ("Narrative Ethics" 531). Narrative ethics is therefore concerned with the way in which humans engage with narrative texts to explain reality, and how narratives, in turn, help them achieve understanding. This does not amount to simply investigating texts to uncover their moral message—narrative ethics aims to scrutinize the ethical implications of the act of storytelling itself, at the level of content, form, author, and extends its inquiry to the ethics of reading narrative texts. In this sense, narrative ethics is especially relevant for stories that depict acts that would normally be considered illegal and despicable, but are tolerated and regulated during wartime, and even more significant when

questions of authority and responsibility are embedded in the figure of the author, as is the case for *authofictions*.

The contemporary focus on narrative ethics is at least partially a consequence of the "Ethical turn" that took place in the wake of the de Man affair. After the discovery of his work for a collaborationist newspaper during the Second World War, as James Phelan has argued, deconstructionist ethics, encapsulated by Joseph Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (538), in which the author argues for the necessity of recognizing the undecidability of a text's ethics of the told, was revealed as inescapably flawed: "the position that de Man's wartime writings do not have a determinate ethics of the told appeared to many to be the outcome not of a disinterestedly rigorous reading but of an effort to absolve de Man of responsibility for his repugnant views. After the de Man affair, literary studies became much less interested in undecidability and much more open to other ways of analyzing the intersections of ethics and literature" (538-539). The texts produced by the veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are, therefore, unsurprisingly self-conscious about the way in which they decide to narrate war and the Other.

Phelan divides the main areas of interest of narrative ethics into four categories: the ethics of the told, which focuses on characters and events, the ethics of the telling, which focuses on "text-internal matters involving implied authors, narrators, and audiences," the ethics of writing/producing, which focuses on actual authors and other constructing agents, and the ethics of reading/reception, which focuses on audience engagement ("Narrative Ethics" 531). In this section I will focus on how all of these questions arise in GWOT *authofictions*, but I will treat the two central issues together as opposed to separately because unlike Phelan, I agree with Richard Walsh on the problem of the implied author in fiction, because "positing an additional class of noncharacter narrators distinct from their authors obscures the communicative act because the distinction treats those narrators as reporting or representing what actually occurred (in the fiction) rather than communicating through fiction" (Gammelgard et al. 10).

Since *authofictions* have to balance the authority with which they narrate war with the revelation that said authority is not final or infallible, thereby showing alternative perspectives and, in a way, pulling the rug out from under their own feet, I would argue that—for the purpose of this study—Hannah Meretoja's approach to narrative ethics, contained in her book *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (2018) proves to be ideal, and for several reasons. Firstly, her conception of narrative hermeneutics emphasizes the experiential nature of narrative, highlighting the continuity that exists between reality and

representation: "Narrative hermeneutics […] questions the dichotomy between living and telling by stressing that experience is continuously mediated. Its key insight is that cultural webs of narratives affect the way in which we experience things in the first place (8-9). Secondly, Meretoja is firmly focused on the way that imaginative texts can have an effect on real lives, and accordingly she applies her principles primarily to narrative fiction precisely because, she argues, nowadays reading fiction could appear futile: "Against the backdrop of the current crisis of the humanities, many philosophers, psychologists, and literary scholars have defended the value of narrative fiction by drawing attention to its cognitive and ethical significance for our development as human beings, moral agents, and democratic citizens, particularly insofar as it boosts our capacity for empathetic perspective-taking" (3). Thirdly, Meretoja sees narrative not only as a structure, but also as a tool for interpretation[50] that does not end in the text itself: "We should move beyond linking interpretation to the idea of unveiling deep meanings; we should see interpretation as an endless activity of (re)orientation, engagement, and sense-making, which is thoroughly worldly, both in the sense of being embedded in a social and historical world and in the sense of participating in performatively constituting that world" (10).

The central argument of *The Ethics of Storytelling* concerns the ways in which narratives may or may not promote a meaningful exchange between teller and receiver—to illustrate her point, Meretoja describes the different purposes fulfilled by naturalizing narratives, which choose to conceal their interpretive role, and self-reflexive narratives, which "overtly raise the possibility of reinterpretation and invite the recipient to participate in the dialogic process" (12). These two narrative modes are seen by Meretoja as diametrically opposite in their ethical potential because of their different treatment of the relationship between the particular and the general "while some (typically naturalizing) narratives seek to subsume the particular under the general, others (typically self-reflexive ones) destabilize such appropriative aspirations and display a non-subsumptive logic by foregrounding the temporal process of encountering the singularity of the narrated experiences" (12). According to Meretoja, then, "the ethical potential of storytelling depends on the possibility of non-subsumptive understanding, in which singular experiences are not subsumed under what we already know, but shape and transform our understanding" (12-13). In other words, fiction is

[50] Meretoja's idea of the interpretive continuum between experience and narrative is shaped by Ricoeur's theory of threefold mimesis: "When we (re)interpret our everyday experiences, identities, and life plans in light of cultural (literary, historical, visual, etc.) narratives, this process manifests the dynamics of a triple hermeneutic. These three levels of interpretation are parallel to Ricoeur's (1984) three levels of mimesis" (62).

more likely to achieve its ethical potential when it reveals itself as such, amplifying its power to question beliefs rather than reinforce them.

As I have already stressed throughout this study, fictionality plays a pivotal role in how narrative is received. In this respect, cognitive approaches to narrative are in agreement with rhetorical ones in their assessment of the qualitatively different experience of consuming fictional content. As Vera Nünning explains in "The Ethics of (Fictional) Form: Persuasiveness and Perspective Taking from the Point of View of Cognitive Literary Studies," fiction is generally perceived to be more persuasive than nonfiction: "The expectation that what is being read is not referring to actual events, makes it easier to accept, for the moment, even quite strange things. Readers thereby engage with views that might otherwise, in real life, seem dubious or even threatening; in knowing that such views do not threaten one's cherished opinions, values, and current goals, the reader is opened to new experiences" (39). Therefore, fiction seems to be the preferred tool of authors who seek to have an impact on the audience's beliefs: "The reading of fiction has two possible effects that are noteworthy from the point of view of ethical criticism: first, fictional stories disseminate values and change readers' beliefs; second, reading fictional narratives or viewing fictional films can exercise cognitive and affective processes that are important for pro-social behavior and for understanding others" (40). Basing my analysis on Meretoja's different "aspects of the ethical potential and dangers of storytelling" (89), I will therefore try to gauge the ethical potential of veteran *authofictions* to negotiate individual experience against multiple perspectives.

The first and most significant insight of Meretoja's narrative hermeneutics is based on narrative's capacity for widening our horizons, and it reads as follows: "I propose that a pivotal but neglected aspect of the ethical potential of narratives is their power to cultivate our sense of the possible: I argue that narrative form in itself does not make narratives either good or bad, and what is ethically crucial is whether and how they expand or diminish our sense of the possible" (89). According to Meretoja, the way in which narratives encourage and enable readers to consider possibilities is at the heart of their ethical function: "I argue that crucial to the ethical potential of narratives is not only their capacity to enrich the hermeneutic resources available for us in understanding our own experiences and those of others, but also their power to expand the possibilities open to us" (93). This sense of the possible is closely interconnected, Meretoja argues, to a sense of history, because narratives can be especially powerful tools to past times and events, which in turn leads to a questioning of dominant narratives: "A sense of history promotes our ability to question the ready-made narrative identities that are imposed on us and to imagine alternative ones" (94). In other words, ethically productive narratives can

help audiences imagine different possibilities while alerting them to the way in which "ethically problematic narratives" (97) diminish their potential for interpretation and understanding.

Many of the veteran *authofictions* that have been at the center of this study share a preoccupation with letting the reader uncover experiences that would otherwise be inaccessible, purportedly exposing them to the "real" way in which soldiers (and other actors) experience war. In this way, these fictional narratives overlap with other forms of knowing the (sometimes extremely recent) past: "Literary narratives, films, television series, and other fictional narratives can function as a form of alternative historiography that affords imaginative experiential access to such worlds. They can self-reflexively explore how cultural narratives shape the space of experience in which individual experience is embedded" (94). Since they represent real historical events that caused enormous destruction and death through particular fictional perspectives, highlighting how individual lives are affected by the violence of war, *authofictions* can reasonably be considered ethically productive narratives, if only for their function in showing that "history consists in everyday actions and inactions: that history is not taking place somewhere else, where the political leaders meet, but right here, where our everyday lives unfold" (Meretoja 94).

Whether *authofictions* always succeed in enlarging our sense of the possible, however, is a debatable issue that requires consideration in each unique case. While to a certain extent readers can certainly cultivate a sense of the possible by reading these veteran narratives, some *authofictions* do in fact represent experiences that some readers might consider to be commonplace or even trite, risking a mindless perpetuation of dangerous stereotypes. In this regard, the work of fiction among those included in this study that comes closer to this dangerous repetition of tropes is *The Yellow Birds*.Here war is described almost as an uncontrollable natural phenomenon upon which humans have no control and which heavily implies that the traumatized protagonist is a victim of such natural power. However, this does not mean that Powers' novel is condemned to be an ethically deficient narrative. *The Yellow Birds* does in fact show American soldiers committing war crimes, and thus arguably challenges received notions of American exceptionality and righteousness that can be used to justify American interventionism.

The second aspect of Meretoha's ethics of storytelling consists in the fact that narratives can "contribute to personal and cultural self-understanding" (90). Here Meretoja posits that narratives can give readers the tools to better understand themselves, especially in relation to an Other. She argues that this can happen in two ways: by shaping one's own story and by interacting with narratives told by other storytellers. While the latter is firmly within the bounds

of the ethics of reading, which I will discuss at the end of this section, the first concerns the ethics of the told, the ethics of the telling, and the ethics of writing/producing, and will be discussed here. Meretoja associates this contribution to self-understanding with autobiographical texts: "Life-writing and autobiographical storytelling in its various forms are not only about self-understanding in the sense of discovering who one is; they are interpretative, performative activities that make it possible for us to become more than we are now, to increase our being, and to fulfill our potential" (101). That is to say, autobiographical explorations do not only interpret the self, but they also contribute to its future development.

While *authofictions* are not classical examples of autobiographical storytelling or life writing, it is undeniable that, as they explore the variety of experiences associated with participation in an armed conflict, they contribute to the widening of the meaning of veterancy in the United States. Most of the texts that I have surveyed create constellations of soldier-characters that populate short stories and non-chronological novels that aim to combat the shortsightedness of the single interpretation. Indeed, for Meretoja, this is a crucial aspect of ethical storytelling especially when the complexity of the theme is unlikely to be grasped if it is reduced to a single perspective and a simple story: "The fixation on the conventional narrative model that involves a central subject of experience and a linear plot that ends in closure may hinder the understanding of complex phenomena—such as climate change—that have no single agent and/or involve a time span that fits uneasily with traditional human-scale, experientially-driven storytelling" (106). Like it happens when dealing with climate change, wars are obviously characterized by extreme complexity, with multiple actors and interests that create unimaginable life loss and destruction. Works like *Missionaries* and *War Porn* try to capture such specificities through multiple perspectives and narrative stances, rarely offering any cathartic moment.

The third aspect of Meretoja's narrative ethics is concerned with narrative's potential to understand others. Arguing against the idea that all narrative is a "violent form of appropriation" (107), she maintains that narratives exist on a continuum that includes "*subsumptive narrative practices* that function appropriatively and reinforce cultural stereotypes by subsuming singular experiences under culturally dominant narrative scripts and non-subsumptive narrative practices that challenge such categories of appropriation and follow the logic of dialogue and exploration" (112). The first tend to reinforce problematic practices, such as using individuals as representations of the groups to which they belong, while the latter "problematize simplistic categorization of experiences, persons, and relationships, as well as control-oriented appropriation of what is unfamiliar, foreign, and other" (112-113). One of the

ways in which narratives can do this is through non-subsumptive narrative practices that emphasize their own constructedness—Meretoja focuses, for example, on dialogical narration and question-asking that drive the narration forward (270).

These methods are hardly ever used in the veteran *authofictions* that I have explored in this study, and it could be argued that these narratives lean towards the subsumptive end of the continuum. However, as I have shown, *authofictions* do call attention to the *constructedness* of narratives and the influence that such narratives have in people's lives. One way in which many of these texts may promote non-subsumptive understanding, then, is through the creation of narrative of the GWOT that are necessarily incomplete without the inclusion of the Other's story—*War Porn*, for example, would lose much of its ethical potential if Qasim's section were to be eliminated. Of course, while the inclusion of other voices *can* work to broaden the scope of what would otherwise be narrow sighted narrations, it could be argued that, in including fictional representations of Iraqi and Afghan voices, veteran writers are appropriating them, subordinating their significance to their narratives' logics.

Since it is closely linked to the third aspect discussed by Meretoja, I will focus on the fifth one before moving on to how veteran *authofictions* can be assessed according to fourth and the sixth aspects of ethical potential. Meretoja stresses the way in which narratives can invite readers to explore perspectives other than their own: "Narratives differ greatly in terms of whether they actively foster perspective-awareness, perspective-sensitivity, and perspective-taking—for example, through polyphonic and self-reflexive narrative strategies—or whether they mask their own perspectival organization through naturalizing narrative strategies" (131). For this reason, *authofictions* that multiply their narrators and/or perspectives can be considered, generally speaking, to be more ethically conducive to perspective-awareness, especially as Western readers are concerned. Van Reet's careful description of Abu al-Hool's complex backstory, as well as of his disagreements with Dr. Walid, is clearly aimed at humanizing the soldier's ultimate Other—the Islamist terrorist. However, the inclusion of Abu al-Hool's perspective in *Spoils* is not only aimed at calling attention to the fact that it is valuable to explore other perspectives. As Meretoja has argued, "perspective-taking and narrative imagination are not only about feeling with or for the other, but also about imagining the processes that lead certain individuals to act in certain ways" (131). In Van Reet's novel, readers are not only able to access Abu's thoughts through his first person narration, but they are also encouraged to try and understand the motives of his actions, as his increasing weariness towards war is heavily linked with his son's death in Chechnya and the breaking down of his relationship with his wife. While *authofictions* like *Spoils*, *War Porn*, and *Missionaries* include

these non-American perspectives, others limit their polyphonic nature within the bounds of the American Armed Forces—these works are comparatively less ethically productive than the aforementioned novels, but they nonetheless urge civilian readers to put themselves in a soldier's boots and other veterans to explore the various ways in which each soldier's experience of war is unique.

The fourth aspect highlighted by Meretoja's narrative ethics is concerned with how narratives can "establish, challenge, and transform narrative in-betweens" (90). By "narrative in-betweens" Meretoja means intersubjective spaces where our sense of the possible is expanded through the sharing of narratives: "Storytelling creates a relational space—a space of possibilities— that allows us to become heard and visible as subjects of speech and action. The narrative in-between shapes what is thinkable and sayable, visible and audible, experienceable and doable within different subject positions" (117). Veteran *authofictions* often show veterans as they try—with various degrees of success—to connect with civilians, sharing their stories and creating a space in which the military-civilian gap can be filled. In this sense, these fictional works can be a way of unsettling "culturally dominant master narratives" (120), but the opposite might also be true. As Meretoja explains, these in-between spaces are not necessarily perfect spaces of exchange. Narratives can both create inclusive and welcoming spaces of dialogue, but they can also work to "reinforce ethically problematic narrative in-betweens that perpetuate cultural stereotypes, restrictive ways of categorizing people and their experiences, and violent, oppressive mechanisms of exclusion and othering" (125). David Abrams' use of the "we" pronoun in *Brave Deeds* can serve as a useful example here, since it widens the spectrum of veteran experience while, at the same time, arguably excluding non-American voices and reinforcing an "us versus them" rhetoric.

The sixth and final aspect is that narratives can "function as a mode of ethical inquiry" (135). According to Meretoja, this means that narratives do not provide readers with answers to moral questions, but rather *ask* significant ethical questions: "The ethical potential of narrative fiction lies more in the questions it poses and in shaping or refining our sense of the complexities of the moral space we inhabit than in the answers it proposes" (135). Here Meretoja makes reference to the affective power of narrative which, unburdened by the "abstract language of moral theories" (133), can be used for both productive and extremely dangerous ends. Quoting Robert Musil and Paul Ricoeur, she sees narrative fiction as a "great laboratory of the imaginary" which "transforms our narratively mediated ethical identities and the moral space in which we navigate" (142). Thus, narrative fiction becomes the place where our concepts of right or wrong are shaped, and ethically productive narratives help us, once

again, when they broaden our horizons or, in Meretoja's own words, they are at their best when they "expand our sense of the possible" (142). As Chance Gooding demonstrates in *Fobbit*, reading fiction can serve to counter dominant ideas that shape one's life. As I have pointed out earlier, his job as a soldier at war does not prevent him from reading what Abe Shrinkle defines an anti-war book, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*—on the contrary, as Gooding argues, reading it is necessary in order not to lose his ethical identity to the war: "I can't think of a better time to read it, can you? It's helped get my perspective skewed in the right direction. Sort of like an owner's manual for this war" (194).

It would be hard to deny that veteran *authofictions* are, broadly speaking, carefully constructed works that function as critical spaces where our ethical capacity is put to use and enriched. As Meretoja has argued, narratives that successfully fulfill their ethical potential can "sensitize us to the multitude of ways of approaching a particular ethical issue and expand the space in which we can move, intellectually and emotionally, as we deal with ethically complex issues" (142). The theme of war—common to all veteran *authofictions*—necessarily forces both writers and readers to confront the vast array of ethical issues related to it. These narratives often do not represent characters that act in morally irreprehensible ways, and frequently include the opposite—however, this does not mean that *authofictions* are therefore ethically defective narratives, because storytelling that functions as ethical inquiry often makes readers face incredibly complex situations that challenge our existing ethical capacity. As Meretoja has noted, this is one of the peculiarities of narrative fiction, which does not work through argument but rather through inquiry: "we should consider the possibility that the ethical lies in the power of literary narratives to function as a form of ethical questioning that unsettles us, rather than in the affirmative moral positions or arguments they may present" (142).

Veteran *authofiction* is, however, especially interesting as far as the ethics of the telling/writing/producing and the ethics of reading are concerned. After all, these narratives have all been written by people (mostly white men) who have been active participants in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and (mostly) Iraq—this means that these stories are easily associable with the perspective of one of the sides at war and, importantly, that their authors wield great authority as they tell their fictional tales. Veteran *authofictions* are set amidst recent historical events, and are produced by inherently biased writers whose identity nonetheless ensures that their content amounts to an authentic representation of said historical events. Furthermore, as I have shown, the use of fictionality in *authofictions* works to reinforce rather than undermine their claim to truth, therefore strengthening the potential power that they hold over readers. This is often explored thematically in the narratives themselves, such as in Phil

Klay's aptly named short story "War Stories," in which two veterans meet another veteran and a civilian playwright in a bar to discuss the story of one of the characters.

In the opening pages of "War Stories," the narrator (Wilson) and his friend Jenks—a fellow veteran who has unfortunately suffered severe burns during the war—discuss the intricacies of telling war stories to civilians. In the story, Klay illustrates how communicating their war experience to people who have not served and consequently defer to the veteran's authority is a complex matter for veterans by showing both the narrator's reluctance to share his own story as well as his hesitancy with regard to Jenks sharing his: "The day before, when he'd asked me to come, I'd told him that if he gave this girl his story, it wouldn't be his anymore. Like, if you take a photograph of someone, you're stealing their soul, except this would be deeper than a picture. Your story *is* you" (225). Announcing his frustration with the very first line of the story—"I'm tired of telling war stories" (211)—he explains that his reluctance does not derive from the traumatic nature of the events (he had a mild deployment) but rather from the perceived hypocrisy of his interlocutors. As Sarah—the playwright—starts interviewing Jenks for her play, the narrator cannot help but notice that she adopts what seems like a ritualized approach to supposedly traumatized veterans: "'At your pace,' she says. 'Whatever you think people should know.' She puts a concerned face on. I've seen that face on women at bars when I open up. When I'm sober, it makes me angry. When I'm drunk, it's what I'm looking for" (223). With these few lines, Wilson criticizes both the façade that Sarah presents as a concerned civilian while trying to exploit Jenks' story and his own use of his narrative authority as a veteran.

In the story, Wilson appears to be firmly fixated on the way in which war stories based on the personal experience of a veteran can be used to influence listeners. In particular, he mentions time and again that he has used it as a strategy to impress girls: "'Way we were talking, you would have thought we were some Delta Force, Jedi ninja motherfuckers.' 'The girls ate it up.' 'We did pretty well,' I say, 'for a bunch of dumbass Marines hitting on city girls.'" (214). However, Wilson is also enraged by the way in which civilians seem to respond to his stories: "'I had a girl start crying when I told her some shit.' 'About what?' 'I don't know. Some bullshit.' […] 'That's nice,' he says. 'I wanted to choke her.' […] 'You were playing her,' he said. 'And it worked. So you wanted to choke her?' 'Yeah.' I laugh. 'That's kind of fucked up'" (215-216). Accordingly, even though Wilson is—or rather, was—willing to use his (made up) war stories, he is critical of them in private. As he hears Jenks' memory of how he got his injuries—a story that Jenks admittedly does not remember well and that he reads from a piece of paper—Wilson corrects him multiple times in his mind, before pointing out

that trying to remember minute details about the event is meaningless: "'A thing like that, if you got ten people there, then you'll have ten different stories. And they don't match.' I don't trust my memories. I trust the vehicle, burnt and twisted and torn. Like Jenks. No stories. Things. Bodies. People lie. Memories lie" (226). Wilson's distrust of war stories is tied to the fact that, according to him, such narratives do not really capture the experience of war, and are instead used to achieve various rhetorical purposes. His final conversation with Jessie, Sarah's friend and a fellow veteran, concerns the use to which war stories are put:

> 'Artists,' I say, putting all the contempt I can into the word. 'I bet they'll find what happened to him *interesting*. Oh so interesting. What fun.'
> 'This isn't for fun,' she says. 'Fun is video games. Or movies and TV.' […]
> 'What's the point of a play?' I say.
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'If not fun, so what is it?' (233).

In this and the following passages, "War Stories" shows how storytelling about war is always at risk of inadvertently banalizing or even glorifying war for the enjoyment of the audience.

While this story could be seen as mimicking the complex process that underlies veteran storytelling, it is apparent that—for all the ethical concerns that are mentioned—one is conspicuously missing, that is, the inclusion of non-American voices. While many of the works that I have explored provide readers with these external perspectives, it is undeniable that many authors of *authofictions* fail to open up their narratives and maintain their focus exclusively on American soldiers. This problem has been exacerbated, according to Elliot Colla, by the emergence of a sort of "military-literary complex" that operates through writing programs and publishing houses:

> "There is evidence—such as Operation Homecoming—of a strategy to make sure military stories have a privileged place on bookshelves. Commercial publishers not passive actors [sic] in this story, for they are publishing and promoting military titles with regularity while consistently marginalizing war literature by Iraqi authors. Book reviewers have engaged enthusiastically in this project as well, writing profusely and positively about combatant literature, but again, mostly ignoring published literary accounts (especially those by Iraqi authors) that challenge the combatant model."

While the involvement of publishing houses in featuring Middle Eastern authors would certainly be beneficial in the struggle to achieve a more well-rounded literary representation of the Global War on Terrorism that is not entirely filtered through the invader's rhetoric, I believe that closer attention has to be paid to the role of the reader in putting these texts to use in order to maximize their ethical potential.

One of the most pertinent critiques leveled against recent veteran narratives revolves around their perpetuation of Scranton concept of the trauma hero. However, as Scranton himself notes, this is not only true for writers who apparently decide to enact the myth of the trauma hero in their writing, but also for readers and critics: "The predominant cultural narrative of the experience of war in American culture today is the story of trauma. Indeed, PTSD is seen as the characteristic human response to the experience of war, and the primary social role the veteran soldier is asked to play is that of victim and witness to trauma" (209). This constant victimization of perpetrators of violence is undeniably ethically problematic—Scranton argues that this phenomenon is not new, and offers a few examples of how, throughout the history of American war literature, authors have transformed their soldiers into trauma victims.

Most significantly, after exploring how in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* the protagonist is granted moral authority because of his experience of combat, Scranton explores how Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* perpetuate the myth of the trauma hero. In the case of *The Things They Carried*, Scranton argues, war's traumatic truth is beyond words: "For O'Brien, a true war story is about the failure of language to communicate experience at all, which is essentially an assertion that the soldier's truth is a mystic truth" (*Total Mobilization* 205). In *The Yellow Birds*, the opposite seems to happen—Powers' lyrical prowess suggests that the traumatic nature of war is communicable and, in fact, can be communicated through expertly crafted poetic language. The result, however, rather than weakening the myth of the trauma hero, reinforces it through the repetition of old ideas: "For Powers, the conventional tropes of war lit are not a means of conveying truth but rather the truth of war itself" (206). This shift is possible only because readers have come to expect certain specific storytelling strategies from veteran authors: "Powers's climactic shift from experience to literariness rather than the other way around suggests that the conventions of traumatic revelation have become purely formal expectations of an audience more interested in myth than in reports from the front" (207). In Scranton's opinion, then, *The Yellow Birds* is a product of its own critical environment.

The revelatory quality of the veteran's discourse—tied to the trauma subject's association with unquestionable truth—endangers the ethical potential of these narratives. If one were to read them without questioning these assumptions, they would inevitably lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes or, to put it in Meretoja's terms, they would become "naturalizing narratives that appear as inevitable, camouflaging themselves as a simple reflection of the order of things" (80). Bringing additional charges against *authofictions*, the persuasive nature of fictionality seems to further condemn the works of American veterans to be considered as stories that misrepresent war and excuse their authors for their participation in the Global War on Terrorism. However, in the case of *The Things They Carried*, the traumatic past of his autofictional character is coupled with an admission of culpability for the actions of *all* Americans in Vietnam. The protagonist's daughter asks the familiar question—"did you kill anyone?"—that, when posed by an adult, embodies the public's fascination with war as a spectacle, making their reading experience a voyeuristic endeavor, and Tim eventually reveals that even though he did not kill anyone, he takes full responsibility: "I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. […] I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present" (179).

Generally speaking, *authofictions* do not depict such clear stances regarding the Global War on Terrorism, but they do raise similar questions that pertain to war stories in general as well as civilian interest in them. Such questions include, for example, "why/what does the civilian want to know?" but also, "why do we tell and read war stories? Are these stories pro-war, anti-war, or do they show a neutral stance? And do anti-war stories even exist?" Speaking precisely about the latter issue, Giorgio Mariani has argued in *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* that while the anti-war label is used to indicate a certain subsection of war literature, no clear theorization of the label has been attempted, because such an effort would create an uneasy divide between anti-war literature and supposedly pro-war literature. In his study, Mariani argues that "conventional" war literature, meaning memoirs, novels, and poems, is hardly ever classifiable as anti-war, whereas genres that have a more or less clear-cut message, like satires, usually are (18). Mariani's book goes on to discuss the issue of how peace studies negotiate the anti-war/pro-peace dichotomy, arguing that Laurence Lerner's article "Peace Studies: A Proposal" advances the useful critical move of studying the war/peace continuum "from a committed position, the view that war is an evil which we are trying to eradicate" (Lerner 643). However, Lerner's peace studies are, according to Mariani, too narrowly focused on literary works that are unequivocally about war—in his opinion, peace studies should instead concentrate on how war "invades" other texts: "By asking the reader to

consider the virtual omnipresence of war metaphors and violence in texts we would not usually class as "war writing," peace studies may indeed break new ground" (23). Such texts do not contain explicit anti-war arguments, but they present images of peace and that, for better or for worse, "self-consciously try to come to terms with the moral and intellectual paradox of waging war on war" (30). I do not believe *authofictions* can sit comfortably in this category, but they do seem to offer at least a way to be read as such. This possibility is enabled by the contradictory aspects of *authofictional* texts—by their ostensibly authoritative appearance and their internal confirmations and negations of authenticity, as well as by the overt fictionalization of the author's own experience.

Unlike satires, literary fiction about war is almost necessarily more ambivalent in its representation of armed conflicts, and it offers a more nuanced approach to the issue. *Authofictions* rarely contain a clear-cut moral message, and they require the reader to do some of the work—this is why the category of "anti-war texts" is so hard to define. Writers—and veteran writers in particular—seem to be aware of the unattainability of a "purely" anti-war narrative about war, so much so that in Phil Klay's "War Stories," while Wilson and Jessie are talking about the way in which *Full Metal Jacket* has effectively encouraged many to join the Army, they come to the conclusion that telling an anti-war story is impossible: "'And that's an anti-war film.' 'Nothing's an anti-war film,' I say. 'There's no such thing'" (234). The strategy pursued by these veterans of the Global War on Terrorism, then, coherently with the gesture of reaching out towards the reader in an attempt to communicate authentically—a gesture that contains its own negation—requires readers to carefully scrutinize their stories to understand that authoritative veteran storytellers are not the custodians of ultimate truths: trusting an *authofictional* story blindly would be tantamount to missing its point. Thus, to read these narratives in an ethically productive way, one needs to constantly question veteran stories rather than silently receive them, asking questions rather than thanking veterans from their service.

In conclusion, conscious of their refiguring function in the hermeneutic circle, most *authofictions* seem to be in search of a way to balance their authoritative voice against their partiality. Their communicative effort, which seems to be primarily aimed at American civilians, strives to be authentic while at the same time sowing the seeds of their own potential deconstruction. The choice of communicating through fictional discourse further guarantees the credibility of the veteran's discourse, but the constant signaling of the likelihood that veteran narratives might be multiple, insincere, or biased alerts the reader to the pitfalls of fictional representations, which might mischaracterize the GWOT to align with the single

veteran's agenda. Through this delicate balance—which, admittedly, is not always achieved—of authority and its own negation, *authofictions* enable an ethically productive engagement with storytelling about war, provided that readers are both attentive enough to the markers of fictionality and authenticity that are present in the texts.

5. Coda: Beyond Veteran Authofictions

In this study, I specifically focused my attention on the fictional narratives produced by GWOT veterans to explore the complex mechanisms at play in texts that inhabit the liminal space between fiction and nonfiction, where personal experience, memory, and fictionality interact to create supposedly authentic tales that aim at both showing hidden sides of the war and, at the same time, partially undermine the author's absolute authority as a veteran. However, these are—of course—by no means the only noteworthy literary works associated with the conflicts that have plagued Afghanistan and Iraq in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. One of the key features of the texts that I have selected is that they all portray at least one character that could be associated with the author—almost always a white male American soldier. This decision enabled the analysis of the similarities that exist between autofictional and *authofictional* narratives, paving the way for the definition of an *authofictional* mode of communication that leverages the author's credibility to authenticate the fictional content of the texts. Because of this specific aim, this study certainly does not constitute a comprehensive overview of the war literature that can be associated with the Global War on Terrorism, let alone of the whole post-9/11 period.

Taking a page out of Meretoja's book, I would argue that, in order to approach the literature of the GWOT as ethically mindful readers, it would be beneficial to widen our reading horizons as much as possible. This means that while some American fiction has represented Afghan and Iraqi perspectives, it would be constructive to engage with Afghan and Iraqi fiction about these wars. As Ikram Masmoudi notes, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that much of this fiction is as of yet unavailable in English (21) with a few notable exceptions, such as Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* (2008), Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013), Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), and Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibitio*n (2014).

Kachachi's novel follows Zayna, an Iraqi-American girl who enlists in the wake of 9/11 and returns to Iraq several years after her departure. Initially fueled by patriotic sentiments, throughout the novel Zayna becomes increasingly aware of how the US presence in her

homeland, far from liberating it, is fueling violence rather than avoiding it. Masmoudi likens the way the novel portrays Zayna as a conflicted translator to how Shākir Nūrī's Al-minṭaqa al-khaḍrāʾ (*The Green Zone*) portrays its protagonist Ibrāhīm, who is a local interpreter who is eventually radicalized and turns against the United States Army:

> Through the lenses of these two translators, who had to do more than what their contracts said they would be doing, we gain insight into how terrorists are made by the politics of the occupation. The politics of security provides the appropriate conditions to hatch and grow the terrorist mind and the terror act. In the case of Iraq, it triggered more violence and more killing and led to an open-ended form of war on both sides of the equation. (162)

According to Masmoudi, throughout the recent history of Iraq, Iraqi novels have shown how years of uninterrupted violence and perpetual war have progressively reduced everyone in Iraq to a condition of bare life—becoming a *homines sacri*, whose life is situated, as Giorgio Agamben explains, "at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law" (73). Since a *homo sacer* exists outside the law, killing them is not tantamount to committing murder—therefore Masmoudi argues that Iraqi novels which depict the widespread status of this condition in Iraq highlight the "overarching continuum in the devaluation of life and the production of *homines sacri* in Iraq" (20).

Death is everywhere in these Iraqi novels, as many of the titles indicate. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist is Jawad, a traditional corpse washer who prepares the bodies of the dead for burial. With the American invasion, the bodies start literally piling up, and, in one of Jawad's dreams, they become products that are pumped out by a US-led industry of death: "There are high ceilings, but no windows. There are neon lights, some of which blink. The bench is very long. It extends for tens of meters and has a white conveyor belt. Bodies are stacked on it […] and outside men wearing blue overalls and white gloves carry the bodies and throw them into a huge truck" (75). Once again, through Jawad's eyes, the Americans are portrayed as careless agents of death who wield absolute power on Iraqi civilians—when his father dies, Jawad needs to transport the body to the burial site, but is stopped by some American soldiers who want to search Jawad and his friends. During the encounter with the Americans, Jawad is the only one who speaks fluent English, and as he stands with his knees on the ground he tries to translate the soldier's instructions for those who do not understand, but is quickly silenced by one of the soldiers:

> ‘You! Open the trunk.’
> When I translated for Hammoudy, one of the two soldiers yelled at me, ‘Shut the fuck up.’
> “Hammoudy got up slowly and went back to the trunk and opened it while the third soldier followed him with the gun. He ordered him to go back where he had been so he did and got back down on his knees.
> The third soldier searched the trunk. He didn’t find anything and screamed ‘All clear! Let’s get the fuck out of here.’ (67-68)

Rendered powerless and mostly unable to communicate with each other and with the soldiers, the group is conscious that they narrowly avoided death: “We stood up and shook off the dirt from our clothes. I realized that we’d just survived death. A slight move in the wrong direction would have resulted in a shower of bullets” (68).

The material abundance of death is also a thematic concern in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *The Corpse Exhibition*, two works that are somewhat different from the ones quoted above. Embodying a less realist and more imaginative tendency of war fiction in Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* employs the science fiction trope of the “mad-scientist” from *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, while *The Corpse Exhibition* is a collection of surreal short stories that quite explicitly show the spectacularization of death in Iraq. The eponymous opening story features the training speech for a new employee at an agency of killers who display the bodies of their victims for artistic purposes. Iraq, in this respect, is fertile ground for their line of work: “You must understand properly that this country presents one of the century’s rare opportunities. Our work may not last long. As soon as the situation stabilizes we’ll have to move on to another country. Don’t worry, there are many candidates” (6). As he continues his speech, the instructor tells the story of the Nail, one of their agents who started to question their methods—not wanting to kill a child, he tries to steal one from the hospital mortuary, and plans to display the body in a restaurant, horrifically arranging the eyes of the child’s family members in bowls of blood. In the perverse world of the instructor, this is despicable, but not for the reasons that the readers would think: “Maybe it was a beautiful idea, but before all else his work would have been a cheat and a betrayal. If he had beheaded the child himself it would have been an authentic work of art, but to steal it from the mortuary and act in this despicable manner would be a disgrace and cowardice at the same time” (9). “The Corpse Exhibition” paints a surreal and dire picture of war-torn Iraq, one in which body parts are everywhere and the mortician (who catches the Nail while he tries to steal the child’s body) is paid by people to put back together the bodies of their relatives. However, at the end of the

story, the instructor reveals that the mortician is the head of his organization, and that to punish him, he hung the Nail's skin to a flagpole in front of the Ministry of Justice.

Not all of Blasim's stories are as grim—"The Reality and the Record," for example, tells the story of a former ambulance driver who is seeking asylum in Sweden and has to narrate his story to the immigration officer. Telling the story of how he was kidnapped and forced to shoot propaganda videos while posing as a representative member of various groups in order to discredit them, the narrator is faced with the fact that while he is asked to tell the truth, his primary goal is to obtain asylum, and he has to balance his story accordingly: "In fact I don't know exactly what details of my story matter to you for me to get the right of asylum in your country. I find it very hard to describe those days of terror, but I want to mention also some of the things that matter to me" (161). Therefore, one of the story's thematic concerns is similar to that of *authofictions*—how should an eyewitness narrate their story, if they need to achieve a goal? As Nadia Atia has noted, the refugee's authority as a storyteller is the central issue of the story: "From the beginning of the asylum seeker's tale, then, the Arabic text in particular alludes to the unreal, performative, and degrading nature of the asylum experience. In its evocation of the fabulous tales of the حكايات, it calls into question the role of fantasy, violence, but also of those crucial elements of the fable: good, evil, and morality in the process of applying for humanitarian asylum" (323). Furthermore, Atia rightly notes how Saadawi asks the reader to become the judge of the narrator's story—or, in other words, to fulfill the role of a border guard: "in the translated text with its English-language audience, our position in the narrative aligns us with this elusive interviewer; in the absence of a fixed person listening to and assessing the story, it is we who are offered this tale and asked to determine its veracity" (324). This strategy works to implicate the reader, questioning their assumptions about the role that refugees are asked to play in order to obtain asylum. At the same time, the story interrogates the ethics of scrutinizing their testimonies in order to carefully weigh their suffering before granting them the possibility to survive.

The aforementioned texts offer "a set of different perspectives from which to view Iraq—the perspectives of those who have been coerced, silenced, marginalised, abandoned and tortured" (Masmoudi 20), and are essential resources to try to grasp the complexity of the Global War on Terror. These perspectives have also been adopted by American writers but, in order to maintain the connection between the work of fiction and the direct experience of the author as an American soldier, I could not include veteran texts that depict the GWOT from exclusively non-American points of view. Admittedly, this is a scarcely populated yet interesting category, and one of the most prolific veteran authors of the GWOT, Elliot

Ackerman, published two novels that are focused on an Afghan and an Iraqi protagonist. The narrator of *Green on Blue* (2015), Aziz, is an Afghan boy who, along with his brother, is left orphaned by the Taliban after one of their raids. Forced to become beggars, the two strive to survive in Orgun, but when the US invasion begins, the Taliban attack the marketplace and severely injure Aziz's brother, Ali. Aziz is recruited by Taqbir to fight in a local, American-backed militia with the promise of earning the necessary money to pay for Ali's cures.

This event hurls Aziz in the world of local warfare, and he quickly finds out that the leaders of each militia have an interest in keeping each side at war with each other. Ackerman's first-person narration emphasizes the importance of seeing the war through different eyes– Americans are not, as in most veteran narratives, young soldiers who have to reluctantly fight in foreign lands in wars they do not necessarily believe in anymore, but shady figures who are complicit in furthering the duration of the war: "I then recalled how Commander Sabir kept Gazan in business, and how the Americans kept Commander Sabir in business. And as I thought of all the ways one could be killed in this war, and of all those who could do it, I couldn't think of a single way to die which wasn't a green on blue. The Americans had a hand in creating all of it" (226). During the American invasion of Afghanistan, Aziz argues, it is impossible for fighters not to die because of a green on blue[51] because all of the different factions are tied by a variety of interests. The very presence of the Americans is seen by Aziz as a danger to civilians: "The militants fought to protect us from the Americans and the Americans fought to protect us from the militants, and being so protected, life was very dangerous" (12).

In *Dark at the Crossing*, the protagonist is Haris Abadi, a former Iraqi interpreter for the US Army who has, by the beginning of the novel, applied for and obtained American citizenship. While this effectively makes Haris an American who travels to the Middle East to fight in a war (in this case, the Syrian civil war), his situation is hardly comparable to that of the American members of the armed forces who participated in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the novel, Haris has to confront the way in which the US-led invasion of Iraq has indelibly altered his identity, forcing him to work for the invaders and later even turning him into one of them. Years after their time together in the war, Haris dreams of Jim, one of the American soldiers with whom he frequently interacted during his time as an interpreter. The dream exemplifies the tormented relationship that Haris still entertains with the American

[51] The phrase "green on blue" derives from the expression used by NATO to indicate friendly fire ("blue on blue"). The *Collins Dictionary* defines it as "attacks on NATO forces by members of the Afghan security forces." In this context, the phrase indicates an attack on someone who is financing the attacker.

invaders—dreaming of himself as Amir (a Syrian refugee he meets in Turkey) and standing in a room with "his" wife and daughter, Jim laughs at Haris' attempt at defending his newfound family: "Then, regaining himself, Jim says to Haris: 'You can't make a home for this family, bud' 'You took away my home,' Haris answers" (166). Once again, Ackerman adopts an external perspective that allows for Americans to be depicted as violent foreign disruptors who cause more problems than those that they claim to solve.

Although I would not categorize *Green on Blue* and *Dark at the Crossing* as examples of *authofictions*, it is worth noting that, as an American veteran who served multiple tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Ackerman writes from a position of authority that is similar to that of *authofiction* writers. However, instead of using said authority to reinforce his fiction while casting doubt over the reliability of veteran stories, Ackerman uses it to embrace the points of view of those that have suffered the most during the Global War on Terror—Iraqi and Afghan civilians—through narratives that do not display multiple perspectives but rather focus on the journey of a single character.

Even though some of the texts that I have surveyed try to imagine alternative perspectives to that of the white male American soldier—as in the case of *Spoils* and *War Porn*, for example—it is undeniable that the group of veteran writers that have authored said texts is not at all diverse. Indeed, the kind of veteran fiction that is the object of this study is, in a way, a reflection of the authority that is customarily granted to veterans, that is, as long as they are white males. As of the time of writing, literary fiction by minority veterans is comparatively scarce. While authors like Klay, Abrams, and Ackerman have published multiple works of fiction that gravitate towards the GWOT, women, who have only been formally allowed to participate in combat since 2013, have generally kept to nonfiction, producing memoirs and autobiographies that focus on their time in the armed forces. Kayla Williams, a linguist in the US Army, published two memoirs, one focused on her time in Iraq, titled *I Love My Rifle More than You* (2005) and one centered around her life as a veteran and her relationship with a veteran who suffered a TBI (traumatic brain injury), called *Plenty of Time When We Get Home* (2014). Other cases of women veterans narrating their war experience can be found in Shoshanna Johnson and Julia Jeter Cleckley, whose *I'm Still Standing* (2011) and *A Promise Fulfilled* (2014) were co-authored by M.L. Doyle. Johnson and Cleckley, both African American veterans, decided to co-write their books with Doyle, who, herself a black woman with experience in the armed forces, has written a number of detective and speculative fiction novels that feature women veteran protagonists. Aside from Doyle's genre fiction, W.B. Dallocchio's *Quixote in Ramadi: An Indigenous Account of Imperialism* (2013) is one of the

few examples of veteran fiction that was not produced by white males—Dallocchio is a Chamorro woman from the unincorporated territory of the Northern Mariana Islands—and that depicts the Global War on Terrorism. Like Cleckley's *A Promise Fulfilled, Quixote in Ramadi* was self-published, presumably due to the difficulties that some—but evidently not all—veterans find in bringing their voices to a larger audience.

In this respect, the nonfiction works published by women veterans frequently function as narratives that can reveal comparatively unusual experiences of war. As the subtitle of Williams' first memoir—*Young and Female in the U.S. Army*—makes clear, *Love My Rifle More Than You* is striving to tell a personal story that has not been previously told. As Williams explains in the Prologue:

> So I wanted to write a book to let people know what it *feels* like to be a woman soldier in peace and in war. I wanted to capture the terror, the mind-numbing tedium; and the joy and the honor. Not overlooking the suicidal periods, and the comradeship and the bravery. The times we were scared out of our minds. The times we were bored out of our minds, too. No one has ever written that book—about what life is like for the 15 percent. Don't count Jessica Lynch. Her story meant nothing to us. The same goes for Lynndie England. I'm not either of them, and neither are any of the real women I know in the service. (15)

In the memoir, Williams narrates her time in Iraq, highlighting the difficult position in which women are put in the US Army. She paints a picture that includes difficulty in affirming her leadership, prejudice, and constant 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" (13). This environment brings her to be extremely observant of the behavior of other women soldiers, who can ruin the progress of her integration: "She's crying in front of a subordinate, and I have even less respect for her now, if that's possible. You never cry in front of a subordinate. Especially if you're a woman in a position of authority. The guys already think we can't handle this. It just isn't done" (91).

The question of authority is also relevant in her second memoir, in which Williams shifts the focus on her return home and her marriage to Brian, a veteran who suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). In *Plenty of Time When We Get Home* the dimensions of trauma, recognition as a veteran, and healing are much more prominent than before, as the book is concerned with the development Kayla's relationship with her husband, who displays

unpredictable abusive behaviors, partially due to his brain injury. As the two start navigating the veteran world in search for help for Brian's condition, Kayla quickly finds out that her status as a veteran is not as evident as she would have thought—frequently, she is mistaken for a military spouse: "Older male vets often assumed I was just at events to support my husband. It didn't seem to click […] there was always a subtle undercurrent of feeling I still had something to prove: it wasn't taken for granted that if I'd been to Iraq, I had actually been to war" (168). Williams shows that there is still a substantial difference in the way both civilians and other veterans treat women who have been to war: primarily, there exists a prevailing assumption that warfare is predominantly a male endeavor, and even upon learning of a woman's veteran status, most assume that her time in the military was spent away from combat. This can perhaps elucidate the reason why, although women veterans have written about their experience in the GWOT, they have so seldomly done so through fiction. Since women veterans are not usually granted the same narrative authority that is customarily attributed to their male counterparts, there is no "*authofictional* game" at play.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the GWOT texts that I have left out, and is even further away from being a list of the narrative texts that, while not focusing specifically on the United States' most recent wars, can provide insight about them. While combat gnosticism has been the preferred method to identify those who are "worthy" of speaking about war since the beginning of the last century, it is crucial to bear in mind that the experience of combat can enhance but also obfuscate one's capacity to narrate war. Veteran storytellers are not necessarily *the* ideal source for information about war, but rather just storytellers who are, for better or for worse, defined by their role in such an event. It is essential, then—especially for Western readers—to approach these conflicts through a variety of narratives that adopt different perspectives, in order to avoid, to put it in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words, the "danger of a single story." Some GWOT *authofictions* alert us to this danger, and provide non-veteran perspectives as a remedy. However, these narratives alone can only alleviate the damages caused by this ailment—it is through a multiplicity of voices and backgrounds that one can find the cure.

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