How To Find What's Lost When What's Lost Is You: The Presence of Disappearing Bodies in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq War Literature

Brandy Williams Williams
University of Mississippi, ermedic7@gmail.com

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HOW TO FIND WHAT’S LOST WHEN WHAT’S LOST IS YOU: 
THE PRESENCE OF DISAPPEARING BODIES IN VIETNAM, AFGHANISTAN, AND IRAQ WAR LITERATURE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

In Southern Studies

The University of Mississippi

Brandy Rachele Williams

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is on disappearing bodies in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq war literature. The term “disappearing body” has several connotations. Disappearing bodies refers to throwaway or neglected bodies, bodies that routinely absorb into the landscape. Women and African Americans typically fall into this category, but at times, Vietnamese, Afghani, or Iraqi people may fall into this category as well. The race, gender, and region of the author often determines how Others are posited in the literature. Disappearing bodies also occur in the form of grotesquerie. These bodies appear as dismembered, decapitated, mutilated, and wasting away. Bodies disappear in male and female literature, black and white, but these bodies disappear in different ways depending on the race and gender of the authors and characters. Bodies not only disappear physically, but also psychologically and emotionally. Erasure of identity appears to be the most prominent way bodies disappear in the authors and characters presented. White males, African Americans, and women all experience some form of erasure, but how that erasure occurs and who instigates that erasure is different for each race and gender. The images of disappearing bodies float in and out of the texts, and the varied ways in which people disappear confront the issues of unjust wars, psychological struggle, racism, sexism, and inequality among the troops.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the voices that have yet to find wings, to the ones who have remained mute to their trauma.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFB</td>
<td>Air Force Base</td>
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<tr>
<td>AK47</td>
<td>Avtomat Kalashnikova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWACS</td>
<td>Airborne Warning and Control System</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMDR</td>
<td>Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETT</td>
<td>Embedded Training Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. I. Bill</td>
<td>Government Issue Bill</td>
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<tr>
<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised explosive device</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSUA</td>
<td>Louisiana State University of Alexandria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LZ</td>
<td>Landing Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEDEVAC</td>
<td>Medical Evacuation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Military Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OEF</td>
<td>Operation Enduring Freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>OIF</td>
<td>Operation Iraqi Freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAND</td>
<td>Research and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROE</td>
<td>Rules of Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Rocket-propelled grenade</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my undergraduate mentor and friend, Dr. Elizabeth Beard, for instilling in me the value of myself and for making me believe that a first generation college graduate could attend Graduate School. I am especially grateful that she listened to my story, encouraged me to write, and helped me find healing through the written word.

I would like to thank Mrs. Janice Miller, my counselor and friend, for providing me a safe space to peel back the layers of my trauma. I am grateful that she gave me the courage to stand in front of others and give voice to my pain.

I would like to thank Dr. Kathryn McKee, my graduate advisor and mentor, for recognizing the importance of personal writing during the course of this thesis. I am thankful she allowed me to take a poetry writing class in order to focus on the angle of therapeutic writing for the thesis. The workshops taught me how to polish my own voice, provided me a safe space to explore my trauma, and allowed me to share my narrative with others. This thesis would not have been possible without the therapeutic outlet that the poetry writing provided.

I would like to thank Dr. Ted Ownby and Dr. Adam Gussow for agreeing to be part of my committee. I am thankful for their never-ending patience as I tried to overcome personal obstacles while writing this thesis.

And most importantly, I would like to thank God for the footprints in the sand. I know that I would not be here today without His mercy and grace. I am thankful He gave me the ability to write, and that He placed the above people in my life when I needed them most.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you.
—Maya Angelou

I sat in the movie theater in January of 2015, watching the highly anticipated release of *American Sniper*, a film touted as being one of the best war films of our times. The movie opens with an especially gripping scene meant to immediately draw viewers in and confront them with the reality of war, with the reality that the enemy is using children to blow up American troops, and, in turn, our troops become “baby killers,” a rhetoric we are all too familiar with after Vietnam. Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper) and his sniper spotter are sitting on a rooftop in An Nasiriya, Iraq, his gun scope quickly scans the rooftops to make sure insurgents are not present. Marines are moving into the area when Kyle spots a man on a balcony with a phone in his hand. The man ends his call and moves back inside. Kyle moves his scope and readjusts to doorways along the roadway. He spots a woman coming out of a door. A child is with her. Kyle notes that the woman is walking funny; her arms are not swaying, and he suspects she is carrying something. She reaches inside her chador, pulls out a grenade, and hands it to the child. The child runs toward the Marines, and Kyle shoots the child in order to protect them.

Throughout the movie, I was emotionally distraught over the decisions Kyle had to make and the people he killed, and I believed that their deaths somehow explained his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I believed the movie was something everyone needed to see because
maybe they could finally understand the trauma that veterans face on a regular basis, and this understanding may make them support the troops more, be more sympathetic. In his recent op-ed piece, “‘Star Wars’ and the Fantasy of American Violence,” Roy Scranton notes that the disconnect between military and civilians is often termed by pundits as the “military-civilian gap.” What this means is that “veterans know something civilians don’t understand or can’t imagine, and that this failure of imagination is a failure of democracy, a failure of dialogue, a failure to listen. What [pundits] mean is that veterans have learned something special through their encounter with violence, and civilians need to hear that sacred knowledge.” In the days after I watched the movie, my Facebook feed blew up with comments about it, civilians claiming it was the best war movie in history, and how they finally understood the demons veterans struggle with. I realized that that was far from the truth when a week later news reports circulated about Eddie Ray Routh, the man who was charged with killing Kyle and Chad Littlefield. The same people who reported to understand PTSD after viewing the movie were immediately convicting Routh for killing an “American hero,” despite the fact that Routh claimed to have PTSD. I disagreed with the comments, and I felt that Routh needed to be confined to a hospital if, in fact, he did have PTSD and it somehow played a role in the murder of Kyle and Littlefield.

At the same time that I saw civilians lambaste Routh, I saw veterans rave about the movie as well; however, I also noticed something else. Most of my friends who had previously deployed were now drinking, having nightmares, and difficulty sleeping. The images from the movie flared up their own PTSD, and they were now having problems functioning in their day-to-day routines. I began to question whether it was more important to create movies that “teach” public awareness of the “reality of war” and PTSD at the expense of veterans who may have setbacks from watching these types of films. The more I questioned this notion, the more I began
to believe that, yes, we do need war narratives, even if those narratives cause problems. Many veterans believe they do not have problems based on their experiences, but they cannot understand why they have difficulty in relationships, holding jobs, or finding happiness. These movies can sometimes force people out of their comfort zones so that they have to face their problems head-on.

I, myself, am a veteran, and, throughout the course of this thesis, I stumbled across many roadblocks. I was never in the war, and no one ever shot at me, but I did deploy seven times. I was a medic in the military, and I worked in a Level One Trauma Unit, seeing the worst of the worst, civilian and military. So I know about trauma. I responded to plane crashes, car wrecks, and train accidents. I saw bodies riddled with bullets, bodies twisted by moving trains, bodies burning in plane wreckage, and bodies thrown from moving vehicles. All of these images flicker in and out of my mind anytime a trigger occurs. That trigger may occur in the classroom, and I shut down, or it may occur when I am driving down the road. There is always an anxiety that ensues, and I feel unable to control myself. Sometimes I am hyper-alert to my surroundings, and sometimes I am supersensitive to noises. So I close myself off from the world, hide in my own safe space, and write until the memories pass.

I realized after watching American Sniper that the side effects we have to trauma are not specific to what we did in or out of the war. We all have similar symptoms for different reasons, and that was something that appealed to me. This narrative needs to be expressed. This narrative needs to be told so that people can really understand. This narrative needs to be read by the general population. This narrative needs to be studied in universities across the United States. But what narrative are we actually sharing with a film like American Sniper? As previously
noted, viewers raved about the film, but what about the book that the movie was based on? And do they care about the book? Or do they only care about what Hollywood deems important?

In the article, “‘This Is a Language Made of Blood’: Speaking of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Strip Malls,” Kristin G. Kelly notes there is a disconnect between the viewing public and the reality of war. People are too busy being numb by “days of overwork, instant streaming, status liking, and following; [people] fear slowing down to grieve properly the tremendous losses of young men and women who sacrifice body and mind” (Kelly 2). People go to the theater and watch movies, but it does not affect them the way it should. People have become so used to “shock and awe” that they cannot transform the screen images into reality. As Kelly states, “We fear their narratives of nightmares and moral failures, both for what they tell us about the true nature of war and for what they tell us about ourselves…so we, consciously, or not, decide not to listen to war trauma narratives” (2). Most of our society does not have issue with watching other trauma narratives, but reading a personal war narrative is too difficult. Society does not want to admit that “children” go off to war and return as damaged individuals. So it is easier to watch a film and consider it entertainment, even if it is based on nonfiction, rather than read the narratives of those individuals, narratives that focus on how bodies disappear—mentally, physically, and emotionally.

A quick skim of his memoir, American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History (2012), provides a different story of this “American hero.” Kyle is a native Texan, who served in the military for three years prior to deploying to Iraq. The book does open the same way the movie opens, with two exceptions: the movie leads the viewer to believe that Kyle was a sniper at that point, but he states in his book that he was not a sniper, but he wanted to be one. This was the first time he performed as a sniper, and that is only because his boss
needed a break. The other exception is that there was no child carrying a grenade. A woman was carrying the grenade, and she tried to blow up the Marines with it, so Kyle shot the woman and not a child. Why did the director, Clint Eastwood, feel the need to immediately show the worst possible scenario rather than the truth? Did he intend to make the connection between Vietnam and Iraq? Did he put his own political agenda ahead of the story so that he could comment on the fact that men at war have to do despicable things, things the public does not really want to know about?

Other areas of the book were even more concerning, especially when Kyle talks about the number of people he killed: “The number is not important to me. I only wish I had killed more” (4). With a subtitle of *The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in American History*, I find it difficult that Kyle did not know how many people he killed. The title, itself, makes Kyle appear braggadocious about his actions in war, and his revelation that he wishes he would have killed more people is unsettling for me as a reader. He continues with rhetoric that is all too common in today’s society. When talking about the woman he killed, Kyle states, “She was too blinded by evil to consider [children in the area]. She just wanted Americans dead, no matter what. My shots saved several Americans, whose lives were clearly worth more than that woman’s twisted soul” (4). He later describes the Iraqi people as “savages.” This profiling or indictment of this woman’s character based on her religion/ethnicity perpetuates a current myth: all Muslims are terrorists.¹ His use of the term “savage” to describe these people harkens back to a dark period in American history, one where African Americans and Native Americans were described as savages. This type of ideology is consistent with previous rhetoric where white males had authority to name individuals and deem their worth.

¹ The general population does not think about whether Iraqis are Muslim, Christian, or any other religion. The consistent rhetoric about Islamic jihadists on television and newspapers leads people to associate Muslims with people from the Middle East.
Kyle’s words do not portray a hero to me. They portray a man who has no qualms about
denigrating people based on their ethnicity or religion. He makes generalized assumptions about
her twisted soul because she is an Iraqi or a Muslim, never considering the fact that America is
the invader, and the woman is trying to protect her homeland. It never occurs to Kyle that he is
the unwanted guest, and that some people do not bow to America as the great savior. They are
not happy about the fact that Americans believe they are the moral police of the world. Kyle also
has a belief that God is putting these insurgents in his path so that he can kill them: “Sometimes
it seemed like God was holding them back until I got on the gun” (297). Immediately after
positioning himself behind the scope, he would notice insurgents sneaking through alleyways
toward American troops, so he would kill them. Hours went by while the other sniper was at his
post, and no insurgents appeared until Kyle was behind the scope. This belief that God somehow
preordained his kills is the same type of commentary that radical terrorists use in the name of
Islam. But many people do not seem to have an issue with his words because he is white and
American.

Although Kyle notes that his men deserve to be recognized for the things they did, he
also insinuates that if it were not for the Rules of Engagement (ROE), the rules that prevented
him from killing whomever he wanted to, his unencumbered actions could have ended the war a
long time ago: “I feel that I could have been more effective, probably protected more people and
helped bring the war to a quicker conclusion without [the ROE]” (300). The revelations
throughout his memoir do not correlate with the “hero” depicted on the screen. I mean, how
would the American public respond to a “cowboy” who admits wishing he killed more people?
How would they respond to someone that does not regret killing one-hundred and sixty plus
people? Something is missing. We are so busy hailing the hero that all other narratives disappear, the narratives of those who served in different capacities and still feel the aftershocks of war.

We have certain expectations about war and what we will find in war narratives. The goal of this thesis is to look beyond those expectations—heroism, bravado, camaraderie—and focus on how war has affected warriors emotionally and psychologically, how the war and the idea of service itself causes people to “disappear” in a sea of green and arise as a mortal mute. The goal is to unearth personal reflections of war by different genders and races, about different wars and conflicts, and show how talking and writing about war are keys to healing from the emotional and psychological ramifications of war. One of the problems with categorizing literature is that we fail to identify and discuss the overlap. So, in part, I would like to focus on how contemporary war literature intersects with southern literature, women’s literature, and African American literature. Warriors come from all races, genders, and backgrounds, so viewing war literature from one specific viewpoint negates the experiences of others, or at least limits what we can see.

One way I would like to analyze this intersection is through Patricia Yaeger’s discussion of women writers in the South. In *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing: 1930-1990* (2000), Yaeger first notes how Ellen Glasgow defined certain elements that were predominant in southern literature: “A tragic sense of life, a deep-rooted pessimism, a recognition of human capacity for evil, and the decrees of history and place” (qtd. in Yaeger ix). She goes on to suggest that these categories are old and boring and that we need to shake southern studies up with new approaches. Therefore, Yaeger sets out to “explore the prevalence in southern women’s writing of flesh that has been ruptured or riven by violence, of fractured, excessive bodies telling us something that diverse southern culture don’t want us to say” (xiii).
Instead of viewing the literature from an Agrarian or white male centered perspective, she wants to assess how women, white and black, write about the South. By analyzing southern women’s and African American women’s writing, she is focusing on an area of literature that she believes has historically been understudied. Likewise, although war literature analysis has been extensive in the past, not enough research has been done to discuss the overlap of genres and how different backgrounds inform the warrior’s response to war.

Before advancing too far into this introduction, I feel it is important to step back momentarily and discuss why there is an importance to focus on how some of these genres overlap with one another, and, since this is a Southern Studies thesis, I feel it is important to discuss how this overlap is relevant to the South. In 2013, military enlistment rates in the southern region of the United States were at 44%, “despite it having only 36% of the country’s 18-24 year-old civilian population” (Bender, Kiersz, and Rosen). There are several reasons why numbers may be higher in the South: more exposure to military bases in the South; cultural or economic differences; different recruiting approaches; or different military ideology. Certain areas of the South have been locked in a perpetual cycle of poverty. After Reconstruction, the South struggled to keep up with the industrial advances of the North. When World War II began, “Southern politicians and their constituents sought and obtained huge increases in war-related jobs. Southern congressmen successfully lobbied for the placement of over half of the new army training camps in the South, at a cost of four billion dollars to the federal government” (Wyatt-Brown 157). Many of these military facilities still exist, and often, people who are not from the region retire from the military and stay in the local area. Their children continue a tradition of service and enlist from a southern state. In regards to ideology, according to Wyatt-Brown, there is a threefold causal link as to why many southerners enlisted in the military in previous wars: 1)
many white Southerners had grandfathers who served in the Civil War, and they were proud of that heritage, 2) more white Southerners had a British background, so fighting with the British seemed like a sense of duty, and 3) Southerners worried about the fact that they did not have much of an industrial or financial base, so they figured that their participation in the war might garner them some national influence (156).

Since 44% of the military population comes from the South, it is feasible to conclude that a higher number of veterans suffering with PTSD will also live in the South, and this should be something that is concerning to southerners, especially since at least every individual knows someone who has served, whether it is a spouse, a child, a parent, a cousin, a friend, a coworker, a neighbor, or a student. Those who struggle with PTSD often become suicidal, especially if they do not have a therapeutic outlet. In a report released by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in 2013, they established that roughly twenty-two veterans commit suicide daily (DeMoss 1).² Even one suicide a day is too many.

In an effort to decrease the number of veteran suicides in the United States, the Department of Veterans Affairs has established a Veterans Crisis Hotline. While the program itself is a step in the right direction, there are numerous flaws, which are highlighted in the HBO documentary Crisis Hotline: Veterans Press 1.³ The Veterans Crisis Hotline is the frontline defense for the VA for suicide prevention. It is an avenue for counselors to be able to intercede when veterans are having suicidal ideation/thoughts and get them the help that they need. One problem with the program is that there is only one crisis center in the United States, and it is

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² Only twenty-one states submitted suicide rates for the study, so it is impossible to see what percentages of suicides occur in the South. Some of the largest states were not part of the study, including California, Texas, Georgia, Arizona, and North Carolina. (Lee). It is also likely that more than twenty-two Veterans commit suicide daily because reports do not consider suicide by cop, and families may request that the death certificate not indicate suicide (DeMoss).
³ This documentary focuses on several crisis counselors and follows them throughout their calls with veterans. It shows how the employees interact as a team, and it also highlights the emotional turmoil that counselors go through by helping veterans in their time of need.
located in Canandaigua, New York. Another problem is that two-hundred and fifty employees work at the center, and they receive an estimated 22,000 calls per month. Some of these calls can last for several hours, which drains the center’s resources. Because manpower is low in relation to the high call volume, many veterans reach a recording and have to leave a voicemail instead of being able to talk to a counselor when they are in crisis (Crisis).

The crisis hotline is a valuable tool in saving lives, but there still need to be more options available to veterans prior to them becoming suicidal. One area of improvement needs to be different avenues of therapy—writing being the predominant mode outlined here—in order to help those who suffer with PTSD, and hopefully, decrease the number of veteran suicides. Part of the goal of this thesis is to discuss how writers use writing as a therapeutic tool in order to heal from or manage their PTSD. I also hope to show how their writing can help others learn to use their own voice and pen their own experiences. In order to fully understand how writing can help veterans, it is first important to understand trauma and PTSD.

The word trauma in Greek is defined as a wound, which originally referred to an injury to the body. In later years, especially in medical and psychological literature, the word trauma signified a wound inflicted “not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, Unclaimed 3). Trauma describes situations that “are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless” (“What”). According to Freud, “The wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that… is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (ntd. in Caruth, Unclaimed 4). Whereas a physical wound has the ability to heal over time, the wound of
the mind struggles with repeated images of the traumatic event. The wound (trauma) is the body/minds response to the event, and PTSD is the delayed response to the trauma. Traumatic events affect each individual differently. While some individuals suffer debilitating effects from the things they witnessed, others subjected to the same situations never exhibit signs of PTSD. When a person witnesses a traumatic-inducing situation, several factors come into play: What is the person’s emotional state at the time of the trauma? Does the individual come from a traumatic background? What type of connection did the individual have to the traumatic situation or people in the trauma? Does the person live a lifestyle that requires them to witness trauma on a regular basis? Does a person feel guilty about what happened? All of these factors bear weight when dealing with someone who has invisible wounds of war.

PTSD⁴ is commonly referred to as the invisible wounds of war, and it is usually associated with the military; however, anyone can experience PTSD, such as victims of the holocaust, natural disasters, sexual assault, or traumatic accidents (Coon and Mitterer 483). PTSD is trauma that “is characterized by symptoms that follow an extremely ‘distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience’” (Aguiar). In order for someone to obtain a diagnosis of PTSD, symptoms from the traumatic event must occur for longer than 30 days (Coon and Mitterer 483). It is important to note that just because a person sustains trauma, it does not mean the individual will have symptoms. Those who exhibit symptoms of PTSD are typically considered emotionally unhealthy at the time the trauma occurs (Calhoun and Tedeschi 95), which is the case with most veterans. Since the exposure rate to trauma by soldiers is consistently high—improvised explosive devices (IED), battle conditions, and traumatic injuries to other individuals—they are consistently more emotionally and psychologically vulnerable, especially since most people deploy to a combat theatre numerous times. Because of the repeated

⁴ PTSD has previously been called soldier’s heart, shell shock, battle fatigue, and combat exhaustion (Mac Bica).
exposure to combat, veterans are more likely to exhibit a negative post-traumatic growth, meaning they will have difficulty healing from their trauma because of their highly emotional state at the time trauma occurred.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website, 30% of Vietnam veterans and 11-20% of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans have a PTSD diagnosis (“How”). Two questions arise from these statistics: Why is there still such a high percentage of Vietnam veterans suffering with PTSD? And what are the real statistics? Vietnam ended nearly fifty years ago, yet there are still veterans suffering with the debilitating effects of PTSD. With the creation of the diagnosis in the 1980s, the psychological community has had ample time to try to figure out how to help veterans. As of yet, no cure exists for PTSD, but psychologists have learned methods to help veterans “deal” with the side effects of PTSD.

Over the last forty years, “Veterans have been subjected to a progression of diverse clinical psychiatric procedures for treating PTSD—psychotherapy, pharmacological therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), cognitive behavioral therapy, and Virtual Reality Exposure” (Mac Bica). Unfortunately, even with all of these treatments, veterans still suffer with depression, anxiety, guilt, alcoholism, suicide, and drug addiction. In the early years of PTSD studies, the “moral injuries of modern warriors [were] virtually ignored, overlooked or disregarded by the conventional psychiatric community” (Mac Bica), but, with modes of therapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy and writing therapy, veterans are finally finding a way to

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5 Statistical analysis only includes veterans who are actively seeking treatment through Veterans Affairs; therefore, a huge percentage is not represented for those who seek treatment outside of the VA system or those who have not sought treatment at all.
6 EMDR is a type of psychotherapy that focuses on situations that trigger traumatic flashbacks. In essence, the patient provides information about known triggers to the therapist, and the therapist is able to retrain the brain so that a negative situation triggers a positive response. Therapists have been successful in treating patients with PTSD; however, patients cannot be treated if they do not know what their triggers are (Miller).
assuage their guilt and heal as best they can from the trauma to which they have been privy. Although cognitive behavioral therapy (one-on-one counseling) has proven to be one of the best treatments for veterans with PTSD, the primary problem is getting veterans in the door to talk about their trauma, especially men.

The reasons why people do not seek counseling vary, and it depends on in which war a person was involved. Veterans returning from Vietnam did not receive a hero’s welcome upon return. Civilians viewed them as crazy people, cowards, baby killers, or crybabies (Mac Bica). Because the civilian population did not reinforce their identity as Vietnam veterans, veterans found it difficult to talk to anyone about the trauma they witnessed. With many people insisting that veterans performed in a morally abject manner, veterans often turned to suicide because they had nowhere else to turn. Those veterans who were able to survive the ordeal closed themselves off emotionally because they feared appearing weak. Many veterans sought drugs and alcohol as a way to numb the emotional/psychological pain. Because veterans could not speak about their trauma with others and so believed they may have been alone in their experience, they did not know they could seek counseling.

Military stigma also plays a role in why military members choose not to disclose that they are having difficulties. In recent times, military members have feared self-reporting to mental health professionals because they fear they will lose their job, privileges, or security clearance. They believe that it will affect their performance reports and chances of promotion. Others fear a diagnosis of “adjustment disorder,” a catchall for the military, which will cause a military discharge. And others think that they will look like cowards. During World War II, when General George S. Patton, considered one of the greatest military generals, visited his troops in the medical tent, the visit was not usually jovial. Patton informed his men that he would
not tolerate men who claimed they had “combat stress” as a way to escape from combat: “Such men are cowards, and bring discredit on the Army and disgrace to their comrades” (qtd. in Wyatt-Brown 165). Patton verbally assaulted these men, and sometimes, he slapped them, making them get out of bed and head back to the battlefield.

This same ideology echoes through later wars, and veterans often find it difficult to voice their trauma to superiors or to loved ones. According to Caruth, veterans cannot give voice to the trauma they witness because the trauma is unspeakable; however, Richard McNally suggests that people can speak about their trauma, but they choose to remain mute because they fear rejection by society. I believe both of these beliefs are true depending on the trauma witnessed. For example, if a woman were sexually assaulted, she may find it difficult to talk about the trauma, therefore making the trauma unspeakable; however, if a soldier kills a child, that soldier may fear what others will say about him if people learn the truth. That individual stays mute for fear of rejection. Men and women have different reasons for remaining quiet about their trauma: women feel weak, not tough enough for the roles they fill; men feel emasculated, made to seem like women. In both situations, men and women are feminized because they have difficulty dealing with the trauma they have witnessed. As Ron Capps states, society treats people who have a diagnosis of PTSD or mental illness as “broken,” “weak,” or a “pussy” (qtd. in McCartney). When reporting symptoms to superiors while he was still in active service, according to Capps, these individuals were often told, “Everyone has stress in their lives, and [you all] need to go to war—so suck it up” (qtd. in McCartney). Since soldiers cannot talk about their trauma with the

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8 Ron Capps served in Kosovo, Rwanda, Darfur, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He earned his MFA after retiring from the military. He created the Veterans Writing Project in 2011, and he offers free writing seminars to veterans so that they can learn how to write their own stories of trauma.
men who should be able to relate to it, soldiers become mute to their experience until it is too difficult to remain mute. When the pain from the trauma becomes too difficult for people to handle, they will often turn to drugs, alcohol, or suicide.

One recent example is the death of Louisiana Guardsman SSG Aaron M. Rutledge. Rutledge served in Afghanistan as a combat medic. On 2 April 2015, Rutledge threatened someone with a firearm and then turned the gun on himself. The police responded to the location, and, when they ordered Rutledge to disarm himself, he turned his gun on the police. The police shot Rutledge because they feared for their lives (Gregory). Another military member commented about Rutledge’s death: “He was too weak to get help with his problems, and he was too weak to kill himself. He had to get someone else to do it for him.”9 These statements directly tie into why people feel they cannot seek the treatment they need—for fear of others thinking they are weak or emasculated.

Women are equally at risk because they no longer represent the stereotypical gender role of stay-at-home mom whose job is to clean house, take care of the children, and have a hot meal ready when their husband comes home from work, nor do they specifically serve in non-combat roles. Some men mock women in the military for showing signs of being feminine. For example, if a woman wears make-up, men use that as an excuse for why women cannot perform their jobs. If they are friendly with the men, then it opens women up to labels such as “slut,” “bitch,” or “dyke.” As Kayla Williams notes in her memoir Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army (2006), women cannot be “one of the guys” because anything they do is often misconstrued, and many men use this interaction as an excuse for sexual assault or harassment. Therefore, women feel compelled to become more masculine so that they can gain

9 I overheard this conversation the next day at Texas Roadhouse. The military member was sitting at the table next to me, and he remarked that he had served with Rutledge in Afghanistan.
the respect of the men. They feel the need to prove to the men that they can do the same job and do it better. The idea of the masculine-feminine posits the veteran as a hybrid individual who is constantly struggling with a “duality of self.”

The term “duality of self” will be used interchangeably with “split-self” and “hybrid individual” throughout the thesis. What I mean by these terms is that people who witness trauma often feel like they are two people housed in the same body. They construct a persona for the world so that they can hide the fractured individual who is damaged by trauma. They essentially present a “masked” self to the public, and reserve their true self for private moments because they fear that people will reject them if people knew everything they have been through.

Everyone in society wears a mask. We are different people in the role of parent, sibling, child, student, or worker. We present a certain aspect of our personality to the world, depending on the role we are fulfilling. However, healthy people are able to interchange, multi-task these roles, whereas those who sustain trauma have a more difficult time. So they wear a mask, pretend to be happy and carefree when they are scared and in pain. This wearing of the mask is similar to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask.” He notes that African Americans wear the mask, grin, and hide. They hide the history of slavery and pain. They hide the trauma sustained. Likewise, veterans hide their pain through empty smiles.

Minorities wear a mask more than non-minorities do because they are an Other. In the military, the white masculine voice is the dominant voice. Maybe it is because a higher percentage of white males enlist in the military, or maybe it is because an institution built on white male superiority still practices those methods. Some men fear that women are trying to take their jobs. Their masculinity is threatened by this notion, which makes them lash out as they try to regain or maintain their sense of superiority. Because of this desire to prove themselves
worthy of wearing the uniform, women unintentionally take on masculine behaviors concerning mental and physical weakness. Like men, they do not want people viewing them as individuals who cannot take care of their families or themselves because they do not want society to look down on them. Race also plays a factor in the treatment of military personnel. Granted, a lot has changed over the years, but just like women, African Americans often feel like they do not belong, like they are somehow disrupting a hegemonic social order. With race and gender biases stacked against them, African Americans and women often internalize their trauma, which only makes it worse, until they spiral out of control into a frenzy of drugs, alcohol, and suicide.

Since many veterans find it difficult to talk about their trauma, one outlet that has proven beneficial to healing is therapeutic writing. Whereas veterans are afraid to verbally voice their thoughts about the carnage they have witnessed for fear of rejection, many people have been able to express themselves through ink on the page. In recent years, several writing programs have launched throughout the United States, mainly in the North: Veterans Writing Project, Warriors Writing Project, and VA therapeutic writing programs. All of these programs teach veterans how to write about their trauma so that they can find some sort of closure. Professors are now teaching classes in war literature and writing at home and abroad. According to Lt. General William Lennox, Jr., superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, cadets take war poetry and writing classes for two reasons: 1) the poetry helps them understand what they may encounter in war, and 2) the writing teaches them how to write their own narrative (ntd. in Himes and Bultman 75-76). Christine Dumaine Leche takes it one step farther and provides writing classes to troops in the war zone. In the book *Outside the Wire: American*

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10 According to research by James Burk, Ph.D. and Evelyn Espinoza, Ph.D., “Racial bias and institutional racism still exist within the military despite efforts to eliminate racial bias and discrimination.” This statement was, in part, proven by the fact that male African American officers were 29% less likely to be promoted when compared to their white male counterparts.
Soldiers’ Voices from Afghanistan, students write stories about their childhood, as well as stories about the war. Many students expressed that writing in the war zone helped them unearth suppressed feelings. Others stated that memories held them captive, and writing gave them a sense of freedom, a metaphorical breaking of the shackles.

As many of the authors in this thesis noted in their memoirs, writing about the war gave them the chance to reflect on it in a non-destructive manner. According to Kelly, “When soldiers construct trauma narratives, they are accessing the strength of language and structure and taking back some of the power from unspeakable pain” (2). Writing helps these writers reflect on and process the trauma they have witnessed, and it helps them find a piece of themselves that has been missing, a piece that has been “shaded black.”¹¹ This idea of writing as a way of finding oneself is the very meaning of the first part of the title of this thesis: “How to Find What’s Lost When What’s Lost Is You.”¹² People who have witnessed trauma often feel confused about their experiences, and writing helps them process the information and clear up, as best they can, confusing memories. By reconstructing the narrative, writers are able to fill in the gaps of their memories, the gaps that make them feel like they are disappearing. Whereas some people cannot create a feasible, coherent narrative in their minds, writing helps them discover the missing pieces, helps them make sense of the chaos. By processing the information through the written word, they are able to use writing as a method that aids in their healing. Writing as therapy is not only relevant to those who are unpublished authors. Many of the authors that I will discuss in this thesis believe that writing saved their lives. They are able to isolate individual issues that serve to compound their trauma: racism, sexism, psychological and emotional struggle, grotesquerie, hybridity, and disappearing bodies. Not only do people use writing as a coping mechanism to

¹¹ I will elaborate more on this term in chapter four.
¹² This title derives from Kevin Powers’ poem “After Leaving McGuire Veterans’ Hospital for the Last Time.”
isolate, analyze, and reflect on the trauma they have witnessed, but also they are able to canonize their own lives so that they do not, in turn, disappear. These themes are not all exclusive to war literature, as Yaeger hits on several of them in her writing.

Yaeger initially interrogates the idea of how the models of southern fiction should change in light of writing by women (xi). She is analyzing the paradigms by which we study the literature that has come out of the South. She approaches the idea of the belle as slim, prim, and proper, and analyzes the female as gargantuan or grotesque. Instead of viewing women through the lens of “male-defined southern ‘tradition’” (xi), she wants to construct a wide landscape in order to study women writing about women from a white and black perspective. Instead of focusing on family, she concentrates on throwaway or neglected bodies and shows how the motif is recurrent in women’s fiction. One of her last tasks is to view women’s writing through the lens of the “unthought known” (xii) or racial blindness. Women of different races and backgrounds write their fiction from varying viewpoints, and she wants to show how these perspectives are ingrained in us.

Likewise, I would like to perform a similar undertaking with contemporary war literature that focuses on Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq because I believe that we are lacking in studies relating to these wars (most notably the latter two wars), especially studies that focus on the way trauma literally and figuratively shapes an individual. We spend so much time “worshipping” the idea of what a hero is that we discard narratives to the contrary. Despite the fact that we are still in the middle of multiple conflicts, the primary narrative presented for the viewing public is a narrative that supports the mission and makes American soldiers look like they are saviors rather than crucifiers. By refusing to shift our perspective or redefine the models by which we analyze
war literature, we do a disservice to all of those writers who do not write the heroic narrative. We negate their experiences because it does not fit into a category that makes us feel comfortable.

According to Colum McCann, “All stories are war stories somehow” (vii). It does not matter what region a person is from, they are all connected through wars fought by their ancestors or wars fought by themselves. He views literature as an avenue to confront the truths about war, to shine a light on the harsh realities of war, and to show how war, itself, changes people. In doing so, he believes writers are ultimately making a political statement about war: “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” (McCann vi). In the context of this paper, the term “political act” is referring to anti-war writing. As Giorgio Mariani notes in his book *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature*, it is difficult to note whether a text is truly anti-war or not, mainly because we all have different perspectives; however, anti-war literature often questions the “moral and political stance a text takes toward the war and the violence it describes” (x). Each of these writers use different genres—memoir, short stories, poetry, blogs, and novels—as a way to contextualize their experiences in war.

There is a gap between what an American hero is and what that American hero has to do in order to acquire that status. According to Scranton, “The real gap is between our subconscious belief that righteous violence can redeem us, even enoble us, and the chastening truth that violence debases and corrupts.” Once veterans finally realize that violence is never righteous, especially in an unwarranted war, some of them become disillusioned by the military. They begin to realize that this unjust violence debased and corrupted them. Whereas they were

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13 Douglas Reichert Powell expands on the idea of connectedness in his book *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (2007). According to Powell, many situations that seem local or regional can actually be applied to a national or global platform.
patriotic individuals willing to support and defend their nation, their nation lied to them, sent them to war without the proper tools, and then refused to take care of them when they came home. With that in mind, I believe writers use themes to make a political stance. Throughout the thesis, I will elaborate more on how the theme of disappearing bodies makes a political statement about war and the military in general.

What do I mean by a political position or stance? Men and women join the military for varying reasons: free education, stability, difficult home life, trouble with the law, or patriotism. Because movies focus on a romanticized notion of the military, I believe many young people are misinformed about what they will experience in a combat zone, or in the military, period. When a person enters basic training, the whole idea is to break the individual down and build them back up, strip them of their old, weak self and remold them as an elite warrior who follows orders without question. Essentially, the military is indoctrinating these young minds to believe that the military houses a specific set of values: honor, integrity, service before self, and excellence in all they do. The military teaches that it is an organization dedicated to peace, while at the same time preparing soldiers for war. They also teach that equality is essential for cohesiveness. And equality does occur for those individuals of a specific gender and race. After serving in the military for several years and after deploying, people finally understand that the values taught in basic training mean nothing in the real world. After arriving in country, some people begin to learn how the system operates, and they typically figure out what the military tells them, what the military makes them do, and what the news reports do not jive. People eventually realize that movies are grossly exaggerated when it concerns military members as heroes. They see the day-to-day in country operations and realize that the reason they deployed does not seem to match up with what is actually occurring. Therefore, they begin to question
why the war started, why the U.S. invaded nations under false pretenses, and why so many people died for a lie. The longer they are in the military, the more disillusioned these people become. They are angry at the military for robbing them of their youth, of their sanity, and of their chance at happiness when it was all based on a lie.

This anger bleeds into the literature, and authors use their narratives to comment about why children were sent to war only to return in body bags. Some women make a stance to speak out against the inequality of the sexes and chastise the military and the government for continuing to “support” a sexist military, a military that reprimands the victim and awards the perpetrator, while waving a banner of “zero tolerance on sexual harassment.” And African Americans make a political stance by pointing out the absurdity of black men fighting for a nation that does not allow them to share water fountains with white people back in the United States. They point out that they are good enough to die for the freedom of their country, but they are not good enough to live free in their country. With these ideas in mind, I argue that one aspect of the physical, psychological, and emotional disappearance of bodies in war literature is political commentary meant to 1) chastise a government and elite institution that does not care about the literal or figurative accumulation of body bags and 2) allow veterans to reclaim those literal and figurative bodies. 14

In some ways, these disappearances are also seen in the lack of war literature available for certain wars and races, which brings me to my final point before outlining the chapters. This thesis has several holes that I have identified. First, I had a difficult time finding war literature by African Americans. I Googled, searched library databases, even contacted a resource librarian at the VA, but it still did not yield much in the way for African American literature. I can only draw

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14 The military does have the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the motto of “No man left behind.” Whereas it does a good job of recognizing those who are already dead, the military does little to help those who are physically alive yet mentally or emotionally dead. It is with this understanding that I approach the theme of disappearing bodies.
two conclusions for this lack of literature: 1) only 16.8% of the military is African American (Bender “These 22”) and, 2) in a world where African American voices have been historically oppressed and ignored, African Americans feel like their voices do not matter. Because of the lack of literature, I was only able to include two African Americans in the following chapters.

Second, I also found a lack of literature on the Afghanistan war. I am not sure why there seems to be an influx of literature from Vietnam and Iraq, but there is very little that I could find regarding Afghanistan. I cannot find any data that suggests a reason for this lack of literature. My belief is that Vietnam and Iraq were both wars that need not have been fought. We entered these wars under false pretenses. Veterans became more disillusioned by these wars because they became angry by the lives destroyed when the wars should not have occurred. However, the Afghanistan war was a direct response to 9/11, and soldiers who fought in this war see it as a necessary evil. Therefore, they have not expressed their narratives as much because they have yet to reach the point of disillusionment.

Third, there is also a lack of literature from women serving in Vietnam. Most war anthologies only cover the predominant voice: the white male. *Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq* (2008) and *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women In the Vietnam War* (1991) only cover the female officer perspective. *Women Vietnam Veterans: Our Untold Stories* (2015) is the only book I found that emphasizes enlisted females. The book is a comprehensive listing of the almost one thousand enlisted women who served in Vietnam. It details their in country dates, rank, and job. There is a section of songs made up by female recruits set to the music of other military songs. The book does not have a section that identifies memoirs, fiction, or poetry. When there is a story by a veteran, it is mainly a collective memory.

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15 There is very little writing concerning Vietnam. The volume mainly focuses on Iraq. All of the Vietnam narratives are by officers.
of the war and the psychological problems they still have from the war. One narrative that does provide more detail is that of Linda “Sgt. Mac” J. McClenahan. She discusses several traumatic events, one of those events being her gang rape by three military police officers who she thought were her friends. When she reported the incident to her command, the commander threatened to ruin her career, and he stated, “What did you women expect trying to be a part of a man’s war?” (McClenahan qtd. in Lowery 663). This book does provide us with a more comprehensive list of the enlisted women who served, but it does little to provide us with writing itself.

Fourth, the only books that are studied in this thesis are books written by military veterans. Although there are many memoirs of embedded journalists within the ranks, the focus of this thesis is not only look at how trauma causes bodies to physically, psychologically, and emotionally disappear, but also to look at how the idea of race and gender of military personnel affects their experiences of trauma. Visiting a unit is not the same as living with that unit. “Playing army” is not the same as being in the Army.

Lastly, the only primary narrative in this thesis by an officer is Benjamin Tupper’s memoir. Initially, I did not realize that most of the narratives I chose for the thesis were by enlisted members. Outside of the female Vietnam experience, the majority of literature is written by enlisted members, probably because 84% of the military is enlisted (Bender “These 22”). Although I read books by female officers, I did not include primary narratives by them because the narratives failed to contribute to the idea of disappearing bodies in the context that I am studying them. I am not sure if this is because being an officer places them in a different hierarchy, which could minimize the amount of sexual harassment they deal with.

For example, In Rule Number Two: Lessons I Learned in a Combat Hospital, Dr. Heidi Kraft discusses her role as a psychiatrist in Iraq. Throughout her memoir, she discusses patients
whom she treats. She makes note in the introductory pages that there were numerous females in her tent, yet she fails to discuss any of the issues that females have while deployed, such as sexual harassment or sexual assault, a statistic she would be aware of because she would be charged with treating these individuals. As soon as women enter the text, they immediately fade into the background, become part of the landscape, a throw away body. While I do discuss the idea of the throwaway body throughout the thesis, the only purpose Kraft’s book served for me was to negate the female experience altogether, or should I say, to erase all female voices except her own. Not once does she question her role in the war, and she tends to paint with positive strokes regarding everything military. Because she fails to discuss any of the women’s issues, despite being a female herself, and because she never questions anything about the mission in Iraq or at least never shares that with the reader, I found it difficult to trust her narrative. Therefore, with the noted holes, this thesis is heavy with literature by men, women, and Iraq veterans. I hope future studies will provide varied narratives so that we can gain a more conclusive understanding of how race and gender in all of the wars play a role in disappearing bodies and the psychological struggles veterans deal with.

Chapter one focuses on the dominant voice in the military: the white male voice. The authors discussed in chapter one are Tim O’Brien, Benjamin Tupper, and Kevin Powers. By evaluating war literature from Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, I want to show how bodies disappear based on the conditions soldiers live in. I also want to narrow down the ways that people disappear based on the aftermath of trauma. Bodies can also disappear by way of identity construction. White soldiers, despite having historically had the greatest access to power, lose their identity because they do not have an Other to compare themselves to. In an interview with author Brian Turner, he states, “It was not easy; that no matter how much he wanted to interact
personally with an Iraqi civilian, what that person beheld in his approach was not another individual but an armed and uniformed American” (Najmi 56). Because Turner was unable to interact with the Iraqis on an individual basis, he could not construct his own identity in the war. In George Herbert Mead’s Mind, Self and Society, he notes, “Social identities are created through our ongoing social interaction with other people and our subsequent self-reflection about who we think we are according to these social exchanges” (Zevallos). Our identities are created based on our interaction with other people. We adjust our behavior and self-image based on these interactions. Turner did not have a relationship with the Iraqi people, so there was never a chance for him to appear as an individual to them. Because interaction is needed in order for Turner to navigate his own identity under a social construct, Turner has difficulty figuring out his own identity in the war. According to Andrew Okolie, “Identity has little meaning without the ‘other’” (qtd. in Zevallos). Turner is unable to figure out who he is because he does not know who the Other is. Like Turner, O’Brien and Tupper have difficulty navigating their identity. However, they do so by positing the Other as an inversion of themselves. This inversion is, in some ways, a form of self-erasure, a situation where these men emasculate themselves because of the things they have done. In doing so, the person they were when they arrived in country is no longer present. This identity crisis creates a dissonance within the soldiers in the texts.

Chapter two focuses on one African American southern writer, Yusef Komunyakaa, during the Vietnam conflict. By analyzing Komunyakaa’s poetry, I want to expand Yaeger’s ideas about throwaway or neglected bodies, and suggest that these bodies become bodies that disappear into the landscape, whether they are in the south or abroad, and that the same ideology about the Other exhibited in the United States is the ideology that Komunyakaa deals with and witnesses during the war. Yaeger states, “In southern literature extraordinary numbers of women,
men, and children fall into the landscape and disappear. It is as if the foundation or basis for this world is made out of repudiated, throwaway bodies that mire the earth: a landscape built over and upon the melancholic detritus, the disposable bodies denied by white culture” (15). White culture denies Vietnamese bodies the same way it has historically denied African American bodies. Not only does Komunyakaa focus on his own loss of identity because of his race, but also he focuses on how the race of the Vietnamese people leads to their eventual discarding and throwing away. They essentially disappear into air, into the landscape, the same way African Americans do throughout southern literature. The fact that white culture transposes a supremacist attitude onto the Vietnamese people touches on Yaeger’s use of the “unthought known.” Christopher Bollas coined the term, and according to Yaeger, the “‘unthought known’ is a residue of childhood imprinting us with expectations about the way the world will shape itself (or fail to shape itself) about us” (101). There are certain things in society that are “known but not acknowledged” (Yaeger 101), hence the term “unthought known.” What Yaeger is saying is that African Americans have largely been overlooked in our society, especially if they come from a lower class like most of those who enlist in the military. We know that African Americans exist, but society chooses not to acknowledge their voices.

In Chapter three, I want to expand Yaeger’s use of the “unthought known,” or racial blindness, to include sexism by analyzing works by Shoshanna Johnson, Kayla Williams, and Jess Goodell. An “unthought known” suggests that we are doing things that we are unaware of, that society and our upbringing have ingrained in us certain values and beliefs, and that our thought processes become automatic. We know things without having to consciously process them. Even with the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights Movement, 16 I am referring to lower class African Americans, like the majority of those who enlist in the service. Some African American voices are heard and respected such as President Barack Obama, Beyoncé, Oprah, or Michael Jordan; but all of these people also have money. In this case, the class system usually overrules the race system.
we still live in a society that demeans people based on race or sex, and that attitude is more prevalent in the United States military than one might expect. I suspect that this notion seems more skewed because we are dealing with higher numbers in a smaller population, meaning that we have a smaller population in the military than in society. Only 1% of the population serves in the military. Of that 1%, 15% is female. So really, viewing how the military still has remnants of the “unthought known” within its ranks is looking at these issues on a microcosmic level, which, in turn, gives us insight to a larger population. Some men objectify women on a regular basis, an ingraining of the “unthought known” by a society that deems this type of behavior acceptable while at the same time waving a banner of equality and inclusiveness. This objectification, most often exhibited by sexual harassment or assault, is a form of erasure, thereby positing the female as a throwaway body that disappears into a landscape of white men.

All three chapters explore the theme of disappearing and throwaway bodies, grotesquerie, and the duality of self. However, each of these narrative constructions depends on the author’s race, gender, or region. Although white males do struggle with their own identity in a way that I never considered, African Americans and females internalize their own existence, and this theme invades every aspect of their lives. Even though white males, as opposed to women and African Americans, are able to return to a more stable constructed identity once they return from the war—meaning because of their role or position in society it is easier for them to assimilate—they still have to process the other trauma they witnessed. Women and other races, however, never had a stable identity to begin with. Their identity is fluid because it revolves around the ideology of a hegemonic society. They are constantly forced into “tight spaces,” and those who are the dominant race and gender dictate their moves. Therefore, as a reader and as a female veteran, I am more sympathetic to their internal struggle and need to find out who they are
because it was easy to relate to their plight. Each chapter will also discuss how the writers use writing as a therapeutic tool. The author’s admit that writing helped them process the war, helped them remain a peaceful person, and taught them how to deal with their trauma.

In the last section of the thesis, I will provide an appendix of my own writing. As previously noted, I am a veteran, and I do suffer with PTSD. When I separated from the military, I thought I was fine. It was not until the death of my father in 2012 that my PTSD flared up again. It has been a day-to-day struggle ever since, but writing and therapy are two sources that bring me comfort and clarity. My therapist noted that writing affected me more than therapy did, and she believes that I should continue to write for the rest of my life. Since part of the thesis covers writing as therapy, I took a poetry class in order to learn more about writing poetry, to learn how to craft my own voice, and to learn how to quiet the dissonance in my head. The result of that class is in the Appendix. I am fortunate that one of my poems was selected for publication in the February 2016 edition of The Report: O-Dark-Thirty, and three poems and one short story were published in Confluence in May 2016. These publications help me share my narrative with others who may be unable to give voice to the trauma they witnessed. The result of my work is my own way of finding myself, of reclaiming my identity, of making sure that I do not disappear.
CHAPTER II
DISAPPEARING BODIES:
RECONSTRUCTING THE WHITE MALE

To the usual chemistry of combat, the Vietnam War added even more volatile elements. Vietnam was America's ideological civil war, pitting hawk against dove, hard hat against peacenik. Patriotism gave way to revulsion, to a questioning of the national character. And most important for the men who fought the war—as it seems to be for the country—Vietnam had no clear ending, neither victory nor surrender. Their art is a search for that final, missing piece.

—Samuel G. Freedman

By analyzing southern women’s and African American women’s writing, Yaeger is focusing on an area of literature that she believes has been understudied. Accordingly, contemporary war literature and its intersection with the South have received little attention. By analyzing war literature by Southern and non-Southern writers who write about Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, I hope to show that, although disappearing bodies is a predominant theme, the way in which these writers approach the topic is varied. I think it is important to cover the white male perspective first because the white male perspective, by most accounts, is the predominant voice throughout history. It is also the sociological identity that has the power to decide who is an Other, at least in the Western world of colonial origins (Zevallos). For the purposes of this thesis, it is not my intent to say that the white male voice supersedes other perspectives, but it is, by all accounts, the leading voice in war literature. This is because white

17 My use of the phrase white male perspective is not meant to be all inclusive. I use the term to acknowledge the fact that the entire chapter is written about white male writers. The perspectives of each author are not the perspectives of all white males. So, when I use the term in relation to the text, I am referring to that particular author’s perspective.
males make up 70% of the military (Bender “These 22”), and they write more war literature than any other race or gender. With that being said, this chapter will focus on the writings of Tim O’Brien (Vietnam), Benjamin Tupper (Afghanistan), and Kevin Powers (Iraq).

By studying the way bodies disappear from a white male perspective, I hope to show that the region (southern or non-southern) an author is from informs how he writes about disappearing bodies. We all grow up with different belief systems based on where we were born, our religious upbringing, our gender, or our political ideology. These beliefs follow us into adulthood because they are ingrained in us. It is not my intent to speculate on whether these writers have a particular political viewpoint or a specific belief about gender. It is, however, my intent to note small discrepancies in the texts about how bodies disappear and note that the region the person is from may be part of the reason they depict disappearing bodies in the manner that they do. By highlighting these differences, I hope to show that these writers, essentially, globalize their texts by applying certain themes, such as honor and violence and “otherness,” to texts that are set in different areas of the world—Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Bodies disappear in varying ways throughout the texts: loss of body parts; loss of life; and loss of identity.

Some of these authors write in multiple genres as a way to give voice to their experience. As Tim O’Brien notes, sometimes fiction is more real than nonfiction. The varying ways that bodies disappear throughout the text question the moral and political ramifications of the wars. These texts question why young men and women had to die in the name of a lie. With that being said, I argue that these writers use specific genres in order to depict disappearing bodies in varying ways because they are trying to show how the decisions of a few men in power have altered the course of these men’s lives, how these decisions have destroyed their chances at
living a normal life, how the trauma that soldiers witness in war has lasting effects, and how these decisions have caused bodies to disappear—literally and figuratively—because of a lie.

If, like McCann suggests, writing war literature is a political act, then it stands to reason that these writers have become disillusioned by the wars, especially if we take into consideration that these writers not only struggle with the ways bodies disappear during war, but also how their identities are reconstructed in lieu of the trauma they witnessed and the psychological aftermath of said witnessed trauma. Unlike Yaeger, who focuses on the South in her studies, I am not focusing specifically on Southern tropes or writers in this thesis for two reasons: 1) despite the fact that 44% percent of the military enlists from the southern states, most books written by veterans that I was able to find were not southern writers or their texts did not provide contextual evidence for the idea of disappearing bodies in the way I will be examining them, and 2) because America lost the Vietnam War, the South cannot claim specific tropes for themselves any more. The entire nation has the right to mourn this loss as they see fit, and no one region can claim to be exclusionary because of being the only region that knows what it is like to lose a war, the way the South did after the Civil War. Therefore, I aim to discuss the region of the author when it is apparent that the depiction of disappearing or throwaway bodies appears to be a regional trope outlined by Yaeger. The white masculine identity also plays a role in how soldiers respond to or depict disappearing bodies. The masculine identity is not confined to one area of the United States; it is a social construct that permeates our nation. When these writers use regional tropes or question their identity in the context of war, they essentially globalize their own beliefs, values, or morals. They carry this belief system to other regions of the world, and those beliefs are now connected to foreign soil—to Vietnam, to Afghanistan, or to Iraq.
Tim O’Brien is one of the most prolific Vietnam writers of our time. O’Brien uses writing as a way to give voice to the trauma he witnessed while serving in Vietnam. He is originally from Minnesota but has lived and taught in Austin, TX for the last thirteen years. He has written numerous works of literature about the war, including his memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Send Me Home* (1975); a book of short stories, *The Things They Carried* (1990); and a novel, *Going After Cacciato* (1999). O’Brien does not view himself as a Vietnam writer, just a writer who served in Vietnam. He views his writing as love stories instead of war stories. His writing not only depicts the harsh realities of war but also the ways war changes people.

O’Brien wrote his memoir a few years after Vietnam ended, and, unlike his book of short stories, he seems to be somewhat reserved in how he narrates his time in war. Although he discusses the war philosophically, for the most part, O’Brien appears to be a distant observer to his own life. It is rare that he becomes emotional about anything going on in the war. O’Brien makes it clear that he does not agree with the war, and, if it were not for bringing shame to his family, he would escape to Canada. He actually feels like a coward because he does not have the strength or courage to desert an unjust war.

In his memoir, O’Brien does not directly write much in regards to disappearing bodies, the grotesque, or hybridity. When one of his friends dies, he describes the scene as if the man were a stranger: “He was wrapped in a plastic body bag, we popped smoke, and a helicopter took him away, my friend” (*If I Die* 123). He never elaborates on the grotesquerie of death; he always notes the manner in which people died—they were blown up or shot up—and then they were taken away in black, plastic body bags. Even though he has moral qualms about killing, he notes that he does conform: “I confronted the profile of a human being through my sight. It did not
occur to me that a man would die when I pulled the trigger of that rifle” (If I Die 97). After he kills the man, he finds out the man was not armed. The man only had a package of papers. He feels guilty about killing an unarmed man, and he hopes that the man is not Li, a Vietnamese officer he met and became friends with while on R&R. He never looks at the man to confirm whether it is Li or not. It is not clear if he only tells us that he never looked because he does not want to describe the scene for the reader, or if he really did not look. It is obvious by reading his fiction that he did encounter horrific images. The closest O’Brien comes to describing anything that is extremely vivid is when discussing the fact that one of his sergeants shot a cow after an attack: “Bullets struck its flanks, exploding globs of flesh, boring into its belly” (If I Die 139). It is ironic that the most gruesome account is about an animal instead of a human. This could be because the idea of describing human death reminds him of his own mortality or reminds him of the people he killed, the things he is not ready to confront. In some ways, his memoir seems like a trial run for his fiction. Writing his memoir was a way for him initially to face his demons, even though he could not share those demons with the reading population; however, through the medium of fiction, he is able to confront his own trauma through his fictional characters because it removes him from the trauma itself. His memoir only causes him to confront the choices he made, and he has to decide what path he needs to take next: “Now, war ended,” O’Brien writes, “all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth” (If I Die 23).

These “unprofound scraps of truth” (If I Die 23) become profound in his book of short stories, The Things They Carried, something that is evident in the way O’Brien constructs the book. O’Brien’s short stories are metafiction, and he intentionally skew truth and fiction. It is difficult to tell when something really happened or when he is making it up. To make things worse, O’Brien creates a narrator with his name, a person who went to war and who is a writer.
He talks about writing technique in stories like “Notes,” “Spin,” and “How to Tell a True War Story;” and, in these stories, he elaborates that it is not important about what is real or fiction. It is only important that he create a specific tone or mood so that people can understand what veterans went through during the war. Because he keeps switching back and forth with the voice, it is difficult to tell when the narrator is talking or when the author is talking. The only thing that appears to follow some sort of pattern in the book is the fact that O’Brien the author is using O’Brien as a way to confront his trauma. In doing so, he uses grotesquerie as a catalyst to highlight the psychological struggles that veterans deal with every day. This is most evident in the order of the stories in the book.

The book, itself, does not have a linear progression. It switches back and forth between past and present, Vietnam and the United States. Character introductions, such as Curt Lemon, also appear in a non-linear, fragmented form. Lemon’s first introduction is in the story “Spin.” Timmy, the narrator, recounts that even though the war has been over for many years, as he sits at his typewriter, he sees “Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree….Curt Lemon steps from the shade into bright sunlight, his face brown and shining, and then he soars into a tree” (“Spin” 31). The second time Lemon appears, Timmy elaborates on Lemon’s death. He tells how Lemon and Rat Kiley were playing a game. They were tossing smoke grenades to one another, acting like schoolchildren instead of soldiers. While trying to maintain some semblance of the children they used to be, children who are not meant to deal with the harsh realities of war at such a tender age, Lemon stepped out of the shade and into the sunlight. Timmy heard a click, and an explosion occurred: “His face was suddenly brown and shining [...] Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted, and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him

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18 O’Brien is the author, and the narrator is also named O’Brien. The narrator is O’Brien’s constructed persona that he uses to give voice to his trauma. In order to clarify who is talking, I will refer to the narrator as Timmy.
and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms” (“How” 67). The third and final time Lemon appears, Timmy recalls that Lemon always acted brave and “puffed up” (“The Dentist” 82)—that is, until the dentist came to their camp. When Lemon went into the dentist’s tent, he passed out immediately, and the other soldiers had to carry him back to his sleeping quarters. Lemon passing out because of his fear of the dentist reminds the reader that these soldiers are just children, barely old enough to drive or vote.

In O’Brien’s book, he elaborates on how war contorts people’s minds, and they become different people because of their exposure to horrific situations. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” Timmy provides more detail about the events that occurred after Lemon’s death. When Lemon stepped on the detonator, his body parts blew into the air. Timmy and Dave Jensen shimmied up the tree and retrieved the parts. Even now, twenty years after the fact, he is disturbed by what occurred: “But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the [body] parts” (“How” 79). This response is not a normal response to someone dealing with the death of a friend. It is the response, however, of someone who is trying to cope with trauma.

The Things They Carried is O’Brien’s attempt to reconcile his own beliefs about the war. His decision to layout the book in a non-linear path depicts the psychological struggles with which veterans deal. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” Timmy recounts Lemon’s death multiple times, always starting at a different spot. His repetitious narration seems like an effort to change the past, but it also depicts how fragmented memories are when a person suffers from PTSD. The most interesting aspect about the way O’Brien introduces Lemon is that it is in reverse order. By describing his death, the events that led up to his death, and a story before he died, it is as if O’Brien is trying to resurrect Lemon from the grave or trying to prevent him from
dying in the first place. O’Brien’s attempt to rewrite history is a clear indicator of his own psychological trauma, evidenced by the starting and stopping of the narrative. As previously noted, Caruth states that people who witness trauma are unable to speak about it. By writing about the trauma through fiction, O’Brien is giving voice to his pain. The constant starting and stopping of the narrative is his attempt at trying to face this trauma. He has been mute for so long, it is as if he does not know how to begin the story, so he does it in reverse. This continuous starting and stopping, the backtracking of the narrative, creates a staccato effect and draws the reader into the anguish of the narrator. It is as if O’Brien is trying to rewrite the narrative so that Lemon does not die, and, in doing so, Lemon never disappears. Everything he saw in the war did not really happen, and he really was not a coward who went to war.

O’Brien makes it clear in If I Die that he does not agree with the war, and he believes people in higher positions are making choices without understanding the ramifications of those decisions. He elaborates on that claim and addresses how the war changes people in the short story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” The story depicts an “all-American” girl who comes to Vietnam to visit her boyfriend. While she is there, she starts hanging out with the Special Ops unit. She mesmerizes them with her beauty, and they allow her to do anything she wants; therefore, she goes out on missions with them. By the end of the story, the sweetheart, all-American girl is dancing in a room full of drugged up soldiers, with a Viet Cong ear necklace draped around her neck and blood smeared all over her face. She disappears into the jungle, and no one sees her again. O’Brien’s point is that children come to war in their most innocent states, and they return to the world as fragile, damaged, fragmented individuals. By showing how Jensen jokes about Lemon’s death and how Rat repeatedly shoots a baby VC water buffalo after
Lemon dies, O’Brien chastises a government who sends people to war without acknowledging how war will change those individuals, how people disappear—physically and psychologically.

Through his writing, O’Brien has finally been able to reconcile the things he witnessed during the Vietnam War; he gives voice to his pain, and he makes sure that everyone, himself included, never disappears from conscious memory. In the end, O’Brien realizes that his writing is “Tim [the writer] trying to save Timmy’s [the narrator/younger O’Brien] life with a story” (“The Lives” 233). Despite everything he witnessed, his writing allows him to make sure that Tim and Timmy never completely disappear. Throughout his memoir and short stories, O’Brien mainly focuses on how his comrades disappear and how his own identity disappears through the course of the war. People disappear in body bags, and he even disappears because of his own actions. He was a conscientious objector, a person who felt like a coward for going to war. He realizes that even though he killed someone in order to save himself, it does not make his actions easier to live with. This stripping away of his own moral code, his own identity, causes a part of him to psychologically disappear, and, through his writing, he seems to be trying to gain back the piece of himself that he lost. The short story “The Man I Killed” is evidence of this notion.

In “The Man I Killed,” the narrator shoots a man during routine missions. Timmy has difficulty with the death of the young man, and he repeatedly describes the way the man’s neck is turned to the side, how his eye was “a star-shaped hole” (“The Man” 118), and how his features are feminine. Although the Vietnamese man is not an African American, he still fits the social construction of an Other. It is through this construction that O’Brien sees a reflection of himself. Before the war, O’Brien was a scholar. He disagreed with the war, and he felt like a coward, emasculated, because he went to the war instead of deserting. The constant repetitive images of the man’s death are jarring to the reader. By constructing an identity for the dead man
that is similar to O’Brien’s, the reader infers that O’Brien understands that he could be the one with a star-shaped hole. He is no better than the Vietnamese man is. It is possible for both of them to die, despite their race or ethnicity. While Timmy is contemplating his own mortality, Kiowa repeatedly tells him to quit staring at the body. Kiowa also strips the body of all of its belongings, including a picture of the man’s wife (“The Man” 123).

This violation of the body seems to follow Yaeger’s belief—or her belief that they are represented as such—that Others are disposable bodies; however, a shift occurs in the representation of the body, most specifically the feminine features of the body and the postulations about what type of man the Vietnamese was. Timmy’s description of the Other is an inversion of himself. He notes the man has bony fingers and a trim waist, appears thin, and has clean fingernails and feminine facial features. The man was a scholar who “had no stomach for violence” (“The Man” 121). He was only in the war because “he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village” (“The Man” 121). The man Timmy killed is a direct reflection of the author, a man who wanted to desert but was afraid to dishonor his family, a man who was a scholar, and a man who had no stomach for violence, but now, O’Brien has taken on a persona of a person he never wanted to be. On the one hand, O’Brien, like many white males, feminizes the Other in order to prove his own white masculinity and superiority; on the other hand, this feminization could be the way O’Brien views himself since he believes he was a coward for participating in a war that he believed was unjust. He is no longer worthy of the white male masculine identity, and he disappears or conforms to a feminized version of himself. Regardless of which viewpoint is correct, if any, the fact that O’Brien, as a white male, identifies with an Other is a key component of his writing. I do not believe O’Brien would have ever been able to empathize or identify with the Vietnamese man if he would have never written the story.
By using verisimilitude in his fiction, O’Brien is able to use his writing to process the trauma he witnessed in war in a way that he could not do in his own memoir. In part, I believe the reason O’Brien could not express himself in his memoir is because he wrote it too close to the end of the war. He did not have the time to evaluate everything he experienced. However, in his fiction, by constructing the narrator as his persona, he is able to identify his own fears. He is able to rewrite narratives as a way to make sense of the trauma. Timmy is able to do what Tim could not; he provides O’Brien with the ability to process these images from a safe distance. By doing so, O’Brien is able to provide his own narrative through a third party. The writing allows him to understand that everyone in the war, regardless of race or nationality, lost a piece of himself or herself. Through writing though, he is able to put himself, albeit slowly, back together. By trying to save Timmy’s life, he, in effect, saves his present and future self. He is able to make sure that he can find a way to heal from his trauma, to make sure he does not disappear. Most importantly, he is able to find a way to forgive himself for his role in Vietnam, implied by O’Brien’s acknowledgement that he was trying to save Timmy’s life through writing.

Like Vietnam, the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts seem like they will never end. They have been ongoing since 2001 and 2003 respectively. The Afghanistan invasion was a response to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, an attack that Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden claimed credit for; and the Iraq invasion was a response to suspected weapons of mass destruction possessed by Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. In the first conflict, there was a clear reason why we were attacking Afghanistan: they allowed Al Qaeda to operate within their borders, and they refused to turn them over to the United States. The Iraq conflict is questionable since there was no clear intelligence that could specifically pinpoint the location of weapons of mass destruction or if they even existed. Regardless, President George W. Bush and his
colleagues tried to convince the American people and the world that Hussein and bin Laden were linked: “The administration claimed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, were building nuclear warheads, and had connections with Osama bin Laden’s insurgents” (Wyatt-Brown 181). When the U.S. was unable to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction and Hussein’s ties to Al-Qaeda, General Colin Powell made a startling admission that the intelligence they received from the CIA, by way of exiled Iraqis, turned out to be misleading and false intel. This revelation led Powell to believe that the Iraq War was an unjust war (Wyatt-Brown 181). These conflicts created some of the most profound literature of our generation, literature that has yet to receive proper analysis, such as those written by Benjamin Tupper and Kevin Powers.

Tupper is from Syracuse, New York, and he is one of the most notable writers of the Afghanistan conflict. Tupper, using current technology via blogs, wrote his memoir *Greetings from Afghanistan, Send More Ammo: Dispatches from Taliban Country* (2010) while on the frontlines in 2006. It is a poignant book that depicts his reasons for joining the military and his subsequent deployment to Afghanistan. Tupper first went to Afghanistan as a civilian, part of a humanitarian mission meant to help the Afghani people. Once he saw the destruction the Taliban caused, he felt the need to do more for these people. His desire to join the military had nothing to do with 9/11 or some sense of patriotism for the United States; it had everything to do with the fact that he blamed the U.S. government for Afghanistan’s current dilemma. He believes that the U.S.’s failure to help provide infrastructure after the Russian-Afghan war is the reason that Afghanistan is in penury, rife with internal conflict (Tupper, Preface).

The book depicts Captain Tupper’s deployment to Afghanistan and his assignment as an Embedded Training Team (ETT) member. ETT’s consist of two American Army members and a
group of Afghan military members. U.S. Army members train the Afghan Army, and they participate in missions without the support of the regular Army. Men like Tupper are, essentially, at the mercy of the Afghans. Like O’Brien, Tupper focuses on different ways bodies disappear: loss of life, loss of body parts, loss of flesh, loss of identity, and loss of mental stability.

Throughout his blog entries, Tupper provides vivid imagery of living conditions, IED explosions, gun skirmishes, and suicide bombers; these images are often gruesome in detail, and the way he discusses them shows a slow degradation of the minds of soldiers, of his own mind. Tupper first discusses these gruesome images by discussing daily hygiene. Stuck in 100+ degree heat with long sleeves, pants, boots, and a 100 pound rucksack, Tupper explains how the heat and sweating break down the integrity of the body, how people begin to itch “in places only [their] doctor and [their] lover have ever laid eyes on” (11). He goes on to describe the deterioration of his feet after walking in the heat for sixteen hours a day. Socks were usually damp, and, oftentimes, the socks would dry and crust over. When Tupper removed his socks, he often removed chunks of flesh. His feet were pus-filled and smelled of Limburger cheese. His “feet had tiny red dots on them, skin peeling off in moist white patties, and yellow, greasy blobs all over [them]” (Tupper 11). Tupper’s careful description of the corrosion of his feet after constant exposure to heat and moisture is a foreshadowing of what occurs to soldiers after repeated exposure to battle, a physical corollary of the disappearing bodies.

Throughout his blogs, the images become much more disturbing, but his response to these situations becomes more distant. He has seen it all: legs that are backwards, cuts across eyeballs, an eyeball split in half, pink mist as brains splatter from high velocity rounds, bodies exhumed from the grave with letters nailed to foreheads,19 legs torn off, arms burned and

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19 When Afghani soldiers are killed and buried, the Taliban exhumes the bodies and literally nails handwritten letters to their foreheads as a warning to those who are still helping the Americans. This technique is used as a method of
deformed, and skulls hollowed out by AK47’s. On one occasion, a suicide bomber detonates his bomb at a local bazaar. Tupper stares at a mysterious “vibrant pink and red object” for the longest time, trying to figure out what it is. The object appears so vibrant because it is against the backdrop of pure, white snow. There were no tracks in the snow, so it was difficult for him to understand where this object came from. After assessing the scene, he realizes it is “the neck stem of a human spine, blasted 150 meters in the air from the site of [the] suicide bombing” (Tupper 200). “Random burned and twisted body parts” (Tupper 201) lay about the area: the bomber’s decapitated head; intact heart; and ribs, which were “cracked and splayed like old mummified fingernails” (Tupper 202). Despite the grotesque images depicted, an Afghani soldier found the heart and started kicking it down the road like a soccer ball. With each of these scenes, Tupper and his men grow more distant. Initially, the images were repulsive to the men. As war took its toll on the soldiers, they began to compartmentalize their feelings, and they began to joke about death, hence the soccer ball. In a world filled with chaos, their only recourse is to survive at all costs—emotionally, physically, and psychologically.

The soldiers notice that they are changing, but some of them try to hold onto their humanity through acts of kindness. Most of the men admit that they are adrenaline junkies looking for the next skirmish, but, even in their macho bravado, compassion seeps through. On one skirmish, Ski (Tupper’s partner) is pinned down by enemy fire. He sees a wounded Taliban member nearby, and, instead of killing him, Ski runs to his side to give him medical care. It would seem that killing the enemy from a distance makes these people faceless, but, when the enemy is near and suffering, humanity overrules, and, in that moment, war becomes irrelevant, and they are just two men with different viewpoints who want to survive. However, it is feasible intimidation, and it serves to not only threaten the Afghani soldiers who are helping the Americans, but also it is a threat against their families.
to assume that Tupper mentions this incident, the only one of its kind in the book, as a way to prove that a male masculine image can empathize with the Other. Just as O’Brien depicts the Vietnamese man as an inversion of himself, Tupper depicts the Afghani insurgent the way an American soldier on the brink of death would want to be treated and views him as a version of himself. Ski applies pressure to the man’s wounds and tries to control the bleeding. The man recognizes Ski’s compassion and places his hand over his heart, a sign that means he has great respect for Ski. The man dies, but he does not do so alone. Ski holds him in his arms and comforts him until he breathes his last breath (Tupper 43-45). This interaction between the two men shows that, although they are enemies, at least Ski is compassionate enough to help the Other in his time of need, even if that help is only to provide him with a compassionate death.

In most cases throughout the book, when the soldiers deal with traumatic situations, they seem to sympathize more with animals than humans, such as when someone shoots a dog because it is trying to steal the suicide bomber’s body parts. The constant wailing of the dog seems to affect them more than the death of their own men, mainly because the men can identify with the death of their comrades, so they suppress their emotions so that they do not have to deal with their own mortality. The dog is also helpless against a loaded gun, and these men identify with that vulnerability. They too feel helpless fighting in the war. By recognizing this shared vulnerability, the dog acts as a catalyst to provide them an emotional outlet in order to deal with the trauma they have witnessed. These types of situations provide them with the emotional outlet they need so that they can control their emotions elsewhere. They have to compartmentalize their feelings because it is the only way they can psychologically survive.

The war—mentally, physically, and spiritually—affects the men, and Tupper begins to fear that they are becoming inconsequential, that they are disappearing themselves. In his blog
“Fading Away,” he discusses the ways in which they are all disappearing. Their bodies “become thinner, shallower, hollowed out by the grind of the war” (Tupper 188). Tupper notes that he has lost thirty pounds in four months, and that the heavy equipment, coupled with the heat, causes him to sweat so much that he feels like he is withering away. Not only does their weight disappear, but also bodies literally disappear. People die and are never seen again. Some of them disappear in pieces: “injuries that remove nonessential parts and chunks of [their] physical forms” (Tupper 188). The men who existed before the war are no longer their mirror image. The psychological turmoil eats away at Tupper, and he becomes consumed by the notion that he will “continue to shed [his] form until one morning, [he’s gone]. Just gone” (189).

The idea of disappearing counterintuitively becomes worse as the men return home. They have difficulty readjusting to civilian life. They lose their wives, their children, and their jobs because they are still stuck in a war thousands of miles away. Images of the war assault their senses: smells, sights, sounds. They become isolated because no one can understand the trauma they have witnessed. The one constant is that all of them, despite being home and physically safe, wish they were back in Afghanistan: part of a team, yearning for camaraderie and understanding, and longing for the adrenaline rush that reminds them they are alive. Tupper notes that his return has been difficult. He constantly has dreams of dying. Every noise is a roadside bomb. He sees his friends constantly drinking, fighting, and getting hauled off to jail because they do not know how to handle their PTSD. The war is with them everywhere, but, in the civilian world, they do not have an enemy to kill, so they become their own enemy.

Writing is extremely therapeutic for Tupper, and he notes that it is the difference between his friends and himself in regards to his struggles with PTSD. Tupper’s experience in combat makes him feel like he is “accruing an armful of heavy, jagged stones. During many missions,
forced one by one to pick up and carry these metaphorical stones” (Tupper 239). With each blog he writes, and with each person who reads the blog, he feels the reader has taken one of his stones and has lessened his burden. Writing, for him, has been better than any regiment of PTSD medication. The freedom he acquires through writing allows him to remarry and to make amends with his ex-wife and children.

Writing not only lessens his burdens and helps him maintain his sanity, but also it provides an outlet to grant the wish, as Tupper believes, of all soldiers: “that upon [their] death, [they] are not forgotten” (210). The fear of disappearing and being forgotten is greater than the fear of death. In his blog, “Alive in Your Mind’s Eye,” Tupper chooses to grant that wish to two soldiers—one American and one Afghani. He notes that one dies and one lives, but he refuses to provide any information to the reader so that no one can determine who died. He prefers, instead, to allow both men to live on so that all veterans will be remembered by readers like these two men—“still active, still engaged, still alive” (Tupper 210). His refusal to admit they are dead is twofold: it is his way of ensuring that those who sacrificed their lives for a cause greater than themselves continue to live on in the hearts and minds of those they touched, and it also establishes that Tupper views the Afghanis life with the same respect that he views the white man’s life. Although some writers would use this opportunity to distinguish hierarchy between the two men, Tupper views these men as equals. In doing so, he equally immortalizes them on the page, and they will never disappear. In the end, is that not what we all want, to be remembered? By writing his firsthand account of the war in Afghanistan, Tupper is able to shed light on the atrocities of war in a region that has been overlooked. He is able to deal with his psychological struggles through writing, and, in doing so, his writing gives voice to those who can no longer speak.
Powers, likewise, gives voice to those who can no longer speak, but he does so in a different medium: fiction and poetry. Powers is from Richmond, Virginia, and he served in the U.S. Army. He deployed to Iraq in 2004 and 2005 as a machine gunner. He is thought of as one of the greatest writers of the Iraq war, and his novel, *The Yellow Birds* (2012), is considered the first American literary masterpiece of that war. *The Yellow Birds* is a poignant tale about the friendship forged between Private Bartle (21 years old) and Private Murphy (18 years old) during the war. Although they are both young, Bartle takes Murph under his wing and feels a sense of duty to keep him safe. A 30-year-old Bartle, who is still trying to make sense of everything that happened during the war, narrates the book. The book weaves in and out of the past, flipping from Iraq (past) to Virginia (present), using vivid imagery and poetic prose to depict the psychological ramifications of war.

The opening line of the book immediately grabs the reader’s attention, and makes one understand just how difficult day-to-day operations were in Iraq: “The war tried to kill us in the spring” (*The Yellow 3*). He posits the war as an independent force, almost as if it is a sentient being. The narrator recounts the ways the war tried to kill them, noting that there is nothing special about them, and that they are not destined to live. The death of others serves only one purpose to Bartle and Murph: to prove they are still alive. They saw the death of others as an affirmation of their own life, and, in this respect, they somehow felt invincible in that moment.

The death of so many, eventually, begins to take its toll on Murph, and he begins to fear proof of his own existence. He starts disappearing for hours on end, and Bartle becomes concerned. Bartle begins searching the base so that he can make sure that Murph is okay. He finds “tags” all over the base stating, “Murph was here.” After talking with SSgt Sterling, their platoon sergeant, Bartle finds Murph at the medical clinic. He believes Murph is visiting the
clinic because he is enamored with a female medic. When he finds Murph sitting on a cot staring at the girl, he soon realizes that Murph is not visiting because he is in love with the girl; he is in love with what the girl represents: the last bastion of hope, the last remnant of beauty and gentleness. When a wounded soldier is MEDEVAC’d into the hospital, Bartle witnesses firsthand the reason why Murph is infatuated with the woman’s actions: “The girl’s hands applied a tourniquet to the leg, and she took a position next to the stretcher and they ran beside it toward the makeshift hospital, and one gloved hand was in his hand and one gloved hand ran over his face, into his hair, over his lips and eyes, and they disappeared behind the tent cloth” (The Yellow 163). Murph and Bartle are drawn to her tenderness, and they realize that her actions, in this moment, may be the last time they ever witness gentleness and kindness.

Despite the fact that the characters see the female medic as the last bastion of hope who displays gentleness and kindness during war, Powers’ choice to objectify her is a form of erasure. Medics will typically hold the hand of a wounded soldier, but they do not typically run their hands through the soldier’s hair or over his lips and eyes. In the middle of a horrific scene, Powers’ choice to objectify her demeans her abilities as a medic. By linking the idea of the female as the last bastion of hope with the sexualized nature of her movements, the reader can infer that “hope” from the female body is only found in service to men, when the female is performing an expected female role rather than upsetting the gender norm of serving in the war. By objectifying the medic, Powers essentially erases her identity as a female soldier and her constructed identity of hope.

The war has changed them, and Murph has difficulty dealing with all of the death, and he struggles with the notion that, inch by inch, he feels like he is disappearing. His fear of disappearing is the reason he tags his name all over the base. He wants to prove to himself that
he IS here right now, and he wants to make sure that no one forgets him if/once he dies. He does not want to become like the soldier who is MEDEVAC’d into the hospital: “All those gathered listened as the unavoidable sound of the boy’s screams weakened and then died. We could only hope that his voice had broken, that he had become tired or had been anesthetized, that he now took deep breaths of cool air, his vocal cords unshaken by the music of his agony, but we knew it wasn’t true” (The Yellow 163-64). The death of others no longer serves the purpose of reminding them that they are still alive. It now impresses upon them the fact that they could die at a moment’s notice.

This thought echoes during the subsequent scene in the book when the base is bombed, as they walk away from the clinic. In the ensuing chaos, Bartle and Murph are separated, and Bartle later finds Murph back at the clinic, leaning over the female medic, who is now dead. Their last remaining hope of kindness and gentleness is no more. Murph becomes distraught that he is unable to save her, and he has a psychological break. Murph disappears, and Bartle and Sterling find out that Bartle was in a neighboring town a few days ago, walking through the streets completely naked. When they finally find him, his body is buried in the bushes at the base of a minaret, and it is completely mutilated: “He was broken and bruised and cut and still pale except for his face and hands, and now his eyes had been gouged out, the two hollow sockets looking like red angry passages to his mind. His throat had been cut nearly through, his head hung limply and lolled from side to side, attached only by the barely intact vertebrae” (The Yellow 205-06). His image would be forever etched in their minds: “His ears were cut off. His nose cut off, too. He had been imprecisely castrated” (The Yellow 206). They discuss what to do with his body and decide to dump it into the Tigris so that his mother never has to see his desecrated body. Their actions present a paradox: they “disappear” Murph to preserve his wholeness in the imagination
of others. Just as Tupper does with the Afghani and American soldiers who died, Bartle and Sterling choose to preserve Murph’s memory in his mother’s mind so that the Murph they knew will not disappear.

One interesting facet in the way Powers depicts his characters in his novel and in his poetry is that he confines the struggle to the veteran or his comrades. Although Powers shows that the nurse’s death affects Murph and Murph’s death affects Bartle, Powers never elaborates on the deaths of Iraqis. There are several places in the text where Iraqis are noted. In each situation, Powers has the opportunity to provide detailed interaction between these individuals, as well as provide context to how Murph and Bartle respond to the death of Others. In the beginning of the book, Murph and Bartle meet Malik, who is their Iraqi interpreter. During a routine mission, insurgents kill Malik. Bartle states, “We did not see Malik get killed, but Murph and I had his blood on both of our uniforms” (The Yellow 11). When the ceasefire order came, they peered over the wall and saw Malik lying on the ground. Instead of responding as if Malik’s death bothered them, Murph immediately asks, “Doesn’t count, does it?” (The Yellow 11). What Murph is asking is if the dead man counts among the numbers of the dead. Bartle replies, “No, I don’t think so” (The Yellow 11). The fact that Malik does not count among the dead, the fact that no one mourns him posits him as a throwaway body. According to Yaeger, “The primary characteristic of the throwaway, in life as in literature, is the absence of the climate of mourning” (The Yellow 81). Malik is not one of their own, despite the fact that he works with them, so his death is of little consequence.

Later in the book, Bartle and Sterling encounter an Iraqi hermit while they are trying to decide what to do with Murph’s body. They load the body into the hermit’s cart and carry him down to the sea. After they dispose of the body, “Sterling shot the cartwright once, in the face,
and he crumpled to the ground” (*The Yellow* 211). Sterling and Bartle walk away unaffected by their actions. This Other who just helped them dispose of their friend so that he would be remembered with honor is nothing more than an object to Sterling. He kills him without consequence because he can, because he wields power over this man. This man does not deserve the same type of respect that Sterling just insisted on for Murph because he is inconsequential, a throw away body that fades into the landscape. Like Yaeger notes, this man becomes disposable once he is no longer needed to serve a role.

What is most notable about Powers’ construction of the Other is that it is markedly different from the previous writers. O’Brien and Tupper both express a sense of compassion for the Other. There was a sense of mourning for these people, even if that mourning was only because they realized they could have been the ones who died, so essentially they mourned the loss of themselves. However, Powers’ characters feel no sympathy at all for the loss of Malik or for the death of the hermit. I do not mean to say that they cannot feel compassion at all, especially not after disposing of Murph’s body because they wanted to preserve his memory. They do have empathy; they just seem to express it for their own kind such as with Murph and the white nurse.

Sterling’s actions are reminiscent of Rat Kiley killing the VC water buffalo after Lemon died. They were both angry because of the death of their friends, and both of them responded with violence: one a person, and one an animal. Despite that this is a response of the trauma he witnessed, Sterling’s actions also seem similar to Kyle’s declaration that he did not feel sorry for killing anyone. He only wished he had killed more Iraqis. Whether it seems meaningful or not, it seems appropriate to mention that O’Brien and Tupper are non-southerners, and Kyle and Powers are southerners. To Kyle and Sterling (Powers’ character), the Iraqis are just disposable
bodies, throwaway bodies at the expense of a white southern ideology. Bartle does not mention the hermit again in the text, and the only experience that Bartle seems to struggle with is the fact that he disposed of Murph’s body. As Bartle tries to deal with the ramifications of his choices, his psyche continues to spiral out of control.

Although Bartle believes he did the right thing by preserving Murph’s memory, he feels guilty about lying about what happened to Murph. When Bartle returns from the war, Murph’s ghost continues to haunt him, and he begins to drink alcohol as a way to deal with the guilt over Murph’s death, as well as for everything else he did during the war. The guilt that Bartle feels is similar to the narrator’s guilt in Powers’ book of poetry *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* (2014). In the poem “Photographing the Suddenly Dead,” the narrator expresses the guilt about what he has done and the things he has seen in war:

We no longer have to name
the sins that we are guilty of.
The evidence for every crime exists. What one
must always answer for
is not what has been done, but
for the weight of what remains
as residue—every effort
must be made to scrub away
the stain we’ve made on time. (ln 47-56)

Just like the speaker of the poem, not only does Bartle suffer from survivor’s guilt, but also he suffers from moral injury. Moral injury “has most commonly come to mean the transgression, the violation, of what is right, what one has long held to be sacred—a core belief or moral code—and thus wounding or, in the extreme, mortally wounding the psyche, soul, or one’s humanity” (Meagher 4). In short, moral injury is doing something that goes against one’s ethics, and, as a result, the person feels guilty for his/her actions. There is a grey line between moral
injury and PTSD, but how the two intersect has not been fully evaluated. Most people diagnosed with PTSD also experience some sense of guilt over the things they witnessed or did in war.

Because of the repeated exposure to combat situations, veterans are more likely to exhibit a negative post-traumatic growth, meaning they will have difficulty healing from their trauma because of their highly emotional state at the time of the trauma. Bartle’s emotional state at the time of Murph’s death and disappearance was unstable, so, when he finds Murph, the only way he knows how to handle what the Iraqis have done to him is by “erasing” his current existence. This erasure mimics Bartle’s “wasting away” as he strips off his clothes: “[His] hands and face were tanned to rust. The rest of [his] body, pale and thinned, hung in the reflection as if of its own accord” (*The Yellow 111*). Bartle feels as though he is fading away, slowly disappearing because of all he has seen and done. His guilt makes him believe that he is emotionally empty and unworthy. Powers explores the concept of feeling emotionally empty and unworthy in his poem “After Leaving McGuire Veterans’ Hospital for the Last Time”: “[…] You came home / with nothing, and you still / have most of it left” (ln 58-60). Because the narrator, like Bartle, feels as if he has nothing to live for, he begins to isolate himself, and his drinking worsens.

Powers elaborates on the psychological effects of war in his poem “Field Manual.” A typical Army Field Manual usually provides guidance for soldiers for Army regulations, first aid, and biological and chemical warfare attacks. Each chapter provides detailed information on how to respond to a series of situations. Instead of detailing military criteria in his poem, Powers details how people respond to the aftermath of trauma:

> Think not of battles, but rather after,  
> when the tremor in your right leg  
> becomes a shake you cannot stop, when the burned man’s  
> tendoned cheeks are locked into a scream that,  
> before you sank the bullet in his brain to end it,  
> had been quite loud. Think of how he still seems to scream.
Think of not caring. Call this ‘relief.’ (“Field Manual” ln1-7)

The vivid imagery depicts a clear representation of how people deal with the psychological ramifications of witnessing trauma. People often have repeated flashbacks of these traumatic events, and they find it difficult to distinguish between reality and memory. Sometimes these memories manifest into hallucinations of those dead bodies, and, instead of believing that the image is only in their minds, they begin to believe that the person is physically talking to them. It is normal for those who have severe PTSD to see and hear the dead; Bartle still sees and talks to Murph on a regular basis. Bartle eventually goes to prison for his involvement in disposing of Murph’s body. Upon his release from prison, he rents a cabin in the woods. The peaceful landscape provides Bartle with a place to heal, and, on his first day in the cabin, he sees Murph the way he was the last time he had seen him, except he is beautiful. He recounts Murph’s journey into the afterlife as though he were a great warrior. In the end, maybe that is what he needs to tell himself in order to right his wrongs.

People who struggle with PTSD often become hybrid individuals. Because the pathology of trauma consists of the “structure of its experience or reception [,] the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (Caruth, Trauma 5). The witnessed trauma causes a fracture, a split self, forcing the individual to construct two identities in one body. People often hide their problems by wearing a mask. Therefore, no one is able to tell that something is actually wrong. The vivid imagery depicted in “After Leaving McGuire Veterans’ Hospital for the Last Time” perfectly illustrates the intersection of the hybridized individual:

[…] If you’ve earned anything
It is the right to be unseemly
While you decide at what point
The bay becomes the ocean, what
Is the calculus of change required
To find what’s lost if what is lost
Is you. [...] (Powers ln 38-44)

Powers implies that in the face of trauma, it is okay for survivors to take on a split persona. It is okay for the person to try to figure out who they are or who they want to be. The only problem with having two personas is that when those personas collide, the individual is unable to tell which persona is the true self. If people cannot figure out how to change their lives because the part of them that is lost is their true self, then the person needs to be able to find their “true north” so that they can find a way to heal from the trauma. The hybridized self is not meant to be a long-term lifestyle; it is only meant to be used in the interim. Otherwise, people will become so accustomed to “wearing a mask” that they will never be able to find out who they truly are. The idea of hybridity is not specific to Powers or Iraq; it relates to all people who have witnessed trauma and are now experiencing psychological problems. Creating a hybridized self is the body’s way of protecting itself so it can heal. This split-self is evidenced by the guilt that people experience over the things they have done or witnessed during the war. This guilt seems to be more prominent in those who served during Iraq and Vietnam.

According to Freedman, there are four things that stand out about Vietnam: “it was America’s ideological civil war,” “patriotism gave way to revulsion,” “Vietnam had no clear ending,” and writing was “a search for that final, missing piece.” Each of these instances applies to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Both of the current wars are ideological wars—retaliation for 9/11 attacks and a belief in weapons of mass destruction. Although many people joined the military in response to 9/11 because of love of country, O’Brien was drafted into the military, and Tupper joined because he blamed the U.S. for Afghanistan’s current crisis with the
Taliban, as well as for the penury of the country. If McCann is correct, that war stories are a political act, then each of these writers depicts a government that they are disgusted with. O’Brien notes the lost innocence of the “children” who are sent to war, and Tupper chooses to embed with the Afghani Army so that he can help correct the wrongs of the U.S. government. Powers notes his disillusionment with the war and the United States in *The Yellow Birds*: “I couldn’t have articulated it then, but I’d been trained to think war was the great unifier, that it brought people closer together than any other activity on earth. Bullshit” (12).

Although it is clear that these writers have qualms about the way the government handled the war, it is interesting how regional upbringing informs their views about the Other. Whereas they all struggle with the things they witnessed in war, O’Brien and Tupper divulge how the death of Others was equally traumatizing, if not more so, to them than the death of their own comrades. Their identity seems to be wrapped up in the death of the Other. O’Brien depicts the Vietnamese soldier as a feminized version of himself, the way he views himself because he was not masculine enough to desert an unjust war. Likewise, Tupper’s depiction of Ski providing comfort to the enemy on his deathbed shows a greater level of humanity for the Other that is not typically represented by white male writers. Powers’ character constructions, on the other hand, seem to depict unsympathetic characters that use their power to decide who lives or dies. There is never any specific southern ideology mentioned in the text, but Sterling and Bartle are both from the South. Sterling’s actions are in line with the southern male of old, the one who kills people because he can, the one who does not have to deal with the repercussions of murder because of his racial and gender superiority. Just as white men did not face repercussions for lynching African Americans in the South, Sterling never faces consequences for killing an innocent man. Much like the “black man,” the hermit becomes another disposable body. The
only person who truly suffers is Bartle because he cannot live with the choice he made to dispose of Murph’s body, even if it was for the right reasons. In the next chapter, I will focus on Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry by emphasizing the ways race influences the disappearance of bodies.
CHAPTER III
DISAPPEARING BODIES AND RACIAL INEQUALITY:
DECONSTRUCTING YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA’S DIEN CAI DAU

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to
attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

—W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Our nation has an unsavory history of violence toward African Americans. Although the Civil War, in part, was meant to end slavery, a white patriarchal society still sought ways to disparage and control African Americans. They used convict labor and Jim Crow laws as a way to keep African Americans in line. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak. Protests often turned violent, and African Americans were killed for looking or whistling at a white woman, as was the case with Emmitt Till. Many African Americans were drafted when the Vietnam war broke out, but many went to war willingly because of the ability to gain education benefits (Wyatt-Brown 171). Although the military was fully integrated in 1954, “white resentments still were in the air. The relations of richer whites and poorer African Americans in this ‘mean, dirty war’ also served as a segregating factor” (Wyatt-Brown 179).

Today, African Americans comprise sixteen percent of the military, but little has changed in the way they are treated in the non-military world. Jim Crow no longer exists, but there is still a systematic racial disparagement that continues to oppress African Americans. The new Jim Crow consists of the mass incarceration of African American males. There has also been an increase in police officers shooting African American males, such as the recent deaths of Alton
Sterling and Philando Castile. Peaceful protests in Dallas in response to these deaths resulted in the murder of five police officers by an African American man. This history of oppression causes many African Americans to not use their voices because they know their voices have historically been ignored by society; however, Komunyakaa, a southern writer, uses his writing as a way to process the trauma he witnessed during Vietnam, as well as to highlight the racial inequality of African Americans. In doing so, he gives voice to a generation of men who have felt powerless.

Unlike the previous authors, Komunyakaa’s book of poetry, Dien Cai Dau (1988), uses imagery that specifically ties his experiences as a southern black man to his experiences in Vietnam. Throughout the collection, several southern tropes surface: racism, Jim Crow, the Confederate Flag, and the idea of the Other. According to Kevin Stein, “the haunting locale of [Komunyakaa’s poetry] is as much the domain of the human heart and mind as the jungles of Southeast Asia.” As an African American fighting in the war, Komunyakaa finds himself on the margins of “official war history,” or as Wallace Terry states, “The forgotten ‘fact’ of the war—the ‘black Americans who fought there’” (qtd. in Stein). Regardless of whether history has forgotten the African Americans who fought for their country, Komunyakaa aims to remind people of the struggles that African American soldiers dealt with during the Civil Rights era. His goal is to make sense of the images in his head, “a means to put in order a private history that exists as much outside of history as within it” (Houghtaling qtd. in Stein). Komunyakaa’s Dien Cai Dau constructs a dialogue between a communal history and private history by focusing on disappearing bodies, racial inequality, and duality of self in order for people of all races and regions to understand the psychological struggle—the “tight space”—that an African American soldier must confront and heal from.

20 Although page numbers are listed on the works cited page, the document provided on the library database did not list numbers on the pages.
Komunyakaa is a professor at New York University, and he is the author of 14 books of poetry. He received the Pulitzer prize for poetry for his “haunting, heroic, heart-troubling 1994 collection Neon Vernacular” (Secher). He was born as James William Brown Jr. in 1947 in Bogalusa, LA, and he is the eldest of five children. His father was abusive, and this caused a rift in their relationship. 1950s Bogalusa was a rural community in the Deep South that was “riven by racism and social apartheid, where the Ku Klux Klan loomed large and the local library did not admit black people” (Secher). When Komunyakaa was a teenager, he legally changed his name to Komunyakaa, his Trinidadian grandfather’s name. This action infuriated his father, and the divide between them grew wider. He felt his only way to escape the routine abuse and constant oppression that he suffered in the South was to join the military. Komunyakaa was sent to Vietnam in 1969 as an information specialist (frontline reporter), and he won the Bronze Star for his efforts in the war (Secher).

Although Komunyakaa hoped that life would be different in the military, he soon realized that the same oppression he faced in the South followed him to Vietnam. It did not matter what he did, he always found himself in a “tight place”: a black man navigating a white man’s world. Houston A. Baker Jr. summarizes tight places as “the always ambivalent cultural compromises of occupancy and vacancy, differentially effected by contexts of situations: that is, Who moves? Who doesn’t?” (69). As an African American, Komunyakaa did not have the freedom to move from place to place unless he followed specific rules set forth by a white male dominated society. Although slavery no longer existed and he was technically free, he did not control his own movements. African Americans who did not “toe the line” often met violent resistance. This cycle of violence prevented him from making his own choices in life and placed him in a tight space, which was “intensified by his tour of duty in Vietnam, in the late 1960s, where disturbing
images of violence and death repeated what he had absorbed from southern culture in youth” (Ramsey). Komunyakaa began writing poetry once he returned from the war, writing that he asserts has been very therapeutic. He uses writing “not as an escape” (qtd. in Secher) but as a means to confront his traumatic past, a past that took him fourteen years post-war to write about.

*Dien Cai Dau* is his attempt to confront his demons and to focus on major themes that have affected him as an African American southerner, as well as an African American veteran. These themes consist of disappearing bodies, duality of self, racial inequality, psychological struggles, and survivor’s guilt. The disposable bodies appear in many forms: whole bodies disappearing, people feeling invisible, pieces of bodies disappearing, or the sanity of an individual disappearing. Southern ideologies and images also figure prominently into his poetry: images of Confederate flags, racial inequality, and white supremacy. Komunyakaa also uses his poetry as a way to overcome his duality of self—the feeling of being split inside, two people dueling for the same embodiment: the African American southerner and the African American veteran/soldier. By doing so, he is trying to understand himself through his own eyes and his own history, something that is difficult to do because he is still trying to break free from the gaze of other people. One other problem he faces is the fact that he does not agree with the war, and he finds himself sympathizing with the Vietnamese. He sees them, like himself, as an Other, an object abused and discarded by white men.

Since moral questions arise when dealing with violence against combatants, it is not surprising that violence against non-combatants is appalling to him. In “Re-creating the Scene,” the speaker reports the events surrounding the rape of a Vietnamese woman by three American

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21 Although page numbers are listed on the works cited page, the document provided on the library database did not list numbers on the pages.
22 Violence against combatants in this aspect refers to those who are murdered or tortured not those who are killed because soldiers are defending themselves.
soldiers. Since Komunyakaa served as a journalist in Vietnam, he is able to narrate the event with precision. The speaker remains detached throughout, and his methodology helps the reader understand, “While the speaker did not actually witness the incident firsthand, he recounts it much like a journalist whose job it is to recreate ‘the scene’ of a crime for his readers” (Ramsey). The speaker pieces together a narrative with specific details in order to expand the context of the incident:

The metal door groans
& folds shut like an ancient turtle
that won’t let go
of a finger till it thunders.
The Confederate flag
flaps from the radio antenna,
& the woman’s clothes
come apart in their hands.
Their mouths find hers
in the titanic darkness
of the steel grotto,
as she counts the names of dead
ancestors, shielding a baby
in her arms. The three men
ride her breath, grunting
over lovers back in Mississippi. (“Re-creating” ln 1-16)

The language of the poem is clear and concise, and the stark contrast of the three men who pull the woman through a “metal door,” as she tries to protect her baby, shows the difference between the empowered and disempowered. Ripped from her largely agrarian society, the woman is pulled through a “metal door” of an armored vehicle, a vehicle that represents the mechanized culture of America. Not only does the speaker show that the men are more powerful by virtue of machine versus land, but also he shows them to be more powerful because they have the ability to desecrate her past (ancestors), present (woman), and future (child) by pulling her “[...] inside a machine / where men are gods” (“Re-creating” ln 19-20). The soldiers believe they are superior to everyone else, like they are gods. By adding the Confederate flag and the state of
Mississippi, Komunyakaa invokes a white history of racial oppression, a history that follows him to Vietnam. Whereas white men see African Americans as inferior individuals on whom they can inflict whatever type of carnage they choose without repercussions, these three men feel the same way about the Vietnamese woman.

During the Korean and Vietnam Wars, soldiers often had Confederate battle flags with them while in theater. Chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy sent battle flags overseas because many southern soldiers wanted something that reminded them of home, and they preferred the battle flag instead of the U.S. flag (Coski 116). Despite the fact that the South lost the Civil War, the Confederate battle flag still represented a symbol of heritage to some white men, but that heritage was embedded with a narrative of racial oppression. During the Korean conflict, northerners posted the Confederate battle flag outside of their tents because their southern friends would joke with them, saying it was about time that they fought “on the ‘right side’—for South Korea” (Coski 116). After the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the battle flag became synonymous with “racial intolerance” (Coski 117). The flag was a sign of oppression to African Americans, a reminder that they were second-class citizens, who would be denied rights and suffer “intimidation and physical harm if they tried to claim those rights” (Coski 157). Although African Americans feared retaliation, they finally complained about the flags after Martin Luther King Jr.’s death in 1968 (Wyatt-Brown 179).

The Confederate flag had particular resonance for Komunyakaa because he grew up in the South and was hoping to leave the flag and all that it represented behind. The fact that he uses the Confederate battle flag in his poetry proves that whether the flag was literally flapping in the wind or not, some white Americans carried the ideology of the flag within their souls, and anyone who was not white became an Other, someone who was subservient to the white man, a
throwaway body that did not matter to anyone. Yaeger notes that African American writers typically focus on dispossession and white writers focus on “whites’ exclusive right to bestow personhood and property on non-whites” (210). Komunyakaa proves this notion by concentrating on the white soldiers’ rights to bestow personhood on an Other, and he recognizes that these soldiers choose to deny those rights and “take” what they believe is theirs. His choice to use the Confederate battle flag in a poem in 1988 also shows that the current debate about the Confederate flag is not new. Despite the continuing argument that the flag represents heritage not racism, Komunyakaa uses the flag to show what it meant to an African American growing up in the Jim Crow South: one person has power over another.

The speaker in the poem is able to identify with the woman because he has a “shared” oppression. His continual violation—in similar and different ways—causes him to understand what it is like to be on the receiving end of the white man’s violence. The woman later reports the soldiers to the MP’s (military police), believing that the soldiers will be punished for raping her. On the second day of the trial

she turns into mist—
someone says money
changed hands,
& someone else swears
she’s buried at LZ
But for now, the baby
makes a fist & grabs at the air,
searching for a breast. (“Re-creating” ln 52-59)

The disappearance of the woman is akin to the disappearances of black bodies who dare to speak out against white men. These disappearances leave children parentless, grasping at air as they search the darkness, looking for the one who always promised to protect them. By embedding southern tropes into his Vietnam writing, he globalizes the issue of disappearing bodies.

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23 LZ = Landing Zone
According to Douglas Reichert Powell, “‘Senses’ of place and region are not so much essential qualities, imparted by singular events, practices or topographical features, as they are ongoing debates and discourses that coalesce around particular geographical spaces” (14). Place, like a house, provides a home for context to live in. When we recall memories of specific situations, those memories are attached to a specific structure or landscape. Space can move from place to place. By sharing those memories in different regions or countries, these memories become part of the collective. They become globalized. In this sense, the same racial prejudices that African Americans endure in the South are transposed to the jungles of Vietnam onto a new Other. African Americans and the Vietnamese are connected by a shared oppression of racial and physical inequality. However, even though he sympathizes with the Vietnamese woman, the speaker must remain detached from such instances. By refusing to intervene or express emotion about his outrage over the woman’s rape and disappearance, the speaker refuses to let the white man know how distraught he is about the woman. He cannot show the white man that he has won, but he can provide a clearer picture of racial politics and disempowerment in America.

Despite the racial politics and division permeating our culture, people often view music as something that can unify them. When people listen to the same music and sing the same lyrics, it is almost as if differences no longer exist in the moment, and people are able to have a unifying experience. War movies depict music this way, most specifically in the chants that soldiers sing to keep time as they run and march. Everyone stays in step because of the music/chant. Everyone is dependent on each other to keep in step. However, Komunyakaa flips that narrative in “Tu Do Street” to imply that movies are just movies, and music does nothing to unify white and black men in Vietnam:

Music divides the evening.
I close my eyes & can see
men drawing lines in the dust.
America pushes through the membrane
of mist & smoke, & I’m a small boy
again in Bogalusa. White Only
signs & Hank Snow. But tonight
I walk into a place where bar girls
fade like tropical birds. When
I order a beer, the mama-san
behind the counter acts as if she
can’t understand, while her eyes
skirt each white face, as Hank Williams
calls from the psychedelic jukebox. (In 1-14)

With the first line of the poem, the speaker establishes that even music has the power to divide the two races, as surely as those lines drawn in the dust by men who see themselves as superior. These lines are racially and politically drawn, “separating one country from another, and likewise dividing one country into separate and unequal parts” (Klein). This division in this context is especially ironic since both black and white men have been drafted to support and defend their country, a country that is founded on a doctrine of equality for all people. Because of this notion, the black man believes he will be treated with a greater respect by white men, that he will have shown that he is patriotic and American. The speaker’s mention of “White Only / signs & Hank Snow” prompts the reader to recognize that the mutual respect the he wishes for does not exist. These dual images of whiteness serve to remind the speaker of his childhood in a Jim Crow South, where whites and blacks used different entrances, drank from different fountains, ate at different establishments, and listened to different music. Signs were posted everywhere in the South, and, the speaker believes that because signs are not posted in Vietnam, he will be welcome at any establishment. Yet even the bartender seems to understand that there is a racial difference and that the black man has crossed an invisible boundary that he thought no longer existed.
Whereas the speaker in “Re-creating the Scene” was able to give voice to the Vietnamese woman because of a shared oppression by the white man, the “mama-san” is unable to break out of that social construction on her own. She looks to the white men, trying to see if they will give their permission for the speaker to drink at the bar. She allows her fear of the white man to displace her in her own establishment. A place where people should be able to relax and be merry, a place where people should come together as one and revel in the fact that they are still alive becomes permeated with a history of racial division. The speaker notes that the only time soldiers are unified is when “[…] machine-gun fire brings [them] / together. […]” (“Tu Do” ln 16-17). During actual firefight, when people have to depend on those next to them to save their lives, the uniform they wear becomes the common denominator that unifies them. However, when bullets stop flying, they fall back into the previous segregated social construct.

Although lines have been drawn in the sand and music divides the races, the speaker notes that the races are closer than they realize. The speaker leaves the bar and travels down a back alleyway, where he rushes into the arms of a prostitute:

There’s more than a nation inside us, as black & white soldiers touch the same lovers minutes apart, tasting each other’s breath, without knowing these rooms run into each other like tunnels leading to the underworld. (“Tu Do” ln 27-34)

In this last scene, the speaker implies that boundaries of racial segregation serve no purpose. Whereas white men choose not to drink from the same fountains or eat at the same establishments because they believe African Americans are dirty, unbeknownst to the white man, they are “sharing” women minutes apart from one another, so much so that they can taste each other’s breath. The rooms that run into each other make it seem like there are separate entrances.
to the rooms so that the white men are never privy to the fact that they have been
“contaminated.” This scene is reminiscent of Storyville, the red light district in New Orleans that
legalized prostitution. Although white and black brothels coexisted in Storyville, African
Americans could not purchase services at these brothels. That did not stop them from trying to
do so, however. The “tunnels / leading to the underworld” (“Tu Do” In 33-34) have ominous
qualities because they harken back to the second poem in the book “Tunnels,” where a soldier
crawls “[…] down headfirst into the hole, / he kicks the air & disappears” (In 1-2). The
Vietnamese used the tunnels to ferry weapons and supplies, but the tunnels also serve as areas
that have been booby trapped for the American soldiers. Many times, soldiers head into the
tunnels and are never seen again. The imagery of the man kicking the air and disappearing is
reminiscent of “Re-Creating the Scene” where the baby makes a fist grasping at the air,
searching for the mother who has disappeared. By linking these two scenes, Komunyakaa is
showing that women are just as powerless as African Americans, if not more so. Despite the fact
that Komunyakaa is no longer in Louisiana, he still feels like the same racial constructs control
his life in Vietnam. The racial divide leaves him feeling just as invisible and helpless as he did in
the United States. He elaborates on the feeling of invisibility in the poem “Facing It.”

Komunyakaa’s second wartime and most anthologized poem, “Facing It,” depicts an
African American veteran who travels to Washington D.C. to visit the Vietnam Veterans
Memorial Wall for the first time. Komunyakaa uses "Facing It" as a conduit for reflection--both
literally and figuratively. Employing simple, concrete imagery, he examines a veteran’s struggle
with discrimination, disappearing bodies, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Through reflection
on the wall and in the poem, the veteran/poet emerges as a damaged but changed individual who
ultimately realizes he is stronger because of the hardships he has endured.
From the onset of the poem, Komunyakaa establishes the tone by juxtaposing his image with the image of the wall. The speaker notes that “[His] black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite” (“Facing” ln 1-2). Immediately, the speaker already has two strikes against him: being a black man and a Vietnam veteran. Being a black man during the Civil Rights era, which overlapped with the Vietnam conflict, was a difficult burden to carry, and that, coupled with being a veteran who returned after the My Lai massacre of 1968, made the burden even more difficult to carry. Immediately, the speaker notes his invisibility since his face hides inside the stone. The black man’s face fading into the stone is literally his reflection in the stone. Because the stone and the face are the same color, it is difficult for the speaker to see his reflection, and he feels invisible. He disappears as he blends into his surroundings, and he becomes a fixture, just like the wall itself. Komunyakaa uses an embedded metaphor to introduce the speaker’s psychological struggle. The “black face” and “the black granite” are the same thing and both share a commonality; they both have the scars of war etched on their faces, and, in turn, they have become historians who have witnessed the casualties of war.

Komunyakaa gradually increases the emotional instability of the speaker using imagery, metaphors, and caesuras. When the speaker struggles to keep his composure while observing the memorial, he becomes emotional: “I said I wouldn’t / dammit: No tears. / I’m stone. I’m flesh” (“Facing” ln 3-5). The speaker has unresolved issues and tries to convince himself to stay strong, and he reminds himself that he promised that he would not cry. The poet implies that crying is for weak people and that strong people maintain composure, even under the most difficult situations. He immediately changes course, weaving his imagery into a metaphor, when he references “stone” and “flesh.” Whereas the poet previously used an embedded metaphor, he now states definitively that the speaker is the wall: “I’m stone.” The speaker’s immediate
retraction symbolizes his internal conflict: “I’m flesh.” The man is trying to remain hard and indifferent to his emotions; however, he becomes overwhelmed and admits that—no, he really is flesh: fragile, vulnerable, and human. Komunyakaa also uses caesuras to mimic the psychological struggle of the speaker. The end-stops noted after “dammit,” “tears,” “stone,” and “flesh” increase the speaker’s level of frustration. It is a powerful staccato effect. The quick jerking movement of the lines linguistically mirrors the constant war that wages within the speaker.

Komunyakaa uses imagery to intensify the speaker’s emotional instability and racial invisibility. While staring at the wall, the speaker notes, “My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey, the profile of night / slanted against morning. […]” (“Facing” In 6-8). The clouded reflection that eyes him is ambiguous. On the one hand, his clouded reflection is, in fact, the distortion he sees in the mirrored wall due to his increased lacrimation. On the other hand, the wall has become a living entity that eyes him, much like the white man does. The watchfulness of his eyes—or those of the wall—leave him feeling trapped, and he is unable to separate himself from the wall in order to break free from the danger that he believes awaits him. Komunyakaa’s phrasing of “the profile of night / slanted against morning” is his attempt to elucidate the racial divide that still exists today. The speaker’s “profile” is not only the silhouette of his “black face” that blends into the night and can only be viewed in the light of day, but also it is the invisibility he feels due to the “blackness” of his skin. His racial discomfort and feeling of invisibility compounds his fragile state of mind, especially after sacrificing so much for an ungrateful nation.

Komunyakaa switches tactics and strategically places words to draw the reader into the speaker’s struggle. He continues to feel trapped by the watchful eyes, and he begins to feel released and then pulled back into the wall:
When the speaker turns away from the stone, he feels like he is free, yet, when he turns back towards the wall, “[he’s] inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again,” essentially disappearing into the stone. The direction in which he turns will determine whether he disappears or if he sees his reflection, an experience that makes him feel trapped in a liminal space. The poet’s strategic placement of the word “turn” at the end of line 8 forces the reader to turn with the line itself. He mimics the action in line 10 and forces the reader into the opposite direction. The word placement and sentence structure mimics the tight space the speaker is in. He always feels as if someone else is in control, as if he is just a puppet on a string. The constant back and forth with the play of words verbally draws the reader into the struggle that the speaker is experiencing. The speaker’s persistent entrapment and freedom, visibility and invisibility, also represents his mental instability as he is caught between the past and the present, the Vietnam Memorial Wall and the jungles of Vietnam.

Komunyakaa changes the direction of the poem by providing evidence for the speaker’s mental instability, as well as reinvigorating the poem with the theme of discrimination. The speaker gazes upon the wall, and he notes that “[He] go[es] down the 58,022 names, / half-expecting to find / [his] own in letters like smoke” (“Facing” ln 14-16). The definitive number is very impersonal, as if the speaker is trying to detach himself. Looking at the names, he expects he will find his own. On the one hand, the speaker is experiencing survivor’s guilt, and he believes he should have died when others should have lived. On the other hand, he expects to find his own name because a piece of him died in Vietnam. His name inscribed on the wall
would give voice to his own pain. The speaker continues his journey down the list of names and recognizes one that is all too familiar: “I touch the name Andrew Johnson; / I see the booby trap’s white flash” (“Facing” ln 17-18). By touching the name, the impersonal number of “58,022 names” becomes very personal and creates a concrete identity with which the reader can identify. It also constructs a bridge to the speaker’s subconscious, and images of the soldier’s death begin to emerge. Komunyakaa’s allusion to the name Andrew Johnson revives the discriminatory component. Although Johnson was a member of Komunyakaa’s unit, the name was also that of the seventeenth President of the United States, and he was responsible for denying freed slaves equal rights by denying the Civil Rights Bill of 1866, a bill that took almost 100 years to come to fruition (Ekiss). The historical component implies white Americans still deny black men the same rights over a century later, despite the fact that black soldiers fought and died defending the idea of freedom. Komunyakaa reminds the reader that the roots of discrimination span generations, and that he suffers discrimination as his ancestors did.

Komunyakaa abruptly halts the speaker’s flashback by casually introducing a woman that is unaffected by the speaker’s anxiety. Disrupted by her intrusion, he notes, “Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall” (“Facing” ln 19-21). Komunyakaa’s use of imagery when describing the names on the “blouse” not only shows the reader how reflective the wall is, but it also reflects the ability of the reader or the woman to walk away casually from the poem/wall, as if unaffected by the speaker’s struggles. The speaker is unable to comprehend how she can move about so freely. Whereas the speaker felt trapped by the wall earlier, this woman has a freedom that the speaker does not. He feels shackled to the stone itself, haunted by images of the dead who follow him everywhere, and he does not understand how she walks away so unaffected, as if she, herself, is stone—hard and insensitive.
The speaker’s irritability intensifies, and he is distracted, once again, by a reflection, one that draws him back into the wall:

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet’s image floats closer to me, […] (“Facing It” ln 22-26)

Glaring at the bird’s reflection, the speaker also sees the reflection of the sky. Komunyakaa’s mention of a “plane in the sky” seems rather ambiguous at first glance. On the one hand, the plane in the sky literally represents an airplane, which is a sensory image that triggers a flashback: “A white vet’s image floats / closer to me […].” On the other hand, the plane figuratively denotes a level of existence, and, in the speaker’s case, it is a liminal space between life and death—a type of purgatory—one that borders the speaker’s own hell (images of the war). Because of this notion, he finds himself trapped between the past (Vietnam) and the present (Vietnam Veterans Memorial). In one moment, the intrusion of reality (the woman that walking by) annoys the speaker, yet, moments later, the speaker flashes back to another comrade who died. Just like the fragility of the bird, the fragility of his mind makes him unable to control the images that haunt him, as is the case with sufferers of PTSD. The smallest infraction or change in light can signal a flashback.

Komunyakaa reinstates the theme of racial inequality through the words “black” and “white.” Twice within the context of the poem, he uses the term “white,” and twice within the context of the poem, he uses the term “black.” By introducing the words “black” and “white” into the poem, the poet invites the reader to reassess the societal norms of “white” versus

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24 According to scholar Frederick Myers, there are seven levels of existence once a body dies. These levels of existence vary depending on the type of life a person led while they were alive. Level two is considered a holding place, a sort of limbo or purgatory (Williams). This plane of existence is where I believe the speaker finds himself. Although he is not physically dead, the psychological trauma he has sustained causes him to feel a spiritual and psychological death. In this realm, he sees images of the dead.
“black.” When he uses the word “black,” it is in reference to the “black face” and the “black granite,” both of which are pleasing images, but when he uses the word “white,” he uses it in a negative connotation. Both times that the word “white” is mentioned is in reference to death: “[… the booby trap’s white flash” and “A white vet’s image.” The booby trap’s white flash is a reminder that Johnson died, and the white vet’s image has pale eyes and a severed arm, both of which indicate he is dead. By associating the word “white” with death, the poet reiterates that although man may discriminate against individuals because of race or color, death does not discriminate. The suffering that occurred during Vietnam spanned both ends of the racial spectrum. His contrast of “black” and “white” continues as it, in turn, mirrors life and death. By attaching death to the “white” images, it reinforces the fact that his “black face” is very much alive, and he has not disappeared.

Komunyakaa continues with the psychological theme and elaborates on the death of the white vet: “[…] then his pale eyes / look through mine. I’m a window” (“Facing It” ln 26-27). When the dead vet drifts closer, the speaker realizes that the vet is not looking at him but through him. Whereas the speaker previously felt like he was “stone” (hard and insensitive) and “flesh” (fragile and vulnerable), he is now a “window,” as if he were literally invisible. On the one hand, the window literally represents a clear glass object that can retain anonymity through invisibility, a trait with which the speaker still struggles. On the other hand, the window also represents a bridge, a transition that links the speaker’s past and present. Depending on which side of the window an individual stands determines his/her viewpoint. Still trying to reconcile his own mortality, the speaker notes that the vet has “[…] lost his right arm / inside the stone […]” (“Facing It” ln 28-29). The apparition inside the stone is a comrade that the speaker saw lose his arm in battle and who later died from exsanguination. The arm lost inside the stone is also
representative of the speaker’s mental instability. He feels split inside—half stone, half flesh—a psychological duality of self. The vet is halfway inside and halfway outside of the stone, which mimics the speaker’s internal conflict. The depiction also represents a concrete image of the liminal state in which the speaker is trapped.

The poem shifts and diminishes in intensity, culminating in a peaceful resolution. The speaker tries to distinguish between fact and fiction: “[…] In the black mirror / a woman’s trying to erase names” (“Facing It” ln 29-30). Whereas the speaker is trying to confront his past, this woman believes she can erase the past, and, if she is successful, then she can erase him too. However, when the speaker changes his viewpoint, he sees something different from what he first imagined: “No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair” (“Facing It” ln 31). Changing his perspective allows the speaker to change his position on life. Where he has been in turmoil for the duration of the poem—constantly struggling in and out of the horrific images of death—he now realizes how faulty his vision truly is since he thought that a woman’s display of affection was actually a misguided attempt to erase the past. The level of understanding that the speaker incurs in this moment is monumental, as is the wall itself. The Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial Wall was designed not only to be literally reflective, but also it was meant to allow individuals the opportunity to reflect on the war, as well as on life. In the moment that the speaker recognizes the woman’s act of love and kindness, he has accomplished the meaning of the wall. By switching his position, he has stepped out of the realm of death and into the world of life.

Komunyakaa uses writing as an effective therapeutic tool to confront his traumatic past and to reflect upon his anger, so that he, in turn, can remain a peaceful person (Secher). His imagery in “Facing It” is simple but profound, and it elucidates one man’s struggle to overcome the haunting images of the Vietnam conflict while dealing with racial inequality. The title of the
poem is a genuine reflection not only of the poem but also of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial Wall. By writing about images that make the speaker question what he is seeing, Komunyakaa is able to use the imagery in order to allow memories to be memories and the present to exist in its own dimension. He strategically placed “Facing It” as the last poem in the volume. Although it was his second wartime poem, he notes that the poem became the standard for which he measured his other poems. The redemptive ending not only culminates in a peaceful transition for the poem, but also it becomes a resolution to his entire experience in Vietnam, and by extension, he is able to make peace with himself.

Yaeger notes in her introduction that she wants to tell us something about disappearing bodies that “diverse southern cultures don’t want us to say” (xiii). The white South does not want us to know that white people historically violated people of all races, not just African Americans. Even though Komunyakaa uses imagery and tropes that are synonymous with his experience in the South, his poetry uses the idea of the South to stand in for a nation that is guilty of similar sins. White people seek to control those they feel are inferior in order to heighten their own superiority, as is the case with the Vietnamese rape victim. Because, in Komunyakaa’s case, the speaker and the writer are both African Americans during a tumultuous time in history, they both feel a familial relationship to the Vietnamese woman, the Other who is violated the same way African Americans have been violated their whole lives. The Other absorbs into the landscape in war literature the same way they absorb into the landscape in southern literature. By applying the writer’s racial makeup to the text, he stands in for a generation of people who disappear at the expense of a white hegemonic ideology. By writing about his experiences in Vietnam, Komunyakaa is not only able to reflect on the trauma he witnessed during the war, but also he is able to reflect on how his identity as a black man has compounded his trauma. In the following
chapter, women express how a white hegemonic ideology built on social constructions erases their identities as soldiers and women, essentially causing them to disappear into the landscape.
CHAPTER IV

DISAPPEARING BODIES AND GENDER INEQUALITY:
FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE MIDST OF

See the lady dressed in black, she makes a living on her back,
See the lady dressed in red, she makes a living in her bed,
See the lady dressed in brown, she makes a living going up and down,
See the lady dressed in green, she gives out like a coke machine,
See the lady dressed in gray, she likes to make it in the hay,
See the lady dressed in white, she knows how to do it right,
Another lady dressed in green, she goes down like a submarine.

—Marine Cadence (qtd. in Goodell 63)

Women have consistently been denied certain rights the same way African Americans have been. One of those rights included the right to serve in the military. From the days of the Revolutionary War, women had to dress as men in order to fight in wars. Over time, rules and regulations began to change. Women were allowed to enlist during the last two years of World War I, and they served as nurses and support staff. The number of women enlisted in the military increased from 33,000 from World War I to over 400,000 during World War II, mainly because women filled the roles at home that men vacated when they left for war. Women still were not allowed to serve in combat roles despite the fact that their duties placed them in harm’s way.

Women were increasingly put in harm’s way during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. As women began to acquire more rights and prove themselves capable of doing many of the same jobs that men could do, the military started opening up new jobs to women. Women were no longer just medical and administrative personnel. Now, they were allowed to be mechanics,
medics, military police, logistics, cooks, flight crew, and fighter pilots. Three women who have been able to take advantage of these new fields are Shoshanna Johnson, Kayla Williams, and Jess Goodell. All three of these women enjoyed being “equals” in the military, but they note that, despite the military stating that women are equal, women are not necessarily treated that way. Women are doing the same jobs as men, yet they are not respected by their peers. They are looked down upon for being women, and those who are supposed to display morals and integrity often sexually harass them. Depending on their jobs and deployments, each of these women faced difficult circumstances while they were in the military, and, in some cases, the trauma they suffered followed them into their civilian lives. Each of these women felt a piece of themselves disappear. By solidifying their experiences on the page, the authors are able to process the trauma they sustained in the military, and in doing so, they are able to make sure their experiences remain relevant to the public at large, that they do not disappear into a sea of green.

Not only Johnson’s female identity caused problems, but also her African American race proved to be of great concern to her during her service. In her memoir, *I’m Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home* (2010), Johnson primarily focuses on her time as a prisoner of war. Her chapters flip back and forth from being back in America to being in Iraq. The chapters complement each other, and Johnson essentially provides details that allow the reader to understand how she and her unit ended up becoming prisoners of war (POWs) days after the war began. She discusses how she was abandoned by the Army, shot in both ankles and forced to walk on her injuries, physically assaulted by Iraqis, kept isolated from her unit, and how the Iraqi men wanted to keep her and have her marry a Muslim because she was similar in color, and how she was treated by her unit, the military, and the VA once she
returned stateside. Like many people, Johnson joined the Army pre-9/11 because she believed that the Army would provide her structure, a job, and a way to provide for her education.

Johnson’s family emigrated from Panama when she was five years old, and she spent most of her life in West Texas. Her father was a drill sergeant, and he raised her with strict discipline. She knew that growing up with a drill sergeant father prepared her for basic training and her career beyond. She always liked cooking for people, and she believed that she would one day open up a bakery, so she enlisted in the Army and became a cook. When Johnson was notified that she would be deploying to Iraq, her father was infuriated, and he stated, “My daughters wouldn’t be fighting this war if they had let us finish what we started the first time” (Johnson 40). He thought the war was an unjust cause, and Johnson was skeptical about the government’s claims that Al Qaeda was linked to Saddam Hussein. She also questioned whether Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Regardless, Johnson mobilized and her support unit was part of the initial invasion into Iraq.

Despite the fact that Johnson’s unit was a support unit, they became part of the war effort within days of arriving in country. On their first mission, they were sent as part of a six-hundred truck convoy to set up camp at another base. Everything went wrong. Radios were not working properly, trucks were breaking down, and the soldiers were tired from driving for hours on end without proper rest. After one of the trucks broke down, Johnson’s group was delayed. The rest of the convoy continued on. Eighteen of the six-hundred trucks remained with Johnson’s group. Since they did not have radios that worked or maps for navigation, they took a wrong turn and ended up driving through An Nasiriya, where they were subsequently ambushed.

The ambush made Johnson feel as if the convoy as well as the military had abandoned her. First, the convoy left them, and no one ever came back to figure out why they were missing
eighteen vehicles and thirty-three personnel. Second, the radios that they were using were the same radios they had continuous problems with while at Camp Virginia during their pre-deployment training. Despite telling their commanders that the radios did not work properly, the Army deployed them with the faulty equipment. Third, Johnson states, “We didn’t get any training on urban battle, nothing about battled tactics, what to do in case of ambush, how to really fight when and if the time came” (51). The only training they received was basic soldiering skills, the same skills everyone receives. Because they were not infantry, they had no idea how to protect themselves. Lastly, they were given improper advice on preparing their weapons. They had a new first sergeant who told them to use “hundred-mile-an-hour tape, a thick green tape with a heavy sticky back, to wrap the entire magazine” (Johnson 83) to prevent sand from getting into their weapons. Instead of helping, the tape actually caused problems. The desert heat caused the tape to melt, sticking to the bullets. Therefore, the bullets could not advance in the magazine. The lack of training and working equipment, coupled with the abandonment of their convoy, made Johnson feel as if their lives did not matter to the military.

During the ambush, their unit was hit with RPG’s (rocket propelled grenades), and their vehicles were disabled. They were each able to return fire once before their weapons jammed, mainly because one round was already chambered. Johnson suffered bullet wounds to both ankles during the attack. Since Johnson and her unit did not have training on what to do during an ambush, they took cover underneath a truck since their weapons were useless. Johnson noticed that the vehicle next to them had severe damage, and she could see blood all over the windshield. Lori Piestewa and Jessica Lynch25 were inside of that vehicle, but Johnson was unable to tell if they were alive or not. Two men finally surrendered, and then Johnson was

25 Piewstewa died during the ambush, and Lynch was taken captive and held in a different location than Johnson. Johnson did not find out what happened to Lynch until after her rescue.
pulled out from underneath the truck by her ankles. The Iraqi men immediately started beating her: “Boots, sandaled feet, weapon butts came out from everywhere, hitting [her] arms, [her] head, [her] wounded legs” (Johnson 13). When the Iraqis found out Johnson was a female, they quit beating her and quickly moved her to a vehicle. Inside the vehicle, the men began grabbing and pulling at her breasts. This physical assault continued until she arrived at her new “home.” When the Iraqi commander witnessed the abuse, he put a stop to it. He made sure she was treated with dignity. He brought a doctor in to take care of her wounds and a dentist to make sure that her teeth were taken care of. They kept assuring her that she would be in good health when she was released, something that did not happen for twenty-days.

During Johnson’s imprisonment, she began to fear the idea that she would be forgotten by her loved ones, that her imprisonment would end with her body disappearing in the desert somewhere. Although she prayed for her death to be quick, if it came to that, she was concerned about the closure her family would have if her body were never recovered: “I didn’t want my parents or my daughter to be left without evidence of my death. I didn’t want them to have to wonder what happened to me, so I prayed they would have a body to bury if it came to that” (Johnson 129). Johnson knew that reports of her capture had already circulated because a soldier came by asking her name, and he wrote it down in a book. Johnson notes that having her name written down somewhere made her feel more at ease: “There was something comforting in knowing that a record would be kept of me, that even if I disappeared tomorrow, my name had been written down somewhere as if I had carved Shoshana Johnson was here, 2003, like graffiti on the walls” (97). This record ensured she would not disappear, that her role in the war would be etched on a wall, similar to the Vietnam Memorial wall. The names on the wall serve not only as a record of those who died but also to remind us of the cost of freedom. This notion is not akin
to specific genders or races, and similar language is presented in Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* when Murph goes around the base tagging his name everywhere. He feared that he would die and no one would know who he was, that he would disappear, be forgotten. Johnson feared the same type of death, and this ledger with her name confirmed that there would be an official record of her existence, despite the fact that the Army seemed unwilling to recognize they had “lost” thirty-three personnel.

Johnson is angry at the military for not taking responsibility for the breakdown “infrastructure,” and she uses her memoir as a way to chastise them for their neglect. In the days following her capture, the Army denied that they were responsible for anything. They blamed Johnson’s unit for breaking down, for not calling in their location, for getting lost, for their weapons jamming, and for being ambushed. The military blamed them for nine people dying during the ambush, and the military never accepted responsibility for their own role regarding the situation. If they had admitted their responsibility in the events that culminated in an ambush, they would have admitted that leadership from the top down was inept. This admission would upset the hierarchy—the hegemonic order—one that continuously blames those at the lowest levels for disorder. Therefore, the military refused such acknowledgements and placed the blame on those killed in action and those who became prisoners of war. In Williams and Goodell’s memoirs, it also becomes apparent that the military has a history of not taking responsibility when things go awry. This is most evident in the continual sexual harassment that these women, as well as many other women, face while they are in service to their country. Fortunately for Johnson, she never stipulates that she was harassed by her own unit, but she does indicate some sexual abuse by her captors.
Her captors made advances towards her because of her race and sex, and these two things made Johnson very uncomfortable. Johnson was initially beaten when she was captured, and she was roughly fondled when the men found out she was a woman. For the most part, the abuse stopped, but that did not stop the men from making inappropriate comments or advances. One of the guards continuously tried to hold her hand, but she would always pull away because she did not want him to think she was interested. When the Iraqi guard brought her a change of clothes because hers were covered in blood, he brought her a red bra, red panties, and a pink t-shirt. Johnson states, “I looked at that lingerie—because with that color and fabric you couldn’t call them simply underwear, this was something much more lingerie-ish than underwear-ish—with my mouth hanging open wondering what these guys were thinking” (130). Johnson is not sure if this is a cultural misunderstanding, but, in American culture, a gift of red lingerie usually means some kind of sexual interaction is expected. This notion makes her feel very uncomfortable, especially since the Iraqis kept telling her she needed to stay and marry a good Muslim man. This made Johnson believe that they would try to keep her and sell her off to the highest bidder, an all too familiar reminder of the days of slavery. The captors would constantly ask her if she had children or was married. She would tell the truth: she had one child and was not married. The fact that she had a child may have been a deterrent for them keeping her, as the captors often left after her response. It is not known whether they would have tried to sell her to the highest bidder or not because her unit was eventually rescued before she could find out. Despite the fact that she cannot remember them abusing her except for the initial capture, Johnson notes that she became weary of people who looked like Iraqis.

Because of the trauma Johnson sustained from the Iraqis, she began to stereotype them based on skin color, the same way African Americans have been historically stereotyped. After
the unit was rescued, they were sent to a hospital for treatment. Johnson notes that they were met by the press as well as a team of doctors. Among the doctors was a Kuwaiti military officer:

“[She] took one look at him, at his dark complexion, his dark hair and eyes, his thick mustache, and [she] was afraid of him. He looked so much like the people who had taken [her] prisoner” (Johnson 215). She was continuously unnerved by the man, especially when he entered the elevator with her. It was not until he spoke to her that she finally felt more comfortable.

Johnson’s fear of this man is natural. He looks similar to the men who held Johnson hostage for weeks. What is interesting is that Johnson does not take this moment to examine her feelings. She does not take the time to reflect—like Komunyakaa does—on the fact that society has stereotyped people for years because of their race or skin color, that she falls into a racial category that is systemically targeted and labeled, that she, too, is expressing the “unthought known” onto an Other. The fact that Johnson does not do more to expand on how traumatic experiences can cause people to stereotype others is disheartening. She previously notes that her skin color made her feel like she would be sold to Iraqis, yet she does not understand that her fear of the Kuwaiti doctor, essentially, erases his identity too, that his individuality disappears because of his race.

Isolation is a common trope throughout Johnson’s memoir, and this isolation makes her feel non-existent, as if she will disappear. Initially, she did not know that the men in her unit were brought to the same location because she was not housed with them. During her captivity, she was isolated for almost the entire time. According to the Geneva Conventions, this is standard protocol; however, when only one female is taken hostage, the isolation becomes unbearable. After a few days, she was able to hear her comrades down the hall, but she was not able to have conversations with them. According to Johnson, “There must have been an empty
cell between me and their rooms, because I could hear them, but they didn’t seem to hear me. I could hear Williams talking sometimes. He would ask everyone how they were doing and they would wait their turn, then report, ‘I’m okay.’ I tried to chime in but they didn’t acknowledge my response” (175). Johnson was starved for a connection with her men. The fact that she could hear them but they could not hear her only made things worse for her. This isolation left her feeling non-existent in the whole scope of things, as if she was slowly disappearing, and no one would miss her if and when she was sold to the Iraqi men.

Johnson felt uneasy, as if she were in a tight space, because they were constantly moved from safe house to safe house, each time with new people guarding them, and she feared that one of her captors might eventually rape her. According to Johnson, however, rape never happened. After her release, she was informed that Jessica Lynch had been rescued and that she had been raped while in captivity. Despite the fact that she denied she was raped, Johnson questions whether she was. During the first week of captivity, she was in a massive amount of pain from her injuries, and the doctor continuously gave her pain meds that made her unconscious. She claims that time is fragmented, and that there are many gaps in her memory; therefore, she is not sure if she was raped or not. Johnson notes that it took her two years after her capture to be sexually intimate with a man. She felt “powerless in captivity and felt threatened all the time” (Johnson 263). The fact that she could not be intimate with a man, coupled with the nightmares she has on a regular basis, lead her to believe that something happened to her that her memory is trying to protect her from, that she has repressed the memories she cannot handle at this time.

PTSD is very difficult to deal with, memories often coming and going, fragmented, like puzzle pieces that one has to put together in order to figure out the chain of events. Johnson notes that that is one of the most difficult aspects of her recovery.
Johnson’s struggle to receive proper benefits from the VA only compounded her trauma. When Johnson was medically discharged from the military, she only received 30% disability for her injuries. She was treated as if she was trying to receive a government handout rather than getting the money she was owed because of her traumatic service. Race became an issue, and the media tried to posit Johnson as a petty black woman who was jealous of a white woman (Lynch) who received more benefits (70% rating) than her: “The press wanted my issues to be about race and compared my experiences with Jessica’s” (258). Johnson denies any claims and states that she is in touch with Lynch on a regular basis. The only problem Johnson has with the disability ratings is the fact that Lynch’s review board automatically awarded her a PTSD disability rating, despite the fact that she was not having nightmares, difficulty sleeping, or memories of the trauma. Johnson was having all of those issues, and she had difficulty readjusting to normal life. Her board did not automatically award her PTSD status and flat out denied her claim that she was having any difficulty: “Although your time in Iraq was trying, your mental condition is not ratable” (Johnson 258). Although Johnson claims she holds no ill will towards Lynch for the fact that she was able to get a higher rating, many news reports have insinuated Johnson is jealous of Lynch because she received more news coverage and benefits due to her race.

Media portrayals of Lynch and Johnson were handled in drastically different ways, and there was speculation that this portrayal related to race. The first time the public saw evidence of Lynch as a POW was during her rescue, nine days after her capture. Due to her fractured pelvis and back, she was held captive in a hospital in An Nasiriya. The rescue was videotaped, and it depicts an image of a scared Lynch, hiding under the sheets, when the American soldiers find her. The narrative paints Lynch as a vulnerable woman who needs to be saved by men: “‘Jessica Lynch’ [the soldier] called out, ‘we’re United States soldiers and we’re here to protect you and
take you home.’ The American approached the bed and took his helmet off and she looked up at him and replied: ‘I’m an American soldier, too’” (Adler qtd. in Howard and Prividera 89).

This scene is reminiscent of a masculine ideology that posits women, notably white, as victims who need a strong man to save them. It is a narrative repeated over and over in our society, a reminder that women will never really be equal. The positing of Lynch paints her as a subservient woman. She has to look up to the soldier, this man, her savior, and try to assert that she is a soldier despite needing to be saved. In the days following her capture, she was hailed as a hero who was captured after unloading her gun on the enemy, a report Lynch later denied. Instead of focusing on her military career, the media focused on her identity as a blonde, female with a frail frame, a poor country girl who joined the military so she could go to college. America fell in love with the southern white girl who was assaulted by the Iraqis, the “sand niggers.” The use of the term “sand niggers” invokes a historical image of black men raping white women. By painting Lynch as a dainty white victim, the media, in turn, painted the soldiers who saved her as the epitome of masculinity. They recycled the narrative of white men saving white women from dark skinned people.

Johnson and Piestewa, on the other hand, were treated differently by the media. Johnson’s introduction to the media was a video of her as a POW. She appeared disheveled and beaten, an image that was far from feminine. She did not fit the image of the helpless woman, and her narrative was largely ignored. Piestewa, a Hopi Indian, received even less attention. No one could make her appear as though she were anything less than a hero because she died in the war. To negate that experience would be to negate her service. Johnson was portrayed as a mother, churchgoer, and cook, descriptions that immediately identify her as a subservient (Howard and Prividera 95). Unlike Lynch who was described by her physical traits,
accomplishments, and background; Johnson was identified by the subservient “roles” she plays in life. She was never described as a soldier or warrior, despite the fact that she was the only female of the three who actively engaged the enemy. By juxtaposing Johnson and Lynch’s narrative, it seems like the media focused on Lynch because she fit a certain model: white, female, and fragile. Because the media constructed both of their identities in a specific way, they essentially erased their identities as soldiers.

Whether Johnson believes that Lynch received a higher rating because she is white does not matter to her. She chooses not to speculate about the motives of the board. Despite Johnson’s beliefs, it does seem like she was treated unfairly, and that treatment could be due to her race.26 After assessing the facts, there is little other conclusion to be drawn. Johnson was a POW for twenty-two days, and Lynch was a POW for nine days. Lynch was in a hospital bed for her entire captivity. Johnson was moved around from place to place, forced to walk on her mangled feet, flesh ripping with every step. Both women were sexually assaulted: Johnson was continuously grabbed, and Lynch’s exam indicated rectal trauma. Johnson remembers being violated, but Lynch has no memory of the event. Both of them sustained major injuries: both of Johnson’s ankles were shot, and she has had numerous surgeries; and Lynch “suffered a broken back and a broken pelvis” (Johnson 259). Whether Johnson wants to admit it, there is a valid argument that race could have something to do with the difference in ratings. And this difference in race leaves Johnson at the mercy of the VA board, continuously trying to get her appeal overturned. Like so many other African Americans, Johnson is just a blemished footnote in the annals of military history, a blemish they wish would disappear. Johnson notes in the introduction that she needed to write her story. By writing her memoir, Johnson makes sure that a system built on inequality

26 According to Burk and Espinoza, “Blacks are less likely to be screened for PTSD than whites.” This improper screening creates a racial gap in treatment provided to VA patients.
cannot completely erase her. She needed to let people know what really happened to her and her unit. Her memoir allows us to peek inside her life, to understand the trauma she sustained, and to keep her narrative relevant. In doing so, her story lives on in all of us, and that story, like herself, will never disappear.

Kayla Williams also felt a sense of herself disappear because of isolation from her unit and the things she witnessed or was victim of during the war. In her memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Military* (2005), Williams details the struggle to navigate her female identity amongst a group of men who are at times her “brothers in arms” and at times men who sexually harass her. She is caught between loyalty to them and spite for them. She details how a male authoritarian institution perpetuates a rape mentality that stems from the constant sexual harassment of women. As one of the only females in her unit, this harassment leaves her feeling isolated because her interaction with men always leads to inappropriate behavior by the men, behavior that leaves Williams distraught and feeling helpless and responsible. The constant struggle she has for getting the same recognition that the men get for doing the same job, the sexual mistreatment, and her continuous weight loss due to depression lead her on a journey of self-discovery. This self-discovery culminates into her memoir, a book that is poignant and honest and brash about how women in the military are made to feel like “victimless victims”\(^\text{27}\)—made to feel at fault for the actions of men—and how these actions have lasting consequences on their psyches.

Williams is originally from Ohio. She was raised by a mother who was “Republican with an antiauthoritarian streak, and [her] dad was a former pot smoker with anger-management problems” (Williams 27). She notes that she was a troubled child and went through a period of

\(^{27}\) I am using this phrase to mean that women are victims of sexual harassment and assault, but they are painted as victimless. They are blamed for the actions of men, rather than the other way around.
being involved in the punk rock scene. Because of the way she would dress, people would often lock their cars when she approached. She believed people were being prejudiced towards her; therefore, she “developed a sense of kinship with black people. People judged [her] on [her] appearance—just like white racism” (Williams 29). This sense of being judged for looks caused her to seek out those who were also judged. When she was attending Bowling Green University, she started dating a Muslim man named Rick. They dated for two years before she found out he was married. Williams learned a lot about Muslim culture through him, and when she joined the Army Reserves in January 2000, she decided to pursue a job as an Arabic linguist. At the time, Arabic linguists were a rare commodity, and Williams never expected that she would later be in high demand. Once she completed her training, she was assigned to the military intelligence company of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and her unit deployed as part of the initial Iraq invasion in February 2003.

Williams starts her memoir with the primary theme that consumes the book: “What’s the difference between a bitch and a slut? A slut will fuck anyone, a bitch will fuck anyone but you” (13). This sentence, in essence, could be the title of her book because it highlights the treatment of women in the military and the treatment that Williams sustained on a regular basis while she was in Iraq. She notes that females have to toughen themselves up in order to deal with spending “months awash in a sea of nervy, hyped-up guys who, when they’re not thinking about getting killed, are thinking about getting laid. Their eyes on you all the time, your breasts, your ass—like there is nothing else to watch, no sun, no river, no desert, no mortars at night” (Williams 13-14). Williams goes on to state that men take this a step farther by making inappropriate comments that make women uncomfortable. One such case is when she is approached by a mechanic once she arrives in country. He proceeds to tell her how his wife likes rough sex, and, since his wife is
not there to feel a void, he would “love to break the back axle of [the] Humvee” on Williams (Williams 72). Because rape myths inundate our society, and women are often made to feel like the perpetrator rather than the victim, Williams starts to question whether she did something that led him to believe that this was acceptable behavior. The young mechanic notes that they see the girls in their T-shirts, they are staring at their boobs, and the women know the men are watching. This somehow leads this man to believe that women must want sex. This type of mentality is not new, and blaming victims for the way they are dressed is an age-old myth that still seems to be accepted in our society.

In a 2013 RAND Military Workplace Study28 (2014), “an estimated 20,300 of the 1.3 million active-component service members were sexually assaulted” (“Sexual Assault”). Ninety percent of these assaults took place in a military setting. One hundred and sixteen thousand active service members were sexually harassed, “with women experiencing significantly higher rates than men: 22 percent of women and 7 percent of men experienced sexual harassment in the past year” (“Sexual Assault”). Fifty-two percent of these cases believed that they would receive some type of retaliation from higher ups if they reported the harassment. The reason why women fear that they will receive retaliation for reporting harassment is because supervision is often responsible for the harassment: “In nearly 60 percent of these cases, the violations were committed by a supervisor or unit leader” (“Sexual Assault”). Women are made to appear as though they did something wrong. Instead of reprimanding those who are sexually harassing women, the women are often reprimanded, and, in some cases, dishonorably discharged from the military, as was the case with Stacey Thompson, a female marine who was drugged and raped by her sergeant. Her sergeant was in her direct reporting chain of command, so it became difficult

28 After separating from the military, Williams began working for the RAND Corporation, and she is one of the authors for this particular study.
for anyone to hear about her assault. Since she was not honorably discharged, she was not able to receive her VA disability benefits or to use her G.I. Bill benefits ("Invisible Wounds"). Her case is only one in thousands of women who were unjustly discharged after claiming that they were assaulted. Her discharge is a direct reflection of the "unthought known." We live in a society where white men have the power to decide whom moves and who does not. This hegemonic hierarchy is ingrained in people, and they feel empowered by the fact that they can control lives, that they can play god. Her discharge and denial of benefits only serves to prove that her sacrifice was worthless to the military and to society at large.

According to the RAND study, approximately one-third of the people who were sexually harassed by an offender state that the same offender eventually raped them. Although Williams denies that she was ever raped during her time in service, she notes in her memoir that she was assaulted by a man who continuously harassed her. She states that she went to one of the male tents one night to check on a friend who did not show up for work. She was concerned about him because he was acting suicidal the day before. She ended up waking up her friend’s bunkmate, Rivers. Rivers exposed himself to Williams and tried to attack her. She was able to get free, but she constantly questioned whether the attempted rape was her own fault. She began to devalue herself and believed that she had somehow led Rivers to believe that this was acceptable behavior. Williams states, “For the longest time I continued to feel so responsible, wondering whether I had encouraged Rivers by being friendly and outgoing. By my willingness to talk about sex with him. By talking about relationships and personal things with guys I didn’t know

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29 Military research data does not provide a racial breakdown of the assailant/victim. However, there is data that provides a breakdown for the overall population. In a 2013 study, 56% of white females were assaulted by white males; 13.7% of white women were assaulted by black men; 10.4% of black women were assaulted by white men; and 62.2% of black females were assaulted by black males (Taylor). My above claim is because 71% of males in the military are white and 16% are African American. White females make up 53% of the female force, while African American women consist of 31% (Patton and Parker). With the military being predominately white and male, it is feasible to conclude that a white male ideology is the driving force behind the things allowed by the military hierarchy.
so well. Did I set myself up? Was it my fault? Was I asking for it?” (258). Williams’ response is a normal response considering the fact that American society continuously blames the victim for the actions of the perpetrator. One the one hand, women are portrayed as fragile individuals who need salvation (Lynch). On the other hand, they are depicted as women who deserve to be assaulted. In this sense, the narrative is constructed based on race. For example, Lynch needs to be saved from “sand niggers,” an all too common them in American, especially southern, society. Williams, on the other hand, is made to feel responsible for her actions because she disrupted the hegemonic disorder and did not allow the “white man” to take what he wanted.

Because our society inherently protects the perpetrator instead of the victim, women often feel they are at fault for the way they dressed, that they were talking to an individual, that they had something to drink, or that they kissed an individual. None of these situations account for why a woman dressed in fatigues who is not drinking, dancing, or kissing this man warrants some type of assault. This is the case with most rapes, but women are still made to feel like they are at fault. Williams eventually turned the soldier in, and his only punishment was that he was moved to another unit. By minimizing his reprimand, the military is essentially devaluing Williams as a soldier. They are saying that he is more important than she is because he is a man. Instead of holding him responsible for his actions, the military will keep moving him around every time a complaint is made. To make matters worse, Williams was constantly harassed because she spoke up. Soldiers who crossed paths with her attacker treated her with disrespect, saying that they knew she was a slut who had slept with everyone in the unit. This type of retaliation is normal for women in the military. Besides the aforementioned slut or bitch, women are often called “dykes” if they do not want to sleep with male soldiers. Men start any type of rumors they can in order to protect their masculinity.
In the article “Masculinity and Rape Myth Acceptance in the Deep South,” the authors—using a study designed to focus on rape myth acceptance in fraternities—provide detailed information about the hyper-masculine fraternity culture wherein men often viewed rape as acceptable. The study revealed that men in fraternities often feel *forced* to prove their masculinity by sleeping with women. The more women a man sleeps with—consensual or not—the more masculine he is. This hyper-masculine culture often leads men to behave in ways that they would not behave if peer pressure were not part of the equation (Rocker and Prohaska 1).

The study goes on to state that “rape myths act as social control mechanisms that perpetuate the oppression of women by punishing women who deviate from traditional gender norms” (Rocker and Prohaska 5). By punishing women instead of men, rape myths keep women in a subservient role, subjecting them to sexual violence and discrimination. Although the study is aimed at fraternities, the same type of behavior can be established in the military.

The military is a hyper-masculine, primarily male establishment, and women serving in the same capacity as men are often viewed as an infringement on the male domain. Men feel threatened by women in their space, and therefore, they must assert their masculinity, which seems to be in the form of sexual harassment and sexual assault. The white-male dominated institution has continuously felt threatened by a female presence. Despite the fact that women have only recently been in the limelight for their service, women have been serving in the military, unacknowledged, for many years. In Marilyn McMahon’s Vietnam poem, “In this Land,” she notes that the construction of females during Vietnam was meant to reinforce the masculine identity. Her poem discusses how women were not seen as equals. They were meant to be viewed as the weaker sex, always ready to listen to and fawn over men:

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30 This article does not list specific fraternities used. This appears to be a prospectus and outlines the history of southern honor and violence as well as previous studies about fraternities and rape culture.
Only his deep voice, sharing items of interest to colonels, and her soft voice, responding to his rank and masculinity. Her dress is sleeveless, short, sunflower yellow, allowing her to bask in the sun. It is not important that her role is that of listener—admirer—the assigned role of her sex for hundreds of years. (McMahon ln 19-26)

In this poem, the woman’s role serves one purpose: to make the man feel like he is masculine, that she is filling her role as a dutiful wife listening to her husband complain about his day. Not only is she required to listen, but she is to represent the “feminine” aspect that is missing from war. She is not in the war because she is serving her nation; she is part of the war effort because her being female serves a role: to make men feel superior and comfortable and at home.

Women have historically been unrecognized for their military accomplishments, during wartime or not. Women often report that they feel the need to be stronger and work harder than men so that they can prove their worth. Williams notes in her memoir, “When women are good at what they do, they are not characterized as assertive. They are accused of being ballbusters or bitches. This is a struggle that is magnified in the military because it is still such a male environment—a weird little microcosm of society on steroids” (278). And even when these women work hard to achieve rank, they are still not respected for being in charge. When Williams became the team leader because of her rank, she notes on several occasions that people in her unit would direct their questions to the highest-ranking male instead of to her. Despite the fact that she went out on many convoys, and did the same duties as the men, she is repeatedly denied for promotion and awards, the same promotion and awards that the men are receiving for doing the same job. It is not until weeks later that she finally gets recognition for her actions, but that recognition comes from a unit that she was not a part of. During her deployment, she routinely went on missions with Delta Company as their linguist. It was easier to approach the
Iraqis with a female linguist because the Iraqis felt less threatened. Delta Company acknowledged that their missions would not have been successful without Williams, and they awarded her an Army Commendation Medal.

The lack of respect and acknowledgement she received from her unit, coupled with her sexual harassment claim, left her feeling isolated. Despite being surrounded by so many people, she felt alone. Any conversation or interaction could be misconstrued as an invitation for harassment, so she quit interacting with people. This isolation began to affect her mental state, and she began to spiral into a depression. She was not the only female who suffered depression while she was deployed, and, in fact, she was asked to talk with another female who was exhibiting signs of depression. Williams did not know what she was supposed to do or what to say, so she just tried to make small talk with the soldier. Williams notes that Specialist Berenger had only been in country for three weeks, and she was struggling with her deployment. Berenger apparently had family issues, and she did not tell her parents that she was deployed to Iraq. Williams tells Berenger that family is complicated, and that her own family is nuts. Berenger states she would have never thought that to be the case “because [Williams seemed] so totally together. [She] wouldn’t imagine [Williams] had problems” (Williams 224). The fact that Williams appeared to be composed and without issue is another example of how soldiers become hybrid individuals. They use psychological and emotional self defense mechanisms in order to hide the pain they are in.

Whereas Williams’ outward appearance displays an individual who is fine after dealing with the sexual harassment and assault, on the inside, she is deeply distraught by those events. In her mind, she cannot let the men see her as a weakling because it will confirm every theory about women in the military. Instead, Williams becomes isolated from the men, and she pretends to be
a strong individual, one who is totally fine, in front of her comrades. To the average person who has not had repeated exposure to trauma, being harassed and assaulted, but not raped, may not seem like Williams should experience psychological trauma, maybe because society is inundated with images of women being abused in movies, media, and television shows. Assault has become mainstream, and society accepts it as a given. I mean, *she was not actually raped, so why is it such a big deal?* Williams was raped when she was thirteen years old, so the harassment and assault 1) serves to compound her trauma and 2) reinforces the notion that women are sexually mistreated in all aspects of society. Because of the sexual harassment and attempted rape, Williams feels as though her existence is being erased, that her voice does not matter, so she puts on a mask, pretends to be and feel anything except who she is, even in the presence of another woman who might have been able to identify with her experience.

Like Williams, Jess Goodell notes that isolation was a primary theme during her deployment to Iraq, but her reasons for isolation not only pertained to her being a female who was harassed and objectified but also because of her job: mortuary affairs. In her memoir, *Shade It Black: Death and after in Iraq*, Goodell states that she was part of the first Marine Mortuary Affairs unit in Iraq. Goodell herself was a mechanic, and she wanted to do her part during the war, so she volunteered for the unit. When she volunteered, she never realized how difficult the job would be, dealing with dead bodies on a daily basis, feeling helpless to help them before they ended up dead on the “table.” She never realized the psychological and emotional struggle that would occur because of her wanting to make sure that she would be able to provide closure to families by ensuring that the bodies were respectfully prepared for their final journey home.

In her memoir, Goodell recounts her time in basic training and technical school, highlighting the objectification of females from the onset of service. She continues to focus on
how that objectification and sexualization of females makes it difficult for females to have meaningful relationships while they are deployed. The constant degradation of females is perpetuated by loved ones and a society who still deems women’s service as non-existent, which is the case with her boyfriend Miguel, a Marine. Females are often isolated because of their sex, and this isolation follows them into the civilian sector, a place where the VA is unwilling to help veterans who are struggling to overcome PTSD. Jobs are non-existent, and the skills veterans acquired in the military are not recognized by civilian employers, leading veterans to believe that their sacrifices for their country meant nothing, like they mean nothing. The objectification, degradation, and isolation of females serves as a form of erasure, an area that is “shaded black,” and Goodell finds herself slowly fading away.

The term “shade it black” is a recurring theme throughout the book. It refers to the mortuary affairs forms that they are required to fill out. When remains of a soldier are brought to mortuary affairs, they have to search the pockets and write down everything that is in them. They also have to annotate tattoos, scars, birthmarks, and body piercings, anything that would help identify the body. A diagram of the form is provided in the front of Goodell’s memoir, and it consists of two illustrations of the body: front and back. When processing a body, they shade the area of the body with injuries black. These injuries may be shrapnel wounds, dismemberment, or decapitation. As they are continuously exposed to death, they begin to feel like a piece of themselves is slowly disappearing, that pieces of their own bodies are being shaded black.

From the onset of her memoir, Goodell attacks the masculine military ideology that sexualizes and objectifies females, noting that it is accepted at every phase of training. Women were disrespected and given nicknames such as “Legs and Dolly,” nicknames that erased their identity and re-identified the women as body parts rather than people (Goodell 25). Cadences
that they ran or marched to were degrading to women, and, despite the fact that women were marching or running to these same cadences, the drill sergeants insisted that women participate. These cadences were often sexual in nature, itemizing the different ways that women have sex (see quote at beginning of chapter). As Goodell explains, the marines taught them that there was no race, that they were all equals, that they were all green; but it was clear to Goodell from the cadences that they sang that the “green [they] march[ed] to goes down like a submarine, and she is a woman, like six percent of all Marines” (63). Goodell notes that because of the male dominated subculture, even exercises were sexualized. For example, “Hello Dollies” consisted of Marines lying on their backs, spreading their legs, like scissors. Goodell implies that these types of cadences and exercises are meant to demean women, meant to remind them that, “historically,” the only thing they are good for is lying on their backs and spreading their legs, thereby insinuating that women are “sluts” and “whores.” This behavior is taught in every level of training, and the ramifications of this training are oftentimes a catalyst to the ever-accepted male dominated sexual harassment ideology that permeates the ranks.

Goodell, like Williams, notes that this permeation is seen in the labels that men give women: “slut,” “bitch,” or “dyke.” Goodell states that there are many women who succumb to these labels, and they often sleep around with men. Because some women are promiscuous, other females are seen as “dykes” or “bitches” for not spreading their legs as well. She states that the harassment she received did not only apply to the men; she was also harassed by women because she would not subject herself to becoming an object. In military culture, it is common for some women to become promiscuous, especially during a deployment when the male to female ratio may be 30:1. According to Goodell and Williams, women who may have difficulty finding dates are now considered beauty queens. These women are overwhelmed with the attention, and they
succumb to men’s advances not because they are sluts but because, as Goodell states, women have been “socialized since childhood to gauge [their] worth, to some extent, by the amount of attention [they] get from men” (65). This culture is solidified on college campuses, and in television shows, movies, and magazines. Everything in our culture revolves around the sexualization and objectification of women; therefore, these women who are not used to receiving attention do not know how to resist. And when sexual harassment or rape does occur, these women often remain mute, and they are made to feel as though they welcomed those unwanted advances because of their previous behavior.

This objectification/sexualization is an erasure of the female body, an erasure of a human being. As Meghan Murphy notes in her article “Erasure,” “As women, we all understand what it means to feel erased. We are paid attention to in extreme, often threatening or violent ways, as sexualized objects, but simultaneously ignored and brushed off when we have something real to say.” This erasure is seen and perpetuated in mainstream society, and it is magnified in a microcosmic setting like fraternities and the military. As previously noted, men feel like their masculinity is being threatened by a female presence serving in a traditionally masculine role. Many men do not want women serving with them, do not see value in their skills, and believe they only serve as a distraction or a doormat. Therefore, men act out, often violently, as a way of asserting their own masculinity. This type of violence and erasure often leads to a sense of isolation. Because Goodell did not want to hang out with the women who were promiscuous for fear that the men would think she was promiscuous as well, and for fear of men constantly harassing her, Goodell remained isolated for a good portion of her deployment.

The isolation that Goodell felt was not only because of the sexual harassment, but it also had to do with her job as a mortuary affairs technician. No one wanted to talk to the mortuary
affairs people because they reminded the soldiers of their possible death. Understanding that people die in war is one thing, but understanding that there is a specific unit designed to collect, prepare, and ship dead bodies back to the U.S. reminds Marines and Goodell of their own mortality. Goodell notes that being around dead bodies all the time isolated them also because of the smell. The smell of death soaked into their pores, their hair, their clothes, and they could not get rid of the smell despite how often they showered or washed their clothes. They spent so much time processing dead bodies, Goodell states, “It came to feel like we were living in two worlds or between two worlds, between the living and the dead. We were the (my emphasis) living among the dead, living in their world more than they were in ours” (83).

Goodell’s description of the liminal space between the living and the dead is reminiscent of Komunyakaa’s “Facing It.” The speaker in the poem was similarly trapped between the living (people at the monument) and the dead (Vietnam wall). Despite the fact that the poem and the memoir are written about different wars by different races and genders, there is a commonality in the way the war affects them. The aftereffects of war are evident to Komunyakaa’s speaker by the flashbacks he has while visiting the memorial wall: the vet floating in the air and the booby trap’s white flash. The speaker insinuates that these flashes only occur at certain times, triggered by certain events, such as going down the list of the 58,022 names etched on the black granite, but for Goodell, the dead never leave her. The dead roam aimlessly through the morgue, trapped in a liminal space, unable to move beyond. Severed heads begin talking to her, eyeing her. When she is on duty at night, she hears people walking in the morgue, but when she investigates, no one is there. Day in and day out, the members of her team analyze dead bodies and “shade it black,” never realizing that in return, they are shading themselves black, that the work they are meant to do causes them to lose a piece of themselves, a piece that they can never get back. It is
as if their experiences are invisible amputations, phantom pains and all, and they cannot figure out how to function without them. For Goodell, this figurative amputation is an exacerbation of erasure by a male dominated society, and this erasure not only comes in the form of the Marines she serves with, but also is perpetuated by her relationship with her boyfriend, Miguel.

When Goodell returns stateside, she and Miguel move in together and try to start their lives over. Miguel suffers from PTSD, and it is so bad that he becomes verbally and physically violent towards Goodell, so much so that she finds herself hiding from him: “I would hide from him anywhere I could find. I hid under the dining room table or behind the headboard between the bed and wall or in the cupboards or behind a rack of clothes in the closet” (147). Goodell fears for her life, and Miguel's rages transport her back to that helpless feeling in Iraq when all she wanted to do was survive. When Goodell tries to discuss the war with him, he negates her service, stating that she really did not serve in the war because she was not part of the initial invasion like he was. According to Miguel, those are the people who really served in the war, and they are the only people who have a right to discuss their trauma. Miguel’s continuous rage leaves Goodell fearing for her life, and she spends much of her time doing the same thing she did in the war: taking cover and cleaning up “messes.” What most people do not realize about mortuary affairs is that not only do they process the body, but also they go out to the field to recover the remains, piece by piece. Sometimes those pieces are severed heads, and sometimes those pieces are handfuls of flesh. That type of exposure takes a serious toll on a person, and for that person not to receive some type of empathy from a Marine who professes to love that person—well, that makes life even more unbearable. As a fellow Marine who served in the war, Miguel should be able to understand what Goodell is going through, but he chooses, instead, to deny her right to express her emotions because she did not serve in the same capacity that he did.
This continual abuse from Miguel, coupled with the isolation she feels from not being able to talk about her experiences, serves as a catalyst for her self-medication. Goodell notes that she became so depressed that she was not eating and weighed less than a hundred pounds at five foot nine inches tall. Her exterior self became a representation of her inner self, more areas for her to shade black. She spiraled out of control and began drinking non-stop in order to subdue the memories of the dead: “When the drinking became too much work, I started smoking weed, which suppressed the pain better than the booze had” (Goodell 173). She smoked all the time: to get out of bed, to eat, and to go to sleep. This type of self-medication is common with people who suffer from PTSD. Most people know that the alcohol is only a band-aid, and it does not serve a purpose except in that moment of distress. When the person wakes up, they are still bombarded with the same memories, plus they have a hangover.

Goodell finally started getting treatment for her PTSD at the VA, and she was able to get her life back on track. She moved back to New York with her parents, and she started attending college. Although she made good grades in her classes, she was constantly withdrawn. She never spoke during class, but her professors did not complain because she made excellent marks. After taking several philosophy classes and psychology classes, she decided to pursue a master’s in psychology so that she could help veterans deal with PTSD, something she felt the VA did not provide adequate or acceptable treatment for. By studying philosophy, she began to understand her own responses to the war and the guilt she felt about those who died. Despite wanting to forget that period of her life, she notes that a professor inspired her to write her memoir, that doing so would help her put her pain on the page, make an inventory of her military life, help her heal from the war, and, possibly, help someone else who has faced the same demons. Johnson and Williams similarly note that they wrote their memoirs as a way to reconcile all they had been
through during the war, that writing has provided them with as much self-reflection and closure as they can hope to find. Writing about their experiences allowed them to understand not only how the war affected them but also how their gender and race made them feel as if they were throwaway bodies that simply disappear into a landscape of men.

In writing their memoirs as a means of healing, Johnson, Williams, and Goodell also help other women who have served in the military. By choosing memoir as their mode of discourse, all three women present facts, as they know them to be. Their stories are not fictionalized to perpetuate stereotypical roles about victimized women. Their voices are authentic, and the truth of their narratives is more powerful than any story. Victims of sexual harassment often feel like they are taking men’s “jokes” out of proportion or making a big deal over nothing. The fact that other females do not complain, and are, in fact, part of the problem serves to reinforce this notion. The military has noted an increase in sexual harassment and assault in recent years, and the fact that these women shine a light on these atrocities strengthens the collected data.

Although bodies disappear; body parts disappear; women are sexually harassed, assaulted, and raped; and the role of women in combat is figuratively erased; one thing remains constant: there is a dissonance between what the military does and what the military says. The military’s zero tolerance policy regarding sexual harassment makes a woman believe that harassment will not be tolerated at any level; however, this is negated by the fact that women are made to feel at fault for being assaulted and are reprimanded and discharged. The demeaning chants taught in basic training serve to teach women that they are nothing more than sexual fodder, while at the same time teaching men that this type of behavior is acceptable from the top down. The military is a hyper-masculine microcosm of society. If long standing beliefs about rape are still so prevalent in our society, like those with Brock Turner—a white, athletic male
who was sentenced to six months in prison so it would not ruin his life—is there any wonder why a hyper-masculine, hyper-sexualized, and hyper-violent, male dominated culture enforces the degradation of women? Men do not erase these women only because they are asked to co-exist in field conditions. They erase women because this is a historically accepted practice, because a male dominated society will continue to degrade females because they fear losing control of a misguided masculine ideology.

Despite the fact that a white male ideology controls the military/government, all races and genders disappear for one reason or another. By writing these narratives, the authors in this thesis are able to focus on the experiences that traumatized them the most. The writing provides a therapeutic outlet by helping them reflect on and process the trauma that affected them. In southern literature, Yaeger notes that there is a prevalence “of flesh that has been ruptured or riven by violence, of fractured excessive bodies telling us something that diverse southern culture don’t want us to say” (xii). That same prevalence appears in war writing, but American culture does not want to admit that the bodies of our American military members are ruptured and riven by the violence inflicted by enemies and friendlies alike. By writing these narratives, these authors are politicizing the fact that bodies disappear for various reasons, yet the military and the government does not consider themselves liable for the fractured bodies returning from war. These narratives also provide a mode of therapy for readers. These narratives can teach veterans, like myself, to create their own stories, and veterans can finally begin to understand that they are not alone in the trauma they experienced. And just like these authors, by solidifying their stories on the page, veterans can ensure that they will never disappear—despite being largely ignored by society—and that their lives will be immortalized by the ink on the page.31

31 See the Appendix for my own poetry, my own way of writing as therapy.
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How to Find What’s Lost When What’s Lost Is You

Memories lie.

We know beginning & end
construct middle  create
story truth.

I see a wall of dust & smoke
& blackened flesh  ravaged
by flames.

But did his screams hang
on a veil of thick
black smoke  did he flounder
like a fish finning
for air?

Who knows?

It’s too painful
to resurrect who we were
in the moment trauma occurs.

We give up  fade
into dust  swept out
like yesterday’s trash.

I can’t handle the
pain.

Failure to live
or heal is ours alone.

& if we never understand
anything dead coming back
to life hurts32

we’ll only continue
in vacuums of time
memories of the dead
& photographs treated
as shrines.

32 This phrase inspired by Toni Morrison’s Beloved.
Area 54, Tonopah Test Range, Nevada, 2008


What the fuck does she know, sitting behind her desk, uniform pressed tight, boots scuff free? She’s never even been deployed, let alone been to the field.

I remember thick black smoke as we arrived on scene, the pilot strapped in his seat so ravaged by flames it was hard to find his body. His arm—flesh melting from bone—waved unceremoniously in the boiling heat, & I wanted to retch, the hand seemingly saying, see ya soon motherfucker. We heard they went into a flat spin at two-thousand feet, tried to save the plane, & ejected too late. Co-pilot survived.

Found him two-hundred feet away, parachute flapping in the wind. He stood motionless, staring at the flames & asked, “Have y’all found my brother yet?” even though death’s perfume soaked into our pores, our hair, our clothes. Truth’s a merciless bitch. It’s cold black flesh at the end of burning cinders, bone-chilling nights doused in putrescence, paralyzed by burning lungs & thick black smoke.
Thick Black Smoke

I rake the leaves, place them in a pile & toss a match. A hard day’s work drips from my brow.

Flames duel, dancing a waltz before ravaging blood heart of a half-eaten carcass I found in the yard.

Acorns pop, whistle like fighter planes dropping from heaven.

Pale, yellow earth turns red.

*White smoke is natural, black is manmade.*

We stand in shade, methodically cleaning residue from guns. I step out back & light up.

Black smoke—thick black smoke billows in the air: “Hey, what’s that?” I ask, pointing at the smoke. “I’m not sure. White smoke is natural, black is manmade,” he says. We go back to the shade.

The radio chirps panicked voices— “Ranger Five—Blackjack—landline, Now!” The Humvee’s squealing tires, the sergeant yelling— “Get your gear! Plane down! Plane down!” break me from my trance.

We race—race across the desert, heading towards smoke—thick black smoke. Sand hammers my mouth, my lungs. I breathe shards of glass.

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33 An earlier version of this poem was published in *The Report: O-Dark Thirty* in February 2016.
We follow smoke, catch air; up, down, white knuckled, grind to a halt.

Pebbles drift over the canyon’s edge—fall like stone snow; imagine falling like a stone, spiraling to an unconscious end on the crushed basalt below.

Blazing sun beats my back, smoke invades my lungs.
I grab my scarf, pull it from my pocket.

We gear up, tightrope the canyon’s edge.

“What’s that smell?” I ask, sniffing the air.

Horrid, rancid—like three day old meat, baking under a desert sun.

He’s there, in the flames, floundering like a fish finning for air.

Sinewy flesh drips from bones.

Heat of a thousand suns scars my face, melts off his.

I reach for him & withdraw my charred hand.

He’s waving, waving goodbye.

No, it’s just my nephew running through vapor fields.
The Light

And there are times we will call it God, drawing us near at the end. Too often, though, it’s the muzzled flashes

of a thousand men,
reminding us we are mortal.

It’s the flash
of memory that loops
in our minds,

the fires burning bright,
the booby trap’s white flash.

How quickly, in those moments, the clock’s tick stands still,

the galloping heart stops, and we are unable to breathe.

And then we remember, it’s the ember’s glow of radiant hearts, of those who pull us

from darkness when the world seems adrift.

And sometimes, it’s that single, solitary streak, piercing through thick black smoke,

wrapping us up in Love.

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34 Published in Confluence May 2016.
Where the Daisies Bloom

That’s the spot they found her, 
where she was dumped like a bag of trash.

I drive by it every day.

I sped down this road, 
transporting bodies: broken 
bodies, beaten, mangled bodies.

Bloodied soldier, sucking chest wound, 
than his uncle shot five times, 
as they barbequed Sunday dinner.

The soldier had just finished training. 
Wrong time, wrong place. 
We cracked his uncle’s chest, 

thought it was filling with blood. 
The surgeon gently caressed his tiny 
heart, trying to coerce it back to life.

No such luck, his pulse & breath ceased.

“At attention in the ER, attention in the ER: 
inbound Code 3 trauma. ETA 3 minutes.”

She’s in her late twenties, Hispanic, 
icy flesh, crusty abrasions along her 
torso, her arms, her face. Bra wrapped 

around her neck, panties torn, inner 
thighs bruised. We stripped her naked 
& ants crawled from every orifice.

No one came looking for her.

She lay in the morgue for two weeks, 
wrapped like a bag of trash 
before we transferred her to Potter’s Field.

That’s the spot they found her, 
where the daisies bloom each year.

I water them every week.
In Memory of Chris
Colias Chippewa

I thought of you today. Not sure why. Maybe because it’s my birthday. I was in Saudi when I found out. I called for your birthday but found out you were dead instead. That the cancer had spread to your brain. That you’d died with all your family & friends, save one, at home, on your own terms. No more chemo or radiation. No more surgery or tubes. Just a house full of love.

I had a meltdown that day & bonded with my superintendent Bill. I told him your name was Chris Reeves, that I’d finally met Superman. How I don’t sing in public anymore because of you. How you asked me about a Tim McGraw song on the radio one day, & in the course of me telling you the words, I started head bobbing, shoulder jerking, hip swaying, foot tapping singing. You laughed at the way I belted out Chippewa. Thought it was cute. But I was self-conscious & never sang for you again. I never sang for anyone. Well, maybe once, that time when I was drunk & sang a Tim McGraw song with my boyfriend on karaoke night, the night I was stupid & lost my virginity because I was tired of people picking on me about still being one at twenty-one. I never told you that. I told Bill about the time I showed up late to work, frazzled from another round of fisticuffs at home, & when I raised my arm, you freaked out because the underside was a large black mass. You wanted me to leave, disown my family. He said you sounded like a good friend. She was, I said. The best.

When I joined the service, you said I should’ve run it past you first. But you understood. You knew I had to leave before I ended up in jail. Guns were locked & loaded, & I needed a way out. You even wrote me a letter of recommendation, signed it Aim High, despite a minor alcohol related offense.

You held my hair back on my twenty-first birthday when I puked on the bar. Darlene was wearing open toed shoes & got the brunt of it, I think. You were happy I finally let loose...all over the dance floor, grooving with some guy I was too wasted to give the wrong number to. We spent the night at the beach house on Dauphin Island & gave ourselves IV’s to help with our hangovers.

You didn’t even tell me you were sick. I found out when I came home for a visit. Was pissed at you for hiding it from me, but happy I was there when you woke up from surgery. When you got your new boobs, you lifted your shirt to show me, acted like they were a shiny new car with all the bells & whistles. You were excited. I was embarrassed, but I loved you anyway.

You loved suns & zebras. I’d buy you souvenirs from all over the world. You fell in love with the zebra blanket I brought you back from my first trip to Saudi, the one I used to pad my cot with because the metal rails were like spokes in my spine. You liked that it had my scent on it. You’d buy me a keychain every time you visited a new zoo. You had a sun tattoo on your ankle & a room full of zebras. You joked about how you looked like an orangutan when you were pregnant, bright red hair, grazing the floor.

I thought of you all that day, the day you died. Walked around in a trance. I had an accident that day. We were working on two engines at once. Winds were high, so we had to remove the
engine cowlings & strap them down. The clip on the strap was broken. I pulled on the strap with all my weight, thinking if I pulled it tight enough, then I could tie the rope & hold the cowling in place. But the rope was dry-rotted from the desert sun, & it snapped just as I put the bulk of my weight into it. I tumbled backwards on the cowling trailer. A metal bar clipped my calf, launching me into a back flip. I landed on my neck & arm on the tongue of the trailer. But I kept working. Needed to feel pain to know I was alive. Mission first. Shawn, my ex, came out later. Asked if I was okay, then bitched the whole time because I was working too slow. I always thought we’d end back up together by the end of that trip, but I realized something else instead: he never loved me. You’d have kicked his ass if you could’ve. I’d have let you.

I learned how to play chess that trip, something you always wanted to teach me. More bonding with Bill. We made our own chessboard & pieces: we drew sixty-four squares with a black magic marker on a table in the smoke pit & used it as our board. We used D cell batteries as rooks, com cord connectors as knights, salt & pepper shakers for bishops, suntan lotion for the king, lotion for the queen, & mini tabasco bottles from the MRE’s as pawns. We’d sit under a starlit blanket, smoking cigarettes, drinking grape Kool-Aid, eating starburst, listening to Dido, & talking about life. Talking about you. How these moments reminded me of us sitting on your porch, drinking buttery nipples, smoking cigarettes, & listening to Fiona Apple. I called him Bob, & he dubbed me Scout.

I didn’t eat solid food for a month after you died. The smell of fried food made me nauseous. So I ate frozen yogurt & drank water to keep up my strength. Bob wanted me to go to the doctor. I’m worried about you Scout, he’d say. In that moment, I felt like he was taking your place, being my superman. He was still mad at me for not going to the hospital after the accident, even though I still had twenty knots lingering in my leg. But how could I put my faith in doctors when they couldn’t save you?

You used to anger me when you’d fall out of remission & never tell me. I’d find out through the grapevine. Said you knew I was off doing important things, that I needed to stay focused on deployments, & it’d keep until I came home. When 9/11 happened a month later, I was thankful you were dead. That you didn’t have to see the carnage, knowing how much you loved New York. It would’ve broken you. I had to block you out, forget about you because I needed to focus on important things. But you reappeared every night. We’d sit under a starlit sky, helmets & flak vests strapped on, our MOPP36 gear at our side, smoking cigarettes, playing chess, listening to Dido, eating starburst, drinking grape Kool-Aid, & talking about life. You were a whisper in the breeze, caressing my face.

I think of you when I sing, head bobbing, foot tapping, & laugh about that day, about how insecure I was, but I laugh, nonetheless, because you’re there: Happy. Smiling. Alive. You’re still my hero. Still trying to save me. You’re with me all the time. In my thoughts. In my heart. The way the breeze kisses my face or the birds sing a morning song. The way the Chippewa37 perches on my knee, its soft, brittle wings golden like the sun.

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35 Com cord connectors are the switches on the cables used to communicate with the airplane crew.
36 MOPP gear is chemical warfare gear.
37 Colias Chippewa is a butterfly that is indigenous to North America and parts of Asia.
Brandy R. Williams was born in Channelview, Texas in 1976, and she grew up in Liberty. She moved to Jennings, Louisiana in her junior year of high school. After graduating from Jennings High School with honors, she moved to Mobile, Alabama and began working in the emergency department at the University of Southern Alabama’s Women and Children’s hospital. After two years of working at the hospital, she joined the United States Air Force, serving from 1997-2010. She spent her first six years as a jet engine mechanic, working on E-3 AWACS. During her last seven years, she worked as an Independent Duty Medical Technician and Paramedic. During her career, she was stationed at Tinker AFB, Oklahoma; Lackland AFB, Texas; and Creech AFB, Nevada. She deployed seven times in support of Operation Southern Watch, Operation Northern Watch, and Operation Enduring Freedom. After separating the military in 2010, she continued her education at Louisiana State University of Alexandria in Alexandria, Louisiana. While there, she compiled and edited LSUA’s literary magazine, Jongleur. She also served as a tutor at LSUA’s writing center. She won the English Academic Excellence Award and the Veteran Outstanding Student Award in 2013.

After graduating with honors from LSUA in 2014, Miss Williams then began the two year Master’s of Liberal Arts program in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi. While there, she was published in The Report: O-Dark-Thirty and Confluence: A Collection of Creative Writing by University of Mississippi Students, 2015-2016. Miss Williams graduates from the University of Mississippi in 2016.