

**“Where Only Machine-Gun Fire Brings Us Together”:
Exploring Camaraderie and Human Connection in War Poetry**

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This thesis honors and remembers the soldiers and veterans who sacrificed their lives for their nations.

Introduction

As multiple wars stained the twentieth century, men and women continuously fought for their countries, some returning home with the added burden of their experiences and some not returning at all. A few of them explored and documented military life through poetry. The resulting literature reveals the true horrors of these wars. The trend in war poetry, in particular, shifts from a then-shocking announcement of war's atrocities during World War I, to expressions of guilt from the Vietnam War, to a focus on the gruesome details of poignant and troubling moments from the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War. The release of this lingering pain through literature fosters connection among the people who read these works as well as among the soldier-poets who experienced these horrors for themselves.

Following war, veterans often struggle with traumatic memories. Brian Turner, infantry team leader in the Iraq War and author of *Here, Bullet*, a book of poetry that details his experiences in Iraq, asks about the soldier's experience upon returning home from war: "How does anyone leave a war behind them, no matter what war it is, and somehow walk into the rest of his life" (Turner 154)? This question troubles soldiers-turned-veterans and naturally inflects the horrific depictions of war within the war literature canon. In his memoir *My Life as a Foreign Country*, Turner depicts home after war:

When I came home, I saw America being America. I watched England soldier on. A long line of soy vanilla lattes, caramel macchiatos with extra caramel drizzled on top. Tapping broken fragments of language to one another on the bright screens in their hands. Plastic palm trees swaying overhead. An uptempo jazz track playing through tiny speakers mounted just under the splay of light green fronds. (164)

While the use of "soldier on" cleverly highlights war, the mention of "soy vanilla lattes,"

“caramel macchiatos,” “bright screens,” “plastic palm trees,” and “an uptempo jazz track” illustrate the aspects of daily life that are frivolous yet masquerade as necessities. The use of “broken,” “swaying,” and “tiny” diminishes the importance of these activities, drawing a stark contrast between life at home and life at war. This description of America upon the soldier’s arrival home makes these aspects seem trivial compared with the constant questions of life or death that plague his mind during combat. Bringing this concern for existential problems to life after war, Turner’s picture of life after war darkens:

I drank white mochas with a layer of whipped cream. I tapped words onto my own bright screen. And as I did so, I considered the British soldier hanging from a ceiling beam in Kentish Town. I recognized the artillery officer’s body floating past early morning kayakers in the Mersey estuary, the smoke from Scouse fumestacks drifting over. Just as it happens in America. The veteran steps away from the chair and the rope does its work. Pills swallowed with whiskey or coconut rum under a bulb of crackling filament. In Detroit, in San Jose, in New Brunswick, in Roanoke, the same. Ice cubes clinking in the glass. Men and women remove their dog tags and step into the bathtub, the process of cleaning the apartment made much easier for those who arrive after it’s done. Thoughtful. Considerate. A pistol or rifle barrel positioned inside the cavity of the mouth. The pad of the thumb depressing the safety. The fine series of lines which form the fingerprint placed gently on the curved metal of a trigger in its cold housing. (164-5)

Turner depicts surface-level adjustments to life at home after war, such as drinking these extravagant coffee beverages and gluing himself to his cell phone, adopting the habits of Americans while remembering the lifelessness of life at war and the psychological trauma that follows. The many illustrations of veterans unable to survive and taking their own lives after war

increase the triviality of these American habits and seeming necessities and heightens the horror of war. Questions of life and death do not fade away with the war's end. While Turner exemplifies twenty-first century life following a twenty-first century war, this struggle to cope with war's atrocities is universal during and following all wars, as this thesis explores.

The catharsis, connection and camaraderie reflected in wartime relationships and war literature help soldiers cope with their experiences and answer this question of what happens after the war. According to George Packer in his article "Home Fires: How Soldiers Write their Wars," "Some of the men will remain alone for years, perhaps their whole lives. But some will begin to recognize their own suffering in the stories of others. That's what literature does" (Packer). This contrast between "alone" soldiers and those who "recognize their own suffering in the stories of others" draws attention to the importance of connection and camaraderie to the healing of these suffering soldiers and veterans. Both literature and the shared experience of war connect soldiers and veterans in ways that civilians struggle to understand. Noting that soldiers who attempt to write about their experiences "have to navigate a minefield of clichés...because every war is like every other," Packer highlights the horrors of war and the effect of shared trauma on the soldiers:

War is hell is another. War begins in illusion and ends in blood and tears. Soldiers go to war for their country's cause and wind up fighting for one another. Soldiers are dreamers (Sassoon said that). No one returns from war the same person who went. War opens an unbridgeable gap between soldiers and civilians. There's no truth in war—just each soldier's experience. "You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (from "How to Tell a True War Story," in O'Brien's story collection "The Things They Carried"). (Packer)

The experience of war is universally damaging, but enduring such atrocities with other soldiers brings these soldiers together, paradoxically strengthening their bonds and causing them to “[fight] for one another,” rather than for the country’s cause. The purpose of fighting quickly becomes to protect and honor fellow soldiers, solidifying the importance of these bonds and connections.

While the general horrors of war stay the same across all wars, specific images begin to represent different wars in the eyes of the public:

The new war literature is intensely interested in the return home. The essential scene of First World War writing is the mass slaughter of the trenches. In the archetypal Vietnam story, a grunt who can never find the enemy walks into physical and moral peril. In much of the writing about Iraq, the moment of truth is a reunion scene at an airport or a military base—families holding signs, troops looking for their loved ones, an unease sinking deep into everyone. (Packer)

Even though these are not exactly the images represented in the war poetry treated in this thesis, these images underscore how these wars are remembered. The differences between how society remembers these wars and how the soldier-poets represent them reveals the variance of soldier experiences at war despite the constancy of their horrors. In the poetry represented in this thesis, Packer’s representation of World War I war literature is accurate: “the mass slaughter of the trenches” largely defines the poetry of Wilfred Owen. However, Owen also details the love within the trenches that helped him cope with his shell shock and the terror of watching friends die until his own death one week before the Armistice. Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry from the Vietnam War does not depict “a grunt who can never find the enemy” but rather one who can. Komunyakaa’s soldier not only confronts the enemy but wonders if he connects more with this

enemy than with his own troops. In regard to contemporary wars, “unease” hardly encompasses the impact of Elizabeth Keough McDonald’s illustration of sexual assault in the military.

Turner’s depiction differs from Packer’s depiction of the Iraq War as Turner’s soldier does not make it to the airport and no one reunites. With these variances in the war experience and in war literature, the connections among soldiers also change, providing some with the strength to persevere from these loving bonds and leaving others struggling to survive on their own.

Camaraderie helps redeem and blunt the horrors of war for some soldiers in some wars. While noting the value of camaraderie, this thesis examines in which wars camaraderie and connection characterize the war experience and which soldiers cannot access this redemptive and healing aspect of military service. In three chapters, I will explore the camaraderie and connection amongst fellow and enemy soldiers, as well as factors that help redeem the horrors of war in war poetry from three different conflicts and multiple perspectives.

The first chapter explores Wilfred Owen’s poetry from the First World War, which largely displays the grimness of trench warfare and Owen’s antiwar sentiments, but argues that his poetry also reveals redemptive aspects of the war experience. A British soldier during the First World War, Owen endured trench and gas warfare, which were particularly gruesome fighting tactics of this engagement. The surge in war poetry during the Great War coincided with a new tendency to depict antiwar sentiments in such poetry, as well as vivid and rhythmic illustrations of suffering, death and destruction. However, in addition to war’s horrors, Owen depicts the strength of emotional bonds amongst soldiers and the extent to which they help soldiers cope with what they saw and did at war.

The second chapter searches for redeeming aspects of the Vietnam War’s horrors in Yusef Komunyakaa’s poetry, discovering these redemptive aspects in Komunyakaa’s own quest

for understanding of the human condition while fighting in the Vietnam War. Following the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War involved violence, protest and division. This politically tense period of the 1960s and 70s functions as the backdrop to the Vietnam War and instigated racial separation amongst American soldiers in Vietnam. As a result, the trend in war poetry shifted during this period away from the camaraderie of the homogeneous soldiers of the British army in World War I and towards the expressions of guilt and complicity among Vietnam veterans. Komunyakaa and some of his compatriots place blame on themselves, while maintaining the antiwar sentiments from the poetry of the First World War. The deeper understanding that Komunyakaa gains informs him about the complexities of racial and national allegiance, and helps him cope with his experience as an African American soldier in a divided army and nation. His search gives him hope that this division will change and, in the future, isolated groups might gain the camaraderie Owen enjoys.

The third chapter focuses on the portrayal of women soldiers in poetry from contemporary wars by Brian Turner, who fought in the Iraq War, and Elizabeth Keough McDonald, who fought in the Persian Gulf War, ultimately noting the disconnect between women soldiers and their male counterparts. Women constitute a larger portion of the military than in previous conflicts, taking on more significant positions as they work through the ranks. Despite these accomplishments, some women soldiers do not receive respect, fair treatment, or a sense of belonging in the military. Women soldier-poets remain largely absent from the war poetry canon, and the trend in what contemporary war poetry by women exists shifts towards more vivid and poignant details of the soldier-poets' experiences. Catharsis is all the more necessary since, in addition to the dehumanization war brings, women soldiers, like black soldiers during Vietnam, are dehumanized as well by their own comrades. Additionally, while

the bonds amongst women veterans help them work through their lingering traumas from war, these women suffer separation from the other soldiers, preventing them from working through these issues while at the front.

Through an analysis of the poetry of Owen, Komunyakaa, Turner and McDonald and research on the wars in which they fought, this thesis explores the antiwar aspects of each poet's work and calls into question what redeems the horrors of war for these soldier-poets, if anything. This question becomes particularly puzzling in regard to the marginalized soldiers who do not enjoy the camaraderie of homogeneous soldiers and, instead, struggle to cope alone.

Chapter One:

“Where Death Becomes Absurd and Life Absurder”: Revealed Horror and Redemptive Camaraderie in the Poetry of Wilfred Owen from World War I

Wilfred Owen depicts the gruesome realities of war in his poetry from World War I, revealing images of brutal death in war that the public had not seen previously, demonstrating his disdain for the public’s praise of these deaths, and illuminating his struggle to cope with the sight of his fellow soldiers’ scattered body parts. These aspects of his work and life seem to suggest that he detested every aspect of military campaigns. By examining three poems, however, I will prove that Owen’s poetry is not two-dimensionally antiwar. Instead, Owen considers the love amongst shell shocked soldiers a redeeming aspect of warfare, reviving their will to survive the war even as it damages both the bodies and psyches of these young men.

Owen does find plenty to lament. His condemnation of pro-war rhetoric and depiction of suffering in much of his poetry display his antiwar sentiments and horror-induced shell shock, characterizing the war as a man-made Hell and those who support it as evil. Marking a shift in the poetic tradition of glorified war, Owen, along with the other World War I poets, emerge as what Fran Brearton deems “a new phenomenon—the soldier-poet” (10). The soldier-poet developed as many educated young men enlisted in the First World War and did not find what traditional war poetry and rhetoric led them to expect: “dashing military heroes and masculine bravery and honour characterised by well-organised cavalry charges and gleaming uniforms” (Richards). The poetry that arises from World War I serves as a reaction to what these soldier-poets experienced instead: “confusion and apparent chaos, cowering in muddy trenches for no obvious reason other than to avoid death, with death itself seldom heroic but rather random and deeply unpleasant” (Richards). Though “deeply unpleasant” may understate the violent and

gruesome deaths soldier-poets suffered, witnessed and eventually wrote about, this chasm between venerated expectations and depraved reality spurred a new trend in war poetry that arguably began with CH Sorley and Robert Graves (“Great War”), followed quickly by Siegfried Sassoon, Owen, and an estimated two thousand two hundred twenty-five Great War soldier-poets (Das). With all these soldiers producing work during the war, this trend towards honest and vile battle scenes in war poetry seems like a natural course following this let down of expectations. Even so, a few poets stand out as icons and leaders of the trend, including Sassoon, Graves and Owen, who all exchanged words of poetic wisdom at Craiglockhart War Hospital, fueling each other’s work and fortifying the trend towards truthful depictions of trench terrors (Hibberd 277).¹

Owen, along with many other soldier-poets of the Great War, responds to the public’s laudatory view of war and participates in the countering trend in war poetry. In her article “How to Kill: The Poetry of War,” Brearton discusses the dawn of the antiwar trend in poetry as educated soldier-poets honestly express their experiences during World War I:

For the first time, war poetry appeared to stand or fall according to the poet’s first-hand knowledge of battle. In this narrow definition, war poetry is experiential writing, designed to educate its audience to the actualities (by which are meant the horrors) of war. The war poets are the soldier poets who sprang to (often posthumous) fame from the trenches of the First World War, and who, in their exposé of horror and indictment of civilian complacency, not only set the standard by which subsequent poetic responses to war would be judged, but also implicitly set out the terms for a more general

¹ Owen and Sassoon were patients who met at Craiglockhart War Hospital (Hibberd 267). Owen met Graves, who also suffered from but was not treated for shell shock (Seymour-Smith 56), through Sassoon during Graves’ visits to Sassoon at Craiglockhart (Hibberd 277). Owen produced many poems during his stay at Craiglockhart, which could suggest that his friendship with Sassoon inspired and improved his writing (Hibberd 267). In fact, Owen, Sassoon and Graves had “the most powerful meeting of English literature in the twentieth century” at Baberton Golf Club during Owen and Sassoon’s stays on October 13, 1917 (“War Poets’ Meeting Place Revealed as Baberton Golf Club”).

understanding of, and approved attitude towards, modern war. Hence the assumption that war literature usually means anti-war literature. (10)

In essence, Brearton suggests that the World War I poets display the true horrors of war that previously were not publicized, upending the traditional poetic responses to war that precede them. This tradition included glorified and heroic death without mention of the violence that brought it. In opposition, the World War I soldier-poets confront the public with the violence they experienced at war, portraying the war as the destitute battleground they saw rather than the exalted test of masculinity, country pride and worth that earlier poets displayed. Owen prefaces his poetry with stern opposition: “This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, not anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity” (Day Lewis, Blunden 31). Owen’s preface rejects the poetic tradition of honor and lies and highlights the new trend born out of necessity rather than aesthetic. As a result, critics characterize the Great War poets, including Owen, as perpetuators of antiwar sentiments in relation to their predecessors due to their detailed illustrations of modern war’s terrors and tragedies.

Not only in opposition to earlier war poets but to war propagandists, the World War I poets—the Sassoons, the Owens and the forgotten alike—display for the first time chilling descriptions of suffering at war to correct the rhetoric from the glory that war propaganda espouses to the horror of the exposed gore and bleeding guts that dot and define the front. According to Ahmed Abu Baker in his paper “The Theme of ‘Futility’ in War Poetry,” poets of the Great War, such as Owen, portray the horror of war, challenging the rumored honor of war and asserting its tragedies. Baker writes:

We find that most modern war poetry deals with the brutality and atrocities of war. The poets try to change the favorable attitude of some people towards war by exploring in depth the spiritual hell that war brings into being, and by describing the physical and the emotional pain which humans have to endure during and after the war. The terror, ugliness, and brutality of war became a major theme in the poetry of war poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, whose first-hand experience of war made their poems lifelike representations of the ugly face of war. (126)

Exploiting his experience at war to recreate the images and sensations of suffering, Owen, along with the other Great War poets, introduces the public to negative visions of war that propagandists previously squelched in favor of nationalist pride and glorified death on the battlefield. By detailing war's ugliness in his poetry and opposing the "favorable attitude" back home, Owen establishes an unfavorable opinion of war, challenging the eagerness of pro-war propaganda and presenting an antiwar sentiment in contrast. In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell quotes an anonymous review of Owen's *Poems*, which was published on January 6, 1921 and contains the condemnation, "The suggestions [in Owen's angrier poems] is that a nation is divided into two parts, one of which talks of war and ordains it, while the other acts and suffers. We can understand how such a thought might arise but not how it can persist and find sustenance," about which Fussell remarks, "But it readily persisted as a reaction to impudent romancing" (89). Fussell's rebuttal indicates that the reigning poetic tradition of glorified war and romanticized death, which sustained the divided conceptions of war, ends with Owen and his fellow World War I poets.

Enlisting classical and popular references in his famed double sonnet "Dulce Et Decorum Est," Owen helps introduce antiwar ideas into literature and kill the trend towards glorified war

poetry. Positive ideas of war and encouragement to enlist, especially those perpetuated by pro-war poet and journalist Jessie Pope, angered Owen and stimulated “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (Araujo), which is sometimes published with a dedication to Pope under the title. An excerpt of Pope’s “The Call” that exemplifies the tradition of aggrandized sacrifice for one’s country that pervaded war poetry leading up to the First World War states:

Who’ll earn the Empire’s thanks—

Will you, my laddie?

Who’ll swell the victor’s ranks—

Will you, my laddie?

When that procession comes,

Banners and rolling drums—

Who’ll stand and bite his thumbs—

Will you, my laddie? (“Jessie Pope, ‘The Call’ (1915)” Lines 17-24)

Pope deploys guilt to encourage young men to enlist. She brandishes those who fear enlisting as weak. She worships the war hero and shames the young men who fear probable death on the front. Owen opposes this manipulative tradition in war poetry by graphically detailing the horrors that young men facing enlistment justifiably fear. Specifically, Owen vividly details the war experience Pope does not know or publicize in his “Dulce Et Decorum Est.” In response to Pope’s poetry, “...an unsparing realism that evokes the gassed soldier’s agonies is the best answer to the fatally uninformed jollity of Jessie Pope, who earned Owen’s hostility because her verses were widely read...and she actively encouraged recruitment” (Kerr 322). Disgusted not only by the ideals Pope touted but by the fact that the public shared these ideals, Owen ardently rejects the tradition of honor, pride and glory in war poetry and dedicates his cutting “Dulce Et

Decorum Est” to “a certain poetess.”

Owen and Pope represent the new trend and old tradition in war poetry, respectively. Underscoring the dueling ideas on how to discuss and write about war, Araujo writes, “The contrast between the poetry of Pope and Wilfred Owen is so stark as to situate the English poets at the farthest edges of the chasm separating supporters and opponents of the war effort” (333). In fact, Owen’s poem’s ironic title translates to “It is sweet and honorable,” which is a fragment of Roman poet Horace’s famed pro-war Latin phrase, “It is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country.” This phrase is stated in Latin at the end of the poem, “[expressing] a sentiment with which everyone who loves his country will be predisposed to agree” (Winkler 177). Yet, Owen does not agree. He ends “Dulce Et Decorum Est” with the assertion that if Pope or any of the pro-war public experienced the horror of war, they would not encourage young men to enlist in war in search of the heroism the public suggests war bestows:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori. (Lines 25-8)

Emphasizing the dark implications of this “old Lie,” Owen ends the poem with “pro patria mori,” which translates to “to die for one’s country” and occupies only three feet rather than the five that every other iambic pentameter line does, demonstrating how war cuts off lives by cutting off the final line and creating a stark and abrupt end that condemns the public’s praise of war. In earlier drafts, Owen revised a dedication from, “To Jessie Pope etc” to “To a certain poetess” (Day Lewis, Blunden 55), but in either case he uses Pope to represent believers in Horace’s phrase and the pro-war propagators with whom Owen fervently disagrees. Dissenting

from propaganda, Owen's poetry fits into the emerging trend towards horrific and honest depictions of battlefield brutality.

Specifically, Owen draws the public's attention to war's atrocities, opposing Pope's celebration of heroic death at war and illustrating the violence of World War I warfare and the fear soldiers faced witnessing death. "In 'Dulce et Decorum Est,' Owen's soldier-poet is caught in a psychological maelstrom that ultimately shatters the Horatian myth to smithereens," effectively determining that death at war is not heroic but horrific (Araujo 338). The speaker addresses the public, asserting that if each person at home during the war could "... watch the white eyes writhing in his face, / His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin" (Owen, "Dulce Et Decorum Est" Lines 19-20), like the speaker has to, then he too would feel the horrors of war. By using the second person, Owen directly confronts his audience, invoking questions of who the "you" is. While the "you" could be Pope and other supporters of pro-war sentiments, the "you" could be the audience itself and all people back home, implicating an entire country in the messy blame of this soldier's suffering. The words "white," "devil's," and "sin" evoke ideas of innocence, suggesting that the boy soldier suffers not by his own fault but at that of some other evil, possibly even at the fault of those at home who have the privilege and good fortune to not have to "watch the white eyes writhing in his face" and see the intimate suffering of the war. Inserting evil into the poem, in addition to the stark image of a soldier writhing in unimaginable pain, Owen effectively presents one depiction of war's tragedies to a public that has never seen or heard them.

Owen details the visual horrors of war, recreating the images of fallen fellow soldiers that spurred his shell shock and highlight his frustration with war. Underscoring the effects of emotional wounds in comparison with those of physical wounds, Baker writes:

War poetry captures the physical and emotional lineaments of modern war: the pain, weariness, madness, and degradation of human beings under intolerable strain. It attempts to crystallize the moment as it offers images of young soldiers in action. Some poems of this era highlight the case in which a soldier survives war physically but remains obsessed with its bitter horrifying memories which drive him crazy. (125)

As a result of the brutality he witnesses at war, Owen attempts to understand his experience through poetry, complicating his relationship with society and the public. According to Fussell, scenarios of suffering come to define Owen's experience at war, inciting frustrations with war and the world:

What [Owen] encountered at the front was worse than even a poet's imagination could have conceived. From then on, in the less than two years left to him, the emotions that dominated were horror, outrage, and pity: horror at what he saw at the front; outrage at the inability of the civilian world—especially the church—to understand what was going on; pity for the poor, dumb, helpless, good-looking boys victimized by it all. (289)

Essentially, the sight of his fellow soldiers wounded and dying triggered Owen's emotional struggle with war, as opposed to the fear of continuously falling shells and endless warfare. In a letter to his sister on May 8, 1917, Owen, referring to enemy German soldiers as "the Bosche," writes, "...it was not the Bosche that worked me up, nor the explosives, but it was living so long by poor old Cock Robin..., who lay not only near by, but in various places around and about, if you understand. I hope you don't!" (Owen, Bell 456). Mentioning "Cock Robin," the nickname Owen's fellow officers gave to one soldier, exemplifies the anguish of not only witnessing the brutal death of a comrade but living with the disfigured body in the trench for an extended period of time as the shells continued to fall and the still-intact soldiers continued to fight. Owen claims

that the difficulty of war involves “living so long by poor old Cock Robin,” indicating that simply continuing with life and with battle was arduous as the soldiers witnessed death on the front. Expressing his struggle to cope with seeing his friend’s mutilated body, Owen wishes for no one to feel similar strife or see what he sees. Even as he describes his experience at war in letters, Owen exudes agony, citing witnessing the suffering of compatriots as war’s core horror.

Fortifying Owen’s antiwar sentiments, the variations on metric feet in “Dulce Et Decorum Est” convey the horror not only of fear for one’s own life but for those of fellow soldiers. As the tension in “Dulce Et Decorum Est” builds with the onslaught of shelling and gas, the conventional iambic pentameter breaks, and the iambs’ musical rhythm stumbles over trochees and spondees. The trochees and spondees mimic the chaotic yet methodic repetition of shelling on the front by altering the rhythm and conveying an unsettling urgency. Owen writes, “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling / Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time” (Lines 9-10), creating spondees with “Gas! GAS!” and “Quick, boys!” and a trochee on “Fitting.” The spondees slow down the line and add extra stress in the foot, creating a sense of panic. The repetition of the word “gas,” the capitalization of its second occurrence and the caesura that splits the line between the hurried orders and the flustered response deepen this panic. By using the word “ecstasy,” which can mean either “joyful excitement” or “an emotional or religious frenzy or trancelike state,” to describe the soldiers’ panicked fumbling as an out-of-body experience, Owen evokes confusion (“Ecstasy”). The trochee further disorients, resembling the soldiers’ panic during the gas attack. The enjambment following the word “fumbling” and the extra syllable crammed in the last foot of the line deepens the sense that the soldiers are literally fumbling with unsure hands to secure gas masks to their mouths before the gas reaches them.

Owen expresses his sympathy for the dying soldier by inserting trochees, spondees and a blank line that illustrate an unsettling scene:

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning. (Lines 11-6)

Following the pattern of the first stanza, the next eight lines connect, but the pause that sets apart a couplet creates stark silence. By end-stopping the word “drowning” before inserting a space between the lines, Owen forces reflection on the drowning boy soldier and the speaker’s experience as a distressed witness, illustrating the feelings of responsibility yet helplessness that pervade him as the speaker watches a fellow soldier painfully die. This effect is magnified by three near-rhymes in a row and finally the repeated “drowning” at the end of the stanza, evoking sympathy and horror. By describing the graphic details of the soldier’s suffering and providing one image that penetrates his mind from his time on the front, the speaker demonstrates his guilt over that soldier’s death, even though the speaker does not start the gas attack that leads to the man’s painful death or deserve any legitimate blame. Suggesting that the speaker feels responsible in some way for the soldier’s suffering and obligated to relieve it, Owen writes, “before my helpless sight,” which depicts the speaker’s struggle with his inability to help the soldier or prevent further suffering. Owen similarly struggles at the front, seeing his fellow soldiers dying and failing to be able to help, which results in guilt that overpowers his experience

at war.

Owen's guilt for his dying soldiers aggravates his detestation of war, defining his experience as an officer and spurring his shell shock. According to Daniel Hipp in his essay, "By Degrees Regain[ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder': Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy," the sight of Owen's dead fellow soldiers not only characterizes the horrors of war but catalyzes his guilt. Referring to the hospital that treated Owen's shell shock, Hipp writes:

...since the men at Craiglockhart were mainly officers, their shell shock had been brought on not simply by having witnessed the horrors but having led their men into the horrors that they themselves witnessed. In other words, the psychological cause of shell shock symptoms such as Owen's stemmed not from his alienation from the work that contributed to the moral strength of the social whole, but from his unconscious recognition that the "work" of leading his men led to the moral wrong of their destruction. Guilt for having acted as a leader in battle plagued officers as much as did their fear of acting again. (32)

While the war poets at Craiglockhart formed a sense of community through their mutual suffering and worked through their shell shock together, war weighed on officers such as Owen, forcing them to consider their role and responsibility in the deaths of their comrades and provoking shell shock. In fact, the speaker's guilt in "Dulce Et Decorum Est" resembles the moral unease that officers experienced more frequently than the soldiers themselves did due to this unending sense of obligation (Hipp). Considering this side effect of responsibility in war within Owen's poetry, Hipp writes:

Owen's structuring of the human relationships in the poem allows him to explore his

guilt. The officer's command to his men to put on the masks marks him as superior to his troops in class, power and responsibility. The gassed soldier's failure to follow the command has dictated that his experience will be different from the troops' as well. Consequently, Owen identifies with the sufferer on the basis of their common isolation from the collective body. While Owen cannot feel the same physical pain as this man, his psychological crippling assures him that he will continue to suffer because of this other man's fate. (36)

Hipp conflates difference and solitude with physical pain and death, highlighting the "common isolation from the collective body" that unites the lone dying soldier and his officer. While the dying soldier becomes isolated from the troop as he is the only one to fail to get his mask on in time, the speaker is isolated as the officer, the authority amongst this watching troop, who inevitably feels guilt and responsibility for the young man's choking and unimaginable pain. Although their union results in mutual suffering, Owen's emphasis on relationships between subordinate soldiers and authoritative officers informs the resulting "crippling" guilt that inflicts the officer as the gas, gun or alternative killing machine decimates the soldier and leaves the officer with an uneasy sense of failure to fulfill his obligations. Regarding Owen's shell shock, Hipp writes, "In order for Owen to recover he had to confront the conflict between personal safety and his guilt for the suffering of others which lies at the heart of his response to war" (28), suggesting that Owen's relationships and feelings towards his fellow soldiers dictated his experience at war and that his guilt for their deaths contributed to his hatred of war. In fact, Owen's sense of obligation towards his comrade soldiers motivated him back into the trenches following his treatments at Craiglockhart and stimulated his resolve to write. According to Fussell, "[Owen] longed to return to the front although he knew he was going to be killed.

Having seen the suffering of the men, he had to be near them. As the voice of the inarticulate boys, he had to testify on their behalf” (290), indicating that even if Owen could not relieve the soldiers’ suffering, he could struggle along with them and expose war’s torment through poetry. Condemning the honor bestowed upon the decision to send young boys to war as horrible, Owen displays his antiwar disposition through his poetry, depicting mutilated friends, dying brothers and the anguish of bearing witness to it all.

However, while antiwar images and shocking depictions of death dominate Owen’s poems, the strength Owen gains from his fellow soldiers and the bonds amongst them manifest as redeeming aspects of war, providing counterevidence that Owen offers more than just antiwar sentiments. Working through his guilt, Owen realizes the power of his close relationships with his fellow soldiers, ultimately serving as redeeming aspects of his time at war. In his book *Wilfred Owen’s Voices*, Douglas Kerr notes the Artists’ Rifles officers’ training course led by Colonel W. Shirley, which stressed the importance of group morale and which Owen attended. Kerr provides useful evidence that military leaders encouraged communal bonds amongst soldiers and indicates that forming such bonds was chief amongst tactics to increase morale and thus improve performance. Kerr claims, “...[Shirley] places comradeship first among the essentials of morale, a priority confirmed by Owen but also by virtually all the literature produced from the armies, for the Great War was an epoch in the history of love” (185). While the military leaders intended for these bonds to help the soldiers work together and ultimately win the war—inevitably undertaking more killing—Owen’s admiration for his brother soldiers proves that the bonds serve a greater purpose: redeeming the war’s horrors and making the struggle of both witnessing and inducing death more bearable.

Not only do the bonds relieve the agony of the monotonous marching and systematic

shelling but they also strengthen the soldiers, comforting them with solidarity and creating a few positive interludes amongst an overall negative experience on the front. Discussing evidence of strong bonds amongst soldiers in “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” Hipp suggests that these bonds helped the soldiers survive the mentally and physically taxing war:

Communal bonds are a potential weapon with which to combat the psychological trauma by enabling his sympathy for others’ sufferings to become the cause for Owen’s self-healing when he becomes able to speak for both himself and them. All are bent double, and all are marching toward the same rest within these opening eight lines, but no man is suffering more than his fellow soldier. (35)

Hipp emphasizes the power of these bonds as they allowed the soldiers to identify with each other’s suffering and use the commonality of their experience as a “potential weapon” to continue their fight on the battlefield and within their minds. This weapon differs from their other weapons as they used it to revive their psyches and recover from the aftermath of killing rather than to kill. Essentially, the sympathy each soldier had for his comrades strengthened him, allowing him to continue marching as long as he did so beside close companions who understood his fears and waning will to march on. With a public blinded by pro-war propaganda, only the World War I soldiers themselves could understand the suffering of war and thus could form these reviving bonds.

Owen illustrates the significance of the soldiers’ strong bonds in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo” by manipulating meter, detailing both gruesome and pleasant moments at war, and mimicking the passion that Robert Graves expects to find in war poetry. Allegedly in response to a letter from Graves, which instructed, “For God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically—The war’s not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above wars” (Owen, Bell 596), Owen

writes “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo,” which translates to “In Defense of My Poetry” in Latin. Though Owen revered Graves and appreciated his guidance through the treacherous pursuit of war poetry, Owen challenges Graves’ criticism while acknowledging the redeeming elements of war. Owen demonstrates the joy he finds even in the misery of war and contrasts it with his characteristic war horror:

I have made fellowships—

Untold of happy lovers in old song.

For love is not the binding of fair lips

With the soft silk of eyes that look and long.

By joy, whose ribbon slips,—

But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong;

Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;

Knit in the welding of the rifle-thong. (Lines 17-24)

By interrupting the depiction of love with that of graphic injury and conflating these images, Owen draws attention to the starkly different experiences of the soldier at war. Owen illustrates the diametric opposition of this mixture by using one trimeter line followed by three indented pentameter lines in each stanza, creating a sense of switching between ideas and emotions. At once, the soldier endures conflicting feelings of true love for his fellow soldiers and suffering or even just witnessing horrific bodily wounds. Suggesting that the shared experience of war and unknowable suffering forms and strengthens the soldiers’ bonds, Owen writes, “But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are strong; / Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips; / Knit in the welding of the rifle-thong” (Lines 22-4). The words “hard,” “drips,” and “welding” detail

the roughness with which the men care for wounds on the front and out of which bonds between soldiers fortify. In fact, the words “joy,” “strong,” and “knit” suggest a closeness that supports these bonds. Just as the bandage that contains the bloody, dripping arm supports the soldier’s arm and enables healing, the bonds that encourage soldiers to aid their wounded fellow soldier in the thralls of battle bring pleasure to life at war that helps the broken men heal their physical and mental wounds. While Graves requested more positive war poetry, Owen maintains his dark depictions of war, but inserts moments of redeeming love amongst soldiers and emphasizes the joy within the gloom, suggesting that out of misery grows love.

As the soldiers struggle with conflicting experiences with brotherly love and horrifying death, Owen demonstrates the extent to which the bonds amongst them not only bring joy but help the soldiers persevere and cope with the roles they play in the death of war. Owen illustrates more of the joy amongst horror in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo:”

Merry it was to laugh there—

Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.

For power was on us as we slashed bones bare

Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder. (Lines 5-8)

By using the word “merry” before describing the horrors that the soldiers endure, Owen creates a confusion about the joy that emanates from the soldiers’ laughter and friendships in light of the continuous violence in the soldiers’ routine lives. The trochee on “merry” amongst conventional iambs and the subsequent three indented lines separates the descriptions of suffering from those of joy. This separation highlights the contrasting experiences soldiers undergo, drawing attention to the joy that enables soldiers to persevere. Just as the soldiers must cope with the horrors they see and feel at war while finding relief in their relationships with other soldiers, Owen’s

combination of both horror and joy in one stanza forces a struggle to reconcile these conflicting feelings. This struggle resembles that of the soldiers.

Owen further complicates the soldiers' struggle by drawing attention to the death these soldiers trigger and providing an image of mutilated enemy bodies. Arranging a spondee on the alliterative "bones bare," Owen highlights and calls back to his shock at seeing his comrades' mutilated bodies. The depictions of dead enemy soldiers juxtapose the soldiers' original merriment and laughter that introduces the stanza, evoking a sarcastic jolliness that mocks the gaiety of traditional war poetry that Graves recommended. The words "power," "slashed," and "murder" underscore the soldiers' brutal duties. While they struggle with these duties, the soldiers desensitize themselves to the deaths they cause and function as killing machines that in theory do not have to suffer the guilt of war. However, the soldiers do suffer this guilt. By using an amphibrach on the last line of the stanza, Owen highlights the word "murder" and conveys the sense that, while soldiers must desensitize themselves to war's required killing, the remorse that coincides with killing lingers and punctuates the soldiers' lives, despite attempts to rid themselves of this remorse, as the line's extra syllables spill into the last word: murder. Indicating that war inspires conflicting emotions and experiences, such as desensitization and remorse, Brearton writes, "...paradoxes inform the struggle that lies at the heart of combatants' war poetry: it is inspired by that which also denies its values, and thus posits a symbiotic relationship between violence and creativity even as it uses one to counter the other; it forces two incompatible roles on the writer, creator and killer" (10). While the war poet acts as both creator and killer, killing his friends again and again as he writes and revises their deaths, the soldier becomes both remorseful and desensitized, and the experience at war exists as both traumatic and empowering. Against a backdrop of brutal yet desensitized killing, Owen suggests that

laughing with fellow soldiers stands out as one of few positive experiences at war. The bonds amongst soldiers help them get through this struggle with conflicting feelings, allowing them to pursue joy rather than become robotic killing machines.

Throughout “Greater Love,” Owen continues this exploration of joy at war and apostrophizes romantic love, presenting several examples of its weakness in comparison with the greater love that results from the powerful bonds amongst soldiers during war. The title “Greater Love,” which may allude to a passage from the Gospel that states, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (“JOHN 15:13 KJV”), underscores the strong bonds that form amongst soldiers at war as each becomes willing to die for any other. Belittling romantic love in favor of this greater love amongst soldiers, Owen compares soldiers’ suffering to gestures of romantic love. Invented for the occasion of this poem, which unconventionally depicts romance’s insignificance in relation to war, Owen’s nonce stanzas contain vacillating trimeter lines and indented pentameter lines. This staggered structure and use of different line lengths draws attention to the longer lines, which tend to include evocative images or ideas of death or love. Owen writes, “Red lips are not so red / As the stained stones kissed by the English dead” (Lines 1-2), conflating images of sensuality and romance with blood and brutality. By using the words “red lips” and “kissed” in conjunction with “stained stones” and “dead,” all of which are stressed, Owen describes the soldiers’ deaths in gentle, beautiful terms and underscores the extent to which their deaths are anything but gentle or romantic. The mix of iambs and trochees in these lines and throughout the metrically strange poem evokes an uneasiness that contrasts the beauty and resembles soldiers’ uneasiness as they cope with the death they cause. Not only is the blood of the English spilled but the English spill the blood of enemy soldiers. Owen emphasizes all that soldiers endure at war—bloody mutilation of friends

and enemies alike—and how insignificant “red lips” and kisses seem in comparison. Rather, the importance lies within the soldiers’ mandated duties, even though these orders are destructive to both enemy and self. Owen writes: “O Love, your eyes lose lure / When I behold eyes blinded in my stead” (Lines 5-6)! Just as love’s “eyes lose lure,” idealized romance dulls when the soldiers consider the destruction they instigate. The knowledge that the speaker blinded—or harmed or killed—another man plagues him, causing him to reject notions of romantic love to which men not at war may aspire and leaving him dull, empty and alone.

Using the gentleness of love to highlight these horrors of death at war, Owen compares love’s voice to the silenced voices of the soldiers who die in battle:

Your voice sings not so soft,—

 Though even as wind murmuring through rafters loft,—

Your dear voice is not dear,

Gentle, and evening clear,

As theirs whom none now hear,

 Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed. (Lines 13-8)

Through the phrases “not so soft” and “not dear,” Owen conveys love’s weakness when compared with the death of soldiers, whose voices are even softer than that of this gentle love because they no longer exist. Owen’s use of negative comparisons evokes powerful anger, highlighting all that the soldiers do not have the luxury to feel or do. The words “stopped,” “piteous,” and “coughed,” underscore the suffering that ends the soldiers’ lives and silences their voices, strengthening the distinction between gentle love and brutal death and illustrating the loneliness of killing and witnessing death. The end of life and quiet of the dead suggests a need for companionship for the surviving soldiers. This companionship is not romantic or sexual but

brotherly. By discussing love in terms of death at war and indicating that romantic love matters little considering what soldiers endure, Owen invokes ideas about the relationships amongst soldiers that form following death.

These relationships amongst soldiers help them cope with the death they both witness and bring about. Owen's suspected homosexuality, which he would not have been permitted to openly discuss in his published poetry, also provides context for the love amongst the soldiers at war.² Romantic love and sexual desire for his fellow men permeates Owen's poetry with his illustrative descriptions of boys' bodies. Because of the shame that coincided "unspeakably wicked" (Hibberd 275) homosexual love and desire at the time he writes, Owen could be writing subtlety about his own sexual desire for his fellow soldiers. Yet, just as his poetry is not simply antiwar, his poetry is not simply erotic. However, Owen's poetry is too complex to address just one purpose or genre, such as antiwar or love poetry. According to Hibberd, Owen's "compassion for the troops was no less valid for its strong sexual element" (275). While Owen's poetry demonstrates undertones of his homosexuality, his strong feelings of brotherly love for his fellow soldiers redeem his experience of war and are not simply reflective of homosexual love and desire. Owen explores the experience of war, finding that love—whether erotic or brotherly—provides protection and escape from the depraved life in the trenches. It seems

² Homosexuality during the early twentieth century was socially denigrated, preventing open displays and publications of homosexuality. Oscar Wilde's imprisonment in 1895, which was fewer than twenty-five years prior to Owen's writing during the war, contributed to this continued sense of shame and secrecy in regard to homosexuality amongst writers (Hyde, Humphreys 13-4). In fact, in her article "Not 'A Normal, Manly Fellow': Wilfred Owen's Contested Masculinities, 1900-1918," Danielle Thornton writes, "Although the revelation of Wilde's homosexuality merely reinforced the affinity between a want of manliness and other forms of dissidence, henceforth, any sign of effeminacy or artistic tendencies could arouse suspicion" (44), suggesting a reluctance to openly demonstrate one's homosexuality in writing at this time out of fear of suffering a fate similar to that of Wilde. Hibberd reinforces this sense of secrecy towards one's homosexuality: "His sexuality could be central to his writing, without being visible to people who might disapprove of it. His poetry... would be driven by love for men, an entirely honourable motive that could be openly stated yet at the same time kept hidden" (276).

especially salient to consider the love shared amongst all soldiers and the resulting strength and redemption.

Although the relationships amongst the soldiers were not always or even usually sexual, they were characterized by feelings of love and support that the men at war needed to survive but had no other way of attaining. Fussell writes:

Given this association between war and sex, and given the deprivation and loneliness and alienation characteristic of the soldier's experience—given, that is, his need for affection in a largely womanless world—we will not be surprised to find both the actuality and the recall of front-line experience replete with what we can call the homoerotic. I use that term to imply a sublimated (i.e., “chaste”) form of temporary homosexuality. Of the active, unsublimated kind there was very little at the front. What we find, rather, especially in the attitude of young officers to their men, is something more like the “idealistic,” passionate but non-physical “crushes” which most of the officers had experienced at public school. . . . The object was mutual affection, protection, and admiration. In war as at school, such passions were antidotes against loneliness and terror. (272)

Working from misinformation created by Owen's brother Harold, Fussell did not possess a full or accurate picture of the poet's life. Essentially, Fussell describes homosexuality at war as a placeholder for the support from women who were not there, instead embodying strong bonds of friendship amongst the soldiers. Whether or not participants' homosexuality was “temporary,” as Fussell asserts, however, this greater love and these bonds amongst soldiers serve as “antidotes against loneliness and terror,” helping the men cope with war. Owen's close relationships and feelings of “affection, protection, and admiration” very much fit into the common experience of

soldiers in World War I, regardless of sexuality. “The masculine camaraderie of war produces a love surpassing all others,” as James S. Campbell encapsulates in his article, “‘For You May Touch Them Not’: Misogyny, Homosexuality, and the Ethics of Passivity in First World War Poetry.” This summary suggests that the bonds formed amongst brother soldiers at war were stronger and the love deeper than heterosexual romantic love. Without these relationships and the sense of support and emboldening camaraderie that coincide with them, would the men have been able to survive war’s constant trials? Perhaps this question denies its own answer as the extremity of the depraved soldier’s life at war both fosters and requires these bonds. As a result, these necessary relationships strengthened the men’s resolve to fight on in both war and life.

Without women and with a need for emotional support, this sublimated homosexuality and strong bonds amongst the men developed naturally in the trenches. Kerr highlights the loneliness in the trenches and the need for a support system as he determines, “It is no good looking to women to provide for the men in the war poetry comfort, shelter, confidence and love. How could they?” (59) C. Day Lewis notes Owen’s disregard for women and concern only with the suffering of men. Lewis states, “It is noticeable that, in his war poetry, Owen had no pity to spare for the suffering of bereaved women” (Day Lewis, Blunden 18-9), which not only contributes to Owen’s belief in the strength of his soldier bonds but to his detestation of Pope, who could not know the horrors of war because of her gender. She could never be one of his beloved brother soldiers. While the soldiers themselves never experience the romantic love with which Owen compares the brotherly love between them in “Greater Love,” they embrace the power of their own camaraderie-based brotherly love:

Heart, you were never hot

Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot;

And though your hand be pale,
 Paler are all which trail
 Your cross through flame and hail:

Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not. (Lines 19-24)

By using the phrases “never hot,” “nor large,” and “nor full,” Owen suggests that the hearts of those who experience this gentle, romantic love are not as strong as those of soldiers who die at war amongst the greater love of fellow soldiers. Again, Owen’s negative comparisons convey his profound anger that war cuts short the lives of the men he loves and his certitude that his brother soldiers gain strength from this love. By punctuating the last line of the poem with an assertive “not” and by suggesting that love weeps because it cannot reach the soldiers who die at war, Owen conveys the sense that the soldiers are better off than those who experience romantic love because these soldiers have the fellowship of other soldiers, an even more powerful love. The spondees on “not large” and “nor full” slow the line and accentuate the idea that the heart that is “great with shot” contains more moral weight and strength than that of the civilian. The description of these bullet-filled hearts illustrates this powerful will to survive by displaying a heart full of weapons meant to kill the soldier but may not, empowering him to fight the bullets that try to stop his heart. The bullets have the potential to kill him, but instead, the soldier uses the bullets’ accumulated weight to fortify himself. This strength out of something that should weaken mirrors the soldiers’ resolve to live. Though their deaths are probable in this particularly bloody war, these men find the will to survive because of the support they gain from their fellow soldiers and the reviving bonds between them that urge them to fight that which may kill them.

While proclaiming the strength of these bonds, Owen expresses disdain for the public, which does not understand the brutality of war or the bonds that form amongst the soldiers as a

result. Addressing the public at home during the war as well as Graves, Owen writes in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo”:

Nevertheless, except you share
 With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
 Whose world is but a trembling of a flare
 And heaven but a highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth:

You shall not come to think them well content
 By any jest of mine. These men are worth
 Your tears: You are not worth their merriment. (Lines 29-36)

Owen describes the brutal war, repeating the word “hell” twice and deploying the phrase “sorrowful dark” to contrast death, which in comparison to the front, is like heaven. Directly following this dark depiction of war and ending the poem with final accusations towards the public, Owen asserts that while the soldiers deserve the public’s sympathy, the public does not receive, understand or experience the joy that the soldiers manage to find at war in spite of its horrors. Owen writes, “These men are worth / Your tears: You are not worth their merriment” (Lines 35-6), emphasizing the soldiers’ ability to cultivate happiness on the barren, depraved front. By inserting spondees on “Your tears” and “not worth” within the same line, Owen slows down the line, underscoring his conviction that the strong relationships between soldiers redeem the grotesque elements of war described and that the public ought to be ashamed for its failure to sympathize. No one, according to Owen, understands the horrors but the soldiers themselves, and there lies the beauty beneath the brutality of war. These relationships redeem their collective

suffering by providing laughter, brotherhood, support and love. In the last letter Owen wrote to his mother four days before his death, Owen expresses his fondness for his brother soldiers, “Of this I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here” (Owen, Bell 591). By helping them cope with the death they both witness and bring about, the bonds amongst these soldiers not only help them survive the war emotionally but provide pleasant moments amongst brutal and bloody death.

Owen’s poetry depicts his hatred of war and the destruction it brought to the soldiers who suffered through it, but neglecting his descriptions of joy amongst his fellow soldiers ignores the significance of their bonds. The soldiers fostered and used these strong bonds to find the will to survive the war despite its horrors. These bonds and the shared experience of coping with seeing the deaths of friends and killing enemy soldiers functioned as redeeming aspects. Though he died in battle one week before the Armistice (Day Lewis, Blunden), Owen died with the love of his friends and fellow soldiers, brightening an otherwise dark and depraved experience at war.

Chapter Two:

“My Black Face Fades”: Myopia and Insight in the Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa from the Vietnam War

Yusef Komunyakaa learns about the human condition during the Vietnam War through close observations of both his fellow American soldiers and his enemy. Through his examination and by virtue of his status as a black soldier fighting for a country that hardly recognized his rights, Komunyakaa discovers his ability to relate to the invaded Vietnamese citizens and his inability to connect with his fellow American soldiers while at war. In his poetry, he depicts the beauty of the Vietnamese landscape alongside the destruction wrought upon it by war, and meditates on how human beings connect and, sometimes, fail to understand each other. By analyzing three of his poems, I will demonstrate how the deeper understanding of human beings that Komunyakaa cultivates while serving in Vietnam partly redeems his experience at war and how camaraderie amongst his fellow soldiers cannot.

Despite the intense activism, violent protests and ideologically divided nations that characterized the Vietnam War, the literary canon resulting from it pales in comparison to that of the First World War, which history remembers for its poetically prolific soldiers. In his article, “‘Where is Vietnam?’ Antiwar Poetry and the Canon,” Michael Bibby notes the exclusion of Vietnam antiwar poetry from many literary anthologies. He writes, “The lack of antiwar poetry in teaching anthologies is so consistent that it suggests relationships to the broader ideological agenda not only to displace dissent in American culture but also to erase the antiwar threat to consensus” (163). Essentially, Bibby suggests that editors censor antiwar ideals from and following the Vietnam War. Perhaps these editors aim to forget the national shame of losing the first war in America’s existence, the global violence that ensued during the twenty-year war, or

the moral wrongs that stained countless psyches. Whether or not Bibby is correct in his assessment of the motivations, he is correct in proclaiming that this should not be the case. Neglecting to publish Vietnam War literature ignores the important role it plays in fostering understanding of historical issues and in giving a voice to marginalized groups. Bibby writes, “By canonizing a representation of American literature practically devoid of dissent over the Vietnam War, teaching anthologies function as an apparatus for this suppression” (163). As the anthologies exclude critical antiwar literature, they ignore and silence the voices that oppose the leading war and political rhetoric. During this time period, there were many such voices. For the first time in history, the media bombarded the public with harrowing images and videos of the war on televisions every night, facilitating public disagreement and unrest unlike any war before it.³ Following the war’s end, it remains important to acknowledge this disagreement, to hear all voices, and to remember the atrocities suffered in both Vietnam and the United States. Despite its exclusion from anthologies, the literature from the Vietnam War creates and contributes to a dialogue on the Vietnam War experience. Without this literature, the atrocities become less visible and harder for the watching public to understand.

This dialogue among Vietnam War veterans through Vietnam War literature also creates a space for traumatized veteran writers to both express their pain from these atrocities and work through their suffering. Serving as catharsis, writing about the horrors they experience allows soldiers, veterans and observers to explore their pain and suffering. Bibby writes:

The Vietnam War has pervaded, infiltrated, and intervened in American cultural

³ According to Bibby, “Widespread domestic dissent, protest, riot, and resistance jeopardized consensus in the U.S. during the Vietnam era more than perhaps in any other period in modern memory; and since the fall of Saigon a dominant theme in domestic politics has been the suppression of leftism and the re-legitimation of the mainstream” (163). The “re-legitimation of the mainstream” enforces marginalization of opposing, non-mainstream voices, even as this war becomes more publicized than any before it.

production at a variety of levels. Americans have focused obsessively on the Vietnam War, perhaps more than any war since the Civil War: Vietnam is the war we lost, the war that introduced “post-traumatic stress” into our national lexicon. Indeed, the Vietnam War signifies a trauma in American culture, and like victims of trauma, Americans write and rewrite the war in order to be purged of it. (159)

Releasing and recasting the horrors of war from the soldiers’ minds to the page allows soldier-writers to express and share the ideas they otherwise keep to themselves. Stephen P. Hidalgo, in his article “Agendas for Vietnam War Poetry: Reading the War as Art, History, Therapy, and Politics,” summarizes, “Within the context, the poet of war experience, Veteran or protestor, endures a kind of social, political, and historical marginalization which the war poem seeks to invert, redefining the center of common experience out of its socially and psychologically repressed margins” (5). By using the word “marginalization,” Hidalgo encompasses the extent to which the public forgot the soldiers’ experiences in Vietnam upon their returns home, presuming their pain dissipated after they left Vietnam. War poetry, and writing and sharing amongst the soldier-poets, diminishes the loneliness of coping with war’s atrocities.

While Komunyakaa did not commit his experiences at war to poetry until the eighties, creating *Dien Cai Dau*, his book of poetry on the Vietnam War, served as catharsis. The title, which translates to “crazy” or “crazy in the head” in Vietnamese, was a term used by Vietnamese citizens to describe American soldiers (“Yusef Komunyakaa”), conveying the unnecessary death and destruction of this war as well as its adverse effects on soldiers’ psyches. In a radio interview in 1989, Komunyakaa stated, “In a way, the brain is sort of like a reservoir. It contains all the frightening images and what have you. I finally realized that writing the book would be sort of a letting-go process. It was a way of dealing with the images inside of my head” (Hanshaw 16).

For Komunyakaa, writing about what he had seen helped him work through it. This sense of shared experience positively impacts veterans because, for many of them, "...in the poet's consciousness, the war is still being fought" (Hidalgo 6). Inevitably, the suffering survives the soldiers' stays in Vietnam.

How Vietnam War poetry differs from poetry from previous wars, however, complicates this logic of catharsis. Fifty years after Owen, Komunyakaa confronts his own "battle with the psyche" (Asali 144) and participates in an even newer trend in war poetry, defined by lasting guilt. While the antiwar poetry of the Great War is largely portrayed as vivid illustrations of horrors never before seen by the public or represented in war poetry, the antiwar poetry from the Vietnam War is characterized by pervasive guilt and feelings of blame in soldiers fulfilling their duties and killing innocent men. In the introduction to the anthology *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*, Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry and Basil Paquet note the Vietnam soldiers' internalization of this blame:

Previous war poets have traditionally placed the blame for the horrors of war directly on others. What distinguishes the voices in this volume is their progression toward an active identification of themselves as agents of pain and war—as "agent-victims" of their own atrocities. This recognition came quickly to some and haltingly to others, but it always came with pain and the conviction that there is no return to innocence. (Rottmann, Barry, Paquet v)

By describing the soldier-poets as "agents of pain and war" and as "agent-victims of their own atrocities," Rottmann, Barry and Paquet draw attention to the soldiers' role and responsibility in bringing about war's horrors. As both agents and victims, the soldiers of the Vietnam War suffer the anguish of experiencing war and the guilt of instigating this and other post-war distressing

feelings for others. These ideas about the soldiers as “agent-victims” of war’s atrocities with psyches forever stained by guilt generally encompasses the trend towards which Vietnam War poetry moves. This trend includes “poets whose war experience, full of guilt and regret, led them to a post-war body of work expressing an extraordinary subsequent interest in the country of their former enemy, and in its art, culture, and people” (Goldensohn). Vietnam War poetry differs from earlier war poetry due to its acknowledgement of and even sometimes identification with the opposing side. In fact, “...American soldier poetry was not merely dedicated to battle and battlefield fraternity, but was emblematic of a frequently ambivalent engagement with the enemy and with the Vietnamese civilian population” (Goldensohn). By moving away from the camaraderie of war, Vietnam War poetry emphasizes the blame the soldiers put on themselves for war’s horrors and the murder of innocent men.

Focusing on these innocent men, Komunyakaa takes an interest in and writes about the Vietnamese citizens, culture and landscape. In fact, he found them recognizable. In “Still Negotiating the Images: An Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa,” Komunyakaa discusses the familiarity of the Vietnamese landscape with his interviewer William Baer:

I knew a good deal about the culture. I’d started reading about Vietnam and the Vietnamese culture even before I went over there. And when I arrived, I was especially struck by the land itself, the terrain. It was such a vibrant landscape, especially during the rainy season. There’s vegetation everywhere, and I’d grown up with that in Louisiana. When you drop a seed on the ground, something automatically grows, so that kind of vibrancy in the landscape didn’t frighten me. (Hanshaw 72)

The luxuriant growth of the Vietnam landscape underscores a regeneration and continuance of life that juxtaposes the soldiers’ killing. While the living and growing vegetation did not frighten

Komunyakka, it did contribute to his guilt for ending lives. Reminding him of home, the natural environment of his war experience increased Komunyakaa's guilt as he identified with it and its inhabitants:

I was quite aware of Vietnam's history, and I think that fact had a lot to do with my feelings. A crucial bond was the concept of the Vietnamese "peasant." I myself came from a peasant society of mostly field workers, and my father always believed if one worked hard enough, he or she could rise to a certain plateau—a black Calvinist. So I saw the Vietnamese as familiar peasants because that's what they are, and, consequently, I could have easily placed many of the individuals I'd grown up with in that same situation—especially the sharecroppers. (73)

Because he could imagine familiar faces from home in the position of these Vietnamese peasants—possibly even himself—Komunyakaa related to the work they did, their social status and their treatment by dominating forces. As the dominating force and the agent of this ill-treatment towards the Vietnamese citizens, Komunyakaa acknowledges his intrusion on their lives and land and suffers guilt not only for the lives taken by American soldiers but for their invasion of the Vietnamese citizens' homes.

In "Starlight Scope Myopia," the fourth poem in *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa explores this guilt about intrusion and killing. He depicts the war "as a torturous web of interactions between empathy and alienation, 'us' and 'them,' killer and killed" (Hill). Blurring the lines between enemy and comrade and past and present, Komunyakaa emphasizes the humanity of the Vietnamese soldiers, who continue to haunt his dreams:

Smoke-colored

Viet Cong

move under our eyelids,

lords over loneliness

winding like coral vine through

sandalwood & lotus,

inside our lowered heads

years after this scene

ends. (Lines 10-8)

The word “smoke” suggests the ghost-like quality to these memories and the fog-like filter through which soldiers remember their times in Vietnam, but it also highlights the hazy morality at war. Soldiers no longer live by established principles about right and wrong—it’s no longer wrong to kill—and enemies are no longer human. The movement of the Vietnamese soldiers under “[the] eyelids” of American soldiers forges a connection between the Vietnamese soldiers and the physical bodies of the American soldiers. This physical connection creates a link between the opposing troops. The use of the ampersand similarly signals connection as the speaker describes the Vietnamese soldiers moving through the natural environment. By using human bodies and nature to describe and connect both groups of soldiers, Komunyakaa draws similarities between warring groups that otherwise remain in strict opposition as enemies. The American soldiers’ “lowered heads” indicate sorrow as they recall these memories years later, perhaps mourning or feeling guilt for the lives they ended. Even though the events of the poem

are memories of the past, Komunyakaa employs the present tense, suggesting that this experience of observing one's enemy and struggling to kill other men persists in the soldier's psyche even after he pulls the trigger.

Demonstrating that the enemy sides share more similarities than they might suppose, Komunyakaa further draws attention to the connections between opposing groups of soldiers by imagining shared interactions:

One of them is laughing.

You want to place a finger

to his lips & say "shhhh."

You try reading ghost talk

on their lips. (Lines 29-33)

Referring to the Vietnamese soldiers' silently moving lips as "ghost talk" hints that these soldiers will die. The "you" wants to protect his enemy. The "you" wants to not kill the Vietnamese soldier he observes, but he knows he must. While the speaker starts the poem using first person plural, he switches to second person. This switch implicates the audience in the moral difficulty. It also illuminates how the camaraderie that redeemed Owen's war experience fails to redeem Komunyakaa's. Instead, Komunyakaa demonstrates not the camaraderie amongst fellow soldiers but the connection amongst human beings on opposite sides:

This one, old, bowlegged,

you feel you could reach out

& take him into your arms. You

peer down the sights of your M-16,

seeing the full moon

loaded on an oxcart. (Lines 35-40)

By his inclination to embrace the enemy soldier, the speaker demonstrates the complicated emotions of war. The ampersand again illustrates the fortified connection between “you” and the enemy soldier. At the hinge of an enjambment, the visual knot of the ampersand creates an image of tension and a sense of the speaker’s conflicted feelings.

As Komunyakaa continues to employ second person, the audience gets caught up in these complicated emotions and connection, and an overwhelming guilt for what “you” are supposed to do lingers beyond the last line. Despite feeling close to the Vietnamese citizens that he watched, Komunyakaa notes in an interview the difficulty of knowing that not only could they kill him but that he could—and was supposed to—kill them:

And yet I knew—I wasn’t insane—I knew that they could kill you, you know? There was a lot of tension there. Okay, for example, I refused to use those derogatory terms for the Vietnamese. And I would question people about them because I thought it paralleled other similar terms for African Americans—that kind of...you know, degradation. You have to degrade before you can kill. So in a certain sense, I identified with the Vietnamese, and yet I knew that I could get killed by those same individuals. And that’s a real trick inside the head to think about it in that way. (Nelson)

By writing, “You have to degrade before you can kill,” Komunyakaa touches on the difficulty of killing at all but even enemies charged with doing the same to him. Knowing that the people with

whom he can identify aim to kill him complicates Komunyakaa's attitude towards the war, mixing his desire to preserve human life with his inclination to protect himself, which "Starlight Scope Myopia" explores. Just as Komunyakaa blurs the past with the future and the soldier with the M-16 with the reader, the speaker's decision to pull the trigger clouds his mind. This haziness mimics, as closely as poetry can, the torture and confusion of ending human life—even that of your country's worst enemy.

Racism back home contributed to Komunyakaa's connection to the Vietnamese citizens and complicated his identity as an American soldier, causing him and other African American soldiers to wonder if their country's enemy was also their own. Considering the speaker in his *Dien Cai Dau* poems, Komunyakaa discusses "That elusive black soldier," indicating how important race is to the book. In an interview with Muna Asali, Komunyakaa expands on the particular inner conflict of the African American soldier in Vietnam:

He's just one black face connected to a parade of others who have risked their lives for this enigma we call America. This black soldier in Vietnam, however, seems rather uncomfortable with his role. Maybe the agent of free will lurks like a specter in his psyche. Or perhaps he feels guilty, because he has a sense of history and he knows that he's merely a cog in the whole contradictory machinery some might call democracy or even manifest destiny. Maybe he has singled out himself because he feels responsible. After all, we are condemned to carry the weight of our own hearts. Indeed, this soldier seems limboed in a kind of existential loneliness. (Asali 141-2)

Komunyakaa puts into words the tension within the African American soldier between duty to his country and guilt for his actions in defense of it, given America's treatment of African Americans throughout history not only as property but also as weapons. These African American

soldiers of the past—and ostensibly the present of the Vietnam War—function as weapons less worthy of the war’s intended gains than the country’s white soldiers. By equating the African American soldiers to the “cog in the whole contradictory machinery” of democracy or manifest destiny, Komunyakaa highlights the extent to which any good end that war brings (during the Vietnam War, American policymakers intended this good end to be democracy for all) is not accessible to African Americans, whether or not they fought and suffered for it in war. Angela M. Salas notes in her book *Flashback Through the Heart: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa* this contradictory lack of access in *Dien Cai Dau*: “What could be more political than to confront a young white reader with what the black soldier heard in the field: that while the soldier was fighting for democracy in Vietnam, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated for fighting for the democratic rights of blacks in America” (68)? This tension calls into question the African American soldier’s identity while at war, spurring increased guilt and suffering.

The civil rights movement and fierce antiwar activism during the 1960s and 70s colored the African American soldier’s experience in Vietnam, contributing to these complicated and tense feelings of a divided self. Wallace Terry, in the introduction to his book *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History*, underscores the multiple wars African American soldiers fought: against the Vietnamese Communist enemy, against those who opposed the civil rights movement’s gains, and against those who refuse to believe African Americans suffered discrimination at all. Of the African American soldier, Terry writes:

He fought at a time when his sisters and brothers were fighting and dying at home for equal rights and greater opportunities, for a color-blind nation promised to him in the Constitution he swore to defend. He fought at a time when some of his leaders chastised him for waging war against a people of color, and when his Communist foe appealed to

him to take up arms instead against the forces of racism in America. The loyalty of the black Vietnam War veteran stood a greater test on the battleground than did the loyalty of any other American soldier in Vietnam; his patriotism begs a special salute at home.

(Terry xv-xvi)

The African American soldier deals with dueling pressures while fighting for his life in Vietnam. As he fights for a “color-blind nation” that may or may not refuse him basic rights and opportunities upon his return home, the African American soldier fights with additional weight on his shoulders. Waging the multiple wars that Terry lists weighs him down. The result upon his return home should be additional salutes and thanks from this “color-blind nation.” Instead, he suffers additional marginalization and racism. Simply put, “The war was destroying the bright promises for social and economic change in the black community” (Terry xiii), and the antiwar sentiment, to its very core, was about race.

Entrenched in this period of antiwar protests and racism, Komunyakaa experienced this internal tension of remaining loyal to the fight for civil rights as well as to the protection of the lives of fellow soldiers. In his interview with Baer, Komunyakaa refers to the civil rights and antiwar movements back home:

When you were out in the field in an ambush situation, you didn't have time to think about such things. You were keenly sensitive to surviving, and you knew that you had to connect to the other American soldiers. But when you saw friends getting killed or wounded, all kinds of anger would flare up, but let's face it, if you're placed in that kind of situation—and you've been trained—you're going to fire your weapons. You are going to stay alive. You're going to try to protect your fellow soldiers, black or white. But at the same time, there were those vicious arguments with one's self. One would feel

divided. (Hanshaw 74)

Although Komunyakaa notes that there was not much time to think about the issues of his race and complexities of his role as a soldier, he and other African American soldiers still felt the coinciding pressures and struggle beneath this weight. The black soldier struggled not only with the loss and atrocities he saw at war but also the confusion and complexity of fighting a war that ignored the issues his race faced. These “vicious arguments” with himself and feeling of division within himself express the essence of the black soldier’s inner conflict and additional turmoil at war.

In the Asali interview, Komunyakaa expands on the distance between the collective troop and the individual soldier:

In fact, I realized about a year after I completed *Dien Cai Dau* that I had been very lonely in Vietnam. I was even lonely in a crowd, and spent most of my time trying to make some sense out of the whole damn thing. I was very conscious of what I was doing and what was happening to me. Though we were responsible collectively, we were also responsible as individuals. I had to write *Dien Cai Dau* as a witness. And I couldn’t escape the prison of my skin, which has also been the source of my strength. (Asali 142)

Struggling internally, Komunyakaa weighed his conflicting feelings about war and race alone. As a member of the collective body of American soldiers in Vietnam and as an individual gun-wielding soldier, Komunyakaa felt guilt about war’s atrocities, as he and they carried them out. This feeling of joint responsibility for the death and destruction of war connects the individual black soldier with the collective American soldiers, both black and white. At the same time, Komunyakaa “couldn’t escape the prison of [his] skin,” suggesting that this connection is not strong enough to erase or forgive the distinguishing line between the black and white soldiers

during wartime. Komunyakaa's self-designated status as a "witness" underscores this dividing line and solidifies his position on a different side than the white soldiers, or the true and honorable heroes of the war. As a black soldier, even though he is American, Komunyakaa does not enjoy this designation. He was simply a witness to the white soldiers' heroic and patriotic deeds. Also to be a "witness" is to be an outsider. As a witness, Komunyakaa remains outside the conflict between the white American soldiers and Vietnam. By stating that "the prison of [his] skin" was also "the source of [his] strength," Komunyakaa signals his attempt to reconcile his divided self by garnering strength from his position as a black soldier fighting alongside, while an outsider amongst, white soldiers. In spite of the segregation and racism that carried over to war, he continues to strive to understand his experience in Vietnam.

In *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa's "Tu Do Street" examines the familiar segregation of the American South reproduced amongst American soldiers in Vietnam and searches for potential sources of integration. The poem begins, "Music divides the evening. / I close my eyes & can see / men drawing lines in the dust" (Lines 1-3). By beginning the poem with music that "divides," Komunyakaa creates a sense of the separation that infiltrates the experience of the African American man and soldier. The image of men drawing these dividing and segregating lines highlights the arbitrary nature of this separation and distinguishing between men. Underscoring this separation and recalling segregation from his childhood, Komunyakaa continues, "America pushes through the membrane / of mist & smoke, & I'm a small boy / again in Bogalusa. *White Only* / signs & Hank Snow" (Lines 4-7). The word "membrane" matched with "mist & smoke" indicates a blurring between the sides of this separating line, which is drawn in impermanent dust. The permeability of membrane and the obscuring mist and smoke mirror the complexities of this black soldier's situation as he passes between both sides of the line, fighting with his

fellow American soldiers in battle while refused entry to the white soldiers' bars in off-duty hours.

In "The Complexity of Being Human: An Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa,"

Komunyakaa discusses this off-duty separation:

In the rear, that's where the problems exist between American soldiers. Not in the field, not on the LZs and what have you—you know, when they're dependent on each other to fend off the enemy—but it was in the rear when they were drinking and trying to forget the war and elements of the war. But mainly when they're drinking. Then the real American shows up again. That was real problematic. (Nelson)

Komunyakaa's mention of "the real American" is striking. It confirms that racism pervaded the American military in Vietnam. While battle and the immediate need to fight for one's life halted racist notions, they resumed again once soldiers no longer relied on each other to survive. Again, black soldiers function as weapons—shields in this instance—for the benefit of others. In the poem, there is a blurring between the present and the past as the speaker invokes past memories and past violence from segregation in the American South, specifically Komunyakaa's hometown Bogalusa, Louisiana. The "*Whites Only* signs" of the segregated South appear again in Vietnam, where the culture does not separate its people based on race like that of America. However, because American soldiers occupy these areas in Vietnam and maintain authority, segregation and racism follow. By writing America as the subject of these lines and as the actor that "pushes through the membrane," Komunyakaa addresses America's role in facilitating segregation and racism in America and American-occupied spaces in Vietnam. Illustrating the segregation that surpasses American boundaries and severs bonds among soldiers, Komunyakaa underscores the severity of the tense racial issues with which African American soldiers had to

cope while fighting and living in Vietnam.

Komunyakaa seeks understanding of the racial divide between black and white American soldiers in Vietnam and draws attention to the underlying and unnoticed connections amongst them. He writes:

We have played Judas where
 only machine-gun fire brings us
 together. Down the street
 black GIs hold to their turf also.

An off-limits sign pulls me deeper into alleys, as I look
 for a softness behind these voices
 wounded by their beauty & war. (Lines 15-22)

By stating that “only machine-gun fire brings us / together,” while detailing the separate bars for black and white soldiers, Komunyakaa draws attention to the lack of brotherly love amongst soldiers at war that Owen, in contrast, finds redemptive. Without bonds or a sense of mutual suffering amongst the soldiers, how do the soldiers come together to fight? Supposedly “machine-gun fire” sparks integration. However, because Komunyakaa next writes, “Down the street / black GIs hold their turf also,” the sense of arbitrary separation prevails. In search of a connection to the other side of the tense dividing line, the speaker enters another bar and watches the women who work there, presumably as sex workers. These women are “wounded by their beauty & war,” serving as victims of this war with whom the speaker can relate. The speaker continues to search for sources for integration between black and white soldiers, finding it within their relationships with these women:

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. (Lines 27-34)

A line break separates “black & white” and “soldiers,” signaling the tense, complicated and relentlessly separated relationship between the black and white soldiers. Race divides the soldiers and, though duty to their country connects them, they still do not know whether to embrace this connection or maintain this division. The concluding lines of the poem reveal an answer to the question: how do black and white soldiers come together to fight? The lines display an uncomfortable sense of integration routed through women's bodies, which function as a vehicle for a connection between the black and white soldiers, even though the men do not know that they connect in this way. The ampersands between “black” and “white” and between “beauty” and “war” earlier in the poem join opposing words, mimicking this underlying and unknown connection. The use of enjambment throughout the poem represents the ideas that travel through the speaker's mind as he strives to make sense of his experiences and understand the culturally mandated separation amongst brother soldiers. Throughout “Tu Do Street,” Komunyakaa forges connections between opposing ideas about race and war, paralleling the overlaps and unknown similarities between the black and white soldiers.

Komunyakaa's use of the “underworld” in “Tu Do Street” invokes ideas of death, lingering guilt and dividing souls into two sides, reflecting his experience as a black soldier

trying to handle segregation and reconcile right with wrong. Despite this separation, “The speaker recognizes a common humanity whose roots cross the superficial boundaries of nations, connecting those of black, white, and yellow skin. Surely the Vietnamese women these soldiers ‘run to hold,’ as well as their brothers who fought the Americans, understand what it is to be human upon this green globe and what sentence awaits each of us in death’s ‘underworld’” (Stein 550). The great equalizer is death. Komunyakaa agrees, but also brings up the idea that, despite this connection, people do not treat each other as connected through a common humanity. Even when fighting for their lives together, they ignore this common humanity and the fact that all soldiers—those they fight with and against—are also mortal humans. In the interview with Baer, Komunyakaa discusses the complicated and blurry “underworld”:

There were many symbolic underworlds in Vietnam, the underground tunnel systems, some of the bars, and the whole psychic space of the GI—a kind of underworld populated by ghosts and indefinable images. It was a place of emotional and psychological flux where one was trying to make sense out of the world and one’s place in that world. And there was, relentlessly, a going back and forth between that internal space and external world. It was an effort to deal with oneself, and with the other GIs, the Vietnamese, and even the ghosts that we’d managed to create ourselves. (Hanshaw 73-4)

As Komunyakaa works to make sense of his time in Vietnam, he equates his experience with the underworld. He creates a sense of vacillating between being an American soldier and being a black man whose life matters less to his government than those of his fellow soldiers, despite their equality in death. The ghosts in this underworld of blurred spaces and identities also represent the guilt not only for his brutal duties as a soldier but for his uncertain identity and forsaken responsibility to the civil rights movement, which the public’s preoccupation with the

Vietnam War obscures. Komunyakaa struggles to harmonize his responsibilities towards himself, his race, his country, and his fellow humans. As a result, he feels lost.

Noticing the ambiguities, Komunyakaa, through his poetry, wonders: did African American soldiers identify with the Vietnamese citizens more than they did the white American soldiers? One could say yes. African American soldiers and Vietnamese citizens share the suffering of oppression, antiwar views and classifications as less important. Additionally, white American soldiers rejected any connection with black American soldiers and refused them entry into their spaces of pleasure and bonding, consequently refusing them entry into their brotherhood of comrade soldiers. This exclusion facilitated distance among the American soldiers but fostered familiarity between black American soldiers and invaded Vietnamese citizens.

Yet, African Americans in Vietnam ultimately share a common humanity with all soldiers, including the white American soldiers, even over the segregating line. This connection's strength, which did not hold up during wartime, becomes clear after years of reflection and confrontation. Choosing to confront this connection as well as culpability for the atrocities of the Vietnam War after years of electing not to do so, Komunyakaa, in "Facing It," the last poem in *Dien Cai Dau*, searches for understanding of soldiers' role and identity—regardless of skin color or nationality. He realizes that solely celebrating black American soldiers' similarities with Vietnamese citizens and denying a connection amongst the American soldiers ignores sometimes hazy but important connections.

Komunyakaa's "Facing It" addresses the fact that his speaker, the elusive black soldier, initially turns away from his fellow combatants, only facing the connections years later. He writes:

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.

I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.

I'm stone. I'm flesh. (Lines 1-5)

Komunyakaa expresses the soldier's conflicted feelings as he finally visits the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. and with it, confronts his guilt and dark memories following the war. While the title "Facing It" suggests that the soldier reflects on his experience in Vietnam and confronts his relationship to the atrocities, it also implies the opposite, invoking questions about delay and repression. Because he does not face these memories and emotions until years after the war's end, it follows that the soldier once chose not to process them. However, the soldier chooses to confront them now, as a veteran, and no longer ignores the unsettled sense of responsibility for the war's horrors.

By beginning the poem with the line, "My black face fades" and creating a sense of the black soldier disappearing into the Memorial, Komunyakaa draws attention to the additional suffering the speaker's race brought to his experience in Vietnam. Despite this difficulty, the use of the word "black" twice within two lines aligns the strength of granite with the strength of the soldier himself through all that he had to fight in war and all that he has to face after war. Throughout the poem, "The speaker is torn between the dialectics of power and powerlessness, racial differences and human universality" (Stein 555), complicating his relationship to his fellow and enemy soldiers during the war and afterwards. As the speaker looks into the Memorial and his face fades into the wall, he sees his reflection. The duality of his face and its reflection emphasize parallels between himself and the soldier's names on the wall. Additionally,

the phrase “I said I wouldn’t,” which refers to the soldier’s refusal to cry, indicates that he prepares himself to deal with his role in the war before doing so. His refusal to cry suggests that he knows that visiting the Memorial and confronting his experience in Vietnam will elicit powerful and suppressed emotions. By writing, “No tears. / I’m stone. I’m flesh,” Komunyakaa indicates that the soldier is strong like stone but also vulnerable in a human way. He is at risk physically during war and emotionally after it, despite the abounding emotional strength that enabled him to survive. Coping with his experiences requires renewed strength, which his newfound connection to his fellow soldiers allows.

Seeing himself as one of many soldiers with a shared humanity enables Komunyakaa and his self-representative speaker to recognize the connection to fellow American soldiers that they could not find during the war. As Komunyakaa searches for understanding of war and of these human connections, the speaker searches through names on the Memorial:

I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.

I touch the name Andrew Johnson;

I see the booby trap’s white flash. (Lines 14-8)

By stating, “half-expecting to find / my own,” Komunyakaa underscores how easily his name could have been included in the names of fallen soldiers and perhaps how he feels as if his name should be inscribed onto the Memorial. This statement could also suggest that some part of the speaker died in Vietnam and that he sees this part through the names of those who actually perished, projecting his partial death onto their actual deaths. Citing the exact number of names on the Memorial highlights the gravity of so many lives lost. The use of “smoke” creates a sense

of blurriness between life and death, past suffering and surviving memories, guilt and dutiful killing, and the hazy connection between white and black American soldiers. The speaker expresses the arbitrary nature of death at war. Those who bring about death could easily die themselves. The speaker's newfound ability to see himself as connected to these soldiers through their common humanity influences him to think that he might even deserve it as well.

Additionally, the name "Andrew Johnson," which serves as an example of one of many names of memorialized American soldiers, is also the name of the first impeached president of the United States.⁴ By using the name of a former U.S. President who deprived African Americans of civil liberties as one of the memorialized soldiers' names, Komunyakaa blurs the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement in the United States, draws attention to what America chooses to honor, and facilitates remembrance of all—both good and bad. From the country's troubling history to the Vietnam War's atrocities, the American people must deal with and remember significant events such as these. The soldier Andrew Johnson's death survives in the speaker's memories as he sees the "white flash" from the explosion that killed the remembered soldier. The horrific images from war never leave the speaker, and perhaps they shouldn't. Recognizing horrors and remembering victims contributes to the sense of a common humanity amongst soldiers, veterans and a damaged post-war nation.

Komunyakaa's fear of the war's erasure from American memory informs his emphasis on the veteran's continued battle with the war's atrocities and fuels his search for understanding connections among soldiers. Employing the names on the wall to represent remembrance of

⁴ President Johnson was President Lincoln's vice president and became the 17th President of the United States following Lincoln's assassination in 1865. Johnson was impeached for violating the Tenure of Office Act by removing Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton from the position. ("President Andrew Johnson Impeached"). His Presidential Reconstruction denied former slaves involvement in the new government and essentially any rights ("Presidential Reconstruction"). The new governments implemented "Black Codes," which "preserved the system of slavery in all but its name" ("President Andrew Johnson Impeached").

war's destruction, Komunyakaa writes, "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall" (Lines 19-21). The use of the word "shimmer" provides a sense of the bright futures these young men sacrificed for their country. As the speaker realizes that the names are only reflected on the woman's blouse and remain carved into the Memorial, he understands that these bright futures no longer exist. Just as the names of fallen soldiers are etched into the black granite and reflect onto the Memorial's spectators, the horrors of war are inscribed in history. The soldiers and their horrors survive in granite and in haunting memories. Next, Komunyakaa writes:

A white vet's image floats
 closer to me, then his pale eyes
 look through mine. I'm a window.
 He's lost his right arm
 inside the stone. In the black mirror
 a woman's trying to erase names:
 No, she's brushing a boy's hair. (Lines 25-31)

Reflected in the Memorial, the speaker sees a white veteran, not himself. The "white vet's image" demonstrates the extent to which white soldiers represent America's honorable heroes of the Vietnam War, despite the speaker's existence as a black veteran still marginalized and still not mattering. The speaker says, "I'm a window," expressing his transparency and suggesting that America looks through him and does not see him but instead sees the white veterans as its heroes and bearers of sacrifice. The use of a "window" suggests that the fallen white soldier sees through the black speaker and finds no common ground, despite their shared humanity. The use of the first person reiterates the loneliness of the black veteran and the lack of camaraderie

amongst soldiers even after the war. The words “floats” and “pale” as the image of the white vet approaches the speaker create the sense of a ghost that haunts the speaker’s mind along with his harrowing memories from war.

Like this apparition of the fallen white veteran and the memories that haunt the speaker’s mind, the atrocities of the Vietnam War must be remembered. Stressing his fear of their erasure from American memory, the speaker observes, “In the black mirror / a woman’s trying to erase names.” While the woman does not actually erase names but instead brushes a boy’s hair in the reflection of the Memorial, the speaker suspects her dismissal, which ignites his worry that the names of fallen soldiers will disappear as will America’s memory of the danger to humanity the Vietnam War imposed. The speaker then realizes, “No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair,” ending the poem with the idea that American society prepares—and possibly even grooms—the next generation, as represented by this young boy, for war. Through this ending, Komunyakaa suggests that, while the atrocities of the Vietnam War seem over to America, the veterans still cope with them. Though future generations will suffer these horrors as they too fight damaging wars, maybe they will sooner realize their shared humanity and forge the connections that the Vietnam War soldiers were unable to discover.

Even though Komunyakaa and other African American soldiers did not have access to the camaraderie amongst white soldiers during the war that Owen celebrates in his poetry, Komunyakaa discovers a connection after the war’s end with the potential to penetrate the segregating line: their shared humanity. In fact, some critics find allusions to this human connection in the end of “Facing It.” Kevin Stein, in his article “Vietnam and the ‘Voice Within’: Public and Private History in Yusef Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dau*,” views the woman’s gesture not as preparing the young boy for an atrocious war but as a “thoughtful, nurturing, thoroughly

quotidian act of love” (557) that redeems some of the horrors Komunyakaa displays throughout *Dien Cai Dau*. Of “Facing It,” Stein writes, “His speaker discovers human existence is always founded on being-in-the-world, bound up with others in the beautiful and frightening relations that constitute our very lives” (558), indicating that, by nature, humans need each other. Embracing common humanity facilitates this bounding-up with others. Underscoring that humans and therefore soldiers can connect through a sense of shared human experience, Komunyakaa “seeks to expand his and his readers’ understanding of humanity, inhumanity, and the ways our individual specialness...can connect us to each other” (“Race, Human Empathy, and Negative Capability: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa” 49). The experience and suffering at war that soldiers share, matched with an embrace of their differences, would allow for more mutual understanding.

Komunyakaa, fascinated by the human condition, discovers that, instead of realizing this need and ability to connect, American soldiers in Vietnam perpetuated their separation. Primarily, he aims to understand why: “Because his quest is inward and subjective, the war’s actual events frequently serve as mere backdrop for Komunyakaa’s obdurate, private search for meaning” (Stein 542). This search for meaning includes observations about the many people entrenched in and inflicted by the Vietnam War, as Komunyakaa attempts to understand the motivations of and societal pressures on men during a contentious period. Komunyakaa yearns for a reconciliation between the opposing sides of the divided America at war and at home. In his article “Working in the Space of Disaster: Yusef Komunyakaa’s Dialogues with America,” Michael C. Dowdy draws attention to Komunyakaa’s examinations of the human psyche and the impact of war and protest. He writes:

Komunyakaa’s America is divided by social and cultural partitions. His poetry considers

questions inescapable in an exploration of American society. Is community possible in a society still absorbed and entrenched in a history of racism and oppression? How do the diverse cultures of America circumvent or subvert the obstacles to establishing meaningful self/other relationships? Komunyakaa's poetry both witnesses and reimagines the culturally inscribed forces that constitute difference as conflict in American society, forces that prevent individuals from building human communities because of ideologies that sanction only certain forms of behavior. (813)

As Komunyakaa examines the people and society around him, he wonders about the dividing lines between and within them. Though Komunyakaa knows that differences between people can foster strong connections, the societal and cultural restrictions ingrained in American people and thus American soldiers in the 1960s and 70s enabled differences to yield conflict rather than connection.

Although this connection among soldiers, veterans and victims of the Vietnam War's atrocities does not manifest during war, Komunyakaa finds learning about the human condition a redemptive aspect of his time at war. His findings do not erase the war's horrors, because these findings reveal the discrimination and prejudice that infected American society in the 1960s and 70s, but learning helps redeem these horrors for Komunyakaa. The process of searching for answers, regardless of what those answers are, functions as a positive residual result of his time in Vietnam. He even manages hope that his insights can change in the future: "Komunyakaa's Vietnam War is, indeed, little different from his poetic rendering of America. Both are chaotic, disordered, and often surreal. But, the poetry that bridges both countries exists in a communally rendered space where individual and collective actions contain the potential for positive change and vital connections between people" (Dowdy 812). The discovery of these "vital connections"

amongst victims inflicted by the Vietnam War also helps redeem the war's atrocities, fostering hope for a potential future reconciliation of currently divided peoples.

While Komunyakaa does not enjoy the redemptive camaraderie that the homogeneous soldiers of the First World War—and possibly even the white American soldiers of the Vietnam War—used to reduce war's horrors, his contemplation of the human condition and the connections amongst soldiers through his poetry serves as a positive effect of the physically and culturally destructive Vietnam War. The understanding about humans Komunyakaa gains from observing the social and cultural restrictions amongst soldiers helps redeem the negative aspects of this war, including the suffering that follows killing, choosing to kill, and existing as a mere weapon to carry out America's objectives, while America denies him and other African Americans basic human rights. Komunyakaa's poetry illustrates the atrocities and guilt of serving as a black soldier in the Vietnam War and observes his constant fight—for life, for rights and for human connection.

Chapter Three:

“His Grabs Were Violent and Painful”: Depictions of Women Soldiers in the Poetry of

Brian Turner and Elizabeth Keough McDonald from Contemporary Conflicts

Brian Turner and Elizabeth Keough McDonald portray America's more contemporary wars in their poetry, including the largely underrepresented experiences of women soldiers in the military. With Turner writing from the Iraq War and McDonald from the Persian Gulf War, each poet paints a different picture of gender relations in the military. While the man in Turner's poem attempts to save the woman soldier's injured body with his touch, the men in McDonald's poems violate women's bodies with theirs. Through one of Turner's poems and two of McDonald's, I will demonstrate the extent to which men's physical interactions with women's bodies define the woman soldier's experience at war. Drawing on mainly McDonald's poems, I will also demonstrate how camaraderie amongst women in the military can empower them to survive the war and speak out against their superiors, although this camaraderie more often remains reserved for their male counterparts.

Although the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War share many similarities with the Vietnam War, including the American public's disdain for its sacrifices of soldiers' lives and the popular notion that the United States should not be in these wars, the poetry from the wars reveals important differences. In his article “Home Fires: How Soldiers Write Their Wars,” George Packer summarizes the differences between the Iraq War and wars before it:

But Iraq was also different from other American wars... Without a draft, without the slightest sacrifice asked of a disengaged public, Iraq put more mental distance between soldiers and civilians than any war of its duration... The war in Iraq, like the one in Vietnam, wasn't popular; but the troops, at least nominally, were—wildly so. (Just watch

the crowd at a sports event if someone in uniform is asked to stand and be acknowledged.) (Packer)

By highlighting the “mental distance” between soldiers and the public, Packer underscores the extent to which the public was newly able to ignore the difficult war across the world. Because there was no draft for the Persian Gulf War or the Iraq War, the soldiers that disappeared from the security of America did so voluntarily. The public was no longer forced to confront the difficulty of war as it no longer saw the human impact of children ripped from their mothers’ tight grasps by force of the U.S. government. In stark contrast to the tearful, desperate goodbyes of earlier wars, televised and commercialized celebrations of soldiers’ returns characterize more contemporary wars. However, the excitement of these celebrations quickly dies down, and the honorees fade into the non-heroic public. Of the public’s celebrations of soldiers’ returns home and the soldiers’ fading fame, Packer notes, “Both sides of the relationship...felt its essential falseness. A tiny number of volunteers went off to fight, often two or three times, in a war and a country that seemed incomprehensible. They returned to heroes’ welcomes and a flickering curiosity. Because hardly anyone back home really wanted to know, the combatant’s status turned into a mark of otherness, a blessing and a curse” (Packer). This apathy and “flickering curiosity” towards the soldiers’ experiences in Iraq illustrates symptoms of these soldiers’ treatment as veterans. Falling into this “mark of otherness” as the excitement and false patriotism of the public fades, these veterans are forgotten.

The Persian Gulf War, the lingering tensions of which led to the Iraq War (“Persian Gulf War”), similarly produced false celebration that masked public apathy. In his article, “IDEAS & TRENDS: The Gulf War Veteran; Victorious in War, Not Yet at Peace,” Eric Schmitt writes, “When the Persian Gulf war came along, a friendless Iraqi enemy was dispatched in a 43-day

blitz of high-tech weaponry with relatively few American casualties. Troops basking in homecoming parades across the country seemed poised to recapture the respect that World War II veterans enjoyed. But veterans' advocates and counselors say that expectation has gone unfulfilled" (Schmitt). While the swift success of the American soldiers earned them "homecoming parades" and near "respect" from the public, this admiration and celebration was brief. The public did not meet this expectation for long-term respect and care for its protectors, and as a result, the veterans suffered. While the public gave them popularity, it also left them to deal with the aftermath of war on their own. Schmitt continues:

Popular support for the gulf warriors soared as it never did for those who fought in Vietnam or Korea. But four years after the war's end, doctors, counselors and veterans' advocates realize the ebullient, brief welcome-home was a poor augury. "Desert Storm vets got a parade...but then the country looked away," said Richard Fitzpatrick, executive director of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. (Schmitt)

Even when Americans celebrate their soldiers upon their returns home with parades and the cursory "Thank you for your service" to the veteran they happen to encounter in their daily lives, they can pride themselves on their thankfulness and walk away, forgetting the veteran's lingering pain. The public can celebrate the soldiers' returns home from both the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War and forget that these soldiers become veterans who need help coping with what they saw, did and experienced.

Without the public's help, both veterans and active-duty soldiers turn to writing. Regardless of whether the public pays the resulting work attention, writing about war allows soldiers to express their experiences and illustrate what fighting in this particular war was like. In his article, "The Literature of War," Joe Woodward writes, "Whether or not their books will

stand the test of time, writers continue to write about war to find the unarguable point of it. And readers read about war for the same reason. It's no surprise, of course, that this goal is never reached. Still, writers struggle to tell the truest tale, to form true opinions, and to make sense of something that is hard to understand" (Woodward). Even though soldier-writers ultimately tell their own experiences rather than the "unarguable point" of war, a potentially unreachable goal, the resulting work provides a basis for understanding their struggles both during and after war that the public otherwise cannot access. While this explanation of what war was like helps the public understand what these soldiers go through, it also reduces the soldier-writers' work to informative guidebooks rather than the literary works they are. According to Quil Lawrence's episode on NPR, "Soldiers Turned Authors Want You To Know: Our Books Don't Speak For All Vets," "that's a problem for this new generation of veteran writers: Less than 1 percent of American families include a veteran, which puts the weight of explaining these wars on writers... That weight could crush any good novel—and it's not why these guys are writing" (Quil Lawrence). Applying this additional pressure to explain the war and represent all soldiers' experiences at war diminishes the soldier-writer's own story and ignores the fact that each soldier experiences war differently. In the same episode, veteran-writer Phil Klay discusses his intentions of and aspirations for writing war literature: "What I wanted to do was hopefully complicate the image of veterans of the Iraq War... At no point did I think that I would be defining the veteran experience... I was pretty skeptical of anybody who thought they could" (Quil Lawrence). Because so many soldiers experience war, each man and woman returns home with a varying sense of what happened, which, despite the pressure to tell a common story and explain the facts of the newest war, adds rich, emotive work to the war literature canon.

The trend in war poetry shifts to include the poignant moments and gut-wrenching details

that contemporary war soldier-poets cannot shake from their memories. In regard to poetry from contemporary wars, including the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War, Woodward writes, “Today, our war literature is no less vivid and troubling—even if it is less grand in theme and less demure in detail” (Woodward). Despite being “less grand in theme” and “less demure in detail,” contemporary war literature demonstrates the horrifying, gory and emotionally difficult details of war that only soldiers could intimately know. In fact, “Their work lacks context, but it gets closer to the lived experience of war than almost any journalism. It deals in particulars, which is where the heightened alertness of combatants has to remain, and it’s more likely to notice things” (Packer). Soldier-writers produce work that reflects their own experiences and tells a vivid story not of war in general but of the war they saw. Underscoring the need for the representation of these different stories of war, Packer explores the soldiers’ experience of discovering what it means to become a soldier and strive to be a hero: “For Americans, this experience has been an overwhelmingly male one, recorded in literature written by men, but that will change as women...go off to combat zones” (Packer). So far, however, this change has not occurred. From the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, “The first wave of literature by American combatants in these long, inconclusive wars has begun to appear...Their concerns are the same as in all war writing: bravery and fear, the thin line between survival and brutality, the maddening unknowability of the enemy, tenderness, brotherhood, alienation from a former self, the ghosts of the past, the misfit of home” (Packer). Even though women account for an increasingly large portion of the military, contemporary war poetry tends to perpetuate the masculinity, harshness and homogeneity of the soldiers and experiences traditionally associated with war while ignoring other perspectives. Without many women emboldened to speak on their experiences at war or embrace how their experiences differ from those of men soldiers, women

continue to be largely absent from the war literature canon.

Not only are there few women soldiers in the U.S. military, but when women could first join the military, it did not allow them to serve in the same ways that men could. The number of women soldiers increased substantially in contemporary wars: “In the largest single deployment of women in US military history, with widespread public support, 41,000 military women made up seven percent of the US Armed Forces in the Persian Gulf,” (Bellafaire) and “An estimated 300,000 women in uniform have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Lemmon). While these military women contributed in other roles, according to Eileen Patten and Kim Parker in their article “Women in the U.S. Military: Growing Share, Distinctive Profile,” these women could not fight in combat:

Department of Defense policy prohibits the assignment of women to any “unit below brigade level whose primary mission is direct ground combat.” While this policy excludes women from being assigned to infantry, special operations commandos and some other roles, female members of the armed forces may still find themselves in situations that require combat action, such as defending their units if they come under attack. (Patten, Parker 1)

Officially, the military had banned women from fighting in combat, but in the reality and chaos of wartime, military women often had to engage in combat activities and sacrifice their own safety to protect their fellow soldiers. As a result, women soldiers transcended the bans the military placed on them in order to best serve their country.

In fact, women soldiers often found ways to fight in combat alongside the men and earn the public’s praise as heroes. According to Major General Jeanne M. Holm, the first woman general in the Air Force and the first woman two-star general in any United States armed service

(Martin), women in the military fought and suffered as the men did:

During the operation, American military women did just about everything on land, at sea, and in the air except engage in the actual fighting, and even there the line was often blurred—it was obvious from the beginning that the front lines were not what they used to be and noncombat units regularly took casualties. In the Gulf War there were no fixed positions or clear lines in the sand—Iraqi long-range artillery and especially the surface-to-surface missiles were unisex weapons that did not distinguish between combat and support troops. (Bellafaire)

By deeming the front lines of the Persian Gulf War “not what they used to be,” Holm not only suggests that the style of fighting changed but that the front lines no longer comprised solely men and that women too suffered casualties despite the ban on women fighting in combat.⁵ This “blurred” line between “actual fighting” and the work of women soldiers allowed women soldiers to engage in this “actual fighting” and function as men soldiers. While the use of the term “actual fighting” suggests that the military perceived the combat fighting in which men soldiers engaged as more valuable than the work of women soldiers, women soldiers’ contributions in combat regardless of the ban demonstrates their value. In fact, “The Persian Gulf War demonstrated to the American public the capabilities of the country’s servicewomen” (Bellafaire), which enhanced the perception of women soldiers. Shifting to the twenty-first century, “Women in this decade have made up a much greater share of the active-duty military

⁵ “In the early 1990s, Congress lifted the ban on women flying combat aircraft and serving on combat ships, and during the first Clinton administration, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin announced new rules and policies that opened more military jobs to women” (Norris), which served as important progress for the roles of women in the military. Even though the U.S. still banned women from fighting in combat, “compared with other countries, women in the U.S. military are playing a more active role in direct combat activities as a result of the Iraq war” (Norris), which often gave women opportunities to engage in combat due to the style of fighting and blurred lines between support and combat groups. The ban on women fighting in combat was finally lifted on December 3, 2015: “DoD opens all combat jobs to women. ‘There will be no exceptions,’ says Defense Secretary Ashton Carer” (“TIMELINE: A History Of Women In The US Military”).

than they have at any time in U.S. history. Among the ranks of the enlisted, 14% are now women (up from 2% in 1973), and among commissioned officers, 16% are now women, compared with 4% in 1973” (Patten, Parker 4). These substantial increases in the amount of women occupying active-duty roles support Holm’s assertion that women maintain more significant roles in the military now than they did in the past. In her article, “Women in combat? They’ve already been serving on the front lines, with heroism,” Lemmon notes, “While we weren’t looking, the military kept fighting, but its fighting force changed” throughout the fourteen years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lemmon). Essentially, women soldiers have been fighting, banned or not, amongst their fellow male soldiers, earning their status as heroes.

While the military’s fighting force changed to include women soldiers, the trend in war poetry did not. The perspective on the experience of war still reflects that of the man soldier, and the women soldier remains underrepresented in war poetry. Turner, “America’s first major soldier-poet of the 21st century” (Najmi 56), comes to represent the soldier experience during the Iraq War. Turner served as infantry team leader in the Iraq War and wrote *Here, Bullet*, a collection of poetry about his experience at war (“About Brian Turner”). Unlike Komunyakaa, who wrote *Dien Cai Dau* many years after he served in Vietnam, “Turner wrote most of the poems in *Here, Bullet* while on active duty in Iraq. This fact makes all the more remarkable the poet’s ability to combine emotive power with aesthetic distance. The distancing strategies of *Here, Bullet* are crucial to representation and individualization, and intimately tied to the white military subjectivity of its speaker” (Najmi 56). Despite Turner’s popularity as the “first major soldier-poet” from contemporary wars, the experiences he represents in *Here, Bullet* are Turner’s personal experiences—no one else’s. While his poems also exhibit what he witnessed, he himself could not experience what every soldier or civilian felt during the war, including women

soldiers. Because there are fewer women soldiers, there are also fewer women soldier-poets. As a result, the contemporary war poetry canon includes few women poets and lacks an established account of the experience of women soldiers. In her article, “The Whiteness of the Soldier-Speaker in Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet*,” Samina Najmi considers the underrepresented experiences in Iraq:

What must that do to you, I wondered, to know that for all the power you wield, your thoughts, feelings, and experiences are irrelevant; that to the people around you, you are not a person but an abstract representation of power—of uninformed, white American masculinity? How, then, would you represent those people and, above all, yourself in the poetry that tries to process and articulate the experience? This crucial question of (self) representation undergirds Turners poems in *Here, Bullet*, and in response Turner minimizes the speaker’s white military subjectivity. (56-7)

Even though Najmi explicitly refers to the experiences of Iraqi civilians, these questions could also apply to those of women soldiers, which American society and the military obscures and ignores. As a result, Turner actively attempts to include these underrepresented perspectives in his poetry without claiming to understand exactly how they felt.

Merely a witness to women soldiers’ experiences at war, Turner represents women through imagination projection as well as interactions with their physical bodies. Based on a soldier Turner knew and a death Turner witnessed (J. p. Lawrence), Turner’s “AB Negative (The Surgeon’s Poem),” the tenth poem in *Here, Bullet*, centers on the last moments of a woman soldier’s life. Turner explores the complexity of witnessing without being able to fully understand another’s experience:

Thalia Fields lies under a gray ceiling of clouds,

just under the turbulence, with anesthetics
 dripping from an IV into her arm,
 and the flight surgeon says *The shrapnel*
cauterized as it traveled through her
here, breaking this rib as it entered,
burning a hole through the left lung
to finish in her back, and all of this
 she doesn't hear, except perhaps as music—
 that faraway music of people's voices
 when they speak gently and with care, (Lines 1-11)

Thalia Fields receives her treatments displaced from the chaos and action of combat, where she earned these injuries. Instead, she “lies under a gray ceiling of clouds” and “just under the turbulence,” creating silence and a sense that the world suspends its usual bustle even as Thalia, her surgeon, her nurse, and the poem's speaker move through the sky and await Thalia's fate. The methodical dripping of the anesthetics from the IV contributes to the painful anticipation of whether Thalia will live or die. The words “cauterized,” “breaking,” “entered,” and “burning” illustrate how the war hurts the soldier's physical body and leave the image of a decimated human body struggling to survive its inhumane injuries. By comparing how Thalia must hear the others' voices to faraway music, Turner demonstrates the speaker's hope that Thalia does not suffer too much pain, even though his graphic description of her injuries indicate that he knows she does. The word “faraway” as well as Thalia's inability to hear the description of her injuries suggests not only that she slips away from consciousness and life but also that she suffers disconnection from her fellow soldier. The word “perhaps” suggests that the speaker, who likely

resembles Turner himself, does not know for certain how the dying soldier feels due both to her proximity to death and to her gender. As an uninjured soldier and as a man, he cannot know her pain.

Lacking stanza breaks, the poem's form reflects the ideas that run through the speaker's mind as he witnesses and tries to understand his fellow soldier's death, even though he cannot. The disconnection between the dying soldier and those who must watch her die continues:

...and Thalia
 drifts in and out of consciousness
 as a nurse dabs her lips with a moist towel,
 her palm on Thalia's forehead, her vitals
 slipping some, as burned flesh gives way
 to the heat of blood, the tunnels within
 opening to fill her, just enough blood
 to cough up and drown in; Thalia
 sees shadows of people working
 to save her, but cannot feel their hands,
 cannot hear them any longer, (Lines 14-24)

The word "drifts" evokes a sense of the faltering connection between the dying soldier and those who witness her fight for survival and work to save her. Though Thalia loses the ability to feel and hear—which indicates her encroaching death, distance from her witnesses, and disconnect as a woman soldier—the nurse touches her body. The descriptions of her body and the others' interactions with it illustrate how the surgeon and nurse attempt to save her life and how her body ultimately fails her. The nurse "dabs her lips with a moist towel" and tries to cool her body,

which fights “as burned flesh gives way / to the heat of blood.” The phrase “gives way,” matched with “opening,” “fill,” “cough up,” and “drown,” indicates that the soldier’s body gives up its fight for survival and reaches its inevitable death. War inflicts these injuries on the soldier, filling her body with blood and drowning her. The surgeon and nurse treat her body’s injuries “gently” and “with care.” This interaction with the woman soldier’s physical body contributes to the sense that women soldiers’ bodies characterize their experiences at war, which bestows these injuries and invites this touch.

By the end of the poem, Thalia’s bodies succumbs to its injuries. Employing images of darkness, silence and physical touch, Turner details Thalia’s death:

...Thalia Fields is gone, long gone,
 about as far from Mississippi
 as she can get, ten thousand feet above Iraq
 with a blanket draped over her body
 and an exhausted surgeon in tears,
 his bloodied hands on her chest, his head
 sunk down, the nurse guiding him
 to a nearby seat and holding him as he cries,
 though no one hears it, because nothing can be heard
 where pilots fly in blackout, the plane
 like a shadow guiding the rain, here
 in the droning engines of midnight. (Lines 33-44)

By emphasizing the physical distance between the war on the ground and Thalia’s dead body, Turner again suspends the action of war’s chaos to highlight the extent to which none of the

people in the plane know how the soldier feels as she dies. Despite the connection amongst all these people on the plane of their mutual experience as witnesses, none of them understands the soldier's feelings as she approaches and ultimately reaches death. The repeated use of "shadow" here and earlier in the poem illustrates the obscured atrocities of war, such as this moment in the plane, to which only the soldiers, surgeons and other military members must bear witness. The "blackout" coincides with the soldier's inability to hear and feel as her body succumbs to its injuries. The lost hearing, feeling and now sight evoke emptiness and blankness, despite the constant "droning" of their plane: "because nothing can be heard / where pilots fly in blackout, the plane / like a shadow guiding the rain, here / in the droning engines of midnight." The inability to see in this "blackout" indicates the extent to which the people back home are blind to soldiers' suffering and the people on the plane are blind to this soldier's experience in this moment as a dying soldier and as a woman in the military. The blanket "draped over her body" not only indicates the soldier's death but also expresses the extent to which her body remains broken, despite the surgeon's gentle and caring treatment that he administers beyond his own exhaustion.

As the surgeon realizes his patient is dead, Turner highlights the surgeon's touch with "his bloodied hands on her chest." The surgeon touches the woman soldier's body out of care and attempts to help her. With "his head sunk down / the nurse guiding him / to a nearby seat and holding him as he cries," the surgeon mourns the loss of another life that he tries and fails to save. Turner uses descriptions of touch between the surgeon and the nurse to mimic the touch between the surgeon and the soldier that represents his attempt to heal her broken body. Unlike in many other poems in *Here, Bullet*, in "AB Negative (The Surgeon's Poem)," Turner gives the soldier a name to highlight the humanity lost in the deaths he witnesses at war and to make it

clear that this dying soldier is a woman. By clearly designating this soldier a woman, Turner underscores how the vivid descriptions of touch and of her physical body align with women's experiences in the military. Women's bodies characterize their experiences at war as many endure discrimination and separation by virtue of their gender and others unfortunately suffer sexual assault.

Though this interaction between the surgeon and the woman soldier's body in "AB Negative (The Surgeon's Poem)" is positive as he administers care and tries to save her, many of the interactions between men in the military and women soldiers' bodies are negative. These interactions include sexual assault. According to the article "Sexual Assault in the Military," the male dominance and associated celebrated masculine ideals within the military illuminate a potential connection between these ideals and sexual assault rates:

The military, like most large organizations around the world, is characterized by a patriarchal structure dominated by values such as formality, rank, leadership, loyalty, camaraderie, and emotional control. Importance is placed on masculine ideals, encouraging notions of dominance, aggression, self-sufficiency, and risk-taking. The military's history of male-only peer group bonding can foster hyper-masculinity, which views masculine interactions in terms of competition, dominance, and control. The power differential between men and women in the military, due to its male-dominated leadership and structure, plays an important role in sexual misconduct. More traditional and hyper-masculine beliefs and negative attitudes towards women have been linked with acceptance and perpetration of sexual harassment and assault (Castro, Kintzle, Schuyler, Lucas, Warner 2).

Though these "masculine ideals" can exist without leading to sexual assault, this article suggests

that they could contribute to some men's negative attitudes towards women whose presence disrupts the "male-only peer group bonding" and "hyper-masculinity" of the military. This hyper-masculinity could facilitate some men's desire to "[compete with, dominate, and control]" the people around them. When these people are women, this desire can manifest in a sexual nature. The article continues: "Hyper-masculine men may feel threatened by competent women... and thus feel the need to constantly prove their masculinity through the use of sexual language and behavior. Women in the military have reported feeling scrutinized and watched by men, judged as less competent, and subjected to jealousy and anger" (2). This "jealousy and anger" stems from the belief that women are incapable of succeeding in the men-dominated military and from the feeling of being threatened when these women prove this belief wrong.

While some men view women in the military as threats to their own career success, some view women as weak and incapable of succeeding as soldiers at war. In their article "Sexual Assault in the U.S. Military: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for the Future," Jessica A. Turchik and Susan M. Wilson write:

The maintenance of a male-dominated military known for its hyper-masculine attitudes is not going to change unless women are allowed to become more integrated into the military. Although some individuals may hold adversarial beliefs toward women, it may be that some laws of the military are based more on benevolent sexism, a belief that women should be adored and idealized while at the same time believing they are weak and need to be protected. (274)

Viewing women soldiers as weak and inferior to men soldiers in terms of their abilities to succeed in the military perpetuates the hyper-masculinity that ultimately harms women.

Additionally, soldiers objectify humans and thus women, which can lead to sexual assault: "Male

and female soldiers are taught to objectify other humans and limit their empathy in an effort to make killing easier. However, when this objectification is applied to fellow service members, it may contribute to an enhanced sense of entitlement as well as psychological and social distancing which can make sexual assault easier to perpetrate and justify” (Castro, Kintzle, Schuyler, Lucas, Warner 3). While this objectification of humans is important for soldiers to allow themselves to fulfill their roles and end human lives, it can also make it easier psychologically for soldiers to sexually assault these objectified humans. Considering fellow women soldiers inferior or as objects is problematic, especially when doing so can lead to an ease of sexual harassment or assault.

Detailing his experience as a witness to the aftermath of sexual assault in the military, Turner emphasizes the burden that the concern for safety from their own troops adds to the woman soldier’s difficult time at war. Turner discusses sexual assault in the military in an interview with Patrick Hicks:

One of the female soldiers reported that she had been assaulted. I remember immediately the guys were trying to figure out which woman it was, but they weren’t trying to figure out who the guy was. When they figured out who the woman *might* be, the conversation shifted to guys saying, “Oh, she was a slut” or she was...they started denigrating her. It quickly shifted to, “Oh, she’s probably trying to get back home because she’s afraid...”

This was another type of assault against her character. It seemed really disturbing to me.

It still does. (Hicks 76)

Noting that the other soldiers did not try to figure out the man’s identity but did try to find out the accusing woman’s identity, Turner highlights the stigma associated with women reporting their sexual assaults and the separation between men and women soldiers. The emphasis on

“might” highlights the extent to which mere suspicion of a woman reporting earns her these soldiers’ ridicule more than a man’s crime of sexual assault does. Turner’s account of a fellow soldier’s sexual assault and her report’s negative reactions from men soldiers portrays how women who report their assaults receive further attack and denigration to dodge. Turner characterizes these reactions as “another type of assault against her character” in addition to the sexual assault she suffered, increasing the horror she endures at war. Referring to the statistic, “one in three female soldiers will experience sexual assault while serving in the military” (75), Turner illustrates this additional trauma bestowed upon women soldiers:

When I heard this figure...I started thinking—well—even if this number is not quite correct, even if it’s only near that number—I started thinking about my sister serving in uniform, being where we were and having people trying to kill her in a combat zone and *then*, when she’s back on base, where people are still trying to kill her with mortar attacks and rocket attacks, and then somebody to her left or right is trying to assault her—well.

(76)

Turner highlights the additional baggage sexual assault victims must carry as women soldiers fighting enemies in combat and fighting fellow soldiers back on base. By leaving his thought about what might happen to this woman soldier unfinished, Turner underscores the enormous difficulty she bears and the trauma she suffers.

McDonald’s poems “Yes, Sir!” and “Every Night Is Footsteps,” which appear in Lisa Bowden and Shannon Cain’s anthology *Powder: Writing by Woman in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq*, illustrate these unfortunate experiences of many women in the military and provide powerful portrayals of the violent interactions between some men and women soldiers. The touch of a woman soldier’s physical body in McDonald’s poetry mirrors the touch of the dying

soldier's body by the surgeon in Turner's "AB Negative (The Surgeon's Poem)," but in a completely different context and manner. While in Turner's poetry, this touch is gentle, caring, nurturing and healing, in McDonald's, the man's touch is violent, harmful and unwelcome. In "Yes, Sir!" McDonald recalls an incident during which the senior officer becomes angry at the speaker for questioning him. Detailing his violent touch, McDonald writes:

When you call me into your office, the Chief
 Nurse also present, to address why I would
 think I need training in a field I have never
 worked, you become angry and throw your
 heavy pen at the table with enough
 force for it to ricochet off my chest. I flinch in
 pain. The black ink stains my shirt. The Chief
 Nurse says, *That is enough* and asks me to leave.
 Another military woman saves her man.

Yes, Sir! (Lines 15-24)

The words "angry," "throw," and "heavy" demonstrate the senior officer's anger, which provokes his violent touch of the speaker. The words "force," "ricochet," "flinch," "pain," and "stains" evoke this unwelcome touch and its lingering effect on the speaker, who is presumably a woman and representative of McDonald herself. "The black ink stains [her] shirt," preventing her experience of the senior officer's inappropriate anger and invasion of her personal space from leaving her physical body or mind.

Underscoring the power dynamics between the senior officer and the speaker and the

abuse of this power, the Chief Nurse, a woman, dismisses the speaker, another woman, in order to protect the man senior officer. The Chief Nurse says, "*That is enough,*" asking the speaker to leave rather than asking the man to stop taking his anger out on the speaker. Earlier in the poem, McDonald writes, "After all you are the senior officer," (8) noting the extent to which his authority prevails, even when he is wrong. The line, "Yes, Sir!," which follows this and every stanza and repeats five times throughout the poem, underscores the dominance of the senior officer's authority and the speaker's submission to it. The phrase's repetition, as the descriptions between each repetition becomes increasingly horrific, reveals the tone's shift from a sincere acknowledgement of authority to a sarcastic defiance of it. McDonald ends the preceding stanza with the line, "I save him, but a piece of me drowns," (13) which aligns with this stanza's end: "Another military woman saves her man." By helping men in the military conquer other women, some military women ignore their senses of responsibility to themselves and to other women in exchange to that of their superiors and "save" military men, sometimes at their own expense.

McDonald accounts the aftermath of inadvertently inciting the senior officer's anger and the consequences the woman speaker suffers:

Soon after, I am not promoted. I am unsure if this
 is related to the pen or the complaint that me and
 three nurses filed on you, the senior officer, who
 thought groping us would better acquaint you
 with the female troops. When you moved up from
 Captain to Major, three of us left the military
 and a fourth was sent to glacial Alaska.
 Penance, a friend of cold places.

Yes, Sir! (Lines 25-33)

Employing enjambment to create the sense that the speaker's thoughts overflow and spill over the lines' ends, McDonald, through the speaker, questions the impact of the senior officer's anger on her promotion prospects. Again, women suffer punishment for actions for which they are not responsible. In this case, these actions are a man's anger and his "groping." While the women do nothing to invite these retaliatory actions from the senior officer, they suffer the consequences. By stating that she does not receive a promotion following the senior officer's intrusive anger and pen-throwing and that she is "unsure if this / is related to the pen or the complaint," McDonald suggests that the speaker does not receive a promotion due to these experiences with the senior officer. This acknowledgment that women do not earn promotions following complaints of sexual harassment illustrates the extent to which women receive blame for their own mistreatment.

McDonald describes the senior officer as the man who "thought groping us would better acquaint you / with the female troops," condemning him for ignoring the impact this "groping" has on women. By phrasing the senior officer's sexual harassment of these women soldiers with derision, McDonald emphasizes the severity and commonality of this experience. Because the effected women do not receive promotions, find themselves dismissed to other locations, or leave the military altogether, McDonald displays the extent to which civilian prejudice infiltrates the military and prevents soldiers from doing their jobs and women soldiers from moving up in their military careers. The words "glacial," "cold," and "penance," which means "The performance of some act of self-mortification or the undergoing of some penalty as an expression of sorrow for sin or wrongdoing" ("Penance"), evoke harshness and indicate that the

women must suffer the “mortification” of the “wrongdoing,” even though this wrongdoing is not their own. Instead, the women suffer the men’s wrongs.

Underscoring the commonality of this suffering, the speaker experiences these wrongs and this intrusion with another military man, her “soon to be ex-husband.” Concluding her list of instances of sexual assault in the military, McDonald writes:

My soon to be ex-husband,
 a military man, calls me when he hears
 my unit is mobilizing for war.
This is so exciting, he tells me.
 His words become another
 pen, a Styrofoam cup, a stray hand
 to my breast.

Yes, Sir! (Lines 34-41)

The excitement of the speaker’s “soon to be ex-husband” is striking. Normally associated with trepidation, worry and agony by soldiers’ loved ones, “mobilizing for war” involves danger, risk and the constant threat of death to the soldiers whom they love. In contrast, the speaker’s husband’s expression of excitement seems violent. Referring to other instances of sexual assault, harassment, and the disparate treatment of women in the military from throughout the poem, the speaker notes, “His words become another / pen, a Styrofoam cup, a stray hand / to my breast.” The speaker equates her husband’s words with these violations of women’s physical spaces. McDonald highlights the prevalence of sexual assault in the military and the unwelcome touch of the women soldiers’ physical bodies by ending the stanza with the comparison of her husband’s

words to “a stray hand / to [her] breast.” The blank line after this stanza before the phrase “Yes, Sir!” provides a break. In this break, the idea that these instances of sexual assault and mistreatment of women in the military are not isolated sinks in. The poem’s audience feels the gravity of this reality as McDonald ends this stanza like all its predecessors: a salute to the authority figure that violates her.

In “Yes, Sir!,” McDonald includes moments of women soldiers leaving the military and men superiors forcing women soldiers to transfer to different locations, underscoring some of the mistreatment of women soldiers in the military and the effects of sexual harassment and assault. Despite the U.S. military’s notable sexual assault prevention and victim protection efforts,⁶ soldier victims continue to suffer:

Sexual assault victims in both military and civilian contexts face blame, dismissal, invasions of privacy, and incredulous questioning, even when it is clear that the assault occurred. A 2005 study indicated important differences in retaliatory behaviors within military and civilian environments. Discouraging a victim from filing a legal report and refusing to take a victim’s report were substantially more common in the military, as was the presence of legal officials telling victims the incident was not serious enough to warrant attention. (Castro, Kintzle, Schuyler, Lucas, Warner 3)

While it is possible that these “retaliatory behaviors” have decreased since 2005, the fact that the military so recently refused to believe victims and pursue justice on their behalf is concerning.

By telling sexual assault victims that their assaults are “not serious enough to warrant attention,”

⁶ According to Carl Andrew Castro, Sara Kintzle, Ashley C. Schuyler, Carrie L. Lucas, and Christopher H. Warner in their article, “Sexual Assault in the Military,” “Unlike the vast majority of militaries around the world, the US military has become more transparent about the rates of sexual assault among its service members and is working towards identifying solutions to end sexual assaults within the military. The US military’s focus on ending sexual assault is important because it recognizes the need to protect the safety and health of all of its service members, as well as the impact that sexual assault has on the military readiness of the force. Thus, ending sexual assault in the military is necessary to safeguard human rights, address health care concerns, and ensure military readiness” (2).

these officials diminish victims' suffering and cause them to feel as though they do not deserve justice, preventing them from moving on from their assaults:

Many victims, both military and civilian, describe the response to and aftermath of sexual assault as more painful than the assault itself. A rigid chain of command and a perceived code of silence can create an environment in which victims do not report or seek help because they believe nothing will be done or they fear retaliation or negative repercussions. According to the most recent DoD data from fiscal year 2014, 62 % of women who reported sexual assault experienced retaliation, a figure identical to that from 2013. Specifically, 53 % of victims reported social retaliation, 32 % reported professional retaliation, 35 % reported administrative/adverse action, and 11 % reported receiving a punishment. (3)

These statistics, especially the sixty-two percent of women who received retaliation following sexual assault reports, highlight the extent not only of the issue of sexual assault but of the difficulty of reporting and recovering from sexual assault. Perpetuating the pain resulting from sexual assault, barriers within the military prevent victims from successfully reporting their sexual assaults, and victims often cannot find justice. Rather, they receive retaliation, punishment and further pain.

The failure to believe sexual assault victims inflicts increased and lingering pain. This lingering pain can even feel like a second assault:

Survivors frequently talk, if they manage to talk at all, about two types of rape: the original rape, which can be brutal, almost a form of hazing and a quasi-tribal rejection of women in the service, and then what they colloquially call a "command rape," where if they manage to gear up and report the assault, the unit's commander treats them so

harshly and there is such retribution from their peers that they consider the second injury, often a career-ending one, to be even worse than the first. (Casura)

Described as “a form of hazing,” rape is unfortunately common to the woman soldier’s experience in the military and seems like a standard, “quasi-tribal” induction ritual, which is horrifying. The existence of a colloquial term for the treatment of reporting victims also demonstrates the pervasiveness of this issue of retaliation following reports of sexual assault. This second assault, which is often “even worse than the first,” hurts the victims emotionally, physically, socially and in their careers. While sexual assault can lead to women soldiers’ ostracism, displacement and career disadvantages within the military, it can also inflict lasting negative health effects:

The impact of sexual assaults on victims can be devastating, affecting their psychological and physical health, military career, and success once leaving the military. Sexual assaults are a major contributing cause to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in female service members and veterans... Sexual assaults are a major reason that some female service members leave the military. As a result of military-related sexual trauma, many female veterans struggle transitioning back into civilian life, with some ending up homeless. (Castro, Kintzle, Schuyler, Lucas, Warner 2)

Not only do these sexual assaults prevent women soldiers from advancing in their careers by placing blame on them and punishing them rather than their assailants, but these assaults harm them psychologically and physically. The lasting psychological effects of sexual trauma emphasizes how horrible these assaults are and how women soldiers need support to prevent and recover from assault.

McDonald’s “Every Night Is Footsteps” employs vivid detail and focuses on the sexual

assault that many women soldiers suffer at war as well as the aftermath of these assaults, including the emotional pain and the camaraderie amongst women soldiers. McDonald writes:

The Other Woman

says *it can't be scary,*

because he only grabbed her,

stalked her, didn't rape her.

Didn't do anything more. (Lines 1-5)

The women soldiers and sexual assault victims become conditioned to expect the worst: rape. In comparison, nothing else—not even being “grabbed” or “stalked”—seems scary. The emphasis on “*Didn't do anything more*” leaves an eerie sense of the unspoken “more.” McDonald continues the graphic descriptions of these women soldiers’ sexual assaults:

Her friend says *his grabs*

were violent and painful

the way he followed her,

unseen, in the dark, came

from behind and did it again

and again. So now every night

is footsteps.

The use of italics not only indicates direct quotes from the friend who describes her assault but also heightens the pain resulting from it. The words “violent” and “painful” particularly jar and set up the rest of the description, which reads like horror. The speaker characterizes the assault as an attack with the words “violent,” “painful,” “unseen,” “dark,” and “again and again” as the assailant sneaks up on the victim “from behind.” As a result, the sounds of footsteps

continuously haunt and warn the women of future attacks, illustrating the continuous nature of sexual assault and the extent to which the effects of sexual assault perpetually inflict victims.

McDonald depicts the military placing blame on women who suffer assault. Referring to the military, which promoted the accused man rather than believing the women's complaints, McDonald writes:

They decided the
 three female officers who
 complained about him were
 simply, like their friends, "a bad lot."
 Like overripe tomatoes in the garden,
 who would bother with them? (Lines 16-21)

By comparing the complaining women with "overripe tomatoes in the garden," McDonald equates these women with unwanted food, picked from the garden and ultimately thrown away. This comparison suggests that the military similarly throws away the women who report the harassment or assault they suffer, removing the victims rather than the assailants. Next, "One by one, her friend says, we / were denied promotion, split up / from the others by different shifts / and assignments" (22-5). Punishing the women soldier victims for complaining, the military separates them and deprives them of the support they might have gained from camaraderie with one another. By separating the women, the military attempts to take away their joint power. In response to their husbands' anger at the woman's separation and displacement, "The Other Woman says, / *Goddamn, That bothered / you guys? That was nothing*" (29-31), suggesting that men do not know what the women go through. Only the women know. As a result, the women can form bonds through this shared understanding and become stronger together.

Women gain the strength to persevere in spite of these experiences of assault, harassment, disrespect and isolation during war by forming bonds and sharing their experiences with one another. Often, women do not find the opportunity to form these bonds and discuss their experiences until after the war's end when women veterans are better able to find each other, though many remain alone. According to one woman soldier, "It's the community that will bring us home' ...and you can take her statement in two ways. The physical community of nonprofits, government agencies and service providers who together can provide the services that veterans need. And also the community women veterans and advocates create when they work together to support returning women veterans, who can feel isolated, almost in exile after their military service" (Casura). Following this feeling of "exile" during their times at war, women veterans can find the support they need to work through their horrors by sharing their experiences with other women veterans. This community of women "[brings them] home," reducing the lingering traumas that weigh them down and allowing them to return to their old lives and feel like their old, unbroken selves. Building these bonds amongst women soldiers, even after the war, helps assuage the horrors of war, which continue beyond their safe returns home:

So coming home seems to be about camaraderie, and allowing women veterans time and space to rebuild that sense of unit cohesion and teamwork they felt as lone sisters in a much larger band of brothers. But it's also about recognizing the deep shadow cast on safe return by the experience of significant trauma, often multiple traumas—not all of which can even be surfaced yet and expressed. In time they may be. (Casura)

This sense of "coming home" surpasses the soldiers' physical returns home to the United States after the war. While family members feel relief upon their loved ones' safe returns home from

war, just because the soldiers survive the war physically does not mean they are completely safe from war's lingering traumas. When women soldiers continuously suffer from sexual assault or their additional burdens as women, camaraderie helps. Because they fought as "lone sisters in a much larger band of brothers," women soldiers endured isolation that prevented them from working through the horrors of war during war. As a result, fostering this camaraderie and forming these bonds as veterans helps women veterans "[come] home" and heal emotionally after the war.

Talking about their difficult experiences and issues helps women veterans form these bonds and ultimately heal. "Good talks and tough talks, laughter and tears, but above all, fellowship, produced from spending time together, bonding over shared concerns" (Casura) contribute to the process of recovering from what these women saw and experienced at war. Unfortunately, many women soldiers find common their experiences of sexual assault:

Gender bias, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape—genuinely, spend enough time around women veterans in any social setting, and it becomes hard to find a woman veteran who doesn't have her version of what is becoming too-universal a story. From the stories women veterans tell of going to female-only veterans retreats, even if the initial focus is fly-fishing or camping or just being together, it isn't too long before the elephant in the room, a shared experience of military sexual assault, gets brought up by one woman veteran, and then others chime in with their own stories. (Casura)

While sexual assault is common and "too-universal" to the woman soldier experience and these women often must survive this assault alone, joining these veteran groups and talking about their experiences even after war helps these women recover. According to the article "Camaraderie Offsets Trauma for Women Veterans," there are many instances in which women veterans "had

yet to even breathe a word of their assaults to their closest family members, a husband or a mother—but did find they could share their stories with one another” (Casura). The ability to share stories that they could not tell even their closest loved ones highlights the importance of these women veteran groups and the comfort women veterans feel within them. The connections these women form allow the members to feel safe expressing the darkest horrors of their war experiences and ultimately find positivity and emotional recovery that help them redeem these horrors.

While this support and these bonds of fellowship come easily to man soldiers, reflecting Owen’s redeeming experience at war, women soldiers, similar to Komunyakaa’s description of the disconnection between black and white soldiers, often have a difficult time connecting with men soldiers and joining their band of brothers. According to the article “While at War, Female Soldiers Fight to Belong,” men and women soldiers suffer disconnection despite their joint mission to fight for their country and unite against a common enemy:

Yet even though women distinguished themselves as leaders and enlisted soldiers, many of them describe struggling with feeling they do not quite belong. For men, the bonds of unconditional love among fellow combatants—that lifeblood of male military culture—are sustaining. But in dozens of interviews with women who served, they often said such deep emotional sustenance eluded them. (Carey)

The “unconditional love among fellow combatants” seems to have one major condition: gender. Women, though equally suffering at war, do not receive this love, form these bonds, or have a place within the “lifeblood” of the military that men soldiers do. Without the “deep emotional sustenance” that these bonds foster, women soldiers struggle to survive the emotionally taxing war. One woman soldier described the disconnect between her and men soldiers as disconnection

from humanity: “I just cannot connect. It’s like there is this 12-inch-thick sheet of glass separating me from the rest of humanity. I see people, and I hear muffled sounds and everything, but none of them can reach me” (Carey). This lack of camaraderie amongst men and women soldiers leads to women soldiers’ feeling of separation from humans at all. Without many other women soldiers around and without bonds with men soldiers, this woman soldier feels alone.

Referring to the camaraderie amongst soldiers at war, a man soldier noted, “It creates a kind of bond between members, a love that transcends anything you’ve ever known... You come to the absolute belief that the noblest and most important thing you can do is die for the others” (Carey). While these feelings provide positivity, encouragement and motivation to continue fighting through the overwhelmingly desolate experience of war, they are not universal to all soldiers: “Many women in the military did not have that kind of love—at least when they were deployed. ‘It’s like, I got all the downside of serving in the Army and none of the upside, the camaraderie,’” one woman soldier said (Carey). Similarly, McDonald notes her continued suffering after the war’s end, “This military is not something I want to talk about—only write about in my poems... I am not the wonderful person I was before being in the military” (Bowden, Cain 134). As lone women soldiers amongst men, these women cannot access the love and camaraderie that help men soldiers survive and help redeem the horrors of war. These women suffer alone without camaraderie and thus without redemption. As a result, women soldiers do not get to experience the “upside” of war or the positive amongst the bleak, leaving them still with the horrors of war until they find groups of women veterans with whom they can share their experiences upon their safe arrivals home—if they make it there.

Through their poetry, Turner and McDonald represent women soldiers at war with emphasis on their physical bodies to demonstrate their additional struggles with sexual assault

and gender-based isolation during their times at war. While camaraderie and strong bonds help soldiers overcome the struggles of war and help redeem the horrors of these contemporary wars, this camaraderie amongst soldiers seems to be reserved for men. Even though some women veterans manage to find camaraderie with other women veterans after the war, women soldiers at war do not have access to these brotherly bonds, and therefore, nothing eases their suffering. In fact, they do not spend their time on base relaxing with fellow soldiers, forming these bonds, and releasing the stress of war like that of their male counterparts, but rather, women soldiers must maintain their defenses during these times, forcing them to keep their traumas to themselves. McDonald depicts bonds amongst women sufferers that help them heal, but women soldiers often do not form these bonds until after the war's end or at all. Without camaraderie during the war, women soldiers find little to help redeem the war's horrors or their additional struggles as women soldiers.

Conclusion

In Owen's grim picture of the front, Komunyakaa's search for understanding of humans, Turner's depiction of death, and McDonald's portrayal of sexual assault, camaraderie amongst soldiers exists. For select soldiers, it serves as a redemptive aspect of war's atrocities, but for those that differ from these soldiers, it becomes an unattainable mode of catharsis, and therefore, nothing dulls the lingering traumas of these other soldiers following war's end.

Women soldiers' inability to form brotherly bonds during the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War and black soldiers' inaccessibility to the human connection amongst soldiers during the Vietnam War challenge the positive effects of camaraderie amongst soldiers that Owen celebrates. While the strong bonds and emotional support of fighting alongside fellow soldiers can help redeem the horrors of what they see and do together, not every soldier shares these camaraderie experiences. These experiences are real and valuable, but their limited accessibility corrupts them.

Marginalized groups tend not to have these same experiences at war and do not attain the productive bonds that help soldiers work through the pain of witnessing and carrying out war. Without bonds with fellow soldiers, these marginalized soldiers lack catharsis for their suffering and connection to fellow sufferers and must bear war's burdens alone.

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