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***“YOUNG YELLOW BLOOD BIRDS
Invisible Wounds of War, Guilt, and Healing
in *The Yellow Birds* and *Youngblood*”***

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*To those suffering
from invisible wounds of war*

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It would take a god to tell the tale [of war].

Homer

INTRODUCTION

The devastating impact of invisible wounds of war on young American soldiers is a central theme in contemporary US Iraq war fiction. Among the symptoms of combat-related PTSD and moral injury are profound emotions of guilt and shame, which play a central role in the two chosen novels *The Yellow Birds* and *Youngblood*. Violence, destruction, and collateral damage are characteristics of war, which affect not only deployed soldiers but even more so the civilian population in Iraq and although American casualties and their psychological suffering are tragic and devastating, it almost pales in comparison to the ongoing traumatization of the civilian population in Iraq. Previous war literature mostly dismisses this fact and focuses on the suffering of its own fellow countrymen, but these two novels are precursors of a new war literature, which equally considers the suffering and trauma of the civilian population living in the combat zone. This thesis argues that its protagonists' psychological pain and anguish from combat trauma and moral injuries interrelate with the suffering of the Iraqi population. Witnessing and participating in killing teenage enemy combatants and innocent civilians psychologically and morally injures soldiers, who become increasingly alienated not only from their military superiors but also from their civilian population. In order to heal, overcoming these feelings of alienation is necessary and this is achieved by closing the soldier-civilian divide, developing empathy towards the enemy and by repairing the superiors' betrayal of trust. US war veteran fiction proves cathartic not only for its authors but also for other fellow combatants and civilians alike since it helps non-combatants to understand the complexities and realities of war and its aftermath.

The structure of this thesis has three main parts. The first part consists of two sections of which the first one is called war and writing. This section starts with the historical background of the Iraq war and its consequences, in which not only the veterans' burdens are called to attention but also the suffering of the civilian population in Iraq. This is followed by a brief survey of the literary output of US Iraq war veterans, with focus on a perceived shift towards more inclusive narratives, or 'counter-narratives,'

as Petrovic (2) calls them, which acknowledge the suffering of Iraqi people. In this thesis, such narratives will be referred to as *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction, which term will be explained and illustrated. Concluded is this first part by the current research on therapeutic writing, as well as bibliotherapy, and its implications for war veteran fiction. The second section of the first part focuses on trauma, PTSD and moral injury and highlights the specifics of combat PTSD, while providing examples from both chosen primary sources. The last section of this part will discuss Larry Dewey's concept of antidote experiences and Jonathan Shay's concept of moral injury. While moral injury is concerned with moral transgressions of superiors or violations of deeply held beliefs, Dewey's antidote experiences seem to provide an answer why some soldiers do not succumb to moral injury or PTSD despite traumatic war experiences.

In the second part of the thesis, these theoretical frameworks and concepts will be applied through a close reading of the two debut novels *The Yellow Birds* and *Youngblood*. The themes of physical recovery of corpses, as well as killing in combat, will be analyzed in regard to loss of innocence. This loss of innocence and the allocation of blame are highlighted by three divisions, which soldiers painfully experience not only in the warzone but also after their deployment on American soil, thus contributing to their reintegration struggles. One reason for the veterans' suffering is their involvement or witnessing of moral transgressions, often resulting in civilian casualties. Both superiors and civilians dismiss this and thus further burden ordinary soldiers. Autobiographical accounts from various war veteran authors support and emphasize this literary analysis.

Recovery and healing, the final part of this thesis, investigates the protagonists' possible recovery trajectories through an analysis of their attempts to bridge divides with their former enemies, their superiors and their own society. In the final section, some further remarks on the value of US war veteran fiction and how it can provide healing for both its authors and readers, veterans and civilians alike. It also can support civilians in their efforts to understand veterans and to help them with their reintegration attempts beyond simplistic rituals of innocence. One way of doing this is by listening to veterans stories and acknowledging that US war veterans are not only victims of war but at times also perpetrators and that the Iraqi suffering also needs to be taken into account since it often is one crucial reason for the moral injuries and PTSD symptoms of US soldiers.

I. HISTORY AND THEORY

War and writing

After a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.

Tim O'Brien

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)

In the State of the Union address in 2002, US President George W. Bush proclaimed the war on terror and referred to Iraq as country within the 'axis of evil' since it presumably provided nuclear weapons to terrorists. In March 2003, Bush declared that the chief aims of war were to disarm Saddam Hussein of his WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction)¹, to liberate the people of Iraq from its dictator and to end Iraq's support of terrorism. Without UN backing and despite the efforts of US allies, whose leaders were convinced that there were no WMDs at Saddam's disposal, the US-coalition forces invaded Iraq on the 21st of March 2003. While the previous military operations in Iraq were called Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), this new military offensive became known as Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Only six weeks after the swift invasion, Bush declared that major combat operations ended, and that the mission was accomplished. After the defeat of the conventional Iraqi forces in May 2003 and Hussein's capture in December of the same year, most Iraqis celebrated coalition forces as liberators, but anti-American sentiment grew soon and resistance turned into guerilla warfare, which has since been labeled as insurgency, sectarian violence and civil war. Instead of freedom and democracy, Iraqi civilians experienced turmoil, looting and escalating violence and "barely a year after cheering their 'liberation,' many Iraqis were growing nostalgic for Saddam Hussein's sadistic dictatorship" (Trofimov xix). Reasons for the dissatisfaction with the occupation were manifold. Most notably were the failure of coalition forces to provide safety and to rebuild the infrastructure of the country, as well as the blatant disregard of Iraq's previous

¹ Despite Bush's insistence on the potential danger for America, the claim that Hussein had obtained uranium from Africa was eventually proven as false.

history and culture (ibid. 142). The lack of cultural awareness of most US soldiers was not helpful either and incensed Iraqis further who perceived it as “American disrespect and insensitivity” (Elworthy & Rifkind 23). Against the advice of numerous experts that most of the population was deeply suspicious about Western motives and opposed a long occupation², Washington decided to stay without term. Although most Iraqis initially celebrated Saddam’s removal, they resented that “the occupiers out-stayed their brief, initial welcome” (Steele 64), feeling once again as victim of an imperial intrusion, with an agenda to “remove an independent anti-Israeli ruler [...] [and] to secure access to the country’s oil reserves” (ibid. 246). In 2005, a 1,500-page report confirmed the suspicion that there was no sign of WMD in Iraq and by then the invasion had turned into “an increasingly bloody war of attrition” (Steele 254), which could not even be contained by the election of an Iraqi Transitional Government. Veteran author Phil Klay states in his personal essay that with the growing insurgency “the wisdom of the invasion [...] was in doubt, but also the competence of the policymakers” (*Citizen-soldier* 10). From 2004 to 2007, the attacks on US forces increased dramatically (Steele 249) and 20,000 additional US troops were deployed to help Iraqi forces to establish peace and to ensure future democratic self-government, which became known as ‘the Surge’. Under the command of General Petraeus, a new counterinsurgency strategy was implemented, which focused on winning the hearts of the civilian population and reduced the number of US casualties over the following years. Nevertheless, provincial elections in 2009 had one of the lowest turnouts in Iraq and anti-American resentment and sectarian violence continued. In February 2010, President Obama announced that the war would end in August of the same year, which was postponed due to another resurgent insurgency. With the withdrawal of the last US troops in December 2011, the end of the war was officially declared but the rise of the Islamic State (IS) led to the Iraqi Civil War and the American-led intervention Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to combat the growing threat and thus US soldiers continued to fight, kill and die in Iraq.

For most returned veterans, the battle, however, is also not over. Surviving the war theatre is only the beginning since many veterans take their personal battles back

² According to the renowned journalist Jonathan Steele, “Washington’s war planners [...] took no account of the nature of Iraqi society or Iraq’s history, or indeed the deep well of Arab resentment throughout the region that would doom a Western occupation” (245).

home. Severe physical wounds impede homecoming, but the wounds of the psyche are often far worse and their “psychological impact [...] emerges as the clearest, most lasting, and most incontrovertible” (Fassin & Rechtman 2). “The basic trauma and burden of war” (Dewey 70) leaves deep imprints on the combatant’s psyche since fighting in a “morally bruising battlefield” (Klay, *Citizen-soldier* 145) comes with a high prize. Haunted by memories, nightmares and feelings of guilt and shame due to traumatic experiences, many veterans see suicide as last option, as the high suicide rate among war veterans substantiates. Many suffering veterans do not seek treatment through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) due to denial, stigma or fear of not being able to continue serving in the army. Regardless of being affected by these invisible wounds of war or not, “veterans feel marginalized in many communities” (Smith & True 151) and thus struggle to find their place in the civilian world. The reasons for their alienation from society lie in their combat experiences, resulting PTSD or moral injury symptoms but also the ignorance of the civilian population regarding the realities of war.

Among these realities is the high number of civilian casualties in Iraq. While soldiers are mostly celebrated upon their return stateside, they often feel shame and guilt since “civilians had been killed” (Powers 186). From 2003 to 2011, the death toll of US soldiers was less than 5000. In comparison to this relatively low number of American casualties, an assessment in 2010 suggested that more than 28,000 Iraqi combatants and almost 14,000 Iraqi civilians were killed³. The civilian casualty ratio thus is 1:2; for every two enemy combatants, one innocent Iraqi civilian lost his or her life. While the goal of the Iraq war was to liberate the people in Iraq, more Iraqis have been killed during the war than during three decades of Saddam’s ruthless regime (Steele 250). While these numbers are terrifying enough as they are, other studies suggest that these are an understatement. According to the Iraq Body Count website, the “death toll of civilians killed by violence [...] averages around 16,000 annually over the first four years of the occupation” (ibid.), which would mean that for every US soldier killed in Iraq, around three Iraqi civilians died as well. Other sources suggest that more than 650,000 Iraqis died within the first three years of the occupation due to violence, disease and

³ According to the Brookings Iraq Index, over 113,000 Iraqi civilians had died by 2008 as a result of the occupation (Gutmann & Lutz 5).

malnutrition (Gutmann & Lutz 6). Such numbers illustrate the magnitude of suffering in Iraq, in which “communities become cumulatively traumatized” (Elworthy & Rifkind 19), which partially explains the growing resistance against the occupation.

The vicious cycle of violence causing so many civilian casualties has its root in ignorance, which is perceived as disrespect. In Iraqi culture, honor and respect are highly valued. With little or no awareness of Iraqi culture and customs, US soldiers are prone to violate social norms, thus offending the local population. Colonel Douglas Macgregor indicated the military’s failure of cultural awareness, which is illustrated through

intrusive measures [...] [such as] arrest[ing] people in front of their families, dragging them away in handcuffs with bags over their heads, and then provid[ing] no information to the families of those we incarcerated. In the end, our soldiers killed, maimed and incarcerated thousands of Arabs, 90 percent of whom were not the enemy. But they are now. (Elworthy & Rifkind 24).

Elworthy and Rifkind, two conflict experts — one of them a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee — argue that dehumanization and humiliation are one main cause of the rise of terror (Elworthy & Rifkind 13). War veteran author Roy Scranton confirms this with his personal account of his deployment experiences:

war was the most dehumanizing experience of my life. [...] Over time, [...] fear and rage built up in us like toxins, until we were praying for reasons to shoot—but not people, mind you, just [...] hadjis. We harassed and intimidated hadjis on the street. We humiliated hadjis in their homes. We ran hadji cars off the road when they got in our way. We locked hadjis up for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some of us did worse. Some of us did a lot worse. (*Essays* 141)

Such behavior further fuels the violence in Iraq and thus causes the growing insurgency.

Regardless of the veracity or otherwise of these accounts and previous numbers of casualties, the psychological impact of civilian casualties on young soldiers cannot be denied. This is increasingly thematized in contemporary war fiction written by young war veterans, who at times attempt to cope with these realities of war through writing fiction.

War literature

There's truth in fiction you can't find in memoir.

Michael Pitre

Throughout the history of war writing, the impact of war on combatants and their community has been a central theme. One reason for the proliferation of war stories, as ancient as wars themselves as the earliest remaining precursors, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, suggest is to answer the question of how combatants and their immediate society are affected and how they manage to cope with war's psychological aftermath. In essence, Homer's *Odyssey* is the story of a veteran's difficult journey home, which ends in bloodshed. Questions concerning how war affects individuals and communities are "at the core of war writing" (Cole 25) and many combatants, in an attempt to answer these issues, transformed their personal experiences into fiction. These narratives often revolve around themes of innocence and its loss, trauma, and at times recovery.

War veterans are regarded as exclusive authority to write on war. Veterans feel "the need to keep the record" for deceased fellow combatants, "who were there and can no longer speak for themselves," and non-combatants, "who were not there and need to be told" (McLoughlin 19). Since they were deployed in an active combat zone, they are valued as ultimate authority on war writing. This notion that combat is such a unique experience that it cannot be properly understood by others unless they experience it themselves, has been referred to as combat Gnosticism (Buchanan 19). According to this notion, one cannot write about war meaningfully unless someone has experienced it: "the knowledge of combat is a prerequisite for the production of a literary text that adequately deals with war" (Campbell 204)⁴. The canon of war literature underscores this epistemological barrier since most iconic works were written by war veterans, as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* illustrate. The marketing techniques of contemporary war literature

⁴ In addition to combat exposure itself, the issue that civilians do not understand most of the military vocabulary thus further exacerbates the situation. Dewey points this out as an important factor for the civilians' struggle to understand: "War experiences are complex, hard to describe, and difficult to appreciate. Much of what is key to the story is basic to the combat soldier's understanding but completely beyond the listener's experience. The vet does not realize that others need to have almost every word explained. It is easy for the listener to get lost and confused." (120)

likewise support this stance since publishers are quick to highlight the authenticity of war veteran fiction. While there are veterans who disagree with this sentiment and argue that civilians can also write outstanding war fiction⁵, many combatants and non-combatants hold fast to this claim. Many mental-health care providers working with war veterans report that most of them struggle trusting non-combatants and since this thesis also aims to highlight how war literature can benefit veterans, its focus will be on veteran war fiction. Their writing does not only authentically help civilians to understand what the war was like but can also aid fellow soldiers to come to terms with their own wartime experiences while being cathartic for the authors themselves. Due to these reasons, Iraq war literature seems to have gained momentum in the last decade.

The recent war in Iraq spawned ample promising literature. After a perceived market saturation of war non-fiction as result to the “first wave of literary response” (Molin 1) in form of war memoirs, contemporary Iraq war fiction was initially met with little interest. The second wave of literary response, however, soon received both “significant public and critical attention” (DeRosa & Peebles 214), as scholars argue, and numerous literary accolades affirm. This surge of new war narratives included two National Award finalists: *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012), a satirical war novel by non-veteran Ben Fountain, which Marlantes referred to as “the Catch-22 of the Iraq War”, and the poetic debut novel *The Yellow Birds* (2013) by former US marine Kevin Powers. Both reached a broad audience, received prestigious literary awards and were adapted as theatrical motion picture. Two other notable novels were published in 2012; David Abrams’ *Fobbit* and Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya’s *The Watch*, which were likewise nominated for prestigious awards. In 2014, war veteran Phil Klay won the National Book Award for his story collection *Redeployment*, thus reconfirming the literary merit of contemporary war fiction.

Most US war fiction focuses on its heroes’ suffering. The majority of US war writing depicts the traumatic war experience of young US soldiers who relate their physical and psychological pain and suffering due to combat. The traditional war narrative is a story of trauma and suffering. War veteran and author Roy Scranton notes

⁵ Ben Fountain’s award-winning debut novel serves as perfect example since it is praised by combatants and non-combatants alike.

that “[e]very true war story is a story of trauma and recovery” (*Essays* 221) but then dismisses such a narrative as ‘trauma-hero myth,’ as he calls it, in which the protagonist “pays the ‘price’ for [US society’s] bloodguilt” (236). University professor James Holstun likewise argues with his term ‘shoot-and-cry’ narratives that many war stories ignore broader questions, such as the war’s validity, in favor of easier topics, namely the suffering of US soldiers (6). By stressing US psychological wounds, such fiction “appropriates the suffering of its primary victims” (Holstun 5), the Iraqi people, and the narrative thus “[serves] a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy” (Scranton, *Essays* 222)⁶. In contrast to such pervasive shoot-and-cry and trauma-hero myth narratives, an increasing number of recent US war writing departs from this tradition and transcended beyond such self-centered fiction.

A shift towards more diverse narratives is noticeable in contemporary US war fiction. In previous American war writing, US narrative perspectives were preeminent and Iraqis and others mostly “appear [...] as unindividuated and function as potential threats rather than as rich and multidimensional characters” (Petrovic 4). Various recent US war novels, however, are more balanced in their narrative perspectives and in their depiction of the other and include Iraqi perspectives in their multivoiced novels, which help “the reader to develop compassion for the innocent victims of US military action and policies” (Haytock 337). While it seems plausible that most veterans focus on narratives which resemble their own experiences, more authors all at once provide “valuable counter-narratives” (Petrovic 2), through including a broader variety of narrators or by “placing [the other] at the forefront of their texts” (1). Clark and Stinson likewise note this shift:

Rather than containing detailed historical accounts or stirring tales of heroism, this new war literature tends to be polyphonic, non-linear, and inwardly directed, with a focus on the inner lives of the protagonists, who may be the ‘enemy’ as well as the ‘good guys’. (2)

⁶ Scranton exemplifies this with Klay’s short story “Redeployment,” in which the protagonist Sergeant Price kills his tumorous dog Vicar out of mercy. The dog “is a substitute for the narrator’s trauma and guilt. Yet [it] also stands in as a substitute for the thousands of Iraqis killed during the American occupation” (*Essays* 235). Scranton convincingly argues that most readers will have more empathy with the afflicted dog and its owner instead of an Iraqi, who is killed by the veteran. By focusing on the individual tragedy of the US soldiers, we can forget the suffering of the other, Scranton argues (237), which is made possible by “turning a killer into a victim, a war hero into a trauma hero” (223).

This is ostensible in Matt Gallagher's debut novel *Youngblood*, in which the cast of Iraqi characters is almost as vast and diverse as those of their US American counterparts. Although the narrator is a US American soldier and all letters and emails in the semi-epistolary novel are likewise narrated by male American soldiers, Iraqi characters are granted more space than in previous US war veteran fiction and their suffering is vividly depicted in the tragic trajectories of various characters, including Rana, Ismael and especially Azhar, who becomes a terrorist after his cousin is killed accidentally. In contrast, a first reading of Powers' poetic masterpiece *The Yellow Birds* might suggest that the Iraqi's suffering is almost invisible throughout, but a closer analysis dismisses this. Although Scranton and Holstun argue that the novel is yet another traditional trauma hero narrative, it subtly acknowledges and thus draws attention to the Iraqi suffering. In Powers' novel, the protagonist's reaction to hearing a woman's mourning is emblematic for this new literary consideration by young US war veterans: "I heard it and even now it seems wrong not to listen" (85). The protagonist's empathy for the enemy and the inclusion of a rounder Iraqi character facilitates "a more constitutive lens of globalized suffering that takes into consideration Arab and Persian perspectives" (Petrovic 22). Gallagher's and Powers' debut novels are thus precursors to this new literary wave.

Inclusive narratives are increasing rapidly. After Powers poetic debut novel *The Yellow Birds* in 2013, dozens of veterans successfully published novels, which display their empathy with the other. This is often achieved through narrative perspectives. Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2014) and Brian Van Reet's *Spoils* (2017) include the perspectives of Middle Eastern locals — an Iraqi interpreter and a jihadist, respectively — next to their American protagonists, thus allowing the reader to consider both perspectives of the war and its aftermath. Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2018) is likewise such a polyphonic novel, in which the narrative of an innocent Iraqi alternates with that of a young US veteran. Among the authors who "refuse to make an exception out of American suffering" (22), Petrovic lists Phil Klay and war poet Brian Turner next to Elliot Ackerman. Ackerman's standing, however, is exceptional across-the-board since he is not only a highly decorated US Marine war veteran who was awarded the Purple Heart and the Silver Star, the third-highest US military medal for valor in combat, but is

also a Middle Eastern scholar and a National Book Award finalist. Despite his undoubtedly hazardous activities during his multiple tours in the Middle East, Ackerman's first two novels do not leverage his personal experiences but are narrated entirely from non-American protagonists. His first novel *Green on Blue* (2016) relates the stories of two Afghan boys called Aziz and Ali, who witness the US invasion and are trapped between the frontlines. *Dark at the Crossing* (2017), his second novel⁷, follows the wayward Arab American Haris Abadi through Turkey into Syria, to join the fight against the regime. Instead of self-centered suffering, Ackerman's focus is the quandary of local people who narrate their own plight. With such additions of more inclusive novels, the literary body of US war veteran fiction has gained tremendous diversity and offers insights into the war experience from different points of view.

The similarities of these novels suggest a newly emerging genre. At the core of these narratives are empathy with the enemy but also shame and guilt of the ambiguous war efforts in the Middle East. Since US war veterans wrote novels which highlight the locals' suffering, it is reasonable that their wartime experiences made them aware of their responsibility for the predicament of the local people. Roy Scranton notes his ruminations about his deployment in Iraq and his subsequent feelings of guilt:

I had helped cause immense suffering, and I had profited by it. [...] And when I thought of [...] the combat pay I'd spent [...] and the blood money that had bought my college education, holding them up against the lives I'd seen shattered by violence [...] I could feel nothing but disgust and shame for having been an American soldier. (203)

His political activism upon returning against the war is obvious throughout his articles, essays and also in his novel, which thematizes the cruelties American soldiers committed against innocent civilians in Iraq. His reference to his combat payment as blood money stresses his feelings of guilt and shame but also alludes to the common practice in the Middle East, which likewise seem to haunt many veterans. Since collateral damage apparently cannot be prevented, the US government opted for the next best solution: pecuniary reparation. Porter, the protagonist in *Youngblood*, learns of this common practice after a checkpoint incident, in which an innocent local is accidentally killed by a

⁷ Only in his third novel *Waiting for Eden* (2019), Ackerman uses the traditional US soldier narrator with the twist that he employs a deceased narrator, who is waiting for the death of his fellow soldier.

US soldier. A relative of the dead civilian claims “*Fasil!*” (Gallagher 49), which the terp Snoop then explains as condolence funds for the deceased. Although the practice of *fasil* has a long tradition in Iraq and “is the ground of [their] law” (Gallagher 128), it leaves a sour aftertaste for the protagonist, who finds “the exchange of blood money by any name, in any culture, to be abhorrent” (68). Placing a value on someone’s life simply seems wrong. Although typical *fasil* demands in Iraq can range between \$10,000 and \$15,000 for the life of a person, Azhar receives only “twenty-five hundred in total” (Gallagher 66) but seems to be content with it. Veterans and military spouses will not miss the fact that their own compensation, or blood money, in case of death is much higher⁸. This implicates, if only subconsciously, that the life of a US soldier is worth more than that of one civilian Iraqi⁹. While most people would immediately dismiss this thought, soldiers in combat are trained to disregard enemies as something less than human, allowing them to kill without hesitation, and this practice thus adds to their subconscious beliefs about the enemy’s value. Although the psychological impact of paying blood money for the death of innocent civilians is unknown, Scranton’s elaboration in his essay might be a good indicator that other veterans feels similar. Gallagher’s Porter likewise is troubled by this practice, especially since the blood money collector then becomes an insurgent, out of anger that his relative was accidentally killed at a traffic checkpoint. Since *fasil* is linked directly to culpability and feelings of shame and guilt but also to compensation and thus redemption, it plays a central role in these recent war narratives, which, for lack of a better term, could be referred to as *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction.

The Arabic terms *fatwa* and *fasil* embrace characteristics of this new literary response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While *fasil* refers to the blood money and thus connotes the guilt and shame related to moral transgressions and failures of US soldiers, *fatwa* is mostly understood by the Western world as a death sentence. Porter, however, clarifies this misunderstanding: “Anything can be a fatwa [...] They’re not just

⁸ “Initially, it was 250,000 dollars that the families or the beneficiaries would get. Then they jumped up to 450,000 dollars per soldier” (Real 254). While the different gross national product of Iraq and the USA is an obvious and logic explanation for the huge difference, it nevertheless has an impact.

⁹ In another essay, Scranton touches on this varying value attached to different lives: “Some lives matter more than others: that’s why Russian propaganda valorizes the Russian dead and American propaganda, the American dead. Some lives matter more than others: that’s why US audiences flocked to watch *American Sniper* but have forgotten Abu Ghraib.” (*Essays* 284)

death sentences” (Gallagher 329). While it is usually related to legal opinions on religious issues of Islam, there are also other connotations, which are rather fitting for this emerging literary subgenre. The word *fatwa* derives from *fata*, which can mean “youth, newness, clarification, [and] explanation” (cf. Masud & Kéchichian). All these meanings apply to this recent shift in war writing since young boys go to war to experience something new and become men but experience disillusionment either during or after their deployment, which they then attempt to explain through fiction. Their urge to write about war thus stems from the need to clarify and explain the complexity and ambiguity of modern combat but also the dilemma of the war. There is not only no clearly distinguishable enemy but also instead of hardened terrorists, the protagonists often encounter war-stricken people, who suffer even more after the US-led invasion and thus resist against allied forces. War veteran literature itself is thus the *fatwa*, the answer to the question: What was it like? At the same time, it is the *fasil*, the price some veterans pay, to stress what many politicians and civilians are not willing to accept; that the war is not simply one between good and evil but that there are good and bad on both sides and that the perpetrators on the ‘good’ side are often ignored. Since US soldiers “seldom faced any reprisal for the devastation they caused, no matter the illegality of their actions” (Petrovic 12), they seem to be willing to pay the price in a different way through acknowledging US culpability in their fiction.

For this thesis, Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* and Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood* will be discussed in more detail since they are precursors of these new war narratives. Both debut novels combine various traditional motifs with new elements, which highlight this shift towards more diverse war fiction. Like most other war veteran fiction, they depict war as “individually [...] traumatic and nationally as folly” (Molin 3) and rely “on narratives of loss and recovery” (Deer 312). Despite their focus on traditional young US soldiers as protagonists and the psychological aftermath of their combat exposure, these novels, however, do not dismiss or diminish the impact of the US occupation on its local people. By admitting the suffering of the Iraqi population, both protagonists realize their enemy’s humanity and thus display empathy towards them. *The Yellow Birds* follows more traditional trauma narratives and its young protagonist Private John Bartle, who is deeply troubled by his combat experiences, fails to protect his fellow soldier and friend

Murph and thus succumbs psychologically. While most scholars and critics see Powers' novel as another trauma hero myth, which "need not imply complete insincerity, only a strategic focus on the psychic wounds of the powerful" (Holstun 5), this view denies certain aspects of *The Yellow Birds*. Petrovic, for example, lists Powers' novel as one of those who "do not articulate an exclusionary, Islamophobic rhetoric against [...] Iraqi people [but rather] seek to exhibit multifaceted narratives of the individual" (22). Another critic notes that the novel challenges "readers to think more broadly about the guilt, innocence, and complicity of an entire polity" (Barta 89) since Bartle is imprisoned not for the death of an innocent Iraqi but for transgressing military rules in relation to the recovery of US corpses. Its realistic depiction of Iraqi people and the fact that the US military is more concerned with the recovery of their own combat casualties than with war crimes committed against the local civilian population, strongly suggest that the text invites readers to consider previously held beliefs about the war, its aftermath and its victims, which are not only the US troops. Gallagher's novel delineates the dangerous deployment of the young Lieutenant Jack Porter, who is deeply concerned for the people in the fictional town of Ashuriyah and risks both his military career and his life for the them. Both protagonists question the purpose of their missions, their military leaders' decisions and the impact their involvement has on the Iraqi people. Instead of fighting trained insurgents, they increasingly find fighting and killing local teenagers, who show their dissatisfaction with the US occupation by taking up arms and joining the insurgency. Being exposed not only to combat but also to the ambivalence of their war efforts and its implications for the Iraqi population, adds further to their psychological burden, which ultimately results in symptoms of PTSD and moral injury. As precursors of *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction, both novels do not include Iraqi narrators but the protagonists' empathy towards both Iraqi combatants and civilians clearly distinguish these debuts from most previous US Iraq war veteran fiction.

In *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction, war veterans thus highlight the injustice and suffering of the other, while admitting their own involvement in it. Despite notions from literary theory to reject authors' biographies, it is difficult to dismiss the fact that the authors seem to come to terms with their own combat experiences through writing war fiction. They also try to understand their opponent's point of view and thus add valuable insights

to the discourse, highlighting that the trajectory of trauma and recovery might be dependent on the perception of the enemy as well. Instead of depicting them as savage enemies, veteran authors of *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction allow Iraqis their humanity by giving them their own space and voice, thus framing both sides as victims but also admitting that US soldiers are at times not liberators but perpetrators. *Fatwa-and-fasil* fiction thus pays the symbolic prize for being involved in the ambiguous war efforts in Iraq by raising awareness of the Iraqis' plight and thus helping its authors to find some form of redemption and closure.

Writing as treatment

If I don't write to empty my mind, I go mad.

Lord Byron

Central to [...] continuing recovery is sharing [your] story.

David Wood

War writing can be therapeutic. Although it has found less recognition than counselling and psychotherapy, therapeutic writing shares fundamental similarities and proves beneficial. Speaking and writing therapy — in their essence — are both story telling (Bolton 143) and expressing oneself verbally or in writing about the impact of a traumatic event “is a critical feature of the ‘healing’ process” (Meichenbaum 96). Dewey, for example, witnessed the miraculous and instantaneous improvement of one veteran’s psychological health after relating his full story to a loved one: “Being able to tell the full story of one’s war experiences to a sympathetic effective listener, even just once, can be remarkably healing for the combat vet” (120). VA clinicians and other mental-health providers notice how veterans frequently express that sharing their story was crucial in the recovery process (Wood 269). Talking or writing about upsetting events and anxieties is a normal response and the therapeutic character of retelling is profound, “in some sense

liberating, [...] cathartic, even curative” (McLoughlin 20). Thus, sharing experiences is a form of unloading one’s burden¹⁰, as common knowledge and proverbial wisdom attests.

The cathartic value of writing equals and often exceeds the one of speaking. In his seminal studies, Pennebaker revealed a significant improvement of students’ immune function if they wrote about their worst traumatic experience several consecutive days (110). He concluded that writing allowed them to approach their individual sensitive issues at their own speed and in as much detail as they wish, thus safeguarding against feeling overwhelmed (ibid.). Bolton likewise states that writing has an advantage over thinking or talking (213); while the spoken word in its nature is ephemeral, writing creates a physical and tangible product which allows veterans to reorganize past experiences and related thoughts and thus come to terms with them (Bolton 199; Meichenbaum 97). Reconstructing events is a self-affirming, healing process since it helps to gain self-understanding (Allen 123; Bolton 25). Scholars, therefore, speak of ‘therapeutic writing’ (Bolton 20) and “therapeutic narration of trauma” (McLeod 151). Raymond Scurfield, renowned mental health clinician and author of *War Trauma* (2006), expresses this in regard to his personal trauma concerning 9/11, where he states that he “used writing as a vehicle through which to express and release the many emotions was experiencing” (22). For veterans, writing about their experiences is helpful since they regain control through “imposing at least verbal order on the chaos [which] makes it seem more comprehensible and [they] therefore feel safer” (McLoughlin 19).

Against common beliefs, writing does not have to be autobiographical to promote the healing process. Fiction offers veterans “a safer-seeming entry into painful and forgotten experiences” (Bolton 215). In her book, Brison, herself a rape victim who subsequently suffered from PTSD, states that narratives are essential in order to process a trauma (97). Bolton argues that the main issue of trauma is not the memory of an event itself but rather the attendant emotions, which are repressed and thus unresolved (199). Even when veterans focus on fictional accounts, describing similar experiences to their real experiences evokes the same emotions, which they then have to cope with, thus promoting the healing process. Writing fiction thus helps veterans with PTSD or moral

¹⁰ In Klay’s short story anthology, one protagonist expresses this in the following way, when a war veteran tries to answer a female civilian about his deployment: “I didn’t know if she’d [...] understand it the way I did, which is what I really wanted. Not to share something, but to unload it” (*Redeployment* 203).

injury to confront their past while pretending it is fictional and they are therefore “able to master the trauma by altering the fictional circumstances and create a new account” (Bolton 206). Works of war fiction can thus be seen “as efforts [...] at rehabilitation” (Pederson 339).

The attitude of writing influences its benefits. In order to be of therapeutic value, veterans have to feel that they are writing for themselves or an audience which cares and can be trusted (Bolton 225). This can even be the veteran author himself. One soldier reported that he wrote a journal during his deployment in Iraq, where he left it behind (Minear 188). Writing down thoughts and feelings concerning his traumatic experiences apparently accomplished its purpose. Most published veterans start writing for themselves and their loved ones first and eventually are encouraged by family, friends or fellow veterans — often in writing workshops — to publish their work.

Veterans increasingly turn towards writing. Within the last decade, dozens of young veterans attended MFA programs or writing workshops. Klay mentions this in one of his short stories, in which a female actress states that she has been “working with a group of writers from the Iraq Veteran Against the War [...] They’ve been doing workshops, a sort of healing through writing thing” (*Redeployment* 221). The NYU Veterans Writing Workshop is one of many such workshops¹¹, which has achieved some literary fame since Roy Scranton, Matt Gallagher, Phil Klay, Jake Siegel and Perry O’Brien met and decided to publish an anthology, *Fire and Forget* (2013). The first three of them went on to publish acclaimed novel-length war fiction. Encouraging veterans to participate in writing workshops might be more effective for some than traditional therapies since it is perceived as less threatening. Combatants do not have to talk about their experiences but can write their thoughts down, correcting and polishing their accounts until they feel comfortable with it. Even then they still do not have to show their texts to anyone but could simply destroy them while still benefiting from the iterative writing process.

¹¹ Other workshops include *Words After War*, *Warrior Writers* and *Veterans Writing Workshop* (VWW), to name a few. The literary non-profit organization *Words after War* tries to serve as nexus between veterans and civilians, who then use literature to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the armed conflicts and its aftermath. The veterans of *Warrior Writers* use all kinds of art to express their creativity while at the same time achieving emotional wellbeing.

The therapeutic value of reading likewise needs to be mentioned since it further stresses the exceptional potential of war writing. During the First World War, librarians and medical staff gave books to veterans mainly to keep them occupied but it soon found clinical usage (Dysart-Gale 35). Using literature for therapeutic means has become known as bibliotherapy, which makes use mostly of non-fiction, religious texts or poetry and is guided reading in order to address the patient's needs (Glavin & Montgomery 96). When fiction is used for therapeutic means, it is referred to as creative bibliotherapy (Dysart-Gale 97). As bibliotherapy depends for the most part on non-fiction¹², research on the benefits of creative bibliotherapy in connection with combat-related PTSD is still in its infancy. There is only little evidence of its potential therapeutic value, but its potential benefits encourage further studies, especially considering its cost-efficiency and easy accessibility (Dysart-Gale 36). Additionally, anecdotal evidence of creative bibliotherapy suggests that this line of research seems rather promising.

War fiction is valuable for non-combatants and combatants alike. Various studies highlight the cathartic value of writing and the increase of veteran writing workshops further attest to its potential. Its numerous advantages over traditional speaking therapies underscore its value. Through writing about war, veterans are provided with a framework, in which they can deal with past experiences and can gain control over them. Non-biographical accounts are also self-affirming and beneficial. In addition, reading veteran fictions also comes with multiple benefits. While civilians can gain an understanding of what soldiers go through in a warzone, soldiers benefit of other veterans' experiences through learning that they are not alone in their psychological struggles. As Dewey put it, "[t]he story of one's man experience can become an antidote for another man's pain" (183). War narratives thus have value far beyond entertainment.

¹² The VA provides a Bibliotherapy Resource Guide for afflicted veterans on their website, not only for PTSD but also various other health issues, including depression, substance abuse, bipolar disorder and even dementia and other age-related issues. The resources, however, are limited to non-fictional texts. For the full list got to https://www.mirecc.va.gov/docs/VA_Bibliotherapy_Resource_Guide.pdf

Trauma, PTSD and moral injury

Time does not heal all wounds.

Jonathan Shay

Definition and Origin

The original meaning of trauma and its modern usage are closely related. Etymologically, trauma is rooted in the medical sphere and the Greek term *τραῦμα*, which can be rendered as ‘wound’, ‘hurt’ or ‘defeat,’ emerged in the seventeenth century in the medical field and originally referred exclusively to physical injury (Fassin & Rechtman 2; Luckhurst 2). Caused by external physical forces such as a car accident or a bomb blast, sudden traumatic injury and the more severe and often fatal major trauma are medical issues primarily affecting the physical body. This medical condition of trauma served as model for the new phenomenon of trauma. Starting with Charcot’s and Freud’s pioneer work in psychoanalysis in the nineteenth century, a growing body of research verified that the human mind can also suffer from sudden unprecedented, extremely stressful life events, which can lead to a ‘wound of the mind’ (Caruth, *Trauma* 3). Due to its impact similar to physical injury, this severe condition was coined psychological trauma.

The definition of psychological trauma is twofold. Used in this modern sense, the term trauma refers to both the life-altering event itself as well as its adverse effects on the individual’s psyche and body. In the second sense, trauma is seen as a psychological condition resulting from life-threatening or emotionally overwhelming situations, including but not limited to traffic accidents, natural catastrophes, armed conflicts, physical and sexual abuse but also witnessing how loved ones are exposed to such events (APA, *DSM-5* 274). Cathy Caruth, the pioneer of trauma research, notes that trauma is caused by a consciously incomprehensible event, which forcefully surfaces repeatedly through thoughts, actions and dreams (*Trauma* 3).

The symptoms of experiencing trauma significantly impede life. Trauma is beyond human understanding and cannot be integrated meaningfully, thus continuing to operate on the individual’s consciousness through intrusive memories and flashbacks, thereby disrupting the person’s life (Caruth, *Trauma* 100). Following Caruth’s lead,

scholars focused on trauma's disrupting character, which is linked to impairment or even loss of memory. Since this disruption — or dissociation — prevents normal mental representation and integration of traumatic experiences in the individual's memory (Leys 2), recalling traumatic events is not always possible. Memories might be “relatively false, exaggerated, or distorted” (Allen 117) and at times traumatic events can even lead to dissociative amnesia — a retrograde memory loss of traumatic life episodes (ibid. 108)¹³.

The topic of memory of trauma raises issues. One pertinent question is whether trauma victims can talk about the traumatic event. Seeing traumatic events as ‘unclaimed experiences’ (*Unclaimed* 4), Caruth and others are convinced of the impossibility of representing and narrating trauma since its origin cannot be remembered and hence not expressed due to its devastating nature (Luckhurst 79). Trauma is seen as “a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time” (Luckhurst 5), which in its essence is ‘anti-narrative’ (ibid. 79). Nevertheless, talking about trauma is not only possible but even necessary for healing and that emotional stress improves memory (McNally 62). In his book on trauma, Richard McNally, Director of Clinical Training in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, convincingly argues against traumatic amnesia, posing that while most people remember traumatic events, they might simply choose not to speak about them (193)¹⁴. Regardless of the individual's memory concerning the harrowing experience, there can be long-lasting effects.

Experiencing traumatic events can result in psychological injury. Exposure to traumatic experiences can cause psychological diseases of which one of the most prominent and most devastating is called posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (referred to as DSM-5), PTSD is a trauma and stress-related disorder, which is primarily diagnosed through its “characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events” (APA, *DSM-5* 274). Previously, psychological trauma has been seen as consequence of an extraordinary, negative event, which definition, however, soon

¹³ Despite conflicting views on trauma-induced amnesia, psychologist Jon G. Allen convincingly argues that false memories do not cause severe trauma (117). Against common beliefs, impaired, false or even non-existing memories are not a sign of invalidity of trauma but rather a main characteristic of psychological trauma, as current scientific knowledge asserts (Almog 296).

¹⁴ Childhood traumas in general and sexual abuse in particular, however, are a different matter. For these topics, McNally's extensive review in *Remembering Trauma* is rather useful (196-210).

became obsolete since a majority of the US adult population suffers at least one traumatic event in the course of their lifetime. Estimates are that 8% of the US population suffers will suffer from PTSD during their lifetime and the disorder thus is seen as “a very commonly-occurring condition” (Kessler et al. 12). In one study, 75 percent of a sample of 2000 American reported at least one traumatic event and about 12 percent of those subsequently developed psychological trauma in form of PTSD (Breslau & Kessler 702). Traumatic events “[b]y definition [...] [are] overwhelming and psychologically injurious” (Allen 16) and there is general consensus that most people develop PTSD under severe enough circumstances (Finley 92; Young 117). Its main symptoms are rather consistent and include avoidance behaviour, intrusive symptoms, hyper-alertness, and negative cognitive changes. Feelings of guilt always play a significant role in PTSD, but its role has yet to be ascertained (Pugh et al. 139).

Although the diagnosis of PTSD is a relatively recent one, the phenomenon of combat stress is not novel to combatants. Throughout the wars of the past, soldiers have displayed adverse symptoms to combat exposure. PTSD became an official diagnosis due to numerous Vietnam war veterans, who suffered from similar symptoms. The diagnosis then transcended from a war neurosis to a common disorder¹⁵ concerning the civilian population alike (Finley 97). Previously, negative psychological effects of war were simply dismissed as ‘insanity’ or were acknowledged and referred to as ‘soldier’s heart’, ‘nostalgia’ or ‘irritable heart’, which nevertheless were all perceived as weaknesses of individuals, who were thus “treated as cowards or malingerers” (Finley 89). Soldiers’ symptoms eventually were labelled as ‘combat hysteria’ and ‘combat neurasthenia’ (Crocq & Crocq 49), further promoting the common belief that this condition was mainly due to personal negligence. During World War I, the loss of one’s senses or memories after combat was regarded as normal response to combat stress and the phenomenon received a new label as more and more soldiers returned from the trenches ‘shell-shocked’ (Finley 90). Toward the end of World War I, soldiers’ neurotic symptoms of hysteria and paralysis attracted the attention of famous psychoanalysts, such as Ferenczi

¹⁵ To the present day, PTSD is regarded as “a very mobile term” (Luckhurst 29), which is under constant revision (Rosen 275) and ongoing heated debates concern its definition, validity, categorization and aetiology. Some even think of PTSD even as a ‘disorder of recovery,’ seeing it as an appropriate response to trauma, whose survivors display its symptoms only temporarily but then often recover naturally.

and Freud, and the term ‘war neurosis’ — coined in 1907 by the German physician Honigman — became more prevalent (Crocq & Crocq 49). After World War I, the term war neurosis or ‘traumatic neurosis’ prevailed but throughout World War II military physicians used various terms, such as hysteria, shell shock, or neurasthenia as rather loose diagnoses for varying degrees of combat trauma (Finley 187). Subsequently, instead of ‘war neurosis’, the less stigmatizing term ‘combat or battle fatigue’ became more prominent. Although PTSD symptoms displayed by veterans from previous wars were rather diverse, the main symptoms do not differ greatly from the typical psychological manifestations of today’s war veterans (Finley 89). After realizing the structural resemblance of all these previously mentioned syndromes — as well as KZ syndrome, rape crisis, and post-Vietnam syndrome — (Reyes, Elhai & Ford 483), clinicians conflated these syndromes under the diagnosis of PTSD and included it in 1980 in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders. Despite individual variation of PTSD, core symptoms of combat-related trauma remained rather stable and PTSD has become known as signature wound for war veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Finley 98).

War-related PTSD Symptoms

Although war trauma is quite distinct, combat PTSD is not a separate diagnosis yet. Although some see trauma in general as a “potentially preventable condition” (Bisson 399), the prevalent opinion is that most people will develop PTSD under the right — or rather the wrong — circumstances (Finley 92; Scurfield 58, Young 117). This seems to be especially true for soldiers, whose exposure to combat dramatically increases the likelihood of being diagnosed with PTSD (Finley 71). Around 20 percent of Iraq war veterans are suffering from major depression, PTSD or anxiety (Hoge et al. 16). Less conservative estimates, however, are almost twice as high (ibid.). Despite vast research over the last decades, PTSD remains the subject of heated debates with “complex and contradictory” (Finley 159) views but the detrimental psychological impact of war has been confirmed repeatedly since modern warfare provides, what Allen refers to as, “severe, prolonged, ‘high dose’ trauma” (16). By its very nature, war is traumatic, but

war-related trauma has not yet been classified as its own disorder but is included in other trauma- and stressor-related disorders and thus shares the same symptoms.

The latest official diagnosis of PTSD can be found in the recent DSM-5. There it is divided in nine sub-categories and consists of 27 symptoms (APA, *DSM-5* 265), of which an individual must at least meet ten in order to be diagnosed with full PTSD. While the PTSD descriptors have undergone various changes from its initial implementation in 1980 to the recent fifth edition of the DSM, the main criteria remained mostly the same. According to the DSM-5, criterion A defines the nature of the traumatic event and a person needs either to personally undergo (A1), be a witness of (A2) or learn that a loved one experienced a traumatic event (A3). Prolonged exposure to traumatic events is likewise among the criteria of the first category of exposure (A4) and can suffice to lead to PTSD symptoms (265). The symptoms of PTSD are divided into four symptom clusters, which are intrusion (B), avoidance (C), negative cognitive alterations (D), and arousal and reactivity (E) symptoms. The final three criteria concern the duration of the disturbance (F) — according to which the symptoms must persist for longer than one month to be considered pathological — social and occupational malfunction due to distress (G), and the final proviso that all these previous symptoms are not caused by other medical conditions or substance abuse (H).

The traumatic nature of war is undisputable. In war, combatants are exposed to multiple or even all criteria from category A. Participating in combat characteristically threatens a soldier's life, which fulfills the first criterion. Witnessing as well as participating in killing are common experiences during combat and can also be traumatic. Due to the strong solidarity within a unit, witnessing the injury or death or learning of the circumstances concerning one soldier's death has the same effect for most soldiers as if it had been a relative, thus fulfilling both criteria A2 and A3 (“[l]earning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member” (APA, *DSM-5* 271). Although soldiers can even develop PTSD without being involved in combat, the extent of combat exposure usually is a reliable predictor since there is a “strong relationship between exposure to direct combat stressors and PTSD” (Scurfield 54). While the DSM-5 descriptors focus on PTSD as result of being a victim of violence, combat trauma affects perpetrators as well, as Allen mentions (7-8). Both debut novels illustrate this since the protagonists grapple

with their ambiguous actions in combat as much as — or maybe even more so than — with their traumatic experiences as passive victims. Due to the complexities of modern warfare, in which there are no clear-cut frontlines and enemies do not wear uniforms, civilian casualties are common and burden the soldiers. Considering this, it is not surprising that many the protagonists, like many veterans, experience one or more of the following symptoms during or after their deployments.

Intrusion symptoms are the first symptom cluster and a core feature of PTSD. Due to the overwhelming nature of trauma, the event cannot be integrated and thus repeatedly forces itself on the conscious, while being “largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 151). Such “intrusion of the past into the present” (Allen 4) — including trauma-induced thoughts, memories, nightmares and flashbacks — reverberates the original trauma (Luckhurst 1) and often is involuntary, recurring, and distressing (APA, *Pocket Guide* 182). Although persistent intrusions effectively disrupt daily life, these symptoms serve the purpose to reintegrate these adverse experiences, “[b]y bringing the images and feelings into awareness, [...] [thus] trying to heal itself” (Allen 122). Nevertheless, its scope and extent often does have detrimental effects on a veteran’s everyday life, impeding all areas of their lives, as the examples of both Private Bartle and Lieutenant Porter show. In Richmond, Virginia, Bartle’s thoughts are continuously drawn to Al Tafari and “everything [begins] to remind [him] of something else” (Powers 134) he experienced in combat. The crow of crows, for example, “strike in perfect harmony with the memory of the sound of falling mortars,” and Bartle forgets that he is back home and “brace[s] for the impact” (ibid.). Porter likewise displays intrusion symptoms. After the checkpoint incident in which Iraqi civilians die, Porter is haunted by “the forever glare of the dead driver” (Gallagher 51). Veterans often repeatedly relive their traumatic combat exposure through intrusive memories, as if “memory has authority over [them]” (Shay, *Achilles* 172), and thus struggle to continue an ordinary life after their deployment.

The second symptom cluster concerns avoidance behavior. In the Abbreviated Pocket Guide of the DSM-5, the description simply states that both “internal reminders [and] external reminders” (182) of the traumatic event are avoided. People suffering from PTSD avoid situations, people or places, which remind them of the trauma and thus seem

potentially dangerous. The inclination to limit social interactions and participation in significant activities thus is a defense mechanism of veterans, counteracting their anxiety of potential threats, which would trigger intrusive memories (Allen 179). While avoidance behavior seems to be a good strategy, it is not helpful since veterans often feel the need to avoid even ordinary activities, such as driving to the shopping mall and buying groceries. The protagonists in both novels frequently display avoidance behavior. During his deployment, Porter's avoidance behavior steadily increases and includes people, places and situations, which remind him of his traumatic events. From being an outgoing lieutenant, Porter changes to a lone wolf, who rather spends time with Rana than with his own soldiers. After his whole platoon has been engaged in firefights, he postpones writing the reports, which he wants to do "as soon as [he] stop[s] associating the award [they]'d wanted so desperately with the two dead soldiers it had cost" (109). Bartle's avoidance behavior is most prominent regarding his isolation. The young soldier spends "days and weeks [...] never seeing a soul" (Powers 131). His only motivation to leave his home is to buy "a case of beer" (ibid.) and even then, he waits before he enters the store until every other customer has left (132), thus limiting his contact with others to the bare minimum. Additionally, he moves into the mountains after his three-year imprisonment to eschew "desert [...] prairie and [...] plains" (Powers 224), which would rekindle memories from Iraq. Even his substance abuse ("It had been weeks since I'd drawn a sober breath" (181)) is a form of avoidance, since it momentarily numbs feelings and memories from his deployment in Al Tifar.

The third symptom cluster — negative alterations in cognitions and mood — likewise can be easily understood as a psychological response to the constant stresses endured in a war zone. The Abbreviated Pocket Guide of the DSM-5 names the following symptoms for criteria D: "negative cognitions: impaired memories; negative self-image; blame; negative emotional states; decreased participation; detachment; [and the] inability to experience pleasure" (APA, 2016: 182). Participation in combat often results in self-condemning cognitions, including strong feelings of shame and guilt. Bartle avoids all contact with people, believing that they can sense his shame and guilt. He is "afraid of [...] having to show [himself] for what [he] had become" (Powers 132) and is convinced that his guilt is "on a cellular level" (179). Porter likewise blames himself for events

beyond his control, such as Chambers killing a goat, Hog killing Haitham, and also most poignantly Rana's disappearance. Prolonged negative affirmations detrimentally influence veterans long after their return stateside and affect all aspects of their lives, as illustrated with Bartle and Porter, who both struggle with their transition due to these negative cognitions. Negative changes in mood and cognitions also damage or destroy relationships. It is not surprising that mood changes, emotional detachment and feelings of shame and guilt affect relationships. Dewey reports that most veterans have difficulties to connect with others after their deployment (61). Although they do not want to be alone, their trauma history convinces veterans that isolation is the safest option. Porter and Murph, for example, both withdraw from their fellow soldiers during their deployment, and Bartle's continuing reclusive lifestyle is rather symptomatic. Such behavior, however, hampers future healing, which requires social support.

Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity as the final symptom cluster of PTSD include various — even seemingly contradictory — symptoms, which can commerce or worsen after the trauma. Veterans might display not only irritable and reckless behavior but also hypervigilance, which manifests itself in an exaggerated startle response to loud noises, sudden movements or other cues, which resemble their traumatic event. Ambushes, suicide bombers, IEDs, as well as snipers, mortar attacks and even the hostile countryside leave imprints on the psyche of deployed soldiers. Upon their return to the homeland, they still respond to potential threats as if they were in the combat zone, which is referred to as hypervigilance. This state is marked by enhanced sensory perception, exaggerated startle response and increased arousal. While such a condition might save a soldier's life in combat, it exacerbates the veteran's transition to civilian life. Self-destructive and reckless behavior, although ostensibly the opposite of avoidance and contrary to hypervigilance, are likewise part of this symptoms cluster. The notion that individuals who seek to avoid stimuli, which might remind them of their trauma, might likewise be thrill seeking or even self-destructive seems illogical, which fuels an ongoing heated debate. Self-destructive and reckless behaviors, however, can lead to further trauma, thus assisting chronic PTSD (Lusk et al. 271). Such irrational behavior can be interpreted as attempt of the veterans to take control of their life again, while it distracts from intrusive memories for a short amount of time. Porter, for example, becomes

reckless during his deployment and even risks the lives of his men when he gives the order to “recon [an IED] by fire” (Gallagher 306), meaning to simply trigger the bomb by shooting at it, instead of requesting a bomb disposal squad, as standard procedure would require. Additionally, he takes “off [his] helmet” (205) while outside the wire, knowing that he is “prime sniper bait” (128) as platoon leader. Both behaviors could be interpreted as suicide ideation, which likewise falls under this category of symptoms and is one of Bartle’s symptoms, who ruminates that “there is a fine line between not wanting to wake up and actually wanting to kill yourself, and [...] you can walk that line for a long while without even noticing” (Powers 135). Apart from self-destructive behavior and hypervigilance, other symptoms in this cluster include prolonged high levels of anxiety, outbursts of anger, exaggerated startle responses as well as sleeping and concentration issues. While “[a]nxiety, irritation, and other distressing emotions are tiring” (Allen 279), much-needed sleep is often not possible since nightmares and intrusive memories invoke insomnia, thus restarting the vicious cycle anew. Back home in Richmond, Bartle remains in his bed the whole day but is haunted by “the same ghosts every night” (Powers 112) and Porter already suffers with sleeping problems during his deployment¹⁶.

PTSD can elicit various symptoms. In the DSM-5, there are four main symptom clusters, namely intrusion, avoidance, arousal and negative alterations in cognitions and mood. Among this last symptom cluster, profound feelings of shame and guilt are often most salient. Intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and self-destructive and reckless behavior often result from these negative feelings and both Bartle and Porter clearly suffer from these and many other symptoms. In order to fulfill the diagnosis of full PTSD and thus be eligible for treatment with the VA, veterans need to meet ten out of twenty-seven DSM-5 symptoms of PTSD. Although both protagonists display various symptoms, they do not seek treatment. Many, who do seek treatment, do not receive the diagnosis PTSD, nor do all who are diagnosed with PTSD suffer from it. This can be partially explained with another construct, in which guilt and shame play a central role, namely moral injury.

¹⁶ A myriad of worries keep him awake during the night: “I hadn’t slept. Because of Saif. Or Alia. Or Marissa [...] Or because Alphabet was less clear in my memory with every new day. Or because of Grant. Or Dead Tooth. Or Chambers, [...] a bloodthirsty murderer of innocents [...] Or because of Rios’ bloody vest. Or because I still needed to call my mom, [...] pretending to be fine. Or because of the clerics, both the one who’d killed Alphabet and the one whose spirit watched over Ashuriyah” (Gallagher 147). His worst nightmares, however, are related to the corpse he excavates and Rana’s disappearance (331).

Moral injury

In war, betrayal of [...] trust is inevitable.

David Wood

Moral injury, as its name suggests, is an injury of character, conscience or values. Although the term initially was used to describe the responses of nurses to unethical behavior within their work field, it soon found usage in the military field and can be traced back to psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (Jones 1767). In 1973, Lifton argued that morally ambiguous acts in combat can lead to detrimental long-term effects, including overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt and anger. Despite this seminal work, most empirical literature ignored his insights but his successors, such as Jonathan Shay, Shira Maguen and Brett T. Litz, found further insights, which could no longer be ignored. While the military rules of engagement (RoE) and the Geneva Convention theoretically regulate how enemy combatants, civilians and prisoners are to be treated in war, many veterans experience ambiguous situations, in which they then question whether their behavior was justified or a violation of those regulations (Dewey 74). In numerous therapy sessions with war veterans, Shay experienced that his patients did not suffer from PTSD but rather from a wounded conscience caused by morally ambiguous events. This emotional injury was then referred to as moral injury. In his pivotal book *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay argues that moral injury “is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury” (4). Moral injury is defined as:

[p]otentially morally injurious events, such as perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations [and] may be deleterious in the long term, emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, spiritually, and socially. (Litz et al. 695)

Contrary to this and other definitions, Shay’s definition connects moral injury not to the soldier’s actions or inactions but rather to their superiors’ failures, which he refers to as ‘leadership malpractice’ (*Casualties* 183). According to him, moral injury includes three elements, which can be summarized in one sentence: “a betrayal of what’s right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation” (ibid.). Such leadership malpractice, or ‘toxic leadership,’ as it is called in the military, “inflicts moral

injury” (Shay, *Moral* 185) and “destroys the capacity for social trust” (ibid. 184), as illustrated in both novels since Porter and Bartle suffer due to Chambers’ and Sterling’s ambiguous decisions, respectively. When leadership failure is at the core of moral injury, it often results in withdrawal, as Bartle perfectly illustrates. Porter manages to come to terms with his injury, while Bartle’s involvement in the killing of civilians proves to be too burdening. In order to heal, finding forgiveness and regaining social trust in their superiors and their own society is crucial.

Distinguishing between moral injury and PTSD is complex. Moral injury is not an official diagnosis yet and although it has been acknowledged by government institutions, such as the VA and the Department of Defense (DoD), to some extent, it still needs to be addressed adequately¹⁷ and debates about its classification continue (Griffin et al. 357). Since moral injury can cause similar symptoms as PTSD, such as intrusions, avoidance and especially profound emotions of guilt and shame, moral injury has often been diagnosed as PTSD and many veterans whose PTSD treatment yielded no results, might suffer from moral injury. Moral injury, in contrast to PTSD, which results from traumatic events, is caused by the violation of beliefs and social norms and thus has internal conflict at its center. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, it suffices that Bartle and Porter seem to suffer from both or either of these two invisible wounds of war and thus need to seek healing.

Recovery from moral injury or PTSD is difficult but possible. Shay clarifies that an individual cannot revert to the same mental well-being as before the traumatic event (*Achilles* 184) and that regaining innocence is likewise not an option: “If recovery means return to trusting innocence, recovery is *not* possible” (185; original emphasis). Veterans, nevertheless, can adapt and still find purpose in their lives. For this to happen, veterans need to alter their negative thoughts and feelings. Recent findings suggest that clinicians should find ways that “help the morally traumatized begin to repair feelings of guilt/shame, betrayal, and isolation” (Griffin et al. 358). Vietnam war veteran Daryl J. Eigen claims that soldiers can only recover and reintegrate when indifference or hatred towards enemies are replaced with compassion, forgiveness, friendliness and ultimately

¹⁷ In his book *What Have We Done* about moral injury, Pulitzer-prize winning war journalist David Wood states that the US government is “light-years behind” and quotes Litz: “In the military and the VA, moral injury is a uniquely and significantly unaddressed war zone harm” (20).

good will (161). Dewey notes that “to continue loving is also the cure for war’s emotional and spiritual trauma” (238). He continues that “[t]he most successful post-war combatants surround themselves in a network of love” (ibid.). Ironically, many veterans struggle to reconnect with their own civilians but rather seek this network elsewhere — namely, in their former combat zone. Thousands of US Vietnam war veterans returned to Vietnam in order to find closure and to reconnect with the former enemy. War veteran authors Roy Scranton and Elliot Ackerman likewise returned to their battlefield and met with former enemies face-to-face to find that they too are ordinary human beings who likewise long for connection and closure (*Essays* 175; Ackermann 13)¹⁸. This shows how veterans seek forgiveness from their former enemies and try to come to terms with their involvement in the war efforts, which too often had fatal consequences for civilians.

Antidote

Not all combatants are affected by devastating invisible wounds of war. In order to reduce high rates of PTSD, military psychiatrists investigated soldiers’ pre-traumatic factors, including environmental, temperamental, genetic and physiological ones, but ultimately failed¹⁹. The question why some soldiers do not suffer from PTSD despite the same or even more amount of combat exposure might partially be answered by Doctor Dewey’s concept of antidote.

Positive experiences during deployment can function as antidote to trauma. Over more than twenty years treating combat veterans, Doctor Larry Dewey, Chief psychiatrist of the Boise, Idaho VA medical center, gained significant insights into the veterans’ burdens and life-altering positive experiences. In his work *War and Redemption* (2004), he argues that single acts of courage or compassion can transform the soldier’s whole wartime deployment into an overall positive experience. Due to this cathartic effect, he refers to such incidents as ‘antidote experiences’ (Dewey 173). Over more than two decades, Dewey came to realize that those veterans who did not seem to be bothered by

¹⁸ Both pretend to be journalists at first but then soon trust their former enemies enough to admit being soldiers in the Iraq war. Scranton elaborates that already during his deployment he wanted to go outside the wire — like Murph in *The Yellow Birds* does — “to have a human encounter with the people whose nation [they]’d invaded, occupied, and upended” (*Essays*, 169).

¹⁹ More than a million soldiers who passed the screening, nevertheless subsequently suffered psychiatric illnesses. Such failures lead psychiatrists to the conclusion that “any individual, under the right circumstances, could be susceptible to combat stress”. (Finley 92)

their war experiences often connected their deployment with such special memories²⁰ revolving around — sometimes small and simple — human acts of kindness, bravery and selflessness (175). Numerous of his case studies support his thesis, suggesting that even “the example of one good man” can be sufficient to remind soldiers of their humanity and that “simple and consistent kindness” during combat can be of therapeutic value and can “outweigh the poisonous horror of war” (Dewey 176-8). Antidote experiences are situations which aid the conscience in such a way that they are overriding all other negative experiences and thus prevent PTSD and moral injury. In therapy, Dewey used his new insights to elicit such antidote experiences from veterans to help them to focus on the good they saw and witnessed. Although witnessing antidote experiences during combat does not automatically aid the healing process or eliminate all guilt and psychological pain, Dewey is convinced that such memories protect many veterans from developing adverse PTSD symptoms (184). In both novels, such antidote experiences are central but are achieved to a different degree. *Youngblood*’s Porter seeks such an experience and even expresses that he wants to accomplish “one good thing” (Gallagher 243) before leaving Iraq. In the end, there are numerous events, which would qualify as his antidote but ultimately it is his empathy towards the enemy and the civilian population in Iraq, which seems to protect him from the psychological demands of combat. Bartle, however, expresses that he “failed at the one good thing [he] could have done” (Powers 144) and thus does not share Porter’s promising path of recovery. This, however, might also be due to another reason, which is closely related with PTSD and is known as moral injury.

²⁰ One Veteran talked about his time in Guadalcanal, where ill-equipped soldiers suffered from malaria and other diseases while being under attack. He, however, did not mention any of this to his clinician but rather told him about “a church-going Mormon [...] [who] must have sung in the choir [...] would [...] sing to [them]” (Dewey 175). He then continues: “When I think of Guadalcanal, I hear him singing” (ibid.). Within the hell and chaos of combat, this war veteran found comfort and relief in music, which helped him not only to endure the war but protected him psychologically.

II. INNOCENCE, GUILT AND DIVISIONS

The first casualty of war is innocence.

Oliver Stone

It was a war of resistance; the objective was to save our souls.

Tim O'Brien

One central theme in *Youngblood* and *The Yellow Birds* is the loss of innocence. John Bartle and Jack Porter are both young, sensitive men, who join the war efforts with youthful naivety but soon learn that innocence truly is the first victim of war²¹. Their “virginal idealism about the war” (Ryan 4) and “hidden dreams of battlefield glory,” as Porter calls them (Gallagher 115), are shattered when they encounter combat. Despite their innocent age²², they are asked to spill blood. These young soldiers thus lose their innocence not only through exposure to dead bodies and killing, but also toxic leadership, which results in moral injury and symptoms of PTSD, the most prominent of which being their guilt and shame. Their guilt is not only perceived by them but is also reinforced by three deep divisions between them and the enemy, their chain of command, and even their own society. Despite their good intentions, they are made scapegoats by both their military superiors and US citizens, which thus result in psychological wounds in the form of PTSD and moral injury.

Recovery of corpses

The recovery of US and Iraqi corpses is central to the plot of both novels and influences the psychological trajectory of the protagonists. Since it is an unwritten rule in the US military to ‘leave no man behind,’ including the dead, the focus on “the recovery of

²¹ The famous quote is Oliver Stone’s tagline of his anti-Vietnam movie *Platoon* (1986). The original, however, can be traced back to the Greek writer Aeschylus and reads: “In war, truth is the first casualty.”

²² This initial innocence is indicated in the title of Gallagher’s novel *Youngblood*. Chambers’ pet phrase refers to new soldiers, who are made fun of by Porter and his more experienced men at first, but also applies to them, who are also ‘youngbloods’ when it comes to killing and dying. The term thus refers more broadly to all young soldiers whose innocence is lost due to combat exposure.

bodies [...] captured or [...] killed in action” (Deer 319) is not surprising. The accounting of bodies in war comes with its own language, including acronyms such as KIA, MIA, and AWOL²³. The primary purpose of declaring these conditions is not an end in itself but is essential for family members to resolve uncertainty and thus provide closure. The unforeseen psychological impact of this, however, has often been neglected but becomes obvious in both novels. In *Youngblood*, the young lieutenant learns of the burial place of Staff Sergeant Elijah Rios, a US soldier who served in a previous tour. The retrieval of this dead soldier results in a media frenzy and Porter receives an award, which highlights its significance. Bartle’s failure to recover Murph, however, results in investigations and his imprisonment. While recovering dead bodies is necessary for closure, it imposes an excruciating burden on those pursuing this endeavor and contributes to their loss of innocence.

Recovering dead bodies, although traumatic, has become routine for them. Handling corpses can be more traumatic than killing in combat (Sites 29), especially when the corpses of enemies or comrades are heavily mutilated, which often is the case in Iraq since roadside bombs (IEDs), rockets (RPGs), and mortar attacks increasingly threaten the bodies’ integrity. Bartle’s remark that “[m]ost of [them] had seen death in many forms” (Powers 206) applies to Porter as well. The young Private continues, listing the horrible scenes he has encountered so far in the warzone: “the slick mess after a suicide bomber, headless bodies gathered in a ditch like a collection of broken dolls on a child’s shelf, even our own boys sometimes, bleeding and crying” (ibid.). Such images become routine for both young soldiers, as they witness the impact war has on human bodies first-hand. Bartle watches medics who try to “put [a US soldier’s] insides back in his body” (Powers 118) and then sees a body with “[h]is head cut off” (123), which is used as body bomb and “its remnants [are] scattered in pieces” (126). After the explosion, Bartle and Murph are ordered to clear the bridge of the remnants, “a piece of skin and muscle, entrails [...] an arm and bits of legs” (ibid.); using hooks, they try to haul “the larger pieces of the body” (Powers 127) off the bridge. Porter’s experiences are similar and when he excavates “a bag of human remains in it” (Gallagher 178), a horrible scene

²³ These acronyms are understood by the majority of the US civilian population and refer to killed in action, missing in action and absent without leave, respectively.

unfolds before him: “Maggots had long ago chewed through the clear plastic to feast on the insides. The skull wasn’t attached to the body but had remained intact, falling to the bottom of the bag” (ibid.). This memory — although in itself traumatic enough — acquires new significance in the course of the story, when Porter fears that Rana might share her husband’s tragic fate. After another explosion, Porter sees how the remnants of his local ally Fat Mukthar are “scooped into pots and pans for burial” and “[b]elly guts [hang] from a palm tree” (Gallagher 280). The fact that both narrators report these scenes in a matter-of-fact tone highlights their emotional detachment, and their psychological burdens due to the recovery of their own soldiers become obvious.

In both novels, the physical retrieval of a US soldier is linked to their most traumatic experiences. In *Youngblood*, the missing corpse of a former soldier is found and recovered, while in *The Yellow Birds* Bartle’s comrade Murph is likewise found dead but his corpse is not recovered. These recovery attempts are thus achieved to different degrees, which affects the protagonists’ psychological well-being. For the young lieutenant, excavating Rios’ corpse is an important watershed, which restores his confidence in himself as an effective leader but nevertheless results in intrusive symptoms and guilt. Bartle’s failure, however, results in suicide ideation. While being exposed to corpses remind the protagonists of their own vulnerability; their greatest concern is not for themselves but for their loved ones. Their worst dreams come true when Murph and Rana disappear, thus linking their previous trauma of witnessing corpses to their new trauma in the form of the likely fate of their special comrades, which leads to nightmares, shame and guilt.

The corpse on the bridge foreshadows Murph’s fate, which leads to Bartle’s dramatic decline. After being forced to clear the bridge of the remains of a corpse, Bartle and Murph are haunted by their imaginations: “We saw him struggling and begging and asking Allah to free him, then realizing he would not be saved as they cut his throat and his neck bled and he choked and died” (Powers 127). Their unrecorded thoughts — that they could share a similar fate — are not difficult to guess. While such a fate seems to be the worst possible scenario, the novel suggests that there is something even worse than their own death, namely witnessing or learning of the death of a loved one. Bartle sees his nightmare coming alive when he finds Murph’s mutilated corpse and is once again

brutally reminded of the suffering of the unknown victim he previously encountered. Reliving the imagined horrors again, knowing that his best friend Murph had to suffer them, is too much for Bartle. While the previous victim was unknown to him, Murph now too has become “anonymous” (Powers 206), obliterated through torture and mutilation. This time, Bartle, however, refuses to recover the dead body, since he cannot bear the thought to be questioned about the circumstances and that the whole world would learn of Murph’s cruel end (207) and thus Bartle’s failure to protect him. Later, however, he regrets his decision and suggests to Sterling that they could tell the truth (69), which is met with scorn by the Sergeant. Surviving the war and returning home ultimately do not bring the desired relief for Bartle but results in survivor’s guilt since he believes that he could have prevented Murph’s tragedy or should have died in his stead.

The climax of *The Yellow Birds* revolves around Sterling’s and Bartle’s attempt to recover Private Murphy. In contrast to *Youngblood*, the platoon’s efforts to rescue the young AWOL soldier are fruitless. By the time Bartle and Sterling find Murph, he is already dead, and his body is broken, bruised and mutilated beyond recognition. Despite their dreadful experiences so far, “none of [them] had seen this” (Powers 206) before: In addition to cutting his throat, insurgents cut off Murph’s ears, eyes, nose and private parts. Fearing the consequences — the questions and reports but especially also Mrs Murph’s shock, when, “in a moment of weakness would turn up the lid of the casket and see her son” (207) — they decide against recovering their fallen comrade but rather dispose of it. Bartle’s decision is also influenced by his feelings of guilt and shame since he promised Ladonna Murphy to bring her son back safe. Additionally, he believes that Murph “would be buried and forgotten by all but her” (207), which he then would blame on himself since they “would have had the chance to change it” (208). His failure to recover his friend’s body, however, haunts him. In an earlier passage, Bartle witnesses how Murph fills out his casualty feeder card. Knowing that “Murph had placed an X in the box for Body Recovered” (Powers 83), adds further guilt to his deed since he fails to grant him this last wish. Disposing of Bartle’s body, thus weighs heavy on his and Sterling’s conscience and as consequence both attempt suicide. Even before Bartle finds out about Sterling’s suicide, he entertains the thought of not waking up and then realizes his suicide ideation (Powers 135), which eventually turn into actions. While lost in

memories of Iraq and Murph, Bartle “unconsciously submerg[es] himself in the river” (O’Gorman 551). While he is rescued, his cry for help is not understood by the police officers, who have compassion with him and simply escort him home, admonishing him to “keep it together” (Powers 147), instead of helping him to receive the professional help he so desperately needs.

In contrast to Bartle, finding the missing corpse of Elijah ‘Shaba’ Rios has both positive and negative effects on the young lieutenant. Porter’s recovery of Shaba’s body wins him the praise of his superiors, his family and the media. The young lieutenant, however, does not claim credit for it since he merely followed his source’s hint. This recovery of his fallen comrade, however, acts as a catalyst for his antidote experiences. Previously, Porter’s perceived shortcomings as a platoon leader resulted in inaction and despair but receiving all this positive attention kindles the desire in him to prove himself and to do a “good thing rather than a lucky thing, like being told where a man’s bones were” (242). Lieutenant Porter wants to be able to look himself into the mirror after his deployment and be proud of something he can tell his family and friends, and thus determines to achieve at least one “good thing,” something “that actually matters” (294). Nevertheless, Porter’s successful recovery leaves an imprint on his psyche, causes him nightmares, as previously discussed in relation to PTSD and results in intrusive images: “I hadn’t slept. Because of [...] Rios’ bloody vest” (147). His most haunting nightmare, however, foreshadows another potential trauma in regard to his good friend and love interest Rana.

Porter’s recovery of Rios triggers fears and nightmares about Rana. The recovery of Rios’ corpse clearly affects Porter, who can identify with the dead soldier due to their similarities. Shaba likewise was a young lieutenant, who sympathized with the locals and believed in a hopeful future for Iraq. In the same way as Porter, he was able to connect with the local population not simply because he tried to learn their language and customs (Gallagher 109) but also because he cared about their future well-being. Identifying with Rios, Porter, who even becomes infatuated with the same Iraqi women, namely Rana, is confronted with the possibility of suffering a similar fate. This, however, is not the main reason for Porter’s emotional burdens. Learning of Rana’s disappearance, Porter anticipates the worst and is revisited by the troubling sight of Rios’ rotting corpse. His

worst nightmare, which includes “[t]hree heads in a ditch, lined up like nesting dolls, their jaws hanging open in everlong shock, smelling of smoke and maggots” (331), resembles Shaba’s excavation and connects Porter’s traumatic memories with Rana’s possibly dreadful fate. The three dead in his dreams are Rana and her two children, whom he wants to protect at all costs without having control over it. For Porter, learning of Rana’s death would be more frightening than his own mortality and hence results in nightmares and intrusive symptoms. Although his recovery of Shaba is praised as one of his greatest achievements, at the same time it is linked to his worst fear, namely losing Rana in a similar way she lost Shaba. At home, Porter therefore is restless and both his alcohol abuse and his car accident due to reckless driving (339), might be interpreted as suicide ideation and would thus be indicative of PTSD and moral injury.

The physical retrieval of bodies shatters the protagonists’ psyches and leaves them with feelings of guilt and regret. Seeing dreadful scenes of war is traumatic and with every dead body they see, the emotional burden of the protagonists becomes heavier and heavier to bear. Previous traumas of clearing the dead from the bridge and excavating Shaba’s dead body are reiterated when their worst fears come true and their special comrades, Murph and Rana, are affected. Through their repeated exposure to corpses and the additional traumas due to Murph’s death and Rana’s disappearance, they sustain psychological and moral injuries, which manifest in various symptoms, including guilt, shame and suicide ideation. While Bartle immerses himself in his hometown river and almost drowns himself (Powers 146), Porter becomes increasingly reckless during but also after his deployment, which culminates in his car accident in the States (Gallagher 329). For both Bartle and Porter guilt seems to be the chief reason for their psychological distress, thus indicating their suffering from moral injuries. While Porter does not succumb to his negative cognitions but rather is determined to rescue Rana, Bartle believes that he “failed at the one good thing [he] could have done” (Powers 144), namely saving his friend Murph, and thus isolates himself. In addition to all those horrors, both soldiers witnessed the negative impact of the US occupation on the Iraqi population, which thus further taints their innocence and plays a part in contributing to their moral injuries and possibly even PTSD.

Killing and moral injury

The act of killing is linked to the loss of innocence and to moral injury. The protagonists' loss of innocence is not only the result of the burdensome duty of recovering dead bodies but also due to the acts of war, which they perform and witness. After killing enemy combatants but also witnessing how civilians are accidentally or deliberately killed, the protagonists cannot maintain their initial innocence and due to transgressions of their chain of command, both suffer moral injuries. Although not all combatants have to kill to suffer from PTSD or moral injury, killing enemies in combat "seems to traumatize [all] people regardless of the perceived danger they're in or the righteousness of their cause" (Junger, *Tribe* 84). Before their deployment to Iraq, Sterling tells his two young protégées about the act of killing: "It's hard at first, but it's simple. Anybody can do it. [...] For some people, it's tough after" (Powers 41-42). While the physical act of pulling a trigger is simple, dealing with the aftermath is not, as both protagonists have to learn. In *Youngblood*, Porter is eager to experience war and eventually engages in combat but is spared the act of killing. Nevertheless, as platoon leader he feels guilty for his soldiers' killings, especially since there are civilian or teenage victims among them. Bartle, in contrast, kills enemy combatants despite his initial reluctance to fire his weapon and wrestles with his actions immediately afterwards.

The young lieutenant is spared the knowledge that he killed in combat. After five months in Ashuriyah, Porter "hadn't even been shot at yet" (Gallagher 5) and his only "confirmed kills" (30) are flies, which the company — out of boredom — started counting. Eager to engage in combat in order to earn his Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB), an award proofing that he had been in actual combat, he is waiting for his first firefight. His first contact with the enemy, however, is over before he can react and one of his soldiers dies (92). Despite being engaged in firefights, Porter does not kill in combat. In the attack on the minaret, however, he fires his whole magazine into a room, not knowing whether his bullets hit someone since Captain Vrettos then orders to shoot the tower with "a 105-milimeter cannon" (234), thus killing everyone inside. Nevertheless, the possibility of having killed an enemy combatant causes him emotional distress and he ponders about these unknown people — among which are also civilians — calling them "the faceless people I'd unintentionally helped kill" (241). At one point, he almost kills

an unarmed man, whom he realizes to be not only Yousef, the falafel shop owner and smuggler but also the insurgent leader called the Cleric. After Porter pays Yousef for smuggling Rana and her boys out of the country, she suddenly disappears before the previously appointed time and the desperate lieutenant confronts the smuggler. Filled with rage, Porter draws his pistol and threatens to kill him. Due to his concern for Rana, however, he does not pull the trigger and learns one thing about himself: “I was no killer. [...] There was shame in that, certainly, for a man in combat, for a leader at war. But there was also relief” (Gallagher 310). Since killing Yousef would have made him “a bloodthirsty murderer” (147), Porter is relieved that he did not kill Yousef or anyone else in Iraq. While he is thus spared from this experience, he nevertheless witnesses the killing of young combatants and innocent civilians, which violates his deeply held beliefs of their mission to liberate and protect the Iraqi population.

Being involved in the death of teenagers morally injures Porter. During a firefight, Porter’s life is saved by Chambers, who pushes him to the ground when a sniper targets the young lieutenant and the firefight is over before he even fires a single shot. When Porter wants “to look at the enemy” (157), the scene of battle unsettles him. Instead of experienced insurgents, he sees “teenage scarecrows made of dirt, all torn to bloody straw” (ibid.). While a fellow soldier has to vomit, Porter admonishes himself to deal with this later: “I put those thoughts into a compartment of the mind and shut it tight” (158). Additionally, for this incident Porter receives an award for being in combat and when he salutes his commander, he feels that he “never hated another man more” (160). Receiving medals for being involved in the killing of disgruntled teenagers is not what the reason he enlisted and thus constitutes one of his moral injuries. A similar moral injury occurs towards the end of his deployment when Ismail, the Barbie kid, is shot dead after killing Chambers. Although this time he does not see the dead bodies, as he only hears of the killings after the event, Porter is overwhelmed with guilt since he “pulled [strings] to get [Ismail] out of jail” (335). The fact that Chambers was killed with Saif’s gun makes the matter only worse since Porter gave it to Yousef as a present to secure Rana’s safe passage to Beirut. Yousef must have sold it to the child, which burdens the protagonist since he believes that he was to some extent responsible for Ismail’s premature demise to some extent. His guilt, however, goes even deeper, as his apology

towards the child a few weeks earlier attest: “We took everything from you [...] I can’t bring back your uncle, or your goat, or your job. I’m sorry” (310). From the start, the lieutenant’s failure to police or rebuke the sergeant (11) allows the whole vicious cycle to take its course, which starts with Chambers’ decision to kill Ismail’s goat. When the teenager then attempts to stab Chambers, Porter expresses his disillusion with his combat expectations and the fact that they suddenly seem to fight against children: “Back when I’d longed for excitement, sulky teenagers with self-designated nicknames [...] hadn’t been what I’d imagined” (135). Although he tries to help Ismail, he cannot prevent that his uncle Haitham is killed²⁴. Both the killing of the teenagers and Ismail’s death thus fulfill criteria for moral injury since Chambers exerts authority due to his combat experience and “infects [Porter’s] platoon” (322) with his numerous transgressions leading to Haitham’s, the teenager’s and his own death. Instead of preventing Ismail’s tragic fate, Porter believes that he sealed it. Instead of liberating the Iraqi people, he and his platoon are the cause that they join the insurgency. While Porter does not pull the trigger to kill, he is convinced that his decisions — or lack thereof, as in Haitham’s case — result in his involvement in the death of both enemy combatants and local civilians.

The certainty of having killed likewise affects Bartle’s conscience. Despite military training and mortal danger, Bartle struggles to pull the trigger and when he finally does, it comes at a psychological price. His reluctance to engage in battle is subdued by Sgt. Sterling’s shouted orders to return fire and to “[s]hoot these hajji” (Powers 20). In the firefight, “Sterling yelled a long time [...] before [he] squeezed the trigger” (ibid.). During the firefight, Bartle sees a desperate enemy soldier and his “first instinct [is] to yell out to him” (20), cheering him on but he then realizes that such empathy seems out of place. Even worse is his realization that he likewise started shooting at the man and “wouldn’t stop [shooting] until [he] was sure [the enemy] was dead” (21). Although the enemy combatant dies in the blaze of gunfire, Bartle is convinced that he fired the lethal bullet: “I knew. I shot him” (21). Sterling’s continuous coercion attempts yielded fruit and thus cause Bartle’s moral declension, culminating in his self-condemning question: “What kind of men are we?” (21). During the next

²⁴ Even before Haitham’s death, the killing of the goat troubles the young soldier and “the Barbie Kid’s scream [...] twisted in [Porter’s] mind like screws” (Gallagher 14).

firefight, Bartle not only kills an unarmed combatant but also reloads his gun and continues to shoot at the dead body, for which Sterling compliments him, stating that “thorough is the way home” (126). The sergeants’ words, however, do not alleviate Bartle’s guilt, but rather have the contrary effect. Being praised for his moral transgressions induces guilt, regret, and shame in Bartle beyond understanding and constitutes a moral injury. His conviction that he should not be praised for such transgressions is subverted by his superior and Bartle fears what else his leader might coerce him into doing: “I stopped firing and put my head in my hands. [...] I had taken it as far as I could [...] what could I do beyond this? Where would [Sterling] take us?” (126). Bartle’s actions thus show his rapid trajectory from an innocent young man into a fierce combatant. Under Sterling’s charge, he becomes a docile soldier and although he hates his leaders’ “brutality and domination” (19), he matches Sterling more and more after each firefight. In hindsight, Bartle acknowledges that he has become “unaware of [his] own savagery” (Powers 159), including violence against animals and people. In contrast to Sterling, however, Bartle shows regret for his actions but believes he has no choice — “all choices are illusions” (217) — since he is subjected to Sterling’s will and fate. This, however, does not protect him from his moral injury and at home Bartle thinks of himself as a “murderer” (Powers 145). In consequence of his moral injury and his feelings of guilt, he loses his social trust and isolates himself completely in Richmond before suffering silently in his prison cell, where he marks his intrusive memories with a piece of chalk on the wall (216). After his prison sentence, he flees into a remote cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains to protect himself from others but also to hide his shame and guilt from them.

Iraqi civilian casualties affect the protagonists severely. In both novels, it does not take long until its protagonists have to learn that civilian casualties are part of their war in Iraq due to negligence, wrong judgement calls, or even cold-blooded murder. This further taints the young protagonists and when Bartle recounts that his “platoon had done well in the orchard, minimized civilian casualties, killed a lot of hajjis and suffered only a few casualties of [their] own” (Powers 15) it sounds as if it were an accomplishment, implying that no collateral damage is the exception and minimizing, instead of preventing, civilian casualties the rule. The frequent death of civilians in both novels

seems to support this. Although Bartle and Porter themselves do not kill civilians, they nevertheless feel partially responsible for their deaths for different reasons. As platoon leader, Porter sees himself responsible for his men and their actions. For Bartle, the main reason is that he does not interfere in due time, which will be discussed in more detail in relation to war crimes.

In *Youngblood*, the US occupation causes heavy civilian casualties, which trouble the young protagonist. When Porter arrives at checkpoint thirty-eight, he witnesses his first civilian casualties of war: “two dead hajji civilians and three injured hajji civilians” (Gallagher 48). Although he had no control over it, these casualties affect him, and as he returns to the FOB, he sees “the mother, still thumping her chest and wailing for answers” (50). Later, he is haunted by memory of the driver’s face (51) in addition to the image and sounds of the wailing mother (165). This, however, is just the beginning and in the fight at the mosque, there are further civilian casualties next to the enemy combatants: “Dead Tooth, two other military-age males, an old man presumed to be the mullah, two unidentified women, and a child” (234-235). There is no way of knowing whether those military-age males — which means that these two could also be teenagers above the age of twelve or grown-up men up to the age of sixty — were enemy combatants or simply civilians. Porter promises himself that he will not forget these “faceless people [he]’d unintentionally helped kill” (241). Dead Tooth, whose real name is Azhar, was once an ordinary local civilian who became an insurgent after the checkpoint incident, in which a US soldier accidentally killed his cousin. This fatal incident distresses Porter due to the ambiguity of their war efforts in Iraq, which too often result in civilian casualties.

The protagonists’ loss of innocence becomes most evident through their involvement in war crimes. Both soldiers are sensitive young men who want to do the right thing, but their combat exposure forever alters them since they become involved in war crimes. Although they do not pull the trigger themselves, they share the burden of guilt because they do not interfere or report when their battle-seasoned sergeants break the rules of engagement and kill innocent civilians. Both Sergeant Chambers and Sergeant Sterling have been numbed by combat and do not hesitate to open fire on innocent people. Despite their use of excessive force, the two sergeants are not reprimanded by superiors and do not face disciplinary actions for their dubious decisions.

Their dastardly deeds, however, have immediate effects Bartle and Porter, whose involvement in these crimes inflicts moral injuries, debilitating guilt and shame.

Chambers' toxic leadership leads to Porter's moral injury. From the start, Porter hears rumors about Sgt. Chambers involvement in the killing of innocent Iraqis. In the second chapter, the reader learns that Haitham claims to recognize Sergeant Daniel Chambers from his previous tour in Iraq and that he "helped murder Iraqis" (Gallagher 16). Porter dismisses this at first until the evidence corroborates. Chambers does not hold back with his strong opinions about Porter being too friendly to the locals (10) and kills the Barbie kid's goat for the sake of demonstrating how to set a perimeter (13). He also voices his opinion that "it's better to be tried by twelve than carried by six" (23), thus expressing his disposition towards the rules of engagement and possible consequences, which foreshadows future events. When Porter confronts Chambers, the sergeant dismisses it as gossip. Nevertheless, Porter collects evidence against the battle-seasoned veteran and is informed by Dominguez, who served with Chambers in Afghanistan in a previous tour that Chambers "tweak[s] the rules of engagement"²⁵ (90). Dominguez also confesses that they "got trigger-happy" (90) in Afghanistan, thus suggesting once more that the claims about Chambers are true. After Porter reads sworn statements concerning the 'drop weapon allegations' against Chambers, he is still undecided until he learns the truth for himself when Hog — in a hasty and wrong decision — shoots the unarmed Haitham in a night raid (200). After the shooting, Hog claims that he mistook Haitham's alcohol bottle for a gun. Porter then becomes entangled in the drop weapon practice; he "knew what was going to happen [next] before it did, but [he] just stayed there in the middle of the room, looking at Haitham's face" (201). Chambers takes control of the situation and instructs Hog to find an AK-47 rifle, which they then place next to the corpse. Porter does not object to Chambers' claim that such "things happen all the time. To good soldiers and good men" (202) and instead of leading his men, the young lieutenant follows the sergeant's dubious decisions and rallies the squad to affirm that it was "[a] good kill" (202) and to remind them of their rules: "You need to always remember the rules of engagement – don't shoot unless they're armed. [...] You [...] hear

²⁵ Although these rules should clearly specify when the use of lethal force is legitimate, there is room for interpretation since the "nebulous lawyer jargon [...] confused more than [it] clarified" (Gallagher 48).

me?” (202). While his soldiers verbally agree, Porter’s previous actions speak louder than his words. Rather than err and get killed in action, they could shoot first and would — like Hog — be protected by their leaders in case they were mistaken. The incident is yet another piece of evidence which confirms Porter’s suspicions about Chambers, but the lieutenant nevertheless does not muster the courage or willpower to take necessary actions, realizing the far-reaching implications this otherwise would have for his soldiers, especially Hog. Porter thus becomes guilty of covering up the murder of an innocent, unarmed civilian, which he considered his *habibi* (202), which is Arabic for friend. His culpability becomes clear when Porter returns into the hut and finds a camel spider on Haitham’s face, which he crushes under his boot. This symbolic scene²⁶ shows Porter’s loss of innocence and that he too becomes as guilty as the other scorpion-like soldiers, who attack and shoot first, in order to survive — even if this means possibly sacrificing innocent civilians for their own safety. The death of Haitham thus represents a moral injury since Porter fails to prevent it and his objections to the cover-up would have serious consequences for Hog, whom he wants to protect. By choosing to protect Hog and follow Chambers’ lead, he violates his own convictions, which deeply trouble him.

Bartle’s moral deterioration culminates in his involvement in war crimes. His experiences are the perfect example of Shay’s concept of moral injury since Sterling commits war crimes in front of Bartle’s eyes and compliments him for ambiguous decisions in combat. Although Bartle is not prone to violence, combat has its effects on him. At first, he dares not to engage even when his life is in danger until his sergeant verbally forces him: “I needed him to jar me into action, even when they were trying to kill me” (Powers 19). Later he even kills an unarmed enemy combatant in a firefight and continues shooting at the dead body with Murph and Sterling (126), which violates not only his own beliefs but also established rules of combat. This troubles him deeply, especially since Sterling praises them that they finally understand what they need to do to return home safely (ibid.) His sergeant’s suggestion that not adhering to moral ethics is necessary for their survival is thus morally injurious. Sterling’s toxic leadership is one

²⁶ After finding a camel spider and a scorpion, the soldiers arrange a prizefight between the two arachnids. When the spider is killed within eighty seconds, Chambers admonishes them: “That’s what happens when you hesitate [...] Don’t be that camel spider. Be the scorpion” (79). Porter’s killing of the spider thus illustrates that he is in danger of becoming a ruthless soldier as Chambers admonished them to be.

major reason for Bartle's moral decline and is illustrated best by another incident. When a car speeds towards them, Sergeant Sterling opens fire despite "[t]wo large white sheets billow[ing] from its rear windows" (Powers 21). While Sterling mistakes the passengers for suicide bombers, Bartle sees them through his rifle-mounted scope for what they are — namely, two innocent civilians trapped in the middle of their neighborhood in this horrible war — and thus wants to warn his fellow soldiers: "I'll yell, I thought. I'll tell them they are old, let them pass. But [...] I said nothing" (22). This confession to the reader highlights his regrets of not trying to intervene, even if it had not necessarily changed the outcome. While he silently watches, the situation unfolds. Sterling opens fire and does "not stop the shooting" (22) when the two civilians are already dead, Bartle offers the reader no insight into his thoughts and feelings other than that he cannot breathe. Bartle then witnesses how a child mourns the death of the elderly couple and almost is killed by the soldiers too. By speaking out, he might have been able to prevent this but due to his inaction, he feels complicit in the civilians' deaths. His sergeants' negative example thus stains the young Private, who then likewise becomes ruthless in combat. A similar situation occurs towards the end with the same results. After disposing of Murph's body with the help of an old Iraqi cartwright, Bartle "knew what was coming" (211) but despite his anticipation of Sterling's next crime, he once again does not interfere as his sergeant cold-bloodedly kills the civilian (207). These violent deaths of civilians understandably corrupt Bartle, who becomes not only Sterlings' companion in arms but also in crimes, even war crimes.

Those deliberate killings of civilians shake Bartle's and Porter's core beliefs. Instead of liberating the Iraqi population, they are perceived as occupiers, who kill those they are supposed to protect. Although both soldiers are the opposite of 'trigger-happy,' they become involved in war crimes due to their scrupulous sergeants, which results in their moral injuries. While their guilt emits from almost every single page, their superiors and civilians do not help them alleviate their symptoms but impose further burdens on them by dismissing their own culpability, as will be discussed in the following section.

Divisions

Closely related to the discussion of innocence and guilt are three divisions, which are relevant in the assignment of guilt. The first binary is the typical war-related us versus them binary, in which the *other* is laden with all negative traits and thus also with culpability. The previously discussed moral transgressions and the usage of the ambiguous term *hajji* for enemy combatants and non-combatants alike, however, reverses these roles of culpability. The other two dichotomies reveal that the army is not unified but that higher-ranking military leaders scapegoat their grunts and that society in like manner blame combatants by claiming their own innocence.

Soldiers vs. enemies

The concept of enemy is fluid in Iraq. In contrast to trench warfare of World War II, modern combat in Iraq does not have clear frontlines and distinct enemy soldiers in uniforms. Instead of a traditional enemy army, Bartle and Porter face rivaling Sunni and Shiite tribal leaders, foreign extremists but also ordinary disgruntled civilians who rebel against the injustices witnessed during the occupation. Distinguishing between friend and foe or civilian and combatant thus becomes difficult since the same people which might converse with US troops during the day, attack them at night. This predicament is expressed by Bartle:

We'd go back into a city that fought this battle yearly [...] We'd kill them. They'd shoot us and blow off our limbs and run into the hills and wadis, back into the alley and dusty villages. Then they'd come back, and we'd start over by waving to them as they leaned against lampposts [...] while drinking tea in front of their shops. While we patrolled the streets, we'd throw candy to their children with whom we'd fight in the fall a few more years from now. (Powers 91)

The protagonists therefore often do not know who their enemies are and many of them only become their enemies due to the injustice they experience during the occupation. This ambiguity of combatants and non-combatants becomes obvious in the epithet *hajji*, which designates both. Although it seems plausible to use one term for civilians and combatants since it is not always clear which of both they are, it disrupts boundaries and

places all Iraqi people on the threatening side of the enemy-friend continuum, thus making all of them potential enemies.

The meaning of *hajji* is ambivalent and demeaning, at least, and dehumanizing at worst. The term itself derives from the religious practice of going to Mecca, the *hadj*, and originally is thus honorific for every Muslim believer, who performed this pilgrimage²⁷. Throughout both novels, soldiers frequently refer to Iraqi people as *hajjis* to refer to both male and female Iraqis, regardless of their age, nationality and whether they performed this religious ritual or not. Buchanan states that the term is used to “describe any person in any country [...], regardless of that person’s status as an enemy, a Muslim, a civilian, or even an ally” (161). While many veterans insist that this is a neutral and not a demeaning term, its use and its implications are, however, rather revealing, given the previous history with such epithets during other wars. Designating the enemy is a common practice and in previous wars, US soldiers always found labels to denote enemy soldiers and Iraq is no exception. The term *hajji* is a “direct descendant of Vietnam’s ‘gooks’ or ‘dinks’ [...] For many soldiers, [...] [it] becomes synonymous with ‘enemy’” (Brown & Lutz 326). In order to be able to kill another human, the enemy needs to be dehumanized, which is achieved through the use of “war words” (Egan 145). War journalist Kevin Sites notes that “the enemy’s humanity is denied” (167) by using such epithets. In military parlance, soldiers often use the acronym MAM (military-age-male), which refers to any Iraqi male “between the ages twelve and sixty, whether a harmless shepherd or a zombie Zarqawi” (Gallagher 66). Porter remarks on this as “the army’s [cynical] distortion of language” (ibid.), placing young children in the same category as followers of the infamous insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Such distortion of language dehumanizes enemies and makes killing them possible in the first place. During firefights, soldiers likewise are trained to refer to enemy combatants as ‘contacts,’ which is nicely illustrated in Scranton’s novel *War Porn* when a soldier — in the heat of the fight — forgets his training: “We got people! I mean contacts!” (66). Nevertheless, Porter’s misses the same distortion of language concerning the term *hajji*. Despite claims that the term *hajji* is a neutral term to refer to Iraqis, its similarity to the US military term is obvious and scholars argue that it is a “stigmatizing label” (Egan 147), which

²⁷ Embedded war journalists Junger and Filkins use it in the proper and original sense as honorific.

“implicates all of Islam and much of the Arab world as ‘the enemy’” (ibid. 151) and thus facilitates and justifies killing in the combat zone. This can be seen in numerous examples, in which soldiers are instructed to “kill these hajji” (Powers 17)²⁸. Scranton illustrates this link of dehumanization and killing clearly when he states that they “were praying for reasons to shoot—but not people, mind you, just [...] hadjis” (Essays 141). *Hajji* thus is not just an offensive umbrella term for Middle Eastern combatants and non-combatants but “a tool of American consensus building and a collective purging of war guilt” (Buchanan 170), dehumanizing the enemy in order to permitting the act of killing them. Using such war words, however, affects the local population too.

The term labels all Iraqis as potential enemies. The term *hajji* is problematic since it does not discriminate between terrorists and civilians and thus classifies all local people as potential enemies²⁹. In *The Yellow Birds*, before deploying Sterling states that “Al Tamar [...] [is] like a hajji proving ground” (39), which clearly uses the term to denote enemy combatants and not civilians but instead of Iraqi insurgents. Although the narrator soon afterwards notes that they “minimized civilian casualties, killed a lot of hajjis and suffered only a few casualties of our own” (Powers 15), it is striking that the ‘neutral term’ is once again used to refer to enemies in this context. When Sterling, however, kills the innocent cartwheel, Bartle likewise uses this epithet for the innocent civilian, “the hajji with the cart” (Powers 208). In *Youngblood*, Chambers likewise uses this term derogatively for the enemy, but civilians are also referred to as hajjis: “two dead hajji civilians and three injured hajji civilians” (Gallagher 48). While even Porter fails to see the insult of this term, its dehumanizing function does not cease when being used for civilians, as the protagonists in both novels have to learn. Instead of infamous terrorists, they too often fight and kill teenagers and civilians. Porter thinks of the innocent victims in the minaret as the people “[he]’d unintentionally helped kill” (Gallagher 241) and even Chambers realizes this and notes that he “had better things to be doing than running up ancient mosques to kill teenagers who’d had nothing to do with 9/11” (Gallagher 239). Bartle too witnesses the death of “boys, sixteen [years] or so” (Powers 118). While those

²⁸ Before their mission, Sterling encourages his soldiers to “[s]hoot these hajji” (Powers 19) and after combat Bartle states that they “killed a lot of hajjis” (151).

²⁹ In Phil Klay’s short story collection, a character expresses this the following way: “They’re all the same to me. They’re all the enemy” (*Redeployment* 150).

civilians are seen as collateral damage for some, it seems that for others they become the easy scapegoat for untraceable insurgents.

US soldiers are not only confronted with enemy combatants but also local civilians. Due to the ambiguity of urban combat in Iraq and the dangerous use of dehumanizing epithets such as *hajji*, there is not only a divide between US soldiers and their enemy but also between those whom they should liberate. Although none of the characters explicitly remarks on this, their actions — in this case using this racial slur — are clear enough. Not making any difference in the verbal distinction between enemy combatant and local civilian affects them subconsciously and it reduces their inhibition threshold to open fire. While some would argue that this is necessary in order for them to protect fellow soldiers from cunning terrorist, the numerous incidents in which the opposite is the case — that local civilians would need the protection but are killed and their relatives are then compensated with *fasil* — seem to suggest otherwise. These devastating and often fatal consequences for the local population in Iraq only increases anti-American resentment and with every fatal incident involving civilians, relatives such as Azhar and Ismail become enemies, thus widening the gap between US soldiers and the local population of Iraq, which then often support the insurgency and thus become enemy combatants.

Soldiers vs. superiors

Even within the US army, unity has its limitations. Although US troops often speak of a ‘band of brotherhood’ and one of its mottoes is ‘Army of One,’ both highlighting the strong ties among military service members, disunity among the US military is thematized in both novels. While most soldiers praise tight-knit unit cohesion and would be willing to die for their fellow soldiers, there are strongly perceived divisions within the army. The most pronounced disconnect is between combat soldiers and higher-ranking officers, who are often ignorant of the realities of combat. This chasm is already indicated in the prologue of *Youngblood*, where Porter points out that that “the power of being in charge [...] got to all officers and sergeants” (Gallagher 1). In addition, one soldier notes that “higher gets credit for planning [a successful mission but if] it goes poorly, we

morons on the ground [messed] it up” (ibid. 316)³⁰. While the grunts risk their lives daily, most higher-ranking superiors issue their unreasonable commands from the safety of a distant bunker, thus increasing this gap through their lack of discernment. Throughout the novels, this division becomes obvious through commanders’ use of rhetoric and their disregard for human lives of their own and of local people.

A major reason for this disunity is indifference and ignorance. The fact that senior officers are not participating in combat is not what troubles common soldiers most, but rather the indifference and ignorance of their commanders. Focusing on overall strategies and the bigger picture, ‘the brass’ discount the human cost of their decisions which creates a wide gulf between them and their troops. This indifference but also ignorance of higher-ranking officers towards their troops is painfully perceived by the two young soldiers in both novels.

Most poignantly illustrated is this in *The Yellow Birds* when a Colonel visits the frontline for a PR gig with a camera team. Bartle notices “the crispness of his uniform” (Powers 86), his meaningless rhetoric and his concern with publicity, which surpasses his concern for their lives. The Colonel arrives with a “broad smile spread over his face” and immediately shows his insensitivity and ignorance by asking the inane question: “How’s the war tonight, boys?” (ibid.). In hindsight, Bartle vividly remembers “the colonel’s pride, his satisfaction with his own directness, [and] his disregard for [them] as individuals” (87). Knowing that some of them will not survive the next few hours, he remains unaffected and is only concerned for his impression on the people who will see the coverage. While the soldiers fear for their lives and wait for what could be their last battle, the Colonel cannot even wait to assure himself that he is satisfied “how the shots looked” (90) until he leaves the battlefield. Given the circumstances, the soldiers are convinced that their superior visited them for PR reasons only while their personal fates are irrelevant to him.

Porter likewise notices his superiors’ apathy. After reporting a gathering of demonstrating locals, his superiors give orders to “disperse it, by any means necessary”

³⁰ In Wood’s work, one veteran likewise states this: “The people in charge who are supposed to make the decisions are hiding behind walls and bulletproof glass because they have a career. They’re not there to get shot at. They’re not there to risk their lives to help us. They’re there to further their career, get a medal, and move on to the next command. Take credit for our good deeds and disown our bad deeds” (203).

(Gallagher 316). Evaluating the situation, Porter suggests a different solution, “calmly explaining just how crazy [the] order was” (317) since they were outnumbered and despite their superior firepower would risk his soldiers’ lives. Even the battle-hardened platoon sergeant seconds Porter’s opinion, believing that the riot “has ambush written all over it” (317). A major in the safety of “the operations center at Camp Independence” (ibid.), however, ridicules their realistic assessment of the situation and chastises them for not obeying his command. Within minutes, hundred “mad and foolish” (321) Iraqis rally and encircle the soldiers. Due to Porter, however, the situation, which could have easily ended in a bloodbath with heavy casualties on both sides, does not escalate. Nevertheless, his superiors’ decisions enrage him since they display their indifference to the people involved.

Both incidents remind of another scene from *Youngblood*, namely the prize-fight of the arachnids. As a pastime, the soldiers stage a deadly prizefight between a camel spider and a scorpion (Gallagher 77). What starts as a pastime for the soldiers, ends fatally for the spider. In contrast to the prizefight, however, the US soldiers are in both incidents not simply spectators but the ones whose lives are on the lines. In this reversal, the nation’s leaders and the military superiors are now the reckless ‘betting gods,’ placing their scorpion and spider soldiers against each other, hoping to win with nothing to lose themselves while the soldiers are at danger of losing it all: their physical and mental health, and even their lives. Thus, both protagonists realize that the sacrifice they are willing to make, is hardly valued by their superiors, who sometimes make their decisions on a whim.

The ignorance and indifference among military superiors thus create a chasm between them and their soldiers. Private Bartle and Lieutenant Porter both feel betrayed by their superiors. When Bartle realizes that their enemies were disgruntled teenagers, the Colonel’s previous statement that they “may never do anything this important again in [their] entire lives” (Powers 89) seems like mockery to him. Instead of the lives of the soldiers, whom he commands, or the dead teenagers, the Colonel’s main concern is his own televised speech. For Porter, such indifference and ignorance are likewise beyond his grasp. Despite his concerns about the lives of his men, the major rebukes the young lieutenant for voicing his opinion instead of simply following orders. Thus, both young

soldiers experience how the chasm between them and their leaders is not only spatial but also ideological due to their complete disregard of the soldiers' physical well-being.

Another reason for this division is the superiors' disregard of Iraqi lives. It comes as no surprise that senior officers care even less about Iraqi casualties, both combatants and civilians. Not experiencing combat directly and meeting with Iraqis, some commanders are ignorant of the war's realities and its casualties and thus do not care. Even the lives of Iraqi allies or local civilians are often irrelevant to them, as their actions suggest. Porter, in contrast, meets Iraqis daily and deeply cares for them and Bartle likewise shows empathy towards them.

In *Youngblood*, Porter notices how his commander disprizes Iraqi lives. Seeing the corpses after a firefight, US soldiers notice that their enemies were four teenagers and Porter forces himself to not think about it (158). They all, nonetheless, receive medals for valor for being engaged in combat. Porter receives his medal and salutes but thinks that he "never hated another man more" (160). Receiving medals for fighting against teenagers was not his reason for joining the army. Later, the commander rebukes Snoop for wearing a mask at an outpost and although Captain Vrettos and Porter try to intervene by explaining the terp's dangerous situation, the commander does not concede³¹. Snoop complies in order to keep his job, knowing that this might mean that "he'd traded [his job] for his life" (250). Apart from the commander, all the soldiers know the implications of Snoop's action³². Later, the commanders show their indifference towards the whole population of the local village when a misdirected US missile destroys an abandoned house. The strike results in a fire, which rapidly spreads and endangers the town. Porter and his men try to help put out the fire but receive the order to return to the FOB (313-15). Since the fire is the US military's fault in the first place, Porter complains and requests to aid the locals but is rebuked. He can only leave their "jugs and bottles of water" (314) to enable them to fight the fire. While the locals desperately need support, Porter is commanded to escort a supply convoy, a "full, lumbering water trailer only miles away from a burning Ashuriyah" (315), which would save the town from burning.

³¹ "Captain Vrettos had tried to explain the complexities involved, to no avail." (Gallagher 250)

³² The young soldiers in *The Yellow Birds* likewise learn this soon. When Bartle and Murph once ask Malik about his mask, "he took his index finger and traced the fringe of the hood that hung around his neck. 'They'll kill me for helping you. They'll kill my whole family'" (Powers 9).

The irony of the situation and the ignorance of his superiors do not go unnoticed by the soldiers, but nobody remarks on it (315). Porter, however, continues to oppose his leaders' decisions when Iraqi lives are at stake and thus gains purpose and inward peace but feels increasingly alienated from his own superiors.

Bartle's superiors, including Sterling, in like manner do not value the lives of Iraqi people. When the colonel speaks of the "great violence [they will do] in the cause of good" (Powers 87), he admits that he does not know "what kind of enemy [they]'ll be up against" (ibid.). After one fight, Bartle sees his enemies from up close: "two boys, sixteen or so" (Powers 118). In addition to witnessing the death of teenage combatants, Bartle is shocked when he is exposed to the killing of innocent civilians. Sterling's casualness after the previously discussed lethal incident involving the elderly couple, illustrates his indifference towards Iraqi lives. The fact that his sergeant shows no sign of remorse and even compliments Bartle for continuing to shoot at a dead enemy combatant (24), underscores Sterling's disregard for Iraqis and increases Bartle's hatred towards his sergeant. Being praised for killing and witnessing the killing of civilians constitute a betrayal of trust and thus inflicts Bartle's moral injuries, which further alienate him from his superiors.

From these incidents, it is obvious to Bartle and Porter that their superiors disvalue Iraqi lives. Knowing that their opinions matter little in the US army, where commanders' commands seem sacrosanct, the soldiers strongly feel the chasm between them and their leaders widening. In contrast to his leaders and his platoon sergeant, Porter has empathy with the local population and tries to do everything within his power to support them. Being restrained by his superiors, however, he feels betrayed, which produces his moral injury. Although it seems that Bartle shares his superiors' views and is only concerned with his and Murph's survival, this is not true, as was argued throughout the thesis. His empathy towards the enemy becomes apparent in various situations but he yields to Sterling's pressure. Both protagonists perceive the chasm between themselves and their superiors and eventually leave the army and thus complete this separation.

The use of rhetoric in Powers' novel likewise illustrate this divide between soldiers and their superiors. The colonel's use of pronouns during his speech to the soldiers indicates the division between front soldiers and superiors. The colonel

patronizingly addresses the soldiers as “boys” (Powers 87), and although he mostly uses the inclusive first person plural, he distinguishes between higher ranks and the combat soldiers repeatedly throughout his speech, thus drawing attention to their difference. At one point, he states the following: “We are that justice. Now, I wish I could tell you that all of us are coming back, but I can’t. Some of you will not come back with us” (87). The different personal pronouns used in this passage make it clear that the ‘we’ has its boundaries and that they might die while he surely returns to the US. This fact alone creates a distinct division since wrong decisions on his part will never affect his life in the same way that it could affect theirs. This is highlighted in *The Yellow Birds* from the start. Within the first pages, Bartle clarifies that “war [is not] the great unifier, that it brought people [not] closer together than any other activity on earth” (Powers 12). Thus, the pronoun we “is paradoxically mainly used to divide, rather than unite” (Enenkel 13), since it is used also by the narrator to indicate that “the perceived unity in the army is just a myth” (ibid. 16). While comrades are willing to die for each other, most senior officers care little for their lives. The colonels’ words thus sound hollow for Bartle: “I can’t go with you boys [...] but I’ll be in contact from the operation center the whole time” (Powers 87). In case of mortal danger or their imminent death, he would be informed but would not — unlike his comrades — risk his life for theirs.

This strongly perceived division also plays a role in the assignment of guilt. The ignorance and indifference of higher-ranking officers, as displayed by their disregard of human lives and their rhetoric, places further burdens on the protagonists and thus exacerbates their psychological well-being. Most of their officers deflect accountability too easily, while the young soldiers themselves lean towards the other extreme, blaming themselves resulting from their superiors’ decisions. Most obvious is this false assignment of guilt with the checkpoint incident in *Youngblood*³³. After a checkpoint control, which results in “two dead [...] and three injured hajji civilians” (48), the ‘Big Man’ erroneously blames the soldier for lacking focus and thus relieves the platoon leader from his position, which enrages Porter since all soldier involved followed the rules of

³³ This event is yet another traumatic one for Porter. Despite his promise to the young gunner that he should not “worry about higher” (Gallagher 48), Porter cannot defend the young soldier in front of the commander. Although Porter was not present and is not responsible for the shooter, he feels that he failed the young soldier, as well as the local civilians, thus being haunted by “[t]he forever glare of the dead driver” (51).

engagement (Gallagher 53-54). When pointing out the soldiers' compliance, he is reprimanded and lectured by his superior that "counterinsurgency is a complicated task [...] [which] [r]equires care, restraint [and] [a]n appreciation for the gray" (54). The irony is that the commander himself does not acknowledge that it is exactly this gray area, which is at the core of this incident and is disregarded by himself. The US gunner opens fire on a car, which speeds towards the checkpoint and thus poses a threat. Since "there hadn't been any guns or IED-making materials" (Gallagher 48) in the car, the soldier is blamed, and the junior officers are released of their leadership position as consequence. Had the drivers been insurgents, or the car a VBIED (vehicle borne IED), the US soldier would have been praised as hero, with an award to show for it. Instead of admitting that the situation was ambiguous and that all soldiers adhered to the rules, the commander simply blames the soldier for the outcome. This false assignment of guilt further widens the chasm between common soldiers and their superiors.

In contrast to their leaders, Porter and Bartle do not deflect guilt but bear the emotional burden. Contrary to their superiors, Bartle and Murph accept accountability not only for their failures but also for situations, they have hardly any control over. Apart from the previously discussed examples of the town fire and the checkpoint incident, the attack on the mosque in *Youngblood* and the killing of two civilians in *The Yellow Birds* likewise supports this. Although Porter attempts to support the civilians during the town fire, he fails due to his superiors, which thus causes a moral injury. Despite speaking out against orders and exposing injustice, he feels shame and guilt. Another example of this is the attack of the mosque. Once again Porter needs to follow orders, which subsequently result in the three dead civilians ("two unidentified women, and a child [...] likely younger than ten years old" (Gallagher 234-235). After the firefight in the minaret, Chambers' attempt to reassure the young lieutenant of their innocence — since they are merely "grunts sent there to do what no one else would" (242) — fails and although Porter would like to agree, he feels that this would be a feeble excuse:

I wanted to agree [...] I wanted us to absolve ourselves of blame, deflect the accountability elsewhere. I wanted to chalk up the ruin we'd wrought to something unknowable, like providence, or chance, or bureaucracy. But something inside implored me not to. (Gallagher 242-243)

His internal fight keeps him awake the whole night and once again, he questions decisions of his leaders while nevertheless feeling guilty for the outcome.

Bartle also experiences guilt and shame, which his military superiors deflect upon him. From the start, Sterling commands Bartle to look out for Murph. When Murph needs him most, however, Sterling dissuades him from trying to help Murph, believing that he is already a “dead man” (Powers 156). Although Sterling was in command, he consents to Bartle’s plan to dispose of Murph’s body but then blames him for “talk[ing him] into [it]” (68) and its consequences. In a bar in Germany, Sterling reaffirms his false assurance: “When I’m in charge, things end up OK” (ibid.). The sergeant thus deflects guilt upon his soldier but when the young Private wants to come clean, Sterling dismisses his proposition, knowing the adverse consequences, which would ensue for him.

The chasm between ordinary soldiers and their military superiors is blatant in both novels. Bartle’s and Porter’s chains-of-command give proof to their ignorance and indifference. Both their military leaders demonstrate not only a lack of sensibility but also complete disregard of their soldiers’ lives through their ignorant opinions and decisions. While their well-being is a given, their ignorance and apathy risk the protagonists’ lives. Additionally, they blame their ordinary soldiers, who thus feel betrayed and eventually separate themselves from the army after their deployments.

Soldiers vs. civilians

Amidst all this fragmentation, US soldiers additionally perceive a distinct division between themselves and their own civilian population. This growing divide between combatants and civilians has various reasons and has been the topic of numerous public and academic discourses. Due to the all-volunteer force, less than one percent of the US population served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Most civilians hence lack insight into the realities of war. Additionally, combat exposure is perceived as such a unique experience that it cannot be properly communicated. This is expressed in the term combat gnosticism, which refers to the belief that combat is entirely unique so that only those who have been to war can truly know about this experience, thus, according to Buchanan (11), reinforcing this separation between soldiers and civilians. Although veterans are

frequently asked about their time in Iraq, they feel that curiosity, rather than concern, is the main driving force behind it and expressions of gratitude and similar rituals often serve to absolve civilians of all responsibility rather than to help returning veterans to reintegrate. Disappointed by the civilians' ignorance regarding the war and its complexities, veterans feel betrayed, alienated, and therefore further isolate themselves³⁴. This division exacerbates the soldier's reintegration into society (Hautzinger & Scandlyn 224), as is the case with the main protagonists of both novels.

Combat experiences are difficult if not impossible to share. In both classic and contemporary war writing, the belief that "civilians [...] cannot apprehend their soldier's experience" (Ryan 11) is a recurring theme. Being exposed to combat includes various life-altering experiences, such as being in a life-threatening situation, witnessing the death of a comrade, killing enemy combatants or even seeing civilian casualties. Speaking of the veterans' experiences, Dewey notes the following (69):

They have survived unimaginable scenes of gore and horror. These scenes seem to be seared permanently into their memories. They wonder about why they are alive and others dear to them are dead. In deep private moments they wonder how they can ever be forgiven and how anyone could ever really understand.

Combat exposure is traumatic since it includes mortal agony, shame and guilt. Unsurprisingly, answering questions about one's combat experience is difficult, if not impossible, for most veterans. Nevertheless, one of the most frequent questions that veterans are asked is "What was it like over there?"³⁵ This question and the fear of having to answer it is addressed in both novels.

Gallagher's protagonist confronts this issue head-on. In the prologue of *Youngblood*, Porter ponders this dilemma of being asked this particular question: "A lot of people ask 'What was it like?' and once, I even tried to answer" (1). Porter apologizes

³⁴ In *Tribe*, Junger convincingly argues that one reason for this tragic trajectory is the gap between soldier-civilian. When the majority of the male population was drafted during WW2, reintegration became an interest of the whole society. The AVF (all voluntary forces), however, constitute only 1% of the population and society is thus rather uninvolved in the war's efforts.

³⁵ The author of *The Yellow Birds* states that the novel "began as an attempt to reckon with one question: What was it like over there?" (239). Veteran author Klay overhears a conversation of fellow soldiers who discuss answering the same question if asked by their families back home: "They couldn't tell them the truth, they agreed. Instead, they'd tell them proud, uplifting things." (*Citizen-soldier* 17).

in advance and admits his failure to adequately convey his deployment experience. Instead of a simple answer or a “clean [story]” (1), he decides to underscore his ambiguous experiences the following way: “But next time someone asks, I won’t answer straight and clean. I’ll answer crooked, and I’ll answer long.” (2). Due to war’s complexity and its psychological aftermath, there is no simple answer to this question. Later Porter confides in his brother, a former soldier, but withholds information about his combat exposure from his girlfriend and parents. While speaking with his girlfriend, intrusive memories from “the dead driver’s mom” (165) disrupt his thoughts and although he wants to, he does not know how he should share his dreadful experiences with her and thus decides not to attempt it.

Bartle fails to communicate his combat experiences. Upon returning, Bartle avoids talking to people and ignores his best friend’s calls, knowing that he cannot and does not want to answer this one question. When he sees his friends swimming in a river, he stays aloof in the distance and ponders his decision: “Why didn’t I just wade out to them? What would I say? ‘Hey, how are you?’ they’d say. And I’d answer, ‘I feel like I’m being eaten from the inside out and I can’t tell anyone what’s going on’” (Powers 144). The events he witnessed and the deeds he committed changed him profoundly that he feels that he cannot reconnect with his family and former friends. Haunted by memories of his combat exposure, he knows that admitting “watching women get killed [...] and shooting [enemies] more times than necessary to actually kill them” (ibid.) is not something he can share with any civilian, not even his mother and his closest friends. In Bartle’s case, shame and guilt play an important role in his inability to share his true feelings about his deployment in Iraq³⁶. Back home, he is disconnected from “all the spoiled cities of America” (215) and thus separates himself from them by moving into the mountains.

In these examples from both novels, the protagonists struggle to communicate their combat experience with their civilian population, including their closest friends and family, thus highlighting how combat creates a deep chasm between the troops and the society that sends them to war.

³⁶ In Sites’ *The Things They Cannot Say* (2013) this is poignantly thematized. US veterans from different wars share similar insights about their struggle to communicate combat experiences due to guilt and shame.

Another reason for this divide is the civilians' ignorance and lack of interest in the Iraq war. In a study focusing on the identity of soldiers, Smith and True report that veterans are marginalized since most civilians "have no interpersonal understanding of recent veterans' experiences aside from media depictions" (151). Media coverage, however, is heavily censored—the US government prohibits pictures of dead US soldiers—and shows a sanitized version of a war without victims. Although military blogs provide further insights into the realities of war, the audience consists mostly of relatives, friends and other veterans. Most civilians thus remain utterly disconnected from their troops and instead of informing themselves, they rather indulge in consumerism and entertainment³⁷ while US soldiers still put themselves in harm's way in Iraq on a daily basis: "The home, which conducted 'business as usual,' was no longer a community" (Leed 205). As consequence, much of the US population does not grasp the hideous facts of the wars abroad and hold on to stereotypical notions that the Iraqi population consists only of Muslim terrorists. Media and entertainment reinforce such assumptions. In Iraq, both protagonists, however, experience something else entirely; instead of well-trained terrorists, they fight against disgruntled teenagers and disillusioned locals, such as the Barbie Kid and Azhar in *Youngblood*, who start fighting against the occupation due to the injustices they had to endure from US soldiers. Simplistic opinions of civilians only increase this divide since it illustrates their lack of understanding and involvement. In response to the barkeeper's remark that the US "ought to nuke those sand niggers" (Powers 106), since the "[w]hole place is full of savages" (ibid.), Bartle refuses the civilian's invitation to pay for his drinks. Porter likewise is annoyed by the civilians' inappropriate desire to be entertained with stories about his wartime in Iraq and states that he "won't answer straight and clean [next time someone asks]" (Gallagher 2). Inappropriate questions by strangers about combat exposure and how it feels like to be in a war, highlight the disinterest since those who inform themselves even slightly, should know that war veterans most likely will not want to talk about it. In addition, the society "instills [...] the idea that [soldiers] have sacrificed their own agency and individuality for the sake of the larger collective" (Smith & True 152). Although veterans willingly

³⁷ Scranton expresses this when he relates his feelings while walking in New York upon his return to the US: "I seethed with scorn at the hedonistic excesses around me" (*Essays* 84).

decided for this sacrifice, civilians depreciate it through ignorance and indifference and thus further contribute to the complex combatant-civilian divide.

Perfunctory rituals of civilians further divide since they deflect responsibility. In contrast to the soldiers who returned from Vietnam, Porter and Bartle, like most Iraq war veterans, receive a warm welcome and are praised as heroes despite the growing dissatisfaction with the Iraq war. This, however, troubles veterans since “[t]o detach military service from the ends to which it is put, to ‘hate the war but love the warrior,’ [...] is to disconnect” (Scranton, *Essays* 147). Hoisting flags, placing yellow ribbons and expressing their Thank-you-for-your-service attitude, which Barta refers to as ‘public rituals’ (81), serve to assert the innocence of the civilian population and thus reinforce this chasm since veterans perceive them as superficial and insincere due to the civilians’ ignorance and indifference³⁸. The two previously mentioned examples of Bartle’s refusal to accept free beers and Porter’s desire to alienate people with his war stories in response to yet another ‘What was it like?’ illustrates this. Both protagonists need support and professional help and not a just a simple ‘Thank you’. Another reason why some veterans do not respond well to such rituals and platitudes is illustrated by Bartle’s reasoning for avoiding people: “I’ll give away that I don’t deserve anyone’s gratitude and really they should all hate me for what I’ve done” (Powers 144). Bartle is convinced that he does not deserve any gratitude and praise since he simply was lucky to survive the war, while his best friend died due to his negligence. The same applies to the young platoon leader, who likewise struggles with survivor trauma and blames himself for the death of his soldiers. While thanking soldiers for their service seems an innocent gesture, it reminds soldiers of the soldier-civilian divide and their sacrifices while also emphasizing that it was their choice to join the military forces, which thus deflects the responsibility of civilians.

For many combatants and non-combatants, choice equals culpability. In both works of contemporary US Iraq war fiction the protagonists are painstakingly aware of this soldier-civilian divide, feeling that they have to bear the sole responsibility of unsuccessful and ambiguous military operations. Bartle expresses this in a stream of

³⁸ In one essay, war veteran Scranton notes the impact of this question: “I’d watch them shift their eyes, as if searching for something appropriately respectful to say and I’d hate them for it. I’d have to hear how they couldn’t imagine, or they wanted to thank me, or they wanted to know why I joined. Every time it came up, I had to relive the whole question of why we were in Iraq and what it all meant” (*Essays* 85).

consciousness passage, in which he blames himself, arguing that it was “all [his] fault, really, because [he] went on purpose” (Powers 145). That this is not an isolated incident or simply a figment of imagination can be seen in various statements of combatants and non-combatants but in scholarly works:

By rendering military service a ‘choice,’ rather than a ‘duty,’ American culture forces veterans themselves to bear the major responsibility for the results that derive from making this choice. (Hawkins 98)

The rhetoric of politicians, the media, civilians but even veterans confirms this, when different personal pronouns for US citizens and US military forces are used. Such rhetoric “ensur[es] the imagined innocence of its civilian populace by separating its citizens from its enforcers” (Barta 83), thus drawing a line between innocent US civilians and guilty combatants. As Bartle, many civilians and veterans hence believe that veterans themselves are to blame for their plight since they made this choice in the first place and are thus responsible. Recalling a heated debate with an anti-war activist, Porter thinks of a return he wished he would have used: “In a representative democracy, we’re all complicit” (Gallagher 62). He then ponders how everyone who pays taxes is “as guilty as anyone” (ibid.) and that soldiers only follow duties while “their country [...] decides where to send them” (Gallagher 62). The question of culpability bothers many veterans. War veteran authors Michael Pitre and Elliot Ackerman relate how civilians asked them whether they had killed in war³⁹. Upset about this delicate question, Ackerman and Pitre eventually give the same answer: “If I did, you paid me to” (Ackerman 28). In return, perfunctory rituals, such as a Thank-you-for-your-service attitude, are not enough since veterans need real support for carrying the burden of going to war.

The disconnection between soldiers and civilians is almost irreconcilable. While combat exposure and combat stress contribute to this detachment, other issues are mostly the responsibility of society. Both protagonists struggle to convey their experience to

³⁹ The complexity behind this inappropriate question is illustrated by Wood (144): “Asking a combat veteran if he ever killed someone is considered rude and, for the veteran, cause for excruciating discomfort: most likely, the answer lies tightly wrapped in layers of pride and guilt and confusion, an experience that’s been hard-earned and not lightly shared.” In an interview with Wood, an army Lieutenant Colonel further elaborates on this: “When acquaintances and strangers ask if we killed anyone in war, we lie or ignore them; they have no right to know” (ibid. 144).

civilians and questions asked with importunity widen the gap further. Both protagonists are haunted by feelings of shame and guilt for their involvement in the killing of civilians but are seen as heroes for fighting against terrorists. Indifference and ignorance displayed by society thus further harm the veterans and convey the sense that their sacrifice was superfluous. A simple Thank-you-for-your-service attitude does not counter such feelings but rather amplifies them since they underscore that joining the army was the protagonists' own choice. Believing in the adage 'With choice comes responsibility' generates guilt and blame exclusively towards combatants. Such views and rhetoric, which are distributed by the media and society alike, however, neglect that civilians sustain the war morally or at least instrumentally, through taxes, and are likewise partially responsible for the veteran's plight.

These three divisions, soldiers versus enemies, soldiers versus higher and soldiers versus civilians, not only isolate the protagonists but also convinces them of their guilt. Bartle and Porter experience separation on all levels; in the combat zone, within the army and even at home. In the war zone, they seem to be at war with everyone; insurgents, civilians and even local allies. They witness how their enemies are not only terrorists but also disgruntled teenagers and civilians and even local tribal leaders who pretend to support them. Civilian *hajji* casualties come at a prize for both protagonists not only due to condolence funds called *fasil* but also psychologically in form of symptoms of PTSD and moral injury due to their superiors' transgressions. Their guilt and shame are reinforced since superiors deny their own culpability by blaming their soldiers, which creates a division within the military. At home, civilians likewise abdicate their responsibility through performing rituals of gratitude and innocence, thus creating a serious disconnect, which is further widened through insinuating that serving was their own choice and the consequences are thus their fault. As consequence, both Bartle and Porter separate themselves emotionally and spatially from the military and their own civilian society.

III. RECOVERY AND HEALING

If contemporary America doesn't develop ways to publicly confront the emotional consequences of war, those consequences will continue to burn a hole through the vets themselves.

Sebastian Junger

Bridging divides

Psychological recovery and healing seem possible for both protagonists but are achieved to different degrees. In the combat zone, the two young protagonists in *Youngblood* and *The Yellow Birds* lose their innocence. While Bartle kills in combat and is traumatized by Murph's death and the death of innocent civilians, Porter realizes how it is the US soldiers' fault that disgruntled locals become their enemies. The young lieutenant additionally suffers from the uncertainty of Rana's fate. Both soldiers are haunted by intrusive memories, nightmares and profound feelings of shame and guilt since they feel responsible for the death of fellow soldiers and Iraqi civilians. Due to their superiors' violations of rules of engagement and their own complicity in these potential war crimes, Bartle and Porter seem to suffer not only from PTSD but also from moral injuries. Having witnessed the impact of the US occupation on Iraqi people deeply troubles them and exacerbates their transition to the civilian world. Despite severe symptoms, they continue to suffer without seeking help and thus become even more estranged from their own civilian population, which influences their psychological trajectory. Since the three previously discussed divides — soldiers-enemies, soldiers-superiors, and soldiers-civilians — create further tensions and are the main reason for the veterans' alienation, they need to be bridged. By overcoming their indignation and infuriation against Iraqis, military superiors and US civilians, veterans can heal their invisible wounds of war to some extent and thus reintegrate into society.

Bridging the soldier-enemy divide

Discarding the enemy image is essential for recovery. Numerous Vietnam veterans return to their combat zone to make peace with their former enemies and the past that haunts them. The need to forgive and be forgiven by the enemy is an important element in the healing process and Scurfield notes that “[r]eturning to former battle sites and meeting [...] [the former] enemy [...] [is] profound in mitigating [...] psychological wounds of war” (18). Veterans must practice dignity for the enemy to eventually “forego the very notion of the ‘enemy’ to live comfortably at home” (Eigen 153). While combat teaches soldiers to emotionally detach, reintegration in society requires them to develop compassion for enemies and non-combatants (Eigen 164). During his deployment in Iraq, Porter strives to stay compassionate with the local people and his return to the Middle East is a sign of his attempt to reconcile with those he once protected but also had to fight against. While Porter seems to find peace amidst the refugees in Beirut, Bartle ponders his decisions in prison and revisits Al Tifar daily in his mind. Although it appears as if Bartle is indifferent to the life of Iraqis, there is reasonable indication that he cares about them and their suffering.

Bartle demonstrates empathy for the people in Iraq. His brutally honest remark after the death of Malik that he “was an incidental figure who only seemed to exist in his relation to [Bartle’s] continuing life” (Powers 12) seems to suggest that he does not care about the local people in general. A closer reading, however, dismisses this interpretation. The fact that apart from Bartle and Sterling none of his fellow US soldiers is mentioned by name, indicates that they likewise were only ‘incidental figures’ for the frightened protagonist. His detachment from comrades, enemy combatants and civilians alike, is a coping mechanism to remain sane throughout the insanity of war. Although his mind is preoccupied with his failure to protect Murph, the young private does show signs of empathy towards his enemies and its civilian population. Shortly after Malik’s death, Bartle wants to shout to an enemy combatant that he “made it [...] [and should] keep going” (20) but the others notice the enemy and open fire. In this pivotal situation, Bartle regrets not ordering the other soldiers to cease firing and he asks himself: “What kind of

men are we?” (21). Although his fear prevails and he himself starts shooting,⁴⁰ his actions do not diminish his achievement to be compassionate with his enemy. His desire to protect and help the enemy soldier, show that he tries to hold on to his humanity. At one point during his deployment, Bartle imagines the daily lives of the Iraqi people:

I thought of the line of people who rode or walked or ran out of Al Tifar four days ago, how they waited patiently for us to leave, for the enemy to leave, how when the battle was over they would come back and begin to sweep the shells off the roofs of their houses, how they would fill buckets of water and splash them over the dried, coppery blood on their doorsteps. (Powers 84)

This passage clearly depicts Bartle’s ability to empathize with the ordinary citizens of Al Tifar but also his admiration for their perseverance despite these dreadful circumstances. His thoughts are interrupted when he hears a woman’s keening and Bartle removes his helmet to listen:

I was not sure if it really came from the women around the campfires, if they pulled their hair crying out in mourning or not but I heard it and even now it seems wrong not to listen. (Powers 85)

His willingness to acknowledge their suffering once again stresses his empathy. In contrast to Porter, Bartle, however, does not manage to alleviate the plight of the people in Al Tifar and is thus overcome with remorse and regret. Despite his good intentions and genuine desire, he fails to achieve “one good thing” (Powers 144) for the people in Iraq, and thus struggles to transition into civilian life.

Porter, on the other hand, manages to act upon his empathy. His concern for the local people is obvious from the start. Will’s observation that his brother’s “empathy makes [him] a good leader and a better man” (274) rings true especially in regard to the way he treats the local Iraqis. In contrast to Chambers, Porter believes in improving the situation in Ashuriyah. As his predecessor Rios had before, Porter honestly seeks to befriend and support the locals, even those who oppose them, such as Fat Mukthar “who was honest enough to hate [them] but still made [them] chai because [they] were guests” (2). His ambition to improve his Arabic (109) and his decision to observe the religious

⁴⁰ “An odd sensation came over me, as if I had been saved, for I was not a man, but a boy, and that he may have been frightened, but [...] I was frightened too, and I realized with a great shock that I was shooting at him” (Powers 21).

practice “fast[ing] through the holy month” (215) are examples of his empathy towards the civilian population. Porter even risks his career twice when he violates military protocol to rescue Rana’s boy Ahmed, who is bitten by a poisonous snake (273) and when he pays Yousef to smuggle Rana and her boys to Beirut. Also for Azhar, who started fighting the occupation forces after an American soldier accidentally kills his cousin at checkpoint thirty-eight, Porter finds empathy, realizing that it is the US soldiers’ fault. In contrast to Chambers and Sterling, Porter does not dehumanize the enemy but respects their dignity and he is genuinely concerned for the local population, which facilitates his psychological recovery.

Porter’s decision to return to the Middle East proves his compassion and empathy for the Iraqi population. By moving to Beirut and learning about the people and cultures of the Middle East, he once again demonstrates that he cares about these people. Instead of internalizing enemy images, Porter overcomes them already during his deployment through spending time with locals, such as Rana and Qasim. Living with his former terp in Beirut and encountering refugees from Iraq daily helps the young lieutenant to “forego the very notion of the ‘enemy’” (Eigen 153), to break down enemy images and thus to reconcile with his traumatic past. Porter’s decision to move to Beirut echoes previous resolutions, which show his inclination to detach himself from the occupiers and to identify with the occupied. The ambiguity of U.S. war efforts and the numerous incidents in which he witnessed the death of Iraqi civilians persuade Porter to side with the local population. His invisible wounds of war alienate him from his homeland and tie him to the denizens of his combat zone, which is highlighted by his care and concern for Rana and Qasim. Porter’s decision to move to Beirut, however, also entails certain risks since Porter anchors his sanity and well-being on the possibility that Rana is still alive. In Beirut, Porter does not seek to Rana in the hope of finding a potential sweetheart but as symbol for what lost in war – his innocence and peace, which are both represented in Rana amidst all the chaos and horror in a war zone. Believing that they are still alive, Porter finds purpose and hope for his future: “We don’t spend all our time looking for Rana and her boys, not anymore [...] They’re here, somewhere” (340). Finding her alive would prove that he did something good during his deployment and that innocence can survive the horrors of war. This belief, however, might also be his Achilles’ heel since

learning of her death would add to his trauma and thus jeopardize his psychological wellbeing. Porter's psychological well-being thus becomes intertwined with Rana's fate. Finding out about her death might prove as cataclysmic event, which could change his psychological trajectory dramatically, adding anew to the accumulated feelings of guilt and sorrow and thus tipping the scales of his mental wellbeing again for the worse. Nevertheless, the decision to start a new life in Beirut is a sign of Porter's confidence and faith in the future and hence signals his steady recovery. Through his empathy with the enemy, Porter finds peace, which prepares him to eventually return home not only physically but especially psychologically.

Both protagonists discover the humans behind their former image of the enemy. Bartle's willingness to empathize with not only the civilian population but also enemy combatants is an important step towards his psychological well-being. His failure to intervene in critical situations, however, leaves psychological scars of guilt and shame. Porter, on the other hand, is willing to sacrifice his military career and even his life for the Iraqi population and tries to save Rana and her boys. Due to his empathy towards his enemies, including Azhar, Fat Mukthar and Yousef, he can bridge this important divide. Returning to the Middle East is another good indicator, suggesting his bridging of this divide and thus his promising journey to recovery.

Bridging the soldier-superior divide

Conciliating with military superiors likewise influences the recovery process of both protagonists. Due to the way the military hierarchy functions, veterans have hardly any contact with higher-ranking superiors after their deployments. Reconciling with them thus proves difficult for the protagonists but there are other junior officers, namely their antagonists Sterling and Chambers, who serve as proxy for their higher chain of command. Previously, both soldiers clashed with their sergeants, at times even physically, and the tension between them needs to be resolved, which both achieve to some extent.

Despite his hate for Sterling, Bartle eventually forgives his sergeant. The conflicts between them start already in Fort Dix. Before being deployed, Sterling punches Bartle for promising LaDonna Murphy to "bring him home to [her]" (47). In the combat zone, Bartle's relationship to the battle-hardened sergeant deteriorates further: "I hated him. I

hated the way he excelled in death and brutality and domination” (19). He hates him not only for his praise after committing his most atrocious deeds in combat (Powers 126) but especially for not encouraging him to look better after Murph, when his comrade needed it most (156). On their layover in Germany, Bartle walks into Sterling in a bar. Since Bartle is AWOL, Sterling could get the young private into trouble, but he covers for him, knowing that Bartle otherwise could divulge their little secret. Thinking of his sergeant after his deployment, Bartle realizes that Sterling “was not a sociopath” (Powers 187) but that he likewise did what he thought he had to do, in order to protect his men. In hindsight, Bartle is convinced that he owes his survival to his sergeant: “I still believe in Sterling now because my heart beats” (ibid.). When he is informed about his sergeant’s suicide, he finds comfort in the knowledge that Sterling had “been able to do [this] one thing for himself” (188), which releases the sergeant from the guilt accumulated during his combat tours. After his prison sentence, Bartle finds placidity in solitude and on some days he “won’t think of [...] Sterling or the war” (223). His previous hatred of Sterling dissolves, and he finally seems to be at peace with himself and his former sergeant to some extent.

Porter likewise reconciles with his antagonistic sergeant. Towards the end of the deployment, the tension between Chambers and Porter increases due to Rana and the drop weapon allegations. In a final clash with Chambers, Porter, however, shows self-restraint. After Chambers’ physical assault, Porter draws his gun and could kill “dirty Machiavellian Chambers, the most dangerous threat of all” (Gallagher 311), pretending that it was self-defense. Instead, Porter quenches his anger by focusing on his breath and “the possibility of rampage collapse[s]” (324). Despite his broken cheekbone, Porter decides not to retaliate by pressing charges against his platoon sergeant, which would have been the end of Chambers’ military career. His decision indicates that he is willing to let the past be and that he has sympathy with his platoon sergeant. Already prior to the fight, Porter burned all the evidence he collected against Chambers, thus symbolically making peace with past events and his antagonist: “It wasn’t my past to dredge up anymore, if it’d ever been. [...] I stayed until I had nothing left to burn” (322). Burning the sworn statements and proofing his courage and leadership qualities during the riot mark his watershed of prevailing over Chambers, whom he then can forgive. Despite

their differences, they find common ground — their desire to bring the men home safely — and Porter eventually gains Chambers' respect, who then praises his "loyalty to the platoon" (Gallagher 329). When the sergeant takes over the platoon, Porter trusts in his successor's abilities to lead and protect the men (330). This reconciliation proves to be important since it brings closure to Porter, before Chambers is killed. In hindsight, Porter ruminates why Chambers did not tell superiors that Porter took the *sahwa* money to pay Rana's smuggler: "If anyone could've sealed my fate, it'd been him. But he'd spared me, for reasons I'd always wonder about" (336). Ultimately, the platoon leader realizes that Chamber does not "[lack] a conscience" but rather that his is broken as a result of his combat exposure during multiple deployments "because that's what going to war over and over again does to people" (325). The young lieutenant thus realizes that it is not Chambers' nature, but his traumatic exposure turned him into the man he is. Due to his empathy, Porter is thus able to reconcile with Chambers and thus finds this soldier-superior divide partially bridged.

The protagonists successfully reduce frictions with their superiors to some extent. While both do not have the chance to reconcile their differences with higher-ranking superiors, they at least both [...] with their antagonistic sergeants Chambers and Sterling. Both young soldiers seem to forgive their more experienced sergeants, realizing that they likewise suffered due to their combat exposure. Porter and Bartle have incriminating evidence against their sergeants but decide against using it and when they both learn of their sergeants' deaths, they seem to be at peace since they reconciled with them to some extent before their untimely death.

Bridging the soldier-civilian divide

Bridging the civilian-military divide proves to be extremely difficult. In contrast to Vietnam veterans, Bartle and Porter receive a warm welcome as heroes and various civilian rituals reflect society's Thank-you-for-your-service attitude, including thanking random soldiers on the street, buying them drinks or offering them better seats in a plane. This could lead to the false conclusion that the divide is not an issue, but such attitudes and rituals are not enough to show veterans that "their sacrifices had a purpose" (Klay, *Citizen-soldier* 22; Hautzinger & Scandlyn 228). Regardless of civilian' perception,

veterans frequently express and lament the yawning chasm, which is also due to civilians' ignorance and indifference of the war. Wood confirms that "the deep divide between military and civilians, one of ignorance and perhaps suspicion, hostility, and guilt, becomes harder and harder to cross" (270). Both protagonists support this since they seem to have no desire to reconnect with their society. Bartle isolates himself completely due to his guilt and shame and retreats into the mountains after his imprisonment. Porter eventually returns to the Middle East, thus also suggesting his ongoing alienation from his homeland.

For Bartle, reintegration into society is not desirable. On stateside, he grapples with his deployment experiences and superficial words of praise and gratitude from civilians make him feel worse since he believes that the atrocities he witnessed and committed in war are "all [his] fault, really, because [he] went on purpose" (Powers 145). He therefore does not accept free drinks from the barkeeper but insists on paying: "I didn't want to smile and say thanks. Didn't want to pretend I'd done anything except survive" (ibid. 107). In Richmond, Bartle mostly stays in his room to avoid people, including his mother and his friend Luke. His imprisonment in a regional confinement facility completes "his separation from the human sphere" (O'Gorman 557) and thus provides some comfort since he does not need to uphold his self-imposed isolation. Within the facility, he feels protected from "the dull world that ignored our little pest of a war" (Powers 216) and his wish to be left alone becomes reality: "My life had become as ordinary as I could have hoped for. I was happy" (Powers 215). Being an ex-convict, however, will not ease his reintegration in the future. Bartle's reconciliation with US society — and hence his recovery — thus seems to fail.

Porter likewise fails to reconnect with the US population. About his post-deployment period at home, the reader learns only little in the epilogue of the novel but his decision to move to Beirut is rather telling: "I came to Beirut fleeing [...]. Fleeing home, where I'd started drinking too much and had crashed my dad's car" (Gallagher 339). Apart from his excessive drinking and the car accident, Porter finds nothing worth mentioning in his first six months after his deployment, thus further indicating that he did not reintegrate well. His decision to move to Beirut for his Middle Eastern studies scholarship provides him "a fresh start [which] seemed necessary" (ibid.). This decision,

however, further proves how alienated he has become from his own people, which already started during his deployment⁴¹. Returning to the Middle East, however, comes with extended risks, especially for him as US citizen, but moving with Snoop into a flat allows him to seek the reconnection he truly desires: the one with the people of Iraq. Together with Snoop, he looks for Rana and her boys, which is his way of paying *fasil* and finding redemption.

The protagonists' failure to reconnect with their own society underscores the continuing soldier-civilian divide. The protagonists feel disconnected from their own society and struggle with their transition into civilian life mostly due to their guilt and shame. Bartle suffers from survivor's guilt since his best friend Murph and innocent civilians died, which he believes he should have prevented. His imprisonment comes as salvation but further impedes his road to reintegration. While Bartle lives like a hermit, Porter leaves the country to return to the Middle East, hoping that he can find closure by finding Rana alive. His physical separation from his homeland mirrors his psychological detachment from his own people. Thus, the soldier-civilian divide is illustrated by their lack of desire to reintegrate into US society after their deployments.

For both protagonists the three divides prove mostly irreconcilable. Both fail to reconnect with their society and only find some closure with their sergeants but not with higher-ranking superiors. In regard to their enemies and the local population, they both are willing to pay their prize. Both have empathy with the enemy, but Bartle fails to act upon it and thus cannot fully bridge this divide. Porter in contrast strives to protect the Iraqi population and to rescue Rana and her boys and although his path to recovery seems promising since "[r]eturning to former battle sites and meeting [...] [the former] enemy [...] [is] profound in mitigating [...] psychological wounds of war" (Scurfield 18), his fate is determined by Rana's. Nevertheless, he finds some closure by reconnecting with the people in Beirut, of which many are refugees from Iraq. Moving to Beirut is Porter's *fasil*, since he tries to learn more about the people, hoping that he will be able to make amends. Bartle, on the other hand, pays *fasil* through his self-imposed isolation but also his imprisonment. His suicide attempt likewise could be interpreted as desire to pay *fasil*

⁴¹ He rather confides his concerns and worries in Saif or Fat Mukthar than his girlfriend, his brother or his friends. Instead of playing cards with his own men, he prefers spending time with Rana and her boys.

for his acts of omission. Since their own society is to some extent responsible for their failure to reintegrate, an analysis of how society fails them through stigmatizing invisible wounds of war seems expedient.

PTSD and stigma

The stigma of PTSD becomes apparent in both novels. The protagonists' reintegration struggles are not just individual cases, but hint at a greater issue, namely the persistent stigma of psychological injuries. A close reading of both novels in regard to PTSD is rather revealing since it discloses the prevalent stigma not only within the hypermasculine world of the military but also in the civilian sphere, which once again shifts blame and guilt from civilians onto the soldiers. Despite increased public awareness of PTSD, there are still soldiers and relatives who are not aware of this invisible wound of war and even less of moral injury, which is why the focus is solely on PTSD. Nevertheless, similar conclusions could likely be drawn about moral injury.

The recovery process is often impeded due to stigma attached to PTSD. Porter and Bartle — like most characters in contemporary US war fiction — do not seek professional help although they struggle with PTSD symptoms. Despite being a central theme, psychological burdens on the warrior's psyche are hardly ever referred to with its proper term, diagnosis or treatment. Regardless of increasing awareness of war-related psychological disorders and efforts to remove such stigmata, it is still pervasive within the male-dominant military and even the public sphere as illustrated in fiction but also reality⁴². Many civilians hold the persistent, limiting belief that a soldier's psychological condition is dependent on personal moral integrity in combat. The assumption that all veterans suffer from PTSD places veterans on a "weird pedestal" (Klay, *Redeployment* 260) and separates them from society, especially since many civilians believe that combat trauma is a result of having done 'something bad'⁴³ in war. This becomes obvious when Bartle's mother quizzes him after his failed suicide attempt: "What happened over there,

⁴² Stigmatization of combat stress has a long history and continues today. In briefings, some veterans who report symptoms of PTSD are told "to suck it up" (Finley 140). After receiving a PTSD diagnosis, some soldiers keep it secret, fearing it might end their military career (Finley 140-141). In October 2018, Jason Kander, former Missouri secretary of state, decided to discontinue in the race for the Kansas City mayor due to his PTSD, which he did not admit to himself until eleven years after his service.

⁴³ Even soldiers who were not exposed to combat can suffer from severe combat stress since PTSD can also result from learning of traumatic experiences, such as the death of a fellow soldier.

Johnny? [...] What did you do?” Stigma is a major reason that veterans feel disconnected from and betrayed by the military, the government and the civilian population, which exacerbates reintegration for soldiers and thus deserves more attention.

The extent to which combat trauma is addressed and its manner is revealing. Explicit references to PTSD in recent Iraq war veteran fiction is rather the exception. Apart from one explicit reference of PTSD in Gallagher’s *Youngblood*, which will be discussed later in more detail, there is no talk of it in *The Yellow Birds*. However, while the term PTSD is conspicuously rare or even absent throughout works of most contemporary veteran authors, it is often alluded to both by combatants as well as civilians in various ways, most often associating it with personal weakness, deriding its seriousness or using derogatory terms for the people suffering from it. The devastating disorder and its symptoms are referred to as being “burned out” (Gallagher 55), “giving up” (Powers 82), “[not] pull[ing] it together” (Gallagher 136), not “get[ting] it together” (Powers 157), “losing [one’s] shit” (Powers 94), or simply by stating that someone “had deteriorated” (Powers 131)⁴⁴. The strong association between PTSD and individual weakness is conspicuous in these examples and the negative impact and consequences of the overwhelming external circumstances are trivialized through such lexical choices. Some phrases, however, imply an element of agency, decision or volition on the part of these soldiers, thus suggesting that veterans — due to weakness or a lack of willpower — decided to ‘give in’.

The context, in which the official term is used, supports such wrong assumptions about psychological trauma. The one and only instance in which the term PTSD is explicitly mentioned in both novels is in *Youngblood*, when Porter sees soldiers working within the FOB and calls this detail “a receptacle for malcontents and PTSD head cases” (Gallagher 53). Referring to these suffering soldiers as ‘PTSD head cases’ reveals Porter’s condescending attitude towards mental illness, devaluating it as craziness. The word ‘receptacle’ further indicates his opinion that soldiers suffering from PTSD need to be contained within a certain place. Whether their containment should happen for their own or the other soldiers’ safety and whether the head cases could — like the malcontents

⁴⁴ Even in non-fiction, this is often the case, as Real’s book *Army of One* suggests, in which soldiers use phrases such as not being “stable” (Real 241) or not being able to “handle it” (279).

— just get over it if they only had enough willpower, remains unclear. Such beliefs and Porter’s attitude, nevertheless, to some extent reflect society at that time, almost a decade ago, in which myths and stigma revolving around PTSD were even more prevalent than today. Porter’s word choice seems to imply that it is the soldier’s weakness and lack of willpower to suffer from mental conditions. Scholarly research suggests that most soldiers share Porter’s opinion and perceive PTSD “as a sign of inadequacy” (Finley 159), weakness and failure, which has the result that troubled veterans do not seek help. This is due to the warrior’s ethos and the “soldier’s culture [which make] it shameful to struggle” (Hautzinger & Scandlyn 13)⁴⁵.

Asking for help is equated with weakness. Both protagonists do not seek professional help during or after their deployments — or if they do, they do not dare to talk about it. Persistent stigmatization of mental illnesses in general, and PTSD in particular, “encourages shame, deters healthy sharing and processing of emotions, and interferes with care seeking” (Finley 173), as seems to be the case with Bartle, Porter and also a soldier called Ty Grant. In a letter to Porter, a soldier comments on the suicide of Lieutenant Grant and states that they “tried to get him the help he needed” (Gallagher 208). Whether he refers to professional treatment or simply more support by fellow soldiers, however, is unclear. Nevertheless, their attempts failed and it is obvious that stigma played a central role in this failure. Veterans diagnosed with PTSD often report anxiety about telling their fellow soldiers, fearing what they might think of them due to their condition (Finley 157). Although some argue that “PTSD is [...] not heavily stigmatized in the general US population” (Hautzinger & Scandlyn 44), contemporary war fiction testifies that stigma is an issue within the military and too often is the main obstacle to seeking professional help, thus impeding recovery.

Deeply held but erroneous beliefs of PTSD are likewise portrayed in Powers’ novel. When Bartle is escorted back home by police officers after he is rescued from his suicide attempt, the police officers’ advice to him is simple: “Try to keep it together” (147). Bartle then relates, that “[t]he cops didn’t make [him] go through the motions of any kind of psych evaluation, out of respect for [his] service” (147), as if his medical

⁴⁵ That this is not limited to soldiers can be seen in another example from real life. Despite obvious posttraumatic stress syndromes, war correspondent Kevin Sites states that he “resisted [his] counselling or therapy, considering it a sign of weakness, for those who couldn’t cope” (14).

evaluation were a punishment, instead of the first step of receiving the professional help and support he so desperately needs. The underlying harmful presumption of both Bartle and the police officers that recovery simply depends on willpower rather than professional medical help is also reflected in Bartle's following encounter with a CID officer (183):

He waited, then said, "What, you've given up?"

"No."

"Not what it looks like."

"It's different out there now."

"No, it's not. You're different."

"No one cares."

"So what?"

"I don't know how to live out there anymore."

"Hmmm ... I was well acquainted with that idea back when it was just called cowardice. Have you seen the doctors?"

"Yeah, I saw them."

After Bartle defends himself, the officer shows little empathy but rather dismisses Bartle's PTSD symptoms as cowardice. In this dialogue, the officer's reprimand thus suggests that Bartle's condition is his own fault due to a lack of stamina and courage. His ensuing question whether he has "seen the doctors" (Powers 183) seems perfunctory and likewise shows how responsibility is frequently deflected from the military to the medical sphere.

From this analysis of the lexical choices describing troubled veterans, conclusions can be drawn that the perception of mental illnesses remains problematic within the male-dominated sphere of the military. False assumptions and beliefs concerning combat stress and its symptoms thus needs to be counteracted. Despite increased awareness, both novels raise awareness of the continuing destructive power of stigma and highlight how false beliefs about PTSD harms since veterans then do not accept or encourage others to seek professional help.

Hope and healing through fiction

It is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us.

Colum McCann

Healing will come only as they're able to tell their stories, to share their knowledge with us.

David Wood

Veteran war literature transcends its artistic value. Numerous prestigious awards attest the literary merit of contemporary war literature. Its true worth, however, is not its artistic or entertainment value but rather its potential to facilitate discourse and reconnect soldiers and civilians. In *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, editor McLoughlin argues that “[h]ow war is written about concerns every individual” (1). Writing war literature has cathartic value for veteran authors and non-combatants alike. Reading war fiction helps especially civilians to gain a better understanding of the complexities and atrocities of war and thus can heal the divide between soldiers and civilians, which is sustained through society’s ignorance and indifference. Since war fiction raises awareness of the psychological impact of war it allows combatants and civilians to transcend the limits of autobiographical details and thus focus on broader topics instead of discussing someone’s individual guilt and shame. Literature thus is not merely entertainment, but “the best chance we have of understanding our experience, of gaining a measure of peace in ourselves. A way to restore meaning when it seems meaning has been lost” (Fountain 13). War fiction thus benefits authors and audiences alike and allows non-combatants to engage in this dialogue in a more meaningful way.

Writing war fiction is cathartic. Kevin Powers and Matt Gallagher both experienced combat in Iraq and were repeatedly asked by civilians the same question. In an interview printed in the appendix of his novel, Powers admits that he wrote his novel “in an attempt to reckon with [this] one question: What was it like over there?” (239). Gallagher similar thoughts into the mouth of his protagonist: “A lot of people ask, ‘What was it like?’ and once, I even tried to answer” (1). Throughout history, veterans have tried

to answer this question not only for non-combatants but primarily for themselves. The curative powers of writing have been well established and numerous veteran writing workshops have been founded to support veterans in their journey of recovery and reintegration. For some, writing is a welcome alternative to more traditional treatment for psychological symptoms and is reported to alleviate guilt and shame. Recent US Iraq veteran war fiction increasingly includes Iraqi perspectives. This trend seems to be a response to the growing disconnect between military and civilians: “Public ignorance and apathy provoke war writing that is amongst the angriest and most purposeful: at the very least having ‘the truth told’ about combat constitutes a vital opportunity for veterans to reconnect with their former lives” (McLoughlin 20). Their writing, however, does not only benefit them and their comrades — who can benefit since “[t]he story of one man’s experience can become an antidote for another man’s pain” (Dewey 183) — but also highlights that they are not the only ones who need empathy and support, thus pointing out the ignorance of most civilians towards the traumatic experiences of Iraqi people.

Reading war fiction raises awareness of the realities of war and can thus bridge the civilian-military divide. In order to accomplish closing this divide, Dawn Weaver, who enlisted with the age of 45 and is a specialist on combat-related PTSD, offered a simple first step in an op-ed in the *Army Times*: “First, civilians need to come closer to our world. They need to read stories written by veterans” (Hautzinger & Scandlyn 226). Veteran war reporter David Wood advances the same argument that it is the U.S. society’s “responsibility to reach for ways to deeply understand these stories, these veterans, before their moral injuries harden into isolation and despair” (262) and he likewise shares his insights how civilians can interact meaningfully with veterans beyond simplistic expressions of gratitude⁴⁶. The educational work war fiction provides is priceless since it bypasses biographical specifics and moves on to greater emotional truths. These truths include but are not limited to the following issues: 1. PTSD and moral injury are psychological injuries and wounds, and not weaknesses, although they are still perceived as such by many combatants and non-combatants alike. 2. Developing PTSD or moral

⁴⁶ Wood suggests asking veterans about their job in the service: “Veterans like to talk about their military jobs; from there, guided by questions like ‘Tell me more,’ ‘How did that feel,’ or ‘What was that like,’ the conversation can go deeper” (267). Instead of sympathy, veterans need non-judgmental listening and empathy (ibid. 272). Another veteran stated the same: “This whole thing needs to be about listening, understanding. Asking and not thanking.” (Wood 267).

injury are not evidence that soldiers have killed — or even worse — committed war crimes; even witnessing the death of a comrade, an enemy combatant or an unknown civilian in combat can result in PTSD or moral injury. 3. For soldiers, surviving the war is not the end of it but just the beginning of a new one, as the high suicide rate among veterans attest. 4. Thank-you-for-your-service rituals and platitudes are not enough in return for the veteran's sacrifice. Being willing to sacrifice one's life is the ultimate sacrifice and should not be devalued by ignorance and indifference of US citizens. Acknowledging their sacrifice requires emotional and financial support, so they can receive appropriate treatment in case of psychological or moral injuries. 5. Enlisting in the army does not equal culpability. It is not the veteran's own fault to suffer since he or she decided to join the army in the first place. Persuaded by media, entertainment and culture, young men go to war with the hope to become men. Combat and death in war, however, are mostly not *dulce et decorum*, sweet and honorable. War is and has always been dirty and complex and even if the cause is righteous — which is not the case of the illegitimate war against Iraq, as most soldiers and civilians would agree — combat exposure shatters the human's psyche. 6. Most Iraqis are not well-trained terrorists. To the contrary, US soldiers often fight disgruntled locals who often suffered more during the US occupation than during Saddam's regime. 7. Finally, US soldiers are not the ones who suffer most in Iraq. The Iraqis' suffering not only equals but exceeds the physical and mental pain of US soldiers since they did not decide to go to war, but the war came to them, killing not only grown-up men but also children and women. Apart from this last issue, most of these are frequently discussed and analyzed. Veteran war fiction, however, strongly suggests that the soldier's burden is — at least partially — attributable to civilian casualties and collateral damages in Iraq and the fact that these are ignored by US government and society alike. This is one main reason why veterans struggle with their reintegration into society; while they are aware of the injustices and wrongdoings committed in war not just against enemy combatants but also non-combatants, civilians at home remain ignorant to veterans' subsequent feelings of culpability but rather praise them as heroes. War fiction thus informs civilian audiences on the complexity of the modern battlefield in general and the particulars of the Iraq war and thus — to some extent — bridges this divide. The sustained interest in war literature, as evidenced by the

sales numbers and numerous literary accolades, but also the increasing numbers of public readings of veteran writing workshops seem to support such reuniting efforts.

Reading and writing war fiction facilitate meaningful discourse. The high unemployment and suicide rate of veterans seems to support the fact that veterans are marginalized and often do not receive the support they would desperately need. Professional help is often not desired due to stigma and long waiting periods, but an increasing number of veterans find comfort in writing. This can be seen in the proliferation of veteran writing workshops. One of them, the *Veterans Writing Workshop* offers, for example, not only free workshops for veterans and active duty service members but also their families, who likewise need psychological support. Additionally, there are publications, such as *War, Literature & the Arts*, which focus entirely on war writing and likewise hold regular meetings, where veteran and non-veteran authors read their work to an audience of both combatants and noncombatants. While this is a good start, there is still more to do. War journalist Sebastian Junger's visionary dream is that

veterans all over the country [should be encouraged] to speak freely about their experience at war [in town halls on Veterans Day]. Some will say that war was the best thing that ever happened to them. Others will be so angry that what they say will barely make sense. [...] But a community ceremony like that would finally return the experience of war to our entire nation, rather than leaving it to the people who fought. (*Tribe* 123)

There are many lessons to be learned through engaging with veteran war fiction and meaningful discourse is only possible when US society devotes itself to it instead of holding on to wrong and harmful assumptions about war and veterans. Some veterans who return are heroes, but they might never talk about it. Some are cowards; they probably will not admit it. Some are war criminals; they surely will not talk about it. Some veterans are — or were — all of the above, maybe even during a single day in the combat zone. They might not want to talk about it but some of them surely wrote or will write about it in form of fiction. Our duty then is to read so we can try to understand.

Paying *fasil*. Although the Iraq War officially ended in 2011, combat operations in Iraq continued during the so-called Iraqi Civil War until 2017 and to the present day, there are still US boots in Iraq. The media's attention, however, has moved on to new current and future battlefields, but US soldiers are still dying and killing in Iraq. If the

history of the Vietnam War is a guide, then US Iraq war veteran fiction will continue to be published for at least the first half of a century. Instead of traditional trauma hero and shoot-and-cry narratives, *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction will most likely increase. US Iraq war veterans raise their voices that their government and their civilian population need to take Iraqi suffering into account⁴⁷. *Fasil* needs to be paid, not in physical but in psychological form. It is paid by listening to war veterans and committing to support them in meaningful ways, such as being involved in politics by at least voting, but also reconnecting with those *others* within US society, who suffer because they fulfill the physical features of *hajjis* and are thus falsely accused, treated and persecuted as terrorists.

CONCLUSION

Agree or disagree with the war, if you're reading this, you are engaged and aware.

Matt Gallagher

Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* and Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood* illustrate the shift in contemporary US veteran war fiction from traditional shoot-and-cry and war trauma hero narratives to *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction. Although both debut novels focus on traditional Caucasian US war veterans who suffer from war trauma, they do not neglect highlighting the suffering of Iraqi people. Both novels encourage empathy with the *other* by portraying Iraqis as equally human and thus stress that the suffering of US soldiers' is associated with the suffering of the Iraqi population. As consequence of leadership betrayals, which are related to the killing of teenage Iraqi combatants and innocent civilians, Bartle and Porter suffer moral injuries, leading to profound shame and guilt. During and after their deployments they seek to do 'one good thing,' (Powers 144, Gallagher 243) to pay the prize, the *fatwa* or blood money. Their accounts are the *fasil*, the clarification and explanation that their suffering is partially also perpetrator trauma.

⁴⁷ In one of his essays, Scranton connects the events on the battlefield with the current *#blacklivesmatter* issue in his homeland: "As long as our government keeps showing the world that Iraqi lives don't matter, Afghan lives don't matter, Muslim lives don't matter, and Arab lives don't matter, our police will keep drawing the same conclusion about black lives." (Scranton, *Essays* 155)

Their narratives are an attempt to relate the unexplainable atrocities witnessed in Iraq and are thus the blood money in form of the realization that some war veterans are perpetrators and that the US war efforts in Iraq often did more harm than good by causing civilian casualties, which created only more insurgents. These narratives further suggest that the veterans' burdens are not just a personal matter but that these burdens must be shared by higher-ranking superiors and civilians, who both too often deny their accountability.

The analysis of both debut novels provided ample evidence how the protagonists' symptoms of PTSD and moral injury are interwoven with the plight of the Iraqi population. The young soldiers display various symptoms, among which their negative cognitions concerning their culpability are the most salient. Bartle's suicide attempt and Porter's suicidal recklessness are proof of their overwhelming feelings of regret, guilt and shame. While most critics interpret Bartle's suffering as consequence of his failure to protect his friend Murph, this thesis pointed out how part of his guilt and shame can be attributed to the fact that he witnessed the murder of innocent civilians. His regret of not being able to intervene despite feeling the urge to do so proves detrimental to his psychological well-being. The novel thus is a precursor of *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction. Porter's regrets circle around the civilian victims of the occupation, with Azhar, Barbie Kid and Rana leading the way. Despite his efforts to support and protect them, Porter blames himself for their tragic fates. From the onset of the novel, Porter's concern for the people is palpable and the diverse cast of fully rounded Iraqi characters is a vivid example of how *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction can help civilians to overcome simplistic beliefs about the Iraqi population.

The assignment of guilt plays a central role in both novels. Although both protagonists blame themselves for their experiences in Iraq, their superiors and society are likewise to blame for their suffering. Both Bartle and Porter suffer moral injuries due to the toxic leadership of Sterling and Chambers, who reject their blame. Additionally, the young soldiers feel alienated from their own civilians who are ignorant and indifferent of the realities of war and deny their own responsibility. While Bartle and Porter witness the high number of civilian casualties in Iraq, many civilians hold on to the belief that all Iraqis are terrorists. Celebrating returning soldiers as heroes does also not help the

protagonists, who are painfully aware of their complicity in civilian casualties. At home, they encounter “a populace that maintains its innocence by ritualistically deflecting its complicity in the violence it has authorized” (Barta 79-80). By superficially expressing their gratitude, they thus deny their own culpability for the war’s ambiguous outcome while reminding soldiers that it was their choice to join the military, which further aggravates the soldier-civilian divide. The veterans’ suffering is directly linked to this assignment of guilt and healing is only possible when civilians realize the complexity of the war in Iraq but also the fact that they themselves have to share the burden of the veterans. The analysis of the stigmatization of PTSD in both novels illustrates how most soldiers and civilians perceive PTSD as personal weakness instead of a psychological injury. Instead of acknowledging that combat exposure creates devastating effects on young soldiers, society blames the victims themselves for not ‘pulling it together’ and offload responsibility to the military, which likewise fails their soldiers.

Both protagonists seek peace of mind in form of antidote experiences. Since this thesis argues that their suffering stems from their involvement in civilian casualties, they need to seek forgiveness first and foremost from the Iraqi population. While Bartle “failed at the one good thing [he] could have done” (Powers 144), he at least relates the numerous innocent victims of the war and states that it would be “wrong not to listen” (85). Although most critics argue that his one big failure is related to Murph’s death, in this thesis it is argued that not intervening in the death of the elderly couple and the cartwheel are the more grave failures since he is convinced that he should have prevented their deaths. Due to his failure, however, he feels complicit in these war crimes and thus sees himself as “murderer [...] [and] accomplice” (Powers 145), which causes his symptoms and eventually results in his suicide attempt and his total isolation.

Porter takes actions to alleviate the suffering of the local population. In contrast to Bartle, however, Porter can overcome his moral transgressions. Although he feels guilty for Haitham’s death, he frequently raises his objections against the poor decisions of his superiors and thus can find some form of antidote. He eventually returns to the Middle East to seek closure in form of finding Rana, which would confirm that he at least achieved “one good thing” (Gallagher 243). In the end, there are numerous events, which

would qualify as his antidote but ultimately it is his empathy towards the enemy and the civilian population in Iraq, which seems to protect him from the psychological demands of combat.

For both protagonists, bridging the soldier-civilian divide is the most difficult. Jack Porter succeeds to bridge at least two of the divides but feels more connected with the people of Iraq than his own country. Bartle manages to make peace with Sterling but fails to act on his empathy towards his enemies and cannot reintegrate into the society which sent him to war and thus isolates himself. Both become increasingly alienated from their own society during their deployments and eventually separate themselves through their own choices; Bartle isolates himself and Porter moves to Beirut. Their failure to reintegrate with their own society thus highlights their incomplete reintegration.

Veteran war fiction might prove to be the most valuable tool to help soldiers to process their war experiences, to reconcile dissociated war veterans with their own society, and to reconnect US soldiers with Iraqis. Within their fictional narratives, veterans investigate questions of innocence and culpability and emphasize the suffering of the Iraqi population. With an increasing number of soldiers suffering from debilitating symptoms of PTSD and moral injury, US society needs to acknowledge their share of responsibility to reduce and relieve the veterans' burdens. This can partially be done by accepting that veterans are not only victims of war but that their suffering is also due to the US society's dismissal of the Iraqi plight. Instead of passing moral judgment or satisfying their curiosity, civilians need to focus on understanding the moral and ethical complexities of the unjust war in Iraq and its aftermath not only on its own soldiers but also the Iraqi population. Civilians can thus pay *fasil* by acknowledging that the war is not just a personal tragedy for US soldiers and their relatives but especially for the civilian Iraqi population. In order to achieve this and to overcome ignorance and indifference, reading veteran war fiction proves to be essential since it helps civilians to engage in meaningful discourse, with the hopes to find possible solutions and prevent future wars.

EPILOGUE

Nobody counted the Iraqi bodies.

Yaroslav Trofimov

Grief is a practical mechanism, and we only grieved those we knew.

John Bartle

One of the jobs of literature is to wake us from stupor. But in matters of war, our sleep is deep, and the best attempts of today's veterans have done little to disturb it.

Sam Sacks

In US Iraq war veteran fiction but also secondary literature, much has been said about the American soldier but little about the Iraqi insurgent and far less about the Iraqi civilian. When young sensitive US soldiers experience “moments of human connection with Iraqis [...] [and feel] empathy, they began to see the world through Iraqi eyes” (Gutmann & Lutz 189). When meeting a former enemy combatant after his deployment in Iraq, veteran author Roy Scranton describes his epiphany as follows: “Like almost every Iraqi I met, his life story was a transcript of disaster, suffering, and crushed hopes” (*Essays* 150). Such moments of empathy translate into their novels. *Fatwa-and-fasil* literature has therefore become a “habitat for gentleness and kindness”, which gives enemies and Iraqi civilians some dignity back by providing “a place where compassion still [happens]” (Powers 164-5). The diverse cast of Iraqis are mostly fully rounded and dynamic characters, with their own struggles, hopes, dreams, and — at times — hidden agendas. In contrast to Iraq war memoirs and previous war fiction, these new narratives authentically portray the Iraqis as humans with strengths and flaws and testifies of their suffering during the occupation. Instead of focusing solely on the pain and suffering of US soldiers, authors emphasize their enemy’s pain and suffering, so that readers can become aware of it. *Fatwa-and-fasil* fiction thus has the power to awake civilian readers from their stupor by ‘counting the Iraqi bodies’ and thus accounting and acknowledging their invisible wounds of war. Such empathic literature prompts readers to dispel their previous illusions that all Iraqis are savages and evil terrorists. Healing from the

aftermath of war is not only necessary for US soldiers but also US civilians who likewise can pay *fasil* by reading and learning in order to overcome false assumptions and prejudices, which lead to racism, hate, violence and future wars. Reading *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction by US war veteran authors, however, is just the beginning of this learning process. These narratives encourage readers to engage themselves with fiction authored by Iraqi veterans and civilians as well. There are Iraqi novels available in English translation. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* are a good starting point and there are many more. Hassan Blasim, who was dubbed 'perhaps the greatest writer of Arabic fiction alive' by *The Guardian*, wrote a short story collection *The Corpse Exhibition* and edited an anthology of Iraqi short fiction with ten short stories by ten different contemporary Iraqi writers, who imagine how Iraq will be 100 years after the invasion. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, a novel by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid shortlisted for 2007 Man Booker award, likewise would lend itself as good entry point into this topic — even for young adults. Perspective taking through reading literature enables empathy with the *other* and can bridge seemingly irreconcilable divisions. The hope is that maybe one day there will be anthologies with the texts of American authors next to Iraqi and other non-American authors, all depicting war as the human folly it is and instead of solely focusing on its own victims, highlighting the most hapless and helpless victims of war, namely truth, innocence and civilians.

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Abstract

With the dramatic rise in US-involved war conflicts around the globe, thousands of young US soldiers have been deployed in war zones and often return forever altered. The impact of combat on the warrior's psyche is well-established and invisible wounds of war, such as PTSD, are long present in the media and entertainment. Despite waning interest in the actual wars, the critical praise and the commercial success of recent US war veteran fiction, such as the two National Book Award finalists *The Yellow Birds* (2013) and *Redeployment* (2014), indicate its widespread popularity. Instead of traditional trauma hero narratives, increasing numbers of works emphasize the suffering of the Iraqi people and acknowledge the U.S. culpability in the disastrous outcome of the occupation. Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2013) and Matt Gallaghers' *Youngblood* (2016) seem to be the precursors of this *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction, as I will call it. A close reading of these debut novels highlights how both protagonists suffer from both or either PTSD and moral injury due to their involvement in moral transgressions in Iraq, which are recompensated with blood money, or *fasil* in Arabic. This burden is exacerbated due to the US civilians' indifference and ignorance of the realities of war. The novels suggest that recovery and healing are possible — for protagonists and authors — through *fatwa*: explaining and clarifying that US soldiers are often not only victims but also perpetrators. Writing and reading *fatwa-and-fasil* fiction could not only help to bridge the soldier-civilian divide but also facilitate healing for US veterans and its society by encouraging empathy with the enemy.

Zusammenfassung

Durch den drastischen Anstieg von Kriegskonflikten, in denen die USA auf der ganzen Welt verwickelt sind, wurden Tausende junge US-Soldaten in Kriegsgebieten eingesetzt und kehren oft verändert zurück. Die Auswirkungen des Kampfes auf die Psyche sind gut etabliert und unsichtbare Kriegswunden, wie PTBS, ist in den Medien und Unterhaltung schon lange ein Begriff. Trotz des schwindenden Interesses an den tatsächlichen Kriegen, erfreut sich US-Kriegsliteratur an breiter Beliebtheit, wie das kritische Lob und der kommerzielle Erfolg der beiden Finalisten des National Book Award, *The Yellow Birds* (2013) und *Redeployment* (2014), belegen. Anstelle traditioneller Trauma-Helden-Erzählungen betonen diese Werke jedoch immer mehr das Leiden des irakischen Volkes und gestehen die Schuld der USA an dem katastrophalen Ausgang der Besatzung an in Irak ein. Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2013) und Matt Gallaghers' *Youngblood* (2016) scheinen die Vorläufer dieser sogenannten *fatwa-und-fasil*-Literatur zu sein. Die kritische Lektüre dieser beiden Debütromane zeigt, wie beide Protagonisten an PTBS und/oder *moral injury* leiden, weil sie an moralischen Verfehlungen in Irak beteiligt sind, die durch Blutgeld, oder *fasil* auf Arabisch, wiedergutmacht werden müssen. Diese Last wird durch die Gleichgültigkeit und Unwissenheit der Zivilisten noch verstärkt. Die Romane deuten darauf hin, dass Genesung und Heilung — sowohl für Protagonisten als auch für Autoren — durch *fatwa* möglich sind: Durch die Richtigstellung, dass US-Soldaten oft nicht nur Opfer, sondern auch Täter sind. Das Schreiben und Lesen von *fatwa-und-fasil* Literatur könnte nicht nur helfen, die zivil-militärische Kluft zu überbrücken, sondern auch die Heilung von Veteranen und der Gesellschaft zu erleichtern, indem sie Mitgefühl mit dem Feind fördert.