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Abstract: *The U.S. war society constructed in the wake of 9/11 has been given to endless war on a global scale. This state of permanent conflict effectively prevents the nation from entering a "post-war" period, one that would allow for national reflection and a collective coming to terms with the aftermath of war. The inconclusiveness of 21ˢᵗ Century warfare delays then the possibility for understanding such wars, which in turn inhibits the work of mourning that would confer some meaning on the loss of life. This essay considers a number of recent American films that take as their subject matter the grieving process* during *rather than* after *war. These films that feature returning veterans struggling with physical or psychic trauma provide popular representations of post-traumatic stress disorder, the accuracy of which is shaped in part by questions of gender. Here the discussion focuses on the differentiation of sacrifice and suffering by female veterans on screen, suggesting how such representations align with the gendered division of military labor itself. From a critical cultural studies perspective, this essay argues that, by defying conventional narrative cinema with unsatisfying, ambiguous endings, such films appear symptomatic of the inconclusive nature of American wars.*

Keywords: war movies; returning veterans; female soldiers; PTSD

In late 2011, after nearly nine long years, the U.S. military finally pulled out the last of its major combat forces from Iraq. By summer 2014, Iraq was once more in the news — at least in mainstream broadcast media — with alarming reports that the militant movement known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria had overrun much of the northern and western part of the country, with major cities like Mosul and Fallujah falling to the insurgents. The U.S. response included sending some 300 "military advisors" to Baghdad, with President Obama declaring that ground forces would not be returning to Iraq.[1] The initial polling on the crisis clearly indicated a lack of public support for sending U.S. troops back to Iraq.[2] Given that a war-weary nation seems so reluctant to (re-)start yet another major war, and given the promise of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016, it may be tempting to begin talking of a post-war era. And yet we must also ask: post-war for whom? For the Iraqis and Afghanis, left with war-torn countries and continued violence, it would no doubt be too soon to declare a time after war.[3] Indeed, well before the 2014 headline news, 2013 marked a grim spike in political violence across much of Iraq, with nearly 9000 Iraqis killed, as reported by the UN, the highest death toll since 2008.[4] Post-

war, not quite. It would also be premature to declare as much for the 2.8 million U.S. veterans of these wars, many now living with the consequences of their combat experience for the remainder of their years.[5] According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, nearly 20% of post-9/11 veterans — close to half a million men and women — have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.[6] Nor can there be much peace for the many military families dealing with the loss of loved ones from suicide, which is reaching epidemic proportions among American veterans.[7]

The view that a post-war period has been postponed is not only a question of perspective, as in who among us must continue suffering from the ravages of war; such a postponement is also a question of temporality, as in a delayed passage of time for fear that the "post" will never arrive. By some accounts, the delay may have been by design all along.

The U.S. war society constructed in the wake of 9/11, from Bush-Cheney's global war on terrorism to Obama's national security state, has been marked by a discourse of temporal deferral or time believed to be outside history. This concern with temporality is tellingly indicated by the titles of the U.S. military campaigns, Operations Enduring Freedom and Infinite Justice, as well as the various efforts at re-branding the on-going conflicts as the "forever war" or the "long war," to say nothing of the detention of suspects at home and abroad as being "indefinite."[8] Coalescing into a discursive framing of temporality, this militarization of our relation to time during war has reached a point where time itself seems both frozen and eternal, both fixed to the historical impasse of present conditions and projected into a receding horizon dictating the only possible future.

This is not to say that 21st Century warfare is no longer ruled by the struggle for territory, since the so-called war on terror was very deliberately constructed as a boundless expanse of potential conflict, the propagation of militarized zones beyond spatial relations once contained by borders and nation-states. Compounding this spatial reach of global conflict, however, is the latest long war's seemingly unbounded expanse of time. As legal scholar Mary Dudziak writes, in her book *War Time*: "[W]e find ourselves in an era in which wartime — the war on terror — seems to have no endpoint. This generates an urgent problem in American law and politics" [and, we may add, culture]: "how can we end a wartime when war doesn't come to an end?"[9]

While the attempt to grasp the temporal relations of "war time" has made historicizing the present difficult enough, the "new normal" of apparently endless wars and the attendant lack of resolution to so much conflict has posed a particular challenge to the culture industries, especially those forms of conventional storytelling and filmmaking requiring a sense of closure or any kind of ending — happy or otherwise. Indeed, this radical disjuncture between the inconclusiveness of the real and cultural representations providing narrative closure may help explain in part what Susan Carruthers calls the "absent audience" for so many Hollywood films on the Iraq war over the past few years.[10] As Stephen Prince remarks at the conclusion of *Firestorm*, his 2009 study of American film in a post-9/11 world: "We cannot get out of or beyond the age of terror. Hollywood's movies promise us otherwise — heroes and narrative denouements provide resolution and closure, an end point to anxieties that seem otherwise so inescapable."[11] I would hasten to add: not *all* Hollywood movies, at least

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not those films that have turned their attention to the homefront and, perhaps in partial recognition of the absurdity of posing a happy ending these days, quite clearly fail or refuse to provide "resolution and closure."

Another, more speculative way of reading why audiences have been avoiding the American war film of late is that the nation has yet to enter a "post-war" period, one that would allow for national reflection and a collective coming to terms with the aftermath of war. But with the inconclusive nature of the Iraq war in particular and the open-ended designs of warfare elsewhere, the very meaning of such wars has yet to be written, thus inhibiting or delaying any final let alone provisional reckoning. As a people and a nation, then, we must ask ourselves whether the loss of life can be properly mourned without a conclusion that confers some meaning on the sacrifice and suffering under way.

In what follows I consider a number of recent films that take as their subject matter the grieving process *during* rather than *after* war. In such films as *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Dry Land* (2010), and *Return* (2011), the emotional costs of war are registered on the suffering of the survivors — both those left waiting on the home front and those returning veterans struggling with physical or psychic trauma. While these returning vet films seem to respect the fact that the trauma of war can be barely glimpsed on screen, they nonetheless aim to recognize that the traumatic experience cannot be simply left behind, that indeed it may never end. Moreover, by defying conventional narrative cinema with unsatisfying, ambiguous endings, such films appear symptomatic, as I will suggest, of the inconclusive nature of American wars.

Within this growing body of films that deal with the lingering effects of war, very few have attempted to depict the combatant as straying from the male warrior tradition. Here my discussion focuses more specifically on a smaller set of cultural texts that address the question of gender and soldiering. Although unprecedented numbers of women have been serving in the U.S. armed forces since 9/11, including in combat brigades over the past decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, the culture industries of film and television have not exactly kept pace in recognizing the actual make-up of today's military in regard to gender, a development often underwritten by a rhetoric of equality (or at least one reaching for the identity-formation of soldiering seemingly beyond gender). As the first part of my essay establishes, while a number of recent movies have sought to deal with the plight of male veterans of the post-9/11 wars returning home to confront the difficulty of re-integration with civilian society, only a handful of films have bothered to include female veterans in their ranks, thereby failing to register culturally the historical reality of military women and their experiences either on the frontlines or upon returning to the homefront.[12]

Apart from the continuing character of a female officer in the Lifetime television series *Army Wives* (2007-present), only two films of note, *Home of the Brave* (2006) and *The Lucky Ones* (2008), have incorporated a female soldier in their ensemble casts of veterans, with both women struggling with physical injuries that impede their transition back to civilian life. It isn't until the 2011 independent film *Return*, by first-time director Liza Johnson, that what had barely appeared at the margins of cultural recognition finally moved to the center of the frame. Having placed the suffering of a returning female soldier at the heart of

its narrative, *Return*, along with these few other cultural exceptions, seems to have raised a series of questions not only over the role of women in the military, at a time when more than 280,000 women have been deployed over the past decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also over prior assumptions around the discourse of post-traumatic stress disorder.[13]

These homefront melodramas of war's aftershocks suggest how the emotional costs of war, including the potential trauma from serving in a combat zone, are marked not by the ostensible overcoming of gendered bodies but rather by the very gendered division of military labor itself. By acknowledging the differentiation of sacrifice and suffering by female veterans, these films imply, as I propose, that what returns historically in the fictional act of female soldiers returning home — and despite the official military rhetoric to the contrary — is indeed a moment of sexual difference. Still, these more specific stories of women and war resonate with the larger set of returning vet films under discussion here in that audiences have been generally denied "feel-good" cinematic experiences. From a critical cultural studies perspective, one that would acknowledge the stubborn reality principle governing this particular slice of the culture of war, I aim to argue that these stories without resolution actually embody the temporal impasse of the present, effectively enacting a form of deferral in the cultural work of grief during an era of war without end.

Cinematic Soldiers Returning to the Homefront

Going back to at least *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Williams Wyler's Academy Award-winning 1946 film about WWII veterans returning home in a less than celebratory way, American cinema has at times turned from the genre of war movies to that of melodrama to portray the "post-war" experience of soldiers struggling to re-adjust to civilian life.[14] Similarly, the post-9/11 war society has seen the culture industries of film and television call upon a melodramatic mode of representation to convey the ways in which war has scarred the homefront, dramatizing emotional conflict now erupting throughout the domestic sphere. A short list of films over the past decade concerned more with the homefront than the battlefield would include: *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Grace is Gone* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), *Taking Chance* (2009), *The Messenger* (2009), *Dear John* (2010), *The Dry Land* (2010), *Cost of a Soul* (2011), and the 2011 film *Return* (which had a very limited theatrical release in early 2012).

Certain characteristics persist across many of these films, all of which, save for *Grace is Gone*, having placed the suffering of returning soldiers at the core of their narratives. One rather predictable characteristic is that, as befits the tradition of melodrama, these films could be said to be largely "apolitical," insofar as they mostly avoid directly addressing any political debate on the post-9/11 wars (with the exception of *Stop-Loss*). For better or worse, the emotional wreakage of war at a personal level nearly always trumps political and historical understanding. Another, less obvious observation is that a curious sub-genre has taken shape in the guise of the road movie. A few of these films, namely, *Grace is Gone*, *The Lucky Ones*, *Stop-Loss*, and *The Dry Land*, have seemed to merge the war melodrama

with a road movie motif to imply, I suspect, a kind of uprooting in the wake of war, as re-turning soldiers now confront the difficulty of re-integration, clearly not yet *at home*. Mean-while, bereaved families of those who will never return find themselves newly estranged, incapable of dealing with the shock of their sudden loss (and with the home now shattered by an unbearable absence). One further development in the melodrama of war, which I will examine more closely below, is that some of these films have recognized, as an indexical gesture to the reality of today's armed forces, the unavoidable appearance of female soldiers returning as survivors of war and often facing the tribulations of combat-related wounds, whether physical or psychic. Both *Home of the Brave* and *The Lucky Ones*, as well as the independent film *Return*, feature female veterans whose suffering and sacrifice is differenti-ated to a degree, implying that the trauma of war is indeed gendered.

Overriding these narrative variables is the shared sense of victimization among the living and the dead, with all of these films offering fairly direct acknowledgment of the costs of war, including and especially the ravages of post-traumatic stress disorder. As if to under-score the sheer randomness of combat violence, the scene of war itself, or the initial trau-matic event, is dealt with in differing ways. Both *Home of the Brave* and *Stop-Loss* begin with combat sequences, giving their narratives of loss an origin and definable moment, even if over the course of the film that moment feels altogether irrecoverable. *In the Valley of Elah* unfolds as a kind of murder mystery, with the father of a missing soldier slowly piecing together the horrifying events that had their origin in his son's traumatic war experience in Iraq. Accordingly, the film's perspective aligns with the general position of those on the homefront who can barely fathom what happened "over there." Indeed, the reverberation of traumatic combat experience, at first suffusing the soldier as primary victim and then perme-ating loved ones back home, makes *In the Valley of Elah* a particularly compelling com-mentary on the Iraq war.

The film's point-of-view, for instance, is staged not from the combatant, Mike Deerfield, but from the soldier's father, Hank Deerfield, who is a retired military police officer from the Vietnam era, itself a gesture of connecting a past quagmire with a present one. The sen-ior veteran conducts his own investigation into the disappearance of his son, who no sooner had rotated stateside from a tour of duty in Iraq than he went AWOL — at least that's the story given by both the chain of command at his military base as well as Mike's comrades from his unit. The narrative takes a sinister turn when the remains of a body, which had been chopped up and scattered in a desert field just off base, are determined to be that of Mike Deerfield. The military closes ranks with a new story, this time of Mike having been involved in drug dealing and killed off gang-style. Although Hank cannot believe his all-American, clean-cut kid had been involved with drugs, the rank-and-file father defers to the military, adhering to the official line rather than the growing suspicion that Mike was brutal-ly murdered by his own Army buddies. As Hank insists to a local detective, "You do not fight beside a man and do something like that to him." But that is precisely what happened, with the revelation finishing off what had been the slow dissolve of Hank's idealistic worldview.

The revelation is telegraphed much earlier in the narrative when Hank steals Mike's cell

phone from his quarters and, with the surreptitious help of a renegade phone technician who reconstructs the damaged data, begins viewing the soldier's amateur video footage of events on the ground in Iraq. Hank can barely recognize his own son, who has been so brutalized by the war that he has taken to sadistically torturing Iraqi prisoners, thus earning Mike the nickname "Doc." One of the last pieces of video Hank views, which is framed as to resemble chaotic news footage from the media culture American viewers often received during the war, documents an atrocity that seems to have traumatized Mike, effectively closing the loop in the process of becoming both victim and perpetrator.[15] Even as *In the Valley of Elah* plays it safe by merely reminding us of the dehumanizing impact of war, a parallel, more incisive process it traces is that of irreparable disillusionment. Making Hank Deerfield a U.S. veteran and true believer in the American myth of exceptionalism, in the nation's "innocence" founded on sanctified infallibility, suggests a more challenging gesture for the film's audience.[16] And by taking us through the slow, painful process of disenchantment, which echoes the slow realization for many Americans that the war had been built on lies, the film provides those on the homefront with an emotional approximation of what it must feel like to lose faith in one's country, and how that loss itself could well be traumatic.[17]

In keeping with the melodramatic treatments of previous wars on screen, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* and, in the wake of the Vietnam War, *Coming Home*, both of which depict returning veterans struggling with the costs of war without ever depicting war itself, most of the other post-9/11 films referenced here dispense with combat scenes altogether. As such they provide only the grim effects of war, alluding indirectly to an experience that seems to defy representability. Yet such experiences are hardly universal. Even as many of these returning vet films attempt to evoke the lacerating reality of PTSD, the differences in these depictions are worth exploring in greater depth.

From the Frontlines to the Homefront: Female Soldiers and the Gendered Representation of Trauma

In order to explore the cinematic faultlines between male and female soldiers returning from the frontlines to the home front and, further, whether the trauma of war has been gendered, insofar as our recent media culture would have it, I would like to highlight two of these films in particular, reading *The Dry Land* alongside *Return*. Both films, released only a year apart, are comparable independent features, low-budget productions without any stars to speak of, and helmed by first-time writer-directors. In terms of formal strategies, both films draw stylistically from the tried and true pool of Sundance indie naturalism — a recognizable mix of low-key lighting, languid editing, minimalist camerawork, and a subdued soundtrack marked more by long stretches of quiet than screaming special effects or cranked up pop songs. Which means these are not war movies but rather (post)war movies in both narrative substance and formal delivery. The primary narrative difference between them, however, conflates director and actor: while *The Dry Land*, the debut feature by Ryan Piers Williams, concerns a male Iraq war vet, *Return*, Liza Johnson's first film, gives as a female Ar-

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my reservist home (temporarily as it will turn out) from her tour of duty in Iraq.

Despite these overt differences, both films offer a moving portrait of the class dimensions filling today's ranks, working class heroes from small towns that have seen better days; whether depicting a hollowed out rust belt town in Ohio or nowhere East Texas, America is home to a desolate landscape, bereft of anything resembling milk and honey. An earnest index of the citizen-soldier drawn from what Arundhuti Roy calls a "poverty draft,"[18] these class-bound subjects toil in dead-end factory jobs, although here too a degree of difference telegraphs trouble to come: In *Return*, not long after Kelli comes home from Iraq and resumes her old position in a sheet metal factory, the monotony and meaninglessness of such work drives her to quit suddenly, without warning to either her boss or the film's audience. In *The Dry Land*, James follows his military service with a ground-floor job at his father-in-law's slaughterhouse, a less-than-subtle reminder of the killing fields in Iraq and the impossibility of forgetting memories of war.

Along with class relations that traverse matters of gender, what also ties these narratives of loss together is that neither veteran seems capable —or willing — to articulate their experience of war. Although both characters return home to families and friends asking, rather than avoiding, what it was like "over there," neither one manages to put that experience into words, with James mumbling that he can't remember anything, and Kelli insisting, as she states repeatedly, "people had it a lot worse than me" (thereby invoking survivor's guilt). As such, these returning war vet films fall well within the tradition of the laconic soldier, that figuration of one robbed of speech or at least the capacity to express the inexpressible. These nearly mute characters in films dealing with U.S. wars in the 21st Century recall Paul Fussell's observations on World War II in which, as he writes in *Wartime*: "[S]omething close to silence was the byproduct of experience in the Second War. So demoralizing was this repetition of the Great War within a generation that no one felt it appropriate to say much, either to understand the war or to explain it."[19]

Seemingly at odds with the genre of melodrama, which typically prides itself on a surplus of dialogue, this lack of verbal expression in the post-war melodrama becomes one of several signs leading to the question of post-traumatic stress disorder. The representation of post-war experience and the difficulty of re-integration, which may or may not be a sign of PTSD, are bound up with the obvious, and perhaps not so obvious, signs of sexual difference. A study conducted by the Department of Defense in 2007 reported that while "female veterans are more likely than their male counterparts to suffer from PTSD,…women are not as likely to be diagnosed with PTSD as men are." The report surmizes, "that this may be based on cultural views that do not easily recognize women as combatants, as well as a tendancy to diagnose women's mental health problems as depression or anxiety rather than combat-related PTSD."[20]

I will here venture to assert that, within these narrative portraits of male and female veterans back home from war, it is in the representation of the struggle with PTSD that separates finally around sexual difference, which more or less conforms to rather familiar patterns of gender roles and expectations in society at large. For *The Dry Land*'s male soldier, plagued by traumatic memories and haunted by his inability to unlock them, his struggle

with PTSD is one of externalizing the emotional wreckage through male rage, including violent outbursts against his otherwise adoring wife. As opposed to such outward purging of violence, *Return*'s female soldier seems to have internalized the effects of war, appearing numb before the suddenly strange banality of everyday life, including and no doubt intentionally the domestic sphere of the family circle. As depicted early in the narrative, alienation from the family, from its stubborn normality, is perhaps even more frightening than *The Dry Land*'s male rage. Kelli's sense of dislocation from the domestic space of home is over-determined by a sense of dissociation from her identity as wife and mother, all of which will slowly slip away as the narrative unflolds.[21]

An early scene in *Return* that captures Kelli's advancing, unnerving emotional detachment from her family is followed by her "girls night out," which turns from boisterous rounds of shots to a series of pestering questions. "They say it helps to talk about it," says one of her friends. All Kelli can muster is that there was weird shit over there. Yeah, sure, she saw dead people, and dead animals everywhere, but again, we hear her utter, people had it a lot worse than her. Then she adds, "now the cups are where the plates should go." Her prior life, the one before the war, the one of work and home, of marriage and family, is steadily deteriorating. A serious lapse in forgetting to pick up the older of their two daughters after school, leaving her to wander the streets, triggers a confrontation with her husband Mike, who yells, "You're here. You're back. Be a god damn mother." He ends up taking custody of their daughters. After Kelli discovers Mike's infidelity and a subsequent night of heavy drinking and a DUI, she is forced to attend AA meetings, which serves to stage the very talking cure that otherwise eludes everyone. At one point the group leader presses her: Tell us about your trauma, to which Kelli responds, "I don't really have a story for you." What is interesting here is the film's resistance to explain away Kelli's troubles with a single, trauma-inducing event. Instead, as the narrative implies, her illness appears to have been the result of a more protracted experience, the harrowing accumulation of witnessing death and dying, of living with death for so long. Not all trauma can be neatly narrated: "I don't really have a story for you."

By foregrounding this sundering of trauma and narrative structure, the film actually points to the *need* to narrativize one's experience, to tell one's story even if what is conveyed, paradoxically, is the absence of having "a story for you." This felt need resonates with some of the work in trauma studies oriented around issues of culture and memory. One such scholar, Cathy Caruth, writes in *Unclaimed Experience*: "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language."[22]

What "remains unknown," as Caruth puts it, is precisely the traumatic event itself, which consequently throws into question the imperative to conform trauma to a narrative structure. These two films in particular refrain from the Hollywood tendency to resort to a cinematic "reveal" — no shocking flashbacks of unbearable carnage or of any direct source of trauma.

All that remains is the aftermath of war, its unforgiving effects, buried in bodies now full of rage or robbed of affect. Given the sheer numbers of those in the military having served in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, we are likely to bear witness to more melodramas of war to come. It is no doubt too soon to say, though, whether female soldiers on screen will be caught between the overcoming of sexual difference — fighting the good fight for equality — and a persistent reminder of difference, especially through embodied trauma. What also "remains unknown" is what will come of the double duty of women's labor, called upon to serve on both the frontlines and the homefront, at once soldiering for and mothering a nation.

A Necessarily Provisional Conclusion For a Time of Ceaseless War

Although the long tradition and lasting legacy of the Hollywood war movie is mostly one of glorifying war, of whitewashing violence and valorizing the male warrior-hero, all of which serve to reinforce and reproduce nationalistic identity formation, something of a counter-tradition appears to be taking shape, with a growing body of films about soldiers returning home in such a state as to cast doubt on the otherwise entrenched cinematic fantasies fueling the American war society.[23] By offering furtive attempts at recognizing combat-related PTSD, these homefront films over the past few years, in particular those that signal a post-ponement in reaching the much-anticipated post-war period, have approached an issue that suffered its own delayed recognition — until quite recently — by an official military discourse and an obedient mainstream media. The delayed reaction to the crisis of PTSD by the Pentagon and a blinkered nation, it could be said, cruelly mocks the condition of trauma itself. As Caruth explains, in *Unclaimed Experience:*

> the notion of trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality. In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (91-92)

This notion of belatedness — a kind of temporal lag for the subject in apprehending a past event that haunts the present — returns us, then, to my leading set of questions on the inconclusive structure of U.S. warfare and the noticeable lack of resolution to so many melodramatic texts — at least those given to the aftershocks of endless warfare. As opposed to such combat and action films as *The Kingdom* (2007) and *The Green Zone* (2010), which more or less offer some kind of resolution to their narrative entanglements, most of the

homefront melodramas of returning vet films, as glimpsed here, close with a lot of unanswered questions, with a future that is unknowable, but with a palpable sense of dread.

In *Home of the Brave*, for example, one of the four soldiers back from their tour of duty overseas actually returns to Iraq, with a closing scene showing him literally riding shotgun on an armored truck, still uncertain over who the "enemy" is supposed to be, a look of fear rather than determination written across his face. In *Stop-Loss*, after a futile battle against the Army's policy of re-deploying soldiers beyond their original contractual obligations, the main character surrenders to the will of the military and joins his unit as they are shown boarding buses for another deployment. Set to mournful rather than triumphant music, the final shots capture how the young soldiers awaiting their departure silently exchange glances with their loved ones, offering weathered looks of uncertainty that even the band of brothers sentiment here cannot conceal. Finally, in *Return*, the film ends where it began, with a shot of the back of Kelli's head, now departing from rather than arriving at an airport, a sense of foreboding enveloping her blank presence in completing the film's ironic title.

The larger context for the reception of these films, as limited as that reception might be, is that, as most polling indicates, the majority of Americans no longer believe that either the Iraq or Afghanistan war has been worth fighting. This steady erosion of public support appears irreversible, suggesting a retroactive reading of the wars and what they may end up meaning.[24] Taking stock of our own uncertain present, those of us on the frontlines of education and the culture wars may need to ask, What does it mean to have given one's life for an unjust (or unnecessary) war? How does one justify the loss without a stable grounding in either unsoiled nationalism or sentimental humanism? Where do the survivors go with their sorrow? What guides the work of mourning? While I have attempted here to explore the perception of temporal deferral, to theorize how the deferral of both historical circumstances and their cultural representations may be connected, my claim is much more modest. In a discussion of the uneasy relation between an era of war without end and narratives without much in the way of tidy conclusions, I dare not offer my own conclusion, short of asking that we re-consider the quiet realism, ironically enough, of melodramas of war, and their belated recognition of the grief still to come.

Notes

1. Gary A. Grappo, "The collapse of Iraq would open a new front in the Sunni-Shi'a war," *GlobalPost*, June 16, 2014, accessed June 17, 2014, http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/commentary/the-collapse-iraq-would-open-new-front-sunni-shia-war.
2. Rebecca Shabad, "Poll: Public doesn't want another Iraq war," *The Hill*, June 17, 2014, accessed July 18, 2014, http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/209582-poll-voters-support-obamas-approach-in-iraq.

3. According to one on-site observer, "Iraq ceased to be news for Americans" once U.S. combat forces left two and half years ago. Yet "Iraqis, of course, lacked the luxury of ignoring what had been going on in their land since 2011," as sectarian violence has never really subsided. Dahr Jamail, "Incinerating Iraq," *TomDispatch*, July 17, 2014, accessed July 18, 2014, http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175869/tomgram%3A_dahr_jamail%2C_incinerating_iraq.

4. See Luke Harding, "Iraq Suffers its Deadliest Year Since 2008," *the guardian.com*, January 1, 2014, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/01/iraq-2013-deadliest-year-since-2008. See also Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraq Fighters, Qaeda Allies, Claim Falluja as New State," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2014, A4 and John Feffer, "Iraq: Revisiting the Pottery Barn Rule," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 22, 2014, accessed February 27, 2014, http://fpif.org/iraq-revisiting-ruins-pottery-barn. As one commentator put it, "The Iraq war is not over; it never really ended." Adam Shatz, "Iraq-Syria," *The London Review of Books*, December 29, 2013, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/12/29/adam-shatz/iraq-syria.

5. The 2.8 million figure is the latest numbers available from the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America website, "About IAVA: Model, Mission and History," accessed July 20, 2014, http://iava.org/about.

6. "How Common is PTSD?" National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Last updated January 30, 2014, accessed March 4, 2014, http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp. These numbers are no doubt considerably higher given the degree to which a debilitating stigma has attached itself to mental health issues by a military culture that privileges "toughness" over any sign of weakness. See Matthew Gould, Neil Greenberg, and Jacquie Hetherton, "Stigma and the military: Evaluation of a PTSD psychoeducational program," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 20:4 (2007): 505-515. See also Paula J. Caplan, *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How All of Us Can Help Veterans* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2011).

7. As reported by *The Associated Press*, in early 2009, the U.S. Army began "investigating an unexplained and stunning spike in suicides in January." The story also noted that, "Yearly suicides have risen steadily since 2004 amid increasing stress on the force from long and repeated tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan." Pauline Jelinek, "Army Reports Alarming Spike in Suicides Last Month," *The Associated Press*, February 5, 2009, accessed February 6, 2009, http://www.truth-out.org/archive/item/82396:army-reports-alarming-spike-in-suicides-last-month. On the sharp rise in 2008 of suicides among active-duty soldiers, see Ann Scott Tyson, "Soldiers' Suicide Rate on Pace to Set Record," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2008, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/09/04/AR2008090403333_pf.html. On the sudden jump in 2010 in suicides of non-active-duty National Guard soldiers, see Gregg Zoroya, "Civilian Soldiers' Suicide Rate Alarming," USATODAY.com, November 26, 2010, accessed February 28, 2014, http://

usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-11-26-1Atroopsuicides26_ST_N.htm. And as reported by *The New York Times* in 2012, "The suicide rate among the nation's active-duty military personnel has spiked this year, eclipsing the number of troops dying in battle and on pace to set a record annual high since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan more than a decade ago." Timothy Williams, "Suicides Outpacing War Deaths for Troops," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2012, accessed February 28, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/us/suicides-eclipse-war-deaths-for-us-troops.html.

8. For example, see Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Knopf, 2008). A debate on the so-called "Long War" in relation to post-9/11 U.S. wars being waged across the Middle East was spearheaded by former CIA Director R. James Woolsey with a series of papers and speeches, including his lecture, "The Long War of the 21st Century: How We Must Fight It," delivered as the keynote address at the University of Richmond, October 24, 2003. See James Woolsey, "The Long War of the 21st Century," the History News Network, n.d., accessed February 28, 2014, http://hnn.us/article/8959. See also Rear Admiral Bill Sullivan, "Fighting the Long War—Military Strategy for the War on Terrorism." In *Starkville: Mississippi State Univ., Executive Lecture Forum to Radvanyi Chair in International Security Studies*, vol. 12. 2006.

9. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4. Of course, the apprehension of war without end is nothing new; its modern lineament can be traced back to at least World War I. During the Great War, according to Paul Fussell, the early optimism (on both sides) that the conflict would be over rather quickly eventually gave way to the likelihood that "[t]he stalemate and attrition would go on infinitely" (77): "The idea of endless war as an inevitable condition of modern life would seem to have become seriously available to the imagination around 1916" (80). Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975 [2013]).

10. Susan L. Carruthers, "No One's Looking: the Disappearing Audience for War," *Media, War & Conflict* 1:1 (2008), 71. See also Robert Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

11. Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 308-09.

12. For a thorough reading of how women serving in the U.S. military have been represented in American culture since the Second World War, see Yvonne Tasker, *Soldiers' Stories: Military Women in Cinema and Television since World War II* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

13. For the number of women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, see Greg Myre, "Women in Combat: 5 Key Questions," National Public Radio's *The Two-Way*, January 24, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwoway/2013/01/24/170161752/women-in-combat-five-key-questions.

14. For an exemplary account of the cultural front at home during World War II, see Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For a similarly incisive reading of the melo-

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dramatic treatment of the Vietnam War, see Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), especially Chapter 5: "Melodramatic Excess: The Body in/of the Text."

15. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner develops the term "media culture" to encapsulate the mass production, circulation, and consumption of ideological spectacles manufactured by the culture industries in his *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern* (London and New York, Routledge: 1995). For his trenchant work on the media culture of the Iraq war, including a similar reading on *In the Valley of Elah*, see Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

16. On the nationalist myths that led the U.S. into one of its most misguided conflicts, what the Vietnamese call the "American War," see Loren Baritz, *Backfire: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

17. Although *In the Valley of Elah* was "inspired by actual events," as we learn from an opening intertitle, based on a singular, nonfiction incident that serves to provide cover for a cinematic story about American soldiers turning on one another, the film's refusal to soft-pedal the capacity for monstrous acts by soldiers is actually quite daring. With the Vietnam and now Iraq wars in particular acknowledged as "senseless," even by the ground troops themselves, the fall-back rationale for fighting and dying remains, as always, for one another, for one's fellow soldier. However, the film casts doubt on even the "band of brothers" principle. When neither high-minded ideals nor the citizens back home seems to be worth dying for, one would expect that at least the undying belief in the comraderie of male-bonding during wartime should stand firm. Yet the film's remorseless shattering of this ideal, the means in the last instance of justifying all the suffering and sacrifice, leaves us without any reasoning at all for why we fight.

18. Arundhati Roy, *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 57.

19. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 132-33.

20. Margaret Baechtold and Danielle M. De Sawal, "Meeting the Needs of Women Veterans," *New Directions for Student Services* 126 (Summer 2009), 37. Their work is based on a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense, *An Achievable Vision: Report of the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health* (Falls Church, VA: Defense Health Board, 2007). See also David D. Luxton, Nancy A. Skopp, and Shira Maguen, "Gender Differences in Depression and PTSD Symptoms Following Combat Exposure," *Depression and Anxiety* 27 (2010).

21. While altogether earnest in their attempt to portray the effects of PTSD, these films nonetheless remain tethered to deeply entrenched fictions of gender. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-IV*), post-traumatic stress disorder presents in roughly three symptom clusters: 1) "re-experiencing" (recurrent and intrusive memories, dreams, or flashbacks of the trauma); 2) "avoidance/numbing" (attempts to avoid feelings and reminders of the trauma; inability to remem-

ber it; a feeling of detachment and emotional distancing); 3) "hyperarousal" (insomnia, anger, hypervigilance of one's environment). Both films mostly subject their character leads to the "avoidance/numbing" category of symptoms, although, as already noted, *The Dry Land*'s male veteran rather predictably succumbs as well to "hyperarousal" (which in reality is far less common than "numbing," according to the studies consulted here). Less predictable is *Return*'s female soldier who falls entirely into the second category of emotional detachment (rather than exhibiting emotional excess), a notable breach of expectations over traditional gender roles. For scholarship on PTSD, see Erin P. Finley, *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011). See also Coady B. Lapierre, Andria Schwegler, and Bill Labauve, "Posttraumatic Stress and Depression Symptoms in Soldiers Returning from Combat Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 20:6 (2007); and Hazel Croft, "Emotional Women and Frail Men: Gendered Diagnostics from Shellshock to PTSD, 1914-2010," in *Gender and Conflict since 1914: Historical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed., Ana Carden -Coyne (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

22. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

23. For a thorough, critical account of the many ways in which war across the 20th Century has been mis-represented, mis-remembered, and mythologized, see Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, A Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

24. Andrew Dugan, "On 10th Anniversary, 53% in U.S. See Iraq War as Mistake," *Gallup Politics,* March 18, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013, http://www.gallup.com/poll/161399/10th-anniversary-iraq-war-mistake.aspx.

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