

5. Singing their “Song”: Veterans, Civilians, and the Trials of Homecoming

Each and every one of us veterans must have a song to sing about our war before we can walk back into the community without everyone [...] quaking behind the walls. [...] Those who are afraid or uneasy must hear it. They must see the art. They must lose their fear. When the child asks, “What is it like to go to war?” to remain silent keeps you from coming home.¹

What is “home” anyway?²

Introduction

In countless war narratives across genres, cultural traditions, and history, the story’s arc ends with the soldier’s homecoming. The battle is won, the war is over, and the hero returns to his loved ones. Many such narratives adhere to and even explicitly invoke what Joseph Campbell has described as the archetypal “hero’s journey”: The hero goes forth to meet and withstand a challenge and, eventually, returns home victorious and matured.³ In US literature and culture, this pattern can be observed in personal war narratives such as memoirs, fiction, war movies, nonfiction books, and in academic analyses of war experience. Milblogs often follow a similar narrative arc. Many blogs end with the soldiers’ report of a happy reunion with their families; photos of soldiers hugging wives or enjoying the peace and amenities of home are typical features of such posts.⁴ In a way, this type of narrative ending resembles the final kiss in a love story—regardless whether the boy gets the girl⁵ or the soldier comes home, both stories suggest

1 Marlantes, *What It Is Like*, 207.

2 Shay, *Odysseus*, 4.

3 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; cf. Becknell, “Listening to Narratives of War,” 17–19.

4 Temple, “Coming Home”; Odie’s contribution in Traversa, “Sgt. David Stephens.” Among other aspects, this chapter also breaks up the earlier chapters’ patterns of gendering: while most bloggers discussed so far were males and milblog conversation thus neatly reproduced traditional patterns of male soldiers experiencing war and encountering large numbers of female commenters in a nurturing role, the homecoming scenarios discussed here also portray female soldiers and veterans in protagonist roles.

5 Cf. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 5.

closure: They mark the successful conclusion of a challenge, but, at the same time, they omit the beginning of a new challenge, i.e., the trials of everyday married life for the lovers, and the trials of readjusting to civilian life for the veteran.

This final chapter addresses how such homecoming trials are discussed in US society and, specifically, how civic activists seek to raise public awareness about them. It acknowledges that, for many soldiers, the physical act of returning home from deployment does not automatically translate into ‘homecoming.’ Combat veterans often need to “dial down” reflexes acquired as life-saving skills in battle.⁶ Traumatized veterans sometimes take decades to understand the symptoms of stress, seek help, and come to terms with their trauma. Most veterans face challenges when returning to civilian life; the cognitive gap between the discipline, hierarchy, and essential sense of mutual dependability in the military on the one hand, and the emphasis on individualism, self-interest, and competition in US civil society on the other hand are frequently experienced as a culture shock.⁷ In a deployment system of individual and unit rotations, returning veterans are aware that the war is still raging overseas and that fellow soldiers and friends are still in harm’s way. Among veterans, this knowledge frequently evokes guilt and a sense of having abandoned their buddies while, at the same time, they face a society that is often ignorant about the hardships of war and whose members frequently do not seem to care about the war at all. In all these responses to their return from deployment, veterans take time to sort their memories and experience and try to fit in to civil society so that an individual sense of ‘homecoming’ is often quite disparate and delayed from their physical return.⁸

Jonathan Shay states in the motto above that veterans must first sort out what ‘home’ means for them, and for their families and communities. This process needs to be verbalized within the veterans’ communities. As Vietnam veteran writer Karl Marlantes expresses above, they must find a “song,” a narrative, to do the sorting, and they must find active and empathetic civilian listeners with whom to share their experiences and to support the sorting process, in order to achieve complete reintegration. This chapter, therefore, focuses on civic projects designed to help veterans find and sing their songs. This understanding

6 Hoge, *Once a Warrior*, x, 51–85.

7 Cf. Hoge; Junger, *Tribe*.

8 In this somewhat generalizing overview, complex issues, such as the prospect of (multiple) redeployments for career soldiers with its corresponding stress situations, cannot be discussed in detail.

echoes observations from Indigenous traditions, such as war-related practices on the Northern Plains, which hold that ‘homecoming’ means a Native veteran’s ability to live with his or her memories, and not be overcome and controlled by them: “[T]here is a widespread conviction that what is needed for veterans to ‘come home’ is for them to be able to ‘forget’ the war; and the way veterans are to ‘forget’ the war, somewhat paradoxically, is to ‘talk about it.’”⁹ The civic activist projects discussed in this chapter all share this philosophy and emphasize the role of ceremonial storytelling among veterans and civilians as critical for homecoming, i.e., for reintegration and mental health.

Milblogs, as the previous chapters have shown, reflect attempts to exchange information and emotions about war experience and to bridge the cognitive and social gaps between soldiers and civilians. They also address the prospect of homecoming and discuss, in more or less detail, anticipation, but also anxieties about homecoming.¹⁰ However, many milblogs are terminated upon return from deployment or simply peter out shortly thereafter; they do not capture and discuss particular post-deployment issues in detail. Rex Temple, in his last radio interview en route to the US, says that he looks forward to everyday life without the restraints of the military, but expects to need some time to “get my bearings” in the civilian world.¹¹ Douglas Traversa posts a few entries detailing his culture shock about some civilians’ ignorance of US soldiers’ and Afghan civilians’ struggles in the war zone, and then moves on to discuss personal-interest issues unrelated to the military (e.g., dog rescue) until the blog is discontinued.¹² Richard Phillips remains silent for a while after his return, and then proceeds to reveal and discuss his problems with depression and related readjustment issues, before redeploying back to Afghanistan.¹³ Although he did not write many entries during deployment on his Afghanistan experiences, Don Gomez wraps up his deployment with a reflective post titled “Afghanistan Post-Mortem” before going back to writing more generally on issues of military culture on his blog *Carrying the Gun*.¹⁴

To cover the experience of sorting out memories and the often lengthy process of readjusting to civil life, this final chapter has to move beyond the realm of milblogging and rely on a corpus of primary sources best described

9 O’Neill, “Coming Home,” 446.

10 Phillips, “Week 23.”

11 Temple in O’Brien, 4-15-Mlt-Rex-Heads-Home.Mp3.

12 Traversa, “Loose Ends”; “Clowns”; “Scum.”

13 Phillips, “Back in the Saddle”; “Back to Afghanistan!”

14 Gomez, “Afghanistan Post-Mortem.”

as ‘homecoming scenarios’ that, nevertheless, shares a discursive context with milblogs. As a complex medium of ritualized narrative practices whose cultural work lies in their self-conscious negotiation of war experience with civil society, milblogs can only be fully understood in conjunction with such cultural practices that concern themselves with veterans’ homecoming, readjustment, and reintegration. ‘Homecoming scenarios’ are a growing corpus of diverse and widely discussed texts and practices of civic engagement; they are medially and modally heterogeneous scripts of homecoming rituals negotiated in documentary films, on websites, in theaters, as well as in creative writing and education projects. The phenomenon cannot adequately be described with the concept of ‘text’ alone, even in its broadly framed cultural-studies sense because its functionality is determined by the interaction and complementary implementation of diverse practices in a variety of media and modes, and it often involves elements of ritualized performance and physical presence.

This chapter, thus, employs the term ‘scenario’ which was derived from performance studies and serves to complement text-centered notions of cultural practice.¹⁵ While a scenario might comprise individual texts, such as documentary films or websites, it also often involves embodied acts, such as town hall meetings or group therapy sessions, which then are often discussed, described, amended, and published in text form. The scenario is formed by the sum and the synergistic cultural work of all individual elements. Diana Taylor’s understanding of ‘scenarios’ seems all the more relevant as her work also contrasts “archive” with “repertoire.” She argues that the use of ‘repertoire’ explains performance and ritual in Indigenous societies as it

enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency, referring to ‘the finder, the discoverer,’ and meaning ‘to find out.’ The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being part of a transmission.¹⁶

In this sense, the lens of war-related ceremonies among Native North Americans focalizes the cultural work of homecoming scenarios. It helps understand them as ‘repertoire,’ as cultural practices requiring embodied presence and expressions beyond mere textual narration, as practices bringing together both veterans and civilians for the communal performance of rituals that are not simply theatrical

15 Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

16 Taylor, 20.

events staged for a passive audience. They require active participation by all involved parties to negotiate the meaning of war experience for both veterans and for civil society, that is, to ‘find’ and ‘discover’ this meaning in a concerted effort.¹⁷ Hence, while most examples in this chapter’s readings refer to texts and discuss how their ‘textuality’ helps determine their cultural work, it is critical to keep in mind that this adaptation of Taylor’s concept reads ‘scenarios’ as superordinate, ritualized narrative structures which are usually iterated in embodied performances and accompanied by the supporting texts discussed in the readings (e.g., websites, online forums, films, oral history collections).

Taylor’s reference to the primarily nonliterate practices of Indigenous peoples emphasizes cultural translation and allows an inclusive approach to the diversity of cultural expressions discussed in this study. Taylor describes scenarios as “formulaic structures”¹⁸ and “portable frameworks.”¹⁹ A scenario, she adds, “includes features well theorized in literary analysis, such as narrative and plot, but demands that we also pay attention to milieux and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language.”²⁰ Scenario, in this sense, means both the performance—i.e., the embodied, spatially determined, and presence-oriented acts executed during a ritual—and the overarching narrative structure, the ritual pattern, whose manifestation and dissemination can be determined by various media and modes, such as dance, milblogs, or communal welcome ceremonies, as well as the supporting para-texts circulated to educate civil society about veterans’ issues and to promote homecoming scenarios as a social remedy. Taylor’s concept of scenario encompasses both the “setup” of performative practices and their “action,” i.e., enactment.²¹ She emphasizes that “the transmission of a scenario reflects the multifaceted systems at work in the scenario itself: [...] writing, telling, reenactment, mime, *gestus*, dance, singing.”²²

17 This understanding also goes hand in glove with Ronald Grimes’s distinction of performances in ritual and theater, i.e., theater is performed for a passive audience of consumers while rituals are performed by participants who reinforce their sense of community through that performance. Grimes, *Craft*, 297. In this context, it is striking that the *Theater of War’s* website, although using the term “audience,” declares that 60,000 people have not only “attended” but also “participated” in the group’s events. Their documentation, thus, similarly emphasizes the active and community-building component of their performance/ritual. “Theater of War: Overview.”

18 Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 31.

19 Taylor, 28.

20 Taylor, 28.

21 Taylor, 28, 31.

22 Taylor, 31.

Thus, her concept grasps not only the multidimensionality of performance and meta-performance underlying this study, but also the generic and medial diversity of its corpus. Taylor's emphasis on milieu in her outline of scenarios as an analytic tool allows this study to sharpen its focus on civic engagement and on the social activist intent behind homecoming scenarios. With the concept of 'homecoming scenarios,' then, this chapter examines the cultural practices' setup, their action and embodiment, and their transmission in textual representations.

While homecoming scenarios utilize different media and address different stages in a soldier's or veteran's 'career,' they are, nevertheless, situated in the same discursive context as milblogs. This is not only because they are both cultural artifacts representing war experience and civil-military relationships with a strong emphasis on the role of community, but also because they both rely on related textual, performative and cultural dynamics, i.e., on forms of ceremonial storytelling driven by social-therapeutic motivations. Like milblogs, homecoming scenarios regard communal, ritualized war narratives as an opportunity to mark the transition between civil and military life in a socially responsible manner. They both assume that practices of narrating war experience, guided by specific cultural conventions, help soldiers and veterans to come to terms with their experiences. For this process, they both rely on—and often explicitly require—an audience that bears witness to this narration and that, in their symbolic statements of empathy and support, sets an example for civil society in general. Both practices, thus, integrate an otherwise passive audience and transform it not only into actors of civic engagement, but also into co-narrators as their response is a critical component of the entire ritualized exchange. Both practices self-consciously emphasize the civic awareness and significance of such narrative exchange. While milblogs seek to inform civil society about the reality of war through firsthand observation, homecoming scenarios propose that veterans' war experience, through a culturally ritualized institutionalization in narrative and performance, can represent the complexity of war experience for civil society and integrate it into civic practices of cultural commemoration.

As such, homecoming scenarios can best be grasped by the two-pronged approach of a) inquiring about the cultural work of the practices to explain relationships and to illuminate how knowledge and values are iterated and disseminated, and b) by examining the negotiation of individual experiences (and suffering) among diverse groups of social and cultural agents. Like the discussions of milblogs in the previous two chapters, this chapter thus looks into the functionality of the sources while also discussing their social-therapeutic intent as critical factors in illuminating their cultural work and social relevance. Integrating its analysis of homecoming scenarios with the previous observations

on milblogs, this chapter thus answers the following major research question: How do homecoming scenarios, which cover a different phase of soldierly careers than milblogs, negotiate civil-military relationships, how do they foster interaction between veterans and civilians, and how do these dynamics reflect those of milblogs?

In the following, I further elaborate on the civic-engagement thrust of homecoming scenarios to situate them within the tradition of American war narratives and to discuss the notions of social therapy inspiring these practices, thus marking them as current cultural practices of negotiating war among soldiers and civilians, before introducing the readings of selected homecoming scenarios. Homecoming scenarios emerged within the tradition of cultural representations of war and are embedded in the activist discourse on war experience analyzed throughout the previous chapters. War memoirs and veterans' fiction and non-fiction writing, for example, have been prominent genres in US literary history, and their academic discussion has produced broad swaths of scholarly literature.²³ However, homecoming scenarios are a relatively recent phenomenon—in terms of reach, popularity, and civic engagement as well as in terms of formal diversity—and as such, they have not yet been outlined as a distinct cultural practice. The phenomenon originated in veterans' projects which—from diverse perspectives and in diverse modes—address the narration of war experience performed as a core element of the social and mental reintegration of returning veterans. In doing so, they delineate and repeatedly call for the social institution of specific rituals of veteran transition and reintegration as a civic practice. This recurring script is being conserved, transported, and reiterated in diverse cultural formats (both textual and performative). The corpus of such practices reflects an explicit ambition to effect social impact—it is promoted by forms of civic engagement and activism that claim social relevance, call for social change, and attempt to spread their ideas by employing established, in themselves 'ritualized,' cultural conventions (e.g., the formal and textual conventions of film).

The corpus of homecoming scenarios is manifest in another unifying feature. Cathartic, ceremonial storytelling, understood as a catalyst for veteran

23 Cf., among others, Limon, *Writing After War*; Jason, *Fourteen Landing Zones*; Anderson, *Aftermath*; Morgan and Michalson, *For Our Beloved Country*; Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*. Some of this chapter's sources extensively show milblogs' embeddedness in this tradition. Both Colby Buzzell's blog *My War* and Michael Strobl's post "Taking Chance Home" are featured in the anthology *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, as well as in the accompanying eponymous CBS documentary. Andrew Carroll, *Operation Homecoming: Operation Homecoming*.

transition, is described, promoted as a ritual, and self-consciously performed as a paradigm of social change. It is, thus, a formally heterogeneous corpus of 'texts' and activities that outline the dramatic script of a ceremonial storytelling practice and enact this very practice at the same time. The phenomenon not only seeks to support the reintegration of veterans and help them navigate their experience, it also strives to value this war-related experience by making it productive for the civilian world. Homecoming scenarios are, thus, unique projects of civic engagement driven by a strong meta-performative impulse: They promote rituals of ceremonial, war-related storytelling as a viable and necessary form of community-oriented veterans' reintegration and social therapy while enacting these rituals through their explicit engagement of both veterans and civilians in these practices.

The civic activist drive of homecoming scenarios is strengthened by their institutional contexts, which becomes apparent when they are compared to depictions of homecoming that have recently become a popular theme in both news media and social media, and are typically manifest in the images of happy reunions at airports, homes, or military bases.²⁴ However, a 2015 study by John Howard and Laura Privera argues that, while these video clips provide an "easy to access script for citizens to understand soldiering and what it means," they overemphasize joy, strength, resilience, and the completion of a task while avoiding topics such as veterans' reintegration struggles, social and economic challenges, and (mental) health issues.²⁵ These depictions usually resort to archetypal characters, such as the triumphantly returning "warrior hero," or the tragic "fallen hero."²⁶ As Howard and Privera conclude, "[t]he glorification of service and war does a disservice to those military personnel who would benefit much more from understanding than nationalistic pride and praise."²⁷ The corpus of what this chapter understands as 'homecoming scenarios' is distinct from these overtly positive portrayals because it engages the challenges that other formats avoid and seeks to do justice to the complexity of war experience, as the following brief example elucidates.

In recent years, the production and currency of homecoming scenarios was extensively promoted and institutionalized. One important factor in this

24 A YouTube search for the phrase "Soldier Homecoming Compilation" will provide a general idea of the structure, content, and popularity of this format.

25 Howard and Privera, "Nationalism and Soldiers' Health: Media Framing of Soldiers' Returns from Deployments," 217–18.

26 Howard and Privera, 222.

27 Howard and Privera, 231.

development is the emergence of mentoring and counseling, creative writing, theater, fine arts, and film courses and workshops for veterans offered by both educational institutions and activist groups. In many cases, English departments, humanities centers, and veterans' centers at universities play a leading role in providing ideas, resources, infrastructure, and focal points for outreach and civic engagement in and beyond the classroom.²⁸ Andrew Carroll's book and the accompanying CBS film *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* emerged on this current wave of academic interest. Since the Vietnam War, psychologists and psychiatrists such as Jonathan Shay and Ed Tick have engaged not only in clinical therapy, but also in the promotion of community-oriented veteran self-help and social activist groups, and helped spawn the recent surge in homecoming scenarios. Their books and ideas feature prominently in the homecoming scenarios described in this chapter; the authors are frequently hosted as guest speakers and advisers.²⁹ Among droves of psychological works discussing clinical PTSD therapy and veterans' mental health, a few recent works explore civic activist projects of homecoming in conjunction with alternative and social therapy.³⁰ In addition, there are extensive

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- 28 Cf., e.g., “Fallout”; Leche, *Outside the Wire*; Dalton, “From Combat to Composition: Meeting the Needs of Military Veterans through Postsecondary Writing Pedagogy”; Simon, “Veterans Learn”; Broder and Tanenbaum, “Soldiers Project”; “Warrior Writers”; Martin et al., *The Journal of Military Experience*; Doe and Langstraat, *Generation Vet*. Academic engagement within the humanities in this regard is probably driven by a number of intertwined factors. Humanities departments have the institutional knowledge and academic expertise for these types of courses and projects. The humanities are traditionally comprised of large numbers of faculty who see themselves as activist-scholars and engage in social issues. In addition, projects focusing on veterans at a university open doors to otherwise scarce sources of external funding for humanities institutions at a time when most such departments and centers struggle in competition with STEM disciplines. I am indebted to Lawrence Acker of Lindenwood University for his insights in these developments regarding veterans' affairs within higher education.
- 29 Among other scholars' works, Shay's *Achilles* and *Odysseus* are seen as classics. They are cited in much of the academic-activist literature and serve as references on the projects' websites. Tick's books and his healing and reconciliation retreat project *Soldier's Heart* are frequently cited as role models for spiritual, community-oriented approaches to veteran reintegration and therapy for moral injury. Tick, *War and the Soul; Warrior's Return*.
- 30 Cf., e.g., Scurfield and Platoni, *Healing War Trauma*; Scurfield and Platoni, *War Trauma and Its Wake*.

interrelations and mutual influence between protagonists of homecoming scenarios, as well as authors and audiences of books about veteran self-help, and about psychological mentoring on veterans' readjustment, mental health, and community-oriented reintegration.³¹ The trials of homecoming are addressed in visual arts,³² in the works of engaged journalists,³³ and even in several official reports on veterans' mental health and social therapy.³⁴ In this context, homecoming scenarios have directed public attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to raise awareness about the challenges of veteran readjustment. They have gradually built up institutional support and infrastructures for their social-therapy agenda.

As with the examples of ceremonial storytelling in deployed milblogs, the motivation behind homecoming scenarios is driven by dissatisfaction with the state of civil-military relationships and by concerns about the social contract among many veterans and civilians. It involves both the veterans' anxieties about abandonment and isolation, and activist civilians' empathy for veterans' issues, their sense of civic responsibility, and their recourse to cultural memories of an alleged general rejection of returning veterans after Vietnam. This activist urge most likely focuses on veterans more than on deployed troops because of the widespread assumption that public attention to veterans is much weaker than to active troops in the field, where bumper stickers, yellow ribbon campaigns,

31 Cf., e.g., Hoge, *Once a Warrior*; Marlantes, *What It Is Like*; Holyfield, *Veterans' Journeys Home*; Meagher, *Moving a Nation to Care*.

32 Cf., e.g., Mitchell, "100 Faces of War Experience"; *5000 Feet is the Best*.

33 Cf., e.g., Finkel, *Good*; Finkel, *Thank You*; Junger, *Tribe*; Updike, "Will They"; Klein, "Can Service"; Klein, *Charlie Mike*.

34 Tanielian and Jaycox, "Invisible Wounds of War"; Yonkman and Bridgeland, "All Volunteer Force." To provide a brief transatlantic contextualization, the German *Bundeswehr* has much less prominence in the public, owing to critical perspectives on the role of the military in World War II and the Holocaust. Public memory about these historical events still generates wary public discussions on the relationship between the military and civil society. However, German participation in the Afghanistan campaign has raised public awareness of veterans' mental health and corresponding problems of PTSD and readjustment. A growing number of German veterans and journalists address these issues. Lücking, "Aufräumen"; Sussebach, "Veteranen: Krieg im Frieden"; Würich and Scheffer, *Operation Heimkehr*. In addition, the parliamentary ombudspersons for the *Bundeswehr* regularly warn about growing official numbers as well as estimates of unreported cases of PTSD in their annual reports. Deutscher Bundestag, "Jahresbericht 2009"; "Jahresbericht 2010"; "Jahresbericht 2011."

and applause for military personnel in uniform at airports offer easy gestures for civilians to express support. As indicated above, the public imagery of happy family reunions suggests a task completed which allows the public to ignore potential psychological, social, and economic struggles in the wake of medialized homecomings.

In this context, the lens of Native American war-related ceremonies applied throughout this study helps understand the cultural work and social relevance of activist homecoming scenarios even better, and mainly for two reasons: First, unlike ceremonial storytelling in milblogs, the spatial and temporal gaps are removed, i.e., the practices discussed here do not have to take into account further combat and combat-related stress, nor look at reunion with one's home community as a distant and somewhat abstract idea. Like participants in the Navajo Enemy Way ceremony or Plains dancers counting coup, the veterans involved in homecoming scenarios have returned from the war zone and are surrounded by their families and home communities. Second, as a result of the eventual removal of the temporal gap and the veterans' physical contact with their community, veterans' problems with readjustment and mental health are perceived as frictions, cause social stress, and make healing and communal reintegration more urgent. It is, thus, significant that many Native American war-related ceremonies not only honor returning warriors but also cleanse them of the taint of violence and mend lingering psychological injuries. It is critical to note that Native civilians actively participate in these ceremonies, and that this joint participation in the ceremonial effort symbolizes the mutual responsibilities to which warriors and civilians commit themselves. By enacting a supportive, empathetic, and healthy community, the participants create, or reconstitute that community and, thus, work to 'heal' both veterans and civilians. It is this notion of mutual aid and communal responsibility to which homecoming scenarios in US mainstream society increasingly subscribe.

Many homecoming scenarios refer to texts about veterans' reintegration and social therapy which explicitly portray Native American war-related ceremonies as role models for community-oriented work with veterans, as Chapter Two discussed. They reflect a growing concern about isolation and the negative effects of overt individualism in US society. Consequently, they seek to learn from, borrow, or constitute and create diverse communal cultural practices to address these grievances. Protagonists frequently cite the positive effects of unit cohesion among deployed troops to explain the culture shock veterans experience upon returning to civil society. In numerous texts, journalists, scholars, and veteran writers explain that the proximity of death in the war zone necessarily

facilitates bonding among soldiers, fostering a sense of trust, reliability, protection, and familiarity. As Sebastian Junger posits, the experience of such virtues and loyalty "can be utterly intoxicating to the people who experience them."³⁵ The loss of these social relations upon return, and the veterans' immersion into a civil society built on self-reliance and competition, contribute to the culture shock many experience. They might help alienate veterans as they realize they are but a small minority within US demographics who made the transitions between the worlds of war and peace, and experienced the resulting psychological consequences firsthand.³⁶ As a World War II veteran told oral historian Studs Terkel, he perceived life with the fifteen men in his artillery gun crew as a "tribal sort of situation where we could help each other without fear."³⁷ Junger integrates these observations with the military traditions and war-related cultural practices of the Iroquois and concludes regarding non-Native veterans' reintegration struggles, comparing unit cohesion in wartime with studies on mutual aid in communities beset by natural disasters: "What people miss presumably isn't danger or loss but the unity that these things often engender. There are obvious stresses on a person in a group, but there may be even greater stresses on a person in isolation, so during disasters there is a net-gain in well-being."³⁸ Like the examples in the previous chapter, Junger (as well as many of the protagonists cited below) speaks of a "tribal" sense of community and refers to "egalitarian societies" as role models because, as he emphasizes, they do not merely "valorize," but "value" veterans. This notion perceives veterans' experience as a necessary contribution to society, but also cautions against pathologizing and further isolating veterans in creating a "victim class."³⁹

Similarly, the protagonists of homecoming scenarios seek to reinstate such a sense of cooperation in their efforts to involve civilian communities in veterans' affairs, to build trust, and to encourage mutual aid and responsibilities. Among many other scholars, Shay emphasizes that a major feature of complex war-related PTSD is not only the "persistence into civilian life of adaptations necessary to survive battle," but also the "destruction of the capacity for social

35 Junger, *Tribe*, 77.

36 Junger, *Tribe*, 77–78.

37 Qtd. in Junger, 92.

38 Junger, 92–93.

39 Junger, 100–01. Junger specifically attacks the VA system of lifelong disability benefits for PTSD, arguing they signify that society no longer expects anything productive from these veterans.

trust.”⁴⁰ Homecoming scenarios, then, work toward (re)establishing that trust since they argue with Shay (and frequently in reference to traditional societies’ practices) that “recovery happens only in community.”⁴¹ Regardless whether activists explicitly cite Native American military traditions or, as the examples of theater projects in this chapter highlight, the veteran traditions of classical Greek drama, these cultural practices subscribe to the sense of crisis in the discourse on war experience that is keenly aware of veterans’ reintegration struggles. They propose to overcome this crisis by way of diverse ceremonial, communal, and therapeutic scripts of storytelling and bearing witness. Homecoming scenarios, then, conduct cultural work in similar ways as many Native war-related ceremonies, and in similar discursive contexts. Although they are embedded in their own cultural context and often invoke their own cultural traditions (such as the citizen soldier), they frequently cite the Native American practices (as well as other traditions) as role models and seek to implement elements from these different cultures to motivate, justify, and help structure their own activities.

The following readings discuss five homecoming scenarios to illustrate select aspects of how these projects use various cultural expressions to promote their social agenda. Notwithstanding their diversity in scale, institutional support, or choice of media, the homecoming scenarios within this selection could be described as projects of institutionalized narrative practices. That is, they conceptualize encounters between veterans and civilians as cathartic, ceremonial narrative practices and institutionalize them through their promotion and prescriptive representation as models for civil-military relationships. These scenarios are usually realized through institutionalized activities, such as workshops, theatrical performances, town hall meetings, and social-therapy retreats, and are supported by various text formats. Many of the supporting para-texts are conceptual works by activist military psychologists (e.g., Jonathan Shay, Edward Tick), as well as documentary materials, such as websites and blogs, which often open up additional space for convergence and interaction between veterans and civil society.

The medial diversity in this corpus demonstrates how embodied, performed, and memorialized practices collaborate with texts serving as prescriptive models. That is, to relate back to Diana Taylor’s concepts, they form a parallel and mutually reinforcing structure of ‘repertoire’ and ‘archive.’ In addition, these projects

40 Shay, *Odysseus*, 4.

41 Shay, 4.

frequently not only refer to Indigenous and ancient Greek war-related narrative practices as role models, their setup often emulates (explicitly or by chance) the embodiment and spatiality of these practices, thus once more revealing the significance of traditional knowledge and practice for the entire corpus of war narration in this study. It should also be noted that most practices of narrativity as they could be observed in the milblogs, i.e., the ways how blog readers directly contribute to blog posts and influence the overall narrative, are not visible in the media discussed here. Most projects have relegated direct interaction with their audiences to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. To keep the scope of this study and the diversity of media to explore manageable, these social media services could not be included in this discussion.

However, the representations of embodiment in films and film clips on websites, as well as the explicit and prominent calls to contribute to a project, illustrate how these scenarios engender direct interaction between veterans and civilians, and how they represent such interaction. While not showing narrativity in action, more often than not, they reveal its foundations and its results. Milblogs use the Internet as their ritual space and the physical interaction between participants and technology (e.g., keyboards, tablets) as an embodiment of the ritual process. Both this spatial setup and the physical interaction with technology provide the sense of presence among participants that enhances ritualization. For these homecoming scenarios, the Internet serves two spatial functions: It is a storage space to collect representations of individual ritual processes in various media. Films show embodied ritualized interaction at a defined space (e.g., the compound of a retreat, or a theater auditorium), and website texts instigate, prepare, and report such events of ritualized interaction. Comparable to the function of tributes and memorial blog posts, the scenarios' supporting websites also serve as convergence spaces, helping to construct the overall scenario by collecting and directing its individual elements, such as hyperlinks to social media where the direct communication with users then takes place, and information on the projects' mission, sponsors, and supporters. The websites also store information on the projects' activities, and on the individual scenario elements in which rituals are presented to the public (e.g., film and audio clips, essays). These convergence spaces thus provide frames for the overall scenarios; they, too, become the ritual space within which the cultural practice unfolds, and they help instill a sense of presence for its participants.

The readings below begin with analyses of the documentary films *Operation Homecoming* (2007) and *The Welcome* (2011), as well as their supporting

para-texts. These films develop prescriptive and exemplary practices of ceremonial storytelling by veterans and, through their circulation as films, promote and rehearse these practices. The supporting websites enhance their civic-engagement thrust as they offer discussion guides and questions, and invite viewers to host screenings or similar events as represented in the films. The interweaving of different media within the homecoming scenario becomes apparent because the medium 'film' depicts embodied and participatory ceremonial storytelling and promotes it as a necessary cultural practice to ameliorate the diagnosed social crisis in veterans' affairs. At the same time, interviews with veterans in the films and para-texts reflect on deployed soldiers' anticipation of homecoming and contrast these memories with their experience of their actual return, and with the corresponding social frictions and emotional challenges. The selection illustrates the broad range of these projects in terms of scale: *Operation Homecoming* could benefit from the institutional and financial engagement of the National Endowment of the Arts, while the Welcome Home Project and its major medium of circulation, the film *The Welcome*, represent the activities of local activists dependent on crowd funding.

Similarly, the third scenario, the Veterans Education Project (VEP), operates on a regional level in New England. It emerged from community-oriented veteran activism since the Vietnam War and will be featured here to examine how public debate on the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has shaped local social activism in veterans' affairs. It illustrates how activists use education to generate interaction between veterans and civilians and to foster opportunities for veterans to make their war experience productive for their communities. This reading focuses on VEP's website, and on an accompanying academic study on social work and narrative therapy. Like the following reading on theater projects, it, thus, does not so much analyze the veterans' stories themselves, but inquires how the activists promote the stories and how the scenario implements their telling.

Finally, the chapter discusses how two projects integrate modern interpretations and theatrical performances of ancient Greek drama with representations of recent war experience. These concrete homecoming scenarios combine theater and town hall meetings to bring together veterans, health care professionals, and local communities. They use websites and oral history video clips to disseminate their ideas of community-oriented veteran reintegration. The discussion focuses on how their website para-texts contextualize the historic reference to Greek drama and promote the projects' social activist thrust.

Operation Homecoming

*This is the first time anyone’s asked us to write about what we think of all that’s going on.*⁴²

This first scenario is centered on a project of soldiers’ creative writing based on their experiences in post-9/11 wars. It culminates in the film *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* (2007), following the titular print anthology edited by Andrew Carroll in 2006. Both the film and the book feature a selection of short stories, letters, e-mails, poems, and blog posts published as part of a nationwide effort to engage military personnel and their families in firsthand war narratives. The project was initiated at a gathering of state poet laureates who eventually involved the National Endowment of the Arts, organizing creative writing workshops at military bases and ships in the US and in the war zones, taught by distinguished (and primarily veteran) writers.⁴³ Following the NEA’s call, some six thousand participants attended the fifty workshops, and of the c. two thousand submissions, five percent were selected for inclusion in the anthology.⁴⁴ The film features a few of these book contributions. It is part of the eleven-episode PBS series *America at a Crossroads* which explores challenges to foreign and domestic politics, as well as social issues, facing US society since 9/11.⁴⁵ The following reading discusses the overall project’s activist motivation before launching into a closer reading of the film to explore in how far its contributions address ‘homecoming’ and how they inform the project’s agenda. Finally, brief sample readings of book contributions and para-texts on project-related websites illustrate how the different elements of this multimedia project complement each other and inform its activist stance.

The NEA representative for the project states that, never having worked with the military before, the institution wanted to bring writers and members of the military into personal contact with each other as it recognized the social and cultural importance of creating an environment of mutual learning.⁴⁶ In addition, the project was supposed to give voice to witnesses of war “who would not normally be heard,”⁴⁷ i.e., lower-echelon personnel and their families back home,

42 Participant during a writing workshop at Ft. Bragg, in Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, xxvii.

43 Gioia, preface to *Operation Homecoming*, xi–xii.

44 Gioia, xiv.

45 “America at a Crossroads. Operation Homecoming.”

46 Gioia, preface to *Operation Homecoming*, xii.

47 Gioia, xiii.

and provide them with a means of reflection on their war experiences.⁴⁸ While such voices have, in fact, shaped the tradition of US war narratives throughout history, it is significant to note that, for the post-9/11 wars, widespread civic engagement has fostered the collection, publication, and public debate on firsthand accounts even as the wars were still under way, and thus given firsthand narratives more impetus and more immediacy than in earlier wars.⁴⁹ This recent interest in personal narratives of war is apparent in the selection of the editor for the print collection. Andrew Carroll has been engaged in several projects documenting war correspondence and personal narratives since the turn of the century.⁵⁰ Project organizers state that they were surprised by the overwhelming response from soldiers and families. Among the range of reasons to contribute to the project, Carroll emphasizes the statement made by a noncommissioned officer in the Special Forces from the above motto—his surprised realization that civil society indeed seemed interested in hearing these voices. Thus, both the institution organizing writers and artists, and military personnel and families involved in the project, undertook efforts to learn from each other and to publicize this learning and exchange. For them to encourage and document such exchanges on veteran reintegration signifies how this project negotiates civil-military relationships at large.⁵¹

48 Gioia, xii.

49 In addition to the writing workshops and the solicitation of e-mails and letters, the NEA handed out audio books featuring classic war narratives to c. 25,000 soldiers. Gioia, xiv. The project thus places itself within the tradition of US war narratives. It also illustrates how soldiers' narratives are influenced by their cultural imagination of war, or "war-in-the-head," i.e., soldiers measure their own experience against their preconceived and culturally determined imaginations of war. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 29–30.

50 Cf. Carroll, Andrew, *Operation Homecoming; Grace under Fire; War Letters; Behind the Lines*. Carroll's own Legacy Project, launched in 1998, seeks to preserve and publicize the communication between soldiers and their families, asking the public to contribute historical and recent letters and e-mails "that describe[...] an incredible story or articulate[...] thoughtfully the nature of war and its profound effect on those involved." Carroll, Andrew, "Legacy." This collection of personal communication has, by now, resulted in a number of print anthologies, films such as PBS's *War Letters* and History Channel's *The Great War: Dear Home*, as well as a number of museum exhibitions, such as the Smithsonian Institution's *War Letters, Lost and Found*.

51 It is striking to see the current, great public interest in collecting and documenting all kinds of historical war narratives. People collect old narratives, but they also encourage active soldiers to publish their own narratives as the wars still take place, and, from the start, determine the value of these contemporary narratives not only in terms of

The book and the film follow slightly divergent narrative arcs. The print collection traces the chronology of a typical soldier's deployment, starting with a chapter titled "And Now It Begins" and ending with "Home. Returning to the United States." The film, however, opens up with series host Robert MacNeil who contextualizes contemporary war narratives, explains the (then) new medium of milblogs, and discusses the magnified publicity of today's Internet-age war narratives, before he resumes introducing viewers to the NEA project. He then leaves the stage to soldier-authors reflecting on their role as writers, as in the first statement by one participant: "I may not be a very good soldier, but I may be a very good witness." In this way, the film emphasizes the soldier's role as a witness to a historical event; it even prioritizes this role over the speaker's primary function as a soldier. The film's selection of homecoming stories is also more homogeneous than the book's. The only film contribution explicitly describing a return from the war zone is Michael Strobl's account on his voluntary escort service to accompany the remains of deceased Pfc. Chance Phelps to his home town.⁵² The book features homecoming "alive, wounded, or dead"⁵³ in more detail, and the stories related there are much more diverse and drastic. The film implies homecoming in John McCrary's depiction of portraits and tributes to deceased soldiers, and in Ed Hrivnak's reports on treating wounded soldiers during *medevac*⁵⁴ flights, but it does not address the social and emotional challenges of veteran reintegration explicitly. At first glance, this seems to be a discrepancy between the different elements of the whole project and a waste of the film medium, particularly given the project's title.

As Jeffrey Geiger posits in his texts on the history of (war) documentaries, the appeal of documentary films rests in 'Western' intellectual traditions that,

how they negotiate the relationship between civilians and the military, but, especially in Carroll's project, also regarding their function as historical sources. Cf. Carroll, Andrew, "Legacy Project."

52 This account first appeared as a guest entry at the milblog *Blackfive*. Burden, "Taking Chance Home." It was then featured in a print collection on milblogs, and eventually served as the screen writing blueprint for an HBO feature film. Cf. Burden, *The Blog of War; Taking Chance*. For discussions on the mediality of this story and its role as a communal narrative mourning ritual over death in war, see Usbeck, "Don't Forget"; Usbeck, "Taking Chance Home."

53 Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, xxiv.

54 Medical evacuation. This is usually done by helicopter to reach the nearest aid station, and by transport plane to transfer wounded soldiers back to large hospitals and rehabilitation facilities, e.g., in Germany, or back to the US. Carroll, Andrew, 291.

ever since the Enlightenment, have equated the visual mode with truth and accuracy. Since the earliest days of the film industry, showing images of soldiers and the results of violence in war “used to harness powerful public sentiments via their impressions of historical veracity and bodily immediacy.”⁵⁵ The effect of harnessing sentiment through bodily immediacy is very drastic, indeed, in *The Welcome* discussed below. In *Operation Homecoming*, however, the choice of visual representations of written text is determined by a temporal obstacle. Unlike popular, recent war documentaries such as *Restrepo*, the filmmakers were not present during the events narrated here. The visuals must help reenact the events, they cannot capture them. The images accompanying Colby Buzzell’s battle depiction in the chapter “Men in Black,” for instance, are animations; their distortion of forms, abstraction of people, military equipment, and events (e.g., cross hairs symbolizing the narrator’s fear as he receives incoming fire) reduce the documentary’s potential to create a sense of veracity among the audience.⁵⁶ However, these effects enhance immediacy in employing documentary’s performative potential, using visual elements such as cross hairs and sound (e.g., gun shots, wailing, Arabic music complementing the reading voice-over) to focus the viewers’ attention on particular aspects of the narration, such as the narrator’s sense of anxiety, the chaos of battle, and being surrounded by strangers in a strange place.

These visual and audio effects also echo the constant struggle between realism and abstraction in depictions of war in the arts. Academic observers of representations of war have argued that both a ‘realistic’ reenactment of battle scenes (e.g., the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*) and artistic, abstract representations (e.g., in postmodern novels such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* or Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*) can serve to show the brutal reality of war but both must also face the “internal constitutive difficulty in addressing the violent, the cruel, and the ugly without transforming it into beauty, without endowing it with aesthetic effects, without arousing pleasure, without bringing to redemption what should be irredeemable.”⁵⁷ The film,

55 Geiger, “Taking Aim,” 158.

56 Like Strobl’s text, the inclusion of Buzzell’s narrative in the project once more shows the transmediality and vibrancy of recent firsthand war narratives as his story, too, originated as a milblog post, was then remediated in Buzzell’s print memoir, and, eventually, in this film.

57 Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, 20. One might also speculate that the realistic mode, e.g., for Buzzell’s battle depiction, would have faced financial obstacles as it might have been too expensive to reenact a major firefight, whereas the scene in Jack Lewis’s piece “Road Work” in which the narrator encounters an Iraqi father mourning

then, must walk the line between conveying to the viewer the sense of fear, confusion, anger, and boredom the contributors depicted in their writing, and using the available technical and financial means for such visual interpretation without distorting their narrative.

However, the abstraction in many visuals, as well as the omission of book material for the film, create the impression that the film was somewhat 'toned down.' It is possible that the educational thrust of the PBS series ruled out the depiction of violence in order to protect children and adolescent audiences. The film also does not address some of the more problematic aspects of homecoming: Unlike the book, it does not go into detail on some veterans' descriptions of substance abuse, PTSD symptoms such as flashes of rage and battle reflexes carried into civil life where they disturb, and possibly harm both veterans and civilians, nor the struggles of physically injured veterans and their families during rehabilitation. It is subject to speculation why these more conflict-laden examples were not included, but the impression remains that the film version seeks to appeal to a wider audience as it avoids many of the more graphic moments and obvious conflicts, and so it neglects some of the book's more critical questions.

The film project, as it cannot capture war experience as it unfolds, further supports its reading sections with short introductory clips. Occasionally, contributors contextualize their stories or provide further details. In "Road Work," Jack Lewis explains how the sight of an Iraqi father violently grieving over his son, imploring Americans in a passing convoy to kill him, compelled Lewis to write about this encounter. As in the opening sequence where a soldier-author muses on his value as a witness to war, these statements often operate on a metanarrative level. The scenario is about soldiers' war experience, but it also explicitly presents itself as an opportunity to share this experience with the civilian public, and the film goes to great lengths to characterize how the authors reflect on both their war and their narrating experience.

Operation Homecoming enhances this metanarrative mode by interspersing statements by senior veteran writers from earlier wars who served as instructors for the project's workshops in between the soldier-authors' clips. This patchwork pattern resembles the multimodality of the whole scenario, where workshops, print collection, film, and para-texts on the website complement each other. In some instances, the senior voices in the film emerge as quotes from their classic war narratives: Tim O'Brien's remarks in *The Things They Carried* that, apart

his dead son by the roadside, could easily be staged for the film. However, even this scene is depicted mostly in film stills, symbolizing the narrator's flashes of memory.

from climactic battle events, war appears to be “aggressively boring”⁵⁸ introduce Parker Gyokeres’s piece “Camp Muckamungus” which depicts the boredom, sports, and the silly games that he and his fellow soldiers had at their camp to pass the time in Iraq. In other examples, senior veterans present their views in short oral-history statements. Anthony Swofford, author of the 1991 Gulf War memoir *Jarhead*, brings viewers’ attention to soldiers’ internal conflicts. While soldiers’ values may be humane, he cautions, “the actions they’re called upon aren’t,” which “permanently puts you at war with yourself, too.” His foreboding statement serves as the prologue for Ed Hrivnak’s “Medevac Missions.” This contribution presents excerpts from Hrivnak’s journal about his missions as a critical care air transport (CCAT) team captain. In one particular incident, Hrivnak struggles with himself and, eventually, lies to a wounded soldier who is not yet aware that his infected wound will require amputation of a limb. Hrivnak does not want to further agitate the man at that moment, but he also admits that the lie is borne from his own anxiety about confronting that soldier with the ugly truth and dealing with his reaction. Swofford’s statement here helps set the stage to introduce viewers to Hrivnak’s predicament.

To cite a final example in this context, Sangjoon Han’s semi-fictional contribution is preceded by the adaptation of a Hemingway quote stating that war, “no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is always a crime.” Although it is not paired with Han’s but with Jack Lewis’s contribution, Vietnam veteran writer Tobias Wolff’s clip serves a similar contextualizing role: Wolff states that fear is a major reason why soldiers develop hatred for the enemy. Han’s story describes how an Iraqi civilian watches as an IED explosion hits Han’s convoy. As the Americans begin to shoot in all directions to protect the stricken vehicle, the man, who might have been only an innocent bystander, turns and flees. Although told to stop repeatedly, the Iraqi continues to run until Han shoots him. The narrative repeatedly switches between Han’s and the man’s points of view, vividly illustrating both sides’ fear of one another. It highlights that Han’s fear prevented him from rationally calculating the risk and the corresponding necessity to escalate his response (i.e., judging whether the man was actually a hostile insurgent or not), but was also determined by his irrational anger over the man’s noncompliance with his command to stop.⁵⁹ Thus, fear-induced hatred of

58 O’Brien, *Things*, 33.

59 Susan Derwin of UC Santa Barbara explained in a podium discussion during the 2013 conference “Fallout. Narrative-Making in the Aftermath of War” that switching the point of view is an important didactic device in her own and many other creative

the 'other' resulted in an escalation that, eventually, fueled Han's self-doubts over the morality of his conduct.⁶⁰ Although the soldiers' directive in such situations is often 'better safe than sorry,' both Wolff's and Hemingway's remarks embed and reinforce Han's story in preparing the audience for the moral dilemma over his decision and his eventual agony over being both safe and sorry.

In these examples, the senior voices serve several functions at once. They place the post-9/11 narratives in the tradition of earlier American war writing by setting them next to excerpts from these classics. Yet, they also assume a mentoring role, helping both the young veteran authors and the civilian audience understand this particular aspect of war experience. By their own example, these 'elders' demonstrate that the new veterans are not alone with their memories and emotions and, in relating to the young writers, they already step forward as role models. These statements, then, are not only metanarrative but, as the examples in Chapter Three have illustrated, they are meta-rituals in their efforts to contextualize and help the new veterans come to terms with their experiences. In turn, this mentoring signifies a role model of reintegration to the audience because the senior voices bear witness to the young veterans' narratives and implicitly call on the audience to do likewise. Finally, these expert voices also serve a media-specific role: In the book, the task of contextualizing the narratives falls to the editor. In the film, however, these expert voices can profit from the popularity and trust attributed to firsthand oral history narratives. As established above, oral history, the direct representation of firsthand memory by a protagonist-witness, makes the representation of events and experience appear more vivid, but also more valid. While this documentary cannot represent war experience in a fly-on-the-wall mode as *Restrepo* does, it establishes its truth claim by empowering its protagonists to tell their own stories. It supports these stories through validation by the senior veteran-writers. Their contextualizations are not only third-party expert voices to this particular war, but their own firsthand experience

writing workshops for veteran students, as it helps veterans to assume the perspective of their adversaries and, thus, to rehumanize the 'other.' Focusing on his narrator's perspective, Han similarly explains that these POV switches served to "humanize the decisions of the soldier and convey just how hard it is to make those decisions and sometimes we get it wrong, and sometimes we get it right and [don't] know it."

60 Recall that Rex Temple reported on a similar ethical conundrum, weighing the necessity versus the potential immorality of escalation during a training mission in Chapter Four. As Temple ponders on his blog whether letting the fleeing mock attackers escape was the right thing to do, Han's story here might serve as a reminder that the decision to shoot and kill can result in even more self-doubt.

related in a similar mode helps validate the new veterans' narratives and places them in the tradition of the genre. As in the case of milblogs, the presence of firsthand witness narrators, however narrow and limited their perspective may be, lends an immediacy and credibility to the narrative that a documentary film or history book based entirely on the perspective of nonparticipant observers—i.e., 'outsiders' such as academics or journalists—could not gain. Like milblogs, these voices promise to represent an unfiltered, unembellished, and bottom-up perspective of war experience.

Given these roles of older veteran voices in the film, recourse to its apparent lack of actual 'homecoming stories' seems in order. The film does not explicitly address the physical return from the war zone to any great extent, the narrating time of some contributions actually predates the return from deployment, and, in some cases, the narrative was created long after deployment. Still, both the film and the book symbolize and portray the soldiers' reflections on various aspects of their war experiences as a definitive element of homecoming and of negotiating experience.⁶¹ In this sense, all texts in the film are, indeed, about homecoming. This sense of reflection becomes particularly vivid when these contributions are related to Karl Marlantes's reference to Native traditions above: If we read the narratives in *Operation Homecoming* as veterans' efforts to find their own song and as the NEA's and civil society's engagement to help them sing it and to bear witness to this performance, then the project's cultural work clearly operates within the same discursive context as *waktoglaka*, the ceremonial narration of war experience in Northern Plains warrior traditions discussed in Chapter Two: Both forms of cultural expression work toward catharsis, a cleansing of the individual through verbalization of critical life experience in the 'Western' sense. In their respective cultural contexts, they also renegotiate the individual's relationship with his or her society in that they reconstitute the social contract between warriors or soldiers and civil society and negotiate the narrators' status as veterans.⁶² Hence, the mere process of writing about war experience among US soldiers and veterans, seen through this lens of Indigenous practice, must be understood here as a critical part of coming home. It harks back to Marlantes's

61 In cases where texts for the project were written during deployment, they would be subject to the same temporal obstacle of anticipated return and the prospect of further danger in future missions as milblogs. Many of the contributions to this scenario resemble the cultural work but also the temporal (during deployment) and spatial (created and set in the war zone) perspective as milblogs, but are narrated in a different medium. Some, like Buzzell's text, are, in fact, remediated milblog posts.

62 O'Neill, "Coming Home," 458.

above observations on how singing 'songs' to their communities helps veterans to 'come home,' not only physically, but also socially and mentally.

In the following, I extend the discussion of the *Operation Homecoming* scenario beyond the film to include a few sample readings from the book and from website texts related to the project. The book contributions offer productive insight into ceremonial storytelling in the scenario that, eventually, can be tied back to similar processes in milblogs. The examples are taken from the final chapter titled "Home" where, unlike the film, various scenarios of returning home are discussed. They range from the regular end of deployment to the evacuation of wounded and the repatriation of deceased soldiers, to readjustment to life back home, be it trying to find a job, learning to live with a war-related disability, or facing symptoms of posttraumatic stress and the resulting social struggles. In all examples, authors reflect on how their war experience influenced their perspective of their current circumstances and how it affects their emotions and sense of self. While neither film nor book offer a medium of direct exchange with the civilian audience over these narrations in the way that milblogs and other social media do, the website texts, especially the discussion questions, highlight the project's motivation to engage audiences with these narratives and to create dialog.

In "Sea Voyage," written as an e-mail to his family and friends, Guy W. Ravey describes his trip from deployment in Afghanistan to Hawaii by ship in May 2003. This is a somewhat unusual homecoming because, since Vietnam, deployed troops have tended to return by air transport. Ravey's voyage, then, gives him several weeks' time to wind down and to reflect on his own and his ancestors' war experience.⁶³ His connection to his family's military tradition becomes particularly significant as his ship passes an island in Indonesia where his great uncle, also a fighter pilot, had been shot down, captured, and executed by the Japanese in 1944. The connection with this relative helps him reflect on his own loss of a fellow pilot and friend. This place makes him feel "the closest I've been to family in seven months. It felt warm and soothing" because "[i]n a way, I feel as though I'm bringing a part of Will's spirit home with me."⁶⁴ Telling his relatives about his research on the great uncle's fate and about his satellite

63 This example is especially remarkable because observers of war stress and military psychologists have pointed out that the long voyage from overseas theaters of war up until the mid-twentieth century offered US soldiers a critical "cooldown period" where they could reflect on past events in the secluded company of fellow initiates before reentering civilian life. Air transportation since the Vietnam War has removed this opportunity, forcing psychologists and military planners to look for substitutes for such "cooldown" phases. Grossman, *On Killing*, 293; Marlantes, *What It Is Like*, 182.

64 In Carroll, Andrew, *Operation Homecoming*, 320. Frank Usbeck - 9783631782941

phone call to his grandfather to inform him he is currently close to the long-departed relative's place of death, Ravey not only reaches closure on his loss but helps his family reach closure on their earlier loss from World War II, as well. He constructs another 'homecoming' within his own, in conjunction with placing his own experience in the military tradition of both his immediate relatives and of the national family, and in sharing his reflections both with his blood relatives, and the national family.

In a similar way, Michael Thomas puts his return from Iraq in 2004 into a historical perspective. Eager to reach home, he is "desperate" about the delay of his flight to Bangor, Maine.⁶⁵ When they finally land in the US, he encounters a group of elderly veterans at the airport, lined up to welcome his group home. He learns that these veterans patiently waited for the delayed flight and describes his emotions as he begins to compare his own experience of a one-year tour of duty with these veterans, of whom many were deployed for the duration of their war, often under far worse conditions. Thomas speculates that some of these veterans would have served in Vietnam, musing about their own welcome, "how they were treated when they came back to the U.S., and yet here they were to support us."⁶⁶ This image of feeling proud, but also humbled by Vietnam veterans who extend a welcome to him that they did not receive themselves, recurs throughout homecoming stories in the post-9/11 era. It contextualizes the recent wars' veterans' experience within US military tradition, but it particularly focuses on the significance of civil-military relationships when these stories invoke and further cement the narrative of how civil society summarily rejected—i.e., betrayed—the Vietnam returnees, unfairly blaming them for an unpopular war.

In the final example (and the final contribution that closes the collection), Parker Gyokeres's last letter to family and friends after returning home from Iraq presents the audience with his struggle with everyday civilian life. It bears the title "The Hardest Letter to Write."⁶⁷ Gyokeres explains why he misses his unit:

The main issue for me has been adjusting to a life without the dear friends I served with and whom I grew to love—and, without whom, I felt lost, alone, and unable to relate to others. I am told this is normal. That did not, however, make it easier. And I know I'm doing better than many for whom I care deeply. They hide it well, but they are struggling.⁶⁸

65 In Carroll, 321.

66 In Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, 321. The earlier reference to longer tours would concern veterans from World War II and Korea. Vietnam veterans, like veterans of later wars, usually served tours of up to one year, depending on their branch of service, as well. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich, *Ways of War*, 461–62.

67 In Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, 369.

68 In Carroll, 369.

Mirroring the sense of loyalty and familiarity in hardship that Junger’s book describes as “tribal,” Gyokeres highlights that this bonding results from the “[t]raumatic, life-changing, or profoundly spiritual events”⁶⁹ that he shared with them. Since he did not share such moments with his family, his relatives struggle to understand and to accept his relationships with his buddies. He explains how such traumatic events also caused soldiers to withdraw and isolate themselves if they could not find a way to express and confront their memories. It becomes clear that, as the introduction to his story points out, his writing is metanarrative with cathartic intent, that he is also “writing for himself”⁷⁰ when corresponding with his family because “[m]y writing gave me an outlet while I was over there and it continues to help me now.”⁷¹ He credits his wife for recognizing his predicament: “[S]he knew when to listen and when to let me work through my emotions. This is perhaps the most important thing any loved one or friend can do.”⁷² It is one of the key revelations in his readjustment process, and it signifies the purpose of the entire scenario because “it’s helpful knowing that there are people who care about us and are at least making an effort to understand. Your support has made this journey an incredible one for me, and I couldn’t have gone through it alone. Thanks for joining me—and thanks, above all, for listening.”⁷³ This letter and final firsthand voice in the book, then, boils down the cultural work and social-activist motivation of homecoming scenarios represented in the many works that take their cues from Indigenous military traditions. In all these cultural practices, veteran readjustment and reintegration requires a civilian community’s encouragement to share one’s war experience, as well as the civilians’ willingness to listen, that is, not only to help veterans find and create their ‘song,’ but also to bear public witness when they sing it.

The para-texts accompanying the scenario’s different media representations further emphasize dialog and civic engagement. The website for the PBS series *America at a Crossroads*, of which *Operation Homecoming* is one out of eleven film episodes, offers a detailed discussion guide and a page for educators. It applies a Habermasian perspective on informed, rational debate in the public sphere as it invites the audience to “join the national dialogue” not only at home, but also in libraries, church groups, at Internet cafes, and at the workplace.⁷⁴ In

69 In Carroll, 370.

70 In Carroll, 369.

71 In Carroll, 373. This statement echoes many similar metanarrative remarks in milblogs, such as Traversa’s. Traversa, “AFROTC”; “From Cats”; “The Daily Commute.”

72 In Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, 374.

73 In Carroll, 374.

74 “America at a Crossroads. Discussion Guide.”

the segment “The Experience of American Troops,” the films *Warriors* (2007) and *Operation Homecoming* provide discussion prompts engaging the audience to reflect on the diverse dilemmas that US soldiers face in post-9/11 wars, such as group pressure to withstand fear, exhaustion, and to uphold prescribed ideals of masculine strength, or finding the balance between personal safety and paying respect to social and religious customs in their interaction with local civilians.⁷⁵ Among these questions, one refers to Sangjoon Han’s story “Aftermath” discussed above. The discussion guide asks viewers to identify the dilemma in Han’s narrative about shooting a fleeing Iraqi civilian after an ambush, and inquires how this experience “blur[s] the lines between right and wrong.”⁷⁶ It picks up Han’s agony over not knowing whether he made the right decision, and asks under what circumstances his decision to shoot might be considered immoral.

While the film and the book emphasize the individual perspective of the soldiers, the entire set of discussions for the PBS series contextualize the soldiers’ experience with the larger picture of US society and with the country’s international relations after 9/11.⁷⁷ In the sense that *Operation Homecoming*, as part of both the NEA project and of the PBS series, seeks to engage the public in dialogue about the role of the military in the recent wars, about the experience of its soldiers, and about the relationship between soldiers and society, it illustrates the function of the documentary genre in national cinema. Documentaries, as Jeffrey Geiger posits, “potently contribute[...] to shifting conceptions of US national consciousness and belonging” and “to both the nation’s making and its unmaking.”⁷⁸ That is, documentaries permanently reflect negotiations of group identity in US society. *Operation Homecoming*, in conjunction with the discussion questions, continues to raise these questions by addressing problems of the

75 The film *Warriors* was not included in this reading as it is not part of the NEA project. Although it discusses personal war experience during deployment in great detail, it does not address homecoming and readjustment.

76 “America at a Crossroads. Discussion Guide.”

77 Interestingly, the educators’ page in the discussion guide, focusing on film screenings at high schools, does not offer any direct questions regarding US soldiers’ experience. Rather, it selects a set of questions from the troop experience segment that employs the switch in point of view once more. Viewers are encouraged to imagine themselves as Iraqi civilians and to discuss how they would perceive US military occupation and what they would like the US to do to improve their situation. “America at a Crossroads. Operation Homecoming.”

78 Geiger, *American Documentary Film*, 4.

personal security of the troops, of winning 'hearts and minds' in an increasingly dirty war, and by reflecting on issues of loyalty, sacrifice, and moral injury.

Contextualized with Andrew Carroll's introduction to the book, it can be said that the overall scenario *Operation Homecoming* avoids gestures of blatant patriotism and war support. Giving voice to the lower-echelon troops, it seeks to work against a military culture that "ultimately values silent forbearance—not individual self-expression—in the face of adversity."⁷⁹ It fosters civic activism to empower soldiers to share their views and experiences, and to engage civilians to bear witness to these narratives. Contributors "did not hold back in reporting the full damage of combat to body and soul"⁸⁰—although, as we have seen, the film producers might have—thus offering alternative perspectives on the war that move beyond a glossy advertising of heroism, manly prowess, and military culture. Rather, they focalize the negative consequences of war for those who wage it. However, as Chapter Three has elaborated regarding milblogs, this scenario's soldierly expressions intend to show that the "sacrifices made by their brothers and sisters in arms are never forgotten, and they know that words like courage and honor are hollow without an understanding of the horrific conditions in which they are forged."⁸¹ *Operation Homecoming*, then, is a patriotic project in so far as it addresses sacrifice in the context of civil religion and ritually invokes the reconstitution of the social contract by pairing veteran narratives with a call to civilian acknowledgment, empathy, and support.

The Welcome Home Project

*What we're gonna do here is make a temporary community, and it's a community based on welcome, based on the attempt to return.*⁸²

The Welcome Home Project (WHP) is a local initiative for community-oriented veteran reintegration focused on social therapy. Its website postulates the state of civil-military relationships as a social ill responsible for the continued emotional suffering of veterans when it proposes to "bridge the historic and often painful divide between veterans and civilians in their communities by hosting creative, healing gatherings that feature our powerful documentary film *The Welcome*.

79 Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, xix.

80 Carroll, xxiii.

81 Carroll, *Operation Homecoming*, xxiii.

82 Michael Meade in *The Welcome*.

These gatherings serve as a vehicle for dialogue, education and mutual understanding.”⁸³ The film *The Welcome*, an independent production released in 2011, features a 2008 healing retreat held by the project’s co-organizer, mythologist and psychologist Michael Meade, in Ashland, Oregon.⁸⁴ This five-day retreat invited twenty-four veterans from US wars since Vietnam, along with their families, to rounds of talk therapy sessions and creative writing, culminating in a town hall performance in Ashland on Memorial Day 2008, where the veteran participants and their relatives shared poems, songs, and short stories related to their war experience with the local community.⁸⁵ Organized locally and dependent on donations for editing and film distribution, this project operates on a much smaller scale than the NEA and PBS-funded projects around *Operation Homecoming*, facing challenges for its infrastructure, reach, and visibility. It is an example of the commitment of some civic activists engaged in community-oriented veteran work. It also reveals how many protagonists within this social movement emphasize spirituality as a cornerstone of social therapy and how their projects are frequently inspired by spiritual and therapeutic practices in diverse cultural and ethnic contexts. *The Welcome* offers striking insight into these activist efforts because it illustrates the potential, but also highlights the underlying conflicts imminent in such practices of cultural transfer.

While *Operation Homecoming* discussed war experience and homecoming in general and outlined PTSD as one possible effect of deployment among many, *The Welcome* offers a deep and very intimate insight into the retreat’s veteran participants’ and their relatives’ struggles with PTSD. All participants have been back from their wars for a while at the time of the filming (some have been back for decades). The psychological injuries they brought home sometimes manifest themselves in severe symptoms and affect the veterans’ emotional and social

83 “Welcome Home Project.”

84 Meade’s own NGO, the Mosaic Multicultural Foundation, is engaged in a variety of projects in civic education and social therapy, focusing on “valuable traditional methods of cultural healing and individual mentoring” working with “at-risk youth, refugees, combat veterans, and communities in need.” Mosaic Multicultural Foundation, “Michael Meade – Mosaic Voices.” Their work features frequent reference to traditional, community-oriented healing methods from around the world, situating itself within the discursive social phenomenon described in this study, i.e., the growing interest in US mainstream society in alternative, often explicitly spiritual, community-centered civic engagement.

85 Since its release in 2011, the film has won awards and recognition at several independent international festivals. “The Welcome.”

lives.⁸⁶ The film documents the five days of retreat, its group discussions, and its writing sessions and rehearsals. It features individual life stories, group reactions, and crises at length, before closing with the final town hall performance. The documentary employs a range of genre specifics in terms of audiovisual effects to facilitate the viewers' empathy with the participants. All in all, the retreat is presented as a success; it reenacts the 'universal hero's journey' that is a recurring topic during the retreat's therapy sessions, including ordeals (i.e., crises) and returns. It is, therefore, a meta-ritual itself, as the following discussion argues. Finally, the film's reliance on references to culturally specific therapy methods, customs, and religious beliefs holds therapeutic potential, but also poses risks to the group. The below reading explores how Meade, the retreat's 'ceremonial leader' and therapist, draws on these traditions to nurture a sense of community among the participants, how some Native American participants raise concerns about cultural appropriation and intercultural ignorance, and how the group seeks to find common ground to overcome this crisis. In this way, the film demonstrates its quest for cooperation as a prerequisite for social healing and reintegration.

Like *Operation Homecoming*, *The Welcome* starts *in medias res*, taking the viewer to the town hall meeting on the retreat's final day. The camera focuses on veteran Laura Carpenter, who introduces herself as an Afghanistan veteran preparing to redeploy to Iraq. As she reads her poem "On the Death of a Young Suicide Bomber," the camera fades into shots of a desert taken from inside a moving military vehicle, panning over a desert town and military installations, to shots of clouds in the sky as Carpenter describes in gory detail the dead body of a suicide bomber she saw in Afghanistan and muses about her little son's body back home. The wide shots of Middle Eastern desert and sky are eventually replaced by lush Oregon forests as the camera documents the group's arrival at

86 The veterans featured here include a few male Vietnam veterans while the majority are veterans of post-9/11 wars. Among the latter, at least one of the female veterans suffers from military sexual trauma (MST), an issue of growing public concern addressed in the film. One veteran, Rory Dunn, suffered physical injuries during deployment; he and his parents discuss depression related to disability and caretaking, as well as rehabilitation challenges. The group also includes two female Native American veterans, Debbie Guerrero and Eli Painted Crow. Their cultural background becomes important throughout the film as they challenge some of group leader Michael Meade's assumptions on borrowing cultural traditions, as well as insist that the group consider the experience of everyday racism as a culturally specific factor in minority veterans' PTSD.

the retreat while subtitles provide a brief introductory context for the story. In its chronological discontinuity, this beginning presents the entire scenario in a nutshell. It addresses the war and what painful memories of the past the veterans brought home; it foreshadows the future conclusion of the project by showing a veteran at the end of the retreat perform her story—visibly and audibly shaken; and it portrays her endeavor, exemplary for the whole group and the scenario as such, as a success, because she overcomes emotional distress and shares her memories with an engaged, sympathetic, and responsive audience at the town hall. Having thus set the stage, the film proceeds to tell the story of the retreat in chronological order.

The film is shot through in what Alex Danchev, in his discussion of *Restrepo*, calls a “fly-on-the-wall [...] documentary.”⁸⁷ Like *Restrepo*, the camera, for the most part, remains “glued”⁸⁸ to the protagonists’ faces, “even when they fall silent. Indeed, it is the silent film that is often the most eloquent, as the muscles work, wordlessly, and the memories go off like depth charges under the skin.”⁸⁹ *The Welcome*, too, employs this technique to its full effect. Apart from a few subtitles at the beginning and end, the viewers do not receive any form of extra contextualization. They are confronted with steady close-up shots of veterans struggling during discussions, rehearsal, and recital. Protagonists sigh, pause, stare at the floor in embarrassment, nervously knead handkerchiefs, break out in violent sobs, grind their teeth, shoot angry glares at one another or gently comfort each other, while the camera is literally ‘in their faces’ to capture these emotions. No voice-overs disturb these sequences, which immerses viewers into the situation and its emotional impact on the participants. Music intensifies these scenes, but, often enough, the absence of music, the creaking of floorboards, the rustle of fabric, the shuffle of feet, and other ambient sounds enhance the emotionality and conflicts displayed. While viewers do not learn which moments and crises were edited out, and what criteria might have been used (e.g., what degree of protecting participants’ privacy was considered and how it was negotiated), it becomes obvious that the film emphasizes these struggles and emotional outbursts by refusing to comment and to contextualize them. As Danchev has observed regarding *Restrepo*, such long moments of silence make the message of *The Welcome*, the collective quest for common ground and mutual support during an emotional crisis, even stronger.

87 Danchev, “Infidels and Miscreants,” 442.

88 Danchev, 443.

89 Danchev, 443.

Contrasting these focalizations, wide angles and full body shots intermittently show participants relaxing, talking, sharing jokes, exploring the compound during recess and in the evenings. They present the participants as a group and show its interaction and relationships, usually during less intense moments, and often in connection with natural features or at the backdrop of the scenic landscape. Supported by soft music, these scenes serve as sequencing devices, to compartmentalize the more heartbreaking and conflict-laden scenes, but also to indicate the passing of the days during the retreat.

The film frequently refers to rituals, to diverse cultural traditions of veteran reintegration, and, most explicitly, to the idea of the universal hero’s journey. Although he does not discuss Joseph Campbell’s works and their influence on many authors and activists in veteran’s affairs, Michael Meade explicitly formulates a universal notion of warriors and of return from war at the beginning of the retreat and throughout. His introduction of the idea merits citing at length:

What we’re gonna do here is make a temporary community, and it’s a community based on welcome, based on the attempt to return. And particularly in this culture there has been a kind of lapse of memory about the fact that people need to be welcomed back and assisted to return and find a place back in the community. The warriors are supposed to get home and not remain in the war. Not left over there, and not left out here. That’s the tradition of all cultures: the honoring of the warrior, the welcoming them back and the return of the warriors into culture as meaningful and valuable citizens who know something about life, who know something about death, and therefore they have wisdom.

Like Jonathan Shay, Ed Tick, and many other activists in the field previously discussed, Meade here assumes a cycle in which a male hero leaves home to face challenges (usually at war), overcomes them, and returns as a victorious survivor whose experience has fundamentally changed him, requiring the support of the hero’s community to work out a new sense of self and to employ his experience in service to the community. Meade introduces the elements of “initiation,” “ordeal,” and “return” to his group during the first day. He states that US society has apparently lost its traditional knowledge about community support for reintegration and suggests that these cultural practices, necessary to complete the cycle, can be borrowed and relearned from other—primarily Indigenous—cultures that still use them. In his explanation, the physical return from war alone does not constitute a homecoming; reintegration into the community requires a community’s active support, i.e., veterans should not be “left out here.” He emphasizes that the retreat is supposed to help the veterans complete their own journeys with a return, because this final stage is supposed to give meaning to the previous two stages, adding that, during return, “you are received by people who understand

the damage that you suffered for the benefit of others and understand that you have knowledge that other people who haven't been through it won't have." He thus situates his philosophy within the range of community-oriented approaches to veteran work discussed throughout this book.⁹⁰

Yet the Welcome Home Project does not simply add a final step to a 'journey' that the participants have begun and lived through elsewhere. In its approach and in the setup of the retreat, the scenario seeks to recreate and reenact the entire symbolic journey: On the one hand, all veteran participants have been deployed to a war zone, survived, struggled with their memories, and now hope to complete the 'journey' through a successful therapy, i.e., a homecoming. On the other hand, the veterans and their relatives have known and suffered from the symptoms of PTSD for a while. Their journey, then, is the path toward healing, starting with the realization that their life situation needs to change for them to recover. Participating in the retreat marks their setting out, their initiation. It sounds odd to call suffering from PTSD a 'comfort zone' but the project encourages the participants to set out to try a new approach and face the challenges of going beyond the typical and conventional 'Western' medical solutions, which is symbolized in particular by Jake Jacobs's previous therapies' reliance on heavy medication, and by the project's overall fascination with non-'Western' and, for most participants, unfamiliar cultural traditions. Accordingly, the 'heroes' face ordeals during this journey, mustering the courage to tell their stories, and the group, symbolizing the overall community, seeks to help them return in supporting their efforts.

A major individual ordeal that may serve as an example is Vietnam veteran Bob Eaton's story. He is accompanied on the retreat by his wife and, through his wife's poems and stories during the first three days, viewers learn how war trauma affects a veteran's relatives and how his psychological injury has complicated his social life since his return in 1970. On the fourth day of the retreat, he summons the courage to tell his central story, describing the event that determined his Vietnam War experience and his postwar trauma. At this point, he has been inducted into the therapy group and its rules, 'customs,' and relationships (e.g., frequent singing to engender bonding, techniques of storytelling, public

90 Meade's approach in this retreat, as well as his philosophy discussed on his NGO's website, mirror many similar such groups. "Michael Meade – Mosaic Voices." The same arguments and imagery recur in the discussions on theater projects below, but also in recent projects on veteran storytelling in which a notion of universal warrior narratives play a role. Cf. "Aquila Theatre—YouStories"; Morie, Haynes, and Chance, "Warriors' Journey."

speaking, and creative writing). He has experienced a few other individual and collective crises during which, as a member of the group, he has actively worked to hold the community together and to aid its members.

Eaton's story marks a climax in the film's narrative arc, symbolizing his individual ordeal during the retreat as exemplary for the other members. He begins by announcing that his story is about "something that happened to me, and may be the reason [for] the way I am. I think my wife knows part of it but I haven't told her the story." At these words, the camera zooms in on his wife who watches him apprehensively, arms folded and eyes wide open. He relates how, early during his deployment to Vietnam in 1969, he experiences an attack on his camp at night. He carries extra ammunition to an artillery piece, not realizing in the chaos that its crew had been killed by a direct hit the moment after his last drop. Because of the imminent danger to the camp, commanders decide to fire antipersonnel artillery rounds, so-called "beehives" which cause horrendous wounds, at the Vietnamese. On the morning after the attack, Eaton is ordered to place the remains of the killed gun crew and of the enemy attackers in burlap sacks ("gunny sacks"). The extent of the carnage becomes clear as he says about the gun crew "I put six guys in three gunny sacks" and, talking about the Vietnamese attackers' remains, explains that he had to scratch body parts from trees with his entrenching tool and hack some into smaller pieces to fit all remains into the few available sacks. Afterwards, superiors tell him to take stock of the remaining ammunition and to forget about this recovery detail, but "I still had eight months left in country. And I thought every fucking night that this was gonna happen again." Forcing his narrative to its conclusion through tears and sobs, he ends: "I left in February '70 and never had a scratch on me ... Go figure."

This story intensely reveals some veterans' inability to 'return' as Eaton explains his distress over the deaths of the gun crew. Because he never learned their names, he could not visit them at the Vietnam Wall where he had traveled three times since its dedication to find solace.⁹¹ Telling Eaton to "forget" about the events of that night might have sprung from the military necessity to keep operations at the camp in order after the attack, but it denied him an opportunity to reflect on the event.⁹² The cathartic effect of finally being able to share this story comes to

91 This episode once more illustrates the significance of the Wall as a cathartic monument for individual veterans.

92 While today's Critical Incident Debriefings could not have diminished the horror of what Eaton saw, he might have learned the names of the gun crew and reflected on the circumstances of their deaths, providing at least the potential for closure on that aspect of his experience.

the fore when he returns to his seat and breaks down as the group applauds him for facing the challenge of speaking up and returning ‘home’ from the podium, into the circle of the group (i.e., the ‘community’). They gather around him and comfort him.⁹³ Meade, as the ceremonial leader and therapist, lets Eaton symbolically release these memories into a nearby stream in a following scene.⁹⁴ Yet, if we read the retreat as a group journey, where community support and mutual aid are paramount concepts, it seems significant that the other participants go out of their way to express their empathy and understanding for Eaton in this situation, such as Eli Painted Crow and Debbie Guerrero, who perform a Cherokee mourning song for him with a hand drum. As Meade had stated on the first day, the participants here utilize the “language” of poetry, stories, and song to help one of their own face his injury through that same language, or, in Marlantes’s words, find and sing his song to come home.

Since *The Welcome* thus reenacts the whole cycle, it reveals that the full journey as such, and not simply the successful homecoming, is the hero’s reward. Although the film ultimately presents only brief snippets of some of the participants’ final performances at the town hall gathering, this does not appear to be a gap because, overall, the film has addressed all stages of the participants’ journey during the retreat. It does not require full-length clips of the veterans’ performances to make its case. Meade’s backstage pep talk reminds the veterans that their performance is “a gift. It’s our way of giving on this Memorial Day.” The footage of the town hall event serves to symbolize how the community receives the gift, and how the veterans ‘return,’ i.e., how they merge with the larger community, as the camera pans over the sold-out auditorium, shows the audience’s applause at the end of the performance, and follows as participants and members of the audience then mingle and embrace each other. This notion of return, of community reunion, is further symbolized by the embodiment of *e pluribus unum*, by the diversity of the group that ‘survived’ the retreat’s ordeals. War supporters and war protesters among the Vietnam generation, war participants and civilian spouses, men and women, Native and non-Native American, as well

93 Viewers do not learn how much was cut from the scene immediately after the storytelling, but it is remarkable that the group of supporters gathering around and comforting Eaton is comprised entirely of women, while a wide shot of the room shows male veterans, such as Ken Kraft, alone in their chairs, obviously affected by the story, but lost in their own thoughts.

94 It does not become clear whether the substance Eaton uses to rub his hands and face to symbolize his cleansing from these memories is pollen or ashes. The former would signify another reference to Native American traditions in the retreat.

as immigrant veterans all contributed their unique experience to the group. They all made an effort to protect each other and to support the group. In this way, the retreat and final performance also symbolize the reconstitution of the national community which the activists hope to achieve through their engagement in veteran affairs.

While all these aspects, as the previous chapters have highlighted, can already be understood as the outline of a civic ritual, the ceremonial character of the retreat is further enhanced by the explicit ritualizing elements included: At the beginning, participants enter the communal room and are greeted with a smudging, while Meade performs a song with a hand drum.⁹⁵ Similarly, the release of Bob Eaton's memories into the creek, possibly with pollen, suggests a Native American ceremonial influence. The group also adopts a western African "Earth Song" for bonding. They sing it at the beginning and end of the retreat's gathering, or during crises (such as described below). Such elements of sequencing foster the retreat's ceremonial character and are also used in other PTSD group therapy settings, where they are explicitly called "rituals."⁹⁶ In the sense of Victor Turner's and Arnold van Gennep's discussions of stages in rites of passage, one might also understand the participants' liminal status, their initiation, their seclusion from the community (hence the term "retreat") and their eventual reunification with the wider community in a formal ceremony, as ritualizing elements.⁹⁷

However, the intercultural ceremonial aspects discussed so far, as much as they help therapists like Meade connect their generally white veteran clients with the notion of universal stages and elements of war experience and introduce them to community-oriented traditions of reintegration, pose the risk of cultural misunderstanding and appropriation. *The Welcome* offers a significant example because, unlike many other projects in this field, viewers experience a clash between the use of Native American cultural practices by non-Natives and some Native participants' reactions to such use during the retreat. I briefly

95 Smudging is a pan-tribal Native American tradition with a huge variety of specific tribal elements and customs. Generally, dried herbs (e.g., sage) are burned, and the smoke is fanned across a person's body for the purpose of cleansing.

96 Johnson et al., "The Therapeutic Use of Ritual and Ceremony in the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." Similarly to Eaton's ritual, therapists in the setting described by Johnson et al. conduct "rituals" where, e.g., veterans and their families symbolically release their "burdens," verbalized on a piece of paper, into a bonfire. Johnson et al., 283.

97 van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

discuss this conflict for two reasons: First, it exemplifies the risk of cultural appropriation in the context of alternative therapy methods and civic activism. Second, the conflict as such signifies an ‘ordeal’ in the journey for the whole group. Some members of the group voice reservations against the outline of the ritual, accusing the ritual leader and other members of cultural insensitivity, and it is a challenge for the group to resolve this crisis and to find common ground in order to prevent a breakup and to complete the ‘journey.’

After the initial welcome ceremony with smudging, drumbeats, song, and the first round of introductions, Meade outlines his understanding of the universal journey, emphasizing that “all cultures” developed practices to welcome veterans home. It is noteworthy that he positions himself within “a tradition that mixes traditions, borrows, steals...” and announces that, during the retreat, the group will “borrow from different traditions.” He proceeds to explain the cultural background and significance of the smudging to the group, adding that it is “a tradition of this land here.” During this speech, the camera focuses on Debbie Guerrero (Alaskan Tlingit), who scowls at the reference to borrowing and stealing. When Meade invites the group to comment—possibly in response to sensing her tension—she admits that she has a hard time “trying to control myself.” Reflecting on the notion of “borrowing traditions,” she complains that, if traditions were to be honored, the retreat’s organizers should have “a traditional person” present to explain and perform them.⁹⁸ Demanding that Native traditional healers conduct Native ceremonies signifies that Native voices be heard, rather than used, that Native people retain control over how culturally sensitive knowledge is shared with uninitiated persons, and thus, that their culture is truly respected and honored.⁹⁹

Meade signals his acknowledgment and acceptance of the criticism, but he adds: “If the old traditions can’t be used to heal the new wounds then we’re stuck with what’s happening in modern culture, and that seems to be wounding everybody,” indicating the whole group. Eli Painted Crow (Yaqui/Mexica) chimes

98 This is a central problem in issues of cultural appropriation. The viewers do not learn whether Meade has the training and whether he received permission to use Native American cultural artifacts (such as an eagle feather fan) and practices.

99 To give an example of intercultural veteran therapy in the manner called for by Guerrero, the Yakama nation of Washington state previously offered workshops in traditional, community-oriented healing for non-Native caregivers, as well as healing retreat options for veteran PTSD clients. These events were conducted by tribal elders and traditional healers. Flores, *Camp Chaparral Native Americans Show VA Caregivers How to Deal with PTSD*; “Camp Chaparral Welcome Home.”

in that she would have needed a preparation, a respectful introduction into which ceremonial elements would be employed and why. She explains that the tradition of "stealing" and "borrowing" to which Meade referred caused pain because, as she repeatedly maintains throughout the retreat, her war and veteran experiences are inseparably tied to her experiences of everyday racism as a Native person in US society: "To me, it's not just what happened to me in Iraq, it's what happened to me my whole life." This shift in focus makes many white members of the group visibly uncomfortable. As Painted Crow cries, a veteran's spouse remarks that "this is getting a little deep for me," and one participant adds that he was not prepared for this conflict because "I didn't come here for a lesson on racism or anybody else's political agenda, I came here to get myself back in some way, shape, or form to who I was before I left [for the war]." Painted Crow then details how officers in Iraq used to call enemy territory "Indian Country," an experience Native soldiers seem to have made throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰ She bursts out: "You're standing there in that goddamn uniform listening to that shit. I'm still the fucking enemy?... Racism matters!" With these emotional exchanges, open conflict has broken out because most of the non-Native respondents do not seem to acknowledge Painted Crow's concerns as immediately relevant to the group's purpose.

Meade then thanks everybody for speaking out honestly and for their mutual respect, opening the floor for other participants' introductory stories. The conflict around cultural appropriation and racism cannot be resolved on this first day, it seems as if a number of conflicts between individual interests (e.g., political controversies over Vietnam) are brought to the table during this initial round of 'rants,' racism being only one topic among many. However, the group also catches a glimpse of the solution because Bob Eaton looks for common ground to unify the participants. As veterans, he points out, "we are our own tribe, we just bring in our own tradition as it is." This statement does not resolve the issues of racism and cultural appropriation, but invoking the shared veteran experience allows the group to establish trust as a prerequisite to go forward. Eaton applies the same premise as Junger who describes soldiers' unit bonding as a form of 'tribalism,' a commitment to mutual aid and to the well-being of the group beyond self-interest in the face of crisis and danger. It is also remarkable that Eaton takes on the role of an elder leader and mentor both because, as a Vietnam veteran, he has more life experience than most participants, but

100 Cf. Carroll, *Medicine Bags*, 177; Holm, *Strong Hearts*, 129; Silliman, "The 'Old West' in the Middle East."

also because his long experience with PTSD symptoms, such as bouts of rage, taught him how to calm down during such moments. His mentoring of younger fellow veterans is thus an aspect of this role as a 'tribal' elder (e.g., mediation, counseling, leadership).

On the third day, the conflict over racism reaches a climax as Eli Painted Crow sees her initial reservations confirmed because the retreat's "teachings [...] felt really white to me." She refers to some participants' earlier signs of discomfort with this issue and indicates that she feels "uncomfortable every day." Meade inquires: "What would it take for you to feel accepted here, now, today?" and Painted Crow states she would like the group "to just listen, and not question why I'm the way I am, or why I do the things I do [...] or why I'm not over it right now." As she spirals into increasing emotional distress, the participants discuss ways to help her; they seek to understand her, but their analytic probing leads Painted Crow to point out in frustration that, what she senses as a "white" way of conversation, i.e., listening "with your head" instead of "your heart," constantly forces her to defend and justify her feelings and positions. The group visibly struggles to assure her of their support, but they also ask her—and each other—more probing questions about her perspective so that, finally, Painted Crow bursts out "...but no, I become the conversation. Either I'm a gift or a pain in the ass or whatever. All I asked for was a listening, and I didn't get it," before storming out of the room. As the group sits in baffled and embarrassed silence, the camera captures Painted Crow in the background, alone on the meadow behind the house, smoking and crying.

Obviously, the conflict escalated due to cultural misunderstandings, as the non-Native group members failed to recognize that their conflict resolution strategies, asking questions and discussing among each other how to help, further aggravated the situation for Painted Crow. Meade invokes the symbolic purpose of the retreat and the overall scenario, stating that "the village is now looking into darkness" and that the community is unsure how to bring everybody, coming with their individual concerns, anxieties, and frustrations, back "into the center." The situation is neatly visualized as the camera still shows Painted Crow through the open door to the patio, struggling with herself on the 'periphery.' In this moment of crisis, it is once again Bob Eaton who reassures the group of their common ground. Jokingly, he quips: "You've got twenty-four veterans with PTSD in here, I think we're doing pretty damn good. We're not killing each other!" Painted Crow had voiced the same idea earlier, signaling that, even in her anger, she recognized the bonds holding this community together, emphasizing that she does not feel left out by the group: "So that's why I'm sitting here [with you], because I don't want to live like this. Not trusting. And this is closer

than anything I've ever been because you're all vets. So it's allowed me to do this. So you're having a more open door than anybody else." Eventually, on the next day, Painted Crow, in traditional tribal regalia, thanks the group for their patience and performs a song about relationships. She visibly returns to "the center," this time bringing her unique cultural knowledge, her experience with tribal communal structure, cosmology, and customs, into the group. Her performance ends with a commitment to the purpose of the community of veterans as she announces, "you are my other me." With this realization, Painted Crow, and the whole group, have 'survived' their ordeal and reconstituted the community.

The film does not show whether the group resolves the issue of everyday racism for Native veterans, nor does it seem to resolve the "borrowing" and "stealing" of traditions during the retreat. Yet, Painted Crow performs a meta-ritual in her return to the group. She symbolically brings her cultural knowledge into the group, and she retains control over how she wants to do it. She, thus, prescribes this cultural exchange by role modeling what she had called for on the first day, i.e., that traditional tribal people should determine how, with whom, and under what circumstances, to conduct traditional ceremonies. In another sense, the group survives its ordeal in symbolizing community reintegration, as the smaller circle of veterans must first establish trust and bonds among themselves before they can go out into the wider civilian community and trust them to help with the reintegration.¹⁰¹ In this small circle, older veterans such as Bob Eaton serve as mentors for younger ones, signifying the role of tribal veteran elders described in many Native American warrior traditions.¹⁰²

The film ends with a successful performance at the town's auditorium. As the participants hugged each other after 'surviving' their ordeals during the retreat, they now mingle with the civilian audience in their symbolic return into civilian society. The participants have learned to understand their experiences and memories, however painful, as "gifts" to share with others. As such, the film's chronology only informs viewers how the veterans have attended the retreat and staged their performances; it cannot go into detail how the integration with civil

101 However, a number of local healers (e.g., physical therapists, acupuncture specialists) offer free treatments for the participants on the evening of the third day. The local community thus symbolically breaks the isolation and signals the civilians' readiness to receive the veterans even before the final townhall performance.

102 The younger veterans acknowledge this role as Melissa Steinmann shares a story in which she describes the continuous emergence of new generations of US veterans as an ongoing uphill march in which Vietnam veterans descend back down the hill, clearing the brush to build a path for those who follow after them.

society proceeded beyond the joyful scenes in the auditorium. Despite the symbolism, the film cannot portray the civilians in the auditorium other than as an audience because it does not include further interactions between veterans and the community.¹⁰³

It is, thus, significant to explore how the film and its accompanying websites construct the project as a civic ritual scenario. Despite its limited options to portray participants' lives after the retreat, the film uses subtitles to further inform viewers, a feature that the website extends.¹⁰⁴ The subtitles and the online page featuring the veterans' bio blurbs emphasize how participants further pursued personal interests about which viewers learned during the film, but they also focus on the veterans' civic engagement in their respective communities.¹⁰⁵ These success stories culminate in an invitation to the wider public to become engaged in veterans affairs: The film's final subtitle, stark white on black, simply states: "There are 23 million veterans living in the United States today." Albeit implicit, this is obviously a call to action. Similarly, the websites promote *The Welcome* as a full scenario, i.e., they invite users to host screenings of the film, followed by town hall discussions. The project website repeatedly emphasizes the role it attributes to local communities and to dialog between civilians and veterans. While organizers call on the VA to take more responsibility for veterans, their community activist stance becomes clear: "[W]ithout this direct involvement of the civilian public many veterans will continue to carry the burdens of their war alone and all of our communities miss out on the depth and wisdom brought home by our returning warriors."¹⁰⁶

The activist impulse is very prominent in the film website's screening advice and discussion guide. This page advises screening hosts to issue trigger

103 Cf. Grimes, *Craft*, 297.

104 "The Welcome."

105 Viewers and site visitors learn that Eli Painted Crow cofounded an NGO to support Native American women, that Ken Kraft breeds service dogs to donate to wounded veterans, while others work with local youth, or for the Veterans Administration.

106 "Welcome Home Project." It should be noted that all participants in this retreat suffered from some form of war-related psychological injury. By invoking all "23 million veterans" at the end of the film and emphasizing the "burdens" of war, the scenario's protagonists run the risk of overstressing their impulse to help by pathologizing all veterans, although they make clear that their philosophy and references to Indigenous warrior traditions merely acknowledge war experience as a critical life experience that requires community support, and not automatically as the harbinger of psychological injury.

warnings and age requirements for viewers. It also seeks to moderate the discussion to control the expected emotional reactions among veteran viewers and it cautions that people might respond strongly to political views and veterans' experiences as expressed in the film. Drawing on their own experience of previous screenings, the organizers suggest that hosts employ discussion facilitators, preferably mental health specialists, and institute rules to control the expected emotions and to ensure civility and mutual respect during the discussion. The questions in the guide are directed either to veterans or to civilians and aim at mutual understanding, using the film as a device to help viewers reflect on their before-and-after-screening perception of the respective other group.¹⁰⁷ The toolkit proposes that veterans and their family members are invited to screenings and panel discussions. As the film illustrates, the project attributes to veterans' relatives a central role as "translator[s] for civilians, living as they do between the veteran's experience and that of civilians."¹⁰⁸ In providing these questions, the project pursues its goal to encourage dialog between veterans and civilians.

On the websites accompanying the film, the scenario situates itself within the larger movement of community-oriented civic activism in veterans' affairs. The film alone expresses the scenario's agenda of creating dialog, but the websites' advice on town hall discussions among veterans, their families, mental health specialists, and local communities more actively foster such exchange. In focusing on town hall meetings as vehicles for dialog, The Welcome Home Project joins similar suggestions from other projects and activists. Sebastian Junger calls on US society to "develop ways to publicly confront the emotional consequences of war,"¹⁰⁹ suggesting that communities hold town hall meetings with veterans each Memorial Day. Such events, he argues, will "finally return the experience of war to our entire nation, rather than just leaving it to the people who fought. The bland phrase 'I support the troops,' would then mean showing up at the town hall once a year to hear these people out."¹¹⁰ Lawrence Gross's website VeteranCeremonies.org suggests interfaith services at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. on Veterans Day, focusing more on the ritual and spiritual aspects of reintegration.¹¹¹ The interconnections between The Welcome Home Project and other activist groups also become clear in their references on

107 "Screening Toolkit."

108 "Screening Toolkit."

109 Junger, *Tribe*, 122.

110 Junger, *Tribe*, 123.

111 Gross, "Native American."

the “Resources” page, linking to Tick’s organization Soldiers Heart and to The Mission Continues, where one of the veterans featured in *The Welcome* earned a fellowship after her retreat in Ashland.¹¹² This particular homecoming scenario, thus, shares its methods of community activism with many other similar organizations, but it pursues its goals through the meta-ritualistic and prescriptive film *The Welcome* as the project’s centerpiece.

The Veterans Education Project

*I don't have a recipe, but there's one thing I do know and that's the power of the narrative. Put the story together. Understand the story. Ask questions of the story; make it answer you... You will find the answer. You keep building the narrative until the answer comes around.*¹¹³

Like the Welcome Home Project and other initiatives discussed above, the Veterans Education Project (VEP) stresses the need to create dialog between veterans and civilians through the public exchange about war experience. The motto above illustrates how the project highlights storytelling as a critical device in the homecoming scenario and how it resorts to metanarrative explanations of its approach in its self-representations. Comparing the outlines and the situatedness of the homecoming scenarios discussed in this chapter, it could be said that, first, *Operation Homecoming* addresses homecoming as an aspect of war experience, but it does not relate much to actual community reintegration in its various media segments. It invites the civilian public to the dialog, but civilians need to engage in the project in order to notice and ‘consume’ the media products that are part of the scenario. The dialog itself is not depicted here. Second, the Welcome Home Project focuses entirely on veterans who suffer from PTSD and their reintegration struggles; that is, it explores solutions for a delayed homecoming. It is a prescriptive meta-ritual directly aimed at the civilian public. However, the veterans depicted in the film are on a ‘retreat’; they are isolated from civil society throughout most of the narrated time and break this isolation in force only at the end of the film with only scant additional information on how they fared after the ‘curtain’ falls. This scenario presents itself as a role model,

112 “Resources.”

113 Excerpt from VEP contributor T. E. Boudreau’s 2008 memoir *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine*, 148, qtd. in Wilson et al., “Military Veterans Sharing First-Person Stories of War and Homecoming,” 393.

calling on the public to conduct similar town hall meetings. Yet, the film, being the scenario's major medium of representation, is primarily concerned with preparing the veterans for such a meeting and not so much with the civilian community and the veterans' interaction with it. Third, VEP places veterans into a civilian setting, and both the website and the academic study used as sources below are metanarratives about how veteran storytellers interact with civilian communities. Education is this scenario's major conduit to promote ceremonial storytelling as a cultural practice of homecoming along with a unique perspective on the veterans' experience of violence that other scenarios do not voice in such clarity.¹¹⁴

VEP was founded by Vietnam War veterans in 1982. Based in Amherst, Massachusetts, the group centers its operations around western New England. It organizes public events at schools, town hall meetings, and in churches, where veteran volunteers tell stories about their experience of war and homecoming. As the name suggests, their approach employs education as a central element to foster dialog: "By sharing their experiences, our veteran speakers gain an authentic connection with our community, provide a bridge between civilian and military worlds, and help us to heal the emotional wounds of war."¹¹⁵ Establishing a public platform to let veterans talk about their experience and to have civilian audiences bear witness to these narratives is, as the previous examples have delineated, a common approach in community-oriented civic activism. Like many others, VEP postulates a divide between civilian and veteran "worlds." It proposes to nurture relationships and to support reintegration through public narrative performances in a ceremonial, formal setting.

Yet, it is remarkable that VEP stresses questions about violence as part of its educational approach. The mission statement on the group's website posits that "[v]eterans shar[e] personal stories that illustrate the realities of violence and deglorify war, in order to promote critical thinking, dialogue and healing in our schools and communities."¹¹⁶ Repeatedly throughout the website's pages, authors come back to this notion of "deglorify[ing] war" and "critical thinking." Unlike other initiatives, VEP does not only call for acceptance and empathy for veterans

114 The final section below discusses scenarios using a similar setting within civilian communities. They focus on drama as the major vehicle. Both settings are comparable to the work of *The Mission Continues* mentioned in the previous chapters, who use a mix of arts, education, social work, and local community volunteerism to bring veterans in contact with the civilian world.

115 "Veterans Education Project."

116 "Veterans Education Project."

as a means to make them feel welcome in civil society, regardless of what they saw and did during deployment. If civilians are to learn from veterans' stories, it seems that this initiative forces its community audiences to acknowledge that war means killing, that violence is embedded in social and political contexts, and that these contexts have implications for the behavior, sense of self, memories, and mental well-being of a service member during and after deployment. With such an emphasis on the complications of war in mind, it is not surprising that VEP evolved from the 'rap groups' of the early 1970s, in which activist psychiatrists such as Robert J. Lifton and Chaim Shatan encouraged veterans to confront moral predicaments and their sense of guilt over their contributions and activities during the Vietnam War.¹¹⁷

This is not to say that VEP appears to be an outspoken antiwar project with a political—i.e., liberal—agenda that would voice particular criticism of the military. On the contrary, the website makes clear in their documentation of volunteer training that speakers should personalize their stories but refrain from “lecturing or advocating political or other positions” as well as from “recruitment or counter-recruitment-oriented presentations.”¹¹⁸ In this sense, it might be questioned, as Patrick Hagopian does regarding the “healing” qualities of the Vietnam Wall,¹¹⁹ how much communal healing can be achieved if the project is so careful to discourage critical analyses of the political contexts around Vietnam that, inevitably, would have to address the domestic strife over the war.¹²⁰ However, the scenario's approach stands out because it seeks to promote ways for civilian listeners to use the veterans' personal stories to draw conclusions about violence in society and war. The personal stories are supposed to illustrate the “realities of war, [...] de-glorify violence, and [...] encourage individuals to make more informed and responsible opinions and decisions regarding the use of force.”¹²¹

This critical perspective on violence and cathartic storytelling becomes clear in a longer quote from a Vietnam veteran volunteering for the project. He describes how he killed a civilian during a house search and thereafter struggled with guilt because he could not determine for himself whether the situation

117 Wilson et al., “Military Veterans,” 396.

118 “Veterans Education Project.”

119 Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 402–05.

120 The website states that volunteer veterans are encouraged to state their political opinions in the debates but to keep personal experience as the foundation of the narrated event. “Veterans Education Project.”

121 “Veterans Education Project.”

posed sufficient danger and risks to his personal safety to justify such use of force. He explains how volunteering as a storyteller helped him confront this moral predicament:

The forum of storytelling is the most positive completion of the healing process, and sharing in my community is the humanizing of an inhumane experience. I think that coming to speak from my heart about the issues of war experience has been essential to connecting to others; to be honest and not try to construct a heroic narrative but say a more personal experience of fear, horror, shame, humor, and the forms of bonding that do occur in hardship.¹²²

In a sense, this story is similar to Sangjoon Han's agony over shooting a fleeing Iraqi civilian in *Operation Homecoming*, or Rex Temple's ruminations over the use of force after a training session in Chapter Four. In the case mentioned here, the veteran not only tells his story and relates his insecurity and guilt over his decision to kill, he also directly opens up to a civilian audience in his deliberations. He knowingly faces the social equivalents of the man whom he shot; talking to civilians helps him see his victim as a fellow human being. His storytelling has a cathartic effect because he receives supportive feedback on his efforts to humanize the supposed 'enemy': He expresses his guilt and the probability of being responsible for the death of a nonhostile civilian whose personal environment, that is, whose expression of humanity, he encountered in that house. Yet the audience also acknowledges his efforts to humanize himself and to enable civilians to imagine themselves in his situation (i.e., expressing his fear of being ambushed and having to make a momentous decision on the spot). He is relieved to be able to connect through honest storytelling and, thus, illustrates that he managed to establish trust. This accomplishment appears even more significant as he refers to the bond in hardship that civilians usually cannot share, nor understand, as so many veterans' and therapists' reports suggest. His storytelling, then, enabled him, like the participants in *The Welcome*, to build on trust within the 'tribal' circle of fellow veterans and extend that trust to civilians. He reconstructs his own sense of self as a member of that community.

The project's self-representation is metanarrative as it outlines the therapeutic potential of storytelling. In a joint paper with the Smith College School of Social Work in 2009, project organizers explore the role of storytelling for veterans' mental health services, proposing public events such as VEP's as valuable complementary measures in addition to working with professional mental

122 Wilson et al., "Military Veterans," 409.

health specialists.¹²³ The paper identifies four potential benefits of public storytelling: First, sharing stories helps communalize experience and promotes mutual understanding, self-reflection, and validation. Communalization, as VEP and the projects above have elucidated, provides a degree of ‘normalization,’ a sense of connection and approval, and spares the veterans from being treated as ‘patients.’ Second, the setting fosters posttraumatic growth, as highlighted in the previous chapter. Talking about one’s memories in a safe environment helps sort through their complex challenges and develop a sense of control. The project’s educational thrust allows veterans to help others and to take on a nurturing role as an ‘elder’ with unique expert knowledge, thus helping themselves find new perspectives and a new sense of self. Third, the study observed moments of social vindication through social engagement in that the veterans’ experience is validated as the community acknowledges their memories and “complex ethical dilemmas”¹²⁴ portrayed in the stories. Fourth, the study emphasizes the learning experience for the veteran storytellers, for their audience, as well as for the accompanying therapists and social workers, especially in the group’s workshops for professionals working with veterans.¹²⁵

The veterans cite a range of reasons for contributing to the project. The following quote mirrors their motivations as discussed in previous chapters: “[T]he most important thing is that I can do something constructive when I tell my story. [When I speak in schools,] I can offer a history lesson about Vietnam, and I can even offer some life lessons that can help kids not to make mistakes and to do better. I can see it in their faces that they are listening and learning.”¹²⁶ The exchange of sharing experience and bearing witness among veteran storytellers and civilian listeners creates a sense of productivity in this veteran. It gives him an opportunity to transform himself from the role of a victim into a nurturing and mentoring role, which, in turn, enhances his self-esteem and his own mental well-being.

As the discussion guides did for the Welcome Home Project, VEP institutes a system of guidelines for ‘safe’ storytelling to avoid triggers and to foster healing.

123 The authors of the study stress the complementary character of therapeutic storytelling. They decidedly do not depict publicly performed narratives as a one-for-all cure for PTSD, and specifically caution against problematic aspects in these public settings, such as trigger situations and moments of ‘intercultural’ misunderstanding and alienation between veterans and civilians. Wilson et al., 395, 402–09.

124 Wilson et al., 420.

125 Wilson et al., 418–20.

126 Wilson et al., 395.

Trainers instruct veterans to forgo competitive storytelling such as "pissing contests," critical analysis, disagreements, or glorification of events, and they help veterans during training sessions to construct stories in a safe way that still "capture[s] the terrible realities and consequences of war."¹²⁷ Audiences receive a primer, being asked for "respectful, supportive, and non-judgmental" listening to forge a "hospitable environment."¹²⁸ The group asks event planners to consider their audience, and to frame and outline question-and-answer sessions beforehand. These precautions, especially the framing of audience response in a controlled environment, are designed to embed these events in therapeutic settings. As has been shown, many of these therapeutic effects occur in exchanges on milblogs and social media services, as well, where a controlled environment cannot be established if comment functions are enabled, and where therapy is not even the primary motivation to write.

The personalization of experience as an anchor in the scenario's scripts serves both its two major target groups. In its educational approach, school audiences value the veterans' stories because "[i]t's like having people step out of the pages of history books and into the classroom."¹²⁹ In another quote on the projects' website, a student explains that five of his relatives fought in Vietnam. One was killed, one is reported missing, while the others never discussed their experience in the family. For that student, hearing the volunteer's story offered a first reference point for his relatives' experience.¹³⁰ To hark back to Pierre Nora once more, it took the liveliness of the veterans' 'memory' in their oral history presentation in class to provide this student with an understanding of and relation to the past that the fixed language of 'history' in a textbook could not offer, and it connected him with the personal history of his family.¹³¹ In addition, the personal stories of PTSD, along with the recurrent emphasis on the effects of violence and the use of force become significant when the group's engagement for at-risk youth in schools and prisons is considered. Sharing stories about long struggles with symptoms, especially substance abuse, anger, and loss of control, veterans connect with students and provide them with "role models who have experienced hard times as a result of violence and/or drugs, and who have overcome significant challenges."¹³² The veterans' frequently painful experience is portrayed

127 Wilson et al., 421.

128 Wilson et al., 421.

129 "Veterans Education Project."

130 "Veterans Education Project."

131 Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, 100–02; Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*.

132 "Veterans Education Project."

as a 'gift' to the community, as VEP's approach seeks to utilize this perspective both to foster appreciation and support for veterans among civilians and to help rebuild afflicted veterans' self-esteem.

Finally, a few words on the ritualistic outline of the project's events are in order. The authors of the 2009 study state that VEP's storytelling events are not "intended to reenact ancient rituals of 'purification.' Yet, storytelling, as the veterans with the VEP perform it, carries characteristics of nonreligious, nonsectarian 'practice' and 'ritual' [...] We suggest this kind of storytelling is, in fact, a small-scale local 'practice' or 'ritual' that can help Veterans heal the emotional wounds of war."¹³³ From the perspective of ritual outlined throughout the previous chapters, and of the homecoming scenarios in this chapter in particular, one must agree. Even if the events are not supposed to reenact ancient rituals, that is, to borrow—or outright "steal," to go back to Michael Meade's term—from other cultures, the motivation, setting, and context mark VEP's storytelling events as civic rituals. They are scripts in a homecoming scenario in the sense that they enact a cultural practice around civic engagement with and for veterans that the organizers deem productive to address a social ill. They postulate a gap between civilian and veteran 'worlds' that their activities are supposed to formalize, problematize and remedy. Their online presence and texts such as the Smith College study provide data and signal the support of academic experts in the field, and the depiction of these events marks them as exemplary models for further civic activism. In this way, like the flanking para-texts of the projects above, the VEP website is meta-ritualistic and meta-performative.

Despite the disclaimer above, the VEP also situates itself in the context of ritual. Its organizers refer to Native American and ancient Greek rituals of warriors' return to motivate their own approach to ceremonial, cathartic storytelling.¹³⁴ Most of all, they place themselves within the discourse on war experience and within the network of civic activists and activist scholars who promote social therapy and community-oriented veteran reintegration through frequent references to Native American, ancient Greek, and other traditional practices. Many of the early notions about the communalization of trauma since the 1970s were pioneered by scholars and therapists such as Chaim Shatan, Robert J. Lifton, and John P. Wilson. Jonathan Shay's works on psychological injury and homecoming in relation to the Greek classics have become classics in the field themselves and are frequently cited in the VEP study and on the website. Edward

133 Wilson et al., "Military Veterans," 424.

134 Wilson et al., 423.

Tick’s ideas on civic healing rituals, based on the rituals of Indigenous traditions, and his work with the NGO Soldier’s Heart are referenced in the study and he has frequently appeared as a panelist at VEP events at Smith College. VEP has also co-organized events with the Theater of War whose theatrical approach to social therapy will be discussed below. These nodes and connections illustrate that, while the organizers might not regard their activities as rituals per se, their philosophy is embedded in a network that seeks to learn from, promote, and construct, cultural practices of ceremonial storytelling in order to further their idea of community-oriented veteran reintegration. Their activities might not reenact ancient rituals, but they certainly construct civic rituals in their own homecoming scenarios.

Theater of War and Aquila Theatre

*Can these ancient texts tell us anything about the psychological effects of enduring combat?*¹³⁵

This final subsection explores the work of two theater projects, the Theater of War and Aquila Theatre, and their extensive use of ancient Greek drama in negotiating issues of war and homecoming experience. Both rely on reenactments and readings of Classical Greek tragedy which are often performed by veterans for mixed veteran and civilian audiences. They both also use their online platforms to engage users in reflections and deliberations on the relevance of these classics for contemporary veterans’ experience and to document discussions held to complement the performances. Like the activities of the VEP discussed above, both initiatives situate their public debate of veteran issues in the ‘civilian world,’ that is, the performances and roundtables portray veterans in a civilian context, and they do not have to break through the isolation between both worlds that other scenarios emphasize much more.

The interest in Greek tragedy regarding issues of veterans’ mental health goes back to Jonathan Shay’s work in clinical combat trauma therapy at the Veterans Administration during the late 1980s. In a 2009 lecture on the development of his pioneering approach, Shay states that he realized while working with veteran clients “that I was hearing fragments of the story of Achilles all over again, sometimes even the whole narrative sequence that Homer gives us in the *Iliad*.”¹³⁶ Based on this comparison, Shay published two books, *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994)

135 “Heracles: The Idea of the Hero” in Aquila Theatre, YouStories.

136 Shay, “Trials,” 287.

and *Odysseus in America* (2002), whose integration of trauma theory, psychiatric expertise, and literary analysis have become classics in the field of veteran trauma therapy, particularly regarding community-oriented approaches. Drawing from his experience with Vietnam veterans in these works, Shay stresses the role of ritual as a form of cultural therapy grounded in his exploration of Athenian tragedy and of Aristotle's concept of catharsis.¹³⁷ He interprets ancient Greek theater as a script for communal veteran reintegration and healing rituals, stating:

The performances of the Athenian tragic theater—which was a theater of combat veterans, by combat veterans, and for combat veterans—offered cultural therapy, including purification. [...] The ancient Athenians had a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration of returning soldiers that was undertaken as a whole political community. Sacred theater was one of its primary means of reintegrating the returning veteran into the social sphere as 'citizen.'¹³⁸

From his observations of the old literary texts, Shay finds that, regarding issues of PTSD and veteran reintegration in contemporary US society, “[r]eligious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professionals conventionally offer.”¹³⁹ His approach entails all major elements of ceremonial storytelling about war experience discussed throughout this study. It encompasses the notion that war experiences potentially endanger a warrior's or soldier's mental well-being; that sharing these experiences with civilians in a public, communal, and narrative and/or performative format helps negotiate both the individual memory and the veterans' relationship with civilians; that ceremonial storytelling, thus, supports reintegration and mental health; and finally, that humans in different cultural contexts and at different times have developed similar cultural practices within this discursive context to foster such negotiations. Shay tackles both major interests informing this study, i.e., the cultural work of such practices designed for the discursive context of war experience and narratives, and a particular society's urge to develop communal therapeutic remedies for individual suffering expressed through these narratives.

Shay's approach has since inspired further research and public debate about the relevance of ancient Greek texts for contemporary veteran issues. Like many activist works focused on community-oriented ritual therapy among Indigenous cultures, proponents of cultural comparisons with ancient Greek drama muse in how far Greek texts “reflect universal aspects of warfare and its psychological

137 Shay, *Odysseus*, 154.

138 Shay, *Odysseus*, 152–53.

139 Shay, 152.

after-effects," whether "ancient Greeks [were] aware of what is now called combat trauma," and whether there were "any particular responses to combat trauma in ancient Greek culture that address, mitigate or even prevent its devastating effects."¹⁴⁰ While scholars do not agree on all these questions, they all seem to suggest a certain degree of universality in war experience that would make the study of ancient Greek texts relevant to modern military psychology. Such research and public promotion of universality have since become popular devices to problematize war experience, PTSD, and challenges of homecoming and reintegration in contemporary US society. Both the Theater of War and Aquila Theatre can be located within this tradition.

Theater of War (ToW) is a production offered by a theater group called Outside the Wire. Founded in 2009, the group defines itself as a "social impact company that uses theater and a variety of other media to address pressing public health and social issues" including psychological injury, but also (domestic) violence, addiction, or incarceration.¹⁴¹ ToW's website lists over three hundred performances in the US, Europe, and Japan, held at military sites, hospitals, schools, churches, as well as the Pentagon and Guantanamo Bay.¹⁴² By referring to the communal and therapeutic effect of ancient Greek drama, they formulate their philosophy of public performances as follows: "Using Sophocles' plays to forge a common vocabulary for openly discussing the impact of war on individuals, families, and communities, these events will be aimed at generating compassion and understanding between diverse audiences."¹⁴³ Their reference to the classics seeks to draw out contemporary veterans' experiences and contextualize them with the ancient texts' symbolism and cultural significance. This general mission statement also implies a gap between civilian and veteran experience and postulates the need to close that gap by bringing "diverse" audiences together and creating "compassion" among them.

Based in London and New York, Aquila Theatre (AT) was founded in 1991. AT is institutionalized as a nonprofit NGO and organizes events and town hall meetings anchored on public performances of poems and plays by Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides. The group specifically promotes an online program called YouStories which seeks to help contemporary veterans make sense of

140 Steinbock, review of *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks. The New Antiquity* by Peter Meineck and David Konstan; cf. Meineck and Konstan, *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*.

141 Doerries, *The Theater of War*, 285; "Mission."

142 "Theater of War: Overview."

143 "Theater of War: Overview."

their own experience by way of contextualization with the Greek classics. The program, thus, “uses ancient stories about war to inspire new stories.”¹⁴⁴ YouStories operates a support website with additional information about the cultural context of these plays, along with video clips where US veterans tell their own stories and relate them to the issues portrayed in the classics. These stories are solicited on the YouStories website, which provides video capture software to allow users to record and upload their own oral history clips to the site. As part of the nationwide public program Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives, YouStories is, among others, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and archives its stories at the Library of Congress, demonstrating the currently widespread academic and public interest in veteran experience, war narratives, and oral history.¹⁴⁵

The YouStories website is complex in its efforts to contextualize ancient ‘texts’ (i.e., drama and artifacts) with modern veteran experience and narratives. It explores four major themes: the experience of “coming home,” as represented in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the “Idea of the Hero” in Euripides’s *Heracles*, “Ethics at War” in Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, and the “Dilemma of War” in Sophocles’s *Ajax*. The website’s subordinate page “Explore Stories” is rich with hypertext connecting diverse aspects of each theme. It starts off with a video clip in which a veteran explains his or her own interpretation of how the classic play relates to their personal war experience. The site then offers a photograph of a Greek artifact (e.g., a vase, or a plaque), a brief description and object biography, and it illuminates how this artifact visually represents the ancient story. In the *Odysseus* theme, the site presents a plaque depicting *Odysseus*’s return to *Penelope*. The description informs visitors that both the returning war hero and his wife test each other before they can once again trust one another after years of separation. It interprets the story by drawing connections to modern war experience and confronts the site visitor with corresponding discussion questions, beginning with: “What happens when a person is trained to fight and kill in the name of his or her country, is exposed to often horrific scenes of destruction, has to deal with inhumane sights and sounds on a daily basis and then returns home to the civilian population?”¹⁴⁶ A brief essay authored by an academic expert on ancient

144 “Aquila Theatre—YouStories.”

145 “Aquila Theatre—YouStories”; Steinbock, review of *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*.

146 “*Odyssey* – Coming Home.”

classics then fleshes out each theme.¹⁴⁷ The themes' hypertext collection also includes a synopsis of the ancient play, links to transcripts of the full play, and to video clips of performances or readings of selected scenes by AT cast.

All text elements invoke the relevance of ancient texts to contemporary society in inviting site visitors to consider the same question from different angles, and in different stories, genres, and media. They ask how the ancient stories can help modern society interpret contemporary war experience.¹⁴⁸ This initial question, in both theater projects, serves as the prerequisite for implying more significant follow-up questions, such as whether the references to Greek tragedy can help modern US society (re)learn, (re)construct, and institutionalize methods and practices of veteran reintegration, whether interpretations of these ancient texts about war experience can help contemporary society solve contemporary problems of social psychology and community disintegration. As in the examples of Indigenous military and veteran traditions discussed throughout this book, the protagonists and the online contextualizations of both theater programs follow the activist thrust in Shay's tradition, arguing that war and veteran experience indeed contain universal aspects that can be gleaned from these texts and that, therefore, ancient Greek tragedy can teach modern US society about citizenship, civil-military relationships, and veterans' homecoming. It is through declarations of universality and relatability that AT and ToW promote their performative practices as homecoming scenarios, that is, they present their performances, programs, and websites as prescriptive communal rituals of veteran reintegration, as descendants of the ancient practices that were remediated and adjusted for modern purposes but retain the same core message and conduct the same cultural work.

Without citing Shay directly, ToW echoes his notions of recurring central issues in military psychology across time when the overview web page states: "It has been suggested that ancient Greek drama was a form of storytelling, communal therapy, and ritual reintegration for combat veterans by combat veterans." The performers of the ancient plays were "most likely veterans or cadets" and "Sophocles himself was a general," as the site explains.¹⁴⁹ From the premise of war veterans writing autobiographical fiction on war that was then reenacted by

147 In the case of the essay on *Odysseus*, the author recommends both of Shay's books as further readings. Race, "The Therapy of *Odysseus* in *Phaeacia*."

148 In comparison, the various websites and pages of the ToW program provide much less detail about the historical and literary context of their reference texts, resorting to brief information about the theater's proceeds and mission.

149 "Theater of War: Overview."

veterans for civilian and veteran audiences, the site draws conclusions about the ritual quality of the plays and implies their relatability and universality:

Seen through this lens, ancient Greek drama appears to have been an elaborate ritual aimed at helping combat veterans return to civilian life after deployments during a century that saw 80 years of war [...] Given this context, it seemed natural that military audiences today might have something to teach us about the impulses behind these ancient stories. It also seemed like these ancient stories would have something important and relevant to say to military audiences today.¹⁵⁰

Modern US society can, thus, observe how a different culture helped veterans find and sing their “songs” about war and how the performance of these songs both addressed the psychological effects of war on veterans and reconstituted the communities. Because they attribute to the plays the ability to “timelessly and universally depict the psychological and physical wounds” of war, their Sophocles program serves as an anchor to “de-stigmatize psychological injury, increase awareness of post-deployment psychological health issues, disseminate information regarding available resources, and foster greater family, community, and troop resilience.”¹⁵¹ It does not become clear from ToW’s online presence what degree of classical education and background knowledge they expect to find among their audiences, but, obviously, their references to the ancient classics offer opportunities for both veterans and civilians to consider universal elements in war experience and, consequently, to regard the conflicts portrayed there as comparable and relatable to contemporary issues of veterans’ reintegration and mental health.

The same notion is present in much more detail in the various hypertext elements of AT’s YouStories. In his contextualization of his own experience with the Odysseus theme, veteran Brian Delate speaks about his emotions during Aquila readings at the White House as he realized how much the knowledge of Greek warriors’ cathartic performance in theater “helped my own healing, my own recovery.”¹⁵² Even more telling, William H. Race points to the parallels in the duration of wars between the *Odyssey* and US post-9/11 military engagements in his contextual essay: “In modern times, with tens of thousands of veterans returning from our ten-year wars involving multiple deployments, we have reason to pay particular attention to the way in which Odysseus recuperates from his harrowing experiences in war and wandering.”¹⁵³ The ordeals of Odysseus

150 “Theater of War: Overview.”

151 “Theater of War: Overview.”

152 “Homer’s *Odyssey*.”

153 Race, “The Therapy of Odysseus in Phaeacia.”

become a particularly significant allegory since members of the military, scholars of military sociology, and the American public voiced increasing concern about multiple deployments and erratic new regulations extending the duration of deployment tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁵⁴

In the discussion of Euripides’s *Heracles*, YouStories presents the hero’s return, his affliction with madness at the hands of the goddess Hera, leading Heracles to murder his own family in a fit of rage, only to be calmed down by the comradeship of his fellow veteran Theseus. The theme, as YouStories has it, “creates a vivid and extreme demonstration of combat trauma or post-traumatic stress, both upon warriors and the societies within which they live.”¹⁵⁵ The project draws a broad connection between different historical interpretations of psychological injuries, ranging from belief in divine intervention as in Euripides’s play, to notions of shell-shock and hysteria in World War I, and today’s conflicting definitions of PTSD. Visitors are confronted with guiding discussion questions: “How can civilians better understand veterans who have to deal with some form of PTS? Can these ancient texts tell us anything about the psychological effects of enduring combat?”¹⁵⁶ Answers follow in the accompanying academic essay which suggests that *Heracles*, both for ancient and modern audiences, portrays significant effects of war because it illuminates “how the violence of war changes irrevocably both those who do the actual fighting and those who, having remained behind, may believe themselves—falsely and tragically—beyond its reach.”¹⁵⁷ This perspective embeds the impact of PTSD on a veteran’s close relatives and, thus, once more strengthens their position as mediators and translators between veterans and civil society, similar to the role Bob Eaton’s wife played during the retreat in *The Welcome*. The deliberation of this theme, although it acknowledges the Greeks’ belief in divine intervention as alien to the modern observer’s eye, nevertheless emphasizes that the ancient Greeks understood how psychological injury affects both those who suffer from it and their immediate social relations, and that they remedied their particular experience with these injuries through community support, understanding, and mutual aid.

The issues of universality of experience and the relevance of ancient texts for contemporary US society gain political significance in direct, albeit rather

154 Cf. Hoge, *Once a Warrior*, xvii; Howard and Prividera, “Nationalism and Soldiers’ Health,” 225; Zacchea, “Veteran’s Advocacy,” 31; Phillips, “Stress.”

155 “Heracles: The Idea of the Hero.”

156 “Heracles: The Idea of the Hero.”

157 Pache, “Heracles and the Idea of the Hero.”

implicit, comparisons to current public concerns scattered throughout the website. In the overview section's discussion how Greek society experienced "80 years of war," and in William Race's reference to the current "ten-year wars involving multiple deployments" cited above, contemporary concerns shine through about a traditional American political paradigm, the belief that "a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War."¹⁵⁸ This paradigm assumes that the populace of a democratic society would have limited patience with its leaders if they embroiled the country in a long war. The public would withdraw its support and, eventually, replace the government to regain peace. This notion inspired George C. Marshall to make the statement about "Seven Years War[s]" in the wake of World War II. Following this paradigm, the US usually pursued quick, decisive military campaigns throughout its history. Once wars turned into quagmires, such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, observers pointed out that public support in the US faded the longer these engagements dragged on.¹⁵⁹

A similar reference is implied in the essay on *Ajax* and the universal "Dilemma of War." Since the ancient Greeks considered war "the father of all things," the author argues, the social challenges facing their democracy at war must also affect the United States:

It is this universal experience of war that allows for dramas produced in democratic Athens to reach out and speak to audiences in another democratic society twenty-five hundred years later. No less important is the universal experience of the returning soldier, and how these realities he or she faces on returning to the "World" are little different over the millennia and across culture.¹⁶⁰

Democracy serves as the direct link between ancient Greece and the modern United States. Tritle invokes the Greek and US traditions of the citizen soldier to address the problem of prolonged wars. This connection also bespeaks anxieties about the social impact that the current state of permanent, worldwide military engagements will have on a professional US military whose members increasingly comprise but a tiny fraction of the US population. Hence, Greek tragedy is supposed to teach American audiences not only about the psychological costs of war, but also how war affects civil-military relationships and notions of citizenship (i.e., privileges and obligations) in a democratic society.

Other text elements of the YouStories website more explicitly formulate political problems in their contextualization of ancient themes for modern US

158 Bacevich, "Endless War."

159 Bacevich, "Endless War"; *Breach of Trust*, 41.

160 Tritle, "Soldier's Home."

conflicts. In the discussion of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, ethics at war become the central issue. Aquila’s website introduces this story of a wounded warrior in the following way. His army abandoned him on an island but, as they realize they need his unique archery skills to win the war against Troy, they attempt to trick the embittered old veteran into rejoining. The website’s discussion question challenges the visitor asking: “Is one’s personal integrity, beliefs and moral compass more important than the strategic aims of an army, or does one have a duty to sometimes set these aside for the common good?”¹⁶¹ Aquila Theatre makes the issue more poignant for a contemporary audience by casting the marooned Philoctetes as a female. The play, thus, addresses contemporary questions of equal treatment for women in the military, as well as the widespread cases of abuse and corresponding military sexual trauma. The website specifically asks visitors whether the dilemma in the ancient text poses “similar reflections in American culture today.”¹⁶²

Vietnam veteran and classicist Paul Woodruff does not raise concrete ethical issues of US post-9/11 wars in his essay. However, he invokes the conflict between Philoctetes, the cunning military leader Odysseus, and the young warrior Neoptolemus who is ordered to commit the betrayal that would trick Philoctetes into rejoining the Athenian forces, to sensitize visitors for contemporary ethical problems:

As a society we should ponder these questions as we continue to prepare for war, and especially before we enter a new war: Can we teach youngsters the arts of war, including subterfuge, without destroying their ethical character? Can we overcome the isolation of veterans who have been wounded in body and soul? Is victory important enough to warrant the whole cost of war?¹⁶³

Particularly his ominous remarks about continuing “to prepare for war,” his warnings about “enter[ing] a new war,” and questioning the value of victory vis-à-vis the costs of war stand out. While most primary and secondary sources consulted for this study agree in their empathy for veterans’ quandaries and on the psychological consequences of war, not many link ethical issues directly to war’s political contexts. They either cling to what milblogger Douglas Traversa has described as his “Tool Time” lecture as discussed in Chapter Three, or they avoid political debates over war altogether in order to prevent domestic confrontations, as Patrick Hagopian observed regarding notions of ‘healing’ after

161 “Philoctetes: The Ethics of War.”

162 “Philoctetes: The Ethics of War.”

163 Woodruff, “Philoctetes, a Short Introduction.”

Vietnam.¹⁶⁴ It is all the more remarkable, then, that Woodruff and Aquila here poignantly make the connection between ancient war stories and future political problems. Referring to preparations for war, Woodruff calls on his audience to read *Philoctetes* as a cautionary tale and reminds his readers that any future military engagement would confront US soldiers with new ethical dilemmas, cause unjustifiable suffering, and thus exacerbate problems within the growing veteran demographic. Although he does not talk about how falsified evidence helped justify military intervention, about atrocities, or how government bureaucracy neglects veterans' needs, he warns that wars are more easily started than concluded and, to emphasize this chapter's context of "homecoming," that they tend to have personal and often harmful effects on those who fight them, as much as on their social environments, even decades after the last shots are fired.

Finally, this discussion of theatrical homecoming scenarios returns to the notion of ritual reintegration with a few concluding observations on textuality. It is remarkable that, in their detailed analysis of the cultural work of Greek tragedy, ToW and AT acknowledge the ancient Greek homecoming scenarios as "an elaborate ritual"¹⁶⁵ but do not interpret or even promote their own performances explicitly as rituals. However, they attribute community-forging and social-therapeutic qualities to their own scenarios when, e.g., ToW states: "Theater of War believes in the power of storytelling to bring communities together and help others heal."¹⁶⁶ They reinforce their mission to negotiate knowledge, values, and identities, and, thus, constitute community when they emphasize that different events and media are part of the script. Their activities are supposed to "forge a common vocabulary for openly discussing the impact of war."¹⁶⁷ They seek to "engage communities in powerful town hall discussions" in addition to their readings and performances in order to "foster understanding and compassion, while mobilizing citizens and resources to help improve the lives of service members, veterans, and their families and communities."¹⁶⁸ All these aspects mark ToW's events as practices of ceremonial storytelling and, therefore, as civic rituals of veteran reintegration in this study's sense.

Jonathan Shay describes Athenian tragic theater as "sacred theater"¹⁶⁹ because the performance of plays conducted cultural work in several, intertwined ways. It

164 Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 402–05.

165 "Theater of War: Overview."

166 "Soldiers and Citizens Tour."

167 "Theater of War: Overview."

168 "Theater of War: Soldiers and Citizens Tour."

169 Shay, *Odysseus*, 152–53.

reenacted narratives embedded in the prevalent cultural context and cosmology, interpreting war experience in reference to divine interaction with humans and, thus, contributed to the Greeks’ world-making. Yet it also brought together veterans and civilians for these cultural events; the stories did not simply talk about homecoming, they enacted homecoming and reintegration by sharing and listening to war stories. These meta-performative qualities enhanced the practices’ degree of ritualization. To return to Ronald Grimes’s reservations, the ancient plays were not so much performances for a passive audience of consumers, but a gathering of people who understood themselves as “congregations, tribes, or communities”¹⁷⁰ and who acknowledged a common purpose far beyond the mere consumption of a particular cultural event. In fact, the event, i.e., performance and active participation both helped renew that common purpose. In this sense, ToW and AT indeed conduct ritual homecoming scenarios because they encourage audiences and performers to interpret, acknowledge, but also contribute to the cultural work conducted in these scenarios and, thus, to self-consciously perform their roles as community members who (re)negotiate the community’s values and (re)constitute group identity.

The diversity of media used in these scenarios adds to their cultural work because it engages their participants. AT invites its audiences to contribute their own stories to the YouStories collection, and to contextualize them with ancient texts and artifacts, as well as with the veteran stories already found on the website. ToW similarly invites the public to add their own stories to the ‘pool’ through the program’s Storyline platform.¹⁷¹ Like the public call for contributions in *Operation Homecoming*, Andrew Carroll’s letters project, and the website *Native American Veterans—Storytelling for Healing*,¹⁷² both theater projects do not simply present their audience with a narrative for consumption, they invite the audience to contribute and to make the narrative their own. This form of narrativity is different from the joint storytelling observed in the previous chapters’ milblog readings because, in the medium of the project websites, civilian visitors see a core narrative, along with the activists’ call to contribute; they even see a number of solicited veteran contributions that added to the core narrative, but they cannot visibly bear witness or participate directly in

170 Grimes, *Craft*, 297.

171 “Soldiers and Citizens Tour.” ToW’s website on the “Soldiers and Citizens Tour” has gone offline since 2016. The site can be found via the Wayback Machine at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160308185130/http://www.outsidethewirellc.com/projects/theater-of-war/soldiers-citizens-tour>>.

172 “Native American Veterans.”

the narrative construction on the websites. They are presented with videos of ToW and AT performances, as well as interviews in which activists explain their agenda, but direct interaction and debate about the projects is directed away from the medium of the website and channeled through social media services such as Facebook and Twitter. The websites as such are limited to a one-way flow of information. Nevertheless, the entirety of each scenario, in its multitude of media, modes, and genres constitutes a form of narrativity that significantly contributes to its activist drive and, thus, to its ritualization.

Conclusion

This final chapter moved beyond the realm of milblogs to discuss civil-military relationships in situations where soldiers, returning home as veterans, and civilians come in direct physical contact with each other again. It showed that many medialized representations of homecoming tend to oversimplify the process, focusing on the happy reunion of families, while blotting out the emotional and social challenges of reintegration. Homecoming scenarios address these challenges and call for active civilian engagement in accordance with their philosophy of ceremonial storytelling and bearing witness as vehicles of community-oriented reintegration and social therapy. The scenarios explored here share these basic assumptions, but they employ a variety of media and genres to express and promote their philosophy and to establish rituals of homecoming. While the milblogs discussed in previous chapters could construct their communities only in the virtual space of the Internet and were inhibited by the soldiers' prospects of further danger in the combat zone, these post-deployment practices can engender direct physical contact and interaction between veterans and civilians. Still, the Internet serves as a complementary virtual convergence space to bundle together the different media used for distinct elements of a scenario, and to disseminate the scenario's message.

Regardless whether the act of ceremonial storytelling is conducted in the form of printed short stories, of films depicting a therapeutic retreat, or of theatrical performances and readings captured on video and stored online, all scenarios share the twofold interest observed in the previous author-audience interaction on milblogs. Their reflections on war experience convey knowledge, negotiate values, and, thus, conduct cultural work resulting in the constitution of group identity and community. In addition, these negotiations exert an increased concern for individual suffering and for the (mental) health of veterans, transformed into an urge toward civic engagement in veteran affairs across various media.

Homecoming scenarios refer to diverse military traditions to motivate their own activist drive. References to Native American and ancient Greek cultural practices are the most common among them. The underlying core assumption behind these transcultural references is the protagonists' concern about civil-military relationships in contemporary US society, a general criticism that government bureaucracy in veterans' affairs, overt individualism, and a general neglect among civilians for wars fought by a socially segregated professional military aggravate psychological injuries that the soldiers bring home from deployment. The scenarios' extensive fascination with these transcultural models of veteran reintegration and social therapy thus demonstrates their activist drive towards community, mutual responsibility, and ultimately, an increased awareness of and commitment to active citizenship in US society.