6. Conclusion

In his comprehensive cultural history *Was ist Krieg* (2013), Bernd Hüppauf argues that discourse is a central element in distinguishing war from other forms of killing: "War requires collective representation and imagination. Human beings are determined by violence and represent violence in symbols."[1] Symbols and images, he adds, turn 'mere' murder and mayhem into war because they "construct an order that expresses much more than victory and defeat."[2] War, then, not only entails the use of force among societies, these societies must also negotiate the meaning of the killings in order for them to be regarded as a 'war.' Although Hüppauf applies a rather ethnocentric perspective in arguing that such discourse could only emerge in urban societies, that is, in states, which would deny Indigenous cultures the capability to make 'true' war,[3] his focus on discourse nurtures a cultural-history perspective on war and it focalizes negotiations of war experience. The order constructed by discourse on war helps a society to identify and mobilize its resources against an adversary. Eventually, the representation of war through discourse serves to justify and make sense of the violence. It deliberates that particular society's norms and values, and contextualizes them with the war. It creates and disseminates knowledge, and (re)constructs collective identity by negotiating the meaning of violence against the enemy. In the US, discourse on war has carried such negotiations since the War of Independence. It has been expressed in leaflets and broadsides, newspapers, memoirs, letters, poems, fiction, feature films, documentaries, and, since the turn of the twenty-first century, in the media and technology of Web 2.0. In these representations of war, US citizens have sought to understand their wars, to justify decisions and outcomes, to mourn their dead, to determine how war affected their relationships with their government and with other nations, and to integrate memories and effects of their wars into a coherent sense of self.

This study has followed a specific strand of such war-related discourse in the US over the last few decades, investigating how, since the Vietnam War, narratives discussed the effects of war experience on soldiers, as well as on civil-military relationships. Throughout these last several decades, a sense of social crisis has prevailed in public discourse on war experience, driven by an anxiety

---

1   Hüppauf, *Was ist Krieg?*, 28.
2   Hüppauf, 29.
3   Hüppauf, 29–30.

about ruptured relationships between US civil society and its military. Within this discursive context, combat-related stress, trauma, and veterans' reintegration struggles are recurring and dominant topics. Public debates and cultural representations have engaged in collective soul-searching, at times even expressing a sense of cultural pessimism about war experience, asking in how far civil society as a whole during and after Vietnam should be held responsible for the emotional toll this war took on soldiers. At the same time, media representations of war mostly center on the spectacular and the tragic: when the news cycle does not report on suicide bombings, it is easy for US civilians to forget about the wars abroad and about the hardships they bring to both locals and deployed troops in the war zone. News media also tend to highlight specific aspects of war and war experience while neglecting others, and the language prevalent in medialized discourse underscores these limited perspectives—footage of happy homecomings suggests closure and standard phrases and bumper sticker slogans such as "thank you for your service" and "I support the troops" offer civil society easy, symbolic gestures of support. For many of the troops and veterans thus thanked, these gestures do not carry real significance as they do not affect their reintegration into society. In addition, charged language that valorizes the troops as "heroes" and "warriors" also nurtures a traditional military culture of hypermasculine strength and stoic forbearance, and discourages open and critical deliberation of war's emotional costs among veterans and civilians.

As a result, activist discourse on war in the media, in popular culture, as well as in academia has pinpointed, scrutinized, and questioned the state of civil-military relationships since the 1970s. It has facilitated the development and dissemination of social perspectives in psychology and psychiatry, and boosted social work and community-oriented projects in civic activism among veterans. Driven by a culturally pessimistic outlook on individualism and alienation in modern US society, and anxious about the growing social segregation between civil society and an all-volunteer military, protagonists have looked for cross-cultural role models not only to reform health care services for soldiers and veterans, but also to place the negotiation of war experience within public discourse on a more communal footing. Contemporary activist discourse on war experience promotes and facilitates the exchange between civilians and veterans. These cultural practices often ritualize such exchanges in order to symbolize the reconstitution of the social contract between civil society and the military. Over the last few years, these cultural practices harnessed new technologies, such as blogs and social media services, and integrated them with traditional practices, media, and modes of discussing war. In a somewhat ironic twist, this crisis-centered discourse reveals the perpetual rivalry between individualism and

collectivism in American self-perception. It celebrates as role models (and some-times appropriates) the same Indigenous cultural concepts that, according to the national founding myth, were doomed to give way to progress and 'civilization.'

In its analysis of activist texts in academia, in the media, and in civic engage-ment, this study has investigated how culturally pessimistic self-reflections drive cross-cultural perspectives and role-models within this discourse. Activists fre-quently refer to Native North American warrior traditions not only to foster social-therapeutic approaches in veterans' mental health care, but also to pro-mote civic perspectives on the social contract. Taking their cue from Indigenous warrior traditions that are based on a closely knit web of community relations and services, activists seek to construct community-oriented therapies and cultural practices in US 'mainstream society.' They invoke Indigenous role models to pro-pose that the public acknowledge mutual responsibilities and social obligations for protection and tending among civilians and veterans as prerequisites for strong civil-military relationships in US society. In their cultural comparisons and models for cultural transfer, two ideas play central roles, i.e., war narratives and rituals are considered critical concepts both to help society make sense of war and to reconstitute community through a symbolic reintegration of the vet-erans, but also to help veterans work through their individual memories of war and tend to psychological injuries as they return into the civilian world.

Hence, activists' practices of veterans' mental health care, social work, and civic engagement seek to implement what this study has described as 'cere-monial storytelling': they observe Indigenous practices in which returning warriors symbolically share their experience with their community who, in turn, symbolically acknowledges this experience and pledges to tend to phys-ical and emotional wounds in order to help the warriors reenter the realm of peace. Non-Native activists develop rituals with similar symbolic and discursive functions, seeking to integrate them either into conventional therapy methods or to construct civic welcoming, cleansing, and honoring rituals with a social-therapeutic thrust. These non-Native rituals usually entail an exchange between veterans and civilians, that is, a sequence of narrating and acknowledging war experiences among military 'storytellers' and civilian audiences. In these rit-ualized sessions of narrating war and bearing witness, expressed in diverse media and modes, veterans and civilians jointly negotiate and interpret war experiences and work to restore order and social equilibrium. Their practices help construct meaning, memory, and identity for individual veterans, but they also engage in collective meaning-making, that is, they symbolize the veterans' reintegration into civil society because the participants act as representatives of their respective group.

However, the concept of ceremonial storytelling not only helps explain the cultural functions of activist discourse and civic engagement regarding war experience but it provided this study with a cultural-comparative lens for the readings of contemporary war narratives. Seen from the perspective of Indigenous war rituals, non-Native milblogs and homecoming scenarios can be interpreted as forms of ceremonial storytelling as well, as narrative rituals in which soldiers and veterans share experience and, in turn, receive symbolic acknowledgment, appreciation, and pledges to support from their mostly civilian audiences. In fact, this perspective makes apparent that civilians, in contributing to the exchange, are not mere audiences but, rather, active participants to such civic rituals. Milblogs manifest such ritualized exchanges in their practices of mourning for deceased soldiers, in their discussions of war stress, or in their commitment to community service in mentoring and culture brokering. The blogs' distinct textuality helps disseminate and popularize these practices. Moreover, it provides a virtual ritual ground, that is, a convergence space for the participants to meet and network, to share information, and to engage in expressions and symbolic exchanges of empathy.

Homecoming scenarios, like Indigenous rituals, bring veterans and civilians together for ceremonial reflections on war experience, often in a shared physical space where embodied practices take place. Yet, they also employ a variety of media, such as print, film, or new media, to disseminate their message, to store information, or to serve as virtual convergence spaces. While many of the conversations in milblogs and homecoming scenarios do not refer to Indigenous warrior traditions, nor self-consciously enact and frame their practices as 'rituals,' they can best be interpreted as forms of ceremonial storytelling because this perspective unveils the complexity of their cultural work. Interweaving the study of war narratives with the notion of ritual, the concept of ceremonial storytelling shows how the exchanges between soldiers, veterans, and civilians in milblogs and homecoming scenarios symbolically negotiate values and norms, construct and circulate knowledge, and constitute community and collective identity. It illustrates how deeply milblogs and homecoming scenarios are embedded in the ongoing activist discourse on war experience and, thus, how they take up and further develop the recurrent debates on stress, trauma, and civil-military relationships since Vietnam.