Emergent Ordinaries at Walter Reed Army Medical Center: An Ethnography of Extra/ordinary Encounter

by

Zoë Hamilton Wool

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Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation explores the inextricable relationship of the ordinary and extraordinary which characterizes the lives of U.S. soldiers severely injured in Iraq and Afghanistan and rehabilitating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C. in 2007-2008.

Living among their fellows and families at Walter Reed, the precariousness which marks injured soldiers’ bodies and lives takes on a feeling of ordinariness. And though these injured soldiers and their families do not quite coalesce into a community, their shared experience of being in common with each other—of sharing Walter Reed’s particular and precarious ordinary—helps make life there bearable.

Through a poetics of the extra/ordinary I explore how injured soldiers’ ordinariness bristles against inescapable invocations of patriotic sacrifice; the ways soldiers’ everyday movements are marked by being post-traumatic; and the reconfigurations of intimate social relations and masculinity such experiences occasion and out of which the possibilities and limits of a future life emerge.
I show that in this moment of life—one which unfolds in a space saturated with narratives of heroic patriotic sacrifice and histories of war and the remaking of men—ordinariness becomes central to injured soldiers’ current experiences and also to the future selves and social configurations they are oriented towards. I demonstrate how injured soldiers’ lives are also always attached to something that exceeds the ordinary; that they are extra/ordinary. But I argue that such extra/ordinariness is an amplification of life’s less notable uncertainties; that all lives are extra/ordinary.

Against the over-determining frames of heroism and trauma within which U.S. soldiers are figured, especially in post-9/11 America, I argue that injured U.S. soldiers’ experiences are neither simply knowable, nor unimaginable but recognizable as specifically tethered to, commensurable with, and distinguished from, more ‘ordinary’ others.
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First and foremost, I thank the soldiers families with whom I worked at Walter Reed. Not only did they allow—even encourage—me to be with them in a profoundly precarious moment, but they insisted on, and persisted in, the ordinariness of their lives. In doing this, often with a clarity and poetry that sometimes took me by surprise, they showed me how to pull at the thread of the extra/ordinary. I have done my best to work that thread with care and can only hope they recognize their extra/ordinary selves in this work.

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................................................ iv

Table of Contents......................................................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................................ ix

List of Appendices ........................................................................................................................................ xi

Preface ............................................................................................................................................................ xii

1 Introduction ................................................................................................................................................ 1
   1.1 What and Who This Dissertation Is About, in General and in Particular............................... 1
   1.2 Men and The Body of The Nation .............................................................................................. 17
   1.3 A Brief Note on Things I Do Not Say ..................................................................................... 24
   1.4 Forget the War on Terror ........................................................................................................... 26

2 The Scale of Encounter and the Poetics of the Extra/ordinary: Notes on The Approach To Everyday Life At Walter Reed ........................................................................................................ 29
   2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 29
   2.2 The Encounter .............................................................................................................................. 31
   2.3 The Extra/Ordinary ..................................................................................................................... 37
   2.4 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................... 48

3 The Extra/ordinary Atmosphere of Walter Reed ................................................................................... 50
   3.1 Walter Reed and Its Particulars .................................................................................................. 51
   3.2 The Miniscule War ....................................................................................................................... 55
   3.3 Vital Signs and Möbius Time ....................................................................................................... 62
   3.4 In-durable Sociality ..................................................................................................................... 75
   3.5 A Vignette of Thin Life ............................................................................................................... 83
   3.6 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................... 94

4 3. The Meanings of Walter Reed: A Fragmented History ..................................................................... 96
   4.1 The Messianic Present and The Story of The One-Legged Flier .............................................. 96
4.2 The Place and Purpose of Walter Reed ................................................................. 104
4.3 Acute Melancholy and Other Deadlinesses of Military Life ................................ 114
4.4 Patriotic Bodies Dramatizing National Feelings .................................................. 126
4.5 Conclusion: Walter Reed as an Uncanny Constellation of Nows and Thens .......... 139
5 The Economy of Patriotism ..................................................................................... 142
  5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 142
  5.2 The Claim of Sacrifice ......................................................................................... 146
  5.3 Thanks A Lot: The Problems of Gratitude and Its Stuff ..................................... 153
  5.4 If I Were a Carpenter ......................................................................................... 161
  5.5 Regular Steaks for Heroes .................................................................................. 168
  5.6 The Rule of Work, The Goodness of War, and The Edges of Regret ............... 175
  5.7 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 186
6 5. On Movement: The Contingencies of Space and Soldiers................................. 190
  6.1 Violent Transformations and The Analytics of Movement .............................. 190
  6.2 Marking Mobile Bodies and The Spatial Contingency of ‘Normal’ .................. 194
  6.3 Re-visioning Space and Being “Post-Traumatic” ............................................. 205
  6.4 The (Dis)Placement of PTSD .......................................................................... 216
  6.5 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 222
7 The Exfoliation of Life ............................................................................................. 226
  7.1 Introduction: Encountering Intimate Life ............................................................ 226
  7.2 Understanding Attachments: Masculinity, Solitude, and The Possibilities of Future Life ........................................................................................................ 229
  7.3 Threats to Life Part I: Solitude is Deadly ............................................................ 233
    7.3.1 Alec Alone, Awake and Asleep .................................................................... 234
    7.3.2 Daniel’s Solitude and The Im-possibilities of Kill or Be Killed .................. 238
  7.4 Threats to Life Part II: Intimacy Through Thick and Thin ................................. 245
7.4.1  Kin and The Conjugal Couple ................................................................. 247
7.4.2  Attached Dependents ................................................................................ 253
7.4.3  Reconfiguring In Dependencies.................................................................. 261
7.5  Conclusion: Being No Less of a Person .......................................................... 266
8  Conclusion........................................................................................................ 270
  Bibliography ...................................................................................................... 274
  Appendix A: Annotated Glossary of Abbreviations ........................................... 286
List of Figures

Figure 1. Fisher House living room at Fort Hood, Texas 9

Figure 2. Fisher House living room at Keesler Medical Center, Mississippi 9

Figure 3. Fisher House living room at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany 10

Figure 4. Fisher House living room at Naval Medical Center San Diego, California 10

Figure 5. Charlie in his room at Mologne House 91

Figure 6. Charlie and a volunteer from Angels of Mercy in the hospital at Walter Reed 93

Figure 7. Sports page of the New York Times, March 14, 1945 97

Figure 8. Red Cross donation plea, New York Times, March 14, 1945 101

Figure 9. Admiration Cigars advertisement, New York Times, March 14, 1945 101

Figure 10. Schoble Hats advertisement, New York Times, March 14, 1945 101

Figure 11. Plate of Walter Reed General Hospital c.1910 which was Fig. 88. of Lt. Col. Weed’s (1923) account of military hospitals during WWI 106

Figure 12. Page 16 of Col. Ayres (1919) “statistical summary” of WWI including “Diagram 3—Sources of the Army” 109

Figure 13. Map of Anthrax-related sites in the D.C. area and headline about the Anthrax scare from the Washington Post October 31, 2001, B7 112

Figure 14. Chart of “Total Hospital Cases in the A.E.F. from All Causes” from Col. Albert G. Love’s (1931) analysis of WWI casualties 118

Figure 15. “Army Officer Ends Life” New York Times, May 23, 1916 119

Figure 16. “Hospital Sets Pace in Soldier Salvage” New York Times April 15, 125
Figure 17. “Distinguished Visitors Call on Wounded Veterans.” *New York Times*
March 30, 1951

Figure 18. “Presenting First Korean Service Ribbon” *New York Times*
February 7, 1951

Figure 19. President George W. Bush presenting a Purple Heart at Walter Reed in 2008

Figure 20. Low-light camera footage of the rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch from Iraq in 2003

Figure 21. Pfc. Lynch receiving her Purple Heart at Walter Reed in 2003

Figure 22. CNN images of Bob Dole rehabilitating alongside injured soldiers at Walter Reed in 2010

Figure 23. CNN footage of Bob Dole rehabilitating alongside injured soldiers at Walter Reed in 2010

Figure 24. Front page of the February 18, 2007 *Washington Post*; the beginning of the Walter Reed scandal.

Figure 25. *Washington Post* photographer Michel duCille’s image of Spc. Jeremy Duncan and his mouldy walls at Walter Reed’s Building 18.

Figure 26. Freeper women on a Friday night at the gates of Walter Reed

Figure 27. A young Freeper on a Friday evening across the street from Walter Reed

Figure 28. A selection of images posted at Freerepublic.com of buses returning injured soldiers families home from Friday night steak dinners
List of Appendices

Appendix A. Annotated Glossary of Abbreviations
Preface

From September 2007 to August 2008 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork originally conceived of as exploring the “war on terror.”

This dissertation is based primarily on my work throughout that year with severely injured soldiers and their family members (including spouses, parents, siblings, kids, or some shifting combination thereof) rehabilitating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C. and living for some time at the communal Fisher House there. It also draws in places on my work with other soldiers I met in D.C.

I originally planned to be at Walter Reed for only two months, and then spend ten months at the Fort Dix, a large mobilization base in New Jersey. For a variety of reasons, the actual shape of my fieldwork was quite different. My ethnographic work at Walter Reed was concentrated in September 2007-November 2007 and May 2008-August 2008. From December 2008-February 2009, I focused on a number of other sites. I sat in on suicide prevention training for deploying soldiers at Ft. Dix, worked with Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), attended congressional hearings related to the “war on terror,” talked to think-tank affiliates who worked on relevant topics, and interviewed people in New York and D.C. ‘directly impacted’ by the 9/11 attacks. Though this yielded rich insights which I hope to pursue elsewhere, in the end I was drawn back to the lives of those I’d met at Walter Reed.

All names are pseudonyms and, where it did not compromise the significance of events, I have changed other details, such as soldiers’ home states, to help ensure anonymity.
1 Introduction

1.1 What and Who This Dissertation Is About, in General and in Particular.

The rehabilitating soldier conjures, and sometimes contains, the materiality of other places about which we both know and do not know: The contours of a residual limb may call to mind distant deserts and familiar declarations of righteous war. When they are present, these soldiers are often spoken for. Others speak about what a soldier has done and why, about the kind of person, and, normatively, the kind of man, he is. These pronouncements leak into him as if each fissure of his flesh, each stitch and PICC\(^1\) line which invalidated the boundary between his body and the world, also invalidated the limit of his self constitution, his ordinary privacy. In these intersubjective moments a particular soldier and his body are over determined, “sealed into crushing objecthood” (Fanon 1991, 109) by the invocation of the abstract figure of the soldier and its multiple meanings of heroism, patriotism, and national sacrifice, the trauma and violence of war, its containment, and its pathologies. Face to face with others at Walter Reed Army Medical Center a soldier in his marked body is made exemplary; generic and not allowed ordinary anonymity. He is “woven [by others] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (Fanon 1991, 111).\(^2\)

But while he is confronted with the generic histories and national values that are worked out on his body, and the images of patriotism, masculinity, and death that are projected on to his skin, the rehabilitating soldier at Walter Reed is also engaged in the excruciating process of

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1 Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter line.
2 While there are of course important differences between being “over determined from without” as a black man, as Fanon was, and being “over determined from without” as an American soldier, the resonance between the intersubjective predicament posed by blackness and that posed by the body of the injured soldier is one which Fanon himself points to in the closing lines of his essay “The Fact of Blackness” (Fanon 1991, 140).
learning to live with, in, and by, himself and the intimate others to whom he has been, or may become, attached. He is engaged in the project of coming to be a self in and through these relations, these intimate attachments, in a way that constitutes an intense amplification of the relational and intersubjective emergence of people in more ‘ordinary’ settings.

The theoretical questions that guide this dissertation are concerned with the ordinary. What does it mean to be ordinary, to live a life that feels ordinary? How does something come to be experienced as ordinary? In what kinds of situations is one’s ability, or right, to claim their life as ordinary and have such claims ratified, threatened, or weakened? In what ways might one forge a more solid, stable, fortified ordinary life in the midst of a marked existence?

These are questions which present themselves to me in thinking through the particularities of social life at Walter Reed Army Medical Center where I carried out my fieldwork between September 2007-August 2008 with U.S. soldiers who had been injured in Iraq and Afghanistan and who were living and rehabilitating there. The fact that these questions about the ordinary emerged through thinking about (and being in the midst of) a place and a group of people almost universally considered to be extraordinary is no accident. It is precisely under apparently extraordinary conditions that the ordinary becomes, as it were, questionable. In thinking through the meaning of ordinariness in the seemingly extraordinary context of Walter Reed, I arrive not at an understanding of a single ordinary and its limits, but at the notion that the feeling of ordinariness emerges out of social life, that new ordinaries are emergent in new social configurations and are felt in distinction from others, and that, most importantly of all, none of

3 In speaking of “intimate attachments” rather than, say, “close relationships” I intend to invoke a wide array of self founding relationships, connections of varying strength, durability, and torque that are anchored in bodies and the socially contingent understandings of their relative stability, wholeness, fragility, viability as human subjects. Rather than distinguishing a type of relation or degree of proximity between persons, I understand the notion of intimate attachments as a way of drawing close attention to the intersubjective production of more or less durable manifest selves. In doing this I draw largely on recent work of Judith Butler (2004; 2009) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2006).
these emergent ordinaries is separate from those ‘extra’ things from which it seems at first glance to be distinct; that every ordinary is in fact extra/ordinary.

The questionableness of the ordinary at Walter Reed, the thing that seems to set it apart from ‘ordinary’ American life, thus leads me to a proposition about a certain continuity (not to be confused with a straightforward sameness) between the marked lives of injured soldiers at Walter Reed and the unmarked lives of imagined ordinary others in America ‘out there’.

Exploring the forms of both public and intimate sociality at Walter Reed is thus also an exploration of the forms of life that such modes of social contact can constitute and an attempt to understand the ways such forms of life are rendered through experiences that are sometimes public and relatively staged and about being seen, spoken about, and made symbolically meaningful but also sometimes intimate. But there is also the more intimate dimension of experience in which bodies and their fleshy contact become constitutive of persons through the intimate attachments forged between them, rooted always in vulnerability (Butler 2004; Povinelli 2006).

And here is what, at the most abstract level, sets forms of life at Walter Reed apart from forms of life in America ‘out there’; on the one hand, these injured soldiers live with a greater degree of publicity and weight of symbolic meaning and on the other their profound and thorough precariousness raises the stakes of their intimate attachments. In the wake of the decisive violence of war, everything about these soldiers’ lives seems uncertain but also radically overdetermined. And it is in this space of life that soldiers are remaking themselves and the lives that they will have, processes which cannot, by their very definition, be completed in the uncertain and overdetermined space in which they must be attempted.

The themes that run through the historical and ethnographic material in this dissertation developed out of thinking through the particularities of Walter Reed’s historic significance and
the social life of the soldiers who I worked with there: the multiple and intertwined impacts of war injury on the physical, existential, and intimate social life of soldiers; the way that soldier’s war injuries problematize coherent frames for understanding soldiers, civilians, and national value; the visibility, invisibility, and containment of war violence in America; the confounding and often contradictory emphases on publicness and privateness that inhere in the exemplary national figure of the American soldier; the experience of occupying such a confounding position.

The theoretical themes through which I explore these particularities demonstrate the continuity between the ‘extraordinary’ problems and facts of social life and death at Walter Reed and more ‘ordinary’ problems and facts of social life and death: heteronormative masculinity and its physical and social entailments; intersubjectivity and the vulnerability that inheres in social life at all scales making possible both violence and intimacy (Butler 2004); the thickness and thinness, interdependencies and independences, of social relations that make a person who they are in a particular social world (Povinelli 2006). These theoretical themes are essential to understanding life at Walter Reed, and they are also relevant to understanding conditions of social life much more broadly.

At the heart of the matter I explore here is a generative tension. Walter Reed is a space of life marked by radical instability—of bodies, minds, selves, social and intimate attachments, physical locations, possible futures. But this instability is an exacerbation of the little chronic uncertainties of unmarked spaces of life, all those often negligible experiences of bodily fragility, intersubjectivity, dependency, and contingency that are not so simply part of ‘ordinary’ living. They are the extra features, inextricable from all kinds of ordinary life that make it always extra/ordinary, though it is in moments when they threaten to overtake the myth of life’s simple ordinariness, in abject spaces or places marked by violence, that they become most visible.
Though it is always there, the extra/ordinary becomes apparent when the ordinary becomes questionable.\(^4\)

In this sense, the reconstitution of life at Walter Reed, the goal of remaking oneself into a viable and ordinary and passable individual, with relatively ‘normal’ physical and social attachments, is an amplification of the activities of life anywhere and has a certain contiguity with and resemblance to even the most ordinary and seemingly banal spaces of life and activities of living quietly in the midst of others.

But it is also true that life at Walter Reed is marked. It is fraught with legacies of war, the strictures of the American military, a deep acquaintance with death, public performances of patriotism, and experiences of physical pain that not only set soldiers apart as a common lot, but that threaten to make life dangerously thin and even to set each injured soldier apart from his family and fellows through the transitional and transient nature of life there and the problem of pain that makes life and its sustaining attachments so heartbreakingly doubtable (Scarry 1985).

The task at hand, the aspiration of this dissertation, is to convey this markedness, the particular intensity of the extra/ordinary at Walter Reed, while suggesting that the apparently radical difference between the lives of injured soldiers at Walter Reed and lives that are recognized as ordinary is not, in fact, one that goes to the root. That the exigencies of coming back to life at Walter Reed are experienced, and best understood, not primarily through their distance from what we think of as ordinary American life, but through their intimacy with it; as iterations of more familiar facts of life which only become apparent as they are amplified in the

\(^4\) Life at Walter Reed is one example. Others include many of the circumstances in which the other anthropologists and theorists I draw on work: e.g. the grinding poverty of aboriginal communities in North Western Australia (Povinelli 2006); the legacies and potentialities of “ethnic” violence among India’s urban poor (Das 2007); the abjection of urban Brazilians abandoned by their families because of physical and mental illness and economic burden (Biehl 2005); the stakes of thinking deeply about the meaning and value of life after September 11th (Butler 2009; 2004); a foundation of ethics that begins with the possibility of murder (Levinas 1980).
intensity of a place like Walter Reed. I suggest that the ordinariness of the supposedly extraordinary resides in the inseparability of the two, the way in which all modes of life can be understood as extra/ordinary.

It is in this context, against the assumption that injured soldiers’ lives are extraordinary and entirely unlike our own, that the ordinary takes on a vital importance. It is in this context that having a life that is felt and seen to be ordinary becomes inextricable from the very question of living. The poetics of the extra/ordinary take on their social importance when we carefully consider these particular amplifications of life.

And so this is not an ethnography of Walter Reed in perhaps the most classic sense: It is not a description of the running or functioning of an institution, or, first or foremost, a rich exemplar the culture of American military rehabilitation, or even a generalizable account of what life is like at a military hospital for a group of American soldiers during times of war—the soldiers there do not, in any durable way, constitute a group. What is generalizable about their circumstances is not the facts of their condition, but the experience of profound precariousness.

Rather, this is an exploration of the particularities of a situation in which life itself—its contours, temporality, and constitution—is rendered up as a central question. Situated within an afterwar of injured American soldiers engaged in the intimate project of coming to live that unfolds within a stubbornly public space, saturated by a history of patriotism, masculinity,

5 In making the claim that there is not a radical difference between such marked lives and those graced with recognition as ordinary, I do not mean to suggest that there are no differences. Indeed, there are differences that matter a great deal. But one of the pains of difference, one of the ways markedness mars, is that it ignores an experience of shared humanity and imperils the humanity of the marked (a point made so poignantly by Franz Fanon in the context of anti-colonial struggle). The point is not to say, for example, that a non-disabled person feels or is subject to the world in the same way as a disabled person, since that is a flagrant minimization of both the privilege of the non-disabled and the marginalization and dehumanization of the disabled. My point is rather to acknowledge that the difference is not radical: it does not go to the root, and that there is a sameness that allows the gap of others ‘unimaginable’ experience to be bridged.

6 I adapt the term ‘afterwar’ from Lori Grinker’s remarkable and deeply thoughtful project of soldier portraits that began with work with Israeli soldiers in 1986 and continued for 15 years. See Grinker 2005.
fitness, national allegories of the value of war, and the particular iteration of these public meanings in an America six years after the event of 9/11, this dissertation concerns the possibilities of life.

It explores what it is like to be blown up as an American soldier and to then be pulled towards an ordinary, American, non-soldiering life while stuck in a place which, with all its proliferating claims about the injured soldier as a hero, a “tactical athlete,” a family man who is “no less of a person,” seems to protest so much that all these possibilities of life are called frighteningly into question. An ordinary future orients these soldiers like a cardinal direction and pulls them on like a polar force, but it is threatened by the inextricable excesses—of publicity, of pain, of uncertainty—that mark soldiers’ lives at Walter Reed.

The three core ethnographic chapters in this dissertation (“The Economy of Patriotism” “On Movement” and “Life Exfoliated”) are not organized chronologically, but their structure does reflect something of the course of my fieldwork.

They move from things that were immediately present on the surface, things that I knew I would write about, to the experiences that were harder to figure, and that I wasn’t at all sure I could write about. These chapters can also be seen as proceeding along a path of increasing intimacy, from structured encounters with strangers, to casual encounters in common spaces, to intimate encounters at ‘home’. They also move from most to least explicitly grounded in the icons of patriotic military service and public narrations of iconic war pathologies that this dissertation attempts to challenge and revise through a particular attunement to injured soldiers,

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7 The term physical and occupational therapists use to describe soldiers in the rehabilitation program at Walter Reed. See Messinger (2009) and Linker (2011) for further discussion.
8 This was the headline of the July 4th 2010 New York Times cover story about quadruple amputee and Walter Reed patient Spc Brendan Marrocco which I discuss further in Chapter Six.
their encounters, and the grip of the extra/ordinary in a moment of sometimes dangerously thin life.

Many of these encounters took place at the Fisher House at Walter Reed. The Fisher House Foundation is a non-profit organization started by Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher in 1990 to build “comfort houses” attached to VA (Department of Veterans Affairs) and military hospitals. The houses were primarily intended to be used by veteran’s family members who might want to be near their loved ones when they were being treated for some illness or injury, the typical picture at the time was of an elderly veteran succumbing to the illnesses of age. One story goes that the idea came to the Fishers after hearing the story at a fundraising dinner of a veteran’s wife who had great difficulty being with her husband while he was being treated for cancer at a VA hospital.

As of this writing, the foundation has built 53 houses. Each house functions as its own non-profit organization, raising its own money, and sorting out its own arrangement with the commander or administrator of the military or VA hospital it’s attached to. And though the houses are “professionally furnished and decorated in the tone and style of the local region”9 they are uncannily similar; each a tactile and visual display of normative American notions of home and family, the importance of which is captured in the ubiquitous Fisher House motto “a home away from home”.

The ordinariness designed into these generic homes, their modern arrangements of living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms, their TVs and stockpiles of children’s toys, their insinuations of normative social attachments, are intended to surround soldiers and their families in the midst of extraordinary experience, offering them a strange domestic simulacra: “a home

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away from home”; a contradiction in terms that speaks rather literally to the discomfort of the *unheimlich*.

Every house features a small front portico, with decorations that change with the seasons: a scarecrow in fall, a wreath in winter, perhaps some red, white, and blue bunting for the 4th of July. Every front door opens into an entrance way at the back of which is a bronze bust of either Zachary or Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher. To the left, is the generously sized dining room, to the right the large living room, complete with built in book cases stacked with paperbacks and board games which frame (where in keeping with the “tone of the local region”) a fireplace. Above the mantle (or, in warmer climes, in its place) is invariably mounted the same huge photograph of Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher in their twilight years, arm in arm in matching leather bomber jackets, like the house’s warm and watchful patriarch and matriarch. From Landstuhl, Germany to Ft. Hood, TX, Fisher House managers pose in front of this homey tableau with novelty checks and proud and grateful donors, military and civilian alike.

10 “Fort Hood Fisher House manager Isaac Howard, shakes hands Monday with Capt. Vonda Conlon, treasurer of the Brothers In Arms Motorcycle Club Central Texas Chapter and a member of First Army Div. West. The motorcycle club made a donation to the Fisher House of nearly $1,500 that members raised during a fun run the group sponsored in June. All Brothers In Arms members are either currently serving or former service members. Also pictured are (left to right): Sgt. 1st Class Angel Maldonado, Lt. Col. Concetta Holloway, retired Sgt. 1st Class Danny Conlon and Sgt. 1st Class Royce Williams. Sgt. 1st Class Gail Braymen, Div. West Public Affairs” Ft Hood Sentinel September 16th, 2010 http://www.forthoodsentinel.com/story.php?id=4817 accessed November 1, 2010.
In the back of the house, there will be a kitchen, with an island counter in the middle, and lots of storage so that each resident family can have their own cupboard marked with a number corresponding to the number of their bedroom. There will be, wherever possible, a kitchen door, and a patio or a back yard. The bedrooms line the halls that flank the house and, when there is a second floor, they also line its hallway. Each bedroom will have a bed and a chair and a desk and an armoire and its own bathroom. In their regional variations, every Fisher House is ‘homey’, and appointed with soft couches and chairs, wooden floors and rugs, warm neutral colors on the walls and in the patterns of the curtains. There is always a perfect spot for the Christmas tree. Alcohol is never allowed. Smoking is only permitted outside.


12 A check ceremony at the Fisher House at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, http://www.nancygaskins.com/A_NancyGaskinsHome.html, accessed November 1, 2010

At Walter Reed, there are actually three separate Fisher Houses. I spent most of my time in the newest of them, House III, Building 56 on the Walter Reed Army Medical Center maps. House III has mottled grayish-brown tiles in the hallways, and a big soft grey rug in the living room. Its granite counter tops and stainless steel fridge are decidedly more modern than the folksy oak of House I, the oldest of the Fisher Houses. Its red brick exterior is surrounded by a well-manicured lawn and modestly landscaped plant beds often tended to in the spring and fall by groups of volunteers from local businesses or schools.

The walls are mauve and the trim and moldings are wide, white, and plentiful, lending the space a kind of old-moneyed elegance. There are framed pictures of the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum (a converted aircraft carrier docked off Manhattan in the Hudson River; another of Zachary Fisher’s initiatives) and artsy black and white photos of unidentifiable architectural elements along with prints of the American flag and monochrome paintings of trees that blend unmemorably and inoffensively into the walls.

Divided from the kitchen by a breakfast bar, there is a den with a huge TV and a big soft red couch, a pair of upholstered chairs, a coffee table, magazine rack, and small computer table with a new computer and desk chair on wheels. It is here, in the kitchen and the den, next to the laundry room with its stacks of modern white washers and dryers and the storeroom full of food and diapers and t-shirts and teddy bears, that much of the little activities of life continue, where soldiers kill time flopped on the couch watching “How It’s Made” or “Worlds Wildest Police Videos”, where babies sit in bouncy chairs while people putter with the dishes or show off new wheelchairs or share tidbits of gossip while snacking on coke or Girl Scout cookies or ice cream, where soldiers or their mothers or wives make lunch, a bacon and turkey sandwich, some frozen tater tots, a can of soup, a Red Bull, spaghetti and meat sauce, ground beef and beans and corn tortillas made from Maseca.
In the back, through the kitchen door, there is the patio with its poured concrete ground and red brick retaining wall. Beyond that, there is a play structure for the kids, the ground below it softened by woodchips, but it is seldom used. The attractive round metal tables and bounceable chairs are home to endless hours of cigarettes and chit chat, to mothers who sit and knit or read with endless cups of coffee while they attempt to give their sons, and perhaps themselves, some time unattached. When the weather is nice, soldiers’ young kids may be out there too, getting hosed off from the heat, set up with some toys on a blanket on the ground, wanting a turn at their father’s remote control helicopter whose movements he announces in fluent military argot complete with call signs. The communal space of the patio is also often given over to barbeques, organized by volunteer and troop booster organizations, who arrive early in the afternoon to set up extra tables, line them with red white and blue table cloths, and arrange their coolers full of soda, huge bowls of coleslaw, and gratuitous supplies of hamburgers and hot dogs. Often soldiers and their families are out numbered by volunteers wielding barbeque tongs and big, well-meaning smiles.

Nearly all of the soldiers I met at the Fisher House were lower ranking enlisted members of various Army branches. Most had enlisted in their state’s National Guard or Army Reserve sometime since 2003—two years after 9/11 and the year of the invasion of Iraq. Most were between the ages of 19-25 and had been seriously injured, many requiring one or more amputation, on their first deployments in Iraq, mostly by an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) or EFP (Explosively Formed Projectile), and some by other large munitions like RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades).

There are many exceptions to this generalization. For example, of the soldiers I knew I spent the most time with Jake who was promoted to Sergeant during the course of my fieldwork and so became an NCO (Non-commissioned Officer). There was one soldier there who hadn’t
been blown up but rather shot at long range by a rifle causing multiple fractures to one arm. Kevin had been injured in Afghanistan, not Iraq, as I discuss in *The Economy of Patriotism*. Alec, who features prominently in *The Exfoliation of Life*, the dissertation’s final chapter, is an exception on many counts: He was in his early 30s, was the only medic I knew at Walter Reed and though he had been blown up he kept both his legs, though he couldn’t much use them.

In the chapter *On Movement* I draw on my work with non-injured veterans outside of Walter Reed. There, Gavin is exceptional for being most marked by his time in Afghanistan even though he also served in Iraq and Cuba, and for having served with the Marines. Also in that chapter, I discuss my interview with Sophia, the only female soldier in this dissertation. She served in a combat hospital in Iraq. Gavin and Sophia are also the only two soldiers in this dissertation who joined the military before 9/11.

There are those, and other exceptions, but there is also a coherence to these varied experiences with war. There are many broad generalizations I could make that suggest, more or less, the shape of the lives that populate this dissertation. I could tell a composite story about a teenager who signs up at the age of 17 because joining the Army seems like the least worse option, and because the recruiter in his public school lunch room in suburban Georgia seemed like a really good guy, and because his father and uncle and cousin were all in for a while so it is easily within the realm of possibility. And maybe he meets a girl who he marries and impregnates in a fit of the vigor and responsibility and panic that he finds in the Army just before he gets shipped off to some desert city full of targets he is itching to shoot at. And maybe he is bored by all the nothing that seems to add up to war and he gets high as a fucking kite off of combat and then one day he’s sitting in a tank with the com system hooked up to his iPod and then there is force and heat and fire and pain and his leg isn’t his leg anymore because it’s decomposed into its constituent parts that look like any other kind of meat and everything is
different only in lots of ways it’s all just the same because he’s still bored and gets high as a fucking kite off of combat.

I could tell a story like that, but such generalizations are too clumsy. Like rag dolls; parodies of the human form cobbled together from bits that don’t quite fit, each piece losing its color as it is cut from the life to which it belongs.

Instead of generalizations, I could rely on statistics to count up all the particulars and position the lives I describe in this dissertation as exemplary, as particulars more or less like all the rest. I could say that between 9/11 and June 2008, Walter Reed was home to 7,800 of the 33,572 service members officially wounded in action in the campaigns called OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) and OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom)—the two main fronts in the official entity known as GWOT (Global War On Terror).  

I could say that as of January 19th 2009, OEF and OIF had caused the amputations of 1,184 limbs, 55% of them due to IED blasts. 

I could tell you that between 2003-2007, the Military Heath System spent $23.2 Million on prescription drugs for TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) and PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder), or that at least 20% of returning service members (now over 2 million individual people) are thought to suffer from PTSD. 

14 WRAMC figures from http://www.wramc.army.mil/Lists/WRNews/DispForm.aspx?ID=85; these casualty figures are compiled from icasualty.org (30,941 OIF wounded between May 2003-December 2008) and the Congressional Research Service’s recent report on OEF casualties (2,631 OEF wounded between 2001-2008 [Chesser 2011]). Updated and comprehensive U.S. military casualty figures dating back to 1980 the Department of Defense (DoD) figures are also available at http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm
16 (Chiarelli 2010); (RAND 2008).
I could tell you that in 2010, military suicide rates surpassed civilian ones, and that rates for suicide and PTSD are higher in the Army, the deadliest branch of service from whence come about 80% of medical evacuations.

I could tell you that only about 20% of OEF/OIF medical evacuations are occasioned by combat injuries and a roughly equal percentage are due to ‘non hostile action’ and that the majority of evacuations are due, as has long been the case in American wars overseas, to illness and disease.

I could tell you that of the twenty-four pay grades in the U.S. Army, 61% of Army personnel are concentrated in the lowest five, or that people categorized as Black are significantly overrepresented in the middle ranks (pay grades E6-E9).

I could tell you that people categorized as White are overrepresented in all Officer ranks and that their disproportionate presence increases the higher you go. But then I’d want to mention that they’re also overrepresented at the bottom (pay grades E1-E4).

I could tell you that when you break death rates down by race, Whites are a bit more likely to die than Blacks or Hispanics, given their representation in the force. And I could tell

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17 This information comes from Gen. Chiarelli’s Army report *Harm Prevention, Risk Reduction, and Suicide Prevention* released on July 29th 2010.
20 Percentages for general population and Army population are: White 79.6%, 70.6%; Hispanic 15.8%, 9.9%; Black 12.9%, 16.8%. Gen population numbers are from [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html), accessed October 1, 2010; Army numbers are from DEMOI’s 2008 report cited above.
21 According to DoD categories and statistics, Whites are about 70% of active duty forces and about 77% of the deaths, for Blacks the rough numbers are 16% of the force and 8.5% of the deaths, Hispanics are about 10% of the force, and roughly the same percentage of deaths (these numbers are from the DEOMI 2008 report and the Congressional Research Service document cited above).
you that despite all that, recruiters almost always fall short of meeting their targets for minority groups and exceed their targets for Whites.\textsuperscript{22}

I could tell you all of these very specific things. I could share these actuarial trivia which, despite, or perhaps because of, the military’s propensity to count and keep records, are so hard to figure that the closer you look the fuzzier they get.

But while these fuzzy numbers might manage to confirm or complicate your ideas about who is in the Army and who dies and is hurt there these days, they don’t tell you what it is like to be one of these particulars. And they don’t tell you anything about the strange experience of being rigorously and publicly counted and accountable, counted on and accounted for. They say nothing of the strange sort of exemplariness by which all these particular people are supposed to be characterized.

And so, this dissertation is written in a different register, in an attempt to understand and convey how the general saturates the particular and how the particular complicates the general. These same themes are threaded through the dissertation in questions about expectations and exceptions, about the generic example and the actual instance, and about how we tell one from the other and when it matters that we do.

I think here of one particular soldier I knew, Javier: While working on a grant application based on this work, I meant to speak generically of some of the ways soldiers' bodies are marked by the violence of war. I meant to write “the blue-green bits of shrapnel beneath their skin.” Instead, I wrote “the blue-green bits of shrapnel beneath his skin.”

To write my 'generic' description, I bring to my own mind the face of one particular soldier I knew. Not even his face, just his left cheek and jaw that were peppered by these bits of

\textsuperscript{22} 2005 is an exception. This was also the only year since 1999 that the Army did not meet its overall recruiting goals http://www.usarec.army.mil/hq/apa/download/Missions1974-2009.doc
metal. I remember it shiny, slathered with ointment after a laser treatment to remove them. His face helps me see the colour of shrapnel, almost like something organic, an ingrown hair, a five o'clock shadow hovering beneath the skin.

But in the act of writing, I am betrayed. I don't remember this mnemonic image, this icon. I remember Javier. Like each piece of metal lodged beneath his flesh, his shining face has a history and a life that inhabits. I realize that there is no such thing as generic shrapnel.

And so this dissertation is an attempt to convey a very particular circumstance of life and the particularities that make it so. I suggest that the qualities of living I convey are essential to what it was to be an injured soldier at Walter Reed in 2007-2008 and that being is inextricable from American histories of war, ideologies of patriotism, national economies of moral debt, as well as normative forms of life and social attachment. These particularities are formed in relation to these generalities; the now exists only in its constellation with the then.

And so this dissertation is about how ordinary life is only and always contingent and how, their lives freighted with sometimes overwhelming significance, the soldiers with whom I worked at Walter Reed are exemplary in their living of extra/ordinary lives.

1.2 Men and The Body of The Nation

In the United States, where there is no compulsory military service and, since 1973, no draft, and where the image of the soldier has long been coloured by the shifting hopes and anxieties of the nation, soldiers themselves have long lived in a public imaginary that links them to heroism and exceptional patriotic service (Allen 1999). This heroism and patriotism have also always been linked to the violence of war and to the foundational violence of the state (Johnston 2007) that, through the ironic logic of the state of exception (Schmitt 1934; Agamben 2005) is
both the guarantor of democracy and the threat of its hiatus. The American soldier is thus a deeply ambivalent figure: even his valour is rooted in specifically national violence.

This long standing ambivalence is captured in the Janus faced soldier figure Lutz encounters in her work at Fort Bragg and the sister-town of Fayetteville, North Carolina (Lutz 2001) during the “hot peace” of the 1990s. Through their own everyday experiences and encounters with soldiers, citizens of Fayetteville come to know soldiers as both the archetypes of masculine morality and discipline and also as debauched and transient inhabitants of their home town; as men (usually) who heroically serve and sacrifice for the nation, and as parasitic and over-entitled consumers who don’t pay their fare share. Lutz succinctly describes this contradictory figure in her discussion of the public notions of the civilian-soldier relationship in WWII. On the one hand civilians feared that returning soldiers would create a havoc of crime and unrest. […] Fear about the soldiers’ antisocial tendencies was evident throughout WWII. [North Carolina’s] main black newspaper published a poem, for example, written in defense of the soldier:

Everybody cheers a soldier,  
On his fighting way.  
And then they call him a ‘hero’  
When in the grave he lay.

Well, a soldier’s greatest battle,  
Is in the time of peace  
When every body scorn[s] him,  
And treat[s] him like a ‘Beast’

And now with these few remarks, I must close  
And I hope you won’t offend.  
But the next time you meet a soldier,  
Just treat him as a friend.
At the same time, soldiers had been depicted in advertising and official rhetoric as “friendly, generous, easy-going, brave, the citizen soldier[s] of America,” and people knew that the ranks included people as loving, talented, young, good-humored, handsome, and healthy as their own sons, brothers, and husbands. [Lutz 2001:81-82]

Among the things that tie these public faces of the soldier together are his connection to the state and its imagined national population, and his embodied masculinity. These two essential features of the figure of the soldier are not incidental, since the physical and discursive production of certain kinds of bodies has long been a seminal activity of the state. For example, Foucault has demonstrated that both sex and reproduction, and the maintenance and regulation of socially constituted bodies (including that of the soldier), are fundamental to the establishment and government of modern national populations (Foucault 1990; 1995). Processes of imaginatively and materially constituting the nation are also always about the imaginative and material production and configuration of particular kinds of bodies (Kimmel 2006; Mayer 1999; Mostov 1999; Povinelli 1999; Mosse 1985). 23 24 Sexuality—normative, pathologizing, and

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23 The recent attention to dead and suffering bodies that are foundational to nationalism and sovereignty are an important dimension of this work (e.g. Das 2007, see esp. 18-37; Ticktin 2006; Mmembe 2003; Castronovo 2001; Verdery 1999). As many of these works also insist, the making of national bodies is racializing as well as gendering (and, as Breckenridge and Vogler [2001] add, abelizing). I give race a tangential position here, as I explain below, and I hope it does not impoverish my analysis too much.

24 Perhaps an effect of his emphasis on language, Anderson’s (2006) treatment of both corporeal bodies and gender is remarkably thin and unelaborated in his seminal work, despite his oft cited recognition of the fraternity of nationalism, the significance to his argument of notions like naturalization, innateness, and nativity, race, or stock and the fact that he concludes the introduction to Imagined Communities with soldierly deaths and begins its first substantive chapter with the monument to the (missing) dead body of the soldier (who, it goes without saying in his opening passages, is male) (Anderson 2006, 7,9). I am surprised that, although his denotation of nationalism as a “fraternity” of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 2006) is generically, rather than specifically male (he writes that this fraternity “makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people” [my emphasis] to die for “such limited imaginings” [ibid.]), it is cited as the main example of his attention to the gendering of nationalism (see Hatem 2000: 33; Mayer 1999: 6).
often public—is central to how a nation imaginatively and juridically constitutes its citizenry, its territories, and their limits (Berlant 1997; McClintock 1995).

And as Mosse demonstrates in his accounts of modern masculinity in the West, normative masculinity, always inextricable from a tangle of morality, sexuality, aspirational idealism and productive sociality, has also been a site of national reproduction (Mosse 1998; 1985). What’s more, he argues, since at least the end of the 18th century this burden of national self-making was carried largely by the idealized bodies of men. Notions of virility and physical and moral fitness of the men and their nation, the nation and its men, were inextricable and not only projected onto fit male bodies but enacted in aggressive and sometimes deadly contact between them (Mosse 1998:16-24). He argues that the “astonishing continuity” (1998:77) in the notion of normative masculinity in the West is in large part because “from its beginning, the manly ideal was co-opted by modern nationalism” (1998: 77).

Perhaps not surprisingly then, images of American soldier bodies have—especially since WWI—been the epitome of national bodily ideals, the health, wealth, and the order of the state read through them as well as a fetishized symbol of the ‘Beastly’ (as Lutz’ quoted poet put it) acts it entails. The image and physicality of the soldier body can thus be understood to belong to the nation in myriad ways; as shaped by national imaginings and disciplinary techniques, as a subject made visible by its logic and an object that acts on its behalf.25 But the nature of this belonging, this relationship between the nation and the soldiers it imagines, has always been fraught and characterized by contradictions rooted in the national violence of war.

Writing against the idea of American martial imagery as purely propagandistic or romantic, Andrew J. Huebner demonstrates that there have long been images emphasizing not

25 For a preliminary and wide ranging international exploration of the long standing connection between masculinities, militaries, identity and the state, see Higate 2003.
just the seedy side of soldiering in war and peace alike, but the horror of war and the stoic helplessness of the soldier in its midst which circulated in previous eras—even without the help of the contemporary media infrastructure—through letters, poems, and especially songs, which are well documented at least as far back as the Civil War (Huebner 2008: 9-12, 280-282).

But even Huebner’s alternative figure of the suffering soldier (as opposed to the ‘Beastly’ second face of the soldier in Lutz’ account) contains within him the heroism of his more well-known, and less dynamic brother; the poster boy of wartime propaganda and nationalistic narratives. While the suffering soldier is vulnerable to the ravages of war, his quiet, begrudging existence (or even death) in its midst are a testament to his heroism. As Mosse notes, even Erich Maria Remarque’s powerful pacifist WWI novel All Quiet on the Western Front is full of “the manly qualities of endurance and calmness in battle” (Mosse 1998: 108).

The heroic patriotism of the soldier informed the treatment of Vietnam veterans, that epitome of the image of the broken and dangerous soldier, perhaps even the anti-soldier, who combines both suffering and beastliness. For example, in Bob Green’s collection of Vietnam homecoming stories, the notorious experiences of being vilified by civilians are sometimes also accompanied by free drinks and patriotic stories in local papers (Greene 1989). Even Ron Kovic’s memoir and testament to the destructiveness of war, Born on the Fourth of July, describes his experience as a special guest at a Memorial Day parade (Kovic 1977).26 Though

26 Though a comparative project is outside the scope of this dissertation, I am reminded of a conversation I had at the U.S. Army’s Landstuhl Regional Medical Center with two Romanian soldiers who had been severely injured together—one by a land mine, one by an IED—on one of the last patrols of their deployment to Afghanistan with NATO forces in 2006. They explained to me two related national narratives that plagued them and, according to one of them, imperiled their return to happy civilian life. People said that Romania had no business in Afghanistan and was sending soldiers to die there as part of the cost of their bid for EU membership. People also called Romanian soldiers who joined the military and went to Afghanistan “mercenaries” (this was the word the two Romanian soldiers used); immoral men who killed for money. These Romanian narratives about soldiers are no doubt coloured both by its status on the European periphery and the legacies of its own violent history of nationalism. I mention them here to gesture at the particularity of the American case.
seemingly incommensurate, aspects of seediness, horror, and heroism are also entwined and woven into the image of the American soldier, even those whose bodies, minds, and very selves are understood to have been devastated by violence carried out both by and against them in the name of the nation (though not necessarily with its whole hearted support).

So while the fighting soldier body has been disciplined and ennobled, decried and obscured, displayed and defaced, the injured soldier body, which insinuates a threatening display of just one of the many deadlinesses that undergird the existence of the modern state, has been handled differently.

The bodies of injured WWI soldiers were the focus and impetus for the foundation, in earnest, of a science of rehabilitation in the United States (Linker 2011). From its start, this coordinated treatment of injured soldier bodies was inextricable from both the notions of normative masculinity in which the soldier body had long been rooted, and also the ideal forms of productive and independent social and family life that were central to the ideals of “Americanism.” As Dr. Charles Mayo (co-founder, with his brother William, of the Mayo Clinic) put it in his remarkable 1917 inaugural address as president of the American Medical Association:

great industries have in the past unnecessarily destroyed thousands of human lives and turned on the public many more thousands of cripples dependant on public charity.[…]

The economic law of supply and demand has gradually been brought into force, and the waste of human life must cease. We hear on every hand of projects and efforts for the conservation of human life, a movement which is the outcome not of any philanthropy or sentiment but of necessity. Men can no longer be replaced with the old time ease, and their individual value to the community has increased accordingly. […]
Now that the war is producing injuries by the thousands, a new impetus is given this work, that by training in special employment and artificial aids such persons may be as happy as possible and self-supporting, and not mentally disabled and a drag on the community [Mayo 1918]

Like the image of the (fighting and normatively functional) soldier body, the treatment of the injured soldier body, especially the amputee, was addressed to national ideals grounded in normative notions of stable and productive male bodies arranged in familiar physical and social configurations. As Linker notes in her history of rehabilitation in WWI America “rehabilitation was thus a way to restore social order after the chaos of war by (re)making men into producers of capital. Since wage earning often defined manhood, rehabilitation was, in essence, a process of making a man manly” (2011: 4).

Reflecting on a century of war and rehabilitation at Walter Reed, Linker writes “then, as now, rehabilitation holds out the promise that the wounds of war can be healed (and thus forgotten) on the national as well as individual level” (2011:7). Work on the body of the injured soldier—rehabilitative and imaginative alike—is also work to smooth over the ordinariness of life in contemporary America, to obscure the violence and pain of war in gestures of hope and gratitude. In the midst of this reconstruction, this public and intimate reconstitution of the injured soldier is thus addressed both to the public, generic figure of the soldier and to the intimate ordinary man he may become. This is a kind of doubled position; both staged and closed; both institutional and domestic; both overdetermined and self founding; and never only one or the other.

And in this context, sexuality, masculinity, fitness, economic independence and future life can become mutually indexical of each other, a multilayered site of the rearticulation of
personhood projected, in the context of rehabilitation, towards an unmarked future ordinary life. In this context, soldiers are collectively, and often compliantly, exploring possible futures, imagining normative futures in which they can, through the “bootstrap performatives” of autological self making (“I discover myself.” “I am.” “I desire.” “I give of myself.”), inhabit the preferred mode of liberal self sovereignty (Povinelli 2006: 183-85). It is within this nexus of America and its productive bodies, violence and its in/visibilities, masculinity and the stakes of its fleshy and flawed appearances in the body of the (injured) soldier, that this dissertation unfolds.

1.3 A Brief Note on Things I Do Not Say

To some readers, there will be a notable absence in this dissertation of explicit discussion of women and femininity, class, and race. My attention to the sociological categories of class and race is, I hope, implicit in my attention to the lives I describe here. My attention reflects the attention given these categories by the soldiers I worked with; they became relevant in particular moments of interaction but were not the explicit focus of great elaboration.

I use masculine pronouns ‘he’ and ‘his’ in the text intentionally, not generically. The reasons for this are twofold: there was only one soldier who was a woman who I worked with, and because, as I discuss above, the soldier as an abstract figure in the contemporary American context is undeniably male. For these same reasons, being a ‘female soldier’ is a profoundly complex subject position, as is being an injured female soldier. Former Major Tammy Duckworth and former Lieutenant Dawn Halfaker have both spoken publicly about their

27 On the politics of visible and invisible bodies in America, see (Casper and Moore 2009).
28 For a very careful discussion of the issue of gendering U.S. soldiers in text see MacLeish 2010: 27-31.
experiences as woman amputees, and there is an increasing attention to women in the military in general with films like Lioness (McLagan and Sommers 2008) and organizations like The Minerva Center. Almost all of the women in this dissertation appear in their connection to injured soldier husbands or sons. As I have revised chapters, their lives have receded into the background. In order to make space for the experiences of soldiers at the centre of this dissertation, I have pushed their wives and mothers to the margins, and occasionally off the page all together. But, as I hope will still be clear, their lives are no less complex, and no less marked by the violence of war, than their soldier sons and husbands and are worthy of a dissertation all their own.

Finally, throughout the dissertation, as I write of ‘the violence of war,’ I am also keenly aware of the violence I do not note. I think in particular of the civilians whose worlds and lives these soldiers have invaded in the course of their work and whose deaths have made up an estimated 90% of war casualties since the 1990s. This is a direct consequence of the array of technologies of modern warfare, from Predator drones to car bombs, and of the rationales and logistics of modern war which have not admitted the contained space of the battlefield since at least the total war of WWII. I only hope that this silence does not suggest that these unwritten lives and deaths and sufferings are ungrievable (Butler 2009), or somehow less human that those I do describe. I hope that this silence does not contribute to the weighing of the benefits of ‘war on terror’, the attempt to mound one side of the scale with things like “Iraqi democracy” or “Afghan women’s rights” or “free Arab press” while the dead weight of soldiers, civilians, and national debt get heavier and heavier by the day.

29 Dawn Halfaker is featured in the HBO documentary produced by James Gandolfini Alive Day (Alpert and Goosenberg 2007). In particular, her comments powerfully convey her unresolved struggles around the possibilities of motherhood which, I think, might form an important point of departure for an exploration of these experiences.
30 http://www.unicef.org/graca/patterns.htm accessed August 1, 2010
1.4 Forget the War on Terror

When originally conceived, this project was about the “war on terror” and the way it caught particular people up in its strange and ever shifting purview. I had imagined being at Walter Reed would constitute only two of my twelve months of fieldwork, and that, in the end, I would write about the disordered enactment of the “war on terror” and all the soldiers who cared about it and all the soldiers who didn’t.

At the end of October, 2007, when I had been at Walter Reed for about six weeks, it occurred to me that this was not what my research was about. I had begun to think about what I was doing, and seeing, and who I was doing and seeing it with, and this clever idea about the “war on terror” had begun to seem contrived and unserviceable. Jake had become my ‘key informant’ (though you might think otherwise from his comparatively small presence in this dissertation). It was in the ordinary spaces of the Fisher House that I got to know Jake, who, after our first conversation, said he’d been mostly hiding in his room, watching DVDs and playing Xbox since his wife, pregnant with their second child, had gone back home to South Carolina. It was out on the patio in its yielding metal chairs one afternoon where he told me that the men on the American side of his family had served in “every war” but that still, his father, retired from his Air Force career, had been unhappy when he’d decided to join the Army. I asked him what the other side of his family was. “From Guam” he said, “right near Japan.”

His mother had moved to Virginia to be near him as he struggled with the effects of the TBI he sustained in an IED explosion outside one of Iraq’s historic and holy cities in 2006. He explained that the pressure from the tight, grey, knitted cap, he often wore, even in D.C.’s summer heat, helped alleviate his incessant headaches. He told me excitedly that in five weeks, he would finally have his foot, which had been destroyed in the blast, amputated; something he had been fighting for for months. He would trade in his cane for a prosthetic leg, he looked
forward to being able to exercise and loose some of the weight he’d put on that gave his face and body a soft and sometimes boyish appearance, despite his square jaw and aquiline nose, and tattoos that crept up his forearms toward the long sleeves of his shirts he had a habit of shoving up above his elbows.

As the months went by, I began to think about how to say some things about his life. Not just what had happened to him in Iraq when his tank was hit by an IED, or the way he wore that hat in the summer time because the pressure helped with the headaches from his TBI, or the fact that he had just married the woman who was now carrying their second child. I felt a certain responsibility to Jake, and James, and Javier, and Alec, and all the other soldiers I was getting to know. I wanted to say something else.

I wrote something down and saved the file on my computer under the name “Forget the War on Terror.” I printed it out and gave it to Jake. I was so nervous that the paper trembled in my hands as I passed it across the table to him as we sat outside on a warm fall day in the quiet of the Fisher House patio. I sat, cotton mouthed, heart racing, while he read the few paragraphs. He was quiet for a moment. Then he told me how great he thought it was, that my book would be important, that he saw himself, and our conversations, in those lines. He handed the paper back to me, and when I told him that I’d printed it out for him, he said he was touched, that it was an amazing gift. I explained to him that not all of the dissertation would be like that, that there would be lots of academic jargon, and theory. I said that this would be the kind of thing I might have in an introduction.

So it seems only fitting, only fair, that as I struggled to finish my introduction on a cold and rainy October day, locked away in a closet-like carrel on the 12th floor of a massive library, that I should turn to those few paragraphs that seemed to say so much to me and Jake three years
ago as we sat together on an unseasonably warm October afternoon talking about the
introduction that I would write that would be about that precarious moment of his life.

These men (they are mostly men) are not drones, animated by someone else’s
patriotic vigor, manufactured for their consumption. Nor are they broken, limp
refuse strewn on the paths of history.

They are passionate about what they have done, about who the army has
made them; their other choices are all but unthinkable.

They have been trained to do unspeakable things, things that they see in
rare unmedicated sleep, things that live like squatters inside them, refusing to
leave, asserting their rights to belong to their being, even if only to stay hidden in
the dilapidated edifices built hastily, without plans, in the days before
deployment, the days before the meatiness of human flesh is known, before the
glare of the Iraqi sun begins to mute the colors of tattoos, before the intimate
knowledge of the profane commingling of brass, copper, and bone.

And here, they wait. For skin to grow, for limbs to fall away, for pain to
subside or transform, for sleep, for inevitable roaring tremors of thunder breaking
through the dull and pregnant pauses that follow lightning’s cleaving of the
colorless sky.

The configurations of bodies, beings, and families that will emerge from
here cannot be known. But each will be the result of struggle, of the picking up of
pieces explosively scattered, some damaged beyond repair, reassembled with
desperation, concession, love, uncertainty, nostalgia.
2 The Scale of Encounter and the Poetics of the Extra/ordinary: Notes on The Approach To Everyday Life At Walter Reed

2.1 Introduction

The encounter, the everyday, face to face encounter, is the home of anthropology. Set off from the grand, narrativised events of History, and the aggregated, demonstrative facts of Sociology, the everyday encounter is where Anthropology goes to encounter the everyday.

But to examine the meaning of the everyday—even more so the ordinary—and to probe the potentialities of the encounter is to realize that this home is haunted, tinged with the uncanny. This dissertation inhabits an analytical space suffused with both the comfort and terror (Ries 2002) that characterize the practices and rhythms of life everywhere but which become apparent in zones of life we would rather think of as radical, zones we imagine to be so terrible and terrifying that we comfort ourselves by attempting to set them apart. But this dissertation works against such comforting sacralization. It insists on the simultaneity of the ordinary and extraordinary and it comes to life in moments of encounter which make apparent this simultaneity and its significance; both its meanings and its stakes.

This analytical space reflects the space of Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the lived encounters of the particular group of injured soldiers living, rehabilitating, striving, rotting, recovering, waiting, and leaving there. Their experiences are characterized by the unstable oscillation between the extreme and the unremarkable. They have lived in ways such that the decision to join an overly kinetic military (Aylwin-Foster 2005) at a time of war was not really so strange, in fact it seemed the option most likely to improve their lives. They went to war, if one can call it that, where the sound of alarms warning of mortar attacks became so ordinary that
they learned to sleep right through them, and where crowds of children so often portended a bomb that they grew to hate them.

These became the contours of their ordinary lives. They did their jobs, much of the time riding around in vehicles, some occasionally shooting at and killing other people who were going about their own lives and jobs. Sometimes these lives and jobs were aimed like weapons fixed on killing these soldiers, and sometimes they weren’t. And then, most often when doing that most ordinary task of riding in a vehicle, they blew up. The ordinary experience of work and life at war was exchanged for something else, a life saved and almost lost, a moment unlike any other and yet common to thousands of soldiers including those who shared the space of that particular vehicle and who might be dead, but might also be back riding in an identical vehicle waiting to be blown up again, for that singular moment to repeat itself, an anticipation that seemed impossible and felt inevitable.31

At Walter Reed, everyday life had a different rhythm. The ordinary was comprised of new contours marked by boredom, pain, drug induced fogginess, impact induced memory loss, unruly and leaky bodies, and new social attachments that seemed to matter so much and that disappeared in blink of an eye.

And through it all, there was an ordinary life that seemed far away in place and time, one that seemed to run away from them while still pulling them near. An ordinary life of an ideally

31 Though U.S. troops are still deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are already an abundance of books and films that detail soldiers’ experiences at war there. The characterizations I give are culled from the soldiers I knew at Walter Reed, but one can hear and see the same details in many of these accounts. Among the non-fiction material that conveys this ordinariness, I find the films The War Tapes (Scranton 2007) and Restrepo (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and the books Generation Kill (Wright 2005) and The Forever War (Filkins 2009) perhaps the most effective. Collateral Damage: America’s War Against Iraqi Civilians (Hedges and Al-Arian 2009) and the recordings of Iraq Veterans Against the War’s Winter Soldier event (which I attended during my fieldwork) which are available in various forms online, including the websites Youtube.com and Blip.tv, are also valuable resources of first person accounts that, in their horrifying abundance of examples of war’s violence, convey something of it’s deadly routine. The NEH funded Project Homecoming in both its print (Carroll 2006) and film (Richards Robbins 2007) versions offers soldier’s creative writing about their experiences and is also a rich and powerful resource.
middle class anonymity, one with an easy and unbroken rhythm unmarred by pain and sickness, quickened by easy leisure, motivated by a simple contrapunto of work and rest (Lefebvre 1991, 29-42).

Each of these ordinaries emerges slowly, as experience extends from a moment in time to a time in life. And each is always threatened by the extraordinary residing there. Like the orthographic form of the extra/ordinary, something extra, excessive, threatens the integrity of the ordinary like a falling wall or timber. The slash cleaves the two apart and together, linking them in a precarious and suffocating relation. War is not ordinary, and yet it was. The facts of life at Walter Reed are extraordinary, and yet it is their ordinariness that makes them barely bearable. The illusive and unremarkable ordinary of suburban middle class life is almost exotic in its distance.

This dissertation demonstrates how these ordinaries emerge through practices of living and being seen to live. It suggests that the encounter, a confrontation between self and various, significant others, is a mode in which the cleavage of the extra/ordinary is especially palpable and so it is at the scale of the encounter that I approach my ethnographic account.

2.2 The Encounter

An encounter is an ominous thing; threatening, active, and full of potential. Its etymology roots it in battle and blood and unexpected contact with rivals (Oxford English Dictionary 2010). Its first meaning in the OED, dating back to 1297, is of “a meeting face to face; a meeting (of

32 ‘Confrontation’ is perhaps too strong a word, though ‘meeting’ is too gentle. Discussing the encounter in this way, I prioritize the face to face over other, more mediated interactions and the interactions between humans over other configurations of actants (Latour 2005). I do this for the sake of clarity and because it keeps me close to my ethnographic experience and I can only hope this does not impoverish my analysis too much.
adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict; hence, a battle, skirmish, duel, etc” (Oxford English Dictionary 2010). Its root is the Late Latin *incontrāre*, from *in* (in) and *contra* (against) and finds its kin in the Spanish *encontrar* which means, interestingly, to find, as of something lost.

I draw on the encounter here not as term with a clear denotative meaning but as a concept that connotes the lived experience of the essential precariousness of life lived amongst others that is heightened at Walter Reed, giving it a shape it is so tempting to circumscribe as extraordinary. As I intend it here, the concept of encounter also plays on the term’s etymology.

Perhaps most basically, the encounter is about distinction: As is viscerally conveyed in Kathleen Stewart’s telling of encounters within abjected Appalachia, and between Appalachia and unmarked America, encounters are always encounters of *difference*, distinguished from interactions where one particular order of things is allowed to speak untroubled (Stewart 1996: 117-139).

It is about coming face to face with others and the potential and danger that inhere in such contact. The meeting or confrontation of the encounter is not only of you and an other, it is also an orientation that brings you up against others’ images and expectations of and about you (Goffman 1986a). And it is also about *encontrando*, finding; finding oneself in and against others, in the midst of others, others who might have been lost to you, a you who is forged—heated, softened, struck, strengthened, changed, made—in contact.

In connoting contact, the encounter also suggests the matter of life, of bodies whole and in pieces, but also of things. It suggests surfaces (see Taylor 2005) and edges as places where people and things can be open to each other, where integrity and attachment are at stake, and

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33 The senses of encounter as a site of potential danger, but also transformation, and as an experience in which we might find ourselves transformed by another are found in later uses of the term, such as the encounters orchestrated by the Situationist International (DeBord 1958; Massumi 2003), the encounter groups of the 1970s (Rogers 1970), and the 1977 alien movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg 1977).
where literal and metaphorical ways of describing people and their social lives overlap and sometimes become indistinguishable. It is about ethics and intersubjectivity.

In connoting a coming upon, a crescendo that interrupts a flowing rhythm it then comes to be a part of, the concept of encounter is also about experiences of intensity that emerge out of and flow into the longer passages of time that they seem, at the moment, to rupture. It is about the grip of a moment in which the weight of the past seems to bear down all at once so that now seems like the only time there is and the invisible weight of the past makes the time of now (Benjamin 1969) as heavy as dark matter.

Though the encounter may seem fleeting, my use of it in this dissertation entails a complex relationship to pasts and futures. It is not simply an isolable here and now. Rather the encounter is full of the conditions of its own possibility and its unfolding affects, and addresses itself to them as it shapes the space of possible futures. As Sara Ahmed notes:

[Encounters] are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters. […] encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular—the face to face of this encounter—and the general—the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries the traces of those broader relationships [Ahmed 2000: 8, original emphasis].

As an encounter is a thoroughly emplaced event, the concept of encounter also connotes places and the ways they become constituted as places of particular kinds by the things that happen there; by all the things that move through or reside in them (see Stewart 1996). And so the surfaces and edges that are suggested by the concept of encounter are not only those of

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34 Ahmed’s emphasis on the trace calls to mind the practice of notation for diagramming the deep structure of a sentence which Derrida elaborates (1980;1998). The position of the words in their original (i.e. deep and unmarked) order is noted with a ‘t’ for ‘trace’. The trace is a present absence, a mark of the past in the present, the deep in the surface, but also something that can be retraced, allowing you to put the words back in their original order: the spectre of the disappeared past and the path to its reconstitution.
people and things, they are also the surfaces and edges of places and their meanings. Encounters not only happen in places, they happen with them.

The circularities in this elaboration of the concept of encounter are intentional, as are its broad scope. These features help make encounter productive and meaningful not as a static, identifiable thing, as it might be in its denotative form (this is an encounter, this is not an encounter), but rather as an analytical concept that draws attention to certain aspects of life and living (and thus necessarily away from others) and thus offers a scale and point of intervention into the ethnographic field. The question is not ‘is this event an encounter’ nor is the task to string together a series of face to face encounters that somehow add up to a picture of a culture and its daily life. The scale of encounter is rather addressed to the question of the process of the emergence of an ordinary. Its task is to convey something of that emergent ordinary with all its uncertainty, danger, and potential.  

Though she attends less to objects and places, and is more focused (given her context of post-colonial critique) on the self-other unit, my use of encounter takes much from Sara Ahmed’s elaboration of “strange encounters” (Ahmed 2000), especially her articulation of emergence. She emphasizes that this process of emergence of self and other is different than the structural notion of the self and the not-self. A key difference is that, if we take the temporality of emergence seriously, “the encounter itself is ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters)” (Ahmed 2000:7). Thus what emerges from the

35 In this aspect, my use of encounter as a scale is rather different than the fieldwork encounter as described by Borneman and Hammoudi “wherein the ethnographer is arrested in the act of perception” (2009: 19). Emergence is rather different than arrest and perception, though I am sympathetic to the relationship between arrest and emergence in acts of hailing (Bakhtin 1981) or being interpolated (Althusser 1977). This relationship is productively elaborated in Didier Fassin’s story of police harassment of certain boys in a Banlieue, and his reminder that in French, interpeller can mean to hold for questioning and that the knowledge and (mis)understanding produced in moments of such literally arresting encounters can quite seriously alter the possibilities and limits of one’s future actions and identity (Fassin 2009).
encounter is not simply knowledge about selves and others, but the very possibility of being a knowable self or other. It resonates with Erin Manning’s notion of ontogenesis (Manning 2007), an emplaced and embodied being-as-becoming which dispels the primacy of the acting subject.

I take up Ahmed’s description of the temporality of the encounter as a present which reopens the past (one which is echoed in Stewart’s description of the “weighted and reeling present” [2007: 1] I discuss below), but am also wary of the risks of radical contingency, a thin temporality of the here and now, to which a theory of encounter might fall prey (Ahmed 2000:9).

I intend the concept of encounter to be historically, ethnographically, and theoretically thick, brimming with meaning that exceeds the spatial and temporal limits of a face to face moment. Nevertheless, this risk of radical contingency is well taken. In my theorization of the encounter, I mitigate this risk through the concept of emergence: an unfolding and reverberating temporality which is not dependant on the dynamics of cause and effect, a present which entails and authorizes various readings of the past and which spills into the future.36 Through the temporality of emergence, the encounter is a glimpse of the constellation of now and then (Benjamin 1969).

Experience understood through the lens, or at the scale, of encounter is thus an emergent experience of contact with an other (or many others, human, material, and iconic alike) and acquires an ethical dimension in its connection to Levinas’ concept of the face. Indeed, though not in a particularly elaborated form, he describes the moment of recognizing the face of the other as an encounter (e.g. 1980: 134, 136, 303; 2002: 78).

36 In the context of post-colonial encounters, Ahmed’s response to the risk of radical contingency is to eschew history in favour of historicity “as the very absence of any totality that governs the encounter” (Ahmed 2000:10). Employing the concept of historicity, she notes “history can no longer be understood as that which determines each encounter. Rather, historicity involves the history of such encounters that are unavailable in the form of a totality” (Ahmed 2000: 11). It strikes me that emergence is also the temporal kernel of this theory (and experience) of historicity.
Like the experience of seeing the face of the other, an encounter makes available and apparent a certain naked vulnerability (e.g. Levinas 2008: 167; Levinas 1985: 86) what Judith Butler has called the precariousness of life (Butler 2004, see especially 134). The ethical dimension of the encounter resides in this precariousness, and the dilemmas that it poses. For Levinas, the encounter is pregnant with the violability of life, with death and murderous potential and he insists on the ethical injunction of the face of the other and its prohibition against the killing that is insipient in the moment of encounter (Levinas 1980: 198-199; 1985: 89-90; 2000: 24-25, cited in Butler 2004: 160-161, n 5; see also Butler 2004: 131-136; cf. Benson 2008 and Ahmed 2000: 137-161).

Though my use of the encounter is Levinasian in that the recognition of the face of the other is a central dynamic, where a Levinasian analysis might focus on the central ethical dilemma posed by the other’s vulnerability, I wish to emphasize the ontogenetic processes through which the other and its vulnerability, emerge.

In place of Levinas’ emphasis on the violence of (attempting to) grasp the other, I emphasize the heterogeneity of violences that inhere in it. It is not only the violence of (potential and cannibalizing) murder that is born in the encounter; there is also an array of subjective and objective violences (Žižek 2008: 2). To face the other is not only to come face to face with them, but to make their face, to resurface them.37

But the confrontation of coming face to face is not just about the vulnerability of the other, but about one’s own vulnerability, one’s own potential to be killed and the converse potential to be open and attached to others (Butler 2009). And in attending to the material, the

37 For a critique of Levinas based on the emergence of others in encounter, see Ahmed 2000: 137-149. On surfacing, see Taylor 2005.
encounter also contains the literal possibility of being resurfaced by objects motivated by other bodies or sometimes by the penetrating contact of other bodies themselves.\(^\text{38}\)

Thus in an encounter there is not only the nakedness of the face, but the violence of the gaze. Not only the mercy of compassion, but its insidious pity.\(^\text{39}\) The animation of metal, the body gone ballistic, the call and response of address and affiliation; all of these unfold through contact in the space of the encounter. Such encounters in turn unfold into ordinaries always awake to the incipient eruption of the uncanny, fragile regularities marked by traces of trouble.

### 2.3 The Extra/Ordinary

Given its rather intimate level of scale, thinking through the encounter might too easily evade the sociological and historical vectors of force that converge on, in, and through it. But acts of coming face to face are not immediate and unmediated experiences. Contact is always mediated, though the political and ethical orientations we carry with us and cultivate in the world, the co-occurrence expectations we have come to know through our particular lifetime of experience, the imperfections and uniqueness of our organs of perception, the most basic and fundamental aspects of our epistemologies. All of this and more mediates an encounter. We move through social and physical ether, not in some impossible vacuum of ‘nature’.

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\(^{38}\) I mean this quite literally, as it is not uncommon for pieces of others’ bodies to become embedded in or absorbed by people during explosions. This is often the case in suicide bombings when the bombers bones themselves become projectiles. The particularities of this latter situation have been documented and addressed, for example, in the U.S. Army Medical Command’s 2008 textbook on war surgery (Nessen and Borden Institute 2008). Soldiers’ bodies continue to be penetrated and resurfaced in countless surgeries and medical procedures at Walter Reed, and injured soldiers’ vulnerability is also made apparent in their encounters with everyone from patriotic civilian visitors to the members of their families living with them at Walter Reed, as this dissertation demonstrates.

\(^{39}\) Tremendous thanks to Mariella Pandolfi for this insight, drawn from the confession of St. Augustine (1909: 34). See also Fassin and Pandolfi 2010.
This is why I explore encounters through a poetics of the extra/ordinary. Thinking through the extra/ordinary calls attention to an always precarious and fickle normativity and the reproduction of categories of marked and unmarked forms of life. An ordinary is always emergent and particular, always evocative of the possibilities and limits of a particular place in a particular period. Approaching life at the scale of the encounter through the poetics of the extra/ordinary thus links the moment of an encounter to a more expansive scale.

In this way the ordinary is rather different than the modernist notions of the everyday, theorizations of which form a small canon of their own. It is telling that Benjamin Highmore, in his companion to this canon, *Everyday life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (2001), uses “the everyday,” “everyday life,” and “everyday modernity” interchangeably, and that modernity persists as a reified and unproblematic, albeit well elaborated, term in his explanation of theories of the everyday.

In this canonical sense, the everyday is inextricable from a particular reading of modernity which locates it in the industrializing West beginning in the late 19th century and which assumes the qualities of newness, acceleration of change, and the impingement of machineries and technologies (especially of production) into areas formerly removed from them.

All of this is juxtaposed to a space of everyday life which ought to be a kind of sanctuary from it, but is not. The everyday ought to be a space of authentic connection between people and their family and fellows, it ought to be slow and free and soft and gentle, quiet, pleasant, and homely. And instead, in the modern era, it is ruptured by incursions of disciplinary techniques (Certeau 2002), it becomes infused with the pacing of work life (Lefebvre 1991: 29-42), it is overwritten by the vestiges of oppression to the extent that even a walk in the countryside (that most natural and unmodernized of spaces) becomes an occasion to view the mechanisms of alienation (Lefebvre 1991:201-227). Though the important differences between canonical
theories of everyday life entrench the term’s ambiguity and multivalence, as Highmore notes “this ambivalence vividly registers the effects of modernity” (Highmore 2001: 2).

The modern here is in many ways like the global as (optimistically) figured by Giddens (1991) in its relentless technological development and its unstemmable tide. And like Harvey’s characterization of capitalism in the post-modern moment (1991), the modern is a locus of compression; a compression of time that leads to the boredom and alienation declaimed by Marx (1978) and a compression of space that leads not to Ulf Hannerz’ cosmopolitan ease (1990) but to the anxiety of Freud’s prosthetic God (2002: 44), appended with the technologies that allow him to be everywhere while reminding him of the painful facts of his distance and absence from various elsewheres (2002:36-52). Arguably addressed more to a post-modernity (i.e. California in the 1980s) than a Lefebvreian modernity (i.e. France at the end of WWII), de Certeau’s reading of the constrained space of everyday life focuses less on this latent anxiety and, in a more Foucauldian vein, on strategies of practical propriety, properness, and their limits and lacunae. But the historical particularity of the everyday de Certeau describes is just as bound to this proliferating modernity as is Lefebvre’s.

This modernist everyday thus has a rather different meaning than the everyday life which anthropology has long claimed as its province. The everyday in anthropology generally denotes the quotidian and banal, but, because of the discipline’s long history of study in exoticized other places, it is in part the comparative strangeness of these other quotidian practices that have made them of interest. For example, as Michael Herzfeld contends:

the real test of any model of social analysis is whether it can be used to understand the mundane in social life, for the noticeably ordinary features of social interaction only register when their very ordinariness seems extraordinary. Otherwise, we do not even think of people as particularly ordinary [Herzfeld 1997: 139].
This is an anthropologically chauvinistic criterion for evaluating models of social analysis and demonstrates both the central importance of the everyday in anthropology and the way in which anthropology’s everyday is defined through structural relations of markedness, rather than the ground of modernity. It suggests the apprehension and comprehension of the mundane as its Litmus test and reflects something of the life of ethnographic fieldwork in which the anthropologist overcomes their culture shock (an encounter with the strange) and is then guided by the originally perceived differences in deciding what is particular, and particularly noteworthy, about a particular place. The ordinary for Herzfeld is an emergent normativity, one which can be performed so well as to deserve comment or just well enough to escape notice (1997: 141; 147-8).

The everyday in anthropology, then, is a category of unmarked experience and denotes an intimate scale. Unlike the modernist everyday, which has definite (if sometimes illusive) characteristics, the content of anthropology’s category of the everyday is culturally variable. Given the centrality of markedness to the anthropological everyday (i.e. it emerges in distinction from the ethnographer’s everyday, in comparison to which it is strange, and the outliers of social experience and action which it is locally situated between) it is especially fitting that Herzfeld elaborates his theory of the production and recognition of regularities and cultural intimacy within a language-derived frame of poetics (1997).

This structural property of the ordinary—the idea that it is culturally syntagmatic—is also at play in a less explicitly structural approach which makes use of it to draw critical attention to the unspectacular suffering and violence that can adhere in everyday life. Drawing in part on an implicit morality about what we ought not to see as ordinary, the formative body of work on everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Kleinman et. al. 1997; Das et. al. 2000; 2001;
Bourgois 1996) introduced into this anthropological everyday the empirically and ethically
important dimension of suffering and its geographical and sociological distribution. Part of the
project of this work has been to show the shadow side of banality and the structuring forces that
produce suffering and link lives in pain to loci of privilege.

Part of the affective and descriptive power of this work (for prime examples see Scheper-
Hughes [1992] and Farmer [1997]) comes from the way it pushes the limits of the structure of
the everyday to produce a certain kind of ethical disorientation. By describing brutality and
extreme suffering as a part and product of daily practices of living, such work marks the
everyday as a site of radical difference: the everyday described is represented as extreme and
extremely different from the everyday of the presumed reader. Because this radical difference
is manifest in physical pain and mortal danger, it operates on the level of bare life (see Fassin
2007b). Thus this radical difference between ‘their’ everyday and ‘our’ everyday beats a path
that seems to lead to a human sameness beneath a veneer of cultural difference (Ticktin 2006).
The strangeness of the other, and the difference and distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ self-
destructs, taking with it the ability to assimilate the ordinariness of such extreme everydays and
leaving behind irreparable fragments of cultural relativism and a moral imperative Fassin has
critically analyzed in his description of humanitarianism as “a politics of life” (2007a).

My project here, to describe the emergent and contradictory ordinaries I saw during my
fieldwork, has something in common with this work on violence and everyday life: it is an
attempt to show how soldiers’ daily lives are marked by suffering and simple quotidian tasks are
shot through with social forces that expose soldiers and their families to this suffering. But my
emphasis, even my fundamental project, is different.

40 Though see Kleinman (2000) for an approach to the less radical and more familiar violences of everyday life.
In this work on violence, the moment in which the everyday is marked by violence becomes the moment of a moral turn to insist on the unacceptable strangeness, the extremity, of those daily experiences of suffering. It is a move which suggests the violence of everyday life should not be accepted as ordinary. In my analysis this is the moment in which I insist on the feeling of ordinariness of life at Walter Reed, and indeed of life at war more generally. I focus on the ways in which life is lived in these marginal ordinaries and on what it is like to live a life so deeply, suffocatingly nestled in the extra/ordinary.

This concept of the extra/ordinary, and my attention at the scale of encounter to the quality of lives lived in it, draw primarily on Kathleen Stewart’s project in *Ordinary Affects* (2007) and Veena Das’ *Life and Words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary* (2007). Each in their own way, Das and Stewart attend to the intricacies of everyday life as a way of making sensible the pasts and potentialities that reside and incubate within them.

Stewart’s approach involves a particular attention, what she calls an attunement (Stewart 2007; 2010), to the unfolding experience of life in the living. In some ways it might be considered a kind of inside out ethnography where the close textures of the moment encompass the social and cultural context rather than only being positioned within them. As I understand it, this practice of attunement is an attempt to establish a perspective (with all the implications of scale, partiality, positionality, and visuality which that word implies) through which to approach the state of things without first being certain of their parameters.

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41 Though life at Walter Reed is characterized by legacies and occasional presence of physical violence; ongoing experiences of intense physical pain; institutionalized dependence on drugs and alcohol; trauma; and gripping feelings of boredom and powerlessness, my ability to take this turn should also be understood within the differences in the circumstances of life at Walter Reed and life in (for example) an impoverished Brazilian shanty town. I have no doubt that these different positions in the triage of social suffering allow me to make certain analytical moves.
Ethnography from this perspective, and in the manner I pursue it in this dissertation, is a way of characterizing, but is intentionally vague about the thing to be characterized as the picture of it emerges thorough attention; it comes into focus rather than being sighted. In this way it is also a transcending of the state of things; not of moving from the specific case to the general type but of always moving towards a saturated, elevated, and concrete understanding of a moment of living.\textsuperscript{42} It transcends the state of things in a way that brings them along, not in a way that simply ‘rises above’ them. It is more an \textit{aufhebung} than a crossing over or climbing beyond. It is a way of attending to possibilities and limits, or better yet, it is a way of attending to one which acknowledges that it is always also the other. In the ordinary, possibilities entail limits and \textit{vice versa}. Through the poetics of the extra/ordinary, one looks to the normative and sees the power and place of the abject. In this way, I find Stewart’s mode of attunement especially well suited to my analysis.

For Stewart, the ordinary is the state of being that characterizes one’s everyday life. It is an orientation to the world, one that can be disturbed, leaving you disoriented, if even for a moment (e.g. 2007: 9-10; 44; 63-4). In the ordinary, possibilities and actualities coincide in ways that ought not to be. The ordinary is the simultaneous experience of this, that, and the other and the vantage or apparatus which allows you to see or feel your way along this simultaneous presence.

While the modernist everyday swings back and forth along a continuum of what is and what might be, of constraint and liberation, drudgery and festival, the ordinary is nebulous. Because of this nebulous quality, this capacity to comprise many things at once, it also invites the confounding of opposites. In particular, it makes apparent both the illuminated and the

\textsuperscript{42} In describing this law of analytic motion towards an elevated concrete I draw on Hegel (1945)
shadow sides of life, things that are apparent and those that are obscured, though present nonetheless.

The analytics of the ordinary also distinguishes itself from theories of the everyday through its emphasis on felt experience. In place of a rigid and brittle concept of agency, it suggests affect—the capacity to feel, to be felt, and to make felt; to make contact and to make and become through contact; to be in, open to, and constitutively part of a world whose force and contours reverberate with the past and the unfolding potential of the present as it becomes the future.

But, as with encounter, to focus on the ordinary is not to adopt an a-historical stance of radical contingency. Far from it. Stewart addresses just this concern in the introduction to Ordinary Affects, noting:

This book is set in a United States caught in a present that began some time ago. But it suggests that the terms neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization that index this emergent present […] do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in. The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world [2007:1].

It is through a close attention to the particular experiences of life, through an attunement to what is happening, that contours the past carves in the contemporary become apparent. Attending to the ordinary, with its particular structural play, requires a contextual understanding of what is at stake in a particular kind of ordinariness and the ways in which its particularity have come to be. This approach to the ordinary finds a kinship with that adopted by Veena Das in Life
and Words, though Das’ historical contextualization is rather different since, for her, the work of time and its resonances in the present are an explicit area of inquiry.

For Stewart, an event (like “the end of the socially responsible state” under Reagan [2010: 3]) is understood as a scene of living. Such a scene is made through life’s little labors and their changes. So the eventfulness of the event comes from the way everyday lives are lived and made. It becomes the thing it is in the Brownian motion of everyday life and the chaotic and unstable filigreed pattern it traces, giving places and the lives in them their qualities and resonances. The ethnographic project—much like the project of learning to live in a new or changed place—is to try and catch on to this motion, to become attuned to the frequency of life and the world that it makes (Stewart 2010).

Stewart’s concept of worlding, a making of the world through everyday acts of being and feeling in the midst of unfolding events, finds resonance with some of Das’ central questions:

What is it to inhabit a world? How does one make the world one’s own? How does one account for the appearance of the subject? What is it to lose one’s world? What is the relation between possibility and actuality or between actuality and eventuality, as one tries to find a medium to portray the relation between the critical events that shaped large historical questions and everyday life? [2007:2]

It is in an attempt to address much the same questions that I focus on the extra/ordinary encounters and the various senses of ordinariness that emerge from, or are torn by, them. I use the term ordinary, rather than everyday, to emphasize the felt sense of life’s unmarked regularity, rather than the bare almost numerical repetition of action connoted by the everyday, and also to

43 One which I understand to be part of a rather different project than is Spivak’s sense of the term (1990: 1)
clearly distinguish it from the modernist everyday of Lefebvre and de Certeau. In using the term ordinary I also import its connection to the extraordinary and evoke their inseparable and threatening intimacy: the extra/ordinary.

These particular flavours which I impart through my use of the term ordinary, are a kind of inversion of the “uncanniness of the ordinary” characterized by Stanley Cavell (1988: 153-177). Cavell is interested in (the necessity of and threats to) the “surrealism of the habitual […] the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic” (Cavell 1988: 153). What I call attention to through the extra/ordinary is the way that what is seen and felt to be ordinary by some, is seen and described as extraordinary by others. I am interested in the threat presented by this lack or weakness of the right to assert one’s ordinarniness and in the desire to affirm the ordinariness of what could be uncanny, the habituality of what others might call surreal. Though I suggest an inversion of Cavell’s terms, I stay close to a concern he shares with Veena Das for the surprising and inescapable complexity of the ordinary and its power to alternately disturb and comfort.

In his introduction to Life and Words Stanley Cavell points to Das’ simultaneous attention to the labours of everyday life, and their durability in contexts of extreme violence, and the historic violence of social upheaval, and its solubility into the ether of everyday labours. He suggests that through this dual attention, cases of extreme social violence “are comprehensible as extreme states, or suddenly invited enactments, of a pervasive fact of the social fabric that may hide itself, or one might also say, may express itself, in everyday encounters” (Cavell 2007: xiii). His choice of the metaphor of fabric is not incidental. Das also

44 Neither Cavell nor Das make an explicit distinction between the everyday (which they use in the anthropological [or Wittgensteinian] sense) and the ordinary. That said, the everyday is used more to denote the banal labors of daily living, and the ordinary the feeling or general space of everydayness.
deploys this metaphor, describing the warp and weave of everyday life and the threads of violent pasts that are imbricated in it (2007: 9-13; 44; 88; 211; 226). She speaks also of the tearing of this fabric (2007: 89), and the projects (her own and those of the people in whose lives she has worked) of knitting, knotting, and stitching together (2007: 13; 16; 102).

Das’ image of the social fabric is also apt for the field of the extra/ordinary I describe here, especially the way it characterizes the relationship of violence and everyday life. For Das, there is not a violent past which haunts the present (Das rejects the language of haunting trauma drawn from trauma theory [2007, 101-105; 215-16]). Rather, the life that past violence leads in the present—its sensibility in the present—exists in the unmarked labor of daily life. When the extraordinary erupts, it comes not out of a distant past, but out of this quiet and living presence. It cannot be otherwise: there is no life to be lived outside of the ordinary, there is only the untenable space of the tear in the fabric or its woven and knotted together expanse.

This is why the descent into the ordinary is the only way of living in the very space of devastation. The descent into the ordinary is her response to her own question, posed some 10 years before; “how [should] one inhabit such a world that has been made strange through the desolating experience of violence and loss” (2007: 7; n 3)? For Das the edge of the ordinary is the limit of the inhabitable world, the “end of criteria” (2007: 8). Beyond the ordinary lies the gaping tear, a space of violent, world annihilating eventfulness (2007).

Das’ sense of the ordinary is thus not opposed to, and therefore is not exclusive of, the extraordinary. For example, in describing the recovery of life in the aftermath of the riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, she writes “life was recovered not though some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary. There was, I argue, a mutual absorption of the violent and the ordinary as if there were tentacles that
reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways” (2007: 7). It is something of this ordinary, this fabric, I wish to capture with the term extra/ordinary.

2.4 Conclusion

The scale of the encounter, the temporality of emergence, and the meaning of the extra/ordinary describe my approach to life at Walter Reed. While these concepts have utility beyond this particular zone of life, there are, as I describe in the following chapter, particular features of life at Walter Reed that make these concepts especially apt: it is the intensity of precariousness, the necessity of emergence, the profound vulnerability, and the pitched extra/ordinariness of life at Walter Reed that give it its vertiginous atmospheric particularity.

What’s more, this approach allows me to do what I think the soldiers and family members who so graciously allowed me into their lives for a while and who enabled me to do my fieldwork hoped that I would do: convey something of the struggle and pain of their lives without marking them as exceptional and without slotting them into grand narratives of trauma, war, heroism, or national value or placing them in a space of the unimaginable. The people with whom I worked tended to position our conversations and time together against, on the one hand, the kind of talking and time they had to do with psychiatrists and social workers, and, on the other, the kind of performance required in their frequent encounters with journalists. This seemed to me an astute characterization of my fieldwork, and also of what they valued about my project as I had described it to them—it was (I hoped) neither pathologizing nor sensationalizing. When first getting to know soldiers and their families and first talking to them about my project, I often said I ‘just want to see what life is like here for you guys.’ My approach to both understanding and describing ‘what life is like’ is forever tied to their valuation and appreciation of that task grounded in empathy and friendship and that seemed, amid the intensity of life and
the abundance of other narratives, so necessary, so far from simple, and so often starkly unattempted.
3  The Extra/ordinary Atmosphere of Walter Reed

The fullness of military life—the discipline of training and comportment but also the diffuse camaraderie of military members, the fire forged bonds of brothers (or wives) in arms, the undeniable if sometimes undesirable common ground occupied by military families—gives rise to intense and intimate socialities that link soldiers to each other and to the particular category of military family life. Institutional ideas of competency and fitness which are shot through with heteronormative masculinity inform these familial and fraternal associations which thicken social life in the Army.

The thick affiliations at hand for soldiers are, almost exclusively, their fellows, on the one hand and their families, on the other (MacLeish 2010; Lutz 2001; Hawkins 2005). MacLeish’s description of a military manifest—half roll call half send off—condenses this particularly configured array of social life. He describes “a kind of intimate social alchemy: one moment the man in the ACUs [Army Combat Uniform] belongs only to the people who have come to see him, to their embraces and smiles and last words, and the next moment he belongs only to the Army” (2010: 177). It is largely within these two socialities, sometimes overlapping, sometimes allergically distant, that soldiers make their lives. Soldiers at Walter Reed occupy a muddled melting point between these elements. This is a point where the institutional spells—the orders, rules, and regs, which have in the past limned the difference between fraternal and familial worlds—no longer work their magic. In their place is the ever remote and ever present horizon of a future ordinary which must be made of whatever the present has at hand.

The weakening of regs, of bodies, and of bonds of kin which characterizes Walter Reed threatens to thin soldiers’ lives, bringing the management of their bodies to the fore and
removing them from the context of the affiliations out of which their lives had been made. Yet these dimensions of social life are also targeted for and subject to a chaotic thickening. Bodies are worked on and rebuilt; daily life is inescapably saturated by kin. Layers of the social skin are sloughed away, but it is never left to rest, callusing and blistering in the intensity and friction of new modes of life and sociality.

Though neither the unmarked or other Americas of the ordinary worlds Stewart sketches (2007; 1996), nor a space of violence in the manner of Sultanpuri or other sites in West Delhi (Das 2007), life’s extra/ordinary quality is especially amplified at Walter Reed. Ordinariness there is not so easy to characterize, in part because it is multiple. It does not have the unity, the productive and intentional inversion, or the definitive course of a classic liminal space (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995). Nor does life at Walter Reed conform to the idealized trajectories of rehabilitation, trajectories which govern clinical expectations but don’t quite translate from out of the textbook and into the unpredictable contingencies of embodied life (see Messinger 2010; for an interesting comparison, see Zaman 2005: 79-86). Its extra/ordinariness is captured in a series of apparent contradictions, enduring juxtapositions, and hapless inversions which settle into the din of daily life at Walter Reed.

3.1 Walter Reed and Its Particulare

As of this writing, Walter Reed Army Medical Center is comprised of 74 buildings, one of which (called the Heaton Pavilion) is the hospital itself. On any given day, of the hospital’s 170 inpatients, about 51 are OEF/OIF casualties. Inpatients are far outnumbered by outpatients who

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45 For an excellent elaboration of the ways military ‘homecoming’ is precisely not a classic rite of passage, though basic training may well be, see True 2011.
46 Walter Reed Army Medical Center 2008
are almost all OEF/OIF casualties. They live in the 200 rooms of the Mologne House hotel, the 19 rooms of the Fisher House, or, if they have no family member there with them, in some of the 500 or so rooms of the Abrahams Hall barracks. Outpatient rehabilitation can take anywhere from a few months to a few years, the average being about 14 months. During my time at Walter Reed, there seemed to be about 300 outpatients at any given time, though actual numbers have proved elusive. There are 4,649 staff, roughly equally divided between military and civilians or contractors.47 There is never enough parking.

Aside from soldiers’ housing, among the post’s 73 other buildings are administrative buildings, a few often disused officers houses, a gym, a chapel, the National Museum of Health and Medicine, medical research offices, soldier and family support service offices, physical plant management buildings, and a number of fallow buildings dating back to around the original hospital’s construction in 1908. All of this sits on 113 acres of land surrounded by a high green metal fence in the northern tip of the District of Columbia’s irregular diamond shape.

The post is bordered on one side by picturesque 16th Street, full of churches with big well-manicured lawns, and, on the other, Georgia Avenue, which is considered quite dangerous and is full of fast food and liquor stores as well as churches with fading signs and bricks in need of repair. Though there is a small Burger King in the hospital, the nearest McDonald’s, often the chain of choice for soldiers and their families, is just north of the post on Georgia Ave, as is a 7-11. Just south is the nearest supermarket, though only a few rooms in Abrams Hall and a few suites in the Mologne House Hotel (whose rooms are now mostly lived in by outpatients and their families) have kitchenettes.

47 Walter Reed Army Medical Center 2008.
Even at the Fisher House with its spacious and well equipped kitchen, given all the donated food, special dinners, cafeteria meal cards, and eating out, there isn’t too much grocery shopping to be done aside from some staples, like favorite cereals, frozen French toast sticks, bread, energy drinks, cheese, ice cream, and sometimes fresh vegetables. The Fisher House kitchen is kept fully stocked with canned and dry goods, snacks, fruit, coffee, frozen food, and endless leftovers from donated lunches and dinners that are packed in Ziplock bags for easy storage and often tossed in the trash after a day or two to make room for more in the always overflowing double wide stainless steel refrigerator.

In addition to Walter Reed’s main 113 acre ‘campus’ (as it is sometimes called by those who work there), there is a small annex called Forrest Glen just across the border with Maryland which houses a small PX (Post Exchange), the Auto Shop, an arts and crafts center, and a number of administrative offices, research buildings, housing for officers and enlisted soldiers who work there, a third Fisher House, and a number of abandoned buildings.

But all these seemingly solid facts belie the post’s ever shifting quality, something it shares with countless other American military bases around the country and around the world (Lutz 2009). Although buildings are only occasionally built or torn down at Walter Reed (hence the number of abandoned buildings), the offices and people in those buildings and the routes that connect them seem to be constantly moving. Sidewalks and pathways are truncated while others are newly carved. The regular schedule that dictates the opening and closing of the base’s two operational gates is strictly adhered to, which is a challenging task seeing as how it changes all the time.

48 The PX is a subsidized store on an Army base where only people with military ID can shop. They are often huge, sprawling, Walmart like places, and a number of soldiers and wives complained about how small the Walter Reed PX was.
One day, a huge set of outdoor flood lights appears. Some people say it is for safety, other say it is for the set up of some concert, everyone is annoyed that it is taking up valuable space in the middle of a parking lot. Some computers are blocked from accessing Myspace or Victoria’s Secret for purposes variously defined to me as security and propriety. But it is not clear which computers are subject to such regulations. I noticed one day that a soldier on duty at the main reception desk in the hospital building was checking his Facebook account, which was surprising to me and also to both the injured soldiers and the civilian managers to whom I mentioned it.

The saturation of the National Capital Region by military installations and military and DoD personnel have long made Walter Reed’s presence rather unremarkable. Walter Reed’s armed private security guards who staff the gates on Georgia Avenue and 16th Streets (the only points of entry that are ever open, other than the tiny helipad near the hospital building marked with a red cross) hardly seem to warrant a second thought or double take. This is, perhaps, especially true in the post-9/11 ordinary atmosphere of paranoid securitization. In Washington, D.C. this has meant everything from the erection of permanent pylons poorly camouflaged as decorative planters near government buildings, to the public running of terrorism emergency and mass casualty (or MasCas) exercises involving local police and fire departments and explosions and simulated emergencies, to the public service billboards and signs that warn transit goers to—as they say in New York—“see something, say something/ ves algo, di algo.” Though when compared to the visual spectacles that characterized the atmosphere of war during WWII (Williams 2004) and Vietnam, the current moment of war resembles much more that low grade

49 For an exploration of the leaking of military visual and affective cultures of fear into civilian space during the Cold War and the conditions of possibility this created for the aesthetics and affects of security and fear in public space in the America of the “war on terror” era, see Masco 2008.
burn of “hot peace” (Lutz 2001: 217) or perhaps the ignorance born of fatigue and suspicion of the Korean War.

3.2 The Miniscule War

Monumental and historic was the Bush administration’s scale of choice describing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and criticism of these wars and the “war on terror” was similarly big. This scale was certainly not inevitable. For example, Obama’s framing of these same wars has been intentionally less grandiose and he has also explicitly refused to take up the reified discourse of the “war on terror” (Wilson and Kamen 2009), contributing to its mortal atrophy not so that he might rebrand the same amorphous object as the Bush administration tried to do (Lakoff 2005; Schmitt and Shanker 2005) but so that it might be disaggregated into variously articulated parts (his Dec 1, 2009 West Point address, with its emphasis on Pakistan, is a good example50).

Nonetheless during the year of my fieldwork (September 2007- August 2008), the bigness of the “war on terror” was especially pitched: the United States reached the macabre landmark of the 4,000th service member killed in Iraq and estimates of civilians killed swelled past 100,000; Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes estimated the war’s cost at $3 Trillion (Bilmes and Stiglitz 2008); and the upcoming presidential election and the candidacy of Barack Hussein Obama (a middle name some right wing opponents tried to use to his disadvantage) entrenched astoundingly voracious and conspiratorial devotion to apocalyptic discourses of security which hinged on an imminent and Islamic threat to something variously described as American values, the real America, and the American way of life.

The grand themes of patriotism, freedom, honour, and national duty with their particular Christian American inflection and their sometimes coded invocations of the war on terror and its caricatureish Islamic boogey man were inescapable at Walter Reed. But as this bigness seeped into the very fibre of life at Walter Reed—flavouring the hamburgers at “support our troops” barbeques, colouring the banners waved by boosters every Friday night, and echoing in the lyrics of songs at USO shows—it was the miniscule and fragmented details of the materiality and lived experience of war that constituted soldiers own attention to the wars they had waged.

Among injured soldiers, talk of war rarely ever found narrative form. Instead of the relative stability and logic of stories, there were descriptions of objects like the CamelBaks and the invariably hot water soldiers would drink from them to quench their desert thirst and keep dehydration at bay or of a man who squats and shits in an Iraqi street. There were bodily feelings or sense-memories, like the heat of the Iraqi sun or the swarm of flies around an MRE. There were the intricate details of hot metal and sweating skin, the sound of gravel blown up in a mortar attack hitting the tin roof under which soldiers had slept, all described without recourse to a narrative context or notions of nationalism. And even when soldiers talked about things that happened, things that they did that resembled the events of more fully fledged war stories, it was often in this same small and fragmented way and always contiguous with the labors of life in the moment, as, for example, my encounters with James showed me.

When I met James he was a single amputee in his early twenties. His wife Erin was living at Walter Reed with him as was their almost one-year-old daughter. They moved into the Fisher House from the Mologne House in October, carting their oversized Tupperware bins full of clothes and DVDs and things for the baby across two sloping parking lots and into their

51 Meals Ready to Eat: the nutritionally engineered, dehydrated, and vacuum sealed food for soldiers in the field. Essentially, MREs are the evolution of the C-Ration of earlier military eras.
comparatively spacious new bedroom. I got the grey plastic media cart from the Fisher House storage room, usually used for moving flats of bottled water or donated goods into the store room or between the houses, and helped push it awkwardly across the rough tile of the hallway floor toward their bedroom as a video game or sweatshirt occasionally tumbled to the ground and was stranded in its wake.

James’ remaining leg had been reconstructed using pieces of his missing one, and as he sat in his light-weight folding wheelchair with its bright magenta aluminum that had been ‘customized’ with black ink by his infant daughter and a friend wielding permanent markers, tilting his slim and slouchy body back and balancing on his rear wheels, he explained that the doctors said it wouldn’t always be so noticeable that his shin used to be his calf, though that span of flesh hadn’t yet settled into its new home, and still defiantly held its convex shape. His rehabilitation had frustratingly plateaued; his reconstructed leg caused him constant pain and so walking on it while using his other prosthetic leg seemed pointless. He’d stopped going to most of his physical therapy appointments.

Amid his pain and boredom and frustration, he often found an easy joy playing with his daughter, though when she developed a habit of crawling out of the kitchen, around the corner, and nimbly up the Fisher House’s carpeted stairs, he was profoundly exasperated that he could not stop her or go get her and that those who could hadn’t.

He grew up in the suburban mid-west, and, as he put it, loved the ‘burbs. It was important for him to be a good father and a good husband and a good provider, something that he showed more in action than in word. He had already bought a house near his parents that he and Erin would move into when he left Walter Reed. He joked that I would have to present my partner dressed in Sunday best and get his blessing before I ever got married. None of that seemed ill at ease with his multiplying tattoos, or his love of horror movies, or his atheism, or his scruffy
brown hair that he half jokingly molded into a Mohawk in the few days it was long enough on top.

As the weeks rolled on, we found a shared a tendency to smirk and shake our heads at life’s ironies. We’d wait for each other to take smoke breaks together on the patio, punching the automatic door opener button and propping the door open with the matt so we wouldn’t get locked out while we sat and talked about daily life or his sore stump or how he hated going to special events for soldiers because they made him feel like a “charity case.”

We were sitting there on the patio one night in late October when we began talking about Iraq, talking about what it was like to be there, the sights and senses that never coalesced into stories. I noticed we were somehow having a conversation about James’ being in Iraq without talking about the war itself. He was describing how hot it was there. He said “basically, Iraq is an asshole of a place.” As we sat there in the cool, quiet dark, he looked up at the sky and said “I think that’s the first star I’ve seen here. Over there, in Iraq, you see them all the time. Back home I’d never seen a shooting star, but you see them like every five minutes there.” I asked him, half joking, if he’d had a lot of time to be gazing up at the stars. “Well” he said “you sleep on the ground.”

Thinking more on the Iraqi sky, he told me how beautiful the sunrises and sunsets were, how bright and orange. All that beauty in an asshole of a place, a sky that presided over war and outshined the dull and light-polluted one that hovered over us there at Walter Reed, a sky that flaunted its brilliance at sunrise and sunset and all through his sleepless fitful nights with gaudy displays of shooting stars. His description verged on poetic and its irony was apparent, but, just to drive the point home, he paused and, after a moment’s poignant silence, said “I guess that’s what you call a paradox.” enunciating the last word as if he were feeling his way along the walls of a dark room afraid to stumble. And then he starts asking me about my research.
When the topic of basic training (BT) comes up, James thinks back to his own, four years before. He says “it’s weird but I’ve only talked to like three guys out of hundreds who I was with in BT but when you’re there you’re closer to them than your parents, than your sister.” He says he can’t really remember anything about it; “so much has happened since then.”

Our conversation meanders and I begin talking about a trip I once took to Egypt, the closest to Iraq that I have been. Given the way that James has tacked so seamlessly back and forth between the D.C. sky and the Iraqi one, between his once upon a time attachments to the guys from BT and my parents, my sister, it seemed to make sense that I would do this, that there would be something comparable about my traveling through Egypt one summer and his time ‘downrange.’ He responds to my story about navigating Cairo’s Khan el-Khalili with my hair, arms, and legs covered during a heat wave with something else he remembers about Iraq, the place, the war zone but not quite the war, that seems to confound him. “You see all kinds of things in Iraq. It’s a weird place” he says. “And you see men beating their wives, like kicking them in the face by the side of the road, weird shit. Kids beating up their mothers. Just weird.” He does not tell a story. He does not speak about Iraq as a mapped out war zone; nor does he imagine what those roadsides might be like when he, perched on top of an armored U.S. military vehicle looking out from behind a weapon mounted there, is gone. The bits of recollection are not war memories or peace memories or emergency memories, they are just the weird shit he recollects.

James does not hypothesize about what if or why, even though he is one of the only soldiers with whom I ever, as Erin lamentably noted more than once, “talk politics”. In those

52 James doesn’t have a sister but knows I do.
53 And about the gendered dimensions of orientalism.
conversations we talk in more abstract terms about bigger things, like the new GI Bill and its impact on military preparedness. But these things do not creep in to his life like memories: He does not look up at the sky and think about his nation’s place in the world or the American dream or any of those big things that stars sometimes evoke. They are not the same kinds of things, those big ideas, not miniscule fragments to be recollected.

And so, for a moment that night on the patio with James, there it was, Iraq, the hot, weird, asshole of a place with the searingly beautiful skies. There it was, its absence overshadowing the dim twinkle of Washington D.C., the weird shit that he remembers and that seems to push the intensity of basic training and its hundreds of closer-than-your-family-members off into some other life. James’ past in Iraq makes itself known in the present through the memory of a shooting star. Iraq becomes a place that is comparable to D.C. The smallness of war’s presence allows it to insinuate itself into life at Walter Reed, and this is part of the place’s extra/ordinary atmosphere.

Even those bits of war’s violence that might seem incommensurate, those somethings that happened in Iraq which might seem to be entirely out of place even in the marked ordinary of Walter Reed, even in the unheimlicheit of the Fisher House kitchen, also make their little appearances even as they tend to refuse narrative form or coalesce into a war story.

Here, for example, is what the war is like in the Fisher House kitchen: I am sitting on a stool at the Fisher House breakfast bar. Erin putters in the kitchen, keeping an eye on something frozen she is cooking in the oven, wiping down the counter tops with the house’s endless supply of Clorox disposable wipes, busying herself. Erin is 20 and has thrown herself into her role as mother and wife, even though it was just two years ago that she and James met and fell in love at first sight in a nightclub not too far from the west-coast base where James was stationed. She always seems stylishly put together, her already straight brown highlighted hair straightened
further into obedience with a flat iron, the effect of her tattooed arm softened by her immaculate but unostentatiously fashionable fitted t-shirts and jeans that show off her curvy figure which, along with her square nose, beauty mark, and round eyes, sometimes suggest a kind of everywoman Marylyn Monroe.

She is opinionated and self confident and good at being busy. Perhaps that is why people don’t think to ask her how she is doing and ask instead only about James and their daughter. She doesn’t complain about this, nor does she broadcast that the reason she goes regularly to a tanning salon is to get a break, if only for an hour, almost like meditation, to shut herself away from her life in a box of sunshine. She told me this when I chided her for exposing herself to the carcinogenic effects of tanning booths, but these moments of sunshiny solitude were more important to her. She tanned even though she knew full well tanning salons are bad for you and even though she might be more cautious about her health seeing as how she’s had a number of tumours removed and had another one in her head that, in the months that followed, started to give her headaches. This ongoing history of tumours is also not something that she broadcasts. The feeling of one growing in her head is another thing she doesn’t complain about when her mother or mother-in-law are asking her on the phone how James and his body are doing. But she is not shy, or self effacing, and when I asked her how she is doing on the one night she and I go out for drinks alone (though to a pool hall which is one of the only spots injured soldiers and their wives or girlfriends ordinarily go, and so we are surrounded by people we know) she spoke openly and unsentimentally about herself and her frustrations.

And so it is an ordinary evening in the Fisher House kitchen as Erin keeps herself competently busy in the kitchen, moving almost constantly from the sink to the counter to the oven and back, while I sit on a stool at the breakfast bar, and James sits in his chair with the slouched posture of teenager half watching nothing in particular on TV, and we talk offhandedly
about how James is about to be taken on his first ever hunting trip by a small group of volunteers.

Erin grew up in the rural north-west, and has been hunting more than once. She declares from the kitchen, with characteristic certainty, how awful hunting is and how James won’t be so excited about his trip once he’s seen someone kill “a little Bambi” and skin it. “The first thing I shot was a duck” she says. James turns away from the TV and looks at Erin; “The first thing I shot was a little girl.” There is a pause just a breath too long to be comic timing and the sarcastic tone of James’ statement hangs in the air between the three of us, reverberating on some strange frequency, moaning low like a confession and popping quick like a witty retort. “Right, okay you got a point there when you put it that way” says Erin.

No one is angry or bitter or upset. Nothing out of the ordinary has been said. A joke has been made. Black humour, like the image of diminutive doe-eyed Bambi skinned and bloodied. A point has been made about the ethics of shooting things. A claim has been made about whose knowledge of the horror of inflicting life threatening pain on living bodies that are iconically innocent is more horrible. Human trumps animal. Girl trumps duck. War trumps hunting. But the point is they are cards in the same game, comparable species of experience. This is the life of war at Walter Reed, the thread of violence in the weave of life (Das 2007: 9-10, see also 88, 211, 226), the extra/ordinary presence of a miniscule fragment of war that is part of an ordinary night at Walter Reed.

3.3 Vital Signs and Möbius Time

As is generally the case when the body breaks down through illness and injury, the functioning of bodies at Walter Reed is a site of great attention and activity, much of which seems to operate through a logic of inversion. Much of the taken for granted, disattended, and automatic
functioning of bodies requires explicit attention and effort. Walking, for example, is the focus of hours of daily practice and the usually negligible details of how a knee bends, how a foot hits the floor, where one’s balance is when walking up or down a flight of stairs is explained by physical therapists and concentrated on by soldiers (see Chapter 6).

Certain bodily configurations may make soldiers aware of parts of the body that are usually so ignored they can even fall asleep. Flesh from the buttocks was sometimes used to reconstruct other parts of the body in which case sitting is made painfully palpable, as it was for Matthew, one Fisher House resident who explained why he was so pleased when cushions finally appeared on the metal patio chairs: the weight of the body bearing down through the pelvis and hips and even the hard dull edges of the bone which pointedly pushed on the diminished muscle crushing it between the surfaces inside the body and the surfaces of a seat outside it, all of this becomes felt and Matthew is made painfully aware of all the little movements, pressures, and pulls that sitting entails.

Colostomy bags, like Manny’s, catheters, like Charlie’s, and PICC lines, like Alec’s, also invert the body’s insides and outsides. Bags house piss and shit outside the body and one must consciously remember to empty them without the familiar feelings of full bladder or bowels or else their abject contents threaten to reenter the body and infect it. PICC lines extend the veins outside the body and short circuit the routes of circulation that ingested and expelled fluids must usually take. Nerves unexpectedly announce their presence, the insides of a body are felt, and interior surfaces become apparent.

And this inverted bodily logic, this particular awareness of the body, becomes a part of ordinariness at Walter Reed, it is inseparable from decisions about what to wear, where to sit, or when to eat. The particular conditions of bodily precarity make the body speak loudly, for example, across the lunch table.
A PICC line runs from Alec’s heart through a vein and out his bicep, where its plastic port is secured with a band of gauze, visible and accessible just at the end of his t-shirt sleeve over which he sometimes wears a half zipped up hoodie. Though the changing state of his legs (now in an ExFix, now in a flexible cast, now their undulating and rugged, fleshy topography in full view) suggests their weakness, sitting in his wheelchair Alec’s body seems thick and strong. His broad face and heavy brow often show his toothy grin and the slow recession of his close cropped hair, usually hidden with a baseball cap, seems to simultaneously betray his age and accentuate his dimpled cheeks giving him the air of a mischievous child.

His is fiercely independent, gregarious, and unflappable. His brother and father and friend take turns flying out from the mid-west to stay with him, but his routine doesn’t change much, and he seems unconcerned or even happy during those in between times when he is unaccompanied and spends the night in his room alone, though it is against the rules; unless you live in the barracks, you may not spend the night without an NMA or ‘Battle Buddy’. It is hard to say if it’s nonchalance or his Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) that accounts for the fact that Alec tends to run out of medications, though he always wears a black nylon fanny pack with zippered pockets brimming with pill bottles.

He says he joined the Army because, after a few years at a liberal college, he was thoroughly unconvinced about the post-9/11 political arguments of the left and the right and thought he’d like to see what was actually happening in Iraq for himself. But he also said he

54 An ExFix is an External Fixator, sometimes called a halo; a steel scaffolding that surrounds and stabilizes the injured limb and is anchored into the bone with a series of protruding screws.
55 NMA stands for Non-Medical Attendant—it refers generically to the friend or family member of a soldier who is living with them and helping through their rehabilitation, but it also refers specifically to a family member of an injured soldier who is paid a $60 per diem to assist with their activities of daily living (or ADL in rehabilitation literature) under a government program which ensures this per diem, plus travel expenses. For more on the NMA program, see Wool and Messinger n.d.
joined because he was tired of people looking to him for answers in his life and wanted “to stop giving orders and start taking them”. Alec doesn’t so much care about politics as he wants to know, empirically, about the world. He is less interested in what should or shouldn’t be, and more interested in what is. This is one reason why he adheres, as he says, to a “policy of rigorous honesty,” though sometimes when he smiles his mischievous smile, it seems he might be up to something else.

One day at lunchtime I sit with him at one of the large round wooden tables in the Fisher House dining room chatting about his military experience while he eats his lunch. I make an offhand comment about how I could never imagine joining the military. Alec seems surprised and asks me why not. I say (not, perhaps, being very rigorous in my honesty) that I couldn’t handle being so tightly controlled and that I like to choose the people with whom I spend my time. Alec responds that it’s not so bad, and that, as a kind of peer leader in is unit, if he ever saw anything that needed changing, he always made sure it got changed.

One morning, Alec asks me if I’d like to come with him and his friend Joe who has been staying with him for a few days to a lunch buffet in the afternoon. He said it would be great, some volunteers would pick us all up in a limo and take us to a famous seafood restaurant right down by the water. We are sitting around in the den, Alec assuring me that there will be plenty of room while he makes himself an English muffin so that he can take some of his pills before we leave. The volunteers do this lunch every few weeks. Javier is passing through the kitchen and insists that I should go, telling me about the huge King Crab legs he had when he went with his family a while back.

Three men arrive at the backdoor and we see them through the window. Two are our dressed-down hosts, both white and in their 60s wearing button down shirts and jeans and
windbreakers, like business men on the weekend. The third is their driver and assistant, he is a bit younger and black and dressed impeccably in leather shoes and a long wool coat.

When they come in, all of them seem annoyed that Alec expects them not only to wait for him, but to wait for him to finish eating. They suggest that he forego his English muffin and save his appetite for the endless bucket of crab legs that awaits us. Alec flashes his mischievous smile and explains that he cannot take his pills on an empty stomach. In their enthusiasm to offer something special to an extraordinary soldier, they did not think of such ordinary requirements of the management of a precarious and war injured body.

Alec finishes his English muffin, pops his pills, and the six of us walk outside to the waiting limousine, and then must consider the logistics. Alec cannot climb over anyone, anyone who climbs over him and his outstretched and painful legs must be limber. We talk over the possibilities, and Alec decides to slide himself in gingerly first and I can sit next to him and Joe next to me. Our host will sit perpendicular to us, we will all be careful not to kick Alec’s legs. Joe folds up Alec’s wheelchair and goes to put it in the trunk. It doesn’t fit. We will have to keep it in the back with the rest of us. He gives it to the driver, and, once the rest of us have gotten situated, the driver lifts it with a strange and awkward care, as if it was a baby giraffe, and leaves it resting on the limo’s remaining empty seats. It takes a long while to arrange us in this way, as Alec knew it would, since it ordinarily does.

Throughout the limousine ride, and subsequent King Crab legs and Giant Clam sushi, parts of Alec’s body—not just his legs, but also his nerves and veins—are, as always, unmistakably present. His fanny pack, t-shirt, and basketball shorts acquiesce to their needs. The way we sit together in a limousine is governed, first and foremost, by the way his legs feel and move. In eating his English muffin, Alec is managing his body’s pain, rather than its hunger. To sit with him is not only to be aware of his legs, but to be vigilant about the space around them. At
Walter Reed, it is dangerous to take such things for granted, but there is nothing out of the ordinary about that.

Towards the end of our meal in the nearly empty restaurant, with its seemingly endless buffet stations spread over the many tiers of the softwood floors and the spaces’ mix of wood paneling, brick archways, and tiffany-style pendant lamps, after our hosts have implored us to get the steak and the lobster, to order from the menu and the buffet, to drink mojitos instead of just sweet tea, either unaware or unconcerned of the way many soldiers’ medications reduce their appetites, nauseate them, and can interact poorly with alcohol, Alec begins to fumble through his fanny pack. From behind the steel bucket on the table that still holds a few huge, bright red King Crab legs, he says he’s having “shooters;” sharp and intense pains that run suddenly though the nerves in his legs, caused by nothing new, a feature of the instability of his appendages, a consequence of all the forces, ballistic and medical, that have pushed themselves onto his legs and carved out their current configuration inside and out.

As our hosts, who turn out to be local business owners who attend the same church, begin to ask me about just how Socialist Canada really is, Alec fingers through the pill boxes, bottles, and blister packs, smiling his way through the pain. “Oh no” he says, and though he is calm, and still smiling, there is the slightest sense of panic in his voice. I ask him what it is. He says he’s run out of morphine, forgotten to get his refill. Luckily, he has some oxycodone on hand (this is his back up med) and he swallows the pills and orders some ice cream. And then he realizes that it’s time for his antibiotics. They are also not in his fanny pack, he tells Joe he thinks he’s left them at home. There is more of that low grade panic emerging from his unflappable and solid presence. The antibiotics are why he has the PICC line, they are fighting off the bone infection that threatens to require an amputation of one, and perhaps both, of his legs. The antibiotics have been working, but they are dangerous and serious drugs and must be taken on time. He says that
if he’s left them at home, we’ll have to leave right away, that very moment, now, but the import of what he is saying, that his legs hang in the balance, seems at odds with that smile, with his steadiness. Our hosts do not move to leave; they do not seem to understand.

And then Joe says he thinks the antibiotics might be in the limo, maybe amid all that coordination and confusion, they fell out of Alec’s pack. From the other side of the rather grand round wooden table, with beautiful inlaid work in various shades of amber, our hosts ask what the antibiotics look like. Alec and Joe and I all describe the little plastic ball of yellow liquid. I do not say that I think it looks like a rounded pineapple grenade, which is what I think every time I see it. Our hosts seem sure it’s in the limo, they remember seeing it there on the seat and wondering what it could be, out of the ordinary as it seemed to them, though they didn’t think, or want, to ask. We are all relieved. But there is still a certain urgency and Alec only eats a few bites of ice cream—mostly to soothe his stomach—and when we make our way out of the still empty restaurant to the black limousine waiting in front, door open, we do not wait to think of logistics again or consult with our hosts. I climb in and scoot along the soft black leather seats, Alec positions himself nearest the door, where the wheelchair had been on the ride down, and as Joe is folding the chair I grab the little yellow ball that we are all quite happy to see, and hand it to Alec.

As Alec attaches it to the port at the end of his PICC line, he says he can feel it burning right to his heart, and traces its course by sweeping his hand across his body from bicep to chest. The path of liquid is searing a custom built trail through his veins and making them sensible. The crisis, the catastrophe which Alec’s precarious body extra/ordinarily verges on or, perhaps, is in the middle of, is contained for the moment.

Such precariousness is not simply the result of the IED explosion in which Alec was hurt or the exploded vehicle that landed on him and crushed his legs. It is not simply the function of a
single, remarkable, if, at Walter Reed, common, event. Such precariousness is a function of extra/ordinary life at Walter Reed: it is part of the process of recovery and rehabilitation that requires continual medical interventions which are both injurious to and necessary for the body and its future form. Through multiple surgeries and various forms of rehabilitation, the very forms of the body are manipulated and remolded. The part of a calf that has been removed and placed on a shin still looks like a calf, though the doctors say its provenance won’t always be so obvious; in a state of the art lab in the hospital, pieces of skull are custom made out of synthetic materials replicating the unique curvatures of a particular soldier’s head; special prosthetics are made by people rumored to be makeup and special effects experts in the movies and each hair on an arm, each little pale crescent in every nail bed is painstakingly crafted to make a new fake hand look just like one’s own real one; special elasticized sleeves called shrinkers must be worn on residual limbs to make the stump conform to the ideal shape so that it will sit comfortably in a socket; sockets are remade as the stump approaches the imagined perfection of a straight and narrow limb with a smoothly rounded edge or as the soldier and his body disobediently swell. All the little shapes of the ‘natural’ unmarked body, the visible and invisible signs of human life, from the tiny little anvil shaped incus bone of the inner ear to the undulating profile of the heel and arch of a foot, must be made, remade, worked on.

Phantom limbs invert the order of thinking, doing, and seeing that usually describes simple motions of, say, the hand. Mirror therapy—where one looks into a mirror held at a right angle to their torso in the middle of their body reflecting the limb they have as if it were transposed into the place of the limb they only feel they have—offers a way of tricking the eye

56 Though advents in the manufacture of sockets make them very customizable, thus accommodating an array of residual limb shapes, this seems to have impacted decisions about where on a limb to amputate (clinical preference used to be for a high, clean, uniform cut) more than how to treat it afterwards.
and the brain, a kind of bio-feedback where looks are made to deceive the brain into thinking it has control over something that is not there.

One afternoon, Javier and I sat for a 20 minute mirror therapy session in one of the hospital’s occupational therapy rooms. The morning had consisted of seemingly endless hours of physical and occupational therapy, practicing walking up and down stairs in the back stairwell, being stretched on the beds laid out in the new wide open PT area on the top level of the MATC (Military Advanced Training Center), balancing on the upside-down hemisphere they call a turtle, trying to walk with even strides, all amid others learning to walk and run again on the brand new running track or practicing their own balance and coordination through various exercises with cones and steps and chairs that their therapists, watching and occasionally touching them with precision and care, arranged and positioned for soldiers while giving them bits of feedback and encouragement or demonstrating a certain movement. Then we’d gone to the MATC’s lower level so Javier could work on upper body strength at the new weight machines, which he did while discreetly ignoring, along with Peter, who was also there, and me, the small news crew from Erie, NY with a young, keen, and well coiffed anchor who was being given a tour of the new facility by a Public Affairs Officer.

It hadn’t been long since Javier stopped using his motorized wheelchair almost all the time and started walking on his prosthetic leg, with the use of a cane, as much as he could. So throughout the day he must concentrate as we navigate the long hallways between the rehab rooms and the SFAC (Soldier and Family Assistance Center) office where we wait to talk to a

57 In other military contexts, PT stands for Physical Training (or exercise). At Walter Reed, PT also means physical therapy. Because many of the activities of physical therapy look like the activities of regular PT (including variations on running laps and strength training) there is a way in which PT at Walter Reed is physical therapy and vise versa. This, along with the fact that injured soldiers at Walter Reed are still active duty military members whose “mission is to heal” and the general acceptance of the opacity of acronyms means that, in some ways, PT means the same thing it did before an injury. PT is thus an interesting example of how life at Walter Reed is and is not like military life in other sites.
case worker in the waiting room with its bowls of left-over Halloween candy, and coterie of heavily made up and well-dressed women administrators who moved back and forth between their desks and through the space. Javier’s little brother, who has, since his time as Javier’s NMA, decided to become a nurse, has gone off to the PX to see if he can buy a new unit patch for Javier to wear on that trip he is about to take back home to Oklahoma to see his unit which is returning from Iraq. Their mother, who is usually also living in the room they share at the Fisher House, told me that, for as far back as she can remember, Javier had always wanted to be a soldier. He is looking forward to seeing his guys. At lunch, the cafeteria had been busy and the whole morning seemed to pass as slowly as its creeping lines.

The hospital’s dim institutional lighting and lifeless colours have contributed to my exhaustion when Javier says that we have to go to “mirror therapy”. I don’t understand what he means until we sit down in the occupational therapy room, slightly brighter and busier than the other rehab spaces and equipped with a pool table and, for a while, a golden retriever. Two young women in hip civilian clothes greet him as usual and then go back to their conversation as they hold a full length mirror balanced on the table where Javier positions himself, his arm resting outstretched on the table’s surface so it is reflected in the mirror which he looks into without any noticeable effort. The mirror reflects his arm back at him in the place of the one he is missing. As he looks where his hand would be, the sight of his prosthetic with its split-hook terminal device is blocked by the mirror the two women hold which instead reflects back to him his extant hand. As he gazes at the reflection and takes in the illusion that it is actually the presence of his absent hand, he moves his extant hand and wrist almost imperceptibly. He tells me, that, though he was skeptical about mirror therapy at first, he has learned how to manipulate his missing hand and can now release its previously painfully clenched missing fist and even twist its missing wrist. When he is done, he plays a bit of pool and pets the dog, and then he is as
exhausted as I am and we head back to the Fisher House around the side of the hospital with its concrete covered walkway, and signs that instruct us not to smoke or salute, and past the shuttle bus stop where people sit and smoke between hospital appointments, and along the sidewalk that passes between the old brick Red Cross building where they now have USO shows, and the little old chapel, and the National Museum of Health and Medicine with its strange collection of Cold War era medical imaging machines, and illustrations of combat casualties since the Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln’s death mask and the probe that fished the bullet out of his head, and jars of preserved, malformed fetuses, none of which we are aware of as we end the day at the hospital, just as excruciatingly long as usual, at 2:30pm.

Through all of these activities, from the mirror therapy to the work out, to the waiting room, to the balancing exercises, to the feeling of exhaustion, the form and function of the body become not so taken for granted. The injured soldier’s body demands his attention and manipulation whether he is walking down the hallway on his way to an office or practicing walking up and down the stairs with a therapist spotting him from behind. The implicitness of the body becomes explicit and thus the extra/ordinary bodies of soldiers at Walter Reed are those that manifest a certain and previously unimaginable labour. Javier’s body, the parts that we can see and the parts that only he can feel, are configured though all sorts of acts of looking, from his own gazing into the mirror to the careful eye of the prosthetist who will create a small prosthetic for his ear, the top of which was blown off in the IED explosion that also took his arm and leg and peppered his pale brown face with those bluish bits of shrapnel that come so specifically to my mind.

The work that it takes for Javier to walk is considerable and spans many objects and actors. There is the effort of his own body, and the concentration of his own mind and that of his physical and occupational therapists. But there is also the work of the prosthetists who constantly
fit and refit his sockets, of the people whose research went into creating the high-tech C-Leg and its special knee, there is the work of those objects themselves, and the way they interact with Javier’s body as he slides his stump in its special sleeve and liner down into the socket, two things whose shapes have been partly formed by the work of surgeons and prosthetists and Javier, but that have also developed symbiotically together, two things that have worked on each other. When Javier puts his prosthetic on for the day, he pulls up his shorts, slides his stump, encased in a soft liner, into his socket and leans into it, then hops on it to push his stump all the way down, and then he releases the air that might be trapped in the bottom of the socket with a special valve. At this moment, he works sometimes on his body, sometimes on its supplements, and sometimes not quite on his stump, and not quite on the prosthetic, but on the space where they meet. And these little and necessary attentions to the body and its insides and edges become part of the extra/ordinary attention living at Walter Reed requires for injured soldiers. Such attention is exhausting, painful, and hard. But it is common there, and does not make a soldier extraordinary within the shared ordinariness of Walter Reed.

This sharedness gave life among injured soldiers some of its particular quality and the heaviness of so much hitting you all at once was matched only by the weight of boredom which was, even in the presence of pain and frustration and anger and sadness, the overriding feeling at Walter Reed. Life there was heavy and slow. Soldiers felt it in the excruciating sluggishness of each day that was so palpable almost all the time. Hours died impossibly long deaths watching TV on the couch, playing video games, sleeping, smoking, nothing. Even the daily activities of therapy appointments and paper work filing and occasional formation were hemmed in by
impossibly hard to kill time.\textsuperscript{58} Waiting in an office or a line and then getting too exhausted and waiting until tomorrow; waiting for the doctors to say what to do about a newly infected bone only to have them recommend more pills and more wait-and-see; waiting for the Fed Ex delivery of a new car part and then waiting until the shop was open to work on it, only to find out it wasn’t available for personal use; waiting for the bus to take everyone out to dinner, where we would wait until some well meaning speaker would say something about heroism so we could hurry up and eat our steak and then wait for the bus to bring us all back home. So while everything changes so quickly, the affective apprehension of time is marked by boredom like you wouldn’t believe, inescapable, inevitable, and everywhere (see Taussig 2004).

Even the temporality of the body was all twisted around like a Möbius strip. Jake went through surgery after surgery to reconstruct his leg, but it only seemed to get worse. After they had done all that they could, it still took months for him to convince them to cut the damn thing off so he could walk more than 20 minutes at a time. The simple telos of a healing body was deformed by the facts of precarious bodies. For Alec, the ExFix that was anchored into the bone and hovered like a scaffolding around his reconstructed leg was literally the structure of healing and the site and cause of a bone infection that slowed the pace of his recovery and even threatened the viability of the limb it had been made to recreate.

At the end of a stump, bones and nerves that had been cleanly cut and covered in stretched and stitched packets of flesh healed and grew against the wishes and orders of doctors

\textsuperscript{58} In most military contexts, formation is like a roll call where members of a unit present themselves for inspection and instruction. At Walter Reed, following the Washington Post scandal, formation was still held in the gym and was required three or four mornings per week, but disciplinary rules about presentation (not only standing at attention, but the wearing and maintenance of a regulation uniform and hair cut) and attendance were not strictly enforced and Peter and James both described it as more or less a “bitch session” at which soldiers would complain about various institutional frustrations.
causing strange pains and requiring new surgeries. There were so many ‘set backs’ and detours that these often characterized the vector of rehabilitation better than any ‘road to recovery.’

Javier, Alec, Jake and others at Walter Reed do not just have momentary experiences that interrupt the flow of ordinary life with bodily intrusions. The point is not just that they may, from time to time, feel pain, or have to stop and think about walking. Rather it is that the most simple acts of being make explicit and apparent characteristics of the body that are normally negligible. At Walter Reed, even things like walking and eating and getting dressed in the morning are obviously corporeal, and compel a certain corporeal awareness. The sudden pains or the 20 minutes of mandated gazing at the reflection of one’s own not quite still hand are not out of the ordinary, they are moments of bodily attention that emerge from an ordinariness grounded in feeling and knowing and thinking about one’s body and its precarious instability.

3.4 In-durable Sociality

Given the staggered twisted temporalities of their bodies and the way they arrive often one by one, injured soldiers at Walter Reed do not form a clear or enduring cohort. They do not arrive together or leave together. Even though everyone spends the vast majority of their time within the post’s gates and in just three or four of its buildings, togetherness itself seems sparse. And it is worth remembering that life at Walter Reed is not “life on the ward” nor is it, in the ways identified by Goffman (1990), quite institutional. A pair or triad of soldiers and their families

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59 Seth Messinger (2010) helpfully outlines the tensions between these experiences of time and the more teleological models of rehabilitation employed by clinicians at Walter Reed.

60 I also note again here that mine is not an institutional or hospital ethnography, nor is it addressed to the epistemologies or cosmologies of medicine and healing that are worked out on injured soldiers bodies (for a very helpful overview of hospital ethnographies, see Zaman 2005: 12-18). This is both because I ask different questions, and carried out a different kind of fieldwork (i.e. not in the hospital itself) but also derives from some significant differences of life at Walter Reed that set it apart from what might present themselves as similar settings. The soldiers I worked with may have more in common with each other than most hospital patients, seeing as how they
may do things together for a while—a trip to the mall and a dinner or two in the course of a week, daily or nightly stints hanging around together in the Fisher House’s common areas—but such groupings of soldiers and families are often dispersed by the contingencies of recovery as a soldier moves into different housing, the state and stamina of his body and mind changes, or he or his family members leave Walter Reed. And alongside that sparse togetherness, when they’re not at appointments in the hospital, soldiers are also very often alone; sleeping, playing video games, watching TV.

Even the course of soldiers’ care and the activities of their rehabilitation—things that might suggested a single shared, common, experience—are dependent on the specificities of their injuries and their negotiations with their array of doctors and rehabilitation specialists. Individuating differences abound. For example, while both Jake and James eventually had an already reconstructed and rehabilitated leg amputated, those experiences and processes of amputation were quite different. Jake actively lobbied his doctors for the amputation. James did not. With the rest of his body in relatively stable shape, Jake’s progress in that post amputation stage of rehabilitation was fast and relatively steady. James’ rehabilitation was less so, not only because he now had two prosthetic legs, but because of the nerve and bone growth at the site of the new amputation. Both of them were living in the Fisher House, but then Jake moved into

_ were all in the military and the contexts of their injuries are very similar, if not identical. They pass through Walter Reed in a staggered way that in some ways resembles other contexts of rehabilitation (Leavitt 1992; Zaman 2005) but is significantly protracted, lasting months or years, rather than weeks. I would also note that this staggered quality and transience is, I think, part of what has made biomedical practices within the hospital more ripe for ethnographic insight than the lives of patients themselves who in general don’t constitute themselves within a space that lends itself to ethnographic fieldwork (see, for example, Mol 2002 and Saunders 2008, though see Martin 1994 for a multi-sited approach that includes patients in a different way). The uncanny homeliness of Walter Reed, including co-habitation with family members, abundance of creature comforts, and personal freedom, also makes it very different from other spaces in which people might live for a long while for medical reasons or while they are, in some way, suffering (see, for example Biehl 2005; Hammond 2004: 56-77; Johnson 1998; Sassen 1999; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). The visibility, publicity, and valorization of Walter Reed as a space of life also makes it remarkably different from those other contexts of the institution, hospital, asylum, camp, or detention centre._
Abrams Hall on his own and James and Erin and their daughter moved into an off-site apartment furnished and paid for by the Bank of America. While on paper their experiences at Walter Reed might have had much in common, the shape of their lives were quite different and often set them apart from one another.

What soldiers did have in common were less the details of a case history or even the interconnected routines of a shared life in a community, and more the diffuse experience of profound precariousness in the saturated space of Walter Reed; something that manifest itself in the experience of piecing together an ‘ordinary’ life in the midst of that saturated space after having been profoundly marked by the violence of war. And they had in common the exposure to others’ (homogenizing and unifying) expectations about who soldiers are and what they have done. These diffuse commonalities were incredibly important to soldiers and their families; they were what allowed a sense of ordinariness to emerge at Walter Reed. But together, they convey not the picture of ‘a community’ but the commonness of being (and sometimes an experience of being alone in common) amid the particularities of Walter Reed’s war torn extra/ordinariness.

In this commonness that is not quite community, sociality takes on a quality we might call in-durability: a way of being with others based in part on a common need for endurance, but that is not itself enduring; a way of being in common that is based on the hardness (dureté) of life—both its difficulty and its explicitly material anchors—but that is also conditioned by the temporal limits of that togetherness—the awareness of many, finite durations, rather than the possibility of a single shared duration (the duration, or even the longue durée).  

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61 The inspiration for thinking of this sociality in terms of these French and English cognates comes from my slightly ironic rethinking of the Paul Eluard quotation that is the epitaph of Michael Lambek’s The Weight of the Past: “le dur désir de durer” (cited in Lambek 2002: x).
Social relationships at Walter Reed acquire an intensity that gives them a condensed and accelerated quality; people become fast friends and, occasionally, fast enemies. Soldiers who have never met may see each other daily in brief increments around the hospital and swap intimate details about their bodies during physical therapy sessions. The empathy with which they can understand each other’s conditions seems at times to tie them together like family in a way that echoes the familial love forged in war and the coagulating filial love that, though sometimes disavowed, solidifies the army and its members (MacLeish 2010). And yet bonded in this way, they may know little about the details of each others’ lives. They skip over the incremental steps of getting to know each other in favour of profound identification and affiliation. In some ways it is like James’ description of the closer-than-family attachments to guys in BT that somehow disappear. Only at Walter Reed BT’s regimented, disciplined, controlled togetherness is absent and in its place is uncertainty, boredom, and unpredictability.

Everybody knows that this mode of life will not last, and indeed they hope it will not last long; that its duration will be brief. Part of what makes it endurable is that very knowledge and hope that it will be over soon. The experience of togetherness and of being in common with other soldiers, and the knowledge that that commonness will not endure are part of what makes Walter Reed in-durable.

Sitting at a table in the upstairs at McGuinty’s, a big Irish bar that is one of the two in Silver Spring that are always full of soldiers on a Friday night, there are young guys—soldiers cleaned up in new jeans and maybe a button down instead of a t-shirt—greeting each other with loud and slightly drunken affection, with a holler and sometimes a kind of masculine handshake-hug hybrid. When a small group of soldiers comes into the area near the small stage where a group of us are sitting at a high top table nestled in a corner between the wall and the chest high dark wood partitions, James waves excitedly to one who squeezes in to greet him and
immediately pulls up one leg of his shorts to show off a new Coyote socket system for his prosthetic they’d been talking about a day before. They shout above the din of conversation and live music and James asks about the pros and cons, how easy or hard it is to get on and off, how pliable, how strong. When James turns back to the rest of us at the table, I ask who his friend was. He says he’d given him a ride to the bar once, but he doesn’t know his name.

One summer evening, Jake and I are sitting in his tricked out white Honda, windows down, the sound of grindcore pumping through the custom stereo system and reverberating through the leather seats. We are driving across the Mologne House parking lot, taking a shortcut from the Fisher House to his new room at Abrams Hall, which, even the long way, takes less than two minutes. As we cruise slowly past the partition separating the parking lot from the Mologne House’s big automatic glass doors, a burley below the knee amputee in shorts and a baseball cap waves to us and we stop. I’ve seen Jake talk to him before at the bar and we all exchange friendly hellos as he leans down to smile at us through the window. It’s a Saturday night, and he asks us sarcastically if we’ve got any “exciting plans”. Just getting some dinner, Jake tells him. We’re gonna eat his mom’s leftovers, I add. He tells us he might be off to McGinty’s slater, so maybe we’ll see him there. We wave goodbye and Jake puts the car into gear as we slowly pull away. When I ask Jake how he knows the guy, he tells me they have PT appointments at the same time, that he’s really nice, and that he doesn’t know anything about him.

So while this condensation makes such relationships seem thick and full and more important that anything else ever could be, their acceleration simultaneously gives them an appearance of thinness: a deep familial bond with someone whose name you don’t know. The configurations of the now, the moment of life at Walter Reed, become critically important, even life sustaining. And yet they are impermanent, not durable. Attachments that preceded soldiers’
injuries may also take on this quality; wives and girlfriends may leave, unable or unwilling to navigate the changing configurations of masculinity, sexuality, in/dependence, and affect. This acceleration of the pace of intimate relationships also means their endings can come quickly and abruptly: in the best of all possible worlds, a soldier will be able to leave Walter Reed and its social configuration behind tomorrow.

In the beginning, when Jake and Manny are both living in the Fisher House they seem inseparable. Manny is quiet and often seems easily contented. He doesn’t need to talk much, and likes to laugh at Jake’s jokes, like when he makes fun of the sound of cars with custom mufflers that buzz like “a bumblebee in a bucket”. He wears baggy t-shirts and sweatshirts and wide legged fleece sweatpants, in part to accommodate his colostomy bag, in part to camouflage the softness of his body which, he says, slightly embarrassed as he sits on the big red couch in the den eating a McMuffin, used to be so ripped that whenever he went out to clubs he’d wear super tight turtleneck t-shirts. He preempts Jake’s razzing for this, saying he knows it sounds “gay” but that it was actually a really cool and masculine Latino style.

Jake didn’t care about cars until he got to Walter Reed, and Manny helped get him interested in them. Now they imagine their only possible future together; they’ll open a garage in South Carolina and work on cars. When Manny plans to take leave and go to California with his mother, who speaks only Spanish, and who, until he got hurt, was looking after his sister and brother back home, Jake is worried about how he’ll spend his time. He’s worried about getting depressed and tells me that if he stops shaving, I’ll know he’s not doing very well. We decide to take pictures of Manny’s car in the parking lot and send them to him while he’s away. Jake thought it would be good to do it everyday, but instead we just did it once. There are forest fires raging in the part of California where Manny and his mom are (it would be easy, but not quite right since their time at Walter Reed began, to call that the place where they live, or to call it
their home). One afternoon while Manny is away and Jake and I are watching TV, I ask him if he’s heard from Manny, if his mom’s house has been touched by the fires, if he’ll be able to get back when he planned. Jake doesn’t know; they haven’t spoken.

Even though Jake scoped out a location for their garage on leave one weekend, no one quite thinks their business venture will ever come to pass, but no one would ever think of saying that. Not even when neither of them goes to a special seminar for injured soldiers who want to start their own businesses. They keep each other going just by being and living in each other’s company day after day, just by existing side by side. Then suddenly, when Jake moves out of the Fisher House and into Abrams Hall, they don’t see or talk to each other for days at a time. It is as though the pace of life is too much, too fast, too soon, and relationships that are pounded out in this rhythm seem thick yet prove brittle. I get used to it myself, and am not entirely surprised when, as a bunch of us are talking one night in the Fisher House dining room just before Javier will leave on the trip to welcome his unit home, I am the only one who knows this home is in Oklahoma, even though these soldiers and families have lived together in such close quarters for months.

Part of the more existential dimension of the precariousness of life at Walter Reed is due to the fact that life afterwards cannot depend on a going back to the stable configuration of community or family that a soldier had, in part because most of them had lived a life of relatively mechanic solidarities, as children in their parent’s homes and a few short years of Army life, which are sometimes not appealing and sometimes not available for them to re-enter after Walter Reed.

And while I, and the people with whom I worked, refer to the configurations of injured soldiers and their wives or parents or siblings as families, it is important to keep in mind that these families have been largely constituted by the distance and absence typical of Army families
in the current military era (MacLeish 2010). For example, though Jake and his wife Tanielle had been friends since childhood, they’d only gotten married after his injury and had never lived together until they moved their lives into a single room at the Fisher House. James was already facing down deployment when he and Erin met and, months later, married. Another Fisher House couple had been pen pals, only meeting face to face at Walter Reed, after an IED took both legs of the groom-to-be. These configurations are families, to be sure, but they don’t offer a refuge from the impermanence and instability of Walter Reed that the term might imply. They are not stable configurations of social arrangements to which a soldier can simply return. Indeed there is often no place, no home, in which these families used to reside and to which they can go back.

For soldiers like Alec, Javier, Peter, and Manny, who were usually attended to by a parent or a sibling, there may be a more enduring familial or fraternal past, traces of genealogical sociality that might thicken and fortify their social skin. But such genealogical affiliations do not themselves constitute stable or suitable attachments through which to found a new ‘ordinary’ self. Indeed part of the project of remaking oneself and imagining an ordinary future at Walter Reed involved moving towards a heteronormative family of one’s own (see Chapter 7), and going ‘back home’ to live with one’s parents seemed like a relatively hopeless future, even if it was possible. And no matter which family configuration soldiers found themselves in at Walter Reed, be it spousal or natal, the facts of those configurations were constantly changing: Peter’s parents both started out at Walter Reed and then took turns alternating weeks so they could keep up at work, and then in the summer his girlfriend came instead. Manny’s mother was always there, but after about a year, she had to go home to California and he moved into the barracks. Erin always stayed with James, though there had been a time, in the first months of his stay at Walter Reed, when she’d been too overwhelmed and had gone home to the West Coast for a
while. And this is part of the uncanniness of Walter Reed, it is *not* home, not a place one settles in. And yet it is a place one gets used to over the months and years of living there because that is something it is; is a place where one lives and where one begins, but never accomplishes, the project of making a life, and it is tinged with as much hominess as it can muster.

### 3.5 A Vignette of Thin Life

Given the extra/ordinariness which characterizes life at Walter Reed and its bodily attentions and temporalities and in-durable socialities, it is worth thinking about the qualities of socially embedded life that such an extra/ordinary zone of life tended to produce; to ask ‘what forms of life are these’? The answer concerns a certain thinness of life that is born of in-durable sociality and the precariousness of social attachments that develop there. In thinking through this complex, social, and iterative mode of self making which is always laden with meaning and forged in flesh, I draw on a set of concepts and metaphors from the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2006), many of which hinge her notion of enfleshment: the process through which social relations and discursive formations entail material anchors, like fleshy bodies, which are a “physical mattering forth” of broader political and social ways of knowing about and...
distinguishing kinds of people and their bodies (Povinelli 2006: 7-8). To focus on the body as a nexus of ways of knowing and their material anchors, Povinelli makes use of the notion of a social skin: the bodily residue of social relations. As I understand her use, when the body is made whole and its integrity maintained through the necessity of multiple, dense, and broad social affiliations, the social skin is thickened. When the body is made whole and its integrity maintained through the necessity of few attachments to other individuals, the social skin is thinned.

I make use of these concepts of thickness and thinness to explore the kinds of social configurations out of which ordinary life is made at Walter Reed, and also the ways that various normative configurations of social attachments are imagined as the things that make future ordinaries possible.

To convey the nature of this thin life and the qualities of precariousness that contribute to it, I offer a dense vignette woven through which are all the themes that this dissertation takes up: the publicity and patriotism that saturates Walter Reed, transformations that are at once about the body and subjecthood which are brought about by war’s violence; and the intimate social attachments through which a self is remade and which are themselves strained at Walter Reed so much so that there is an ever present possibility of their undoing.

Charlie was not one of the people I came to know well, only meeting with him twice over the course of a month during my whole year of fieldwork. The first time we encountered each other it was in the breezeway at Mologne House, a kind of arcade between the lobby and the guest rooms that fronted on the large parking lot and was furnished with patio tables and chairs. It was where soldiers, family members, staff, and others would go to smoke. I asked him for a light and we chatted as we smoked.
He gabbed away in a frenetic manner, his train of thought skipping stops and jumping tracks. He commented on this, telling me that he knew he was ‘chasing rabbits’. Chasing rabbits, or chasing bunnies, was a term I heard a few times at Walter Reed used by soldiers who, due to the way their minds had been disordered by force and drugs alike, would veer off topic at odd angles or stop short during the course of a conversation. Giving this disordered thought a name had the effect of drawing attention to it and explaining it for the benefit of the interlocutor who might otherwise become confused or even angry (see also Messinger 2009). But it also had the effect of rendering this disorderly thought into an almost purposeful, if chaotic, practice, one that unified its practitioners into a community of literally like-minded individuals. It was, in this way, a radical description of what might otherwise be dismissed as insanity or dysfunction. It created social recognition out of a way of being that might easily be abjected and rendered anti-social and a-human.

Jake sometimes apologized for chasing bunnies when we were engaged in deep conversation or informal interviews: like Charlie he imagined that this mode of thinking would make it hard for someone like me who was, it seemed, attempting to make sense of things. But chasing bunnies is sensible in its own way, not in the sense of offering a reason or a cause or a justification for anything, but in the sense of making known, making palpable, the particular disorientation that characterized the present, the way life at Walter Reed that was essentially fragmentary. On the one hand, the idea that you could, as Jake said, pick up the pieces, was part of the momentum of the future’s pull: the fragments could be reassembled. On the other, as Jake also said, you had to wait, and so the existence of the fragments was part of the inertia of the present, keeping your life here and broken: the fragments could not be reassembled here or now, but they were collected and lived with.
As we talked out there in the breezeway, Charlie proudly told me about how he had been hit by an EFP (Explosively Formed Projectile), and how the copper that they had pulled out of his torso was the biggest piece they had ever taken out of someone who was still alive. If he bragged about it, it was like a little kid bragging about a new toy. There was no bravado in his story; he was not bragging about surviving, he was not puffing himself up, hinting at some kind of magical resilience. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a ziplock bag, inside of which was that piece of copper they had extracted from his body, about the size of a baseball. He kept it on him so he could show it off. I was thrown by the tone of his presentation, and also by the presence of this hunk of metal. It seemed so inert, sterilized and then stuffed in mock forensic fashion into a plastic bag, carried around in a pocket, a pocket that was just inches from the place where it had ripped apart flesh and organs, so hot, as it is often said of the EFP, that it cauterizes the very wound it makes, a property that is sometimes credited with saving the life of the body it partially eviscerates. It had stopped moving of its own momentum, after the explosive penetrating course it had taken, thrusting itself into Charlie’s torso. Since it landed there, it had been hitching a ride with Charlie, first inside his body, somewhere amidst his organs and beneath his flesh. And then, with a little help from the doctors and medics and their instruments of extraction, it was now moving around inside Charlie’s pocket, between Charlie’s hands and mine. The doctors had killed it, and rendered it inert. But Charlie and me, we reanimated it, like a marionette. And it nestled comfortably, a dead weight in Charlie’s pocket, living next to the wound in his side and all that active flesh that was coming to life and dying there. It kept company with his catheter and colostomy bag.

We finished our cigarettes and I had to run. Charlie told me which room he was in, and invited me to stop by anytime. The night I took a picture of Charlie, I had taken him up on the offer, knocking on his door in the early evening. He was surprised to see me, told me he hadn’t
expected me to come by, and invited me in. At this point, in early November 2007, Charlie hadn’t been out of the hospital long and he was decidedly unsteady and unwell. In fact, it wouldn’t be long before he would be back in the hospital for further surgeries, though there was nothing particularly unusual about that. Like James’ second amputation or Jake’s first, it was just part of the iterative process of injury and healing that played out on the bodies of hundreds of soldiers at Walter Reed. It was the impossible directionality of Möbius time and the rapidly changing contours of the body, often equally Möbius in their manipulation of surfaces and interiority and exteriority, all of it ordinary and part of the precariousness of life.

On this second night, there in his room, everything about Charlie seemed in tatters, a shambles, a life of fragments. His body was weak, pasty, and unstable in excess of the wound that the copper had inflicted. He was still chasing bunnies. He told me he had a bottle of vodka in the cupboard. He said he didn’t drink, but enthusiastically proffered it to me, along with some other things he had to eat and drink. I declined, but he kept on. He even offered to give me the bottle. He was being a gracious host. He asked me if I was married. When I said no, he told me that he was. His wife was away, she had gone for a little R&R and, though it was hard to piece together what had happened, it was clear that his marriage was not solid either.

He volunteered that he was on Levitra because that way he could have sex with his wife, but that it wasn’t really sex, it wasn’t nice, it was just penetration, like some kind of mandatory exercise for his penis. He was in no way embarrassed to tell me about this. He told me about it just like he told me about the hunk of copper and just like he told me about the weekly Mologne House poker game, like it was all the same kind of information, like sex, poker, and being penetrated by a searing hot, aerodynamically formed, copper ballistic were all the same kind of event. Each of these was a fragment of his present state of life; the extra/ordinary facts out of which his present was fashioned. A bit of normative family, though not a whole one. A token of
normative masculinity, though it seemed counterfeit. Some gestures of normative sociality—
offer your guest a drink, play poker with the boys—but in a scene that wouldn’t allow them
constancy. A bit of metal, that happened to fragment his life and his body, and the fact that this
would always be true.

This broken fractured present life is not the opposition to life itself: as Veena Das has
said “fragments allude to a particular way of inhabiting the world” (2007:5). Drawing on this
insight as well as other Benjaminian readings of the fragment, Anand Pandian notes that
fragments can be very much alive, perhaps precisely because, taken as they are, they need not
imply the death of a life that was, but rather the afterlife that is (Pandian 2008, see especially
470). While soldiers often do hold out hope of reassembling, clinging to the myth of totality and
wholeness, the fragmentary character of life here and now is indeed a way of being that is
saturated by devastation and ruin. Soldiers have moved on from “the very place of devastation”
(Das 2007: 6, 13), but they still live with it, often literally carrying pieces of it with them. Literal
fragments that are connected to, sometimes the very cause of, their fragmentary lives and bunny
chasing thoughts.

Charlie had to drain his catheter, telling me cavalierly of the dangers of leakage and
infection, the hazards of piss that gets out and piss that stays in. He went into the bathroom as I
sat on the bed, just behind where he stands in the first picture below. It was covered with stuff.
He didn’t close the door, and I heard the sound of urine hitting the water in the bowl. I was a bit
ill at ease, thinking of him peeing with the door open, thinking that I was sharing the same air
with his exposed penis. It occurred to me that he wasn’t peeing…not exactly; that his penis was
only tangentially related to what was going on in there, out of sight but well within ear shot.

The offering of vodka, the talk about sex, and the ‘peeing’ with the door open all came
together to show me that Charlie’s social existence was just as tattered as his flesh. In a way that
recalls Povinelli’s idea of enfleshment (2006), it seemed that Charlie’s social skin had been thinned and stretched past the point of tearing. In the absence of not only his wife, but—so it seemed—all significant others, he cared for himself, and seemed not to do it particularly well. His body was so thoroughly medicalized that the meaning and use of his penis had been radically altered, sex with his wife was only about the biomechanics of penetration, urination was only the act of necessarily expelling waste fluid from his bladder.

The sociality within which he and I interacted was awkwardly incomplete, I was in his room, on his bed, he had offered to get me drunk, his wife was away, we talked about his dick, and yet there he was, with the bathroom door open the sound of his urine splashing into the toilet coming at me. The potential of a sexual liaison was clearly written into the script of our interaction. Kind of. As was the medicalization and desexualization of Charlie’s body. Kind of. Some trace of sexuality was still there. He was, after all, having some kind of sex with his wife, and the reading of my arrival at his door as some kind of revision of the premise of a stereotypical porn plot was viable and part of the subtext of our interaction. But yet, the functioning and effluvia of his penis that links urination to sexual penetration had been disrupted; the desire, violence, feeling connected or simply feeling that is part of a sexual encounter were nowhere to be found, not in his description of sex with his wife nor in his orientation towards me. The layers of his social skin were torn, he was flayed in such a way as to make the various available socialities untenable. He was not really autological, and the infringements on his self sovereignty were not really genealogical. We interacted in a mode of virtual abjection. In that way, Charlie hovered dangerously close to bare life.63

63 I am aware of the pun here: under other circumstances, his physical proximity to me, Zoë, as I sat on his bed might have been threatening to me and to my bodily sovereignty. Here, it is rather his proximity to bare life, to zoē, that is threatening to him and his bodily sovereignty.
Among the heaps of stuff on his bed and standard hotel armoire are medical supplies; bandages and ointments and equipment needed to pack up the holes in his body or keep the fluids flowing out of it contained. It is the stuff to patch him together, to fortify the precariousness of his body and his life. But there is also an abundant miscellany of the vast economy of patriotism within which we are figured. Charlie seems to take and keep everything he is given, and he piles it up in his room which is now overflowing with t-shirts and hats and blankets and magazines. He wears a donated hat and a donated shirt which reads “Support our Troops” accompanied by a yellow ribbon. These things also serve to patch him back together, to make him into something socially legible until he steadies out and arrives back at himself. But this patch job is tattered too.

The statement on his shirt is one meant to be uttered not by ‘a troop’ but a supporter. The bumper sticker or t-shirt of a soldier or marine normatively proclaims their status as a soldier or marine. The yellow ribbon is for others and addressed to others. It is the bumper sticker of the soldier’s wife, mother, father. Of the child of a veteran. Of a booster. And it will have been one of these people, the ones for whom this script is written, who has given Charlie this shirt. The statement changes. It is offered in a moment of ‘I support you’. As Charlie wears it, it approaches a plea: ‘Support me.’

Even the icon of the yellow ribbon contains an irony which becomes apparent to me as I look at Charlie and his stubbled head and smooth chin and boyish face. The bow of the yellow ribbon, the one that was tied around the old oak tree in a grounded display of hope for homecoming—a blazon that marked the location of absence and a beacon that called the absent

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64 The visual grammar I outline here is fundamental and deeply rooted, if not inviolable and I am grateful to Ken MacLeish for pointing out that at Ft. Hood, soldiers’ own cars might bear a yellow ribbon bumper sticker. I wonder if there may be some differences between the bumper sticker and the t-shirt in terms of the alignment or flexibility of the roles of principle, author, and animator that might warrant elaboration in another forum.
one home—has been transformed into the loop of a campaign, a sign of support for others, rather than a felt absence, a sign of an ally, rather than a subject, of a generic and public display of politicized ethics. This is a transformation I imagine the boosters would disavow, but there with abject Charlie in his room overflowing with expressions of gratitude laced equally with pride and pity, the excesses of medical technologies that disaggregate him into so many dysfunctional systems, the hollow traces of a-sexual encounters that mark the unused bed and the un-drunk vodka, it speaks to me.

In the midst of it all, there is that lump of copper. Charlie no longer keeps it in a baggie in his pocket. No, now it is in a Lucite case, one that used to hold a baseball. It is kept like a prized possession, like a trophy, in a box. I asked Charlie if I imagined using the picture in a dissertation itself, waxing theoretical about objects, dancing in the text between the actants of Bruno Latour’s Reassembling the Social (2005) and the heroes of Tom Robbins’ Skinny Legs and All (1995), an unlikely crew of a painted stick, conch shell, and can of beans. When Charlie picked it up and posed with it, I was caught. I hadn’t wanted to take a picture of him, only of the thing that had been taken out of him. I thought for a moment that maybe I would tell him that. Then I felt intensely guilty and immediately complicit in his abjection. Sorry Charlie, its not you I’m interested in: the real protagonist of my story is going to be that ball of copper.

I nervously snapped the shot, the flash made a strange shadow in the dark room, almost like it was hovering in the air rather than being cast against a solid surface. We went to the
cafeteria where Charlie bought me dinner. On the way over, he kept saying how he really wanted a BLT. When they didn’t have one, he was really disappointed. It was the most, and most deeply felt, emotion he ever showed me.

I came across a second picture of Charlie about a year later while combing the Internet for a slide show for a presentation I was giving at the Centre for the Study of the United States at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. It’s not that unusual, actually, for me to come across pictures of folks I know if searching for images of Walter Reed or doing research about various volunteer organizations, although, as time passes and new soldiers move into the beds and the rooms there it becomes less and less common.

Though it’s not labeled, I recognized both Charlie and the location of the photograph: it’s inside the hospital, in a kind of internal atrium off one of the hallways near the OEF/OIF wards. I recognized the pebbled surface of the planters, and I had only once seen someone wheeled outside of the hospital, bed and all (that was to see Gary Sinese’s Lt. Dan Band, named after the double amputee Vietnam vet he played in Forrest Gump, at a USO show). I do a little digging and realize this picture was probably taken before I met him, rather than during his subsequent surgeries. Of course the pictures are taken in very different contexts, for very different purposes, yet I can’t help but think that Charlie looked better before in that sun dappled hospital bed, than after, in his dim and cluttered hotel room. And then I think that that is rather the point of this second image.
The bed has been adorned with American flags, almost like a presidential limousine. Just like in his room, Charlie’s bed is covered with booster swag. But this time, Charlie is tucked-in, and the miscellany are laid on top of him. Hovering over him is a member of the organization who donated this stuff. They are called Angels of Mercy. Charlie is reading Men’s Journal. The image on the cover is a square-jawed man’s man; actor Aaron Eckhart, a heteronormative Adonis. The cover teases the magazine’s feature articles, including "The Great Debate: Should You Take Testosterone" and "A Man's Guide to Meat: how to kill it, cure it, cook it & devour it." I think of Charlie and his dickless urination and Levitra. I think of the seared meat of his torso and the ways other soldiers like to metaphorize their body parts at the moment of injury; usually as a ham or some hamburger meat. For some unknown reason, Charlie has been pinned with a corsage, and a seated woman in what looks like a wedding veil is visible behind him. Masculinity, meat, marriage, and death, all wrapped in an American flag blanket.

To Charlie, the Angel of Mercy brings, instead of the gift of release through death, distraction through useless stuff and momentary company, plus perhaps a reminder of the disabled, desexualized, abjected reading of his body and the expectation that he will be a rehabilitated man. The older woman ministers to Charlie at his bedside, she packs his body with icons of patriotism and masculinity, quilting together a seamy subjectivity that she literally foists
upon him and which is then documented for posterity. The strange tear in his social skin that characterized my encounter with him—the inability for us to interact completely within a sociality constituted by potential sexuality or the constraints of thicker social obligation or a mode of bare life—is stitched up around him sealing him in. Plugged in to his IV line, tucked into his bed, piled with objects, hovered over, and wheeled about prone, Charlie is done for.

3.6 Conclusion

There are tensions, even apparent contradictions, in the above characterizations of the extra/ordinary atmosphere at Walter Reed: big things and their small appearances; an explicitness and exteriority that appends to things normally implicit and internal; a commonness that is vitally important but does not congeal into a community; a self that threatens not to become in a place where remaking the self is the only task. Such tensions and contradictions are a motif of the history of Walter Reed itself, a place that is simultaneously marginal and central, that is focused on athleticism and virility and life threatening injury, that brings together publicity and intimacy, and that I elaborate in the following chapter. That this motif of contradictions in suspension is also found at the heart of the extra/ordinary and throughout this dissertation is a reflection of those peculiarities of Walter Reed and characteristics of life there out of which the concept of the extra/ordinary and this dissertation have emerged. Contradictions in suspension are essential to forms of life at Walter Reed where soldiers and their families confront the impossibility of ordinariness, but hang on, of necessity, to the idea that they might one day be nothing more than ordinary. Life there was lived in anticipation of the disintegration of whatever rhythm or body one had just settled into. Surprises were so expected you could almost see them coming. Intensity marked no feeling more than boredom. The durability of relationships that usually thicken and stabilize a life, a self, and a social world, was no longer reliable such that, while injured soldiers were in common with each other, and while
that commonness was essential, they could hardly be said to constitute a community. Elements of life usually written neatly and separated by the slight but undeniable difference between recto and verso were all cut up and crumpled together.

In short, Walter Reed is a vertiginous place, where footing is unsteady, where the world that is in so many ways the same seems dizzyingly unfamiliar, where the working of one’s own corporeality—one’s physical and inextricably existential and relational being, like that strange site of the inner ear, that literal interface between the brain, the body, and the world with which it vibrates—betrays one’s most fundamental expectations of the world and one’s place in it. Things change too fast, the earth is unsteady. And here, in this extra/ordinary place, you must find your footing.
4 The Meanings of Walter Reed: A Fragmented History

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never seen again.

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

The present […], as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.

-From Walter Benjamin’s V, VI, and XVII Theses on the Philosophy of History

4.1 The Messianic Present and The Story of The One-Legged Flier

Combing through the New York Times online archives for stories about Walter Reed, I am struck by a headline from Wednesday March 14, 1945: “One-Legged Flier Tried by Senators”. I wonder what this story could possibly be. I imagine congressmen in some kind of publicity stunt testing out an early and ill fated helicopter with a single skid, nicknamed the ‘One-Legged Flier’. I imagine a story of a traitorous WWII amputee hauled before the Senate to account for his disloyalty. But then I imagine I would I have read about that somewhere before. I follow the link to an image of the full newspaper page on which the story appeared.
Figure 7.

The article is both much more and also much less than I had imagined. It describes an event that is neither momentous nor spectacular, and yet I am deeply struck by its multiple significances. It feels like the past has anticipated the present; like 1945 is winking at me. Or like the present and past have collided and left fragments of the same bodies spread throughout time; hot bits of metal still ringing with their coincidence.
The article I am looking at is from the sports section. The “One-Legged Flier” is Lt. Bert R. Shepard, a former pilot and POW and then current patient at Walter Reed who was shot down over Germany on his 34th mission. The Senators are Washington D.C.’s American League baseball team. Lt. Shepard is trying out for the team. There are no photos. The story is brief, the event, unremarkable.  

My textual, archival encounter brings me into contact with the enduring and iconic figure of the American soldier, a figure that abides at Walter Reed and with whom the soldiers in this dissertation must contend. It is a figure that they encounter in intimate and public spaces alike, a figure that sticks to them like an ill fitting shadow.

The story of Lt. Shepard is one of normative masculine perseverance and aspiration in the face of profound military trauma. He says of playing baseball: “this is the thing I dreamed about over there [in the German POW camp] for months [...] Sure I’m serious about playing ball, and I believe that I can.” His dreams and aspirations pull him towards a normative future of manly American vigor and success.

The story speaks of normative fitness and technologically-assisted bodily integrity. After practice Lt. Shepard’s stump was “only a little sore.” And Shepard had convinced himself that he could get around nimbly enough. [...] He is still a patient at Walter Reed Hospital. “I can still take a good cut at the ball, throw well and when I get a special leg instead of this temporary one, I’ll do O.K.”

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65 It is unremarkable in the context of baseball during WWII, when ‘fit’ men had enlisted or been drafted and only men classified as A4 (unfit for duty) could stay home and play ball. By 1943, two years before the “one-legged flier”, the Browns already had a one-armed pitcher named Pete Grey.
His mental fortitude and physical perseverance are complemented by a bit of American mechanical ingenuity—the special leg—to help the self motivated man along. After all, he is contributing to the war effort: an article on the same page proclaims President Roosevelt’s desire for baseball to continue amid the war-time shortages of men and means. Senator’s owner Clark Griffith paraphrases Roosevelt: “What the president said shows that baseball has done a good job in the war effort.”

Condensed within this slim column and its arrangement on the sports page of March 14, 1945 are many of the most enduring and poignant themes of life at Walter Reed in 2007-2008, the time in which this dissertation unfolds. Now and then, Walter Reed exerts its particular war-time pull. Now and then it is publicly imagined as a space in which “our boys” piece themselves back together again with the help of new technologies and self-making fortitude which hold out the promise of good futures for good men. Such senses of Walter Reed are always situated within a broader and often deadly military topography and also within the social poetics (Herzfeld 2005) of military America and the intimacies and imaginaries it has produced far beyond its putative institutional boundaries.

I think here not of the way in which American History is written as Military History but of the ways in which, as Lutz writes, we might read a “single, deeply entwined but often invisible world of America and its military” (Lutz 2001: 1), and that at stake in its moments of visibility are foundational issues about the forms of life and social obligation through which the nation imaginatively and materially constitutes itself. The figure of the soldier is thus a live site for the articulation of Americanness, and the lives, sightings, and siteings of actual soldiers unfold in spaces like Walter Reed: fraught with social obligation, normative nationalism, and

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historical narratives of pride and progress written on gilded parchment with bloodied ink. Needless to say, it can get a little close in there.

It is within this deep and public history of military America that the iconicity of Walter Reed in 2007-2008 must be read, and it is within this saturated space that soldiers’ encounter others’ expectations of who they are and their own aspirations of who they might be all of which inevitably sit in relation to this history and its normative protagonists. I offer this history of Walter Reed not to describe a coherent genealogy or causal narrative (there is none, or perhaps too many, to be told), but to convey the tenacity of this history and suggest something of the impossibly cluttered space in which the soldiers with whom I worked struggled to fashion ordinary lives.

I have found Lt. Shepard, “still a patient at Walter Reed Hospital,”69 in the midst of all this. His physical place on the page, nestled into a corner that is riddled with normative masculinity, national obligation, the sometimes-suffering-sometimes-fit soldier body, the artistry of appearance, and the technophilic and indulgent aspirations for the future, is echoed in the talk of today; of high tech C-Legs and soldier bodies that can even be re-fitted so well they can contribute to ‘the war effort’ by going back to combat.70

On that sports page from March 14 1945, the “One-Legged Flier” article is literally framed by advertisements that speak to similar themes of masculinity, national obligation, and a certain American aspirationalism. An ad for Admiration Cigars—that symbol of masculine leisure—including an image of a young, aproned woman removing a huge and steaming steak from a

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70 Though many did not know his name, the legend of David Rozelle of the 3rd Armed Calvary Regiment who returned to Iraq with a prosthetic leg in 2005 circulated widely at Walter Reed. The 3rd ACR museum at Ft. Hood in Killeen TX has a life sized diorama devoted to him, complete with pictures of post-injury Rozelle in action, a mannequin wearing his combat uniform, and one of his own prosthetic feet.
‘futuristic’ looking countertop oven. The caption reads “For Your Admirations Tomorrow—Electronic cooking will broil a steak in 2 seconds.” “For Your Admiration Today” is, of course, an Admiration Cigar. Technology, futurity, improvement, and excess, all wrapped in a heteronormatively masculine package.

Figure 8. Figure 9. Figure 10.

Tucked below the cigar ad is a small plea from the Red Cross “GIVE MORE Our Fighting Men Need More GIVE TO YOUR RED CROSS.” The call evokes the relationship between individual citizens and collective, masculine, soldiers. It begs an intimate but intensely mediated kind of encounter. You, in the singular, are implored to give your very own blood to those collective men of war, those men who are ours, who belong to, and thus depend on, us. The sense of national obligation is multiplied by each pair of eyes that reads the words. The fighting men are homogenized and carnalized: their collective troop body does war’s deadliest work and needs its most basic bodily supply.
The “One-Legged Flier” hovers just above an ad for Schoble Hats, dignified and gothic. It reminds readers that “Quality in hats, like quality in men, goes deeper than the surface.” It simultaneously suggests the high value of deep masculinity, of ‘quality’ that resides beneath the surface like the ‘quality’ of Lt. Shepard with his aspirations and perseverance, and the inextricable relationship between inside ‘quality’ and outside appearance (Goffman 1986; Foucault 1994; Mosse 1998: 24-28; Yeung 2010). Lt. Shepard will “do OK” once he gets his special leg.  

71 The surfaces matter, be they apparel, prosthetic, or flesh.

These themes echo in contemporary talk at Walter Reed of the importance of passing and appearance, but also of seeing beyond bodily surfaces. They echo in talk of national moral debts and slogans of support for “the troops.” Lt. Shepard’s act, his exercise on the baseball field, echoes in the new models of rehabilitation at Walter Reed, where injured soldiers are referred to as “tactical athletes,” and in the public presence of injured soldiers at baseball and football games, once again tying the bodies of injured soldiers to the particularly American masculine fitness of popular national sport and athleticism, as David Serlin notes of the image of Iraq veteran and amputee Michael McNaughton jogging on his high-tech blades alongside President George W. Bush in a 2004 photo op (Serlin 2006: 173). Now and then these public displays entail cultivated encounters between soldiers and civilians who see them as they are shown to be and are implored to support them with their blood, or at least, their blue-bloodedness. All of these echoes resonate throughout this dissertation.

My aim here is thus not to tell a story of the development of Walter Reed or offer a series of ‘and then’s which causally explain how Walter Reed has come to be what it is and not what it was or could have been.

Instead, I offer a fragmented archival history of Walter Reed to show that it is a space within which resonant iterations of American militarism have long echoed. Rather than suggesting that things stay exactly the same from one moment to the next, or that the changes that characterize Walter Reed’s history constitute a story of causal or coherent development, my archival encounter with the “One-Legged Flier” reveals enduring themes that give Walter Reed a certain timeless coherence and integrity irreducible to changes or continuities in its size or institutional function or in the shifting logistics of American warfare. It is this constellation that makes Walter Reed sensible as a public site and that charts the deep meanings soldiers there must confront today even as the context within which such confrontations, such encounters, unfold is indeed rather different from one war to the next.  

The names of the men borne by the buildings injured soldiers frequented —Major Walter Reed, General Creighton Abrams, General Leonard Heaton—were inconsequential and often unknown to them. But the significance of this place, the narratives of national moral economies, the imbrication of war and progress, the body of the soldier as the embodiment of American patriotic duty, the manifestations of the deadlinesses of military life, all these confronted soldiers with a muddy symbolism that they did their best to see beyond while living within.

This fragmented history, then, tells of the accretion of these layers of meaning as they have flowed through Walter Reed since its very beginnings. In this way I hope not so much to tell a progressive story of Walter Reed as to describe the configuring of its public sensibility, to

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72 America at war now is not the same as America at war in 1945. Though the current invisibility of war in American public space is often overstated, there is an undeniable and palpable difference between the war rationed, scrap collecting America of WWII and the lower taxes and patriotic duty to shop that characterize post-9/11 America. In fact, America at war now is not at war, it is in a legalized state of exception, a permanent emergency (Agamben 2005; Butler 2009).
show some of these things that make it such an impractical and improbable place to make an ordinary life and that condition the particular extra/ordinariness of life there.

4.2 The Place and Purpose of Walter Reed

Walter Reed General Hospital was built in 1908, in part following the urging of the Army Surgeon General in 1903 that a new general hospital be built in Washington, D.C. to replace the dilapidated hospital at Washington Barracks. In his 1903 report to the Army, the Army Surgeon General:

repeat[s] most earnestly [his] previous recommendation that a general hospital of sufficient size and perfect in every respect be built in the District of Columbia for the following purposes:

First. Treatment of cases needing the services of specialists, surgical or other observation, and treatment of officers incapacitated for service prior to their appearance before retiring or examining boards.

Second. Training enlisted men of the Hospital Corps in nursing and military duties.

Third. Instruction at the Army Medical School in military surgery, hospital administration, Hospital Corps drill, and establishment of field hospitals.

Fourth. To serve as a nucleus around which, in time of war, temporary wards may be erected without delay to any extent and at minimum expense. [cited in Weed 1923:273]

It was named for Major Walter Reed of the U.S. Army who died November 23, 1902 following an apparently unsuccessful appendectomy at the outmoded hospital his namesake institution would replace. Maj. Reed was, and still is, known for his discovery that mosquitoes, not people, transmitted yellow fever. Most of the research for this discovery was carried out by
Maj. Reed and his team on human ‘volunteers’ in U.S. occupied Cuba. Both the fact and site of the discovery seemed deeply providential. As a friend and fellow doctor noted in a eulogizing letter to the editor of the New York Times:

One among the many reasons given for our interference with Spanish rule in Cuba was our desire to eliminate through modern sanitary measures the perpetual menace to our Southern States by yellow fever. [...] Were the discoveries concerning the propagation and spread of yellow fever [...] the single advantage from our war with Spain, they would have been cheaply purchased.

Thus even before the hospital was built, Walter Reed’s legacy was founded on the many deadlinesses of military life: not just those who died fighting in the Spanish American War, but the many researchers and research subjects who died of yellow fever in Havana. The memorialization of Walter Reed’s accomplishment also encodes the supremacy of national interest and the notion of a war worth while for its sake, no matter the cost in lives and treasure.

The original Walter Reed General Hospital was a modest but elegant building in the Federal style, with red brick, a small cupola, and six Ionic columns supporting its small portico flanked on either side by symmetrical grids of 18 windows, six long and three high, giving it both the imposing, stern quality of a Georgian hospital and the slightly conceited nobility of American Neo-Classicism.

Figure 11.

This building still stands on the grounds of what has been called, since 1977, Walter Reed Army Medical Center and though it still faces a small fountain in the middle of a circular drive, it has long since become disoriented from the post’s main entrances and other buildings as the base and the city of Washington D.C. have grown in fits and starts around it.

All throughout its existence, Walter Reed has fulfilled its first function as a prestigious site for the treatment of officers, federal politicians, and sitting and former presidents, all of whom are entitled to be seen there, mere miles from the National Mall, while also offering the advances of hard won research to countless soldiers needing specialized care.

The United Service—a military affairs organization that tracked the movements, promotions, and reprimands of officers in the various military branches—lists countless officers referred to Walter Reed for “observation and treatment” since the earliest days of the hospital’s
These little wire stories, tucked away in various corners of the newspaper, were accompanied by others that spoke of Walter Reed, “perfect in every respect” for the treatment of officers, current and former presidents and members of congress “needing the services of specialists, surgical or other observation” (O’Reilly cited in Weed 1923:273). And this first function always continues during times of (more widely acknowledged) war.

For example, while news of the Vietnam War—and increasing opposition to it and the draft it necessitated—was filling the pages of the national papers, and the bodies of soldiers were filling the wards of Walter Reed, it seems that the connection between the hospital and the war was more likely to be routed through the temporary residence of Dwight D. Eisenhower or Senator Everett Dirksen (the Republican leader for whom a Senate office building is named) as they weighed in on debates about the course of the war and its waning support.

And at the start of the post-9/11 era, Walter Reed continued to be most often (if not most memorably) mentioned for its non-combat related functions, though that started to change after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 when U.S. casualties began once again to swell the ranks of injured soldiers flooding back from over seas and requiring Walter Reed to become a war-time “nucleus” once again.

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75 Among the earliest examples is a record of an Army Captain J.W. Wilen being sent from a military hospital in Arkansas all the way to Walter Reed, presumably for services not available elsewhere: “Capt. J.W. Wilen, Thirteenth Cavalry, relieved treatment Army Navy General Hospital, Hot Springs, Ark.; to Walter Reed General Hospital, District of Columbia, for observation and treatment” (United Service, New York Times December 1, 1912).
77 Dwight D. Eisenhower spent much of the last five years of his life at Walter Reed being treated for his numerous heart attacks, bronchitis, arthritis, gastrointestinal problems, gallbladder surgery, and pneumonia, all of which was reported in wire stories that quoted the daily updates from his Walter Reed doctors (e.g. “Eisenhower Doing so Well Bulletins are Halted.” New York Times November 27, 1965; “Eisenhower Sitting Up.” New York Times, December 18, 1966; “Eisenhower Sitting Up.” New York Times, June 29, 1968.)
From the flows of injured and active duty soldiers to the national capital’s most notable residents and from the sprawling paths of American military life to the amorphous network of terrorism, Walter Reed’s location has long been nodal; a dense cluster of people, buildings and activity through which can be read a cross section of American military and government life and death.

Read through the United Service reports between 1909, when the hospital opened, and 1917, when the U.S. entered WWI, Walter Reed General Hospital seems like any and every other node in the vast military infrastructure that spread around the country and beyond. As yet untested by fully-fledged war, the exceptional significance it acquires through contact with the bodies of war-ravaged soldiers had not been clearly established. In those early years, officers who had been in the Philippines quelling the insurrection were moved to Walter Reed not for treatment, but for command and training duties. For example, the United Service report of Jan 30, 1912 recounts a kind of logistical chain reaction. It is set off by an officer coming into port in San Francisco and it comes to a rest at Walter Reed, some 3,000 away:

First Lieut. G.H. McClellan, Medical Corps, upon arrival at San Francisco, will proceed to Fort McDowell, Cal., and report to commanding officer of that post for duty, relieving Capt. H.H. Johnson, Medical Corps, who, upon being thus relieved, will proceed to the Walter Reed General Hospital, Tacoma Park, D.C., for duty.  

This is just one trickle amid a cascade of American soldiers moving across the globe, some staying put, for a while, at Walter Reed.

In that pre-1917 period, Walter Reed General Hospital continued to physically expand, populating its acreage with more Georgian red brick, more experts who could observe and treat

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special cases, and more nurses, doctors, and members of the Hospital Corps who received all levels of training in medicine and military medical care. As Lieutenant Colonel Frank W. Weed notes in his 1923 account of the hospital during WWI:

The annual reports for the years preceding 1917 indicate steady progress in the work at Walter Reed General Hospital and marked improvement in the physical aspect of the buildings and grounds. The register shows that up to April 6, 1917, the day on which war was declared, 7,017 cases had been admitted to Walter Reed [Weed 1923:278].

When the U.S. joined WWI in April of 1917, the post acquired an additional 26 acres of contiguous land, increasing its size by more than half (Weed 1923: 282). The number of soldiers treated at Walter Reed increased dramatically, but more as a consequence of the massing of troops than of early war injuries: in the 19 months of U.S. involvement in WWI the Army increased 20-fold—from 200,000 to 4,000,000 (Ayres 1919: 16).
It wasn’t until 1918, when “the overseas cases, with their more complicated problems, had arrived” (Weed 1923: 304), that the hospital fulfilled its fourth and final function: “To serve as a nucleus around which, in time of war, temporary wards may be erected without delay to any extent and at minimum expense” (my emphasis, cited in Weed 1923: 273). As those new flows of bodies traced their path back from the battle fields of Europe to the U.S., Walter Reed became nucleic indeed, pulling soldiers’ fragile injured and ailing bodies into its state-side orbit.

As America and its military have moved through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the pull of Walter Reed’s nucleic function has waxed and waned with the flows of injured soldier bodies that rush in at times of war, and subside in times of putative peace. In 1944, the year the U.S. began its WWII European campaigns, Walter Reed received 18,000 new patients; an increase of 296% over 1941 (Borden Institute 2009).

Walter Reed thus finds itself structurally situated as a just another node within the pathways of America’s sprawling war geography, but one that becomes, periodically, central. And even when its wards are not full of combat casualties, it retains another kind of centrality, encapsulated in its unofficial title as the “center of gravity” for military medicine which was part of its original purpose and location in the capital amid a dense cluster of government and military facilities. Not only is it a 20 minute drive from the White House and the Houses of Congress, but it’s no more than 10 miles from Ft. McNair, 80 Ft. Myer, 81 and the Pentagon 82 and within about 20 miles of Ft. Belvoir, 83 Ft. Mead, 84 and Andrews Air Force Base. 85

80 Ft. McNair is just 6 miles south, nestled on the southern edge of Washington D.C. where the Potomac and Anacostia rivers come together. It was included in L’Enfant’s original city plan for the capital. In that earlier incarnation as Ft. Washington it housed the dilapidated hospital in which Maj. Walter Reed died. It is currently the home of the National Defense University.
81 Ft. Myer is less than 10 miles south, originally built on land confiscated by the government from Robert E. Lee in 1861. It was the site of the first military test flight, piloted by Orville Wright, as well as the second during which
One effect of this arrangement is to produce Walter Reed as both the most logistically convenient, and symbolically meaningful location for all sorts of public encounters; for photo-ops, donations, and, in times of war when its nucleic function is added to its geographic centrality, publicized events having to do with injured soldiers and all those things they are seen to represent. It functions as something of a metropole to the colonies of smaller far flung military medical outposts; a site of culture, prestige, and knowledge production and the consumption of vast resources. That its structural nodality is matched by its geographical location in the center of government and military command is part of its original design. It was built in a center and so, not surprisingly, it is consistently reproduced as central. But its iconic significance is an ongoing effect of the particular ways that its place and functions overlap and become publically produced as meaningful in the shifting contexts of American militarism.

It is because of this metropolitan status, this closeness with the structures, icons, and representatives of the United States, that in the period between the 9/11 attacks and the invasion

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Wright’s Officer/passenger became the first person to die in a powered aviation accident (http://www.fmmc.army.mil/sites/about/history-myer.asp accessed September 13, 2010)

9 miles due south, the Pentagon is that city sized building in Virginia whose 3,705,793 square feet were constructed in 16 months during 1941-43 to be a command hub for the direction of the American military during WWII and which remains the Department of Defense’s center of operations (http://pentagon.afis.osd.mil/ accessed September 13, 2010)

25 miles away in Virginia is Ft. Belvoir, which traces its history back to the beginning of the Colonial period and which will take over many of Walter Reed’s administrative functions starting in 2011. Ft. Belvoir currently counts among its military and government ‘tenants’:
- two Army major command headquarters, as well as 10 different Army major commands, 19 different agencies of the Department of Army, eight elements of the U.S. Army Reserve and the Army National Guard, and 26 DoD agencies. Also located here are a U.S. Navy construction battalion, a Marine Corps detachment, a U.S. Air Force activity, and an agency from the Department of the Treasury [http://www.belvoir.army.mil/tenant.asp accessed September 13, 2010]

Ft. Mead is 20 miles northeast. It was created to accommodate massing troops of WWI and now houses the National Security Administration (http://www.ftmeade.army.mil/pages/history/history.html accessed September 13, 2010) which is involved in post-9/11 ‘warrantless wiretapping’ of both U.S. and foreign citizens.

20 miles northwest is Andrews Air Force Base, home of Air Force One, named for General Lt. Gen. Frank M. Andrews who helped found the Air Force and who died in a plane crash in 1943, the day after the base was named for him (http://www.andrews.af.mil/library/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=4479 accessed September 13, 2010).
of Iraq in March 2003, Walter Reed first figured not as a site of patriotic pride and anxiety routed through the bodies of injured young men, but as a site of national security and a node in the network-like “war on terror.”

In 2001, Walter Reed was a site in the seemingly endless unraveling of the national Anthrax scare touched off by letters full of its white powdery spores sent to Senator Tom Daschle. It was thought to be the intended endpoint for spores found in a government mail facility that serviced “Walter Reed and its research laboratory”. This, quite literally, put it on the map of the War on Terror’s strange topography:

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rule over Cuba that 100 years before had brought Maj. Walter Reed his status as a heroic national servant, preemptsing the deployment of weaponized smallpox became one of many worthwhile risks of a potential invasion of Iraq. Talk about smallpox forged a link between the dangers of the Iraqi state under Saddam Hussein (who was said to have weaponized smallpox) and a global and amorphous network of terrorist cells (who, it was insinuated, might also).

It was, fittingly, at Walter Reed on December 21, 2002, at 12:15pm that the President was himself vaccinated with a shot in his left arm, which he used, the public was reassured, to carry his dog back at the White House an hour later before watching a movie with his parents.87 Given his long anticipated announcement that both soldiers and emergency health workers would be vaccinated (and that Walter Reed would be the first vaccination site) the meaning of headlines like “President is Vaccinated” and “President Feeling ‘Great’ After Receiving Inoculation” would have been readily apparent to readers at the time.88

More recently, the movement of soldiers and the fear of mobile post-9/11 terrorism passed once again through Walter Reed in the personage of Major Nadal Hasan, the army psychiatrist who was born and raised in Virginia and received training and worked at Walter Reed and who, on November 5, 2009, after being transferred to Ft. Hood in Kileen, TX but before his scheduled deployment to Afghanistan, killed 13 soldiers and shot 31 more before he was shot and partially paralyzed by police. In the story of his life that has emerged, Walter Reed figures as a place of ‘radicalization’, where, through his contact with a ‘radical cleric’ and in his

87 Jill Lawrence, “President Feeling ‘Great’ After Receiving Inoculation” USA Today, December 23, 2002.
reaction against perceived Islamophobia, he became a ‘terrorist’, never mind that it was also at
Walter Reed that his colleagues began to doubt his sanity.⁸⁹,⁹⁰

4.3 Acute Melancholy and Other Deadlinesses of Military Life

The small and logistical traces of notable people’s comings and goings suggested that, since its
inception, Walter Reed has been a pit stop in ever expanding routes of American military traffic.
Other archival presences suggest it was also a rather haunted place mired in the multiple
deadlinesses of military life. Attending to these archival traces makes apparent the deep and
intractable strains that riddle American soldiers’ bodies, minds, and configurations of social
attachments.

Among the earliest deaths at Walter Reed were those that echoed with the more diffuse
dangers and strains of military life; those connected directly to war making, if not exactly to war.
In 1912, two Army Airmen died as a result of a plane crash during a training exercise at nearby
College Park.⁹¹ Following not far on the heels of the very first powered aviation death at nearby

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⁸⁹ Media coverage and online chatter quickly suggested that Hasan found his service in the U.S. Army was
incompatible with his Islamic faith but could not get out of the service contract that had paid for his medical
training. This combined with the fact that he was heard to shout “God is great” in Arabic before shooting led many
to consider his act part of the loosely coordinated Islamic terrorist war against the U.S. in particular and the
Christian West in general--this despite the facts that his rampage seems to have been entirely unaided and that some
of his superiors at Walter Reed suggested that he might be going through a psychotic break, see Wool 2009b for a
parsing of some of this chatter.

⁹⁰ It was at Walter Reed that Hasan was in email contact with American ex-pat Anwar al Awlaki, who since became
the first American citizen officially approved for targeted killing by the U.S. It was at Walter Reed, said his family
members, that he felt the Islamophobic repulsion of his fellow officers. And it was at Walter Reed that he gave an
unsolicited presentation discussing issues of being Muslim in the American Military, a presentation of which much
was made in the aftermath of the Ft. Hood shootings. (e.g. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-
dyn/content/gallery/2009/11/10/GA2009111000920.html?sid=ST2009123002982 accessed January 2010;
Lieberman and Collins 2011)

⁹¹ “Two Drop To Death in College Park Aero” Washington Post, September 29, 1912.
Ft. Myer, these two Airmen became the 5th and 6th such deaths in the U.S. Army, and the 190th and 191st worldwide.\(^{92}\)

Corporal Scott was killed instantly [shortly before 6 o’clock], but Lieut. Rockwell lived until 7:05 o’clock, dying on the operating table at the Walter Reed General Hospital in this city, where he was hurried after the accident […] More than 300 men and women witnessed the accident […] Several officers and a number of enlisted men rushed on the field and pulled the broken wings and heavy engine off the two men’s prostrate forms. It was found that Scott had been instantly killed. His skull was crushed, his left arm broken, and his right leg crushed in two places. Lieut. Rockwell was unconscious from concussion of the brain. Both his legs were broken. Brother officers who witnessed the accident were at a loss to account for it.\(^{93}\)

This military fictive kin, these “brother officers,” are witness not only to the loss of life, but the loss of accountableness—it was not possible for them to give an account; instead they give a silence, an ellipsis in the flow of words about all the other details of the event. This same article also notes that U.S. and foreign service members have born the brunt of aviation fatalities and in so doing gives, at a broader scale, an account of its own that speaks of this foundational military mortality, of that feature of soldier life that makes it eminently killable and stripped of the familiar armature of sacrifice; that degree to which every soldier is \textit{homo sacer} (Agamben 1998).

In this early example, Walter Reed is associated not with the best of military medicine, but with the worst of military war preparedness. It is a site in which the mortal consequences of the technologies of war are felt in a soldier’s fading pulse. And even when war came in 1917,

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these inglorious deaths, byproducts of the contingencies of military life and logistics, continued. Its nodal location and nucleic function drew to Walter Reed more than the iconic wounded warriors often pictured in its wards, since even during war there are many ordinary hazards which, exacerbated by the physical facts of war, can kill you or come dangerously close to it.

During WWI, U.S. combat deaths were shocking in their numbers: more than 50,000 from battle alone, most concentrated in about 200 days of intense fighting (Ayres 1919)\(^{94}\). But when all deaths of all U.S. military personnel (at home and overseas) were tallied, that number climbed to 125,000. This included about 25,000 from the Influenza pandemic, 15,000 from non-flu related pneumonia, 3,000 from meningitis, and 367 non-battle related losses at sea (Ayres 1919: 119-130). Caring for the ill, for those dying these less glorious, but no less military, deaths, was thus a major part of military medicine during WWI and is inseparable from the treatment of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers wounded by gas and bullets on the battlefields.

In his 1931 meta-analysis of war casualty data, Lieutenant Colonel Albert G. Love of the Army Medical Corps describes how best to manage the bodies of injured soldiers during wartime (Love 1931). To him, the dead are less of a concern than the dying and the incapacitated living, since he is concerned with the most efficient ways to move these bodies around for the benefit of maintaining active fighting bodies and to calculate the rates of attrition so that the military might know how many fighting bodies it should expect to keep, how many to loose, and in what manner. He writes that:

\[^{94}\text{The American death rates—2 out of every 100 soldiers deployed—paled in comparison to those of other countries involved. Ayres calculated that “Russian battle deaths were 34 times as heavy as those of the United States, those of Germany 32 times as great, the French 28 times, and the British 18 times as large.” (1919: 130). 50,000 U.S. deaths are indeed shocking. But it bears remembering that, in total, 7,000,000 individual soldiers were killed in battle alone in the four years of WWI. Such numbers are so hard to fathom, they convey their significance poorly.}\]

Hospital patients in the Theater of Operations who are permanently incapacitated should be returned to the Zone of the Interior [i.e. the U.S.] as promptly as the interests of the patients and the military situation will permit. Thus patients with pulmonary tuberculosis, those who are mentally unsound, and those who have such definite surgical disabilities as deformed or amputated limbs, often can be classified as disability cases very soon after entering hospital. [Love 1931: 53]

While Col. Love’s report, like others of the interwar period (e.g. Ayres 1919), tends to separate out battle from non-battle illnesses and injuries, these various afflictions rub up against each other both in such accounts and in the actual activities of military medicine at Walter Reed. The various modes of soldierly living, suffering, and dying, from venereal disease to influenza to bullets, are distinguishable but inseparable as evocatively depicted in his hand drawn chart “Total Hospital Cases in the A.E.F. from All Causes.”95

95 A.E.F. stands for American Expeditionary Forces—the U.S. forces deployed to Europe during WWI.
Included among these afflictions are those understood to primarily impact the mind, thus Love includes the “mentally unsound” alongside those with amputated limbs. And for as long as soldiers have been passing through its wards, the psychic tolls of war and military life more generally have been among those ailments treated and observed at Walter Reed. Diagnoses of war neurosis, severe combat reaction, shell shock, and, later, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have always accompanied the shrapnel wounds and frost bite that mark soldiers’ war injured bodies. But still other mental instabilities related to military life, disturbances other than those hallmarks of war’s sharpest traumas, have also long been linked to Walter Reed. And just as battle deaths and incurable influenza and tuberculosis appear in tandem in Ayers’ and Love’s
accounts of death at war, so such ‘mental’ suffering is inextricable from the physical facts of military life.

A striking special to the New York Times of May 23, 1916 tells of two strange deaths at Walter Reed the day before. The headline reads “Army Officer Ends Life: Col. Phillips Shoots Himself After Hurt—Lieutenant Killed by Fall.” The piece reads, in part:

Colonel John L. Phillips, U.S.A., Medical Corps, formerly in charge of the Walter Reed Army Hospital, committed suicide in a ravine near the hospital today. At the time of his death and since September last, when he accidentally fell down an open elevator shaft in the hospital, a distance of 18 feet, injuring his head, from which he had not recovered, he had been a patient at the institution. He suffered from an acute form of melancholia.

As had been his custom since being a patient, he arose early this morning and started for a walk. Between noon and 1 o’clock Thomas Tuthill, an orderly of the hospital, found the body of Colonel Phillips. He had killed himself with a revolver shot. Pinned to the lapel of his coat was a note addressed to his wife and daughter, who live at the hospital officers’ quarters, telling them that he was tired of life and asking their forgiveness […]
First Lieutenant Luther M. Ferguson, U.S.A., Medical Corps, recently appointed to the surgical staff of the Walter Reed Army General Hospital, was killed there today by being thrown from a horse.  

The circumstances of Col. Phillips melancholia—a mental state that seems traceable back to the physical injury of his head—address the complex interrelation of mind and body, of physical injury and mental state, something echoed in current thinking on war-related Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (Wool 2009a). If not impossible, it seems irrelevant to separate out the degree to which the impact of his fall or the experience of his post-fall self caused Col. Phillips’ melancholia: it is precisely their combination which contributes to his death. In Col. Phillips’ case, the occupational hazard of falling down an open elevator shaft is linked to the strain of head injury, a strain so heavy that the proximity of his family cannot shore him up. At the end of Col. Philips’ story, there is Lt. Ferguson who dies that same day, in that same place, when he is thrown from a horse, reminding us that incidental mental strains of military life must always be read alongside the physical ones.

And then, as if to make the point even more indelible, to call into question the very distinction between the mental and physical effects of military life, the following day, an article appears under the headline “War Aviation Chief is Injured by Fall: Lieut. Col. Reber, Leaving His Son’s Bedside, Plunges Down Staircase. Suffered From Vertigo.” The article describes how Col. Reber had been visiting his son who was at home, bed ridden with measles and fell down the stairs where “he was picked up unconscious and for a time was believed to be dead.”:

At the Walter Reed Army General Hospital it was stated that Colonel Reber had three broken ribs and had suffered other injuries of a serious character, but it was believed he would recover. At the War Department it was explained that Colonel Reber, who had been under a severe mental strain on account of the illness of his son, and had lost much sleep, had experienced two attacks of vertigo in his office at the War Department this morning, and it was thought that he may have had a third just before the accident.

Colonel Reber [...] was widely known for his work in aviation, and the unfortunate accident which he suffered today not only greatly shocked, but caused an exceedingly painful impression in army circles. 98

The deaths of Col. Phillips and Lt. Ferguson and Col. Reber’s accident each in their own way resonate with the deadliness of military life, even when that military is not at war. In macabre fashion, they condense the privileges and precarities of military expertise, the way the attachments of military life leak into domestic life, straining soldiers sometimes past the point of breaking. In these events, Walter Reed is both a cause and cure of such dangers. It offers Col. Phillips the prestige of his status “in charge” of a major hospital and the well appointed home—purpose built of Georgian brick—for his wife and daughters; it engineers the convenience of an elevator into whose shaft he falls; it provides the care for him once he is injured and the grounds for him to walk along in his melancholic state; it provides the ravine in which he shoots himself, perhaps even the revolver with which he does so; the orderly to promptly find his body; and the position of significance that allows his death to be written of in some detail in the national paper of record. 99

98 “War Aviation Chief is Injured by Fall New York Times March 24, 1916.
For Col. Reber’s part, military life includes the social attachments to all of those who feel exceptional pain at the news of his accident, the thickening of his social skin through the genealogical sociality that ties him to all his brothers in arms. But it has also pulled him physically away from his immobilized son, away from the autological ideal of a necessary and sufficient nuclear family. The result seems to hit him somewhere between the ears and the pulling and moving makes him dangerously dizzy.

These stories show that Walter Reed has long been a site of the unraveling of a neatly ordered mind amid the dragging weight of military life, in ways that aren’t always easily pinned to a moment of wounding war trauma. And even during times of war, this more ordinary mental anguish is inseparable from iconic forms of physical and psychological war trauma.

When the 130,000 injured soldiers evacuated to the U.S. during WWI started coming back, Walter Reed was one of 14 military hospitals specially allocated for the “reconstruction of disabled American soldiers when brought back from France”. And though Walter Reed was one of two facilities set to specialize in amputations, there is still frequent mention of soldiers’ need for mental activity and help, as war is openly understood to have ravaged the mind as well as the body often through “war neurosis,” a genealogical predecessor of PTSD.

In addition to the direct mental damage caused by war (the term ‘shell shock’ mirrors this immediate and material sense of causality) there is also a concern for the more diffuse mental distress that can arise in soldiers at Walter Reed and elsewhere; the feeling of incomplete humanity, uselessness, and of a wasting self; what WWI Army Surgeon General Ireland refers to as “hospitalization.” The new technique of “reconstruction,” Surgeon General Ireland says,

100 “14 Hospitals Chosen For War’s Disabled” New York Times, April 1, 1918; “Army School for Nurses” New York Times, July 6, 1918.
in addition to [...] shortening the convalescent period, retains or arouses mental activities, preventing ‘hospitalization,’ and enables the patient to be retuned to service or civil life with the full realization that he can work in his handicapped state, and with habits of industry much encouraged, if not firmly formed.\textsuperscript{101}

As a special site of reconstruction, Walter Reed becomes a place where the minds, bodies, and life conditions of injured soldiers will be remade in a model of regular productivity. Soldiers should be returned to recognized, and recognizably productive, lives, rather than succumbing to an invalidating transformation. As one subhead had it: “Work Must Be Thorough: Mental and Manual Activity to be Required to Fit Patients for Civil Pursuits.”\textsuperscript{102}

‘Hospitalization’ is a concern addressed to the less than ordinary life that soldiers might confront at Walter Reed. Various new spaces and techniques of reconstruction recognize the way such life might exacerbate the array of strains that pull on soldiers, damaging not only their bodies, but, as in the case of Col. Reber, thinning their social and familial ties to an untenable degree.

A new WWI Red Cross reconstruction facility at Walter Reed draws on the inextricably physical and psychic dimensions of war trauma beyond the acute shocks of the battlefield. Part of the facility’s recuperative aim is to make life ordinary, and enable the necessary mental and social activities “to help sick soldiers and sailors back to health and happy usefulness”. The building includes a “broad screened in porch provid[ing] the fresh air cure and a place for smokers with all sorts of games available on easily moved tables” as well as “rooms for kin.”\textsuperscript{103}

It links family to the precarious process of reconstruction noting that:

\textsuperscript{101} Quoted in “14 Hospitals Chosen For War’s Disabled” \textit{New York Times}, April 1, 1918.
\textsuperscript{102} “14 Hospitals Chosen For War’s Disabled” \textit{New York Times}, April 1, 1918.
\textsuperscript{103} “More Rest Houses for Sick Soldiers” \textit{New York Times} July 14, 1918.
The Red Cross has provided on upper floors twelve comfortable bedrooms which are for the accommodation of relatives summoned to the hospital by news that their men in uniform may not be able to “carry on” much longer. They are thus enabled to spend their entire time within call of the bedside, and do not have to conceal their grief or anxiety among strangers in a hotel.104

Here, alongside a trajectory of reconstruction toward normative bodies, are family members who, among fellows rather than strangers, are free to let loose their grief and anxiety. In addition to being a place of diligent reconstruction, these public presentations speak again of Walter Reed’s connection with soldier death and family tragedy inflicted by military life. The anxiety of the soon-to-be-war-widow echoes the vertigo inducing anxiety of Col. Reber for his bed ridden son. Activity in common, and simply being in the midst of others, in addition to exercise and fresh air, are seen to have curative, reconstitutive powers for soldiers and their families alike. The pains of war’s bodily violence ripple through the grief stricken minds and hearts of those who are physically untouched. The strains of military life shake the minds of service members until their bodies come tumbling painfully down.

Perhaps hospitalization was one of the causes of Col. Phillips’ “acute form of melancholia.” Perhaps if Walter Reed had also offered him the Red Cross’ sun porch, which offers not only “the fresh air cure,” something Col. Phillips’ solitary morning walks surely provided too, but a space of social distraction (or perhaps attachment), he might not have taken that final, solitary walk. The need for such ordinary embellishments even made headlines, as when the Washington Post reported “Reed Hospital Lacks Vases; donors of flowers for wounded

men urged to supply them.” A welfare worker in the hospital notes that “Flowers sent to soldier patients at Walter Reed Hospital help the men toward convalescence.”

This inextricability of the mental and physical dimensions of injured soldiers continued as new wars brought new techniques, and ideas of ‘reconstruction’ gave way to ‘salvage’. For example a 1943 article offers an inside glimpse of Walter Reed, explaining its mandate as “to save lives and salvage human bodies.”

![The Army ‘Saves Lives and Salvages Human Bodies’](image)

**Figure 16.**

It notes that about one third of the cases are “mental or nervous cases,” many shipped from battle fronts half way around the world with “minds vague and bruised from what they have seen.” But, significantly, others have yet to see combat:

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105 “Reed Hospital Lacks Vases” *Washington Post*, December 29, 1918.

Many of them are constitutional psychopathic cases who, occupying ‘obscure little grooves’ in civil life, got by quite nicely. It was only when thrown up against the routines and rigors of Army life that their minds slipped.¹⁰⁷

Nearly 30 years later, When William Calley was being court marshaled for the massacre of civilians at My Lai, the Army had him sent to Walter Reed for examination by “a sanity board” convened after his own psychiatrist testified he might have been “deranged” by second hand marijuana smoke as he helped slaughter over a hundred unarmed Vietnamese villagers on the orders of his commanding officer. The board, which included psychiatrists who had served in Vietnam, found that he “had been suffering no more battle strain than were any of his soldiers.”¹⁰⁸

In all of these ways, again and again, Walter Reed has been a publicly notable part of the painful, grievable, and mystifying mortality at the heart of the American military. Its publicity has displayed the ways that, at war and home, military life can pull soldiers apart from the social attachments that help keep them grounded in a shared world, tugging them into the solitude of a padded cell or suspending them in a simulacrum of ordinary domestic life. But just as the life of a soldier at Walter Reed is sometimes dangerously thin, so is the figure of the soldier sometimes fleshed out at Walter Reed thick and full of meaning.

4.4 Patriotic Bodies Dramatizing National Feelings

On May 12, 1966, then President Lyndon B. Johnson went to Walter Reed to visit with soldiers injured in Vietnam. At that time the officers and enlisted men were kept on separate wards;

Johnson toured them both. One account read “at times Mr. Johnson seemed so affected by the sights and odors in the wards that he was reduced to murmuring almost inaudibly ‘Your country is grateful to you’.”

It is as if, in the presence of the bodies of injured soldiers amid the hallowed and haunted halls of Walter Reed, Johnson’s senses become so saturated and suffused with the material effects of war, with the remnants of war’s spent “human material”, that all he can manage is to speak the nation’s gratitude under his breath, or perhaps breathlessly. In either case, it is an utterance that speaks to the act of breathing that separates life from death, a murmur that betrays the affected body of the speaker as it is hit by the smells and sights of the bodies of soldiers who have been affected and hit themselves. This is one cluster of national feelings attached to Walter Reed and its injured soldier bodies which circulates for public consumption during times of American war.

The nature of these feelings change, as do the configurations of actors and scenes that display them. But Walter Reed, and the bodies of the injured soldiers attached to it in times of war, continuously enact and enable the public figuring of national dramas. The scenes of these dramas often have the operatic quality of the scene of Johnson’s murmurs: they are often multi-sensory, they are often characterized by feelings, they allegorize or otherwise display in condensed form the grand themes of national mythos and shared condition, they are often, with varying degrees of literalism, staged.

110 From Charles Mayo’s 1917 AMA Inaugural speech: “It has been cheaper for [the great] industries to let Europe pay the cost of bringing individuals to maturity and to replace the injured and lost with new human material than to go to the trouble and expense of providing suitable means for protecting the lives and limbs of employees. Today we are face to face with the truth that we must arise to upbuild [sic] our own people. […]We hear on every hand of projects and efforts for the conservation of human life, a movement whish is the outcome not of any philanthropy or sentiment but of necessity. Men can no longer be replaced with the old time ease, and their individual value to the community has increased accordingly” (Mayo Clinic 1918). This excerpt comes from the same section of the speech quoted extensively in the introduction.
An article from June 1918 tells of a correspondence between Teddy Roosevelt (then a Colonel) and his son Archie concerning a Sergeant who’d lost his hand in France under Archie’s command and for whom, he hoped, they might be able to find gainful employment. It begins:

When Colonel Theodore Roosevelt learned today that Sergeant Frank A. Ross, a non-commissioned officer in Captain Archibald B. Roosevelt’s company, was in the Walter Reed Hospital at Washington with his right hand missing, he sent the Sergeant the following telegram.111

Here, not only is Walter Reed described in connection to the war injured it has been specially tasked with reconstructing, but it is publicized, and publicized as a place where family duty and national obligation collapse into each other, lending national moral debts an intimate character. The correspondence between Archie and Teddy is about the intimacies of the Roosevelt family and its multi-generational devotion to American military leadership.112 It is also about the debts of officers to their good soldiers, and about an inspiring Sergeant who was cited for gallantry and survived the German gas, only to loose his hand to a German mine.

During the Korean War President Truman wheeled a Walter Reed soldier out on to a stage during an inside-the-beltway USO fundraiser. The Times called this the event’s “emotional highlight.”113 The soldier—25 year old Anthony J. Troilo who “lost both feet from frostbite when he was captured by Communists and forced to march without shoes for many days in

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111 “Roosevelt Will Aid His Son’s Sergeant” New York Times July 1, 1918.
112 Accounts of the Roosevelt sons being injured and killed in the war appeared in the papers, including about Archie’s own injury in May of 1918 and the fact that he had been at the front when his own son was born (“Captain Roosevelt Sees His Baby Son” New York Times, September 5, 1918).
subzero cold',\textsuperscript{114}—is literally put on display in front of the powerful and wealthy people of the nation’s capital. The audience “honored Troilo with a stirring chorus of the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’.”\textsuperscript{115}

In an event intended to transform national gratitude into donation dollars, the body of this footless soldier animated by the president contributes to the effort by evoking stirring emotions. In this instance, the smells are not necessary; the sight of the soldier’s footless body and its particular public staging seem to be enough. And in other similar stagings, the arrangement and presence of the injured soldier’s body—rather than the full personhood of a particular soldier—is central. Such theatricality leaves little room for the complex livelihood of people. Which is not to say that such public acts are entirely anemic. Far from it, the iconicity of these material and sensuous arrangements of injured soldiers points broadly and deeply to national feelings and is full of historical resonances. These dramas are deep, but they are not precisely about 25-year-old Anthony J. Troilo or the individual soldiers whose collective bodies leave President Johnson breathless. Walter Reed as a national stage iconizes these particular soldiers; encounters with them are exemplary and allegorical. They are fleshy, but not exactly personal.

The exchange between a particular visitor and a particular soldier effects a certain elision of scale. What happens in that encounter is not only, or even primarily, about the particularity of the people present, it unfolds in the ideal register of the soldier and civilian. A grateful individual on behalf of a grateful nation. A heroic sacrifice, on behalf of the same.

The awarding of the Purple Heart is a literal enactment of this. The award itself is an iconic token of gratitude offered in recognition for blood sacrifice,\textsuperscript{116} but when the act of

awarding it is publicized, it can be an occasion to render soldiers exemplary, to have one soldier stand in metonymically for the whole of them. In such acts, a soldier is transformed into the soldier. But the mimetic magic of this transformation is built on its own kind of sacrifice. The particularities of soldiers’ lives and sufferings must be made to disappear.

Around Christmas 2007, when I was conducting my fieldwork, Daniel was told he would get his Purple Heart at a special ceremony. Daniel, his wife Sam, and Sam’s sister Vanessa, who all lived in one room with Daniel and Sam’s infant son Little J, were asked to provide their Social Security Numbers and other personal information in preparation. They were told to arrive at a room in the hospital around 10am on the day of the ceremony.

When the day came, they arrived at the appointed room at the appointed time. The room had been draped in thick, dark curtains which one soldier later suggested might have been bulletproof. In addition to a number of security guards, there was another soldier who would also be getting his Purple Heart. He was accompanied by his father. Sam figured he’d had some serious head trauma, maybe some TBI, since it seemed to her he didn’t know what was going on. He’d just kept talking about how he really needed to go to the bathroom.

After a few hours of waiting, Sam tried to go the computer lab to check her email and Myspace page. Two of the security guards put their hands on her shoulders and said “you need to go back inside.” At 3pm, their previously unannounced conferrer of Purple Hearts arrived, official photographers and entourage with him, turning the small and isolated room into a

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116 In 2008 there was a debate about whether or not soldiers diagnosed with service-connected PTSD should be eligible for the Purple Heart. The debated raised the question of whether or not PTSD was a ‘real injury’. The decision was that PTSD sufferers were not eligible for the Purple Heart, but not because PTSD wasn’t a ‘real injury’ but, in part, because the rules of the award say blood must be shed. There is currently a new question of whether sufferers of TBI should be eligible (see Jeff Schogol “Pentagon: No Purple Heart for PTSD” Stars and Stripes January 16, 2009).
profoundly public space, its claustrophobic closeness all of a sudden turned inside out. As they had already begun to suspect, it was President George W. Bush.

A rare, self identified Democrat (the fact she was a Democrat was no rarer than the fact she so openly identified with a political party at all), Sam held back the vitriol she had heaved upon him in conversations with me and dutifully shook his hand. She even let him hold Little J. As the President pinned the other soldier and thanked him for his service and sacrifice, Sam was sure he’d responded by saying something about having to pee.

Perhaps it is needless to say that none of these particularities, none of Sam and Daniel’s hours of waiting, or the indignities Sam felt at the hands of the security guards and the President or the confused anxiety of the other soldier, circulated along with the captioned images of the interaction. They show Daniel straight backed and smiling while shaking the President’s hand. In the narration of those pictures, Daniel is an exemplary soldier. He stands for all the rest.

On February 6, 1951 it was at Walter Reed that the first ribbons for service in the Korean War were presented by the Secretary of the Army and the Army Chief of Staff. Not only is Walter Reed the right setting for such a significant act of official recognition, but, the image of them reaching over the soldier tangled up in his cords and medical contraptions is itself a kind of motif that continued to reappear in public images of Walter Reed.

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On March 29, 1951 a variation on the motif shows the wives of the French President and Ambassador to the U.S. visiting a wounded soldier at Walter Reed under the headline “Distinguished Visitors Call on Wounded Veterans.”

On July 25, 1953 there is a small story about Waclaw Jackiewicz, a Polish immigrant to the U.S. who joined the Army shortly after coming to the country and then lost both eyes and hands in Korea. He was sworn in as a U.S. citizen following his injury at Walter Reed.

In all these examples, and hundreds that still linger in the archives, Walter Reed is a site of national affective ties, a place from which emanate emotions that can bind Americans to each other.

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other and to their President in collective experience. It is the site at which the nation, metonymized in its military leaders, selectively recognizes the military service that is so fundamental to its existence. It is a place to display international alliances in an age of international alignments. It is a place in which great dreams of self improvement and actualization through Americanization, even if at the cost of lost sight and limbs and even for a Pole in an age of Communist paranoia, come true with the swearing of an oath. It may be a place where prominent politicians and officers go to die, but it is also a site of powerful acts, a place where people might perform certain kinds of national magic; a place where the pinning of three ribbons on three soldiers becomes the national recognition of all soldiers who fought in Korea.

The body of the soldier is freighted with meanings of patriotism, discipline, and masculinity. The body of the injured soldier at Walter Reed here seems to stand in for all soldiers and for the particular and ideal Americanness that they, collectively and ideally are seen to embody and which becomes all the more necessary when the soldier body is seen to be so precarious.

In the post-9/11 era, the iconic images of Walter Reed visitors are uncannily restaged in, for example, the awarding of Purple Hearts.

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120 Gratitude is named, but what else is felt? What are those other things that do not escape a President’s breathless lips? Guilt? Pity? Hope?
During my fieldwork, on the last Friday of every month, a Purple Heart ceremony was held in Walter Reed’s Heaton Pavilion during which certain soldiers, emblematic, exceptional, and notable, are put on stage and spoken about in a register of patriotic moral debt. Pfc. Jessica Lynch, whose mythic story was itself a dramatization of national gendered war anxieties that played out in the green and black of night vision that gave way to blonde hair and a bright white smile, was awarded her Purple Heart on that stage in 2003.122

And, unlike coverage of Eisenhower’s frequent visits to Walter Reed for his own treatment during the Vietnam War, when NBC, CNN, and other news outlets reported on Bob Dole’s recent rehabilitation at Walter Reed following knee surgery and post-surgery pneumonia exacerbated by the former Senator’s own war injuries, the story was invariably also about his avuncular vet-to-vet relationship with wounded soldiers there. A short video on CNN.com ends with Dole, flanked by wounded soldiers and family members arranged in rows, as if for a class photo. He sweeps his hand from side to side, gesturing at his new injured friends and says “This is what America’s all about right here.”

122 For an analysis of the events surrounding Lynch’s story, including her later renunciation of the propagandistic means to which she felt her image had been used and the gendered national politics of visibility and invisibility therein, see (Casper and Moore 2009: 133-155).
These newest visual arrangements of injured soldier bodies during the period of my fieldwork and after had an additional (though not exactly new) significance refracted as they were through what came to be known variously as the Walter Reed or Washington Post scandal.

The series of investigative articles by Anne Hull and Dana Priest that touched off the scandal were published in early 2007 in the Washington Post. They describe in often touching descriptive prose the frustrations that soldiers suffered due to an impenetrable bureaucracy, apparent lack of institutional coordination, and, occasionally, outright neglect. What many people remember about the series, however, is mildew.

Figure 24.

While many of these conditions had already been publically documented years before $^{126}$ it was the images of injured soldiers—images in which the bodies and surroundings of these freighted icons looked wrong—and their public circulation that lent the series the force it had.

Figure 25.

One of the images accompanying the series and its online supplement is this image of Spc. Jeremy Duncan in his room in Building 18, $^{127}$ a small apartment building the military rented across the street from Walter Reed that was used to house the ballooning numbers of outpatient soldiers.

Building 18 was swiftly closed. The on post hotel, Mologne House, was devoted to housing injured soldiers and their family members. Every room got a new Mac computer and a big, wall mounted flat screen TV. President Bush struck a presidential committee to investigate. Based on their quick work (Dole and Shalala 2007), a new system for managing injured soldiers was created, including the Wounded Warrior Brigades, military units with the same command

$^{126}$ Mark Benjamin had reported on them in 2005 on Salon.com (see Benjamin 2005).

$^{127}$ Washington Post photographer Michel duCille’s accompanying images, including the above image of Spc. Duncan, were part of the Pulitzer Award citation the reporting team received. They can be found at http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/7824# (Accessed June 10, 2010).
structure as any other to which injured soldiers can be attached and where their “mission is to heal.”

A more diffuse effect of the scandal was to solidify and popularize the tie between Walter Reed and injured soldiers returning from war, and to do this in a context permeated by national discourses of soldiers’ patriotic duty and civilians’ patriotic debt to them which was haunted by a specter of neglected Vietnam veterans.

But the relationship between Walter Reed and this figure of the Vietnam vet is not at all a straightforwardly historical one. In the later years of Vietnam, as both the war and the protest movements heated up, Walter Reed was sometimes held up as an implicit or explicit contrast to the spaces of conflict or neglect in which Vietnam veterans were and are often still figured.

But even as Walter Reed was hailed as a site of specialized medicine and technological advance during Vietnam, the heroic and cared for bodies within it could also be conjured as

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128 These are better known as Warrior Transition Units and have been implemented across the Army. They have recently come under public scrutiny for their nearly wholesale failure. This is not entirely surprising, governed as they are by the same Catch-22 military logic that led to the problems at Walter Reed which they were supposed to solve.

129 The figure of the neglected, harassed, or generality unrequited Vietnam veteran has become a prominent presence in discussions of how returning soldiers ought to be treated by both the government and the civilian public. The story of the spat-upon Vietnam vet is invoked as a cautionary tale. While Lembecke (2000) argues it is important we recognize such tales as apocryphal, disseminated as part of a political strategy by Nixon and then again by George H. W. Bush in the run up to the Gulf War, and Greene (1989) shows a wide array of homecoming experiences, including parades and handshakes, I would suggest that the veracity of these stories doesn’t much impact their effect. In that way, they function a bit like rumor.

130 A 1970 article about the over crowding, under staffing, and neglect at VA hospitals, notes that “Many veterans say that the time spent in the military hospital can be helpful to a wounded man, surrounded as he is by friends in similar straits.” and recounts a story from Walter Reeds’ officers’ amputee ward to illustrate (Sandra Blakeslee “Crippled Veterans Find Hospitals Crowded and Attitudes at Home Ambiguous” New York Times, April 3, 1970). One reason for this is that Walter Reed is a military hospital, not a VA hospital. During the Vietnam era, stays at military hospitals were relatively short, since they were not (as they had been during previous wars) responsible for rehabilitation or any kind of long term care: these were the function of the VA system, which was over crowded and under resourced and had to requisition nursing homes and other facilities to manage the numbers of veterans requiring their services. The relationship between the military medical system and the VA continues to be a structurally problematic one. The most recent issue being dealt with is around ‘continuity of care’ as veterans transition from one to the other, encountering not only all new doctors and care providers, but new regulations, forms, and institutional protocols sometimes requiring new examinations and diagnoses to continue treatment that is already underway.
ghoulish symbols of the nations’ bloody failure. On September 1st, 1970 Senator George McGovern famously declared that

every Senator in this chamber is partly responsible for sending 50,000 young Americans to an early grave and in one sense this chamber literally reeks of blood. Every Senator here is partly responsible for that human wreckage at Walter Reed and all across this land—young boys without legs, without arms, or genitals, or faces, or hopes.\(^\text{131}\)

McGovern’s list of the missing features of young soldier boys—arms, legs, genitals, faces, hopes—supplements the silences about injured soldiers in articles about research and VIP visits to Walter Reed during times of war and the inarticulateness of President Johnson’s overwhelmed murmurs. It strategically places the crucibles of a lost masculinity (genitals), humanity (faces), and future (hopes) on disconfigured soldier bodies at Walter Reed. It suggests that even at ‘war’, soldiers’ deaths may be needless killings, worthless deaths, anything other than sacrificial.

Walter Reed does not speak for itself; its role as a staging ground for national feelings and war dramas must be enacted and while its importance is enduring, its meanings are as shifting and multiple as its functions.

When I was given a tour of the hospital in late September 2007, a slightly testy nurse lamented that no one used to come and visit when it was mostly cancer patients there, and now the flood of celebrity visitors and volunteers only wants to be directed to wards 57 and 58 where the OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) casualties are. Even, she noted shaking her head in disappointment, the actor Robert Duvall. This recent shift must be understood alongside the Washington Post scandal that spurred a general attention to the

\(^{131}\) The remark was quoted the next day as part of a front page New York Times (Robert Smith “Senate Defeats ‘End War’ Move by Vote of 55-39” New York Times September 2, 1970) and circulated widely and rapidly, and has become both famous and infamous.
treatment of returning soldiers and thrust Walter Reed onto centre stage. The scandal and its images drew on the horror and breathless guilt associated with the figure of the Vietnam era vet, which was shocking in its departure from the patriotic icons of earlier eras, but made possible and plausible by the continuous ravages of war on the body and mind of the soldier which are variously attended to and elided. The “One-Legged Flier” always resides along side “young boys without […] hope” and those “minds vague and bruised from what they have seen.”

4.5 Conclusion: Walter Reed as an Uncanny Constellation of Nows and Thens

And still, and so, and yet, Walter Reed is about America. The good care and cutting edge research, the fitness of soldiers who it has ‘helped to happy productivity,’ who have persevered dreaming of baseball in German POW camps, may seem, for a moment “what America’s all about”. But they also grate against McGovern’s small but stinging and stubborn evocation of Walter Reed as a place of the end of soldiers’ human life and the beginning of something less than. A place of research, reconstruction, and rehabilitation, Walter Reed is also a place to die the notable death of a faded battle axe, or the social death of the soldier cut down in his prime. It is a space through which patriotic men of the nation pass, and a kind of public theatre in which notions of national masculinity and patriotism and civic rights and debts are dramatized with each flash bulb, sound byte, and stroke of the pen.

132 McGovern’s framing of injured soldiers has a number of effects. While it is generally cited as an impassioned and rhetorically effective anti-war stance, it stands on deeply abelist ground, suggesting that being armless, legless, genital-less, or faceless means being hopeless and insinuating that being armless or legless is of necessity a form of emasculation and animalization. Ideas about fitness, bodily integrity, and passing that circulate at Walter Reed—among soldiers and clinicians alike—are similarly problematic, and, given the fact that injured soldiers are among the only people with disabilities who you’ll see on the cover of the New York Times, these standard body ideologies carry implications of for other people with other kinds of marked bodies.

133 There were very few reported deaths of Vietnam vets at Walter Reed. The death of 21-year-old recently released POW Spc. James W. Brigham is one example (“GI Freed by Vietcong is Dead after Surgery” New York Times January 18, 1969).
In his essay on the uncanny, Freud identifies repetition as one of the characteristics that distinguishes that particular feeling of disturbance from other varieties of anxiety or fear (Freud 2003). I have offered this fragmented history in a gesture of the uncanny. Not the repeated revisiting of an unassimilated, unrecognized past that characterizes what it is often called trauma, but almost an inversion of that: a familiar state of affairs we imagine we have moved beyond, a past we know well but which has become repulsive to us and which we think we have left behind. Yet it remains, so fundamentally a part of the way we inhabit the world that we can only ever kid ourselves into thinking we’ve abandoned it in some roadside ditch as we move on to bigger, better things. From time to time, again and again, it breaks through into the present, grotesquely winking at us, flashing us a rotten smile of recognition.

In some ways it is always the same, each fragmented moment repeats the same meanings—Walter Reed as rallying cry for the civic obligation to publicly recognize, honor, and repay its military debts; Walter Reed and its bristling meanings of patriotism and national shame; Walter Reed and its nucleic function amid the swarms of injured soldier bodies; Walter Reed’s laboratories, so central to medical research for American ways of life and health and war; Walter Reed as the site at which the mortal consequences of the technologies of war are felt in the soldier’s fading pulse; Walter Reed as a site to dramatize government ties to and care of those who are said to sacrifice on its behalf; Walter Reed as a Gordian knot of heteronormative masculinities, American patriotism, fitness, and faith in technology and the petty messianicism of teleological History.

But each incarnation is also unique, a tableau vivant of the same old ghosts posed in a scene that can only describe the present moment. The fact of these repetitions and the uncanny feeling that I have in recognizing them hints at the repulsive and familiar thing we wish was not still bound up with us; the resonance between these fragments. I suggest that this is our own
social entanglement with the multiple deadlinesses of war making, the inextricability of the lives of American civilians at home and at peace, with the pain and death of (certain) others.¹³⁴

In 2011, Walter Reed Army Medical Center will no longer exist as a physical or bureaucratic entity: it has been slated to close since 2005 as part of a Base Realignment and Closure project (BRAC) that will see most medical services moved to what is now Bethesda Naval Hospital, a five minute drive north, which will be renamed the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

And so, we will still be able to speak of Walter Reed and, in so doing, invoke the things we do now. The relocation of services does not obliterate the constellation of the experience and meaning of American militarism since the beginning of the 20th century. Things will change, of course, but probably as they always have: not leaving a lesser past in their wake, but making of themselves a new iteration of those most durable meanings that give coherence to such diffuse objects as military America, or American masculinity. In this way ça change and la même chose are like recto and verso, distinct but inextricable surfaces on which the history of Walter Reed is written.

¹³⁴ Thinking of Butler (2004; 2009), I am mindful of those deaths which pass unnoted and lives which pass unmourned but which are just as inextricable from our own as the ones we memorialize in sites like, and citations of, Walter Reed. I think the structure of life and the recognition of life that she outlines helps account for why the repetition we might recognize in accounts of, say, civilian deaths in the fire bombing of Dresden and the Shock and Awe campaign in Iraq, or the massacres at My Lai and at Haditha could strike us as obvious, rather than uncanny.
5 The Economy of Patriotism

5.1 Introduction

In the old Red Cross building, the one that once housed all those homely distractions for soldiers as well as their desperate families on grief’s tenterhooks, there is a USO show. There is Gary Sinise’s Lt. Dan Band, named for the Vietnam veteran and double amputee character he played in the film Forrest Gump (Zemeckis 1994). In the buildings’ entranceway are folding tables laid out with white paper gift bags with little white handles overflowing with coloured tissue paper. There must be more than 100 of them.

Behind the table is a middle-aged blonde woman with enthusiastic and kind eyes who encourages everyone to take one. Inside the bag is dinner: ham or turkey sandwiches, pasta or potato salad, a bag of chips, cookies, soda, plastic forks, paper napkins. Each bag will have been assembled, its tissue paper carefully fluffed, by a volunteer like her, like the others buzzing around the entranceway making sure each soldier has filled out a raffle ticket. Perhaps my dinner was assembled by one of the dozens of volunteers, some in t-shirts and polo shirts bearing the names and logos of their organizations, mostly women, mostly white, who mill around the edges of the building’s hall, painted a dull cream with honey coloured wooden trim. They survey the space with anticipation as the folding chairs slowly fill with injured soldiers and family members and other soldiers and civilians who work at Walter Reed.

The stage is set. There is a huge USO banner hanging in the back, its white letters flanked by stars on a patch of blue framed in red. The lighting is elaborate: five large coloured spots hang from the scaffolding that bridges the stage. There is all the rigging of a rock show: a full drum kit, huge amps, massive speakers, microphones arranged for the dozen musicians who, along
with Gary Sinise, will soon mount the stage and fill the space with the booming sounds of cover songs played to a mostly unenthusiastic crowd.

But first, there is our emcee, a USO organizer in his 60s wearing a button down shirt that looks as if it were made out of a single American flag; its blue field of stars resting on the right side of his chest and creeping along his right arm, its red and white stripes wrapping themselves around the rest of him. He runs down a list of fundraisers, from celebrities to local organizations, who have all contributed “big chunks of change” to fund the event.

He introduces the Right Guard Body Spray Girl to draw the winners of the raffle. She is then joined by a man our emcee introduces, choking back tears, as the first man to be shot down over Vietnam. We are told his body was paraded around strapped to the top of a Viet Cong tank and he spent the rest of the war “in the Hanoi Hilton having the hell beaten out of him.” He walks on stage to applause and his body betrays no trace of this history. The raffle prizes are autographed box sets of the first season of Sinise’s TV show CSI NY, two Halo 3 special edition Xbox 360 video game consoles, and 10 laptops. When one soldier’s name is drawn twice, and he walks up to the stage to give back his redundant laptop, everyone claps, especially the volunteers. The applause is thunderous.

Gary Sinise comes out, shaking hands on his way to the stage. He introduces the cast of the TV show JAG who have come to show their support and a group of firefighters from Brooklyn who are standing at the back. They’ve visited the Fisher House before. I remember noticing a decal on their van in the Fisher House parking lot that read “Lt. Dan van.” The crowd includes a few soldiers who are still inpatients and whose hospital gowns seem out of place amid the polo shirted volunteers, family members (mostly wives) mostly in plain or patterned t-shirts and blouses, the injured soldiers who mostly wear graphic t-shirts, many donated by volunteer organizations and featuring their logos, and a smattering of ACUs (Army Combat Uniform) on
those soldiers who work at Walter Reed. Though the Lt. Dan Band plays well, the crowd is mostly subdued, though some cautiously mouth the words to Sweet Home Alabama.

The mood changes when Sinise introduces a song that a then band mate wrote after a USO show they played in Korea. It’s called “A Letter Home.” The singer mounts the stage with her acoustic guitar. The lights are dim except for a single spot that frames her as she sings. The song is about dying for freedom. Its titular letter is written by a dead soldier. “I’d give my life for yours” she sings, her voice full of emotion. She gets teary when she comes to the refrain: “I am your son, I am your daughter/ My love is pure, I stand for honor.” When she is done, she is not the only one blinking back tears. Jake’s mouth is tense and his eyes are moist. Vanessa smiles as she wipes away tears.

The rest of the set is brimming with patriotism. The last song is Lee Greenwood’s “Proud to be an American (where at least I know I’m free).” It brings most enthusiastically to their feet, many sing along, but there are others, soldiers and family members alike, who stay seated, arms folded, looking thoroughly uninspired.

At the end, before he leaves the stage and poses for pictures with some of us in the audience, Sinise makes a short speech, closing out the event with an explanation of what it is, what it means. He says a few words about how “the Hollywood atmosphere” can make it seem like people don’t care, “but they do: they don’t take your sacrifices for granted.” He says “God bless America” and the stage show is over.

An event like this is a congress of encounters occasioned by people who have come to be with injured soldiers and who bring with them various degrees and kinds of publicity and iterations of patriotism. There are the local volunteers, like the woman with the bagged dinners; the national organizers and officials, like our emcee wrapped in the flag; the other notable supporters, like the Brooklyn firefighters, and the Vietnam vet; the celebrities, like Gary Sinise
and the cast of JAG. All of them have their own intentions, expectations, and feelings of obligation which are brought together under the sign of the flag. The pervading sense of Americanness, of patriotism which exceeds the citizenship on which it is founded, is the common denominator constituting the atmosphere of the event.

At the centre of what people actually do at this event and in all the interactions that comprise it and the others large and small, announced and unannounced, broadcast to the nation or to just one room, are exchanges between soldiers and others who have come to see and meet and touch them. At the same time that they might be an intrusion or a distraction, they were also *de rigueur* and a fundamental part of Walter Reed’s extra/ordinariness. Deciding what to do with the abundance of time on one’s hands at Walter Reed involved consideration not only of scheduled appointments, but of this endless roster of sometimes indistinguishable events.

And at the centre of these extra/ordinary encounters is a particular and deceptively simple kind of exchange. Whatever their type or intention, sometimes as if a reflex, sometimes as if a rallying cry, sometimes as if a devotional prayer, visitors would say thank you to soldiers for their service and sacrifice. They would offer soldiers their gratitude. “God bless America” “They don’t take your sacrifices for granted.”

In this chapter, I approach this array of encounters by considering the sacrifice of the soldier and the gratitude of the grateful nation in which they are framed and the ways in which that frame does not hold. I suggest these kinds of encounters enact an economy of patriotism; a field of exchange between soldiers and others which draws on the iconic figure of the soldier, but also makes apparent the unreality of that figure which is seen to embody the value of patriotism and which is challenged by soldiers’ unsteady understandings of what has happened that slide between notions of work, duty, accident, expectation, worthiness, and the edges of regret. It is a field of exchange in which value is jacked up, broken down, and inconstant, as are the
relationships of obligation that acts of giving, getting, and owing might otherwise entail (Mauss 1990).

5.2 The Claim of Sacrifice

The language of patriotic sacrifice is, to say the least, ubiquitous in public remarks about or addressed to soldiers. At Walter Reed it framed not only big events like the USO show, but even the most passing encounters between soldiers and volunteers.\(^{135}\) While this frame is often used in encounters with non-injured soldiers, the broader language of appreciation\(^{136}\) tends to become more specified in the case of injured soldier. Appreciation, support, and general thanks are coupled with specific gratitude for sacrifice.

The connection between sacrifice and acts of killing and dying that soldiers perform during war is enduring and well documented (for the most comprehensive survey, see Ehrenreich 1998). And Mosse notes that in modern Western war this connection blends Christianity, nationalism, and masculinity, writing that during WWI “sacrifice for a cause was now thought to be the highest virtue of which masculinity was capable, without replacing the other, by now traditional values” (1998: 112).

Sacrifice has also long been a source of fascination for anthropologists and others who are interested in elaborating the hazy cluster of issues within which it is often framed—ideas of

\(^{135}\) There were precious few exceptions. I recall two: a small elderly woman who I was told worked at a nearby assisted living facility and would come by in the afternoon with un-eaten pre-plated lunches, dashing into the kitchen, depositing the wrapped plates on the kitchen counter, dashing back out and not saying a word. One family member told me that when she’d casually thanked the woman one day she burst into tears, apologized, and left. There was also pair of local massage therapists who came regularly and set up their chair in the Fisher House living room for soldiers or families. Their encounters with soldiers and family members seemed like any they might have with a client and focused on discussions of bodily sensation and did not, when I saw them, involve expressions of national or personal gratitude. Despite the ‘ordinariness’ of these encounters, when the therapists wanted to explain their program and raise money for a network of massage therapists at other military medical facilities, it was framed as a service to deserving Wounded Warriors.

\(^{136}\) In addition to “thank you”, variations on the statement “we appreciate you” are common in volunteer organization material, including packages and letters sent to deployed soldiers.
mortality, relations to divinity, the material mediation between the visible and the invisible, the ordering of rights over death and life (e.g. Tylor 1874; 1889; Frazer 1995; Hubert and Mauss 1981; Lévi-Strauss e.g. 1990; 1983:93-94; Girard 1979; 1989; Bataille 1991; Agamben 1998; Lambek 2002). While of central importance to the areas of religion, law, and value such work interrogates, it is often diagnostic, or sometimes functionalist in its intentions and concerned to understand what a sacrifice is, what its felicity conditions are, what ontologies and cosmologies it implies, and what it is that people do and make when they conduct the act of sacrifice.

Such sources do the important work of suggesting a general economy within which sacrificial exchanges might be embedded or of which they might be productive. But they derive from rather explicit and systematic (though, of course, breakable) socio-religious and juridical rules, which is something quite different from the unruly tangle of concepts, values, and expectations within which soldierly sacrifice is situated. While sacrifice as it tends to be considered in anthropology or the study of religion or systems of value might be considered *de jure or de facto*, sacrifice as I consider it here—as it is used to by people other than injured soldiers to frame the injuries of soldiers and their injured bodies—is neither *de facto* nor *de jure*. Rather than a thing or an event, it appears as a claim. As a claim, it can be made regardless of one’s authority to make it successfully and regardless of the degree to which actual circumstances strengthen or weaken it. Sacrifice as a claim (as distinguished from a ritual performance with material residues) is not a systematically legible fact. It is rather an irretractable speech act that contains provisional and disputable propositions about the state of

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137 As Lambek so deftly demonstrates, the widely encountered centrality and priority of blood sacrifice to the production of ultimate value, the value of life itself, ties sacrifice to the production, evaluation, and transvaluation of worthiness (in terms of both value and virtue), as well as to the kinds of social and religious exchanges in terms of which it is more often analyzed (Lambek 2008: 148-150).
things which—be they true, false, irrefutable, or unfalsifiable—suggest, entail, and are addressed to relationships of obligation between those who claim, those (people and things) who are claimed (or about which propositions are made), and, perhaps, those who witness claims being made.

This distinction between sacrifice as a ritual performance and sacrifice as a claim matters because thinking of sacrifice as a formal act does not explore (nor perhaps leave room for) the dysfunction that occurs and the disorientations felt when the notion of patriotic sacrifice, with all its infelicities, is encountered by the fleshy people—the injured soldiers—it seems to so easily describe.

Sacrifice is an inescapable term in thinking about soldiers and their wartime injuries and deaths and the ways in which their injured or dead bodies are made meaningful and valuable in public, in a national scene like Walter Reed. Sacrifice is—to borrow from Lambek (2008: 150)—at the bloody, beating heart of the ever shifting and inconsistent sorts of value that circulate within the economy of patriotism. At Walter Reed, sacrifice is both ubiquitous and incoherent. While the frame of the sacrificing soldier may seem orderly, a fit secular analogy to religious forms of blood sacrifice, its contemporary invocations are muddled.

The muddled language of sacrifice is a practical requisite for public remarks about, and to, injured soldiers. Michael Chertoff, then Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security created in the wake of 9/11, offered a particularly rich example when he presided over a ceremony at Walter Reed for injured soldiers who were becoming American citizens:138

138 Under the 2007 DREAM Act, passed by President Bush and supported by the Pentagon, military service became a ‘path to citizenship’. A cover story from the Boston Globe on June 16th, 2007 noted “There are currently about 35,000 non citizens serving in the U.S. military and about 8,000 join each year to take advantage of an accelerated path to citizenship, according to Pentagon statistics. The government wants to further accelerate the process; about 4,000 immigrants serving in uniform became citizens in 2005, compared with 750 in 2001” (Bender 2007).
You put your life, and your safety on the line for millions of Americans that you’ve never even met, and you’ve proven yourself willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for this country. On behalf of the President, and a grateful nation, once again, I thank you deeply for your sacrifice.¹³⁹

Patriotism here is the measure of sacrifice. The soldier’s sacrifice is explicitly distinguished as proof of patriotism, of a devotion to America that non-citizenship puts in doubt. Patriotism here is a devotion to the nation above and beyond citizenship, a devotion to America that exceeds being American. The deadly risk of soldiering is rendered worthy for the sake of the country and its citizens. The nation is grateful, thanks and citizenship, are offered, once again.

In this frame of soldierly sacrifice, a willing blood sacrifice is rendered as the highest act one can perform for the sake of the lives of all Americans and for the nation as a whole. The nation expresses its gratitude with public recognition and, in the case above, the designation of citizenship. But that blood sacrifice is also something that these injured soldiers are said to have paid rather than offered or committed. And indeed, in public speeches of this kind, there is often an elision of “paying the ultimate price” and “making the ultimate sacrifice” as if the two were the same. But sacrifice and payment entail rather different flows of value and relationships of exchange, obligation, and faith.

The point here is not that Chertoff gets it ‘wrong’. Rather it is that Chertoff gets it just right; that there is a confusion and incommensurability within these platitudes and sentiments about injured soldiers’ sacrifice (be they sincere, cliché, theatrical, etc.) that makes them rather

different from, and not entirely analogous to, the classic modes of sacrifice and their logical entailments.

What’s more, and perhaps more important, is that the soldiers I worked with insisted that they had not sacrificed themselves. This was not some sense of false modesty or an expression of the unselfconsciousness that Emerson tells us is so necessary to heroism (1857: 221-240). In an echo of American soldierly sentiments from the Korean War (Young 2010), some soldiers said it all seemed more like police work than war; a job, albeit of a strange life and death sort. Despite what others might say, despite the heroism and sacrifice that others might attach even to ‘a job’, soldiers were adamant that their job, was just a job, that being a soldier, even at war, was ordinary work. There were times, as I elaborate below, when this insistence rubbed up against something else, something addressed more to virtue than value, but it did not cede to it. And beyond even this insistence was that fact that, as far as the injured soldiers with whom I worked were concerned, there was no thing, no singular sacrificial act. There was no decision to step on or ride over the IEDs they didn’t know were there, there was not even a considered or decisive willingness to do so.140

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140 On more than one occasion, people have suggested to me that soldiers’ willingness to serve in a war zone is as good as a willingness to sacrifice themselves in this way, for the nation and/or its ideals. I argue that it is not for three reasons: First, such questions often assume that soldiers join the military for explicitly and primarily patriotic purposes, which is not the case. Second, death and injury are very successfully absented from the recruitment picture, training is addressed to the willingness and ability to kill rather than the willingness and ability to die, and soldiers are all too willing to push that possibility to the very edges of their awareness (which seems perfectly understandable to me). Given the absence of self-sacrifice from the picture of military life presented when soldiers decide to join, it hardly seems logical to read the decision to join the military as necessarily indicating a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the nation. It might be seen as a (still tacit or even inchoate) willingness to put the life of a comrade before one’s own, to share an intense and life-or-death solidarity, but this is not the same thing. Third, both soldiers and parents with whom I worked consistently said that while the possibility of soldiers dying at war was very real in their lives, it was also very abstract and was ignored as much as possible and that they did not think about the possibility of being so seriously wounded; despite the conditions of combat deployments, loosing a limb did not readily present itself as a possibility. Soldiers’ deaths were thus considered (when they had not occurred, that is), by both soldiers and their family members, as passive acts—a thing that might happen, not something that might be done, requested, or required.
Consider the absented practicalities: Nearly all the soldiers I knew at Walter Reed had been blown up by IEDs: they had been riding in a vehicle which detonated a bomb. There was no moment of truth, no last breath before charging over the trenches, no split second decision to shield a buddy from a bullet or grenade blast. There was only the extraordinary work of soldiering which had become ordinary and which was then exploded into the extraordinary once again. Like Curt Lemon in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* who is one second walking in the Vietnamese jungle and the next is hanging in pieces from the trees (1990: 89), there is no sacrifice, only jobs and accidents; an ever present danger which comes occasionally screaming to the surface and then recedes once again to its tense omnipresence.

In thinking through this strangeness of sacrifice in encounters between soldiers and others, I turn to Nietzsche (1998). In his discussion of the origins of Christian morality, he proposes sacrifice as a relation of debt, a relation of debt that has an intense social force. Nietzsche calls for a recognition of sacrifice as a kind of trick. Where Girard (1989; 1979) sees sacrifice as the final moment in a spiraling cycle of the gift in which previous entanglements are laid to rest, Nietzsche sees it as the initiation of a new and intense cycle. Not only does this approach to sacrifice suggest the notion of an *ongoing* cyclical exchange, but it is a cycle (or a type of looping and unstable circuit) of exchange motivated by *gratitude, debt,* and the tricks and rubs of recognition. The thing about the crucifixion, he tells us, is not that Jesus died for our sins, becoming the victim of sacrifice that we might be purified, but rather that he created an unpayable, almost unimaginable debt, a debt which Christians would be forever bound to owe, a

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141 Significantly, this distinction between the Christian sacrifice that initiates an endless cycle of moral debt and a pre-Christian Talmudic sacrifice which cancels a self sustaining cycle of violent vengeance is the same as the distinction that Žižek elaborates (using the same insight from Nietzsche) between a so-called Christian justice based on mercy (a forgiving but not forgetting) and the so-called Jewish justice of *ius talionis* (a forgiving and forgetting) (Žižek 2008: 185-193).
privilege for which they would be forever grateful and bound to gratitude (Nietzsche 1998, see especially 60-64).

The encounters between soldiers and others which I describe here are a fractured iteration of this cycle. In making claims about soldiers’ sacrifice, others produce national moral values and debts and route the meaning of Americanness through the body of the injured soldier. But is this an injured soldier who sacrificed himself for the nation? Who was sacrificed by the nation for its own sake? Who is a greater patriot than the ordinary citizen because of his sacrifice but who can be thanked with the citizenship he is greater than? Who pays for something—freedom, it is sometimes said, but whose?—with his limb, and is repaid with $50,000? It is never entirely clear.

These claims about sacrifice are strange and sometimes shorted circuits of exchange. And in their particularity and ubiquity, they get at the central tensions of the extra/ordinary seen here through irreconcilable notions of sacrifice, gratitude, debt, payment, entitlement, exploitation, and work and the unsettling ambivalence of being nominated as a sacrificial victim and being thanked for it.

Sacrifice is front and center in this chapter about injured soldiers’ encounters with others because it was consistently invoked and implicitly omnipresent. It is also front and centre in this chapter about exchange, gratitude, regret, and patriotism for its significance to the production and flow of meta- and national value (Lambek 2008). But this chapter is not about soldierly sacrifices that have been made, or that one might argue have been made, regardless of what soldiers might say. It is about sacrifice as a claim about heroic patriotism and worthiness, and it

\[142\] Indeed, Lambek’s passing reference to “the valiant unknown soldier […] at the heart (the bloody, beating heart) of human value” (Lambek 2008: 150) is elaborated by a footnote reading “The wars that lie at the heart of so many national mythologies, the tombs of unknown soldiers, statuses of leaders who died under fire, and the like, are all evocations of sacrifice.” (Lambek 2008, fn 28).
is about the entailments and obligations such a claim creates and their multiple and messy implications, effects, and affects which were part of extra/ordinary life at Walter Reed.

5.3 Thanks A Lot: The Problems of Gratitude and Its Stuff

Almost every encounter between a soldier and a volunteer or VIP, including those mediated by cards and signs, included expressions of gratitude. Among other things such simple, and no doubt genuine, expressions carry with them the implication that there is something for which these volunteers and visitors owe their gratitude, some extraordinary and self-sacrificing act that has created a moral debt.

But the soldiers with whom I worked actively disavowed the need for such debt because, they insisted, there had been no singular sacrificial act, and also because the things that they did were not, in the context of war and in their commonness amongst other soldiers, extraordinary. In fact the ‘ultimate’ value and virtue of patriotic sacrifice began to dissolve when soldiers talked, in their not quite narrative ways, about the actual activities that comprised their time in Iraq, the many things that are collectively given the obfuscating name of ‘war.’

As has nearly always been the case in modern American warfare, the things they did during their time in Iraq didn’t seem particularly connected to the national ideals they were supposed to be serving or sacrificing for: riding around in armoured vehicles; busting down doors and clearing out rooms; pointing a vehicle mounted .50 calibre machine gun at a crowd and occasionally shooting at figures that looked out of place in a place you’d never been; huffing “dusters”—cans of compressed air that you buy from the PX meant for blowing the sand out of your computer—because you’re bored; and lighting up a whole group of civilians who were
firing guns into the air in celebration and then driving on and not filing a report to save your commanding officer the grief he’d get from CNN.¹⁴³

These were things that happened, things out of which the extra/ordinariness of war had emerged, and that were sucked out of the room the minute someone said “thank you.” And beyond all of these things that were but ought not to be invoked in expressions of gratitude, the things that lingered in the trace of their absence, there was also the problem of too many bodies and relations between them that might be the subject of the sacrifice about which someone was making a claim in their offer of thanks. There wasn’t just the soldier and the things he had done, though that would have been complicated enough. There was a soldier and his buddies, his limbs, his memories, his parents, his girlfriend, his wife, his child born in his absence. Perhaps most absent of all there is an Iraqi whose home is destroyed, who is afraid, who is taken care of, who is dead, who is disappeared.

These were all necessary omissions; implicit and necessary fictions that supported expressions of thanks and the claim of sacrifice. Gratitude depended on them. But it wasn’t only their partiality that was problematic, it was the very structure of sacrifice, gratitude, and debt that even such necessary and familiar fictions could not always sustain in the face of all of those things whose weighty and turbulent presence warped and splintered the structure of patriotic sacrificial exchange.

¹⁴³ These are references to specific incidents that soldiers told me about during my fieldwork. Though they told them to me ‘on the record’ (in the case of the dusters, one soldier prefaced his answer to my question about what they were saying “here’s something for your book”) and though I have changed details about the soldiers in this dissertation in order to ensure their anonymity, the stakes of these illegal acts are so high that I have chosen not to attribute them at all. I write about them in the second person in an attempt to mitigate against the recourse to the myth of the one-dimensional crazed combat vet which it is tempting, and perhaps comforting, to imagine when considering these kinds of acts. In addressing you, the reader, I hope to trouble that othering myth with a provisional and ethical empathy.
Peter was a good looking 19 year old, though he occasionally insisted he had lost too much weight since it had happened. So he ate a lot. These days, it was mostly cereal. And he was indeed eating a bowl of cereal in at the breakfast bar in the Fisher House when the man from the VA walked in with suited entourage in tow. Until he walked in, it had been a pretty boring day. Peter and I had been just killing time in the kitchen, chatting with Alec. The unique topography of Alec’s leg was on display within the cage of its ExFix, its shades of pink and red and its tell-tale grid pattern, like someone was squeezing it too tight with a hairnet, spoke to its many surgeries, skin grafts and growing infection. Peter hadn’t yet fully healed from his amputation surgery and he wasn’t wearing his prosthetic leg. His wrist was still bandaged from the surgery to set its broken bones.

The man from the VA and his entourage were led in to the Fisher House kitchen by the Fisher House manager who was giving them the standard Fisher House tour. As usual, she stopped and opened the gleaming, stainless-steel refrigerator doors, explaining the system by which we differentiated the donated food from food individual families bought for themselves. The group nodded a tad too earnestly in appreciation. The man from the VA moved over to counter where I was sitting on a stool and Alec and Peter were sitting in their respective wheelchairs. He asked Peter if he could ask him some questions. Peter agreed. Even though Peter hadn’t been at Walter Reed for long, he recognized this as an ordinary task, taking a break from his cereal so that some guy in a suit could ask him questions in front of some onlookers.

The man briefly introduced himself, saying that he was from a large Midwestern VA hospital and then quickly asked “where you from, and where were you hurt?” Peter replied with one word “Iraq.” The rest of the group, now clearly constituting an audience, stood back by the refrigerator and watched, clearly anticipating some elaboration. The man tried to elicit it: “and?” There was a silence which details of Peter’s injury or recovery were expected to fill. Instead,
Peter raised the remaining stump of his leg—his residual limb—and pointed to it with his milky spoon, giving a quick definitive nod of his head and saying nothing. The man from the VA tried again, asking “But how are you doing?” Peter’s response was as sarcastic as it was brief: “I’m fine.”

The man from the VA finally seemed to take the hint. He probed no further and moved to close the awkward interaction, smiling politely and saying “Well, you’re fighting for our freedom so thank you for your service.” But before he could move on to Alec, Peter jumped in: “and your job. If we didn’t get blown up you wouldn’t have a job.” A nervous laughter rippled through the group of onlookers in the pause which followed. The man from the VA replied “Well, yes, we prefer if you didn’t get blown up.” He quickly moved on to Alec, shaking his hand and asking him the same questions.

While visits from celebrities and VIPs were ubiquitous during my fieldwork at Walter Reed, part of its extra/ordinariness, such blatant calling out of the problem of gratitude and imputation of (here implicit) claims of sacrifice was by no means typical. In this context, behaving like Peter wasn’t just ‘rude’ it could get him labeled as crazy, as unable to deal with his PTSD, as ungrateful, or unpatriotic which was perhaps worse since though soldiers disavowed any special patriotism, to be labeled by others as unpatriotic called into question one’s loyalty and devotion to one’s fellow soldiers, not just one’s country, and that cut soldiers to the quick. Behaving like Peter would also wear on a soldier’s connections to the vast network of resources—from free diners to free laptops to free houses—which folks like the man from the VA were part of.

But though it is exceptional, this interaction encapsulates the tropes and traps of sacrifice and gratitude within which Peter and his comrades were entangled. And though the man from the VA doesn’t explicitly refer to Peter’s “sacrifice,” the trope of sacrifice is so ubiquitous as to be
nearly synonymous with service at Walter Reed, and perhaps in the context of American soldiering more generally. It is part of that extra-ness that prevents injured soldiers at Walter Reed from being simply ordinary. The very present absence of Peter’s leg, the small American flags stuck in his wheelchair (part of what he referred to as his “crazy vet” look), the man from the VA who has made this pilgrimage to see, and touch, and thank the soldiers who have given, or lost, or had taken from them, bits of their bodies, minds, and selves, all of this speaks to the claims about soldiers as sacrificial victims.

Such encounters are framed by claims of sacrifice and the debt of gratitude that sacrifice is thought to produce. Sacrifice, in this context, is tangled up with relations of debt, but it is the debtors, that is, the volunteers, visitors, and war and troop boosters, who insist on this debt. It is they who insist that they owe things to the soldiers. It is they who claim, and even insist, that soldiers have sacrificed on their behalf. They elevate soldiers to a level of self sacrificing heroes, and do their best to pay this unpayable debt. The soldier is (or is made) sacrificial not because of some essential quality he has or because of the circumstances through which his body has been dismembered. He is rendered sacrificial because an other claims his pain, his death, his loss, in their own name. He is their sacrificial victim: There is little he can do to be otherwise.

And yet, in making that claim, the grateful erase that same violence, the same pain and death and loss, on which is it based. Gratitude sanitizes the gory implications of sacrifice, leaving in its stead a picture of patriotism. The visceral pinkness of raw flesh is displaced by the glossy thickness of blue blood. During the encounter with the man from the VA, the gesture of Peter’s amputated leg is not enough to make this absurdity clear. When his gesture is met with thanks for his service on behalf of the ideal of freedom, Peter insists on reinserting his suffering into the exchange in a way that breaches the safe, hygienic frames of both abstract patriotic gratitude and depoliticized employment. Soldiers’ work is violent and deadly. In their gratitude, civilians
shake hands, make signs, and knit blankets; they give away laptops and build houses; they arrange dinners and trips to Disney Land. Their insistence on soldiers’ extraordinariness ignores those violent ‘extras’ that always append their ordinaries. They insist on soldiers’ extraordinariness and attempt to supplement it with a missing ordinary. To Peter, in this moment, it seems ridiculous.

And this is part of the strange ordinariness at Walter Reed, because even in the absence of people like the man from the VA, even in the kitchen rather than the USO show, Peter and the other soldiers at Walter Reed were literally surrounded by material manifestations of gratitude.

It is hard to convey the unimaginable abundance of ever-present stuff and the way it washes over soldiers at Walter Reed, but I am reminded of it every time I look at the paper and see a photo of a rehabilitating soldier wearing a t-shirt donated from the support organization whose logo it bears.

In the first months of my fieldwork I volunteered at the Fisher House, and the first task I was given there (as it had been when I volunteered in 2006 at the Fisher House at LRMC in Germany) was to reorganize the storage room, which was then overflowing with donated goods, excess office supplies, and Fisher House promotional material. There were boxes of ‘medi teddys’ (small stuffed teddy bears dressed in hospital ‘scrubs’ meant to comfort children), there were piles of hand made quilts in red, white, and blue motifs, there were t-shirts from various support organizations printed with their logos and slogans, there were hand knit hats, and CD players, and backpacks, and lap blankets, most tagged with little messages from women somewhere in the country, never from urban centers, conveying their gratitude, support, and Christian prayers to soldiers who were constructed as heroes fighting for their freedom. During my time there, these donations came in an endless stream and went, for the most part, unused.
The notes which were attached to the bundles of quilts and boxes of hand knit hats never made it to the soldiers for whom they were intended. The packages arrived in the mail and were whisked into the storage room where I was the only one to read their messages. Reluctant to throw the notes away, feeling it disrespectful, I tucked them into newly organized bins in which they would sit until the decision was almost invariably made to pass them along to the giveaway table in the Mologne House lobby. There was plenty in the storeroom that people did use, however: baby formula and diapers, toothpaste, and sometimes socks or a board game. There was food in the storeroom too, and we all enjoyed the seemingly endless supply of Girl Scout cookies and bottled water. But the objects that most clearly exuded an air of others’ expressions of patriotic gratitude, the painstakingly crafted red, white, and blue lap blankets and the saddle bags made of down-homey denim that could be Velcroed onto crutches, these things languished in their boxes and bins.

When things had to be taken over to the Mologne House to make room for a new shipment of Doonesbury cartoonist Garry Trudeau’s books or Fisher House swag used during the Combined Federal Campaigns (CFCs)\(^\text{144}\) or if I expressed frustration about the amount of useless stuff just taking up space in the storeroom, often soldiers and their wives, most of whom had themselves stayed at the Mologne House before moving into the Fisher House, would suggest that I should dump it all over there and that it would be gone before I walked out the door.

Admittedly generalizing, Erin once called the people at Mologne House “vultures” and described them hovering around waiting to descend on the next shipment of 300 piece America themed-puzzles or home made wooly hats. People described a kind of greedy and insatiable consumption. It didn’t seem to matter that these things were donated, and in many cases

\(^{144}\) This is the time of year when organizations can solicit donations from federal employees. During these weeks, the Fisher House puts up signs along the post fence and takes soldiers out to fund raising events to give talks.
especially created, to be taken and used and eaten and worn by those same people. Nor did it seem to matter that the only alternative was to throw these things in the ever overflowing garbage dumpster whose top often yawned open over its decorative fenced enclosure in the Fisher House parking lot. I in no way mean to belittle these offerings or the intentions behind them. Rather, I suggest, following Peter and others, that the experience of being nominated as a willing sacrificial victim through such unstable circuits of gratitude can be profoundly troubling.

Soldiers’ attempts to frame their past, present, and future selves as ordinary are foiled by these ubiquitous declarations of their exceptionality and claims of their sacrifice; claims which they are called upon to validate; a validation which invalidates their sense of an ‘ordinary’ self; an ‘ordinary’ self that is already compromised by extraordinary personal pain; a pain which generic, patriotic, soldierly, heroism leaves no room to suffer. Into the generalizing expression of gratitude, Peter had inserted the ugly facts of his particular body in pain. Presented with a vague and honorable notion of service, Peter countered with the violence obscured by America’s lush war economy.

And amid all this stuff, there was a rather fine, and not especially fixed, line between greedily taking and graciously receiving. And while that line was recognized through approbations about carrion consumption, a particular person was not always on one side or the other. For example, about nine months after his encounter with the man from the VA, I asked Peter to tell me more about what he thought about all the volunteers and VIPs. “Well, it’s good” he said, “they’re wanting to help” but if you’re at Walter Reed “you’re gonna get exploited here, that’s just how it is. So I just take whatever I can get, and do whatever there is to do.” Some people were greedy, sure, but he distinguished greed from the kind of mutual exploitation he considered himself to be participating in. While Peter had reconciled himself to the kinds of encounters in which he had, months before, been a reluctant and sometimes belligerent
participant, his new participation did not necessarily entail taking on the role of the compliant, patriotic, subject of sacrifice. His participation was much more pragmatic: he took whatever he could get and did whatever there was to do.

He had ridden in a Wounded Warrior bike race in New York, one of a wide variety of ‘feel good’ public events organized for soldiers that are tinged with inspiration, aspiration, and normative notions of masculine fitness all wrapped up in an energizing patriotic package. Peter participated because it was the thing there was to do, not because he wanted to set himself a physical challenge to meet and, in so doing, prove his ability and potential as a still virile young man, even if he was missing a leg and couldn’t hear much out of one ear. And so, when Peter broke his specially adapted bike by riding it in the wrong gear and didn’t finish the race, he really didn’t care.

This new stance about sacrifice, gratitude, and its stuff had gotten Peter, among other things, a Sony Play Station game console, a laptop computer, and a mountain bike. He enumerated these things for me while he stood eating a Sponge Bob Square Pants ice-cream pop in the Fisher House kitchen. The next morning, he was going to be taken fishing.

5.4 If I Were a Carpenter

James was one of a few soldiers who avoided encounters with volunteers, VIPs, and boosters as best he could. It wasn’t long after he and Erin had moved into the Fisher House that I began to

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145 While I don’t think it is a coincidence that, as I describe below, James finds a form of typically masculine manual labor an apt analogy for his soldierly labor, I do think the Christian resonance of carpentry is. In naming this section for Tim Hardin’s 1967 song (“If I were a carpenter/and you were a lady/would you marry me anyway/ would you have my baby”), I play on this second resonance and it’s relationship to the sacred; the problematic production of value that inheres in Nietzsche’s reading of the crucifixion; the muddled nature of virtue and value in the frame of sacrifice deployed at Walter Reed; Erin’s glancing invocation of hippie counter-culture below; and the importance James’ places on masculinity and being able to provide, financially, for Erin and their child.
notice his regular absence at events like the Lt. Dan Band USO show and a dinner and raffle put on by Soldiers’ Angels in the Mologne House dining hall where they wanted to be sure that every newly arrived soldier got a new laptop, or the way he would often slip out or into his room when he noticed the arrival of some set of VIPs whom the Fisher House residents had been notified about in one of the endless stream of sternly worded memos that the house manager would write and slip under the bedroom doors and which most people ignored.

One night, before I left for a free dinner James was adamant he didn’t want to attend, I asked him why he never seemed to come out to these events, and why he avoided encounters with visitors and volunteers even though this meant forgoing free stuff and the often welcome distraction from the boredom of life at Walter Reed. Before he had said it made him “uncomfortable”. Tonight, he specified saying “It makes me feel like a charity case”. I asked him to elaborate and he fumbled for an explanation. He couldn’t find a satisfactory way to elaborate or to pinpoint what it was about all the free stuff offered, as it was, in a spirit of grateful repayment, that seemed like charity. He knew that wasn’t the intention, but that was the feeling it left him with. He explained that he experienced even the simplest things as a kind of overpayment. That one of the reasons he didn’t like going to the mall was because people would hold the door open for him. In the context of the economy of patriotism, a context which is tethered to James’ body, such common courtesies as holding a door for a guy in a wheelchair are understood to be the act of a grateful citizen honoring a soldier who has ‘given so much.’ “They don’t owe me anything.” James explained, “respect maybe, but that’s it.”

James’ discomfort with these extra/ordinary expressions of gratitude and attempts at the repayment of debt continued, even as he made choices about what to do and where to go that made such encounters more frequent. They were ubiquitous, but often avoidable at Water Reed, but in the spaces of ‘ordinary’ life beyond its gates, there was no getting around them.
McGinty’s is an Irish Pub in Silver Spring’s revitalized and pedestrian friendly shopping area. On weekend nights its upstairs, with a bar and stage for live music, was heavily populated by injured soldiers from Walter Reed and their wives, girlfriends, or visiting pals. It was a kind of in between place, sometimes pervaded by an unmarked ordinariness which was sometimes supplemented with Walter Reed’s extra/ordinariness. It was one of the only places injured soldiers would go and hang out regularly on the weekends without the prompting of a ‘special occasion’ or the planning of a volunteer. It was as though the particular ordinary that emerged at Walter Reed, the one where having been blown up put a person in common rather than set them apart, was transported to this other place in the midst of a more recognizable and generic ordinary.

The bartenders were friendly with the soldiers, joking with them like regulars, or like a special category of regular; an instant regular who was also and out-of-towner on his way elsewhere and who would never be carded despite the distinct possibility that he and his date were not yet 21. As soldiers stood at the bar or perched on stools waiting for the next round of Buds for the guys or Cherry Bomb shooters for the girls which they would add to their tab and bring back to the table, bartenders would ask soldiers about where they were from, and, if it was slow, they might show each other their tattoos, or see if they knew any of the same people from the states they’d called home or crisscrossed in their itinerant lives. So while James forewent many special events organized for soldiers at Walter Reed, he was a McGinty’s regular. But McGinty’s was not beyond the reach of debts of gratitude.

One night as James and I stood smoking by McGunity’s small outdoor seating area that spread across the sidewalk at the entrance, his prosthetic legs (it is summer: he has had his second amputation) protruding from his khaki colored cargo shorts catch the eye of a mildly intoxicated middle-aged man ambling along with a few friends. He stops and addresses James,
ribbingly asking “what happened to your feet?” James replies with one word and a slightly smug smile: “Bomb.” The man, still standing there in front of us, unignorably close to us, although he ignores me entirely, nods slowly with sincerity and says; “I believe it. Thanks, thank you for what you do.” Then he moves along, back to his waiting friends.

We go back to our cigarettes and conversation, but whatever ease or unselfconsciousness or ordinary sense of being in common James might have had upstairs is intersected by that sentiment and its implicit fictions. An encounter that begins with a recognition of the glinting traces of horrible violence and pain, traces that James makes more present with his one chosen word—“bomb”—are unspoken and perhaps unspeakable within this frame of gratitude. Instead they are spoken as a conspicuous vagueness: “Thanks, thank you for what you do.”

These are encounters with others who seem to position both themselves and soldiers unproblematically within a structured cycle of exchange through which all citizens are tied to all soldiers through heroic duty and debts of gratitude: citizens and soldiers configured together in a solution of patriotism. And they are simultaneously encounters between actual soldiers, like James, and the figure of the soldier and his generic heroism and his worthy experiences and acts of violence about which one need not think too closely. It is not clear about whom, James or the figure of the soldier, the claim of sacrifice is made, but in these passing encounters it seems unlikely that there is much specificity in it. And as a figure with only generic content, the soldier’s acts of violence are actually inscrutable. These grateful encounters, and their dual nature, are part of what makes James so uncomfortable. Although he becomes habituated to their ubiquity, they remain troubling to him. They are ordinary and extra at once.

These attempts to pay perceived debts of gratitude can create messy and elusive relationships, sometimes even durable ones. But they create debts, rather than settle them: there are too many Nietzschean tricks at once. James is elevated as the self sacrificing hero, who
suffers on behalf of others, others who, in their turn, try to recognize and repay this impossible debt. And in their claim they become the creditors, making James feel he should take these things he feels he doesn’t and won’t ever deserve. And, as it is for Peter, sometimes they are things that James wants, or that he needs, or that he might like to have, but this is not the same as being owed.

It is worth noting, by way of distinction, that these encounters are troubling in a particular way that concerns the unsustainable structure of duty, sacrifice, and debt rather than the ordinary experience of being marked by the gazes of gawking strangers. James does not feel like a “charity case” when that same night outside McGinty’s a drunken woman sitting with friends on the patio looks at his prostheses and shouts something like “Oh my god! I mean, sorry, that’s just so cool!” and then it sounds like she makes a joke about hot dogs that neither James nor I can quite hear. There is something about the scene (a weekend night, a bar) and about what we can hear of her comments that seems masculinizing; as if she looks at James and sees some kind of bionic man, enhanced. And though James does sometimes ‘show off’ the fact that he can rotate one prosthetic leg 360 degrees at its knee and leave the sole of his shoe face up, parallel with the sky, his condition is hardly enhanced when each night at McGinty’s she must carefully calculate his trips outside for a smoke, waiting until his craving is strong enough to outweigh the trouble and pain of walking down and then back up the short flight of stairs. So there is something about being stared at by this woman who says “wow”, rather than “thank you,” that also undercuts James’ ability to be recognized as ordinary in public, and which literally calls attention to the difference of his body and deploys an ill fitting interpretation of it. But while this encounter is one that James must contend with, it is not quite the same as one which makes claims about the worth of all the things he has done which become indiscernibly swaddled in patriotism and gratitude “for what you do”.
Even as James increasingly did things that made such encounters unavoidable, like going to McGinty’s or out to the movies, he remained ambivalent about attending the weekly Friday night steak dinners for soldiers and families, ‘support our troops’ barbeques, or fundraisers for Fisher House or other organizations. But such ambivalence needed to be weighed against other things, like boredom, and the current and future comforts of his life with Erin and their daughter. And given how much gossip fueled drama there was in the Fisher House, and how antagonistic James’ relationship with the house manager had become, I was not entirely surprised when, in the middle of the summer, James and Erin moved, with a number of other families including Daniel and his wife Sam, and their son Little J (Vanessa had gone home before Christmas and had been disconcertingly out of touch with all of us), into one of 15 plush, fully furnished apartments rented for them by the Bank of America.

The apartments were in a towering and gleaming new gated condominium complex in Silver Spring, MD. The couches were leather, the coffee table glass, the wall-to-wall carpeting was soft and high pile. There were sliding glass doors off the eat-in area between the living room and the kitchen that led—past a sill low enough to roll over in a wheelchair with a bit of effort and momentum—to a small balcony that, from its great height, looked down on the sizable playground with its slides and climbing structures and benches. There was even a shoppette in the building’s basement, and a veritable sea of parking out of which the complex’s buildings rose like some modern monolith, Atlantis on asphalt.

146 She was not well liked, nor did she seem to want to be as she would rather run the house as if it were little more than an extended stay hotel. She commanded little respect from James, who was almost entirely dismissive of her and her authority. His belligerence was further inflamed when the manager took away the coffee table in the den, required everyone to use paper plates because she could not consistently ensure that people didn’t leave dirty dishes out over night, and had a number of volunteers start keeping a public log of everyone’s comings and goings.
Towards the end of my fieldwork, James and I sit waiting in that great expanse of parking lot. It is late at night, and his legs are too painful to walk on. Erin has gone to get his wheelchair from the apartment and he sits on the edge of the leather seat of the luxury SUV with the door open as I stand outside. He had just returned from a special water sporting trip for injured soldiers and their families. He tells me that the bus in which they’d traveled had a helicopter escort, the highways were cleared of traffic and at every police and fire station they passed, service members were lined up to salute them as they drove by. I ask James how he felt about all that fanfare, given that charity case feeling he’s reiterated but had a hard time elaborating.

In response to my question, he tells me a story about something he said to the head of the family with whom he and Erin had been staying during the trip. He and this man were sitting in a hot tub drinking beer after dinner. “I said to him: ‘you’re a carpenter, right? Well, imagine that you went out to a job and built some cabinets and all of a sudden on your way home, everyone is lining up and waving flags and saluting’ and, I mean, that’s really what it’s like”.

Parts of the trip had been thoroughly enjoyable, like riding in a squad car, sirens wailing, to the bar where the local cops hung out. James joked he’d only ever left a bar that way. And so amid James’ discomfort was also an enjoyment, sometimes an almost carefree pleasure. It is nice to be treated in this way and to forget all the things that are memorialized in and on your body. It is worth noting that in the intense vulnerability of Walter Reed, where everything about life and being alive and being seen to live, is so undecided, where being is dispersed across so many edges, others’ expectations can be powerfully compelling, solidly grounded as they are to foundational notions of patriotism and the schematic valuing of violence that allows or justifies or sometimes requires soldiers to kill and be killed. But James’ insistence on the analogy of carpentry and soldiering also indexes the experience of ordinary work and the economy within
which something like the labor of carpentry might be evaluated. There, there is no patriotic blood sacrifice, no ultimacy.

In fact, James had explicitly ridiculed the notion that his time in the Army constituted service to the nation on behalf of some ultimate good. One evening sitting around in the Fisher House den watching TV with a few soldiers and their wives and babies, Sam was telling me that the favourite job she ever had was working at St Jude’s Hospital, because, even though she didn’t do anything special there, just office work, she felt like she was really helping people. This, she said, was much better than working at McDonald’s, where “you only help McDonald’s people get rich”. In a loud voice of mock self-righteousness, James chimed in: “Well I was spreading freedom and democracy” he paused “and liberation!” Everyone laughed, and Erin made a peace sign and dopily moaned, “I’m spreading peace and love.”

And so, claims about soldiers’ sacrifice and the attendant utterances of “thank you” and other expressions of gratitude aimed at settling debts actually seemed to produce debts. The exchanges involved in these grateful encounters are hopelessly lopsided. In place of the reciprocal or circular logic of exchange and the way it can make or thicken social selves (Piot 1999; Strathern 1991), there is a flattened figure, an unpayable debt of gratitude that hasn’t been incurred, and an expression of feelings of gratitude that have little to do with the unspoken and unqueried tasks of war or acts of violence that look more like accidents than sacrifices.

5.5 Regular Steaks for Heroes

Tangled up in all the expressions of gratitude and claims of sacrifice that were based on the idea that injured soldiers were extraordinary were also volunteers’ own understandings of the importance of ordinary life. Sometimes, contradictory as it might seem, volunteers aspired to offer soldiers and their families a taste of normalcy in the midst of all their insistence on its
opposite. In addition to encounters intended to generically honour soldiers (and tangentially their families), the many smaller events such as barbeques at Fisher House or outings like Peter’s fishing trip were sometimes intended in part to give soldiers a chance to feel unmarked. Organizers of these events would talk about wanting to give these guys a chance to do something normal and were often unaware of the tension between this goal and their doting attentions and expressions of indebtedness, ignoring the extra-ness their attempts to offer an ordinary experience entailed. This intractable contradiction between a well deserved but regular good time and a partial payment of a sacrificial debt of gratitude is well captured by two weekly Friday night events: the steak dinner and the Freep.

Every Friday night a chartered bus came to Mologne House to pick up soldiers and their families and drive them downtown for a fancy dinner at one of a handful of locations where they would eat from a specially crafted menu that always included steak. Every Friday night, when the bus came back, there were a group of people waiting by the front gates, holding big homemade signs that said things like “God Bless Our Troops. Defenders of American Freedom. American Heroes”, and “Straight Girls ♥ Men in Uniform” and shouting tributes like “We love our soldiers!”

Figure 26. Figure 27. Figure 28.

147 Images from Freerepublic.com, the images of the returning bus are posted there individually, accessed April 2, 2009.
These two events have become entangled with each other: the sign holders waiting for the returning bus, taking pictures of it, featuring it in the stories they tell online about their weekly adventures; the bus driver inside turning on the lights and the organizer directing soldiers and families to the waiting throng who he described as “the good guys.” But the dinner and the rally had unrelated beginnings. The Friday night steak dinners were originally sponsored by a local restaurant owner and the Friday night “Freep” rally had been started by a group of right-wing activists who call themselves Freepers after their website FreeRepublic.com who were counter-demonstrating against a silent vigil held by the left-wing group Code Pink.

One Friday night, over steak at the Republican Club of Capitol Hill, Ned, the original founder of the steak dinners, explained to me their origin. A while back he owned a restaurant downtown, a steak house. It had a bar up front and a dining room in the back. He said he didn’t have any family in the military, and wasn’t a veteran himself, but he just thought that he should do something for the guys at Walter Reed and this was what he could do. He just wanted to invite some injured soldiers out for dinner, give them a chance to “get out” and “just have a good time.” He said at first it was a bit weird. No one really talked to anyone, everyone just went straight back to the dining room and ate their steak. But, he explained, eventually, after a few soldiers came a few times in a row, they started saying “hi” to the regulars at the bar, and then they started stopping for a drink and a chat with them, and then they were all regulars, a bunch of guys, getting out, just having a good, regular time.

But then Ned lost the lease on his restaurant. He vowed to continue the dinners and set up a foundation to raise money and got in touch with places that might be willing to donate space and offer injured soldiers and their families a steak dinner for free or for a nominal fee that his organization could cover. And so it was that we found ourselves at the Republican Club of
Capitol Hill, surrounded by white linens and jacketed servers and rare steaks that everyone wanted to send back for more cooking but didn’t feel they should.

Without having been to the ‘regular’ dinners at Ned’s old steak house, it’s hard to know how ‘regular’ they were; in what ways they might, for example, have resembled a night at McGuinty’s. But the story of his Friday night steak dinners touches on the essential ambivalence of soldier encounters. He felt, as a private citizen, that he ought to do something for soldiers because they were soldiers, because they were hurt, because he was concerned their lives were cooped up in a strange place with no good times or relaxation or regulars. What he wanted to do was give them a taste of a future, or perhaps past, ordinary; to thicken up their social skin with a bit of barroom fraternity. But in order to sustain his gift, he had to call on others to feel as he felt, as citizens should feel toward ‘their’ soldiers. He had to make way for claims of sacrifice. Thus I sat next to a soldier from Kentucky in his Soldiers Angels’ t-shirt and a baseball cap in a private room at Bobby Van’s steak house at a table with white linens and wine glasses looking at a steak (filet mignon) that seemed to him, too small, not “real steak”, and not cooked right, not well done, but who ate it anyway, not wanting to be ungrateful, and who politely applauded when TV reporter and new American citizen Rebecca Pepin made claims of sacrifice and called the soldiers present “living heroes” before handing out copies of her coffee table book *Faces of Freedom Profiles of America’s Fallen Heroes: Iraq and Afghanistan*.

In some ways, the Freep was a very different kind of event. With its slogans and banners and flags and shouts and general spectacularness, it was not intended to make soldiers feel ‘regular’, as Ned had wanted to when he started inviting soldiers out to his steakhouse. But the tension between an ordinary appreciation and an extraordinary debt of gratitude still adhered in the Freep, in part because the Freepers, like Ned, recognize the importance of ordinariness to the lives of soldiers at Walter Reed, even in the midst of their intentionally polemical patriotism.
Butelle, one of the principle Freep organizers, explained the history of the Freeps to me as he stood in the church parking lot across from Walter Reed’s main 16th Street gate, assembling the huge sign they called the MOAB (Mother Of All Banners). He explained that the Freeps had started when some Freepers caught wind of the silent vigils that Code Pink—a well known and theatrical group of leftist women activists—were holding there every Friday night. Butelle and other Freepers were horrified not only by what they considered to be the un-Americanness of Code Pink’s message (he cited signs that read “Maimed for a Lie” and “Support Our Troops, Bring Them Home”) but also by the fact that the group had chosen Walter Reed as the place from which to convey it. They felt it was a political exploitation of the soldiers who were rehabilitating inside.

When he’d finished telling me the full story of the Friday night Freeps¹⁴⁸ I asked Butelle what being out there every Friday night meant to him personally. He replied:

for me initially it was…you know…I think the guys ought to be able to come and heal unmolested. To be left alone, you know. People come and go, the street’s uh vacant, other than the traffic, and just go in there and convalesce and heal and, and uh recover from their injuries. And uh, not to have to put up with uh leftist anti-war jackasses on the street corner getting, you know, making it worse, and uh you know hurtin’ their morale.

Rather than beginning with an invocation of debt, sacrifice, or the public significance of Walter Reed and its soldiers, Butelle describes the anonymous liberty of empty space. It is this space, this privacy, which seems to be important to healing. It’s not brave heroes who have earned our gratitude or support. It is “guys” and “their injuries” who “ought to be able to come and heal

¹⁴⁸ The account was very detailed and included the fact that one Freeper guilefully used his connections with the D.C. Police to find out when Code Pink’s permit expired so that the Freepers could scoop up the permits for all four corners by the main gates, thus pushing Code Pink to a more marginal location down the block.
unmolested.” Butelle is a veteran himself, he is wearing a hat that commemorates his service in
the Air Force, and he brings the military context into his comments by dropping little bits of its
specialized register into his talk with words like “convalesce” and “morale.” But he roots his
motivation, the personal significance of his weekly trek into the city, in a guy’s right to be left
alone, to not have his physical injuries compounded by the presence of others who have (as he
frames it) bad things to say about what he has done.

But then, in his very next words, he draws on the idealized patriotism of soldiers, on their
exemplary, generic, beliefs, and on their special connection to the citizens who they are so nobly
defending. He continued:

And so come out here and counter, and you know, let the American troops know,
these guys know that they [Code Pink] do not speak for the majority of
Americans, that they really are appreciated and we believe in what, that they
believe in what they’re doing and we believe in what they believe in, you know,
for all the same reasons

In the space he has cleared, the therapeutic vacancy he wants to maintain, Butelle inserts
a message, spoken by “the majority Americans”, addressed to “the American troops”. But he
falters, the tension is already there; his message is addressed to the American troops who are also
just these guys, both iconic and ‘regular’. The message is that they are appreciated, and it is also
a message about a cycle of shared faith: “we believe in what...” It seems as though he might say
that Americans believe in what the American troops do, or that Americans believe in what the
American troops believe in. But he hesitates, and then repairs. He begins his cycle not with
Americans, but instead with American Troops: “they believe in what they’re doing and we
believe in what they believe in, you know, for all the same reasons.” He constructs two kinds of
Americans—citizens on the one hand, soldiers on the other—and then ties them together, rooting
them both in common values, giving them a generic, American correspondence and patriotic value, to be expressed in the space of encounter, no longer vacant, which he creates every Friday night.

Towards the end of his response, he returns to these same contradictions and correspondences, the vacant space for regular guys, filled with a patriotic message, the identity between citizens and soldiers:

but for me it was really to get ‘em [Code Pink] away. You know you guys are protecting us uh in the war against terror or any other kind of uh issues that uh threaten American national security and we got your back, you know, we got your back and we’re gonna protect uh the gates of the hospital for you guys.

The relationship he invokes here isn’t so much a common cycle of faith, but a fair exchange: you protect us, we protect you. But then, in the Nietzschean fractured cycle of debt motivated by gratitude, in the shorted circuit of the economy of patriotism, it doesn’t end there. Gratitude once again keeps things going in unpredictable directions.

‘Cause they come out and they’re walking the streets you know, cause you got the outpatients over at Mologne House and anybody who can come out and uh like I was saying before uh we’ve had guys you know in the mechanical wheelchairs comin over here like thankin us.

These guys, in their iconic bodies, express gratitude for appreciation. As another Freeper put it “soldiers come by and they say ‘thank you’, and you say ‘oh no, thank you’, and you kind of get into a competition: ‘thank you’. ‘Thank you!’.” Gratitude for appreciation for service for ideals in a space where soldiers are just guys who ought to be left alone unmolested.
At the end of the night when I went across the street to give my card to another Freeper I’d spoken with, he asked me with a quiet and concerned tone what the feeling was among guys inside. I said “most of them just want to get on with it, just get on with their lives.” He told me hopefully that sometimes guys had come out and told him that they wanted to go back, to be redeployed. Though I knew there were all kinds of complicated reasons for that, reasons that had nothing to do with “the war on terror” or patriotic duty, or freedom, or America, and much to do with the genealogical pulls of thick military life, all I said was that I’d heard that too. There was a brief pause. And then he said “I know it’s not for national security or anything, they’re fighting for each other.”

5.6 The Rule of Work, The Goodness of War, and The Edges of Regret

Though the profound connection between soldiers who fight together, and the responsibility they feel for each other, and the thick social skin such martial labors entail give their job a special purpose, for the soldiers I worked with being in the military is still more often seen as a job, rather than a patriotic obligation; this is its ordinary frame. The injured soldier was working

149 This remains true during war itself, and it is important to remember that _esprit de corps_ is not the same as national _fraternité_. I have found no more better expression of this than in the words of Spc. Sterling Jones, part of the unit featured in the documentary _Restrepo_ (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and whose words are included in Tim Hetherington’s book of the same experiences _Infidel_ (Hetherington 2010). Jones says: “I can speak for my platoon and my platoon only […] but those guys didn’t join because they were really patriotic. Everybody’s got their own reason, and very few of them are patriotic. Now, do you feel a sense of pride about the flag you wear on your shoulder? Sure. But I’m not doing this for the recognition from my country. I couldn’t give a shit what anybody thinks, except for those guys to my left and my right […]. Those guys are what it’s about, and I can’t stress that enough. In the end, you don’t have anything else. Your momma ain’t there, your wife ain’t there, your sisters, your brothers your cousins […]. So you become a bond. […] You make a conscious decision to say, ‘I’m willing to die for this guy.’ And that’s a hell of a statement for a guy you’ve known two years. […] That’s the attitude and that’s the pride. But patriotism doesn’t really exist—not amongst us. I think patriotism came from the 9/11 incident, where people went, ‘We’re America, we’re going to stand strong and we’re going to be patriotic.’ And for thirty-five seconds, people forgot that they didn’t like spics or niggers or white people or whoever the fuck they don’t like. They forgot for a little bit and went ‘We gotta go against this.’ In the end, really patriotic beliefs are almost hatred. You talk to people about Muslims and they’ll tell you they hate fucking Muslims. Why? Because some Muslims crashed planes into our building? They just lumped everybody together. […] So the patriotic sense seems like it’s
(intensely, dangerously) for pay, fulfilling his (extra/ordinary, life and death) contract, and now, he is missing a leg.

Given their explanations of soldiering as work, it is worth challenging part of Ehrenreich’s account of the “sacralization of war.” She rightly points out that “warriors do not come automatically to a transcendent, or religious, sense of their occupation, any more than to professional chefs or athletes” (1998: 159). But she also suggests that it is the warriors themselves who affect this transcendence and that this transcendence brings soldiers to a pseudo-religious and deeply patriotic valuing of their work. But certainly this isn’t the case for James, who feels like a carpenter, and is troubled when he is treated otherwise, or for Peter whose favourite things about Army life were getting shit-faced in Germany with the guys in his unit, blowing things up, and not living with his parents.

This was as true of their time in war as it was of their time before that in other kinds of training and duty, when soldiers get up in the morning and “go to work”. For the soldiers I knew, serving one’s country was more like a perk of the job, a welcome side effect of the decision to join the military, not the reason for it. The reasons were sometimes more pragmatic and nearly always less transparent. Some, like Peter, joined at 17 through the Delayed Entry Program (DEP) to earn money for school or to buy time before they sorted out what to do next. Some, like Alec, had gone to college for a year or two before deciding that it was too expensive, too soon, or too pointless, and saw a contract with the military as the best possible alternative. For others, like

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been fabricated for the American people: ‘be patriotic because we need to band together to destroy something else.’ But here, everybody has their own individual reasons why they’re here, why we do what we do.” (Hetherington 2010:200-201).

150 She writes “In the new era [beginning somewhere around the 17th C], the sacralization of war would depend less on established religions like Christianity, and more on the new “religion” of nationalism” (Ehrenreich 1998: 176)
Manny, it was the best way to secure the financial solvency (and citizenship) for oneself and one’s family which is so hard to come by in America’s economic margins.

It was usually a complex and sometimes contradictory combination of many motivations, circumstances, and apparent possibilities and impossibilities; it was all of the ordinary uncertainties that contribute to any decision to commit oneself to a thing for a time. The decision to enlist in the military is also, in important ways, different than, say, the decision to go to college. It entails a fundamental refiguring of your rights over our body, it exposes you to acute and endemic forms of violence, it makes you killable, it places you within a separate legal regime, and reconstitutes you (in post 9/11 America more than ever before) within a state of exception (Agamben 2005; Schmitt 1934). But not all of these extraordinary facts (not even most of them) were especially present in the minds of the soldiers with whom I worked when they enlisted. What were present were those more ordinary facts, things to do with money, education, and making a life in the future that was better, or at least more stable, than the one they or their families had. It is precisely in this way that the decision to join was not extraordinary but extra/ordinary. And so whatever the reasons for joining that had found a place in soldiers’ personal accounts at the time that I encountered them, these reasons and the act of enlistment to which they led were always necessarily situated in the rest of soldiers’ lives.

Though it might seem rather obvious to say that a major decision like enlistment is made, and must be understood, in the fullness of the life of which is a part, within the frame of patriotic sacrifice injured soldiers’ lives get configured in just such isolation, as if a soldier’s life is devoted to a single, moral purpose perched clearly at the top of an orderly hierarchy of values, a life and devotion which culminate in a worthy and willing act of sacrifice. This telos is one of those fictions necessary to transform certain violences into sacrifices, part of the imperfect magic
of the economy of patriotism. In James’ life, or in Jake’s, that moral hierarchy is more like a pile of pickup sticks; at every decision it trembles with contradictions, intentions, and accidents.

Of all the guys I knew at Walter Reed, Jake flirted closest with, and seemed to desire most, that fictional clarity of moral purpose and its hierarchy of values. He often described both his time in the Army and all the more ‘ordinary’ decisions and struggles in his life as underwritten by his abiding desire to do good, to be the kind of man who was good because he would act to thwart the ‘triumph of evil’, no matter how small or large the scale. It was one part of the reason he enlisted, as was a certain stagnation in his life at the time, as were his father’s past service and his familiarity with military life.

But although Jake often framed his time in Iraq in terms of duty and principle, it was not a necessarily or exclusively patriotic duty or a principle based on national belonging or obligation or love (cf. Anderson 2006: 144). It was the same kind of principled living that meant he never gave cash, instead offering to buy food or drink for panhandlers, as he explained walking out of a 7-11 and handing a homeless person a donut and bottle of water. It was the same aspiration to be a good man that had helped lead Jake into the Army and out of the 7-11 with that donut and bottled water. And it was also the reason he had decided to marry his wife Tanielle.

Tanielle and Jake had been friends since back when he was a rail-thin teenager in a heavy metal band. They had started dating after he’d joined the Army, not too long before his deployment to Iraq, and, as was often the case with pre-deployment romances, things had gotten very serious very quickly. And then, when he was in Iraq, on a day that turned out to be the ninth

151 Jake’s personal motto was: “Evil triumphs when good men do nothing.”
before he was blown up by an IED, Jake got a call from Tanielle. He told me about it one afternoon outside a grocery store in Silver Spring.

Tanielle was back in North Carolina, where she’d been put on bed rest to stay until the birth of their second child. Jake has just driven me and Sam and her sister Vanessa up to the mall so they can buy a new car seat for Little J with a donated gift-card. It is early evening, and the day is taking its toll on Jake. He wants to pick up a DVD box set of a TV show that his dad told him about, but he can’t remember what it’s called. He is a little frustrated since he knows he should have written it down, as he must write down everything that he wants to remember, his concussed brain no longer reliably up to the task. As we walk slowly up and down the brightly lit aisles, he is in pain, stepping gingerly and leaning heavily on his cane, and he jokes that one of the good things about being with Tanielle while she is pregnant is that she can’t walk fast either.

The pain becomes too much for him, and when Sam and Vanessa go on to the grocery store, Jake and I sit on bench outside and smoke while he rests his leg. This is when he tells me about the phone call. He says that nine days before he got blown up, Tanielle told him she was pregnant the first time. She said that she had been raped by an acquaintance when they were out drinking one night. Jake told me he didn’t believe she’d been raped. If she had, he was sure she wouldn’t have continued hanging out with the guy, even spending time with his family the way that she did. He figured she’d just been cheating on him and was trying to make an excuse. Whatever had happened, he decided to raise the baby as his own. He explained to me that it was the right thing to do, the thing a good man should do, the way his father raised him. And after he ended up at Walter Reed he and Tanielle had gotten married as soon as they could, configuring them, and soon, their son, as the right kind of family. It was a principled decision, and one he remains proud of, even though it is one he also sometimes regrets.
As we sit there outside the supermarket, afternoon slipping slowly into evening, Jake talks about the things that have come to constitute his life: the frustratingly slow pace of rehabilitation, not only the pain he feels when he walks, but the forgetting that is so hard to manage, and the challenges of making a marriage happen amid the extra/ordinary space of Walter Reed. I crack a sarcastic joke, suggesting that all that interminable struggle and pain is somehow “fightin’ the war on terror,” evoking the way that these experiences are publicly swept away in a tide of pat and poorly reasoned patriotic fervour. To him, my joke raises questions of worthiness, and though I have not mentioned regret, Jake volunteers that he doesn’t regret a thing, that he’d do it all again, even if he knew how it ended, even if he knew he’d be blown up. “But,” he says “the only thing I wouldn’t do, is get married.”

His sense of serious purpose and quiet masculine duty tinged with righteousness cuts across his response to my quip about his war torn life and explanation about marrying Tanielle. This presents the decision to be a husband and a father and the decision to be a soldier in a time of war decisions of the same, or at least a comparable, kind. But there is also room for difference: while Jake sometimes regrets the principled decision to marry Tanielle and raise her son as his own, in this moment he pushes his decision to join the Army, and the things he did in it beyond regret. It is not exactly that such acts are inherently unregrettable, but rather that, at least for now and for Jake, the stakes of regret are too high. In the words that I offered Jake, the words that he enthusiastically affirmed, “other choices are all but unthinkable.” The durability of his desire to do right, to not let evil triumph, did not lead to infallible decisions; his certainty about the right thing to do bowed against the edges of regret. In the case of his family, he allows regret to break his moral certainty, but the potential for regret in the context of war is even more deeply dangerous.
When, late in the summer, Jake heard that his old unit was being redeployed to Afghanistan, he started telling me about how he’d heard it was so much better there than in Iraq because in Afghanistan “you don’t have people jumping all over you every time you pull your trigger. They don’t make you feel like a criminal for doing your job.” He said he couldn’t count how many times he’d been hauled into the Tactical Command Center to account for pulled triggers. We sat on the patio furniture in the covered breezeway of Mologne House and he offered me these little scenes, alternating between his voice and that of an outraged superior shouting at him by his last name:

Smith! How come you opened fire on those people?! Because there were firing at us
Was there no other option?
There were trying to kill us!

Is there a possibility that you could have hit someone you weren’t supposed to? Huuu, yeah! But I didn’t hit anyone who I shouldn’t have.
How many rounds did you fire?
I wasn’t counting!

Smith! How come your unit is always opening fire?!

He said “I told my guys: ‘If you need to shoot, fucking shoot’.” He said “Too many young guys are getting killed or hurt because they’re afraid to pull the trigger. In Afghanistan, they leave you alone and let you do your job.”

There is a certain irony underlying Jake’s frustration, and it is not about the value of soldierly sacrifice. The righteousness of the war in Afghanistan, its value, its worthiness, is the very thing that makes the depoliticized and de-moralized job of soldiering more seamless. Its worthiness seems to be measured in the ease with which soldiers can do the most deadly parts of
their work. The difference between Iraq and Afghanistan is one of moral value, one of good men and bad guys. But the goodness of Afghanistan lubricates a trigger pulled by a soldier who doesn’t give a shit either way. Jake’s experience of that moral difference is one which makes it recede right out of the frame. The point is, or becomes, that in Afghanistan, you can shoot people without counting bullets. You, and your good men, can be left alone to do your jobs.

The first night I visited Jake in his new room at Abrams Hall I sat in the gliding rocking chair they’d gotten for Tanielle to nurse in that he’d brought with him from the Fisher House as he puttered in the small kitchenette area with its sink, small fridge, and two burner cook top. The room seems to be made of a million shades of grey, the walls, the linoleum tiles, the laminate countertop, the computer desk, the small, wall-mounted collapsible table, the chair that will remain piled high with his clothes until they process his work order and fix the broken rod in his closet. His bed is tucked into a small alcove just big enough to fit it and a foot locker. On the wall above the foot locker is a huge flatscreen TV like the ones that the Army put in every room of Mologne House following the Washington Post scandal. Above the head of the bed, Jake has tacked up a green sheet printed with a staggered array of little grey tanks and the word “army.”

When I ask him about why, amid the abundance of TVs, none of the soldiers at Walter Reed seem to watch the news, a stark contrast from Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany where I had done preliminary fieldwork in 2006, he says that it would make him want to go back. “To finish the job?” I ask, taking up a common refrain from justifications for staying in Iraq that have been circulating in the news as well at various events for Walter Reed soldiers. “Yeah” he says “I don’t like to start something I can’t finish.” When I tell him I wouldn’t exactly say he started it, he says “I was over there for nine months. I hope I started something.”

In light of the centrality of killing to Jake’s job and his frustrations in the face of the disorganized frictions that sometimes stopped him and his men from killing and sometimes put
them in a position in which they are more likely to be killed, the “something” that Jake hopes he started feels profoundly sinister. “Starting something” is not a neutral term. The thing is usually trouble, starting something means picking a fight. When Jake talks of starting something, his voice is low and strong and clipped. The image that comes to my mind is of kicking a hornets’ nest.

Jake’s commitment to his guys, to his job, is not, or at least not here in his room with its rainbow of institutional grey and leaky shower in his newly-built wheelchair accessible bathroom, a commitment to the highest ideals of the nation. But nor is it a commitment to that more general principle of goodness which has guided his other decisions, like marrying Tanielle, a principle that has proved fallible, whose fruits have proved regrettable. Starting something sits at the edge Žižek (2008) identifies where principled striving for goodness meets the rationalized violence of vengeful rage. In this characterization, Jake is not fighting for. He is fighting. It is a matter of life and death that he is able to do it well. It matters much less whether he is able to do it with righteous purpose.

While claims of patriotic sacrifice may sometimes be vital fictions, or soothing alibis, while they can be persuasive and comforting to soldiers and civilians, they can also be of ironically little help as soldiers like Jake struggle to think through who they are and what they have done and the kinds of experiences which may make ‘good’ decisions regrettable, whether they are decisions about pulling the trigger of a gun or about getting married, each of which, in their own time, emerge as ordinary decisions made in the course of daily life. The grand notions of patriotism and sacrifice that soldiers encounter feel all encompassing, and they are of little use when Jake is trying to figure out if he should get a divorce. A frame of patriotic sacrifice excludes too much if one is coming, or failing, to find terms to capture the ordinary deadliness of
war and its violence too dire to regret, too ordinary and overwhelmingly important and present to rationalize away.

This is not to say a sense of the goodness of war isn’t sometimes also helpful to injured soldiers in accounting for their experiences. Indeed this may be one of the differences between the guilt or shame of some Vietnam veterans (and veterans of the current wars who see them as unjustified [see Gutmann and Lutz 2010]) and soldiers like Jake, who is, for the time being, not troubled in the same way.

But this justification, this justness of war, is not just helpful as part of a partially articulated moral accounting. For Jake, justness has more practical implications. It is one of the reasons that ‘working conditions’ would be better in Afghanistan. Jake imagined there’d be less accountability in Afghanistan because ‘bad guys’ were there. It was a better job, but better in a way that bears little resemblance to the goodness Jake strived for. It was good in a way that wasn’t about morality but about satisfaction and ease.

When I first met Kevin, the only soldier injured in Afghanistan who I knew at Walter Reed, we sat in the den while he and James played a Tiger Woods golf game on the Nintendo Xbox they’d hooked up to the huge TV. He was in rough shape. Not only were both his above the knee amputations relatively new, his stumps in their most unruly and sensitive phase, but his girlfriend had just left him, and he was disconcertingly depressed, something not helped by his drinking or by the medications that made it difficult for him concentrate or even stay awake. He told me about how, before she’d left, he’d taken his girlfriend shopping at Nordstrom’s, the glamorous, high-end department store. There, a man had started talking to him about what he imagined Kevin was going through, telling Kevin how he must feel. The man assumed Kevin had been hurt in Iraq and said he couldn’t imagine that Kevin didn’t regret it all. Kevin had just ignored him, hoping he’d take the hint and walk away, which, eventually, he did. But he tells
James and me that the whole time he was thinking “First of all, I wasn’t in Iraq, I was in Afghanistan. I was fighting guys who were Taliban; who actually attacked us. I don’t give a shit about Iraq. And whatever, if I were in Iraq, I’d hate those guys too.” It strikes me as a remarkable statement. He evokes patriotic duty and the goodness of ‘the good war’ as an alibi against regret: “I was fighting the Taliban; who actually attacked us.” But he is quick, perhaps especially so in James’ presence, to dismiss the necessity of that goodness and hint at the rule of work, the extra/ordinary work of soldiers at war. He knows he could hate people he doesn’t give a shit about, and that’s an alibi too.

In the context of war, regret makes you feel like a criminal, it may cost young guys their lives. The muddy waters of good acts and doing the right thing make way for a working rule: “if you need to shoot, fucking shoot.” Regret exists in a province of values carefully weighed against each other, in a space of choice and alternatives. It is a feeling born of moral contemplation. In some sense, sacrifice is about moral worth (Lambek 2008), about recognizing the possibility of regret and deciding, on balance, that some act of destruction was or will be morally worth it. It is a measured justification in the *ius talionis* sense, the total closure of a cycle of revenge like Girard’s scapegoat (Girard 1989). To regret it is to open it back up, to make memorable and present what has been decided and put away, to make its violence unjustified, punishable, criminal (see Žižek 2008: 190-192). While Jake remains committed to the idea of acting for the greater good, it is his marriage, not his war experience, which has taught him that even principled acts can be regrettable. Kevin fortifies himself against a stranger’s imposition of regret with recourse to justified violence, but that is just a “first of all.” What comes next is a
dismissal of justification all together in favor of obligatory hate.\textsuperscript{152} For Kevin and Jake experiences in war (that extend to current experiences of their bodies) are not about the metrics of justice and the value of sacrifice. Their understandings of this violence withdraw from the edges of regret which exert pressure on other principled acts. For both Kevin and Jake, war’s violence becomes something that happened as part of a job, a duty that was not about ideals of patriotism, but life or death obligations of hatred, violence, and fraternal care. It is not about sacrifice and, therefore, about value and the measuring of moral worth which, though unretractable, can be regrettable (see Lambek 2008:150). It is about the necessities of the work of war, and the all-but-unthinkableness of regret.

5.7 Conclusion

In a moment of contact between a civilian and a soldier, or when the President walks into the room, or when an anthropologist turns on her recorder, people may do their best to participate in a coherent exchange, to repay debts they claim exist, to be grateful, to give things back for a pound of flesh taken. But when we look closely, we see that the exchange is not so smooth, that the circuit gets shorted in all kinds of ways. Rather than simply trading in patriotism, this economy is ragged and produces icons, frictions, and anxieties rather than clear value or relations of exchange. What emerges is never simply an unblemished ordinary, or a shining beacon of extraordinary national valour. What is hidden includes the configurations of state violence that underwrite cleaner pictures of patriotism and frameworks of sacrifice and value.

\textsuperscript{152} Though this need not be the case in all wars or for all soldiers, it has been certainly been illustrated time and again by the stories of American soldiers fighting in Iraq. When talking about the question of hate, racism, and dehumanization with a member of IVAW he put it to me this way: “think of a soldier who gets as many hours of training on Iraqi culture as you can imagine, 40 hours, 60 hours, and then you send him over and after a month of living with the awareness that all the white guys are safe and all the brown guys might not be, what do you think? That training can’t hold.”
Agamben’s deployment of the figure of *homo sacer* is a helpful heuristic for exploring the essential ambivalence of sovereignty through the possibilities and impossibilities of sacrificial victimhood that lie at the foundation of sovereign law (Agamben 1998). His elaboration of the internal contradictions of *homo sacer* and the question of bare life—riddles that revolve as much around modes of death as they do around the rule of law—suggests something of the strangeness of the figure of the soldier. Soldiers at war are killable bodies who have legally relinquished their will and rights and been drawn into a state of exception which affords them special protections and rights based on this relinquishment and bodiliness and every soldier’s body is interchangeable with that of another.

And yet, in another moment, a claim can be made about his sacrifice, a claim based on an idea of his special worth and worthiness that is, while rooted in his body and its proximity to death, the very opposite of bare life. No wonder then that both Agamben (Agamben 2005) and Butler (2004; 2009) explore the character of sovereignty and life in the modern state by thinking through the conditions of post-9/11 soldiering: acts of petty sovereignty that reinsert sovereign power into the space of governmentality (Butler 2004: 54-56) but that are predicated simultaneously on the impunity with which the solider can kill, but also the impunity with which he can be killed, all within the legal state of exception that grants him these powers and precarities under the laws of war that (to complicate things further) often do not, and can not, by design, apply in the “war on terror.”

These ambivalent conditions of war and soldiering allow claims about soldiers’ sacrifice to be made, and the act of making those claims works to make those very conditions disappear. While the soldier may linger in the legal state of exception and while he is a figure who is both made to live and required to die within circumstances decided by sovereign decisions, who is vested with the power to kill, and whose death and bodily suffering can be, at the same time,
understood as sacrificial rather than sovereign—*a* soldier is also, to himself and at the scale of encounter, unexceptional, un-sacred, and ordinary.

Notions of sovereignty, exception, and sacrifice can be mobilized to explore the power of the position he occupies or to fit his acts of life and death into a reducible relationship between citizens and the state. But they may also fail to account for actual soldiers’ understandings of their own lives and acts, and for the experience of being exploited, explained, and named in ways that are publicly recognized as sensible and valid but which intersect soldiers’ own framing of their lives at odd and awkward angles.

It wasn’t quite fitting to say the soldiers I knew had done anything on behalf of America, or its values, or its people. They weren’t owed gratitude, just compensation. Their base pay and its various supplements like danger pay, extra money for dependants, the regionally determined Cost of Living Adjustment, and TRICARE (the health insurance that was free for them and heavily subsidized for their dependants) were certainly their due. They were entitled to their TSGLI payments of about $50,000 per limb lost. These things were compensation. Beyond that, “respect maybe” for the hard and dangerous work they compliantly did, which had to be done, which others didn’t want, or have, to do. But neither sacrifice nor *gratitude* was part of the equation. No one needed to be grateful to them for extraordinary patriotic sacrifice; according to soldiers’ accounts, they had done nothing to incur such debt.

But, often regardless of the participants intentions, encounters between soldiers and others slide into the register of national sacrifice and tropes of heroism and exceptional duty. The economy of patriotism and the production and management of debts of gratitude seem to be

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153 Traumatic Injury Protection Under Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance is a program created in 2005 under Section 1032 of the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, 2005 in which the VA pays between $20,000 - $100,000 per limb.
unavoidable. The traces of national narratives seem to seep out of every corner of Walter Reed’s saturated space. While supporters may conceive of themselves as offering soldiers and families a private space of social intimacy, the apparent extraordinariness of what soldiers have done and who they are supposed to be intrudes in a handshake. In this broken circuit, the extra trumps the ordinary.

Even when he wishes it were, a soldier’s work is not allowed to be the same as a carpenter, the violence that is its most fundamental characteristic is framed and reframed again and again. It’s accounted for and paid for and silenced and counterbalanced by mounds of indistinguishable red-white-and-blueness. But in the end, none of these frames can hold, the mimetic magic of the exemplary soldier is fleeting, the conversation at the bar as a regular among regulars is interrupted by an other’s loaded utterance: “Thank you for what you do.”
6 On Movement: The Contingencies of Space and Soldiers

6.1 Violent Transformations and The Analytics of Movement

In this chapter I seek to understand soldiers’ experiences of the contingency and always unfinished emergence of new ordinaries marked by war’s violence. The emphasis on contingency and emergence evokes the play of multiple ordinaries and the experiences through which they become perceptible, sensible. To gain this perspective, I move from inside to outside Walter Reed, with both injured soldiers and with two of the non-injured soldiers I worked with. I include this broader material here to help push past distinctions between visible and invisible markedness, between experiences of transformation usually separated by the mind-body dualism. In doing this, I link the experiences of soldiers at Walter Reed to other experiences of life after war and demonstrate the reach of the notion of multiple emergent ordinaries in the wake of the violence of war. This chapter is about multiple experiences of transformation; experiences of difference that produce distinctions between habituated ways of being in the world.

This approach to a world-altering violence and the experience of post-combat

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154 This distinction is also sometimes reproduced in studies of (and social organizing around) marked ways of being in the world where those that appear clearly on the body (i.e., conditions usually encompassed by the term disability) are disarticulated from those that do not (conditions usually encompassed by the terms “developmental disability,” “cognitive disability,” and “mental illness” or “madness”). Sensory impairments, especially deafness, are often situated in a category all their own. See Lewis 2006; Davis 2002.

155 The term combat has a specific meaning in the context of the U.S. military: it refers to kinetic enemy contact. The specificity of this meaning is important bureaucratically, since it makes one eligible for certain commendations, badges, awards, and compensation, but it is also made meaningful by those who distinguish experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan along the combat–non-combat axis. I use the term here in the more general sense of military service in an active war zone or zone of occupation where killing and being killed are pervasive and realistic possibilities. My decision to use this term is essentially a compromise intended to facilitate my writing and your reading, but it is one with which I am not entirely satisfied.
transformation is also an attempt to trouble the hegemony of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which, as the most widely recognized articulation of such transformations in the current context of returning U.S. soldiers, often stands synecdochically for a vast and subtle array of transformations I describe here. While much of the visibility of PTSD is due to well-meaning efforts to get help for soldiers who struggle with life in the afterwar, the ubiquity of the label has an effect beyond even those who are diagnosed with PTSD or those whose experiences are characteristic of its symptoms. Homecoming trouble and post-combat transformation have become tethered to, if not enveloped by, PTSD. My aim here is not precisely a critique of PTSD itself, and I largely leave aside the diagnostic practices and politics that surround it. Rather, through the analytics of movement I offer another more encompassing way of thinking about post-combat transformations, or homecoming trouble, or the ongoing state of being post-traumatic. It is one that does not begin with pathology or diagnosis but rather the experience of being disoriented and the vertiginous and not always successful process of becoming reoriented that is occasioned by transformations residing in a sensate moving soldier acting in a here and now that is itself transformed by the violence of a there and then. This approach derives some of its effectiveness from the array of different forms of markedness I present here, from soldiers

156 For example, many news articles that describe the enduring effects of deployment focus on what is often referred to as the "psychological toll" and even when PTSD is not explicitly mentioned, the characteristics of this 'toll' are clearly informed by it, like a front page Denver Post article from 2004 which talks about a soldiers' sleeplessness, intrusive images of dead Iraqis, and responses to loud noises, even though it never mentions PTSD explicitly. A long 2006 Washington Post cover story called “Home but Still Haunted" seamlessly equated the generic “post-traumatic stress” it mentions in the sub-headline with the diagnoses of PTSD it recounts in the lede (St. George 2006). This conflation is also evidenced in a number of newspaper articles about soldiers’ homecoming struggles which are archived in the Proquest database and tagged with the subject Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and which describe experiences characteristic of the disorder but only actually talk about “post-traumatic stress” generally, not using the term ‘disorder’ or the acronym PTSD (Colvin 2003; Spencer 2004, 2005; Krupa 2005; Carey 2006; Haberman 2007; Boudreau 2009); Of the 617 new articles in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, or USA Today between the beginning of the invasion of Afghanistan and the end of my fieldwork that contain any mention post traumatic stress and/or PTSD 68% are about soldiers. PTSD is included in five of the nine brief descriptions of mental health resources listed on the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA); and one of the key recommendations of The President’s Commission on Care for America’s Returning Wounded Warriors (the official response to the Washington Post Scandal) was specifically about PTSD.
like Kevin (who is a double above-the-knee amputee), to soldiers like Sophia, whose body isn’t marked at all.

Each story in this chapter explores different kinds of combat-connected transformations which are most apparent in moments of social, visual, and physical contact as bodies move through space. ‘Movement’ here is an attempt to capture carnal and emplaced experience, flesh and the way it is seen and felt; proprioception and those other senses of sight, sound, touch, and taste through which a body and a space enact a meaningful, sensible articulation. The emphasis on sensible transformation is an exploration of the plurality of ordinaries and a way of including as ordinary, or as habituated experience, ways of being in the world that get short shrift when they are pathologized through discourses of PTSD. Using movement as a lens for looking at the transformations which result from soldiers’ time in Iraq and Afghanistan has allowed me to bring together experiences which might otherwise be kept apart as either physical or psychological, as either normal or pathological.

In bringing these stories together around the theme and practice of movement and the encounters it entails, I understand the stakes to be about more than how one understands post-combat soldiers and their moving bodies. Recalling Ahmed’s insistence that we ought not to think “the being who encounters” prior to the encounter itself (Ahmed 2000: 7), I understand the analytics of movement not as an approach to knowing how post-combat soldiers are, but a mode of thinking about how they be and become. And so I suggest these stories describe visceral, ontological transformations. Following Judith Butler, my (re)description of ontology here implies “the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure,

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157 TBI occupies an interesting position on the hyphenated Cartesian continuum: it is caused by the gross bodily damage (usually concussive force that often leaves no outward physical marking), but its expression, in things like outbursts of uncontrollable anger, memory loss, and non-linear thought, is tied up with the mental half of the dualism.
bodily persistence, desire, work, and the claims of language on social belonging” (2009: 2). This is a deeply social ontology and is inseparable from epistemology. It is a knowing-being-in-the-midst.

To this understanding of ontology I graft Povinelli’s (2006) insight that modes of being are also spatialized and that spaces acquire their social force as people, in all their carnality, inhabit and move through them. I draw as well on Erin Manning’s concept of ontogenesis, which effectively displaces the *identifiable* body (one that can be deictically connotated) with what she calls a *sensing body in movement* or *becoming-body* (Manning 2007). These authors’ emphases on contingency, emergence, and movement highlight the worlding (Stewart 2007)—the emergence of peculiar rhythms of an ordinary present—that touch and movement constitute. The experience of life that emerges from this approach is marked by what Michael Taussig (1991) has called, following Benjamin, *tactility*: a proprioception that (together with the optical unconscious [Taussig 1991: 149; Benjamin 1969: 7]), constitutes the distracted attention through which the familiar and habitual become familiar and habitual.

Drawing on these approaches to encountering the world, the analytics of movement grounds itself in a close attention to the way experience is made matter-ful in bodies as they (are seen to) move through and act in and on spaces. In this context, I distinguish this approach from the dominating frame of PTSD.

In its current scientific iterations in the U.S., PTSD is increasingly figured as a neurological malfunction, likely located in either the amygdala or the hippocampus (for reviews see (Woon, Sood, and Hedges 2010; Woon and Hedges 2009, 2008; Karl et al. 2006; see also Scheper-Hughes 2008; Leys 2000: 254-264) created by a potentially adaptive reaction to an event which is, by its traumatic nature, inassimilable by the brain’s usual mechanisms of
perception and apprehension. Even as its utility, parameters, and very existence are debated (see Rosen and Frueh 2007), PTSD is understood to be treatable, potentially preventable, and perhaps curable, all with recourse to increasingly biological and neurochemical mean, or what Young and Breslau characterized as “the passionate interest in discovering [PTSD’s] biological markers” (2007: 231). The particular form of PTSD and its colonization of modes of thinking about the experiences of U.S. soldiers after combat dramatically narrows the field of intelligible experiences. It limits the temporalities of transformation and, if accidentally and evenironically, effaces a complex and emergent becoming-knowing-being with an increasingly mechanistic bio-chemical body and brain and a set of pathologized behaviors. While explanations offered within a PTSD frame have important effects all their own, I suggest an analytics of movement as a way of attending to some of what such a frame excludes. In the service of this suggestion, to allow the analytics of movement to do its own work, I contain my discussion of PTSD, pushing it away from the centre of this chapter’s ethnographic and analytical material.

6.2 Marking Mobile Bodies and The Spatial Contingency of ‘Normal’

Bounded by gates, the space of Walter Reed is marked off from the city and world around it. The flavour of normalcy within those gates is sometimes related to movement. Not only is it normal

158 This strategic description of PTSD, given here for the benefit of the reader, lends it much more coherence than it has in practice. For example, though the thrust of much current PTSD research focuses on the brain and its malfunctions, the proposed new definition of PTSD includes (in addition to existing criteria A-G) the new H criteria: “the disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication or alcohol) or a general medical condition (e.g., traumatic brain injury, coma)” (American Psychiatric Association n.d.). For a masterful critique of trauma and its incoherence, see Leys (2000). For a specific and definitive genealogy of PTSD see Allan Young (1997).

159 I elaborate these current meanings of PTSD in the section of this chapter titled The (Dis)Placement of PTSD.

160 This is also true of much research in the context of military medicine, which seems especially passionate about rendering PTSD in biological terms (Brenner et al. 2009; Van Boven et al. 2009; Killion et al. 2009; see also Dieperink et al. 2005).
to see wheelchairs and people with prosthetic limbs, it is also normal to be 20 years old and missing a leg. The ordinariness of these facts is challenged by encounters with others, but in their absence, going from place to place in a wheelchair, on crutches, on wobbly new legs is unmarked and unremarkable. In this way, at Walter Reed, normalcy—those expectations that characterize life within a particular ordinary—often addresses itself to movement, how people do it, and what it looks like.

Many of the activities there are explicitly concerned with the intricacies of movement. For those who have lost legs, the activity of putting one foot in front of the other becomes a site of intense focus and attention. The activities of physical therapy, of stretching, walking, balancing, running, jumping, all use movement to train movement. And the evaluation of movement through space is one of the main ways rehabilitation is measured. The question of how, and how well, one walks is a powerful index of progress towards recovery, a state which has much to do with the normative appearance of bodies in motion drawn from the ordinary life of an ideal elsewhere.

These practices of managing movement within Walter Reed are normative and disciplinary. While they operate on miniscule movements understood to be somehow incorrect, it is the wobbliness of movement, the common experience of instability, that gives these practices a ground on which to establish themselves. This common experience of difficult, labored movement characterizes the extra/ordinary space of, and movement within, Walter Reed, even in sites of normative discipline like the various rehabilitation labs and physical therapy rooms.

161 This syntagmatic, relational property of ‘normal’ is also at the heart of stigma (Goffman 1986; Coleman 1986). What I describe here certainly relates to, and my analysis is indebted to, such powerful sociological concepts. But given the particular national frame and value attached to the bodies of these injured soldiers, the ways in which civilians, through claims of sacrifice, ground the value of war in these injured soldier bodies, and my emphasis here on the emergence of soldiers transformed modes of being in and apprehending a transformed world, I do not find the notion of stigma, especially its connection to shame and discredit, the most well suited for this context.
Outside the gates of Walter Reed, however, things are different. Ordinary movement looks different and bodies in motion are read according to different visual and semantic fields of reference. Sometimes this means that injured soldiers become exposed to unexpected encounters with grateful civilians or to experiences that emphasize the simultaneous excesses and absences of their marked bodies (Porter 1997), though the economy of patriotism makes this a different context. Indeed, while the question of movement and marked bodies is, I think, necessarily informed by critical work on disability, I feel compelled to note that the soldiers I worked with did not, in the in-between moment in which I encountered them, identify themselves as part of a community of disabled people, nor did they identify themselves as disabled. There were instances in which they joked about the condition of their bodies and their limitations in ways that played on the worst of ablist stereotypes and in which they also recognized themselves as subject to such stereotypes. So while I draw here and elsewhere in the dissertation on the rich and productive work on disability, I do not feel authorized to describe the injured soldiers I worked with as soldiers with disabilities, with all the political, personal, and historical meanings that such a naming would entail.

Sometimes for injured soldiers, moving through unmarked spaces made apparent and available for comment the ordinariness that injured soldiers shared at Walter Reed, those ways of being in common that were the basis of in-durable but important sociality and brittle but necessary social attachments. And so such movement was also about the proximity of multiple ordinals and what it might mean, and look like, and feel like, to ‘pass’ in them.¹⁶²

One night, bored with watching TV and playing video games, James, Kevin, and I decided to go somewhere for dinner and a few drinks. Tired of the usual spots in nearby Silver

¹⁶² For a rich reflection on the dynamics of in/visibility, im/mobility, and erotics in images of amputee women, see Smith 2006.
Spring, we tried to think of other possibilities. A certain degree of class comfort always guided these exercises: we wanted something cheap and familiar.\footnote{Incidentally, these places—the kind you find in strip malls across the country—are usually also large and wheelchair accessible.} I suggested we flip a coin. James and Kevin both laughed at this; making a decision in such an arbitrary way seemed strange. But that’s what we did. Heads. We’d go to Chili’s. James was using his two prosthetic legs, Kevin wasn’t and was using his manual wheelchair. The three of us piled into the luxury SUV James had recently bought Erin, paid for with the trade-in of his own car and the second TSGLI payment of $50,000 he received following the recent amputation of his second leg. James fluently folded Kevin’s chair and placed it in the ample trunk.

Driving north on Georgia Avenue, Kevin shared a thought which we all found amusing. Echoing Jain’s observation that in contemporary America, the car can be read as a “synecdoche of capitalism” (2006: 61), Kevin mused “I wonder if when people see you driving this thing, they think you’re just some spoiled rich kid.” We all laughed, recognizing the irony of the comment. Though he had been much smarter with his money than many of his comrades, James was not exactly rich, and he certainly didn’t rely on his middle-class parents for financial support. What’s more, far from being spoiled, he had, in as literal a sense as possible, paid a leg for this car.\footnote{The opportunity for jokes offered by the actualization of the expression ‘I paid and arm and a leg’ was well used at Walter Reed.} We also laughed because through the visual frame Kevin conjured up—the car window—James might well be drawn into the ordinariness out there which seemed so distinct from ordinariness at Walter Reed. He might well pass for a “spoiled rich kid”: he was handsome and fashionable and had a face that certainly looked no older than his 24 years; he was more Jimmy Stewart than GI Joe. Through the car window, one wouldn’t see the tattoos covering his arms, some of which
explicitly referenced his injuries and some of which were marked by them, and one wouldn’t see the two stretches of plastic and titanium connecting his sneakers to his shorts.

Kevin and James elaborated on this rich fantasy James projected through the window. Maybe people would think he had borrowed his parents’ car, they suggested. Playing on the passionate “automotive emotions” central to the aesthetic and kinesthetic experience of the car in contemporary America (Sheller 2004), Kevin and James conjured a protected world of classed privilege, one which can be read through visual contact and which might be bitterly envied.

While their joke draws on feelings of sensuous desire that the sleek black SUV is understood to evoke in viewers, it plays even more explicitly on the luxury car as an index of the driver/owner’s class. The joke works because both class and desire are made present in the image and act of James driving this brand new luxury vehicle up a relatively impoverished stretch of a Washington, D.C., street—the way class and desire might be read in ‘ordinary’ life, the kind of thing they might come to mean in a future ordinary. But the most fundamental premise of the joke plays on the movement of bodies and their extensions (cars and prostheses and tattoos) through differently normalized spaces, so it makes apparent the distinction between the extra/ordinary space in which James and Kevin are living and the ‘ordinary’ out there though which they now move. It is a joke about the ill fit of two ordinaries, physically differentiated by the gates of Walter Reed and coming into contact through movement.

Among other residents of Walter Reed, the image of James driving that stylish SUV was understood very differently. Inside, there was indeed a sense of that postmodern automobility which emphasizes recognition and affiliation through the aesthetic accoutrements of “subculture” (Gartman 2004: 141). The parking lots at Walter Reed were peppered with luxury and specially
Many soldiers were, or became, interested in cars and bought them, worked on them, prized them, talked about them, and spent their salaries and TSGLI money on them.

Cars belonging to soldiers might be marked as such: most soldiers had handicapped parking passes (though they usually didn’t display them while on Walter Reed) and many sported license plates with an iconic image of the Purple Heart, indicating the owner was a recipient of the medal. But inside Walter Reed even cars without the special plates were usually assumed to belong to soldiers, especially if they were tricked out with body kits, specialty window tinting, or decals. Reading these cars as belonging to soldiers was the exercise of a particular “schema of vision” (Lingis 1986:91), a particularly educated eye that relied not on the more obvious icons of the handicapped symbol or the Purple Heart, but on an everyday knowledge of the ordinary gained by presence in a place, derived from the common sensuousness, rather than common sense (see Taussig 1991: 147), of being at Walter Reed.

Given the strange and excessive economy of the military, and of Walter Reed in particular, the meaning of these cars is not quite the same as in a broader public where they might easily be read as signs of luxury (Gartman 1994; Jain 2006; Miller 2001)—the reading that Kevin and James invoke while traveling up Georgia Ave. This military economy is flush with base pay and supplements for dependants, housing, and potential and actual injury; it is depleted by need, family, the gratification of consumer desires; it unfolds within a limited range of places to spend; and it is constrained by powerful social and cultural forces insinuating acceptable and

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165 These were of the souped-up rather than the accommodation variety. If at all workable, injured soldiers preferred not to have accommodations, like hand gears, in their cars, and some of the cars—being especially small and low or big and high—were not at all practical or easy to get in and out of. For example, the suspension, grill, and body modifications on Jake’s car made it so low to the ground that he was in danger of damaging it on speed bumps and potholes and couldn’t drive it in heavy rain. MacLeish (2010) makes note of the sensibility of cars in a more “ordinary” American military context..

166 Some states also offer Purple Heart license plates to the surviving spouses of service members killed in action.
unacceptable expenditures which come from the relative closeness and normativity of the community. Within such an economy, a Hummer or a modified Mazda doesn’t signal discretionary income or conspicuous consumption. Or rather it does, but in a way that is particular to this economy and common to many of even its least solvent members.

Thus, at Walter Reed, the cost or quality of the car wasn’t read as a cue to the class of the driver in the same way it might be on Georgia Avenue. Kevin’s joke would not have made sense within the ordinary space of Walter Reed, which is why he didn’t make it there. But crossing the gates out onto Georgia Avenue, moving into a different spatial and social field, spurs Kevin to postulate a different reader, a different inhabitant and interpreter. We laughed at Kevin’s joke because we thought he was right; to someone else driving up Georgia Avenue, James would be a spoiled rich kid. We appreciated the ordinary public he invoked, a public whose eyes were not educated as our own, not accustomed to the light of the Army’s ordinary.

We also laughed because we understood the irony of such a reading, how it highlighted the different sensibilities and sensuousnesses, the different ordinaries of the spaces we moved between and that encountered each other in such movement. Thus moving out of the space of Walter Reed and through the public space of Washington D.C. makes apparent the particular visual register that enables a reading of normalcy and the ways in which such a reading is rooted in the reader’s own ordinary life. James driving this SUV inside Walter Reed is read by the particular extra/ordinary people there as congruent with his belonging to a contingent of young, wounded, male soldiers who spend newly gotten money on cars that fit within a particular aesthetic spectrum of luxury. Outside, he and his (wife’s) car are a marked image, coded by class and targeted for envy.

This visual differentiation of various ordinaries also applied to the bodies of soldiers themselves. Seemingly simple acts of walking along a city street make apparent certain
contingencies of the aesthetics and affects of class, gender, patriotism, and politics, ideals of bodily form, mastery and control. They make available for analysis the complex syntagmatic relationships through which marked forms are produced as such. Whereas the appearance of soldiers with amputated limbs and their movement were common within Walter Reed, these same soldiers moving through other spaces were cause for comment. In a way, these soldiers and their visible prosthetics walking through the ordinary of streets beyond Walter Reed function like an image out of place that “signals a ‘more’ postulating the existence of an elsewhere, beyond the conventional logic of that place” (Massumi 2003: 31). Visibly injured soldiers’ moving bodies postulate a “more” that speaks of the social division of the labor of war and its violent effects, an ordinary of war and its material legacies that is often out of sight.

As was the choice for many soldiers, James’ prosthetics were almost always visible, stretches of titanium and plastic between his sneakers and his shorts. Walking with him, when he was using his prosthetics or when he was in a wheelchair, made apparent aspects of the world that I would otherwise ignore; every change in the grade underfoot, every crack or bump in the sidewalk. Such usually negligible topographies required James’ care and concentration. And then there was the kind of transformation James experienced as he moved through space outside of Walter Reed. As I discussed in Chapter 5, the particular markedness of his body was legible as that of a soldier, and this indelibly transformed him into a public figure. And as James moved through the public space of Washington, D.C., it wasn’t uncommon for people to speak to and occasionally touch him. These kinds of encounters changed not only the spaces he chose to

167 Soldiers at Walter Reed typically chose to expose their prostheses. For an elaboration, see Messinger 2009. But there was a tension between this exposure and ideals of passing that were also important. As we saw in the previous chapter, Jake saw Al’s ability to pass as inspiring. When I went shopping with Javier and his brother in preparation for their visit to Arkansas, where Javier would get together with the members of his unit who had just returned from their deployment, he wanted to get long pants and shirts to cover his prosthetic leg and arm.
inhabit, but his sense of being in an ordinary world he used to inhabit, a world in which his body and its meanings are newly marked as extraordinary.

When a small child stares at him transfixed and slightly scared in the elevator at a movie theatre in D.C. James leans toward her and gives her a stern warning: “Eat your vegetables.” He likes to say this to children who stare at him. He thinks it’s funny. I think it’s upsetting, because in addition to James’ paternal pseudo–object lesson (Eat your vegetables, be healthy, have legs) it calls to my mind the long legged tailor with giant scissors who snips off the thumbs of children who suck them in the Struwwelpeter stories. But either way, James’ utterance contains a proposition about his monstrousness; it concedes that there is something about him that the child is right to be afraid of and evokes the deep and dangerous history of the gaze (Mulvey 1975; Lutz and Collins 1993; Kress and Leeuwen 1996; Davis 1995: 126-157). Such encounters expose something of the limits of self-constitution and perhaps even the risk of being “sealed into crushing object-hood” by the gaze of an other, even a child (Fanon 1991: 109).

Another night, as James, Erin and I walked from dinner to a movie theatre, a man walking quickly towards us extended his hand as he approached James. Without hesitation, as their paths crossed, James took the man’s hand, and there was a single firm shake. The man said “thank you” and they both kept walking, having hardly stopped at all, their courses altered almost imperceptibly.

These two incidents speak clearly to what happens to the reading of James’ presence, the meaning with which his appearance is imbued, as he moves outside the gates of Walter Reed.

168 It is worth remembering that this objectifying encounter is not an end, and the rest of Fanon’s essay is structured through various attempts to respond to and against such objectifying moments (Fanon 1991). But nor is such a moment just a moment. In a way that recalls Ahmed’s (2000) discussion of emergence, which I discuss in Chapter 1, and also Butler’s elaboration of the iterative, citational, and stabilizing dynamics through which bodily surfaces are made to matter (1990, 1993), such an encounter is inextricable from its social and historical moment.
James’ body is not read as disabled in the same way other, ‘mis’configured, bodies might be (Davis 1995: 11-14; Clare 2003; Udegbe 2007). Nor is his social class, or cultural taste (Bourdieu 1987) remarkable in the way it might otherwise be were his thin frame and heavily tattooed arms still adjoined to legs of his own flesh and blood. In this particular socio-cultural space, because of his normative masculinity, his youth, and the physical transformation of his body and its means of movement, James is interpolated as a soldier who has (in the problematic language of public commemoration) sacrificed and is worthy of comment, recognition, and gratitude. Here, James is not a stranger. He is a public figure, a national and nationalist archetype. He can be touched, grasped.  

James’ experience of moving is thus not only marked by new mechanics, it is an experience of being overdertermined, a certain weakening of the always contingent ability to feel self-contained and private, to pass or to pass unnoticed. He is arrested, if only momentarily, by the figure posited by passing others. The signification of his prosthetics overwrites the signification of other aspects of his body, like his many tattoos, that used to lend themselves to another reading. His legs carry him into public space and into a public figure that he has little choice but to inhabit. He responds to the question asked. He shakes the hand that reaches towards him. The touch of the handshake recalls Manning’s insight that touch, always an act of reaching toward, “enables the creation of worlds. […] To touch is to engage in the potential of an individuation” (2007: xv).

In these ways, James’ experience of himself in these public spaces has been radically altered, and there is an unbreakable continuity between the variety of ways he has been, and continues to be, altered by his experiences in Iraq. His ordinary life is marked by all of these. His

169 This makes for an interesting counterpoint to the Levinasian other who eludes one’s grasp (Levinas 1980: 179-201).
physical transformation is not separable, perhaps not different, from the range of other transformations these moments of movement bring to the surface.

Movement brings into view the variety of transformations these moments show and make. It draws our attention to the corporeal aspects of ontology and the kinesthetics of intersubjectivity. But these stories are not narrative physics equations; they tell of more than mass and velocity. This is because movement is always a social accomplishment, with all that entails. It is never just the movement of an object or a body or a hybrid actant, it is a dynamic interaction of socialized material. And, as de Certeau (2002) and Benjamin (1969) have each evocatively described, the spaces through which we move are always far from empty. The spatial is always the socio-spatial (Urry 1999; see also Low 2003; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Wacquant 2008). And so, the spaces of Walter Reed and of the D.C. street are spaces of certain kinds, semiotically full in ways which preceded, antecede, and are altered by movement through them.

Moving into view is always central to this dynamic; moving and seeing are imbricated. As Alphonso Lingis notes, sensibility is incorporation, “the visible things […] are ‘encrusted in our flesh’” (1986: 92-93). This process is always also concerned with the contingencies of space and movement (Lingis 1986: 91-96; Merleau-Ponty 2002: 98-147). To be in the field of the visual is to be in a spatial relation with visible things, to be “in contiguity and proximity” (Lingis 1986: 96). And so it is that, as Lingis writes “I find myself in the midst of them, in the midst of the visible, myself something visible. I become something seen” (my emphasis, 1986, 96). As James learns new movements and his transforming body moves into new spaces, he moves into view, becoming something seen.

Such an approach suggests that practical experiences of movement and the encounters they comprise are not separable from intersubjective and emergent experiences of self or
sensuous experiences of one’s body. To ask what it means that James has no legs—how we understand his condition, how we make sense of it—is to attempt to force the real into the realm of the symbolic. These are not questions that I know how to answer. They are not even questions I fully know how to ask. Rather, I ask what is it for James to have no legs, how is it for James to be without legs? The answer is addressed to the fragility of human experience and the exposure, vulnerability, and porosity of the self, qualities which body forth in moving encounters.

6.3 Re-visioning Space and Being “Post-Traumatic”

The experience of moving through space had also been forever changed for those soldiers with whom I worked who hadn’t been physically injured in ways that were readily visible. Their experiences of moving through space, including their practices of seeing, were also fraught, their sense of ordinariness also now altered. Their movements, if not the still image of their bodies, were sometimes marked as jumpy or too tightly coordinated, and their experiences of seemingly disattended tasks of negotiating public space were transformed by combat.

I sit with Sophia in a coffee shop in a subway station in Manhattan. We had met once before at a press conference about the new GI Bill on Capitol Hill where I had approached her to ask if she’d be willing to arrange an interview with me. Worried she might not remember what I looked like, I arrive at our meeting a few minutes early. I had thought I’d get a coffee and situate myself in view of the door, looking anthropological with my note book and audio recorder laid out on the table so that she might recognize me. But after I get my coffee and double back to the seating area, I see her already there, at a small metal table set with two chairs on opposite sides. She sits in the chair facing the door, sipping a hot chocolate.
We settle in, I pull out my note book and turn on my recorder. I ask her to tell me about herself. She starts with the past and pieces together a story about what she was like: born in Puerto Rico, but equally American, one of four siblings, a tomboy, a churchgoer who tricked her mother into signing the forms that allowed her to join the military in 1999 at the age of 17 so she could pay for college. She had been concerned about her younger siblings and knew their mother couldn’t afford to help all of them with school fees. Enlistment had been an obvious option: there was always that recruiter hanging out in the lunch room of her public school and that recruitment office on the way home and all those posters in the subway. She figured she’d get herself a desk job, not that it mattered so much then, back when, as she said, “it was Clinton time, there was no war, no signs, no, no signs of nothing.” “I was like, ‘There ain’t gonna be no war’ but little did I know.”

For about three hours, we talk about her joining the military, about being a woman in the military, and about her experiences as in a combat hospital in Iraq, an MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) for which she had been given two weeks of mobilization training and for which she had been selected in part because she was such a quick study. As we begin to speak about her time in Iraq, as we move inexorably towards the present, we also begin to speak about coming back from war and about the inevitable strains of ‘reentry,’ the atmospheric burn that makes painfully apparent expectations about a then and there of life at war and a here and now of life at peace, a feeling that makes apparent certain irrevocable transformations.

Sophia gestures at this difference when she tells me about demobilization.

You know, they check you out quickly, they don’t talk about it, they do it not individually, they do it everybody, as a group, as a unit, you know, and be like, “This is what happens this is how it is now remember how you were.”
I am incredulous, and blurt out “remember how you were?!?” Sophia confirms:

“Remember how you were and act, just you know be like that. Remember that.” And you’re like “Uhhh, what?” like, “How was I again?”

Part of what makes it so impossible to “be like that” are the stubborn visceral facts of being somehow something else, an irrepressibly emergent ordinariness. Sophia can remember what she used to do, the things she used to care about, how she used to spend her time, but her transformed mode of being in the world does not allow her to “be like that” or even to remember with all her body and might what being like that really was like.

She said “It changes you, it changes the way you see people. When you come back everything, everyone, is a suspect. Anything and everything everyone is dangerous, everything looks dangerous.” She laughed.

Sophia’s twinning of being and seeing—“everyone is dangerous, everything looks dangerous”—is a sort of cipher encoding the complex relationship between seeing and being and inferring the key to its understanding. In her own way, Sophia points to the intimacy between becoming, becoming visible, and coming to see that Lingis theorizes (1986: 92-93). She sees and feels the world as it is, and the world is as she sees and feels it. It cannot be otherwise. She feels that this world is a different one from the one she knew before Iraq, but also that it is she, and her vision, that have changed: “It changes you, it changes the way you see.” Iraq has educated her eye in a way that allows her to see danger and to know that it is there. The world and the people in it are full of potential danger because now she knows how to see.

For the next little while we discussed this experience of seeing things differently. Sophia laughed a lot as she spoke, a little self-conscious about the experiences she relayed.
Before I would have just walked in and umm sit down. Usually, now, like even though its been a few years and I know how to live in the normal life, with no guns no nothing, I still look in and see what’s my surroundings, see my potential, what, see that there’s an exit over there, see if something happens over there, where can I go.

[...] 
I don’t sit first [she is laughing], I like go right, I look right I look left, so I mean I don’t know if you were here when I did that.

“No,” I say.

Okay because when I literally walk in I stop over here and I look to my left and I do that everywhere I go. The same thing when I’m in the train. [...] How many people are there, if I have to run where do I go? You know if it’s faster the other way or the other way, where the poles are so I know how to, you know, so that’s how usually that’s how I. You know you walk into a place you want to know which other exits, how....

She pauses. “How you would move through” I offer, hinting at the arc of possibility that is part of her experience, hinting at the ifs that her experience proliferates: if there was a bomb, if there was a gunman, if there was, as they say in military parlance, contact.

Sophia moves from telling me about how she envisions space to showing me. As we sit facing each other, she facing the door, she demonstrates the breadth of her peripheral vision by telling me which tables she can see, inviting me to test my own vision, to look at the space and revise my view of it, to see with her eyes. “And,” she adds, “maybe you notice, I’m not looking at you, I’m looking at whoever’s moving, whoever’s moving too fast. I’m like looking, looking.” As she repeats the word “looking” she demonstrates for me, exaggerating the darting movement
of her eyes, showing me how they see and also making me see them. “So you know, I don’t know,” she says. “I get used to it. Yeah.”

I ask her if this new way of being bothers her. She says that it’s “unconscious”, and that it actually makes her “feel comfortable in a place”. She goes on:

I don’t count how many people go in and out but, like for example I remember the last person who walked in. You know, not to, to say but, like for example: a black female with short hair walked in with a jacket. That was like a minute ago. You know the other guy, he put some headphones on and he, he got out. So its like, I’m aware of who’s in and out. So I would be able to notice if somebody walked in and out twice, I’d be like, “Why?” That’s the first thing: “Why are you walking in again?” You know so. It’s something that keeps me, my heart pumpin’ slower, not like du-du-du du-du-du. Not like everything is dangerous.

Here Sophia articulates a complex of seeing, looking, and feeling that characterizes her changed experience of being in the world. Though she is reflectively aware of this change and has no trouble identifying it and linking it to her experiences in Iraq, she also explains that it is “unconscious”, habitual, it is the way she feels comfortable, the way she has become, part of her tactile everydayness (Taussig 1991), her ordinary way of encountering the world. Her particular vision gives her not only the abstract feeling of comfort, but changes the feeling of her heart in her chest—it steadies her sense of her self in her body. And her newly educated eye, the one that allows her to see that “everything is dangerous,” also allows her to feel comfortable and “not like everything is dangerous.” This apparent incommensurability—that everything is dangerous and that she likes to feel it is not—points to the clash between ordinaries. There is the ordinary of

170 Sophia seems to be almost quoting Lingis: “My eye as a seeing power does not double up, and superimpose upon itself my eye as a visible thing, but the visible field doubles up to inscribe itself upon that one chunk of itself which is my eye, making itself a vision on that visible. The visible organizes itself into a view, inscribes all of the visible, or some synopsis of it, on one of the visibles—my eye” (1986: 92).
being in ‘safe’ spaces (like a coffee shop in New York) and the ordinary of being in ‘unsafe’ spaces (like a combat hospital in Iraq). The incommensurability also points to the way that her new practice of seeing, her new vision of the world, keeps these two apparently incommensurate ordinaries suspended together in a way that plays out in her feeling of herself as she moves through space. The taken-for-grantedness of safety is gone and she must work to achieve the feeling of safety through recognizing potential danger.

When our interview was over, Sophia and I walked together to the subway platform to wait for our respective trains. It was a relatively crowded afternoon, and, leading the way, I came to a stop in the middle of the widest part of the platform. Normally, when waiting for the subway I lean against a beam and look down the tracks, or pace near the platform edge. But after our talk about Sophia’s experience moving and watching others move through space, after her small attempt to educate my eye, I thought she might rather be in the middle, able to see on all sides, the main entrances to the platform easily visible. I was wrong. She fidgeted a little and then asked if we could wait over by the stairs; she said she could see better that way and would be “more comfortable”. What I hadn’t noticed, in my attempt to see the space like her, was that in the widest part of the platform there would always be one staircase directly in front of her and one directly behind: from this vantage, she couldn’t see all the points of entry or exit at the same time, only by turning her back on one would the other be visible.

In our interview, and again on the platform, she described and demonstrated her experience of being back in “the normal life, with no guns, no nothing” in corporeal terms: sights, sounds, heart rate, and overall uncomfortable-ness. She described, and then on the platform enacted, the transformed way she senses and moves through space. She attributed a part of this transformation to her intense physical training, like the 30lbs of muscle she packed
onto her slight 5’2” frame. But she rooted the balance of it in the visceral intensity of her experience downrange.

It is not simply that Sophia has learned new skills of moving and seeing: She has undergone a deep ontological transformation. She explains her experience of reintegrating into “the normal life” as one of reconciling her transformed embodiment and experience of space with the incommensurate and socially reproduced hegemonic facts of space and comportment in the “normal” world. The normative experiences of a past there and a present here collide, and it is through her vision of the world that Sophia navigates this collision. This collision becomes her new ordinary; she feels it in her body, in the growth and loss of muscle and the exertions of the heart.

Unlike a more proxemic analysis, which might focus on military versus civilian ways of navigating space, a kind of cross-cultural mis-navigation or the resonances of a misplaced discipline (Foucault 1995; Hall 1969), Sophia’s elaboration invokes an extracurricular transformation of her own body and also of her sensation of the world around her. Feeling, seeing, moving, being, are all inseparable aspects of her transformed experience of the world. Even tactical practices of navigating space that can be linked directly to military training, like Sophia’s mapping of exit routes, cannot be boiled down to discipline. The body on which disciplinary power acts cannot be separated from the seeing person who moves. Though it is entirely appropriate that Foucault should begin his explication of docile bodies with the figure of the soldier (1995: 135-37), it is not at all necessary that an ethnographic account should end there.

Veterans render these normatively disattended activities of negotiating social space as tactical navigations. It may be training that introduces these particular disciplines of vision and movement. I tell these stories here not simply to highlight soldiers’ ability to move in such
specialized ways, but to describe their experience of movement as suffused with their experiences of war zones; the way their experience of being and moving in one place has changed their experience of being and moving anyplace.

Movement here is not simply a question of physics. It is a worlding, with all that entails: a becoming and a making (Manning 2007; Povinelli 2006; Stewart 2007, 2010). While it may be training or experience that disciplined these soldier-bodies, it makes little sense to say simply that these techniques are internalized. The moving, seeing being experiences a disciplined exterior space as much as, if not more than, a disciplined feeling of its own body. Thus space itself is transformed, and not only is there a continuity of practices of moving and seeing that inheres in a particular soldier, there is also a contiguity of space established between the there of war and the here of home. As the soldier marches from Tal Afar to D.C., so the distance between Tal Afar and D.C. is bridged and foreshortened.

Since 9/11, Gavin had served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Cuba, and I met him through some work I was doing with Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). Since he’d gotten out of the Marines his life had been ungrounded, maybe even unhinged. He’d been homeless for a while and had tried to slit his wrists on the floor of a bus station, though without a sharp enough instrument he didn’t get very far. His new involvement with IVAW and the focus and fellowship he found there was, I have no doubt, life-saving.

After we’d known each other for a few months, Gavin suggested I might like to come with him to the local VA hospital, where he wanted to get tested for depleted uranium poisoning.\footnote{Depleted uranium (DU) is used in some forms of heavy military armor and artillery. The use of DU is controversial internationally and a number of countries and NGOs have condemned its use. The issue of DU poisoning in the U.S. military is also controversial, and it has been linked in some quarters to Gulf War Syndrome.} The hospital was close to the house where he was staying in Washington, D.C.,
about a 15-minute walk, and our path took us along small side streets and across some stretches of industrial landscape, all of which was made innocuous, even pleasant, by the warm summer sun. As we walked, we talked about Gavin’s frustrations about getting tested for DU poisoning and about how (and if) there was some way I could help. We chatted about a recent trip home and his distress at the casual and disinterested way his more or less estranged family had treated him. We both seemed to attend more to the conversation than to our route, Gavin angry and frustrated, me cautiously quizzical.

We come to a large thoroughfare that has no traffic lights or pedestrian crossings. This was the usual route Gavin took to the VA and clearly he knew it well. He had crossed this road in this spot many times in the four months he had been living in D.C. We stop at the curb. There weren’t any cars coming but I wait for him to cross. Instead, we just stand there, waiting, for nothing. I step forward. He immediately holds me back, stopping me from moving. Then he looks both ways (still no traffic) and escorts me across.

Once we we’re on the other side, he jokes that people say he has a “mom arm”, demonstrating by stretching his arm out in front of me across my body, stopping me in my tracks. He says he’s so cautious with traffic that he hates anyone who drives. I ask him to elaborate: “So, just then, I’m going to cross the street and you’re gonna stop me. What does that bring up for you? What’s in your head?” “Well,” he explains, “it’s that you’re going to get hit unless I’m there to provide, you know, extra security.” Since Afghanistan he needs to think about things like that, like “extra security” to cross a city street. And not just streets, but crowds too—he looks at them differently than he did before. “So things look different than they did before

For more details on the international debate, see the UN Secretary General’s July 2008 report Effects of the Use of Armaments and Ammunitions Containing Depleted Uranium and its addendum (United Nations 2008, 2008b)
Afghanistan?” I ask. The answer is so obvious he is almost annoyed: “Of course, everything is different.”

He initially offered me an explanation of his actions which has been constructed by other people and that makes no reference to his experiences in the military or in Iraq or Afghanistan: people tell him he has a “mom arm”. But when I asked him to articulate his own experience in that moment, when he touches me to make me still as we stand together on the verge of movement, he invokes his military experience in the need to “provide extra security.” As he elaborates, it becomes clearer that it is not military training that has caused him to move this way, like an unconscious muscle memory, a body acting on its own. Rather, like Sophia, Gavin brings together seeing and being in his explanation of movement. I ask him about appearances; he answers with essence. “Everything is different.”

To him, crossing a road is no longer the relatively simple task that it is to most of us; it is a potentially fatal act requiring special tactical support. The road is not simply part of a city’s infrastructure, not just a pathway; it is a site of extreme danger that requires special expertise to navigate. This is not the same as the regular appreciation of the dangerousness of crossing a road inculcated in children by their mothers, as the “mom arm” diagnosis implies. There is no such cuteness for Gavin. His actions are not born out of cautionary tales; they born out of visceral experience. The road is dangerous. He is different. These are not separable facts. One does not precede or cause the other. Everything is different.

Later, sitting in the VA cafeteria, a worker changing the bag in the garbage can attached to our booth slams the lid. Gavin jumps in his seat, his eyes lose focus and then he stares sharply at the table with his head down, for a second his face displays an intense anger, both wild and concentrated. This whole experience is what would be called, in clinical terms, an exaggerated startle response. It takes a conscious and concerted effort for him to refocus and return to our
interaction, to reengage with a shared present. The implications of that sound, of the reverberations of that slight impact through his seat are, to him, potentially grave. Because of his experiences, because of what he has seen and felt and done, Gavin knows that the material world is a tentative place. Like Sophia, he knows that bodies in motion can explode, that bodily integrity is not sacred. Gavin’s experiences in Afghanistan have transformed his experience of space, altering the limits of what is possible in it. Given what Gavin knows and feels to be true, his response is not exaggerated at all.

Like Sophia, Gavin’s lived, felt, experience of the world around him has been transformed. Though Gavin more clearly attributes this to a change in the world rather than to his coming to understand its true nature, his and Sophia’s experiences are more similar than different. For both of them, a new experiential knowledge about the vulnerability of solid objects, like bodies, cars, and buildings, has transformed their experience seeing, feeling, and moving in the world. Common tropes used to describe the unsettling and disturbed experiences of returned veterans—“in his own head, he’s still in the jungle” or “she brought Iraq back with her”—might be seen as recognition of these kinds of transformations. But whereas these interpretations attempt to reinforce a model of distinct spaces—a certain geographical mapping of the possible—the materiality of soldiers’ experiences erodes that geography. Such comments also suggest an impenetrable boundary between the inside of a person and the outside of the world. But sensing bodies in motion belie these boundaries (Manning 2007). These spaces and their contents bleed into each other.

These “post-traumatic” movements are not the same as disciplinary effects (Foucault 1995), historical techniques of the self (Foucault 1988: 16-59), or professional ways of seeing

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172 On other altered modes of seeing space, see Mitchell 2001.
(Goodwin and Goodwin 1992). Such training is obviously important, but, both for those who are physically marked and those who aren’t, these different experiences of moving through space are explained as results of being in Iraq or Afghanistan. While there may have been an ontological before and after separated by basic training (which only a few soldiers ever mentioned to me) or mobilization training (which was also hardly mentioned), there is clearly a before and after oriented around being downrange. Following Manning we might characterize this shift as ontogenetic, rather than ontological (2007: xxi; 105): a shift in the ways and selves bodies become and the worlds they make. Movement makes this shift apparent, emphasizing its materiality, corporeality, its sensuousness (Stoller 1997)\textsuperscript{173}. But, following James, Sophia, and Gavin, we must also remain attentive to the sensibility of this ontogenesis, what it looks like and how it is seen, and remember that the form of being that emerges in movement is not only the self, but also the world it haunts.

6.4 The (Dis)Placement of PTSD

Most, though not all, of the soldiers in these stories have been diagnosed with PTSD. But I have avoided discursively marking them in this way or reinscribing their diagnosis in this text. Rather, I have attempted to describe soldiers’ variegated and tactile ontological transformations without dependence on the PTSD framework. The place I wish to give PTSD is a marginal one, within, but not central to, the experiences I have elaborated.

\textsuperscript{173} I would argue against Stoller’s distinction between the “higher” and “lower” senses, and his mapping of them on to Western academic epistemologies and north and west African practical epistemologies, respectively. I suggest—based on my own fieldwork and a reading of anthropological work that does attend to bodies in various ways—a distinction between higher and lower senses is one rooted not in locality, but in academic tradition.
Though soldiers engage with PTSD in a variety of clinical and intimate settings, if taken in isolation the diagnosis is of limited use in understanding the ramifying transformations that are at the heart of the particular vertiginous state of life within which these soldiers find themselves. By engaging with the hegemony and the troubled history of PTSD at this place in the text, I hope to make its limits clear and to demonstrate some of the implications of its continued hegemony.

Though connected to psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and even actuarial attempts to understand the nature of trauma and traumatic memory (Leys 2000; Young 1997, 1995), PTSD itself was created specifically to address the cluster of symptoms occurring in U.S. veterans returning from Vietnam which echoed the psychic suffering of soldiers of previous generations, especially the ‘shell shocked’ soldiers of WWI (Young 1997). The clinical diagnosis of PTSD was crafted for the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The DSM III was published in 1980 and represented a radical shift towards scientifically verifiable, universal, and standard diagnoses and away from the clinically derived and qualitatively differentiated observations that underpinned previous editions (Young 1997: 94-107; Gonçalves 2002; Beutler and Malik 2002; Kirk and Kutchins 1992). As Allan Young notes, this shift “gave primacy to scientific truth over clinical reality, to noncontingent and generalizable forms of knowledge over local knowledge” (1997: 106).

For PTSD, this shift has lead to a growing focus on biological markers and treatments and an entrenchment of PTSD’s status as a single, coherent, verifiable, and discrete disorder (Young 1997). Consequently, the most urgent aim of contemporary U.S. PTSD research is to help combat veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and this work focuses on brain imaging and the manipulation of brain chemistry (e.g. Georgopoulos et. al. 2010; Miller et al. 2001; Karl and Werner 2010; Koenigs and Grafman 2009; Mulvaney, McLean, and De Leeuw 2010; Yehuda and LeDoux 2007; NCIRE n.d.; Duke-UNC n.d.).
In part because of increased rates of diagnosis (Shevlin et al. 2009; Bray et. al. 2009) and the considerable public and private resources devoted PTSD research and publicity, PTSD has slowly colonized media accounts of soldiers’ experiences of post-combat transformation. The constancy of PTSD in contemporary news stories about the effects of war on returning soldiers makes it the key concept for rendering soldiers’ personal transformations wrought by “combat trauma.” The pervading sense that war changes those who fight it is thus rooted in an experience of transformation through trauma, and in the particular context of U.S. military engagement, PTSD is the most, perhaps even the only, legible form of trauma.

Through this PTSD framing, unruly and unsteady reconfigurations of life and world are increasingly read through a PTSD-based understanding of trauma and traumatic transformation. This understanding posits clear breaks between the past of the war zone and the present of home and relies on binary dichotomies between pathologically injured brains and symptomatic people and ‘normal’ people who act in the world as if they had never been to war.

But the ordinary experience of the ‘post-traumatic’ soldier—those so diagnosed, and those not—is not one easily captured by the symptomatology of PTSD in the DSM, the radically biologizing explanations of much current PTSD research, or the monster-out-of-place of many PTSD-tinged news stories of soldiers’ rocky homecomings. The state and character of being post-traumatic that I have described here exceeds the limits of each of these variations on the inescapable PTSD theme. It emerges through being in the world. It is the dangerous spaces

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174 See fn 156 above. Another particularly powerful and elaborated case can be found in the New York Time’s controversial series War Torn about OEF/OIF veterans who committed murders upon returning home. The stories linked the veterans’ crimes to the lingering effects of deployment. PTSD figured prominently in all five feature stories and was also a central focus of the heated criticisms—both in print and online—that followed (e.g. “The Killer-Vet Lie” New York Daily News January 17, 2008; “Stories That Speak for Themselves” New York Times January 27, 2008).

175 Trauma theory offers a related but different explanation of the workings of trauma. Yet, with its own diagnostic tendencies and emphasis on rupture, it is apart from the project of ontological description I pursue here (see, for example, Caruth 1996; for a critique, see Leys 2000: 266-297).
through which soldiers move; the markedness that their bodies acquire in normative public space; the world that they can see with their new vision, feel with their new senses, which is simultaneously perceived, sensed, made, and responded to. The axis along which soldiers identify their transformations in their ordinary lives is sensuous, tactile, material, and affective, rather than strictly behavioral or biomedical, and it may go beyond, or not register within, such a frame. Given the current parameters of psychiatric intervention, this discrepancy between PTSD and the experiences it names may not be surprising. But it is worth demonstrating, and perhaps insisting, that experience exceeds these parameters.

For example, one afternoon while playing cards, the sound of a siren ringtone caused James to start and become panicked and angry. A PTSD frame would point to the observed fact of his disorderliness. His behavior world be pathologized as exaggerated, abnormal, an evident symptom of the disorder. But thinking through the analytics of movement, considering James—emplaced and embodied with his own ordinary modes of tactility, optical unconsciousness, ontogenesis, sensuous apprehension, and the worlds that his being makes sensible—it is on James’ sense of this sound that I focus, on his experience of what happens in that moment and the worlds that collide and echo in that sound. At the time, his reaction led us to a conversation about what it sounded like in his quarters in Iraq; it was the computerized voice of a woman, not a wailing siren, which warned of incoming mortars. The big booms and pings and pops of various munitions became so normal, their effects to negligible, that these sounds stopped signaling danger. But the sounds of the shrapnel—a sound like gravel raining on a tin roof—that was scary. He described the scariest sound of all, the unbearably loud screaming of a tiny little mortar that made a hole in the ground no bigger than an orange. Sound, size, and danger don’t correlate anymore. Loud and scary and harmless is not better than quieter and negligible and potentially devastating. James’ reaction to the siren ring tone may be untenable; it is disturbing to
him and to those around him. But it is also sensible, born not out of a particular traumatic event but out of his tactile knowledge of the world.

Furthermore, I would cluster alongside this new way of hearing the variety of other sensuous transformations which a PTSD frame does not include. Because of his experiences, James no longer eats outside, but again this is not because of a particular traumatic event or association, not because eating outside triggers PTSD’s symptomatic states of arousal (though that is not to say it couldn’t). James doesn’t eat outside because he had to eat outside so much when he was in Iraq, and the experience of eating outside is no longer connected to the great American barbeque, or romantic Italian al fresco, or any other pleasurable archetype. For James, the experience of eating outside had been sensuously colonized by the taste of MREs, the feel of the blazing heat of the Iraqi sun, and the inescapable presence of desert bugs. Because of this, he told me, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich eaten indoors now tastes better than prime rib eaten outdoors. Anticipating my incredulity, he insisted that the sandwich actually tastes better, not that eating inside is metaphorically a sweeter or more delectable experience. This fact is part of his transformed self, a self that experiences a transformed world, a transformed world that is remade in the play of air on his tongue and skin and field of vision.

Within the PTSD frame, this aspect of James’ transformation would likely be separate from others, like the fact that the sound of a siren ring tone sends him into a state of panic and anger. The latter is behavior pathologized, the former sensibility is not.\textsuperscript{176} But the full array of transformations encompass his transformed body, his transformed experience of objectification in the eyes of various others, the many facets of his transformed experience of movement

\textsuperscript{176} It is entirely possible that James’ eating inside could be pathologized (even though he says it is not about avoiding a trigger), but even if it were, understanding this as “avoidance behavior” offers no way of figuring the transformed experience of taste which James is so insistent on.
through space, his knowledge about the violability of human life and human bodies, his recognition of the unimaginable as an imminent reality.

Some critiques of PTSD from within anthropology have focused on the question of its cross-cultural applicability, noting, for example that PTSD is based “on modern Western conceptions of the self as constituted through continuities of memory” (Breslau 2004: 116; see also Han 2004).177 Another stream of critique has otherwise sought to denaturalize and historicize PTSD, positioning it as a condition with a particular, traceable genealogy, and identifiable institutional effects (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; French 2004; Young 1997, 1995). In a slightly different vein, I suggest that to understand the experiences of transformation which PTSD was originally created to understand (i.e., those of U.S. soldiers returning from combat) we must fracture some of PTSD’s foundational binaries—past/present, inside/outside, perception/reality—and attend to experiences that run rather roughshod over its neat lines.

This is not to say PTSD is irrelevant to an account of soldiers’ experiences. Given the record numbers of soldiers diagnosed with PTSD and its prevalence in public narratives about returning soldiers, it is a seminal part of these experiences. Soldiers’ encounters with PTSD deserve attention in their own right (see Finley 2009), especially in light of recent anthropological explorations of the important effects of regimes of medical subjectivity (Fassin, Rechtman 2009; Petryna 2002; Povinelli 2006, see especially 46-93; Ticktin 2006). Such work has shown that diagnosis, illness, and injury are sites of complex articulations of belonging, not just exclusion, and can become necessary to transform oneself into a legible citizen worthy of rights and compensation. This is no less true for soldiers whose diagnoses of PTSD can be

177 Significantly, Norris et. al. (2001) use cross-cultural comparison to ‘test’ the universal validity of PTSD and determine that it is a “meaningful construct” beyond its American homeland.
stigmatizing but can also entitle them to increased benefits and can offer them and their families a framework for understanding and dealing with dramatic changes (Finley, Pugh and Jeffreys 2010; Marshall, Spitzer, and Liebowitz 1999). It does, however, raise the important question of what is to become of those experiences and those soldiers that are not diagnostically legible and become disarticulated from those that are.

PTSD treats ways of being in the world as symptoms, sequestering certain behaviors and assuming that their meaning can be understood apart from other, non-pathologized behaviors that are equally part of being post-traumatic, part of extra/ordinary afterwar living. It offers an explanation of being which is increasingly limited to certain visible surfaces of the brain.\textsuperscript{178} It effects a nominalization, transforming an ontogenetic self from ‘-ing’ to ‘thing’ (Taylor 2005: 745). Through the orthogonal arraignment of stories here, I suggest that PTSD can only be read as a segment of the polyhedral transformation that is underway. From the broader perspective of the analytics of movement, we can see this transformation marking all aspects of soldiers’ lives, infusing their ordinary sense of being in the world and linking, for example, the dimensions of corporeality, family, masculinity, sensuality, the material world, and one’s perception of it with a single, piercing thread.

6.5 Conclusion

In exploring the significance of Benjamin’s contribution for practices of academic thought and writing, Taussig is sharply critical of our disciplinary attention to the body in what he calls an allegorical mode. He writes:

\begin{quote}

178 The visibility of PTSD can be helpfully situated within analyses of the importance of visibility within Western medical epistemology. See Saunders 2008 and Dumit 2004.
\end{quote}
This is not merely to argue that such a mode of analysis is simple-minded in its search for “codes”. [...] Rather, as I now understand this practice of “reading,” its very understanding of meaning is uncongenial; its weakness lies in its assuming a contemplative individual when it should, instead, assume a distracted collective reading with what I call, by way of shorthand, a tactile eye. [Taussig 1991:152]

The experiences of transformation I have written about here are clearly about bodies, but never as simple or inert stuff nor simply as a metaphorical ground for more ‘weighty’ concerns. They are about the ways that meaning is made through bodies seeing and being seen, but they are about many other things too. And rather than ask the allegorical questions of what these bodies mean, I have attempted to convey something of this distracted and collective experience of the tactile eye, this strange new ordinary that emerges for soldiers after combat. I recall Sophia’s eyes darting back and forth for my eyes to follow, and also my own inability to see and know the space like her. I recall James’ hand rising almost automatically to meet the outstretched stranger’s. As I move and move with and am moved by James, Gavin, Sophia, and others, I recall the feelings in my body, the feelings they recounted and displayed with me, and my own affective responses. I recall being touched and stilled, being on the verge of movement, moving together, the feelings of anticipation and action in the pit of a stomach, the racing of a heart and pounding of a chest, the burning of a muscle, the tightness of panicked attention felt somewhere behind the ears. These things are literal and meaningful and, though I bring to their distractedness my own concentration, allegory does not get us very far.

Pointing to this dissembling effect of allegory recalls the history of PTSD. Allan Young (1995) reminds us that trauma, a term originally reserved for physical wounds, was extended to

179 For critiques of such metaphorical thinking on the prostheticized and/or disabled body, see Jain 1999; Clare 2001; Smith and Morra 2006; and Sobchack 2006.
psychological and emotional states not by analogy (“my psyche has been wounded as if it were my body”) but by bio-scientific investigations into (and reifications of) the connections between bodily and cognitive or emotive responses to physically traumatic events. As I have noted, this biological lineage is alive and well in current psychological understandings of PTSD. While PTSD can be an important signifier for soldiers and veterans, sometimes precisely because of its medicalization (Finley 2008), the popularity of the diagnosis and its annexation by ideas of transformation which are exclusively corporeal is problematic. What this calls for is not a reinstatement of analogy (trauma as an “as if”) but a thoroughgoing phenomenology which refuses easy distinctions between the social, biological, affective, ethical, cultural, and historical.

Such a phenomenology is analytically necessary here, as the description I wish to give of post-combat ordinariness doesn’t decompose along those lines. It is analytically necessary because it is ethnographically and existentially accurate; for the people I describe, changes in the ways their bodies move through and experience space are not separate from changes in their experience of the material social and political worlds they encounter, nor are they separable from aspects of themselves normally cast as interior, relational, or biological.

The analytics of movement is an attempt to attend to the complex integrity of experience, one which is made apparent most when it is threatened by new awarenesses of the fragility of life and its epistemological and ontological foundations.

As a point of ethnographic intervention, this analytics of movement opens to us the intimate corporeality of the ordinary, the radical intersubjectivity of interaction, and the affects of disciplined bodies moving through disciplined social space. What’s more, as the im/possibilities of linguistically communicating pain and suffering have long been of concern to those writing about experiences of violence (Daniel 1996; Das 1997; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Scarry 1987), movement offers a point of entry into the way such experiences perdure that
need not begin with the impossibility of discourse. In the context of experiences of violence, an analytics of movement offers a way to plumb experiences of transformation without subjecting the corporeal to the symbolic and which, in the gesture of empathy fundamental to anthropology, leaves these subjective experiences more rather than less intact.

My aim in bringing together stories which might seem to be of very different sorts is to show their continuity and place them all under the rubric of ontological transformations wrought by the multiple violences of military action and current American modes of war making. Perhaps it is because I am not a clinician or bureaucrat that I have the luxury of refusing the tightly diagnostic categories which give rise to discreet and cannibalizing phenomena such as PTSD. But given the ways that such clinical practices ramify, fragmenting experiences, carving limbs and lobes from whole and wholly enfleshed people, I wonder if this mode of analysis ought to be such a luxury. As Butler reminds us in laying out the foundations of a non-violent critique of war based on recognition and the possibilities of grief, frames of recognition and modes of apprehension matter, such things are “politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power,” and they delimit “the ‘being’ of life itself” (2009: 1). As Veena Das notes of the importance of anthropological modes of addressing trauma in another context, “there is also the matter of too much being at stake in speaking carelessly or without tact on these matters” (2007: 210).
7 The Exfoliation of Life

7.1 Introduction: Encountering Intimate Life

In this final multi-part chapter, I explore the reconfiguration of life that soldiers confront in various spaces of intimate sociality, continuing to displace the iconic figure of the soldier with the felt practicalities of ordinary life at Walter Reed. While time there often seems stuck in a never-ending present, a familiar present comforting in its habituated intractability, the future always looms. Even as they seem stuck in the present, practices of rehabilitation are intrinsically oriented toward a radically different ordinary future: the mythic ordinary of unmarked civilian life.

This mythic ordinary is strongly rooted in normative configurations of family. At Walter Reed, the pull of this social form was sometimes explicit and sometimes more subtle: the MATC included a family room with a small kitchen, table, and chairs where soldiers and their families could practice cooking and eating together as part of their occupational therapy; the rules of the NMA program reinforced normative family configurations and foregrounded them as the primary social mode, displacing the intense and thick homosociality of active duty military life; the nickname ‘Walter Breed’ played not only on the heteronormative sexuality that pervaded the place, but on the future possibility of a normative nuclear family. In these and many other ways, the extra/ordinary present at Walter Reed was oriented toward a normative future woven largely out of the ties of normative intimate attachments.

By ‘intimacy’ I invoke a kind of closeness between (paradigmatically) two individually constituted selves based on the openness they have to each other, that openness that is the seat, as Butler notes (Butler 2004: 27-32), of both desire and violence. It is the essence of vulnerability. Intimacy in this sense is about self-founding social relations and, as Povinelli and others have
shown, in modern liberal democracies, a well founded self is understood to be one configured within the normative intimate social formation Povinelli identifies as the “conjugal couple” (Povinelli 2006: see especially 188-190). And so, in this context, intimacy is very much about bodies, the kinds of contact their flesh can have (and normatively should have) and the volition with which such contact can be affected or avoided.  

My exploration of intimate life in this chapter is thus addressed to carnal social attachments, the implications of such attachments for an ‘ordinary’ future, and the ways in which dependence, independence, and solitude—conditioned by the manifold precariousness of life at Walter Reed—complicate expectations about the thickness or thinness of social skin (forged through such attachments) required by ‘ordinary’ life itself.

My understanding that questions of intimacy are also questions of life itself is informed by the fundamental ontological significance of vulnerability and attachment which Butler articulates (Butler 2004: 26-29) and also by Povinelli’s notion of enfleshment—that “physical mattering forth” (Povinelli 2006: 7) of discursive, juridical, and political ways of knowing a social world and its subjects—and the forms of sociality through which the quality of enfleshed people and their lives is understood to be normal, problematic, or pathological. The social skin is the messy interface between the ‘purely’ corporeal and the ‘purely’ discursive: it is carnal in

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180 As Lauren Berlant has keenly noted, intimacy is not the same thing as privacy, and in contemporary America intimacy has become quite public (Berlant 1997). But even in its most public guises, intimacy—a slippery word whose flavor shifts as it moves across discursive contexts—is grounded in things that are grounded in the body, like sex, gender, love, kinship, proximity, domesticity and willful and desirous bodily acts or violations. And even in elaborations of intimacy that look to discourse, law, or institutional logics, embodied life (though sometimes primarily its recognition and regulation rather than its more visceral qualities) remains fundamental and central to ideas of intimacy: intimacy is addressed to and/or felt in the body (e.g. Berlant 2000).

181 For example, in considering grief—an experience impossible without this vulnerability—she writes “Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (2004: 28, emphasis added).
Povinelli’s particular sense of the term (2006: 7). The concept of the social skin offers a mode of thinking simultaneously about the condition of a body, the logics and material practices through which a body and person are (seen to be) made whole or otherwise conditioned, and the social worlds of which those logics and practices and bodies are a part and through which they may be seen or felt to be sufficient or deficient. As I note in Chapter 3, the social skin is *thickened* when sufficiency and wholeness depend on multiple, dense, and broad social affiliations. When sufficiency and wholeness depend only on few attachments to other individuals, the social skin is *thinned*. 

Povinelli describes as *genealogical* the socio-cultural configurations in which there is a normative expectation of thick social skin. Those in which the expectation and need is only for thin social skin, she describes as *autological*. This distinction between autological and genealogical is addressed to the physical, social, and political reproduction of, and care for, bodies and the imbrication of carnality and sociality. But while autology is addressed to individual freedom and genealogy addressed to social constraint (2006:3), both are rooted in liberal humanist notions of self sovereignty (2006:5). In so being, they index two different regimes within which social attachments and dependencies are read as supporting or constraining that sovereignty. In both, intimate attachments are seen as necessary for both social and biological life: if the social skin is too thin the body and its (social and juridical) life may cease to be.

I make use of these concepts here to explore the kinds of social configurations out of which ordinary life is made at Walter Reed, but also the ways that various normative configurations of social attachments—configurations which are sometimes not available or desirable at Walter Reed—are imagined as the things that make future ordinaries possible.
These future ordinaries and their necessary attachments, dependencies, and independences, were anchored into a present life at Walter Reed that was sometimes dangerously, sometimes necessarily, thin and disordered. Ordinariness at Walter Reed was comprised of shards of shattered lives, bodies, and the bits of matter that surrounded, supported, and threatened them. Such shards were there for the reassembling, amongst them was distributed the hope for an ‘ordinary’ future, yet, as Jake once said “you have to wait around before you can even begin picking up the pieces.”

7.2 Understanding Attachments: Masculinity, Solitude, and The Possibilities of Future Life

In her exploration of love and various practices, ideologies, histories, and presents that are said to entail love in white settler societies, Povinelli insists that

love is not merely an interpersonal event, nor is it merely the site at which politics has its effects. Love is a political event. It expands humanity, creating the human by exfoliating its social skin and this expansion is critical to the liberal Enlightenment project, including the languages of many of its most progressive legacies. [Povinelli 2006:177]

Within this particular political notion of (‘true’) love, people are constituted as such. They are made as thinly skinned social people, as autological, through this love that seems to put them squarely in a deep and durable relation with one other, rather than collective others of their kin, race, religion (Povinelli 2006: 177), or, we might add, the thick homosociality of military fraternity. What is sloughed away is the collective, adscititious, and superficial fleshiness, leaving the ‘purely human’ core; the subject of those highest Enlightenment ideals of individual
freedom, the one to whom belongs that array of inalienable individual human rights.\(^{182}\) The “intimate event” of love is thus a seat of full liberal humanity, at the same time as it represents, in its primacy of the private, a threat to the social, and even to sovereignty (Povinelli: 2006).

It is important to remember that both genealogical and autological modes of life are enabled only through intimate affiliations, though the origins and dynamics of those affiliations are different. In other spaces of military life, soldiers are thickly, genealogically constituted through their intimate attachments to (particular involuntary groupings of) other soldiers and yet also thinly and autologically constituted through the intimate familial attachments that abide tensely in the midst of Army life (MacLeish 2010). Walter Reed’s in-durable sociality makes the usual thickness of military life recede into the past, and while injured soldiers and their families imagined a firmly autological future, secured within the embrace of the conjugal couple, the extra/ordinary present at Walter Reed was often inhospitable to the intimate requirements of autological selfhood.

The autological subject is self-made, but it is not a solitary self and is inextricable from the “two-by-two of the Biblical flood, a sanctification of a conjugal couplet, rather than, say, a group” (Povinelli 2006: 181). In liberal ordinaries, solitude is an untenable state. Conditions understood to entirely strip away the social, Agamben’s “bare life” (Agamben 1998) and Biehl’s state of “ex-humanity” leading to social (and often physical) death through utter abandonment (Biehl 2005), are also said to be marked by radical solitude. In all of these ways, practices of

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\(^{182}\) The power of her analysis of white settler societies (broadly defined) comes in part from the essential individualism said to be a quality of the human in these contexts. But it is also interesting to note that in at least one such society (Canada) there is a strong current of rights that reside in collectivities existing alongside rights that reside in individuated humans.
living often seem oriented toward social connection, and practices of dying seem oriented toward solitary bodies.\textsuperscript{183}

But recent scholarship on various communities constituted in part through physical pain and suffering has shown that regimes of personhood and modes of bodily being must be understood together (Biehl 2005; Petryna 2006; Povinelli 2006). Central to such work is an attention to the simultaneously biological, social, political, and symbolic spaces of life that emerge through practices of negotiating the possibilities of precarious life and death in community. Building on the emphasis on modes of sociality and the attention to flesh that characterizes this work, I use the lenses of solitude and of a sexual, heteronormative, masculinity to explore the possibilities at Walter Reed of future life in a way which blurs the lines and vectors of causation between biological life and social life. As soldiers negotiate new configurations of family and fraternity occasioned by new bodily configurations, solitude sometimes comes to be a limit of life (both \textit{bios} and \textit{zôē}), as being alone risks pushing Walter Reed’s extra/ordinary intimacies with physical and social death over the edge. Yet solitude is an undeniable feature of life at Walter Reed, and not only did \textit{concerns about} solitude sometimes help bolster social life, but sometimes solitude itself had a life preserving effect. And, though they are not the same as solitude, related notions of self-sufficiency and independence long central to ideas of rehabilitation in the context of the U.S. military (Linker 2011) complicate the apparent danger of solitude and the normative autological condition of needing an other. Yet these particular notions of self-sufficiency are themselves inextricable, in the context of male war amputees in America, from demonstrations of a particularly military masculinity rooted in ideals

\textsuperscript{183} In addition the threat of solitude in this array of liberal humanist social worlds, non-enlightenment-rooted religious practices which involve intense solitude and circumvent human sociality by focusing on gross physical and transcendent divine being are also seen within their own social worlds to have a potentially dangerous intimacy with death (e.g. Klima 2002; Parry 1982).
of productive able-bodiedness and a heterosexuality that is unflappable even in the face of enduring queer motifs (Linker 2011; Serlin 2006, 2002).

At Walter Reed, local normative masculinity, with its connotations of physical, sexual, and social potency that are so palpable in a military context, becomes a primary site in which social life can be reimagined and projected into the future, linking the divergent ordinaries of pre-military life, deployment, the precarious present, and an aspirational future public anonymity. Part of making this reimagined social life plausible is also recalibrating the degrees of dependence—both being dependant on and being depended on—that allow soldiers to imagine being with (rather than the death or non-being of solitude) in the future.

As Povinelli has noted, practices of love and intimacy constitute “an intensification of enduring social relations of kinship […] and ritual, themselves anchoring and anchored by institutions of everyday life; a means of building collectively oriented and materially anchored socialities; and a manner of securing the self-evident social roles of men and women” (Povinelli 2006:179). Masculinity, the practices of affiliation it enables, the autological ideals it entails, and their sometimes antagonistic pulls, are central to the recalibration of social attachments and the rehabilitation of viable, non-solitary selves at Walter Reed.

This central activity of rehabilitation, broadly understood, this act of finding one’s footing in a newly configured body and social space, was part of the “something” that was happening (Stewart 2007: 5) at Walter Reed. But while physical stability was an articulated goal of physical rehabilitation, a state which marked the beginning of the MedBoard and exit from the military, social or existential stability was more a cardinal direction than an end goal. While still at Walter Reed, it was impossible for soldiers to have the life toward which were drawn, but

184 That they would ever be able to have those lives was not at all clear.
many of them did their best to approximate it, exploring the possibilities of futures without the
fraternal attachments of active duty military life. Imagining and making possible their future
families, maintaining ties that might allow them to be family men, was part of this process.

7.3 Threats to Life Part I: Solitude is Deadly

As MacLeish points out in the context of the U.S. Army’s Ft. Hood, while tainted meanings of
military communities—of promiscuity, violence, abuse—filter through and are reified by their
very members (MacLeish 2010: 183-184), out of the banalities of living and the “vicissitudes of
love” (MacLeish 2010: 171) accrues a fraught intimacy that sustains social life in the face of ever
looming threats of death. To the threats of war borne death that are notably present at Ft. Hood,
Walter Reed adds certain hazardous experiences of solitude.

During deployment, death is waiting on the other end of the phone as many wives attest
(see Macleish 2010), and at Walter Reed the nearness of death takes many forms, from the
unstable bodies and looming infections that keep soldiers’ futures unknowable, to the usually
quiet knowledge that these men are intimately familiar with both killing and dying. And in the
impossibly clear light and anemic tones of life after the haze and saturated experiences of war,
living with those experiences threatens to seal a soldier in on himself in a way that echoes the
profound doubt and the limits of communication and recognition that characterize the expression
of pain (Scarry 1995; Daniel 1996).

Again and again the guys I worked with would say how stupid it was to talk to
psychiatrists at Walter Reed who, they said, couldn’t understand anything because they hadn’t
been there. Though soldiers didn’t sit around swapping war stories, the knowledge of mutual
understanding was always in the air and, even amid the drama and enmity of living in close
quarters, it was important to them to be around others who understood their condition through a hard won empathy. The weight of not only their past, but their present, and remote future seemed incommunicable, but also seemed more than what could be born alone. In the privacy of sleep, it would wreak havoc, causing nightmares so bad that if soldiers couldn’t take their sleep meds for one reason or another, they would rather stay up all night. Because of concerns about suicide and the mixing of meds and alcohol, soldiers at Mologne House and Fisher House were not supposed to spend the night alone if their NMA went on leave, and spending too much time alone was understood to be a sign that someone might be at risk of hurting themselves or someone else. In these ways, aloneness was thought to be potentially deadly; a threat to biological life.

7.3.1 Alec Alone, Awake and Asleep

Alec had been an Army medic when he was blown up outside Fallujah in 2007, about six months before I met him. His legs had been shattered, and his back, arm, and jaw broken. The pace of his recovery was unsteady, hampered by the persistent bone infection in one of his legs at the site where his ExFix penetrated his shin.

He seemed to get better, well enough to take leave and head home to the Midwest, but the infection flared up while he was away and put him in the hospital there. Though he was nearly ten years older than most of them, he sometimes got advice from the other guys at Fisher House about the pros and cons of amputation. Sitting in the den, just off the kitchen, on bar stools or in their wheelchairs, they explored the pragmatic facts of their injuries. Was it better to have two more or less useless legs, or no legs and a pair of prosthetics? They took into consideration the different kinds of physical pain each option represented. They considered the different kinds of toll that each form of mobility would take on their bodies over time.
Most of the time, Alec’s younger brother Steve, a trained chef who worked as a roofer, stayed with him. But Steve had to get back to work and his own life from time to time and so their father, kind and quiet, would fill in when he could. Though it was against the rules, there were often days and nights when neither Steve nor their father, who also worked as a roofer and had medical problems of his own dating back to an accident on the job, could be there. So then, Alec would fend for himself, eating a lot of cereal and forgetting to get to the pharmacy in time to refill his prescriptions. For his bone infection, he took IV antibiotics—those little yellow balls that reminded me of rounded pineapple grenades—that he hooked up to his PICC line and that were so strong that he said when they’d had to inject them without the PICC line at the hospital in the Midwest, the nurses had to use a different vein every time because the drugs just ate them up. The fanny pack that he carried with him was full of innumerable other prescriptions, hard for anyone to keep track of really, and, like most guys, he took sleeping pills every night.

He told me once about a dream he had. He’d called it a dream, but it wasn’t quite; it was the first thing he remembers after being taken out of Iraq. He’d woken up in the hospital. It was nighttime and it was dark. He saw his legs suspended in the air in front of him. He quickly realized what had happened: He’d been captured by Iraqis and they were going to cut him up and sell off his body parts. He panicked. His only thought was of escape. He scanned the room, trying to think of a way out, trying to make a plan. Just as he started moving, struggling against the traction with his broken back, just as he was about to rise up out of bed and make a break for freedom, a nurse came in and managed to explain to him where he was. She saved his life, he said. He was sure that if he had managed to get out of bed he would have crashed to the floor and died.

It was during one of the in between NMA times, his solitary cereal days, when I came into the Fisher House around 9:00 am and Erin told me that they’d had to call for an ambulance
just an hour before, when they’d found Alec nearly unconscious in his bed. She had been in the kitchen making breakfast, a few other Fisher House family members were there too, when she realized that his alarm was still going off. She went over to his room and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. She knocked harder, and then banged even harder until she realized somehow they were going to have to go inside. Most people know how to break in to a Fisher House room with a credit card or, if it’s on the first floor, go in through the window. But instead, Erin went to get the manager to come with her key, even though people avoided her as much as possible and even though she was the last person anyone wanted involved in anything other than business as usual. Erin told me she had been afraid to go in alone. She’d expected that Alec was dead. The others who had been around thought the same thing. It was the first thing that occurred to me too, as Erin described the beeping alarm clock that had been the only response from behind Alec’s door. The manager went in and tried to wake him, but he wouldn’t wake up and wouldn’t move. Finally he opened his eyes a bit, but couldn’t keep them open. They called for an ambulance.

Throughout the morning, we tried to piece together what had happened. There’d been dirty laundry and general mess strewn about the floor of his room. He was without an NMA. Some said maybe he’d seemed withdrawn recently, maybe spending too much time in his room. A consensus emerged: it had been a suicide attempt. A press release about the Army’s 2010 suicide prevention report (Chiarelli 2010) parsed the "typical" suicide this way: “Army suicide victim is a 23-year-old, Caucasian, junior-enlisted male. Most suicides are committed using firearms and often involve drugs or alcohol. Perhaps surprisingly, the risk decreases for soldiers who are married or have one or more deployments. That might be because soldiers who chose to remain in service following combat deployments are more resilient to stress.” (http://www.govexec.com/story_page.cfm?articleid=45792&oref=todaysnews, Accessed July 29, 2010) But Alec was back at the Fisher House before lunch. If anyone else had thought it was a suicide attempt, he’d still be in the hospital, possibly on the locked psych ward and probably for a few days at least. When I asked him what
happened, if he was okay, Alec told me, in his gregarious and exaggerated way, that it was no big deal. He said he’d just taken his sleep meds too late at night, that it was nothing but a schedule snafu. He smiled and rolled his eyes as he told me, a caricatured dismissal of my concern. Alec often mixed sarcasm with sincerity; his quick wit was sometimes dead pan, sometimes over the top. It left me unable to say what had happened, unable to know whether I should read his dismissal of my concern at face value or as a wink. But he didn’t want to talk any more about it and it seemed like it might be hazardous to pry.

The impossible truth of Alec’s overdose aside, both that event, and his waking dream testify to the dangers of solitude at Walter Reed. In the gossipy hours before he returned from the hospital, it was largely out of solitude that we fashioned the suicide theory: It seemed to some, in retrospect, that he had been too much by himself. It was in no small part because he’d spent the night alone that Erin imagined him dead in his bed, so far gone from the blaring alarm.

In the nearness of death that characterizes extra/ordinary life at Walter Reed, it can be aloneness that brings death closest. Though it is a heightened example, Alec’s dream speaks to the dangerous aloneness of nighttime and the interior solitude of dreaming. Alec’s dream was one in which his life was gruesomely threatened, his knowledge of the previously unimaginable horrors of war lending themselves to a new, and, to him, entirely plausible, scenario of organ theft. And because he is alone in his hospital bed, the movements he makes threaten to end his life given the fragile state of his body. Amid this combination of the nearness of death and the precariousness of biological life, Alec requires company for survival. It is too hard to weave the frayed edges of sustainable life back together on one’s own. People do it, of course, even those single soldiers who avoid such injuries requiring long rehabilitation in the presence of others. As suicide rates among active duty soldiers and young veterans climb higher than ever before (in the Marines and Army the rates are respectively more than double and just under double the civilian
population rates$^{186}$ it seems that life can be unsustainable, but also that seemingly unsustainable life remains for many.

### 7.3.2 Daniel’s Solitude and The Im-possibilities of Kill or Be Killed

Daniel was not often around. When he was, he sometimes smiled in a shy and polite way and always said little. Other times when Sam managed to get him parked on the couch in the den, he sat silently, maybe scowling a little, maybe just sitting. Sometimes he smiled at their son, Little J, who, even though he wasn’t yet a year old, looked just like Daniel with that same charming smile. Daniel’s leg had been badly damaged in an IED blast, and soon after he arrived at Fisher House, it became clear that it wasn’t going to get any better. He used crutches to get around, and, despite the diagnosis from his doctors and the gentle counsel of Sam, his wife, and of other soldiers in the house, he didn’t want his leg amputated. Instead he followed the advice of his parents: to pray and trust that the Lord would heal him. This I know because Sam told me.

When Daniel wasn’t in his room, it was clear that he didn’t really want to talk to me, or to anyone else for that matter. Even in the company of others, he often managed to be alone.

At one point at the Fisher House we tried to get into the habit of making communal dinners, recipes from the kitchens of a few house soldiers’ moms. We did Filipino one night, Mexican another. Daniel never wanted to join us, and no friendly invitation or wafting smells of empanadas could coax him out of his room. Even though it was against the rules, Sam often shuttled food to him, shuffling down the hall with a plate of chicken nuggets or a grilled cheese sandwich with mayonnaise, the way she’d taught herself to make it.

Daniel’s preference for solitude was cause for concern. Other guys in the house tried to get him to hang out in the parking lot and work on their cars, something he loved to do before he was hurt. But even this passion of his couldn’t pull him into shared space. The day they managed to convince him to go to the mall and buy a GPS it was big news, and when he got back we tried not to make a big deal about it, afraid we’d scare him off.

No one needed to explain the concern to anyone else. We knew why Sam and her sister Vanessa wouldn’t leave Little J alone with him, and why people kept trying to engage him. If something happened to Little J, we all imagined Daniel would let it. He might let him fall, let him choke, let him die.

In the way that it entailed deeply altered and unfamiliar socialities, such solitude was also read as a sign of unpredictability. No matter how he tried, Daniel couldn’t sever the ties that linked him to those around him, especially his wife, son, and sister-in-law. But his attempts to shake them off made those ties, the very ones sustaining his social and biological life, seem hazardous. They became the sites of mutual vulnerability (Butler 2004: 27-32), and as he attempted to gouge out the anchors that held them fast, the diffuse concern about unpredictable, perhaps even violent, social contact proved well founded.

Garry Trudeau, Doonesbury cartoonist, comes by one night to sign copies of his books The Sandbox: Dispatches from Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and The Long Road Home: One Step at a Time, some of which I dug out from the storeroom. He’s donated the proceeds from both books to the Fisher House Foundation. He sets up at one of the big round wooden tables in the dining room and some of us putter around eating Chinese food off of paper plates and chatting.

Some VIPs have come along. There’s a General who coins a couple of guys, palming his personal coins and stealthily sliding them into their hands as he firmly grips and shakes them. It seems like there are two nights happening simultaneously: In the dining room is a low-key
performance of patriotism and gratitude. In the rest of the house, the ordinary reconstitution of precarious lives goes on.

Vanessa is telling me that the night before they had left Little J alone in the room with Daniel while she was hanging out in the den. Little J was asleep, and Daniel said he was up for it. He’d seemed a little better lately. It seemed okay. She’d gone in to check on them. As soon as she’d opened the door, Daniel jerked back, pulling a pillow away from Little J’s head. Vanessa screamed at him, demanding to know what he was doing. He said he was just trying to make Little J more comfortable. Vanessa said that was bullshit: He was trying to kill him. To smother him with a pillow. It was obvious. Vanessa was sure that if she hadn’t gone to check on them, Little J would be dead. She’d taken Little J out of the room. She’d told Sam. She was furious. She didn’t know what else to do. The consequences of reporting it to an MP\textsuperscript{187} or his CO\textsuperscript{188} would probably make things worse, rather than better. But they wouldn’t leave Little J alone with Daniel any more. As I listened to Vanessa, back in the dining room that other night continued smoothly. Trudeau signed books and talked to soldiers and families. The General and his aides hovered. People enjoyed the sesame green beans.

Then there was a ruckus outside, some shouting, but nothing that disrupted the casual special occasion in the dining room, with its almost homey, almost cozy feeling. It seemed to be coming from the parking lot. It was followed by a silence. The assistant manger (who was well liked and very friendly with most all the Fisher House residents) went out the side door to check. He didn’t come back right away, but I hesitated following him, not wanting to rubberneck. A few minutes later when my concern overrode my modesty, I found him standing next to Sam who was leaning on their rented car, her eyes red and still dripping with tears.

\textsuperscript{187} Military Police officer
\textsuperscript{188} Commanding Officer
Daniel had tried to leave, to get into the rental car and take off. Sam had tried to stop him. In his condition, with his useless leg, his medications, and in his wild state, it was hard to imagine how he could survive any length of time behind the wheel. But she’d kept that to herself. Instead she’d reminded Daniel that soldiers aren’t allowed to drive the cars rented for their families by The Yellow Ribbon Fund. He’d insisted he needed to leave. She didn’t back down, insisting that he not drive himself anywhere. And that’s when he lifted up one of the crutches he’d already tried to put in the trunk and, with all his might, swung it at her hitting her square on the side of the head. Then, leaving one crutch on the ground and one sticking out of the trunk, he’d taken off limping painfully into the contained darkness of Walter Reed.

The side of Sam’s face was red. She said her ear hurt and pulled back her hair for me to take a look. It had taken the brunt of the blow and was already severely swollen. She said she couldn’t hear too well. She was hurt and angry and worried about Daniel. But she was also calm, letting the events unfold, not fighting them, not shocked at them. We knew Daniel wouldn’t get far. She could have her ear looked at in the hospital. Vanessa was there to take care of Little J. It was almost as if things weren’t so different than they had been before. I went inside and helped clean up the Chinese food leftovers from the book signing that was winding down undisturbed.

During the night, they found Daniel. He hadn’t even made it to the front gate. They put him on the locked psych ward for three days. When we’d past the ward on the hospital tour, our tour guide, Col. Collins, had said “war is trauma. Some of the people [i.e. the mental health workers] taking care of them wouldn’t have performed as well.” On the second day, Sam reluctantly went to visit Daniel, but only because she needed the car keys which he said he’d only give to her. Now that he was locked away, in an enforced solitude of someone else’s design, he used the little leverage he had left to pull her to him. He tells her it’s horrible in there. That he
doesn’t belong in there. He also tells her that he doesn’t have the keys. That he threw them into
the grass that night. He doesn’t seem entirely sure why.

Daniel is made to talk to a psychiatrist, and Sam goes with him a couple of times. Later
she explains to me what his desperate need for solitude was about. He told her that the whole
time he’d been at Walter Reed, ever since he’d left Iraq, he’d look into anyone’s face and know
they were trying to kill him. This was why he stayed in their room. This was why he never went
to the mall. This was why he’d tried to smother Little J. Every face was deadly. In a disturbing
twist on Levinasian ethics, where the face of the other is an injunction against murderous
violence (Levinas 1985: 87), for Daniel, the face to face encounter was a moment of kill or be
killed. Every face was a face of death.

That night, he’d tried to take off in a desperate attempt to save himself. But also to save
those faces he couldn’t help but see; those most intimate to him. Solitude had seemed like the
only possible continuation of life, the only way to avoid death. But faced with the decayed
sociality of the psych ward—these dangerously thin lives that seemed to have come unmoored
from even the battered anchors he still, despite his best efforts, had—he did his best to be with
others, getting Sam to come to him. He did his best to feel the tug of intimate dependency as one
of desire rather than niggling vulnerability (Povinelli 2006:3; Butler 2009: 19-32). He wasn’t
particularly good at this, but after he got out of the psych ward, things were a bit better. Though
eventually he stopped going to the psychiatrists, complaining that all they wanted to talk about
was Iraq, he kept taking his new meds. His need for solitude was less overwhelming, his still thin
sociality less deadly. Though he still rarely spent time with other soldiers, it wasn’t because their
faces were a threat to his life. It was now, at least in part, because he felt guilty that he wasn’t as
badly injured as some of them were and was worried that they’d think he didn’t have a right to
be there; in place of a need to sever the affiliations he had and thin his social skin further, there
was a fear that the affiliations available to him might be untenable, his social skin somehow disintegrated or beyond thickening.

This story of Daniel, the way that death mediated his relationship to his wife and baby son, and the way that solitude was both a sign of potential death, but also an unsustainable refuge from it, is exceptional. It describes a rare instance in which the various nearnesses of death confront a soldier with a choice between the social death of radical solitude and the biological death of intimacy and attachment, making both genealogical and autological modes of life all but unthinkable. But as an exceptional case it speaks to, and even demonstrates, habits and tacit understandings of social regularities. In this way, it is extra/ordinary. Though people at Walter Reed hardly ever do what he did, Daniel’s solitude was readily legible to those around him as a sign of deadly danger. His explanation that everyone around him—even his baby boy—was trying to kill him was instantly comprehensible, even to Sam, and no one I spoke with ever called it into question. Daniel tried to retreat into solitude because otherwise, he would kill or be killed. Solitude was also the only sanctuary from death. Though (despite the over abundance of media coverage) it is exceedingly rare that such potential death should become actual, families at Walter Reed live with such possibilities as extra/ordinary facts of life.

In the face of Daniel’s life threatening solitude, Sam did what she could to help him stay alive, tending to the strained ties that bound him to her, bringing him food, pulling him gently so that even when he refused, he might still feel the line linking him to social life, that life line holding him back from the social death he sought in isolation.

Though she often left him alone, she did not abandon him altogether to the structures of the military and its various zones of isolation (cf. Biehl 2005), both locked and unlocked. Her continued presence, her refusal to grant him the social death he first wanted and then, on the psych ward, feared, might be thought of as a wifely prerogative; an example of good old
American stand-by-your-man, or as the distorted response of a battered woman. But neither of those frames allows for the complexity, sometimes contradictoriness, of Sam’s mode of living and her connection to Daniel. Nor are such frames up to the task of conveying Daniel’s own desiccated social skin and profound vulnerability. Both before and after that night, Sam left Daniel alone, sometimes in acquiescence to his wishes, sometimes in ignorance of them, sometimes despite them, sometimes out of love, sometimes out of anger, sometimes simply because she had something else, something better or something more necessary, to do. Sometimes she dragged him out, for all the same reasons. She was always both attached to him and self-possessed and it always seemed to me that she was much more the latter.

Months later, Sam told me about how she had forbidden Daniel from trading his rifle (which he’d had before his service) for his cousin’s two pistols when he was on leave in Alabama. She’d said “what if late at night I’m coming out of the bathroom and you wake up and you think you’re in Iraq. Or what if you loose it with Little J? You could shoot us, and then we’ll be in the paper just like everybody else”. She said it like a matter of fact, because that’s what it was, something so seemingly ordinary that it’s happened to “everybody else.” Managing this deadliness was a part of life and continued to be, even after the depths of Daniel’s solitude receded a bit. And, as we hear all too often, attachments can be deadly too.

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189 Given the overabundance of media coverage of soldier violence, it is important to say that, while it seems like this ‘happens to everyone else’, it doesn’t. There are serious problems of domestic violence in military communities, but such problems go in many directions and need to be understood in context. When they are not, it is too easy to caricature soldiers and veterans as abusive monsters whose morality has been trained out of them.
7.4 Threats to Life Part II: Intimacy Through Thick and Thin

Even when the threats to biological life seem more remote, solitude can still be figured as a threat to social life, to the possibilities of the affiliations that thicken and shape the social skin. In its most extreme forms, aloneness can lead to what Biehl (2005) calls social death; an absence of the most basic recognition and sociality that is essential to humanness. But, as Biehl himself indirectly demonstrates through documenting the experiences of unrequited sociality of those left to wait for death in the infirmary at Vita in Brazil, there is intimacy and affiliation even in the midst of such oblivion. For example, Catarina and others abandoned to Vita feel themselves to be having intimate (and sexual) relationships with others there (Biehl 2005: 76; 99-101; 114; 354-55). Though these claims are contested, it seems that the experience of such intimacy suggests there remains a social life within the social death of abandonment.\(^\text{190}\) The thread of sexuality that runs through such precarious attachments at Vita can be easy to overlook, in part because of the untamed and difficult to decipher forms of public sexual exposure—from nudity (2005:250-251), to masturbation (2005: 80), to sexual abuse (2005: 116-118)—that destabilize the normative relationship between sex, intimacy, willfulness, and selfhood.

While the local public presence of sexuality at Walter Reed has little, if anything, in common with that of Vita, it is equally easy to miss the centrality of sexuality to the negotiations around remaking one’s self in relation to significant others there. Awash in the peculiar masculinity of the military, various vernaculars of sexuality, like dick jokes and rumors of promiscuity, can slide by without remark. But in the context of their reconfigured bodies, and the new relationships (especially) with wives and mothers mediated through them, soldiers’

\(^{190}\) I do not mean to suggest that social life in a space of abandonment where people wait to die mitigates those acts of state and familial abandonment, only that it is part of what makes “ex-human” life possible and that being abandoned does not necessarily mean being in total solitude.
masculinity—here inextricable from (supposed) sexual pleasure—is an important site in which such reconfiguration happens. It is also worth noting, as Povinelli has, that “the intimate couple is a key transfer point within liberalism” (2006:17); a site through which discourses and practices of normative selfhood and bodiliness migrate and in which they can reside and be transformed.

In the rehabilitative context of Walter Reed, the relationship between this normative individualism routed through the normative intimate couple—the conjugal couple (Povinelli 2006)—and the normalizing work done on and with soldier bodies makes heteronormative sexuality and the stabilizing, humanizing, self-authorizing force of couple-hood rich resources for remaking an ordinary future out of an extra/ordinary present.

I understand this as part of the reason why there are so many prescriptions for, and uses, of erectile dysfunction drugs among young married soldiers at Walter Reed. The story of Charlie, injured by an EFP, which I recounted in Chapter 3 is a good example of the rush to prop up masculine life by erecting penises for penetration. But such explicitly sexual medical work often surfaced incidentally, like when Carl, a recently married double amputee who was on his way out of Walter Reed in my first month there, sat on the counter in the Fisher House kitchen, his two prosthetic legs dangling in front of the paneled white wood below, describing his frustration that even though he was so close to leaving, he had a nagging infection in one of his stumps and just as he was thinking “what the fuck can go wrong now?” he started pissing blood, which he attributed to the interaction between the various drugs he was on which included Prozac and Viagra. He’d been switched to Zoloft, another antidepressant, but still he was pissing blood.

That drugs, like Cialis, Levitra, and Viagra are used as a kind of prosthetic masculinity shows not only that masculinity was central to rehabilitated forms of life at Walter Reed, but that heronormative sexual intercourse, that very specific bodily practice, was central to masculinity and to normative forms of re/productive masculinity key to rehabilitation there since its very
beginnings (Linker 2011). And along side this significance of masculinity and couple-hood, other non-sexual forms of love and intimacy—such as those genealogical ones which impel the obligations of kin—were also key modes of articulating and instantiating liberal humanist subjectivities (Povinelli 2006: 5).

Soldiers at Walter Reed often inhabit the space between modes of living embedded in these obligations of kin (and, to a lesser degree, other thickening affiliations) and those embedded in the sexual carnality of the intimate couple, especially as they reorient themselves to new possibilities of living in the midst of new forms of dependency that tie them to parents, siblings, and partners. Even relationships with wives and girlfriends can come to represent something other than (just) the “intimate event” of love that Povinelli argues is foundational to liberal individualism (Povinelli 2006:183-192). While soldiers might find or consolidate love at Walter Reed, they might also feel their relationships with wives and girlfriends transformed as the strains and mess of caregiving gets in the way of previous modes of sexual contact.

Sometimes the loss of this conjugal component contributed to the end of both intimacy and, eventually, couple-hood. But often things were not so clear cut, and with the looming deadliness of solitude, such self constituting attachments were worked on in myriad ways, from talk therapy to Cialis to time living apart.

7.4.1 Kin and The Conjugal Couple

Tisha, the Midwestern mother of a soldier who lost both legs and who, like Daniel, seemed to be too much by himself, told me she was surprised that any wives or girlfriends managed to stick around, guessing that it must be harder for them than for mothers. She explained that when her son gets angry at her, she can push back and put him in his place. The density and depth of their attachment is enough to absorb whatever pounding it might take. The
pull of their genealogical dependencies and obligations are strong, fortified by the rest of the family and military community whose expectations and integrity come to bear in Tisha’s presence there and her absence from her husband and younger daughter back home. But in young wives she recognizes, in her own way, that “thinnest embrace of the conjugal couple” (Povinelli 2006:46), and wonders what it could be that sustains such a configuration of life.

Tisha’s concern about the thinness of the social skin constituted in couple-hood hints at the ways in which the mode of military family life is intensely genealogical. When one is part of a military family, one’s social skin is thick and hard to shake. I recall Vanessa telling me a story about talking to her father, then an Army recruiter, on the phone on 9/11. She was in high school in Georgia at the time, at one of the few non-military schools she and Sam attended growing up as ‘Army brats’. When news of the planes hitting the Twin Towers filtered through the school that morning, she got a call from her father who was in an airport. She screamed at him over the phone to get out of his uniform, worried that if America were under attack, he would be a target or perhaps that he’d been called on, or expected, to do something dangerous. He’d gotten off the phone, gone into a bathroom, changed into civilian cloths, and called her back.

The other kids in school were worried for her and her father because he might be deployed, but they didn’t understand why she’d yelled at him to change out of his uniform. She lamented the fact that she’d been at a regular public school then. If she’d been at a military school, everyone would have understood. She wouldn’t have been alone with her experience and the things she knew. She said “I could tell you then that we were going to war. Some people would be heading off in 24 hours and everyone else would be going within 6 weeks.” No one else around her, she felt, knew what was going on.

Her experience of 9/11 was one in which she felt, as the daughter of an NCO, the pull of that thick social skin and in which the isolation of being in the midst of unrelated civilians—a
being uncommon rather than in common—made the pain of that pull harder to bare. This feeling of being in common, of knowing things that only some similar others do, is one experience of the genealogical side of military life and the social skin it develops. It pulls soldiers and officers and families together into a common lot and into the service of war. These diffuse connections that subject people to all the things it means to be military—even if they’re not a member of a service—are part of what make military life deeply, thickly social. Part of what gives “Army friendship” (MacLeish 2010:202) a cast of kin, or more than kin. As James put it to me, the guys he served with in Iraq “they’re closer than your wife.”

In his elaboration of the meanings of Army Family, MacLeish argues that while, in its official instantiations like the “Army Family Covenant,” Army Family is about institutionalizing and standardizing particular stabilizing configurations of domestic life, it is also about the deeply felt filial and fraternal connections that make other soldiers worth living and dying for and about the ways in which such connections in turn weave themselves back into the domestic (but never, in the military context, extra-institutional) world of spouses and kin. He writes “one of the features of love in the military is that it is not necessarily possible to disaggregate military and biopolitical instrumentality from practical concerns from authentic emotional investments.” (MacLeish 2010:190).

Maybe this is why it is misleading to describe Army Family in terms of mere polysemy. For as much as the term assumes different meanings in different contexts, its various definitions overlap with and feed back on one another; they can’t be disaggregated. And that is arguably what is most powerful about them: not their exploitation by the military, by their effective enshrinement in corporate culture, their rejection by the jaded or the suspicious, their embrace by others, but the whole knotty constellation, all these things and more. [MacLeish 2010: 196]
The conjugal couple exists within this genealogical society even as it poses a threat to it (MacLeish 2010; also Povinelli 2006), and the significance of the dyad of the soldier and his wife is just as important as the tension between the exclusive intimacy of that dyad and the Army’s diffuse homosociality and organizationally enforced interconnectedness. It is not a coincidence that James describes his relationship with the guys from his unit, guys with whom he is not at the time in regular contact, specifically as “closer than your wife.”

In these ways, before soldiers get to Walter Reed, their modes of living are marked by a simultaneous emphasis on autology and collectivity both of which are forged through the experience and rhetoric of heteronormative and fraternal love and familial attachments. Despite the Army’s recruitment campaigns based on ideas of self-sufficiency and individual performance and excellence (nicely condensed in its “Army of One” slogan) deep solitude is not part of ‘healthy’ military life. It is not surprising then, that, as soldiers engage in projects of remaking themselves, the various available attachments take on a vital importance.

But the transformed intimacy of the conjugal couple that exists at Walter Reed can take on extra layers, making strange previously familiar modes of affiliation. Wives may sometimes become like mothers or like “just friends”, deadening the sexuality so fundamental to soldiers’ possible and properly manly future selves (Linker 2011; Serlin 2002). But wives may simultaneously represent new families and even new genealogical obligations to take the place of those military ones that will be lost on entry to civilian life.

Take, for example, three moments from Erin and James’ time at Walter Reed. Though I didn’t know them then, Erin told me about the months she and James spent in the hospital and then at Mologne House, before they secured their room in the Fisher House. On different occasions, she and James each told me about the first time they saw each other after his injury. Though James was in pain and heavily medicated, the first thing he wanted to do when he saw
Erin was have sex. He tried to convince her to close the door and get into the hospital bed with him. Erin had been confused by this, she had been concerned for the fragile condition of his body which had been both shocking and disgusting to her though she kept those feelings to herself, and she had resisted. This was a common enough story at Walter Reed and one that I think speaks to more than just lust accrued through separation or the ‘hormones’ of young men. Having sex with your wife is also an expression and enactment of your status as a heteronormatively constructed liberal individual: It is the essence of conjugal couple-hood.

While James’ desire may have been about lust, it was also about being a husband and all the dimensions of past and future livelihood that represented.

But, as Erin told me, there were also periods in the beginning, just after he became an outpatient, when James wouldn’t get out of bed for days on end, not eating, not getting up to go to the bathroom, and hardly talking at all. Erin took over the basic maintenance of his body as best she could, shifting into a kind of mothering but one absent of mutual affection. Erin told me what she did when she couldn’t take it anymore: She got a cup of water and a toothbrush and brought them to James, saying that he needed to brush his teeth because she wouldn’t kiss him unless he did. By her account, pointing to the precariousness of their relationship as husband and wife in this way, imperiling their sexual contact, was effective and helped bring James back to a fuller life. In her narrative, this was a kind of turning point in his rehabilitation. The last resort was to their conjugal couple-hood, and it was from that preserve that James re-emerged as a thicker, more viable person.

Many months later, James’ repositioned himself as a kind of patriarch of Erin’s family, jumping into action to help her mother’s boyfriend sustain the family once she lost her job. This suggests something of the way that Erin connected him to an array of kin within which his social skin could be thickened, nestled, and secured. By that point the two of them were on (relatively
speaking) solid ground and their sexual contact was a part of that. We talked about sex, lube, sex toys, and at one point when James made a reference to masturbation, Erin jumped in annoyed that he might not be sexually satisfied with her rather than, as it had been before, the other way around.

But this multifaceted and foundational attachment—one that was ever present but also always in flux—brought risks too. Though when I knew them, their relationship seemed the strongest of any of couple at Walter Reed, there had been a time when Erin left to go home for a bit since the strain of the situation and James’ depression and anger had been too much for her to bear. And even later, after they had moved out of the Fisher House and into the Bank of America apartment in Silver Spring, I recall a particular moment in which the potential devastation of Erin’s connection to James—the dangerous aspect of open attachments—became crushingly apparent.

In their apartment with some other couples one night, the conversation turns from a discussion about how frustrating it is to have to wait to get meds at the hospital pharmacy to the urgency of injured soldiers’ medical needs. As an example, Erin begins to describe what James was like when he was an inpatient, that time period when he’d so wanted to have sex with her in his hospital bed. James is sitting on the floor with its plush wall-to-wall carpet and has taken off both of his prosthetics and one of his snugly fit liners which sits on the coffee table where he had been demonstrating how it could double as a whoopee cushion earlier in the evening. Erin says in the hospital he’d been “just sitting there in his retard chair” referring to a high backed wheelchair with a head support. “Thanks a lot” James says, his tone sarcastic but tinged with real hurt and anger. Erin says “Sorry, but seriously…” and goes on to describe him overmedicated and drooling.
James looks away, not angry now, but sad; like he’s been put in his place. I think about how James had been proud of himself when he told me about wanting to have sex with Erin that day in the hospital and how when Erin told me about it, she’d been almost disturbed. In light of these other moments, this one seems to be the very definition of vulnerability as Butler describes it: because we are socially and physically constituted through attachments, because it is “ties or bonds that compose us,” we are also “at risk of loosing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 2004:20, 22). It is this vulnerability that soldiers must navigate in rehabilitating themselves. This is the promise, possibility, and risk that their attachments bring, as these same attachments ward off solitude and gesture toward a future of autological masculine selfhood.

7.4.2 Attached Dependents

Given the radical reconfiguration of dependencies and obligations—forms of social intimacy out of which soldiers’ masculinity, morality, and liberal selfhood emerge—soldiers’ modes of being are also reconfigured in a way that is routed through their reconfigured bodies and the acts of care, affection, and disciplining of these unstable bodies which mediate much of their contact with their intimates, sexual and non-sexual alike.

Being attached has multiple implications in this rehabilitative context, and various kinds of attachments enable and constrain different modes of life. In this space, they engage one of Povinelli’s key questions: “which forms of intimate dependency count as freedom and which count as undue social constraint” (2006:3)? When parents and siblings respond to the pull of genealogical obligations and leave family at home to come care for soldiers at Walter Reed, many of the logistics of life there are eased. The same is true for wives and girlfriends. It is helpful to have someone to help with getting around, making food, taking meds. But that
someone is there because of mutual attachments and obligations as kin and, especially in the case of parents and wives with children which entail attachments beyond just conjugal couple-hood, those mutual obligations sit uneasily with the self-oriented aspects of rehabilitation. Soldiers seek to constitute themselves as self-sovereign, at the same time as they depend on, desire, and require the obligations of kin. Kin may also try to minimize those obligations, giving soldiers the ‘space’ to be in excess of their roles as sons, brothers, husbands, or fathers. But those roles, and the obligations they entail, are crucial to the selves that soldiers are rehabilitating since they are part of the future ordinary toward which their efforts are aimed. Given the threats of solitude described above, these attachments have high stakes. But they can also sometimes become untenable. Soldiers must then work on them, sever them, replace them, thin them, or otherwise alter them so as to make current life possible and future life imaginable.

When I first met him, Jake had been looking forward to his life with Tanielle, their almost two year old son and their second child, a daughter, who was on the way. Imagining life as a good and responsible father, full of wisdom like his own father was, and a stable provider for his family were some of the main things that drew Jake through his protracted time at Walter Reed. But while he was oriented toward that future ordinary life, actually having it was impossible at Walter Reed; even though they depended on each other, the two ordinaries were incompatible. There were seemingly innumerable obstacles to living even some tightly circumscribed version of that future ordinary within the gates of Walter Reed.

One night when we were out for dinner with Manny and his mom, Jake got a phone call. It was Tanielle, who had gone home for a pre-natal check up. All of a sudden, his face changed, he anxiously chewed his lip and his eyes betrayed the trace of tears. “What bad news?” he said.

It turned out that Tanielle’s doctor had prescribed bed rest until the baby was born: two months. She wouldn’t be able to come back and be with him. Jake’s mother, who had moved to
Virginia to be close to him, could spend some nights with him at Fisher House, but he’d have to sleep at her house more often. He was supposed to spend the night at Walter Reed, but he wasn’t supposed to spend the night alone at Fisher House. But maybe staying at his mother’s was better since the new orthopedic mattresses someone had donated were killing his back. On the other hand, he couldn’t take his sleep meds when he stayed in Virginia and still get up early enough to get back to Walter Reed in time for appointments or formation, and without his meds, he’d have nightmares, which meant he’d have to stay up all night to keep them at bay.

At first, they had managed a complicated back and forth, with Tanielle coming up and leaving their son with her mother and Jake sometimes driving down to see her there. But the back and forth had apparently proved to be too much for her. But then the back and forth proved to be too much for Jake, who, after driving down and back, six hours each way, a few weekends in a row had had to pull over to the side of the road and sleep in his car for a while.

Even later, in the times they did manage to be together at Walter Reed after their daughter was born when Tanielle would leave both kids with her mother, she and Jake fought all the time. Never even having lived in the same house, they could hardly stand living in the one room they shared at the Fisher House. It was an open secret that their son was not biologically Jake’s, and Tanielle would occasionally impugn his status a ‘real’ father, something that cut Jake to the quick. Deciding that he would be a father to the boy who, Jake was sure, had been the product of Tanielle’s infidelity, her faithlessness, rather than rape as she had told him during that fateful phone call nine days before he’d been blown up, had been a self-constituting act for Jake; a way of being the kind of good man he was so sure he should be. Following through on his

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191 While their son’s paternity was gossiped about (Jake told me about it in the conversation I recount in Chapter 5, but I was also told about it ‘in confidence’ by others) and Tanielle herself made these kinds of not-so-subtle remarks about it, the possibility he might have been conceived through rape, rather than simply ‘cheating’, was not and I suspect that most people were unaware of it.
decision, that promissory act of a good man, by marrying Tanielle and insisting on his commitment to her and fortifying it by fathering a child with her, even as she eroded it in word and deed, even as it all became regrettable, was the same kind of self constituting act, although now, in the midst Walter Reed’s precariousness, the stakes seemed even higher. It was the kind of act out of which he’d wanted to fashion his life before and which now gestured toward the possibility he still could.

After his injury, this sense of masculine duty became ever more important to Jake. He was concerned that he’d gotten selfish during his rehabilitation. Doing things for others, subordinating himself to the obligations he had, being depended on, these things became central to his thinking about the kind of person he wanted to be. Being a good father was part of that.

But the dynamics of dependency and obligation were anything but straightforward. One night at the mall before their daughter was born Tanielle told me that she hadn’t wanted to get pregnant again, but after Jake had gotten hurt and had told her he wanted them to have a child together, she didn’t think she could refuse him. Having a child together was another step toward a future ordinary that pulled Jake on; a configuration of familial attachments from which Tanielle was not then willing to extricate herself.

And yet, despite her ambivalences, Tanielle was jealous of Jake when she was away. She seemed to suspect he was always betraying her in one way or another. As some sort of imaginary retaliation, she told her mother malicious lies about Jake and her mother started trying to keep their son, and then their daughter, away from him. People said she was bleeding his bank account, burning through $10,000 in a matter of months.

But through all of this, being a good father, a good husband, and a good man by caring and providing for those who depended on him, or who might, he hoped, in the future, remained central to Jake’s sense of who he was and to the ordinary life he wanted to have.
It was during one particularly bad patch with Tanielle, when their attachments were fraying to the very core, that Jake had said “you have to wait around before you can even begin picking up the pieces.” He experienced the frustration of seeing the future domestic life toward which he had oriented himself shatter around him and being unable, given the contingencies of life at Walter Reed, to hold it together or to pick up the pieces. He seemed impatient, unwilling to bide his time in the present while and wait for a future to come (see Das 2007: 85-86). And yet it is that same imagined life that he wanted to reassemble, those same pieces that he wanted to pick up eventually, once he’d done his waiting. So despite his frustration and exhaustion and sense of the current impossibility of being there, as Tanielle’s “bad news” pushes him to the verge of tears, he maintains his attachments and feels them pull him toward the future. As things continued to fall apart, the likelihood of ever assembling those fragments into the life he wanted seemed more and more remote, but Jake refused to give up on the possibility, to stop imagining that increasingly unlikely future.

Then one night, in the midst of a fight, Tanielle hit him. It seemed like the last straw, and Jake kicked her out and moved into the barracks with the other single soldiers. He got his mother to call a divorce lawyer. But even though he told me again and again how he felt so much more like himself without Tanielle there, their attachment retained a profound importance. While without Tanielle Jake felt more like himself, severing his attachment to her entirely would challenge all those ‘good’ decisions he had made about remaining with her which were also self-founding acts through which he constituted himself as a good and dependable man with a properly thin and integral social skin. And when a volunteer suggested that she might be able to get Homes for our Troops to build him a house, he couldn’t imagine that they would do it for him if he weren’t still with Tanielle, even though we both knew the same organization was already planning to build one for another single soldier.
Jake’s experience shows in a particularly pronounced way how the projects of being and of being a (in his case “good”) man were always intertwined and how they depended on dependencies which made an unmarked future ordinary seem possible.\(^\text{192}\) There were other ambitions that he had—opening the garage with Manny, playing drums again with his metal band—and these were also part of his imagined future and also coded with a familiar masculinity. But in relation to their loss, intimate attachments, like Jake’s to Tanielle, distinguish themselves from other, fraternal connections as key to the possibilities of life. In this way they are also more fundamental than future ambitions or even the expression of identity. Such attachments are not only helpful and normative but also formative. In the context of Walter Reed, where life is so deeply uncertain, this is especially and sometimes literally the case.

At Walter Reed, biological life is sustained through social contact in many senses; through necessary medical care, through rehabilitative therapy, and also through intimate vigilance that keeps wounds clean and dry but that also feeds the possibilities of an ordinary life that makes visible, or imaginable, a future. Ways of being are also ways of being with. And being without, losing constitutive ties, suggests the imminent possibility of not being at all, as well as the possibility that the future ordinary pulling soldiers on might fail to materialize.

Being at Walter Reed, finding a mode of extra/ordinary life sustained by attachments that pull soldiers toward an unmarked ordinary elsewhere, is always marked by the precariousness of transitional life and the distance between the configuration of attachments and dependencies of now and the autology to come. This tension between the simultaneous awareness of current and future ordinaries occasioned certain frustrating incommensurabilities, like when James was ordered by his CO to go to credit counseling after he bought Erin that sleek new SUV. There are

\(^{192}\) On the ethical dimensions of the banalities of being, see Lambek 2010.
notorious problems, especially among new, young soldiers who are making a decent wage for the first time in their lives and who, in the relatively closed economy of military life, have few personal expenses and little experience managing their finances (having not ever had any to speak of) and who, so the stories go, spend all their money on video games and car modifications or whose wives drain their bank accounts buying purses and jewelry.\textsuperscript{193}

But James had been careful with his money, and had even made investments in the stock market that were doing pretty well. He had bought the SUV for Erin following the amputation of his second leg with the money from his second TSGLI payment and a trade in of his own car, which he could no longer drive. When he told me about being ordered to credit counseling by his CO, a woman with whom he had often butted heads during the time when he had more or less given up on rehab and had stopped going to his appointments, he focused his frustration on her personally, saying that she didn’t know anything about him or his finances. When he went to the credit counselor, armed with bank statements and credit card bills all in the black, the counselor said no one should have sent him there in the first place, and that his finances were impeccable. According to James, the CO was just a “dumb bitch”, and he was going to try and get switched to someone else.

Calling your CO a dumb bitch and casually asking, and reasonably expecting, to be transferred to someone else’s command testify to the peculiar flexibility and certain softness of military structure at Walter Reed. But, despite his documented fiscal responsibility, James still had to go to the counselor once he was ordered there by his CO, even if she was a dumb bitch. While James blamed this one particular CO for inflicting the humiliating experience of credit

\textsuperscript{193} A woman with whom I worked at LRMC had been previously employed as a financial counselor for American soldiers in Germany. Her husband was an MP, she came from a military family, and she was hardly naïve to military life, but nonetheless she had been shocked at how financially illiterate the soldiers she saw were. For example, many of them had never had a checking account (or any kind of bank account) and had no idea how to write a check.
counseling on him and indicting his ability to responsibly take care of both himself and his wife and daughter, he also blamed the structure of the Army and its radical infringement on one’s own province of personal time, money, and allocation of both. While James had described the guys in his unit in Iraq as “closer than your wife,” now he also indicted the Army saying “the Army sucks” and that he would never reenlist precisely because of bullshit like this. The combination of fraternal devotion to, and disgruntled resentment of, the Army is a feature of Army life in general (Hawkins 2005), but at Walter Reed it is more easily overlaid with individuated dimensions. James isn’t just being slotted into the category of feckless E4, he is also personally, rather than just categorically, offended.

As he tells me the story, he blames his particular CO, while he also saves some of his frustration for the Army as an institution. What’s more, as he attempts to work out a civilian self, solvency is a central thread James weaves together with new forms of masculine responsibility. When Erin tells us one night over dinner that her mother is about to loose her job when the daycare she works for closes and will have to support her children and step children (totaling five), as well as her grandchildren (two more) who live with her but over whom she does not have legal guardianship, with welfare payments and food stamps and minimal contributions from her ailing live-in boyfriend, James is upset. He makes a plan to call the boyfriend and talk to him man to man, provider to provider, about what they should do and suggests that he might offer to help out with some money. At the age of 24, James is positioning himself as a kind of patriarch, the guy who swings into action to shore up the family beyond his own small domestic unit. His ability to make a financial contribution and offer financial advice to this extended family is the

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194 His pay grade: Enlisted grade 4. Army pay grades are E1-9, Warrant Officer (W) 1-5, and Officer (O) 1-10. In conversation, enlisted soldiers are generally referred to by pay grade (e.g. “he’s an E4”), which correlates with rank (e.g. Specialist or Corporal).
bedrock of this role. Though it’s Erin’s mother who is the household’s main income earner and it is she who is facing down unemployment, James will speak to her boyfriend: solving a family crisis like this is man’s work.

The masculine-coded competency James had as a gunner in Iraq is gone. As he shifts from a form of life and livelihood made possible by the particularities of the Army, he gravitates toward the pull of a masculine-coded responsibility woven together with fiscal savoir and decisive grasp of the mantle of family provider for a thickening abundance of kin. No wonder then, that his CO’s suspicion of his spending cuts so deep; it is dangerously close to a pulse that animates his imaginable future.

Though in different ways, James and Jake both confront Walter Reed’s adumbration of the fullness of autological citizenship founded on the conjugal couple-hood so fundamental to civilian life. Peter’s experience represents another way in which such intimate attachments are necessary, but also the sites of strife; the way such attachments can make the future imaginable but can also make the present hard.

7.4.3 Reconfiguring In Dependencies

Since Peter was 19 and unmarried, his mom and dad alternated two week stints staying with him at the Fisher House, driving up and down from Pennsylvania and passing like ships in the night. He had been injured on September 11, 2007, a coincidence that his mother informed me of in a voice that resonated with uncanny significance. For the first weeks of his stay at Fisher House, those first weeks out of the hospital, both his mother and father were there with him as much as possible. In the beginning, Peter was deeply, thoroughly, and undirectedely angry and no small part of this rained down on his parents as he raged against the infantalization he felt at their
helping hands. One evening, as Jake and I sat on the living room couch, we heard Peter screaming at his parents as they murmured words of caution while he attempted, with a recently amputated leg and unfamiliar prosthetic, arm full of stitches, and vertigo from a blown out ear drum and incus, to mount the stairs to his room by himself.

He screamed “Don’t treat me like a child!” his mom responded, restrained but pleading “But you have a suture, you need to be careful!” Peter shouted back that in Iraq, he had dragged himself and his equipment—a total of 300lbs—out of harm’s way with only one good arm and now they think he can’t walk up the stairs. It seemed like sound logic to me. Just as sound as his mother’s gentle admonition, not about his missing leg, his most exceptional injury, but just about his stitches, the kind of injury that anyone might have.

Peter’s vitriolic admonition that he not be treated like a child speaks of much more than a line between adulthood and infancy. As is the case in other contexts of disability related dependencies (Kumari Campbell 2008: 152-154; Thomas 2007:88), condescension and infantilization enact a particular kind of existential violence, obviating both a sense self-determination and a reservoir of personal experience in a single fell swoop. Though offered out of love and well-founded concern, Peter’s parents’ interventions into his physical precarity—both in that moment on the stairs and in a more general way as his NMAs—subject him to a contingent livelihood, undermining his autology in favour of essential and unchosen dependencies. As work on disability and masculinity has noted (Russell 2004; Shakespeare 1999; Tepper 1999), because of its attendant reconfigurations of self-control and dependence and independence, disability presents a fundamental challenge to the kind hetenormative masculinity that is so central to the projects of self- and future-making underway at Walter Reed. It is true that Peter needs help, or at least that there are basic things like making food, keeping his room in order, and getting around, that would, for the time being, be exceedingly difficult
without it. But it is not merely this, not merely the ‘straight forward’ facts of his body and its limits, which frustrate him and fuel his anger. To be treated like a child in this way is to be treated as an insufficient and incomplete acting person in the world. The missing pieces here are not the thick affiliations of life in community. His fullness seems to have an abbreviated range, extending only to his assistive parents, his social skin is thin, but not autological. Peter becomes tied to his parents, his life beyond them thinned and he is more legible through them, as their son, their child, than as the self-contained, self-determined, and self-controlled person he wants to (continue to) be.

To fashion an autological self, Peter turns, in part, to a sexualized masculinity. A mode of being that is strikingly unchildlike. He locks himself in the bathroom for hours negotiating his relationships with two girlfriends. Not easily given to coquetry, I was none the less stunned by one of the first conversations I had with Peter, in which he regaled me with stories of drunken sexual conquest when he was stationed in Germany before heading off to Iraq. He described, in relentless detail, and well within ear shot of his mother, how easy it was to pick up German girls in bars, how “easy” they were, how he and his friends drank so much they passed out and had to help each other home, peppering his stories with ‘slut’ and ‘bitch.’ He often hinted that he could hook me up with some friends from his Infantry Division who might be coming through the D.C. area, assuring me that they were young, fit, and oversexed. When one of his girlfriends came to visit, she sat in his lap on the couch in the den, the two of them occasionally lapsing into sloppy make-out sessions. When that relationship ended and he was reconciling with his other girlfriend, Sharon, a high school senior and catalogue model, he again spent hours locked in the bathroom attempting to win back her trust. Eventually he did.

Sharon was, by all accounts including Peter’s, an insatiable drama queen. They fought almost incessantly, and her gossiping and erratic behavior didn’t put her in good graces with the
other wives and girlfriends. She refused to talk to me, to even be introduced to me, and the first time she saw me at the house, on a summer Sunday afternoon when I had made plans to hang out with Peter for the day, she stormed off and started calling his cell phone over and over. He ignored her calls, not wanting to deal with her but also in full awareness, even enjoyment, of the drama that would ensue. After a while, she started calling and texting other Fisher House women saying that Peter had brought some girl home from a bar and wouldn’t be convinced otherwise, even when others explained to her that it was essentially my job to hang out with soldiers and that I also spent time with wives, girlfriends, and other family members, both with and without soldiers around.195

But even amid their fighting and the complicated negotiations Peter had to go through to make nearly any plans to hang out with almost anyone, Peter worked hard to keep the relationship going until long after I had left the field, apologizing to Sharon for things he did and didn’t do and putting up with her scheming and screaming which he sometimes egged on. When he told me he’d broken one of his prosthetics by throwing it across the room at her, I insisted he elaborate, concerned about the level of violence between them and telling him that throwing things at her was the same as hitting her, and that both were abuse. He said that he’d actually thrown it at the wall, not at her. When I suggested it was still not really okay, he said “that’s not abuse, abuse is when you push the thing I’m leaning on out from under me” which he said Sharon had done at least once. By the summer she’d finished high school and moved into the

195 This situation, and a not dissimilar problem with Jake’s wife Tanielle, caused serious problems during my fieldwork. Sharon refused to go somewhere if I was there and would do her best to stop Peter from going too. For a period during the middle of my fieldwork, Jake stopped returning my calls and emails, and though he initially tried to make other excuses (largely, I think, to spare both of us the indignity) he eventually confirmed the rumor others had passed on to me; Tanielle had forbidden him to speak with me because she thought we were having an affair. While it is easy to assume (especially given the foundational importance of Margaret Mead’s work) that being a woman would give me unproblematic special access to ‘women’s worlds’ at Walter Reed, situations like these shouldn’t be thrown out as exceptional.
Fisher House, taking over as NMA from his parents, but keeping her appeased enough to stay wasn’t some cold calculation on Peter’s part, it wasn’t simply a ploy to keep his parents gone. Nor was he opting for some unfettered independence and freedom of adulthood made possible by having a girlfriend, rather than a mother or father, as his most intimate kin: the strictures Sharon placed on him, and to which he submitted himself in order that she should stay, were in many ways tighter than his parents’. While he could not be radically independent and self-determining with Sharon, being with Sharon made more readily available a form of life that he was rehabilitating towards. The implications of the dependencies that he and his parents faced were very different than those he and Sharon faced.

Just as military life is characterized both by an emphasis on self-sufficiency and on social obligation, and to get a sense of that life it is necessary to see the two and the tension they create, it is also misleading to see Peter’s rehabilitation as moving from a dependence on his parents to an independence with Sharon: the autological ideal is always based on dependencies.

David Serlin suggests that “domestic portraits of Iraq war veteran [sic] and their wives and girlfriends [portray] the disabled veteran who is virile but in need of protection by the state and his loving female partner” representing “familiar distillations of heteronormativity” and full citizenship (Serlin 2006: 175). But I would argue that the ‘need of protection’ exists in tension with heteronormative masculinity and full citizenship. While having a loving female partner is at the heart of ideal autological maleness, the particular dependency that can be written into that partnership in the context of rehabilitating veterans works against the full measure of self-discipline and self-mastery that other images of full American citizenship and military masculinity invoke (an example of which Serlin offers in the image of single below the knee amputee Sgt. Michael McNaughton jogging on his C-Leg alongside then President George W. Bush [Serlin 2006:174]).
Peter trades in the explicit and literal infantilization of his attachment to his parents for the sexual potency and potential of self-founding conjugal couple-hood of his attachment to Sharon. His vehement insistence that he is not a child is an assertion of his own manfulness against the incomplete individual child-self he feels his parents figure him as. But it’s also a claim against the social obligations that his parents tie him to, and for the autological freedom that life with Sharon might represent. But the mutual dependencies that might mark autological freedom elsewhere are complicated by Walter Reed’s extra/ordinariness and the truncated array of modes of available life. Peter moves in the direction of an ordinary future through a channel defined by sexualized heteronromative masculinity. But being at Walter Reed, even being with Sharon, that state of being he worked hard to achieve and maintain, is never the same as being ordinary elsewhere.

Taken together, Peter’s frustration with his parents and his frequent and flamboyant orientation to heteronormative masculine sexuality suggest something of the complicated way in which ideas of independence, adulthood, and sexuality saturate soldiers’ (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) imaginings of their future lives and selves.

7.5 Conclusion: Being No Less of a Person

As I was drafting this chapter at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, NM, the New York Times provided a current and public example of the stakes of attachment at Walter Reed. No fewer than five people who I’d just met contacted me to tell me about it. It was the July 4th 2010 cover story about Specialist Brendan Marrocco who was rehabilitating at Walter Reed with his brother NMA and who was the first (surviving) quadruple amputee of OEF or OIF. Below the big, above the fold, color image of Spc. Marrocco’s body in mid-movement on a physical
therapy bed, three of his residual limbs and one prosthetic visible, the paper offers this fragment as a headline: “no less of a person.”

This plea for his full measure of personhood is in large part an artifact of Marrocco’s social attachments which remain intact: we are told his injuries have brought his estranged parents back together, that they have changed his brother’s life for the better. In the article, these ties provide a main lens for appreciating the normative fullness of his personhood. We are also told of his fiancé, who he met after getting to Walter Reed. But their relationship, one which is described in a typically autological narrative of love and self discovery (Povinelli 2006:175-192), has been on and off, the ordinary future of the conjugal couple delayed just a bit longer. According to the logic of the article, the attachments between Marrocco and his family seem to have ensured that he is “no less of a person,” but he is not yet one whose life is his own and his personhood is not allowed to go without saying. I can’t help but think that without his family, without even an on and off fiancé, if Spc. Marrocco were at Walter Reed without his arms and legs and without his family, the story would have been different, the proclamation “no less of a person” threatened by a precarious thinness.

If Spc. Marrocco, with all his connections to kin and futurity, seems to be at the thick end of the spectrum of autological life, Charlie, alone with his stuff and his fragile body, seemed to be at the other. Though it is not triumphant, the story of Spc. Marrocco offers a narrative of recovery, a thickening of social life, a repair of autological self-hood and a rebuilding of a normative body. Lizette Alvarez, the story’s author, tells us about Marrocco’s dramatic impending double arm transplant and, though this will “set back his progress so he will likely return to Walter Reed for further therapy” (2010: 17), this is just a bump in the road that leads in

196 The continuation of his other normative desires and affects—like eating pizza and cracking jokes—is the other principal way this full personhood is conveyed.
one clear direction. The story ends with mention of the fundraisers (including Sinise’ Lt. Dan Band) that are supporting him and will hopefully build him a house near his family in Long Island, and with his fiancé’s conjuring of their heteronormative future: they will be married at the WWII monument in D.C. and they will live in a house where their daughter’s dates will come to the door. She holds out hope for this future, he seems less sure.

Mixed in with the impossible pace of recovery as it unfolds in the thickening and thinning of bodies at Walter Reed is the strengthening and fraying of those attachments that make social life possible, ‘imaginable’, or not. The care demanded by certain attachments strains them. The dependencies they entail can prop life up as much as they can hold it back. In the strange middle ground between the thick social skin of military life, and the normative independence of civilian ordinaries, soldiers never reimagine or remake themselves alone, the sexualized masculinity of fatherhood and autological couple-hood and always loom on unreachable the horizon.

Though rarely discussed explicitly, the sexual dimension of men’s rehabilitation has long been at issue. For example, Serlin cites a 1957 UCLA rehabilitation manual which addresses itself to the following questions in the context of male amputees: “Will he be acceptable to wife or sweetheart? Can he live a normal sex-life?” (cited in Serlin 2006: 171). For soldiers at Walter Reed, becoming ordinary, common, is inextricable from becoming a ‘whole’ man (Linker 2011). In this context, being in common is a foundationally sexual and heteronormative mode. It is this kind of life, like Spc. Marrocco’s hypothetical life as a husband and father, in a specially built house somewhere in Long Island, which mitigates against the dangers of solitude, that seems to make future life imaginable.

But at Walter Reed, these lives are not actually livable, the configurations of bodies and space don’t allow for them, and the intimacy with death that marks this space belies the security
which is part of the autological selfhood such lives gravitate towards. And even the array of attachments that fortify the social skin at Walter Reed are peculiar and brittle. The relationships between soldiers and families, soldiers and other soldiers, soldiers and volunteers, aren’t fashioned out of the *enduring* temporality of social relations, but their in-durability; the condensed intensity of rehabilitation’s unpredictable coming back to life. The experience of coming to life isn’t the experience of traveling the ‘road to recovery’; it is the experience of bumps in the road, of literal and metaphorical hits, of bodies, people, and relationships that won’t behave. Coming to life, and staying alive, constitute the ‘activities of daily living’ as much as the usual list of things like getting dressed and going to the bathroom, and, like such ‘ordinary’ ADLs, these other, perhaps more foundational, activities are hard to imagine without assistance, without the attendance and attachment of significant others.

Charlie, Alec and Daniel, James, Jake, and Peter, and their wives, brothers, and parents, are engaged in this mode of precarious living. In different ways, they show the limits of life at Walter Reed, and the possibilities and impossibilities of life beyond it in some kind of ordinary space they can only and always imagine.
For the soldiers in this dissertation, this moment of afterwar life is profoundly precarious. It is a moment of living in which attachments and vulnerabilities to others are powerfully felt, and the world and one’s presence in it are marked by instability. The process of rehabilitation is, in part, an attempt to fix this: to repair and stabilize life and bodies, and to regularize them in their appearance in contact with the world.

And yet, at Walter Reed, life goes on in all its un-fixedness, with all its precarities. Life in this liminal mode is awake to the knowledge of its markedness, confronted as it is by new arrays of possibilities and limits, and the expectations of others. But while the hope of an unmarked future—passable and fixed—exerts a powerful draw, soldiers also become habituated to their precariousness, to the instability of life in the liminal present.

By looking closely at soldiers’ encounters with intimate and public others, with spaces inside and outside the gates of Walter Reed, each of the chapters in this dissertation has attempted to show how this habituation happens and how, in the midst of its strangeness and pain, the small and ordinary details of life endure, giving life a familiarity or recognizability that make it possible, livable, human.

This project thus bears a close kinship to Veena Das’ contention that, in the aftermath of world shattering violence, “life was recovered not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary” (2007: 7). But in the case of injured soldiers at Walter Reed, that descent is thwarted by other’s gestures towards the realm of the transcendence of sacrifice, and that recovery is deferred by the impossibility of a simply ordinary present. Here and now is only the extra/ordinary.
And even after moving on from the saturated space of Walter Reed, and even for some who were not so shattered that they needed to pass through it, there is a complicating difference, a difference that brings us back to the comforting distinction between America’s safe homeland and its distant warfronts overseas. Unlike families in Delhi and women in Sultanpuri, these soldiers will not live ordinary lives in a shared social space of devastation. They will not be surrounded by others with whom they share a common experience of fragmentation. The ordinary they have to descend into is one in which their new knowledge of the world in fragments is unacceptable and ought to be put in its place, over there.

This difference between what injured soldiers know about the world and what most American civilians know about the world is something that is often at the centre of their encounters with each other. Out of these different knowledges about the world emerge utterances of gratitude and neat pathologies of trauma. I am reminded of many soldiers’ insistence that there was no point in talking to psychiatrists if they hadn’t been in combat. Perhaps because the mode within which we interacted was different, more ‘everyday,’ or perhaps because I did not ask them about their experiences in war or their injuries until they brought them up, it was possible for them to reflexively tell me and show me about this basic ontological problem, this fact that they know certain things about the world that others’ experiences do not admit.

But, of course, I can only know and write about this knowledge, grasping at the periphery of its experiential core. I can not have this knowledge, or live in it. That I live an ordinary life, as much as anyone can, puts me in a distant relationship to the extra/ordinary lives and pain of the soldiers I worked with.

I am in the courtyard of the Abrams Hall barracks, sitting in the sun on the edge of a planter while I wait in line to collect Fisher House mail from the kiosk that is only open four hours a day. My body feels lazy and warm and I do not care about the Heller-esque encounter I
am about to have with the soldier who will try not to give me the mail. I am being indulgent, fed up with the tight control I have been exerting over my body because I am nervous about doing fieldwork and because I’m afraid people will think I am undisciplined or disrespectful.

I become aware of someone ahead of me in line. A soldier. She is with her mother, who hovers anxiously around her. She is standing, her feet planted, though the rest of her can’t quite keep still. She is very, very pale. Her eyes don’t focus. She is not well. Her mother wants to take her back to her room, to get the mail another day, but she is insistent that it be done now.

I feel, for the first time I can remember, that I owe it to this person, to this soldier, to stand up, I feel that it is disrespectful and lazy of me not to. I have taken the ease of my body for granted, and I am embarrassed. I feel attached to her and obliged to recognize that attachment and the way we diffusely constitute each other through it. I do not know her, or what happened to her. I do not feel I owe her a silent ovation for her sacrifice, nor that I owe her a debt of gratitude. I feel I am obliged to be present in my own discomfort and guilt that the presence of her injured body has occasioned in me. I do not want to exploit the privileges that reside in my body and have brought us to this place where I can sit alone in the sun and feel a sense of transgressive self-satisfaction and she teeters on the brink of collapse in the presence of her mother. I feel it is not fair that any of this should be so. And each of these feelings is occasioned by my understanding of the particular difference between her and me, by my thinking she has passed though the world shattering violence of war and my knowledge that I have not.

So while I might say, as Das does “I found that the making of the self was located, not in the shadow of some ghostly past, but in the context of making the everyday inhabitable” (2007:216), I would also say that the descent into the ordinary proceeded as Zeno’s paradox; always moving closer without hope of finally reaching the destination.
And so, in this dissertation, while they move away from the proclamations of sacrificial heroism and towards the enactment of social intimacies that might let them be comfortably whole, independent, and depended on, injured soldiers’ lives don’t seem to cover them over with the ordinary. There is always something extra, and even as life stabilizes, it stabilizes in an extra/ordinary register.

In thinking through these soldiers’ lives, I have sought to challenge the notion of the ordinary, a seemingly small and taken for granted notion that is called into question by the intense and publicized experiences of the soldiers I came to know. The significance of this exploration extends well beyond Walter Reed and beyond the lives of soldiers. But I hope that the more specific implications of this exploration are also clear: that we should be wary of even the most well intentioned diagnoses of returning soldiers, as patriotic heroes, victims of trauma, subjects of inspirational striving, or objects of intimate danger; that the deadlinesses of life at war grow into the deadlinesses of life after war; that it is only through a particularly privileged position of civilian safety we are able to make claims about the appropriateness or veracity of soldiers knowledge about the world; and that, when we attend to all of this, we see that there is no such thing as generic shrapnel. Through its exploration of the space of precarious life at Walter Reed, I hope this dissertation offers the extra/ordinary as a thread which allows those of us who reside most often in a privileged space of comfort to trace the ways that such lives are neither ‘fully’ knowable nor unimaginable, but recognizable as specifically tethered to, commensurable with, and distinguished from, our own.
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Appendix A: Annotated Glossary of Abbreviations

**ACU**  
**Army Combat Uniform**: The camouflage printed uniform worn during combat since 2005 when it replaced the Battle Dress Uniform and Desert Combat Uniform of earlier eras.

**BT**  
**Basic Training**

**C-Leg**  
A state of the art prosthetic leg with a computerized knee joint made by the Otto Bock company whose marketing emphasizes the technophilic details of the device and a sporty, physically active, and normative body and lifestyle for its wearer. At the time of my fieldwork, the C-Leg considered the ‘cutting edge’ in prosthetics.

**CO**  
**Commanding Officer**: CO is not a rank, but a relation. Though any commissioned officer in charge of a particular unit of whatever size could be called its commanding Officer, your CO is usually the Officer with whom you have the most direct contact. In practice CO was generally used to refer to the person in a soldier’s chain of command who is most likely to be the one to discipline or care if he did something wrong.

**DEP**  
**Delayed Entry Program/Delayed Enlistment Program**: An Army program that allows enlistees to delay the start of their contract for 365 days. Its main use is to contract people who are 17 years old and cannot actually begin service until they turn 18.

**DoD**  
**Department of Defense**

**EFP**  
**Explosively Formed Projectile/Explosively Formed Penetrator**: A self-forging shaped charge that, when the charge is exploded, propels a super heated piece of metal which forms aerodynamically into a projectile. As they’re found in Iraq, EFPs are usually comprised of a canister full of explosives with a convex copper disk for a lid which is formed into a projectile that is dense, hot, and fast and can
penetrate the hardened steel of armored vehicles. They are usually considered a sub-species of IED.

**ExFix**  
**External Fixator/ External Fixation Device:** Sometimes also called a halo, an ExFix is a steel and titanium scaffolding that surrounds and stabilizes a shattered limb and is anchored into the bone with a series of protruding screws.

**GI Bill**  
The original GI Bill was the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act passed in 1944 as a way of providing financial support for returning soldiers (or GIs stands for Government Issue and said to be derived from galvanized iron), including loans, medical expenses, employment insurance, and tuition funds (its most well known benefit) to help them establish civilian lives. In 1984 an updated version called the Montgomery GI Bill was passed and in 2008 a new post-9/11 GI Bill was passed with an even more explicit emphasis on training and education and benefits for family members.

**IED**  
**Improvised Explosive Device:** The particular species of homemade bomb that has become characteristic of insurgency warfare in Iraq and, though to a slightly lesser degree, Afghanistan. In Iraq, they were often hidden on the side of, or beneath, roads traveled by U.S. military vehicles and were sometimes detonated by pressure switches and sometimes by remote.

**IVAW**  
**Iraq Veterans Against the War:** Modeled on Vietnam Veterans Against the War, IVAW is an organization of American service members and veterans who have served since 9/11 and who are organized in opposition to the war in Iraq, but who also organize around other issues, like PTSD awareness and sexual violence in the military.

**LRMC**  
**Landstuhl Regional Medical Center:** The U.S. military hospital in Germany which, in addition to serving the large U.S. military community there, is the place to which soldiers from Iraq or Afghanistan are medically evacuated and stabilized before being sent on for treatment elsewhere.
| **MATC** | **Military Advanced Training Center:** The $11 million state of the art rehabilitation facility that was opened at Walter Reed in 2007. |
| **MedBoard** | **Medical Evaluation/Medical Evaluation Board:** This is the process through which a soldier is medically evaluated for medical retirement from the Army and through which the Army disability rating (which is not the same as their VA disability rating) is assessed. Soldiers must wait until they are medically stable (which at Walter Reed may be a year or more into their rehabilitation) to begin their MedBoard. The duration of the process was most often said to be 8 months, though after the Washington Post scandal, the military was trying to streamline the process and also to dovetail it with the VA evaluation process to ensure a ‘continuity of care.’ In other military contexts, this process is referred to as the MEB/PEB (Medical Evaluation Board/ Physical Evaluation Board). |
| **MOS** | **Military Occupational Specialty:** The particular job of an enlisted soldier for which they receive particular training. An MOS could be anything from Infantryman, to Radio Operator, to Paralegal Specialist, to Plumber. |
| **MP** | **Military Police** |
| **MRE** | **Meal Ready to Eat:** the nutritionally engineered, dehydrated, and vacuum sealed food for soldiers in the field. MREs are the high tech replacement of the C-Ration of earlier military eras. |
| **NCO** | **Non-commissioned Officer:** A low ranking Officer who, in the U.S. Army, is still in the E (Enlisted) pay grades. Technically, the ranks of Corporal – Sergeant Major are NCO ranks, but the rank of Corporal shares the same pay grade as the non-NCO Specialist (E-4). |
| **NMA** | **Non-Medical Attendant:** The person living with and helping an injured service member while they require treatment at a military medical facility that is at least...
100 miles from the service member’s home. This person is (usually) entitled to a per diem and travel expenses from and to their own home and is expected to assist the service member with “non-medical” activities of daily living. At Walter Reed, NMAs were usually wives, girlfriends or parents, though occasionally brothers, and friends would fill the roll. They were entitled to a $60 per diem, for which they had to file paper work and receive “orders” (i.e. official authorization).

**OEF**  
**Operation Enduring Freedom**: The name for the U.S. led mission in Afghanistan that began on October 7, 2001 as a response to 9/11. It also includes operations in Guantanamo Bay, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Philippines, Seychelles, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.

**OIF**  
**Operation Iraqi Freedom**: The name for the U.S. led mission in Iraq that began on March 20th 2003. On February 17th 2010, the Obama Administration changed the name Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation New Dawn (OND) to reflect the changing nature of the U.S. role there.

**PICC line**  
**Peripherally Inserted Central Catheter line**: a tube that runs from the heart to the outside of the body (usually the bicep) through the most direct intravenous route. There is a port on the outside of the body to which intravenous medicine can be attached. At Walter Reed PICC lines are most commonly used for administering aggressive antibiotics.

**PT**  
**Physical Training/Physical Therapy**: Usually in the military, PT means Physical Training (i.e. exercise). At Walter Reed, this meaning of PT slides into Physical Therapy in a subtle way.

**PTSD**  
**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder/Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**: The psychiatric diagnosis developed to recognize the particular psychic trauma of U.S. soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. Though the criteria are shifting, generally PTSD can be applied when a person’s response to
(experiencing/witnessing) a traumatic event includes a specified combination of pathological remembering or forgetting of the event, avoidance of things associated with it, emotional and affective numbing, heightened arousal, sleep disturbances, and other symptoms which begin anytime after the event.

**PX**  **Post Exchange:** The PX is a subsidized store on an Army base where only people with military ID (including dependants) can shop. They are often huge, sprawling, Walmart-like places selling everything from food, to furniture, to clothing.

**SFAC**  **Soldier and Family Assistance Center:** A central location where soldiers and their family members can access services, get information, or ask for help about everything from child care, to leave forms, to substance abuse counseling. The SFAC at Walter Reed also featured a huge storage room from which staff could retrieve anything from DVDs to sweatshirts if soldiers or family members needed or wanted them.

**TBI**  **Traumatic Brain Injury:** A brain injury acquired when the brain is damaged by sudden impact, including concussive force, physical impact to the head, or penetrating wound to the brain itself. Of the three types of TBI clinically differentiated—mild, moderate, and severe—mild TBI (or mTBI) is the most common in the current U.S. military context and is, along with PTSD, often identified as one of the ‘hallmark’ injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**TRICARE**  **A comprehensive suite of managed care health insurance products that is heavily subsidized and available to all members (civilian and military) of the Department of Defense and their dependants.**

**TSGLI**  **Traumatic Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance:** An extension of the low-cost SGLI provided to service members by the VA. TSGLI entitles soldiers to $20,000 -$100,000 per limb. The payments for soldiers I knew were $50,000 per limb. TSGLI was created in 2005 under Section 1032 of the Emergency
Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief.

**USO**  
**United Service Organization**: A nonprofit, congressionally chartered, private organization founded in 1941 as an umbrella to unite other existing charitable groups wanting to support members of the U.S. military. They are perhaps best known for their tours, during which they bring entertainers (usually comedians and musicians) to perform for service members stationed around the world, especially downrange.

**VA**  
**Department of Veterans Affairs** (formerly the Veterans Administration): The branch of the U.S. government that oversees veteran’s issues, including administering the GI Bill and running a sprawling medical treatment and research network comprising over 700 facilities.