The Camouflaged Minority:
Culture, Trauma, and Repatriation of the Student Veteran Diaspora

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Abstract

The subsiding of American involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is resulting in an increasing number of veterans attending college. For many in the current generation of servicemen and women, wartime incentives created a path to education and upward social mobility that is incomparable in its scope and availability for those without any other access to educational resources. As their service concludes and they exit the regimented and violent environment of the military, veterans find themselves arriving in a world they find unrecognizable. Numerous veterans are attempting to re-integrate into civilian society while bearing the scars of traumatic events and suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In spite of the fact that so many veterans cite the desire for educational resources as their primary motivation for committing to military service, they are finding that civilian institutions like colleges and universities seem unprepared to handle the challenges that arise with the growing student veteran population. An ethnographic investigation of student veterans at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, the University of Tennessee Knoxville, and Western Michigan University reveals lingering effects of trauma and militarization that alienate them. Student veterans comprise a diasporic culture, estranged from their classmates and the traditional pedagogical approaches implemented in civilian classrooms.

1. Introduction

I became a student veteran approximately a year and a half after being medically retired from the Army. The military was a path to achieve this education while simultaneously serving what I believed to be a noble cause. Having grown up poor in rural southern Appalachia, this appeared to me as the best option. My enlistment was furious. After attending the Infantry School at Ft Benning Ga, I was assigned to the 10th Mountain Division as a machine gunner and deployed to Afghanistan. In June 2006, I was wounded in an ambush north of Shajoy Afghanistan and my career in the military was ended. After some rehabilitation, I was medically retired from the Army.

The symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder manifested in me before I transitioned out of the Army. As I enrolled in college, I discovered that the process was arduous and that numerous factors, including PTSD, made college very difficult for me and the first few years were very slow going. After seeking help, I managed to learn to cope and to perform as a good student in college. As I gained control, I founded a student veterans' organization and began bringing veterans together. In the winter of 2012, I began an ethnography of student veterans to examine the experience of other student veterans at UNCA. As I found the information compelling, I expanded to two other colleges. After 15 months of fieldwork, a complex narrative had developed.

This study demonstrates that student veterans experience difficulties in the classroom and in the social interactions of an academic institution that are associated with their military experience and veteran status. It is also

demonstrated that among veterans enrolled in college, the primary reason cited for their military enlistment was to attain the education benefits that they are utilizing. This is particularly salient because the significance of the loss experienced by veterans who fail to complete their education can best be understood in this context. With physical and mental trauma, years of violence and the brutality of the military lifestyle, the loss of close friends, and sense of betrayal experienced by so many military veterans, it is a heavy and somber reality that student veterans so often fail to realize the completion of the education that they suffered so deeply to attain. In consideration of this, it is important to note that during the course of this study, I commonly heard from traditional college students that they were completely unaware that access to educational resources and desire for social mobility is such a prominent incentive for military enlistment (The National Center for Education Statistics defines a "traditional college student" as a student who "earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time")[1]

After speaking with dozens of veterans, it became obvious that no two stories were completely alike and that even within their demographic, they are a very diverse group. However, patterns did arise, with some patterns that were common to all. Though covering a complex and broad range of situations, I arrange the majority of the struggles experienced by veterans into three contexts: challenges associated with internal conflict (dissonance between contradictory ethical systems that were internally normalized in different moral worlds), challenges associated with cultural conflict (considering student veterans as a diaspora and examining the power of ideology), and challenges associated with trauma. With such a significant number of veterans having experienced trauma during their military service, the lingering effects of those experiences can significantly disrupt their personal lives and functionality in the classroom. Success in the classroom will be difficult to obtain without addressing the cognitive, physiological, and ethical wounds suffered by veterans.

Many of the issues experienced by veterans while transitioning into an academic environment are the result of cultural conflicts between themselves and the students, faculty, or norms of the college. Veterans can be understood as a diaspora of individuals who feel displaced, alienated, and psychologically fixated on a conceptual "homeland" that eludes them. Struggling to adjust to a cultural context that is such a severe departure from that of the military, the rituals, symbols, and ideologies that once allowed them to operate smoothly in the military do not neatly translate into the civilian world. Differences in age, economic status, and worldview sometimes create conflict with their classmates identified as "traditional college students." The situation is confounded further by the fact that for some veterans, the homeland they are attached to and long for is difficult for them to identify and is sometimes a paradoxical place where ideologies, emotions, and even their own memories collide and reality can be elusive.[2] Still, many long for this place and may experience confusion, guilt, and self-conflict in accepting the fact that they do.

Many cultural, linguistic, and epistemological differences preclude seamless and complete integration of the student veteran diaspora into the body of traditional college students. However, as is often the case in diasporic groups around the world, student veterans can find strength in each other and locating a body to identify with can address the sense of isolation that weighs so heavily on them. In fact, community-building is a fundamental and requisite step in addressing not only cultural alienation but also the effects of trauma that can be so devastatingly disruptive in the lives of military veterans.

2. Methods

The research for this study is performed through a combination of ethnographic investigation of students in the university environment and interviews with student veteran volunteers. As I am a student veteran, participant observation at events (such as student veteran organization meetings) and personal classroom experience is utilized. As the president of the student veteran organization on the UNC Asheville campus, I have had the opportunity to interact with numerous veterans from the university in varying group environments as well as through casual one on one conversation.

One important aspect of the research is the collection of stories told by student veterans during one on one interviews. Following IRB approved guidelines (from UNC Asheville and the other institutions where veterans were interviewed) veterans were recruited by emails sent by the official Veterans' Affairs representative at each school, with a description of the research project. During interviews, veterans were asked to share their pre-military background (household situation growing up, economic status, hometown, etc.), discuss their military service, and describe the process of transitioning from the military into college. The description of the transition includes the logistical process (paperwork), relationships with students and faculty, and academic performance. In the end, a sampling of twelve veterans representing all four branches of service participated in these in-depth formal interviews.

Outside of the formal interviews, I have spent hundreds of hours interacting with dozens of student veterans at student veterans' meetings, volunteer/community service events, and out-of-school informal social events. I occasionally reference my own experiences as a participating representative of the studied demographic in the fieldwork location.

3. Legacy of the Warrior

The foundation of understanding the experience of the student veteran is in recognizing the military background that shaped the veterans themselves. As a diasporic culture, it is important to examine the homeland from which they are separated. Rather than a physical place, it is a system of norms and rituals that were unmarked during enlistment.

Within the culture of the American military, a concrete nationalistic ideological system dominates nearly every realm of social interaction overseen by the institution.[3] Deep indoctrination begins at the onset of the basic training sequence (called "basic training" in the Army and Air Force and "boot camp" in the Navy and Marines). This indoctrination process is brutal and serves to train the members of the armed services to react to stimuli in a rigidly prescribed manner.[3] It is impossible for me to forget one of my Drill Sergeants training us in a call-and-response drill while I was at the Infantry School at Ft. Benning, Georgia. His call was: "What is the Definition of Discipline?" to which we would have to reply in loud unison: "Immediate Execution of Orders Without Question, Drill Sergeant!" We did this over and over throughout our training cycle, until the call-and-response became subconscious and thoughtless. To this day, I cannot hear the word "discipline" without having that response replayed in my head. In this manner, the word "discipline" has become a symbol in and of itself, one that was deliberately (and very successfully) implanted into my mind and reinforced through the lockstep regimentation of the occupation. In essence, initial military training is a bombardment of symbols and forced associations. In a combat situation, this allows for quick and efficient decision making with respect to the identification of enemies and execution of complicated orders in that incredibly violent and foggy arena.

The heavy symbology of the military is complete and deluges the service-member's life. Tangible symbols such as rank identification, unit crests, and cadence-calls for dress and ceremony surround the service-member, who must learn to effortlessly negotiate the wide range of protocols for addressing and engaging colleagues and leaders in the dozens of combinations of scenarios for different people in different environments (there are different ways to address commissioned officers, warrant officers, and different types of non-commissioned officers, which can vary in different environments such as outdoors, indoors, in the field, during evaluation boards, etc). Intangible symbols become an integral part of the equation as well. Certain paradigms are systematic in the military, such as a value for dogged puritanical work ethic. From this comes the denotation of certain words as symbols with a negative connotation. The word "sensitivity" stands as a prime example here; I recall the sarcastic tone with which it was used by my drill sergeants during basic training in their complaints about the Army's new regulations discouraging the abuse of recruits. Considering that I was an Infantryman training in an all-male battalion outside of the traditional basic training sequence, these sarcastic remarks were often evoked in tandem with the drill sergeants' blatant disregard of them (the regulations) and choice to perpetuate training techniques deemed unnecessarily excessive by the military's governing bodies, knowing that something of a "blind eye" was turned to the Infantry School (as well as other training sequences intended to prepare recruits for particularly violent duty) due to the nature of the job we were being trained for.[3] The idea of "sensitivity" is disparaged throughout the military experience, even after the indoctrination period is over. This ranges from a political culture that is critical of social welfare to a need that the military feels to strip its warriors of the capacity to experience empathy for people that they might be ordered to engage as enemy.[4]

For many veterans, the encounters and experiences of post-military civilian life (such as the university environment) are processed with military metaphors. When veterans enter a classroom for the first time and looks for a place to sit, they may conceptually "cover down" on a particular seat ("covering down" is a military expression that refers to the protocol of appropriately arranging oneself relative to others in formation by established standards), as I have heard veterans use this expression many times while sitting at meetings and socials. The lexicon of military metaphors is expansive and veterans often apply them to civilian situations. The meaning of this extends beyond semantics though, as metaphors can reveal the very manner in which people conceive of the world.[5]

4. Internal Conflict

Further complicating the situation of the division between the student veteran diaspora and the power of the heavy symbology codified in the veteran's cognition is the fact that many current veterans have feelings of confusion and even resentment towards the "homeland" they are so deeply identified with. Some veterans I spoke to after a veteran's day event held around the flag at the UNCA campus quad expressed a difficult-to-describe sense of confusion. Interestingly, many of the veterans I worked with have adopted an anti-war stance and some are traumatized by unsavory wartime atrocities they witnessed and participated in. Once out of the context of war, decorated warriors deemed "heroes" may not wish to be honored for acts that they do not take pride in.[6] Some veterans express a sense of betrayal and feel that their patriotism and willingness to serve was taken advantage of and used for immoral purposes.[3] In these cases, the flag waving and patriotic music accompanying events that are intended to honor veterans can stir negative feelings and remind them of the type of banal nationalism that they feel led to xenophobia and jingoism that caused a war; a war that resulted in the deaths of countless people, including their friends and innocent civilians.[7,8] Adam, a veteran of the Marines from Western Michigan University expressed the confusing feelings he experiences when the ROTC program at his school stages events. "I am not ashamed to be a veteran but I get really annoyed with the dress and ceremony show surrounding the ROTC cadets when they are marching around. The show drives me insane. I hate seeing that." Krum, a veteran of the Marines and survivor of grievous combat injuries, described feeling an "unwritten force against the military" among his UNC Asheville peers that he finds unfair and hurtful, that wounds him at the same time that he is burdened with the question of "why did we fight and die?"

Feral is a transgender woman who served as an elite Special Forces medical sergeant in Afghanistan. For her, joining the military was part of a strategy to force herself to fulfil a highly-masculine gender role that she felt pressured to conform to and to "do something honorable" with her life. Succeeding greatly as a soldier, she made her way through the rigorous and selective training necessary to become a Green Beret with no trouble. She participated in numerous combat missions in Afghanistan but also set up temporary clinics to offer medical services to Afghan people. Though she felt like she was serving for the greater good of the world, one significant experience shook her faith in the military and her belief in the legitimacy of the United States' role in Afghanistan.

> For a while, I actually bought into this narrative that we were doing something to help the people of Afghanistan . . but that perspective was radically altered when I had a newborn come in, a neonate . . this child had been born prematurely. When they brought her in to me, I thought she was dead . . but she wasn't. She started moving. I thought she was dead because she was so desiccated; dried out like a little prune. Yeah, she wasn't eating or drinking anything. When she was strong enough she would cry but it was a weak cry. Anyway, I got an I.V. started on this child and I called for a medevac . . and they wouldn't give me one . . there were birds (helicopters) available but they wouldn't give me a medevac for this child. So . . I got lucky in that we got a resupply that day. I actually took this child and sent my junior with her to Qalat (a city in Afghanistan) on this supply bird . . I got permission from my Captain to do this and we sent her out on the supply bird. And . . I heard over the radio . . heard somebody say: "we should just chuck her out over the canyon." And . . that was the first time in something like 15 years that I cried . . I mean . . that was very clear . . evidence that . . excuse me . . very clear evidence that we really didn't give a shit about the people of Afghanistan and we were just there to you know . . just make some money and do violent things and . . it was a very disheartening experience for me. So . . I reached the sort of perspective that this was just kind of a destructive thing . . we were just there to kill. We certainly did enough of that."

Feral still describes her feelings about the military as confusing. During our interview, she said that she still feels angry about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and she still feels pride in her accomplishment of having become a Green Beret (she still carries her green beret with her in her car). However, many of her recollections of her service-time are dark. Having embraced her female gender since her discharge, she remembers her time in the military as a time of striving to adhere to (and successfully fulfilling) the exaggerated masculine social norms idealized there. Also, the memories of injustices such as the one with the Afghan infant still haunt her enough to stir tears during our interview.

The internal conflict experienced by student veterans can also be related to the continuing relationships with their former military comrades, particularly those who are still serving. Some people in the military may look unfavorably on others who chose to get out of the service. The strong ideologies among some in the military that do

not regard higher education very well can cause antagonism towards those who have chosen to follow that path. The continuous connection that social media allows people to maintain in the modern world keeps those who have gotten out of the military in touch with their former buddies, who can have considerable emotional influence over them. For Paul, an Army veteran and also a survivor of combat injury, the disapproval his old military friends show towards his education, career path, and changing worldviews is particularly painful.

> I am still in touch with some of my old military buddies; we chat on Facebook and such. I'm trying to go to school and get an education but with a lot of the political debate going on right now, the liberal vs. conservative arguments, I have been told by some of my old friends that I am getting "brainwashed" by the liberals. They think that that is what college is all about; some sort of liberal agenda to change who I am and turn me against "American" values. I don't really feel like I'm doing that but it still hurts sometimes. I fought with these people and we took care of each other in combat. Even though I've been out of the military for a few years, I still feel their influence on me. It is hard not to feel that. It is like I don't belong anywhere . . I go to college and don't fit in because I am a veteran and I go home and talk to my old military buddies and don't fit in because I speak out against the war and I don't vote the same way they do and I say that I think the government is spending too much money on the war.

Paul's experience demonstrates the power of the dissonance caused when a veteran finds his/herself at odds with a background and culture that they were deeply invested in. The sense of isolation resulting from being in conflict with the ideals of their former peers (and former self) can also be heightened by the sense of displacement that the veteran may experience from the physical separation from their former homeland and the alienation that may be experienced as they struggle to relate to the residents of their new environment.

5. Diaspora

Veterans returning to the civilian world are not unlike the many diasporas that live around the world. Using Rogers Brubaker's definition of diaspora, a diaspora maintains three criteria: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance.[9] In his definition, the dispersion must be "forced or otherwise traumatic" and that dispersions "within state borders will suffice." The second criterion is "the orientation to a real or imagined 'homeland' as an authoritative source of value, identity, and loyalty." Boundaries "can be maintained by deliberate resistance to assimilation through self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation or as an unintended consequence of social exclusion."

As student veterans studying at a non-military institution, the individuals participating in this study are all by definition under the condition of dispersion. The divide between military culture and the culture of a civilian liberal arts institution is markedly sharp. One individual I interviewed, Lolita, was in her first semester of study at UNC Asheville. She was 28 years old and a veteran of the Marine Corps. Married at the age of 20 to another Marine, Lolita decided to enlist when she was 23. She described boot camp to me, calling it a valuable experience and said that she considered it important to be pushed beyond her comfort zone. "It was the sort of experience that is incomprehensible to people who have never experienced it" she said. She discovered that she could do things that she never thought possible and that though she remembered being very uncomfortable at the time, she now recalled the experience fondly. Fresh out of the Marine Corps, Lolita said that though she thinks her classmates are good people, she "has absolutely nothing in common with them."

Discovering the ten year age difference between her and the freshmen in her introductory college classes, Lolita sensed that she was no longer "at home" in the classroom. Though she finds her veteran's education benefit to be a fantastic resource, she told me that she was considering leaving the university environment, partially due to the fact that she feels like such an "outsider."

When Krum began at UNC Asheville, he too was struck by the difference between himself and the other students in the classroom. After barely surviving a bomb blast and spending a year and a half recovering from his wounds at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C., Krum actually felt very motivated and happy to be getting on with his life, inspired by the incredible experience of survival. In the classroom, he immediately began to have moments where he felt so different and "out of place" that he would wonder "why am I here?" In his eyes, UNC Asheville seemed like a "bubble" filled with naïve people who are disconnected from the things that are really going on in the world.

My relationship with students is improving, although for most of the experience . . I still . . sometimes I get waves of "what the fuck." I feel kind of different. I feel ostracized. I feel like my life experience set me . . they don't know. Just being naïve to it. Ignorant to it. There's all this ignorant shit I've heard; It hurt me a lot. . . . The faculty here, at least in my major, is really supportive. Faculty outside have not been as supportive. I've taken some "out there" courses and really enjoyed them . . I wouldn't narrow it down to department but certain professors had such a doctrine that they are presenting and if you didn't fit it or reflect it back to them, you are not a successful student. If it's something like foreign policy, history, or about The United States and "how do we do it," it's just clumping together with this lecture, negating the fact that its human beings, with all of the players involved . . neglecting that there might be a veteran with PTSD, who fought for this country and returned to have a professor to say "it's a fucked up war." It's the same for students here; rallies against it, even the next war. It's a liberal arts college and it's a bubble here. It's "majority white," and only like 7% black (According to the University of North Carolina at Asheville College Portrait, the actual percentage of African American students at UNCA is 3%).[10] We don't have diversity here. There's an unwritten force against the armed service. It can tap into the core of who I am. It taps into the dichotomy of my life. On one end, I have to recognize that I'm against the war myself, but on the other I've got to recognize that I fought it and my friends fought it and died for it and what the fuck was that for? That's just the reality of coming to school, I guess.

For Sophia, a veteran of the Air Force, her sense of being an outsider has alienated her from nearly everyone she goes to school with. A 12 to 15 year age difference between her and her classmates creates a barrier that she believes to be nearly impenetrable. Though she does not advertise that she is a veteran, she feels that her age causes her younger classmates to disrespect her and to consider her ideas and contributions to class discussions to be irrelevant when compared to their perspectives, which they consider to be "fresher."

My relationship with other students is almost not there. I don't really relate or talk to many people. I've been here a year and don't tell people I was in the military; I hide behind the fact that I look younger. I don't really get to know people because I don't want them asking me questions . . The staff and faculty I get along with really well. I can hold conversations with them, I feel like. I do often. I talk to faculty often about the materials; I'll talk to them after classes. I do have more problems with teachers in the Spanish section. As far as them not understanding or relating to the fact that I'm 15 years older than everyone in the class. It affects me in the sense that there will be assignments that ask in Spanish like 'have you ever gone bankrupt' or 'have you ever owned a home' and I would say 'yes, I have owned a home.' The whole point of the exercise though is that they think that these are children in the class are 18 year olds who have never owned a home and the answers are expected to be in the negative. So, that affects my language building because I can't even answer the questions the way they want me to because of my age. They don't get it as much as the sociology and anthropology department does. I have been able to talk to them and say "that just doesn't really relate." One professor was concerned because I don't talk very much in class and I told her 'the students make me feel like an old lady and telling me 'no, this stigma doesn't happen anymore, that was from like 1999.'

The experience with faculty that Sophia describes here is enlightening, especially when compared to Krum's. Though she feels absolutely alienated from her classmates, the relationships she has developed with faculty are important to her and are the aspect of her experience as a student that she described most positively to me. Like Krum, she feels a connection to the faculty in her major (sociology) but has been offended by faculty from other departments. Just as her description of the faculty she perceives to be supportive was particularly positive in tone, it was during her telling of bad experiences she has had with other faculty that she seemed most upset.

The examples of Krum and Sophia shown here demonstrate the value of the relationships that veterans have with faculty. In cases where veterans who, like Sophia, feel so different and disconnected from their younger classmates, the dignity and intellectual maturity that they perceive in some faculty provides the only connection that they feel with the institution. The military functions in a hierarchal manner, with order maintained through an unquestioned maintenance of respect for leaders. It is not uncommon for veterans in the classroom to incorporate faculty into this thought process, viewing them in the same way that they once viewed military leaders (which can make it especially frustrating to veterans when they perceive that classmates are not paying attention in class or are being otherwise disrespectful to the faculty member who is teaching).[7,8] This is also suggestive of why both the positive verification and the disapproval of faculty members can elicit such strong emotional responses from the veterans in their classes.

Using Brubaker's definition, veterans' identification with a homeland is central to their identity as a diaspora.[9] This is complicated though as this is one of the cases described by Brubaker where the homeland is imagined. Military experience affects all veterans and some veterans are deeply affected. The most significant world that the veterans are separated from though is not the physical place of a military base or overseas deployment location. The homeland is a complex arrangement of the "things" that comprise what it meant to be in the military for each individual. Regimentation and order are the homeland for some. For others it is the familiarity of a uniform (one student veteran I spoke to struggled emotionally with not being able to wear his old military uniform to his college graduation ceremony). For many, the homeland they are separated from is the place where they were once personally involved in tasks with a level of meaning beyond what they perceive as obtainable in academia, where they are surrounded by what appears to many of them to be spoiled and naïve teenagers. Many veterans experience this feeling when they feel that the classmates around them are not even aware of the "bigger" things going on in the world. Krum summed up this feeling to me by describing times when he was sitting in class, consumed with the feeling of "they don't know." He didn't have to explain to me what it was that "they didn't know." Knowing that I am a war veteran myself, he knew that describing the feeling would be sufficient and I would understand him. I did.

The boundaries that prevent assimilation can be the result of self-imposed exile or social exclusion. Among the student veterans, it can sometimes be one causing the other or vice versa. It can be a vicious non-terminating cycle of rejection and deliberate seclusion that drives the student veteran farther and farther away from his or her peers, society as a whole, and their chances of academic success. This is most pronounced in cases where the "homeland" that defines the identity of the student veterans comes under attack in their eyes. This stimulates deep feelings in the veterans that can overpower their minds and bodies and create what may seem like an insurmountable barrier between themselves and the academic world they are attempting to function in.

For Lolita, the majority of the rejection that she has perceived has come from faculty. She describes her classmates as being like naïve children but feels that she subscribes to a value system that is openly unaccepted by her professors in the classroom, particularly with regard to her religion.

> I don't like to . . I'm not trying to jump on that same ticket of 'oh *poor me*, oh *discrimination* or whatever,' but I really kind of feel like that . . you know, um discriminated like we talked about both for being religious, for being a Christian, and for serving in the military, there's just a stigma, it feels like there's a stigma against that coming from a few of my professors . . Professors. Yeah. The students, like I said, they're kind of caught off guard by me. Cause I'm just this little girl. So yeah, I can see it kind of take a minute for them to come up with a response; I don't really know what ideas go through their head while they do that. I haven't really had any issue with anyone coming outright and saying something derogatory to me because of my service. I don't even know how I would react to that.

The differences between the established value systems of the world they left and the one they are trying to move into enhances the difficulty many veterans experience in integrating into civilian classrooms. They are different moral worlds and the ethical priorities of one may not translate in the other.[6] Paul found himself in this sort of situation during a class discussion on torture.

> I hate torture and I do not believe that it should ever be used. I hate it when people try to justify it. I was in a class though and we were having a discussion on ethics and torture came up. I felt myself getting upset before we even really started talking about it. Students started throwing around lots of scenarios involving saving children and such. I felt like they were judging too thoughtlessly and I said so. I was clear that I don't support torture but it didn't matter. The students in the class knew that I am a veteran and a few of them got mad at me. One told me that I don't have any morals. He didn't know anything about me other than me being a veteran and my saying that they were judging too quickly. I had to get up and leave class. I cried while I was driving home; I don't even remember the rest of that day.

In Paul's experience in the classroom discussion on torture, the value system (and its priorities) of the world he had once resided in were not compatible with the value system of the new moral world he was trying to succeed in. Even though Paul strongly opposes the use of torture and the way that the military world sometimes deals with it philosophically, his time operating in that system had left its mark and he found himself immersed in a cognitive dilemma that he was unable to resolve at the time. The potential power of the impact that the differences in these different ethical systems can have over those locked between them can be seen in this example due to the fact that not only does Paul oppose torture now, he opposed it and spoke out against it while he was in the military. It wasn't

even that his values had changed in the time since being discharged; the moral world he was in was the only thing that had changed. The shift in moral worlds was enough to induce cognitive dissonance on its own.

The sense of otherness experienced by veterans in college can be intensified not only by the fact that they are being stigmatized by their peers because of their veteran status but also by the fact that they may strongly not identify with the image they are being associated with. The expectation that society has for veterans to perform according to a pre-conceived template of behaviors can weigh heavily on them.[3]

It is worth note that many student veterans perceive a barrier between themselves and students and faculty because of background/socio-economic differences that are not directly related to their military experience. The enlisted men and women of the United States Military hail largely from poor and working class families.[3] This is corroborated by the perception of many of the veterans that I have spoken to that they come from poorer economic backgrounds than their classmates. For these veterans, this is a sense of difference that they perceive regularly. Regardless of their economic background or religious affiliation (I have spoken with veterans who are devout Christians and others that are atheists), every UNC Asheville veteran I have spoken to expressed to me that they perceive a "sick irony" (that is Krum's wording) in UNC Asheville's proclaimed diversity focus and believe that the diversity that is spoken of is actually based on an exclusive set of criteria that does not include them. Even though I did not ask about religion in the interviews, a common complaint (even from non-religious veterans) that was raised when I asked veterans about how they have been treated is that students and faculty openly criticize Christianity in the classroom. Religious and non-religious, conservative and liberal, many student veterans I spoke to feel that their demographic tends to be poorer, more conservative, and more religious than the traditional student in their classrooms. Thus, even non-religious veterans expressed feeling personally offended by open anti-Christian sentiment in the classroom because though they are not currently practicing religion, they were often raised in Christian homes and have many Christian family members and loved ones that they feel are being unapologetically attacked. Though this is not directly connected to military service, this feeling is something that student veteran participants in this study have repeatedly and without provocation expressed to me during their descriptions of their sense of difference from their classmates at UNC Asheville.

Another significant challenge facing many student veterans derives from their tendency to come from a more economically disadvantaged *social* background. The poor and working class households they grew up in may not have valued college education or may have even openly resented it. The cultural capital necessary to pursue a post-secondary education may have been absent. The lure of social mobility was a nearly universal motivator for enlistment among the participants of this study but for some, this did not include college as part of the plan at all and the military itself was seen as the end-state of their escape from their poor economic situations.

Sophia enlisted in the Air Force in the late 1990's due to the perception that there was literally nothing else that she could do. Her father was in the military and raised her and her siblings with military-style regimentation. She disliked the military because of this and she had no desire to enlist but did so because it seemed "logical."

> There was nothing for me to do. There was no outlook on college. It seemed like the next logical step . . I can't even give a reason why. I hated the military so much because of my dad but when I turned 18 and it was time to make a decision, it was the only decision I could make. I can't even really give a reason . . It seemed like the logical one.

College was not seen as an option in the home she grew up in and the attitude produced by this situation resulted in her being one of the few people who actually rejected the GI Bill when she enlisted.

> When I was in the military, I did not get the GI Bill; I did not sign up for it. I was one out of a group of 200 people. I did it out of complete spite and anger of people fussing at me and yelling at me. I was like "you want to do that? Then fuck you. I'm not doing it." People were in my face saying "you need to have this" and I was like "I don't need shit."

Years after getting out of the military and desiring a new life, Sophia researched to see if there were any education benefits available to her as a veteran. Fortunately, the Post 9-11 GI Bill had been passed and it authorized education benefits for anyone who served in the military for more than 200 days after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Though she is now a dedicated student and doing well in school, the legacy of her socio-economic past continues to influence her. She maintains a relationship with her parents, who still do not value college education and get offended by the necessary prioritization that she gives to her studies.

My mom, my dad, they completely don't understand it. They don't get it. If they come up for a visit, they don't understand that "Sophie can't take off" for a visit." They ask "you can't just take a day off?" No. Even if you try to explain it, they're just thinking that you are blowing them off for school or "reading a book" or something that is not relevant (to them). It is something that is not God, Jesus, or health so it is not a priority to them. That is another reason that makes me question my father's having earned a college degree (Sophia explained that when she began college, her father began claiming that he had earned a bachelor's degree, which she had never heard him mention before and does not believe to be true). They don't understand the money, the time, the support, they don't support in any way. If I start talking about my classes, they are like "deer in the headlights." Don't know. Don't care. "Why the hell are you even thinking that hard? I just asked you if you wanted to go to dinner."

For students who are already struggling to overcome the sense of alienation that they experience in the college environment as well as the damaging effects of prior trauma, the external pressure that can come from family members who do not value college education and see it as a waste of time and money can feel even heavier than it would on its own.

6. Ideology

The powerful presence of the ideal of self-sufficiency that is held in such high esteem by many members of military culture is a theme that has recurred from the early stages of my fieldwork with student veterans.
This has manifested in some form every time that I have raised the issue of veteran's advocacy in a group of veterans. It has even been expressed privately to me in emails from participants who were personally distressed by the conflict between their value for self-sufficiency and reflexive distaste for the perceived dependency and weakness which they wish to avoid.

A Geertzian perspective of ideology as a cultural system as described in *The Interpretation of Cultures* is useful here. Describing ideologies as cultural symbol-systems, Geertz explains that "templates for the organization of social and psychological processes come most crucially into play in situations where the particular kind of information they contain is lacking, where institutional guides for behavior, thought, or feeling are weak or absent."[11] This is given after his example of the power of the maxim "War is the father of creation and the mother of culture" among the Japanese militarists of the WWII era. In the context of imperialist 1930's Japan, adherents to this ideology would have been utterly confused by the famed "war is hell" quote attributed to General Sherman during his own incredibly violent campaign during the American Civil War. Sherman's context was different though. Geertz explains: "It is thus not the truth that varies with social, psychological, and cultural contexts but the symbols we construct in our equally effective attempts to grasp it."[11]

I was participating in a task force panel at UNCA for a program intended to help address the needs of student veterans. The committee was small, including a handful of faculty and staff members in addition to me and J (a member of the student organization for veterans). At the beginning of the meeting, we began strategic planning for an initiative that I had proposed to create a systematic form of education to instruct faculty and students in matters of PTSD and cultural sensitivity and awareness towards veterans due to their increasing presence on college campuses. I was pleased that the meeting was going well and to discover that the staff members present had been seriously contemplating strategies to implement this proposal and put it into service.

Approximately fifteen minutes into the meeting, a student veteran arrived to participate. After sitting quietly through a few minutes of the discussion, he interjected to inquire about the situation, of which he admitted that he was completely unaware (I would later discover that he thought he was attending a meeting of the student veteran organization rather than a Task Force meeting). I began to explain to him that numerous veterans on campus suffer from PTSD and that we were pursuing a method of increasing awareness of the condition in the classroom. He interrupted me to declare that he thought that what we were discussing was a terrible idea and that spreading awareness about PTSD would only serve to increase the level of anxiety in the classrooms and make students and professors even more frightened by veterans. I tried to explain that increased awareness could dispel the myths and fears associated with PTSD and help humanize the people who suffer with the condition.

He changed the direction of his argument to extend it to include his philosophical dissonance with the idea of encouraging cultural sensitivity towards veterans. "Veterans do not need to be coddled and babied by their instructors" he said. He further explained that he believed that a "culture of special treatment" for veterans would be inappropriate and that it is important for individuals to maintain their own responsibility, remain engaged in class, and keep their emotional impulses under control.

After a few minutes of back-and-forth between us, J interjected to change the subject, claiming that he was feeling uncomfortable with the argument. The student veteran got up and left the meeting. I never saw him again.

During our disagreement, the veteran used the word "sensitivity" several times, always expressing it negatively and sarcastically. Consistent with the pattern of forced symbol-associations in military training that I described earlier (page 6), the word "sensitivity" is contrasted with the powerful hubris that is cultivated there.[4] The student veteran who was offended in the task force meeting may have been alienated by an environment in conflict with the ethical system he had long maintained to survive in his military homeland.

A very significant part of the military ideology and experience is the maintenance of a heavily masculine gender ideal. One important aspect of the military masculinity concept is that that it is defined metaphorically, with the "masculine/feminine" corresponding roughly with "military/civilian." Military masculine "hardness" is constantly threatened by a feminine "softness" that is equated with the civilian sphere.[12] This can even be seen in civilian discourse when it is said, as is commonly accepted, that war "makes men".[13] Because this concept of masculinity is verified by adherence to military norms and not necessarily by biological gender, women can achieve it as well.[12] The "sensitivity" disparaged in the task force meeting and the aversion to being "coddled" were certainly expressions of the military's idealized concept of what it means to be a "man" and were to be avoided.

The initial concern of that veteran at the task force meeting was that PTSD awareness training would serve to deepen the already present stigmas held by the public about combat veterans. As he described his concern to me, he said that "people will think that we are going to start freaking out in the middle of class and start throwing desks and chairs." Though I felt (and feel) that sensitivity training would be beneficial, his concern's premise (existing stigmas about veterans and PTSD) was quite real.

7. Trauma

The image of the traumatized veteran has been imprinted on our collective consciousness. Particularly after the Vietnam War, images of broken men, scattered like worn and discarded debris across a modern American landscape entered the discourse of popular culture media. Popular films like *The Deer Hunter* perpetuated the image of the psychologically damaged veteran, brutally traumatized by war to the point of absolute madness, suffering from flashbacks and the loss of the ability to recognize the familiar and their own self-destructive behavior.[14] This imagery became emplotted enough that comedic films like *The Big Lebowski* were able to caricature these behaviors for humorous effect. Naturally, this correlates with an increasing incidence of stigma but to what extent has this concept of brokenness been cultivated in the consciousness of the veterans themselves? With the risk of physical and emotional trauma among veterans already being high, the disembodied culture of trauma that awaits them in the civilian world serves to facilitate the germination of the seeds of trauma that have been planted in them.

The majority of the veterans I have spoken with experienced some form of trauma during their military experience. While shouldering the burden of navigating the difficult transition from the military world into the foreign academic lands that they struggle to understand, haunting memories of violent experiences and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder complicate every challenge they encounter by another order of magnitude.

Combat is not the only source of PTSD in veterans. Many veterans are the victims of Military Sexual Trauma (male and female), which is the experience of sexual assault and harassment in the military, which is often underreported and is believed to produce an even higher rate of PTSD than combat experience.[15,16]

An unexpected pattern reported among the veterans I have spent time with in this study is a high incidence of non-combat related trauma. I am unsure if this can be definitively correlated with their status as veterans in any way or if it is a random result. The high rate that this was reported though warrants notation. Sexual abuse and non-combat related military accidents are examples.

One reason that I believe it to be important to include this finding is the correlation that has been made between multiple incidences of trauma and the development of PTSD.[17] If someone has been exposed to trauma in the past, the likelihood that they will develop PTSD after being exposed to it again is increased. If this is in fact the case, the importance of PTSD awareness on college campuses with a veteran presence is magnified.

The high rate of trauma that veterans experience weaves the awareness and understanding of trauma and its effects with any concerted attempt to understand veteran culture. Indeed, it is important to understand the norms and rituals associated with military indoctrination and the effects that they have in fashioning the veteran's environment (perceived and physical). It must be understood though that trauma occupies such a prominent place in veteran culture that it commands attention equal to that which is given exclusively to institutionalized military ritual. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has re-woven the fiber of the consciousness and souls of the student veterans I spent time

with during this ethnography and these phenomena have often taken center stage in the drama of their struggles in the classroom.

8. Moral Injury

The nature of war experience and the psychological damage that occurs from it involves more than just direct, combat induced trauma. Betrayal of one's values by unit leadership and the military institution as a whole is a common occurrence that can render devastating effects on the service-member.[18] Trust in institutions can be weak or non-existent and military veterans are prone to an expectation of being exploited.[2] Many veterans served under officers that they perceived to be acting out of concern for their own careers ahead of their concern for the service-members serving under them. Within an institution like a university, with professors who not only work for their students but also may appear to be teaching and researching for the purpose of their own academic career advancement, veterans in the classroom can have their sensitivity to this triggered. I observe a possible expression of this among the veterans who participated in this study in the concern that they often express to me about *my* purposes for this study and their idea that there is some piece of information that I am trying to find in them that will help me achieve some sort of personal goal. Though I would always explain that I was simply recording the experience of veterans in college, regardless of what their military experience may or may not have been, I would often be asked what I was "trying to find" and veterans like Lolita who had never been in combat, Sophia who got out of the military before the war and generally avoids identification as a veteran, and transgender woman Feral initially suggested that I not interview them because they might not be productive for my *purposes.*

It is also true that veterans can experience a breakdown in their sense of reality, being deeply affected by the confusing betrayals they experience in the military. Having been placed in situations that do not make sense to them that involve the life and death of themselves, their friends, and the people of the places they occupied magnifies the impact of the trauma they experienced. In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many veterans found themselves in a powerful moral dilemma when they perceived that in spite of having believed to have been involved in a war to spread freedom and democracy to the oppressed people of the world, their missions seemed aimless and unnecessarily antagonistic towards innocent civilians.[3]

Krum served as an Infantryman in a deployment to Iraq. He described the moment when he felt his sense of purpose in Iraq turned upside down, at the very beginning of his tour. Experiencing violent combat immediately and with his emotions raw and tattered, his ethical sensibilities were confused when he was physically assaulted by a leader for expressing friendliness towards an Iraqi child. He was ordered to perceive and treat all Iraqis, regardless of their status, with a harsh otherness and to consider them all as "Haji" and enemy (though the term "Haji" is used in the Islamic world as a term of honor for people who have completed the Hajj pilgrimage, it is sometimes used as a pejorative slur by American servicemen/women for people of Middle Eastern descent). This was a very upsetting moment for him; he described it to me in our interview in short sentences and has referenced that event a number of times in casual conversation with me outside of this interview.

> It was 3rd world, straight up like in the movies. It was a shocker and my brain, I just remember like "what the fuck are we doing?" It was a culture shock and far from home and I felt like I was on mars. We were on the Syrian border and I remember I had tootsie rolls in my sack. Anyway, we were on our first patrol. We had landed and we started to set up camp and we were on patrol immediately. An IED blew up like in the first hour. It was maybe like 20 feet away. My buddy was right on top of it and he was thrown in the air. He was ok, it was buried too deep…. I'm really thankful. I mean, pretty much every day was IED's and gunfire and we had mortar 30 and we were living in this abandoned tire house on the border of Syria and every night you had to wear flak (body armor). It was combat. There were only 150 of us out there. We were out there with Recon and Special Forces and sniper units. It was really isolated and I remember about a week in, it was immediately clear that "this is bad." After that we had four dead already. Going to the funeral is the fucking weirdest thing. It is like this stupid makeshift boots and gun and like you walk by and you touch the helmet and you're back on patrol. There were so many elements of this that were really tweaking me.
>
> I was handing out tootsie rolls and my sergeant came up and just slapped me and was like "we're in combat." I'm like, here in the UNCA perspective, on so many levels what we did was just . . You just go in and show your fucking force and you're going to get some kickback. There we did. Even down to like, everything was just "us" and there were "others." I remember the sergeant saying "They're all haji.[4]

They're all evil." In my book I was like "why?" I didn't understand that. There was . . "this is wrong." I had some moral conflict. I definitely didn't go in wanting to kill anyone.

It was only a 2 mile by 3 mile radius. This place. You would feel the IED and you wonder "what just happened?" 30-plus marines were killed in 6 months. They ended up shutting that place down.

Krum spoke in a clear and confident voice, casting his short and firm sentences through a kind of wry smile that conveyed an agglomeration of sternness, sarcasm, and disgust. Earlier in our interview, Krum spoke reverently of his mother who died when he was 15 from a blood clot in her brain. She cultivated a sense of compassion and social responsibility in him at a young age that made a deep and lasting impression in his character. He recalled her taking him to volunteer in the Special Olympics when he was in the second grade, an experience that he values to this day. Though Krum was grievously wounded in Iraq, he still recalls the loss of his mother as the single most painful and haunting experience of his life. Krum described her as the spiritual, ethical, and philosophical anchor of the family. His father "lost his mind" after her death and became violent and unstable, once chasing Krum down the street with an axe while naked and drunk. In his mother's absence, he came to see his environment as a dark and painful place which manifested damage that "reverberates through the years." Escape from that dark place was one of Krum's primary reasons for joining the military and it seemed like an ethical path to follow, consistent with the values his mother bestowed upon him. Faced with the sudden realization that he was contending with a situation that violated his deeply held ethical sensibilities, his sense of alienation thickened and he experienced a crushing sense of betrayal, stripped of the values he sought to pursue in the military that were given to him by the mother whose absence created an emptiness he had hoped to leave behind.

When faced with the anti-war sentiment and protests common on college campuses, the still unhealed wounds from these ethical conflicts can be torn back open, causing terrible suffering for the veteran. In cases like Krum's, where he actually shares in his classmates' anti-war feelings, the offense he feels from this creates even more dissonance.

9. Conclusion

In this ethnography, I have shown that institutions of higher learning in the United States have a growing population of student veterans. 2.2 Million servicemen/women have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and by the end of 2014, 90,000 are expected to return from Afghanistan.[19] Over the next five years, it is expected that approximately one million veterans will get out of the military and begin the transition into the civilian world.[19] With so many veterans having enlisted for education benefits, academic institutions can expect hundreds of thousands of individuals filling their classrooms to pursue the educations promised to them in exchange for their service.

The group of veterans I have worked with is diverse and the feelings that they expressed to me have been varied, as is to be expected. I have spoken to veterans who have grown to love college and I have spoken to others who hated it and wanted to get through with it so they could get on with their careers. Consistently though, every veteran I have spoken to has felt "out of place" in the classroom. Many feel that they have been betrayed by a military/government system that lured them into service with the promise of an education that it did not set them up for success with. Some struggle primarily with the age difference between themselves and their classmates, which is unavoidable for people who have to complete at least one enlistment term before they can start college. Some are offended when they feel that they (and their families back home) are judged by classmates of a different socioeconomic status due to stereotypes about the conservative working class demographic they hail from. There are some veterans who endure pressure from family members who do not support their pursuit of higher education and there are veterans who still strongly identify with a military value system that does not translate neatly into the civilian world and in particular, academia.

The military culture and environment can be quite severe. During enlistment, servicemen/women were forced to participate in brutal war deployments and to observe strict military norms. Every recruit's service begins with a period of indoctrination in which they are disciplined into a no-questions-asked adherence to orders and military protocol. The servicemen/women are obligated to suspend their own moral and ethical standards that exist outside of the moral status assigned to observance of military duty/hierarchy and deep nationalism. Success and survival in the military can be dependent on an individual's ability to do this.

College campuses become a foreign landscape for veterans who may have become so removed from civilian culture that they have lost the ability to easily function in such an environment. The culture of academia, particularly in liberal arts campuses, is steeped in the concept of critical thought; students are encouraged to utilize the scientific method, which involves the critical analysis of observed data and the discovery of truth by detailed

scrutiny. This is absolutely antithetical to the very core of military epistemology, which is rooted in unquestioned obedience to orders and absolute adherence to tradition. This, combined with epidemic rates of combat-related PTSD, has significantly stifled the success of military veterans in their pursuit of higher education.

The questions that are begged by this data are numerous. Since this is an autoethnography, I am particularly obligated as the ethnographer to exercise caution as I try to determine what the most salient questions are and to make every attempt to present them in a manner that is fair and productive. At the beginning of my ethnographic research, the connection that I felt (and feel) to the stories that are told here certainly pressured me to focus on problems, seek blame, and locate culprits. The temptation exists to form simple conclusions that fault the military for failing to prepare veterans for re-integration into civilian society or academic institutions that alienate veterans and make them feel out of place. Rather, I would like to let the stories they tell speak for themselves while I focus on identifying cultural themes, symbols, and what their meanings are to the veterans who participated in this study. To the reader, I will limit myself to a few of the questions that are brought up by this investigation. What does it mean to us as a society that thousands of young Americans risk their lives by fighting in wars from which they come home confused (if even intact) and then struggle to attain the education and social mobility that was promised to them in exchange for their sacrifice? However one interprets this situation, where do our responsibilities lie in how we do (or do not) address it? How do we address the effects of the trauma that will, to some degree, continue to manifest in this culture and to the rest of the world for many years to come?

10. Acknowledgments

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