



Positionality in Embodied War Imaginaries: American Snipers

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Abstract

This paper maps the positionality of two soldiers embodied experiences as snipers for the US military. One, Chris Kyle who is labeled as “the most lethal sniper in US military history,” wrote a book uncritically glorifying his experiences, which was later turned into the Oscar nominated film *American Sniper*. His attempt to help veterans heal from PTSD by taking them shooting was a possible trigger that reignited the traumas of war, which can be traced to his eventual death. The other, Garrett Reppenhagen, who was the first active duty member of the antiwar group Iraq Veterans Against the War, and currently works to help others heal from the traumas of war by getting them engaged in wilderness programs and environmental activism. Both stories expose a range of traumas of war, both within wartime and in peacetime, and we see the ways in which their narratives of war have different reflections of what it means to heal during times of peace. This paper juxtaposes these two stories, their war imaginaries, and how one works to reinforce the military *dispositif*, while the other works to impede it in favor of human rights.

Key words: Embodiment, Militarism, Soldiers, Veterans, War Imaginaries.

Introduction

Ghost Limb

*my open palm searched for the missing guard
and in my weariness attempted to curl around it
the other hand dreamed of the grip it once supported
my cheek earned for the stock it rested upon
my nose reached for the charging handle
that once set my consistent sight picture
my eyes scan for the front sight post*

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*invisible now before my target
 all the while my finger readies to kill again
 oh the comfortable caress of my cradle rifle
 some amputees say they can still feel their missing limbs*
 --Garett Reppenhagen¹

The release of the 2014 Oscar nominated hit *American Sniper*—based on the real-life American soldier and his memoirs, Chris Kyle—stirred up controversy on all sides of the political spectrum. As some progressive liberals labeled it a 2-hour propaganda reel for the Global War on Terror, conservatives hailed it as a true testament to the heroic struggle's soldiers faced and painted anyone critical of the film as unpatriotic and treasonous. One of the main criticisms of the film was the apolitical tone that it took, as the film's protagonist, Chris Kyle watches the attacks on 9/11 and is then in the next scene is fighting in Iraq. The film's director, Clint Eastwood claims that the film was not about the politics of it all but rather about the ways in which war affects soldiers and their families.² However, with no critical analysis one is to assume that there is a link between the events of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, which was how the war was initially sold to Americans; though there were no real connections between the two. Therefore, the conscious decision not to say something is in and of itself a political act.³ Furthermore, the film works to perpetuate the military *dispositif*, creating a particular war imaginary that was widely seen as glorifying war at the cost of soldiers.

The other primary criticism of *American Sniper* is the glorification of Chris Kyle and the disconnect between what he wrote in his book versus what played out on the big screen; though there have been recent claims that even Kyle's book was exaggerated. This disconnect between the book and the movie was widely examined, but one of the most poignant voices was that of Army veteran Garett Reppenhagen, who also served as a sniper while in Iraq, but later came to become a peace activist. While both served at the same time their stories have interesting similarities and differences that are worth examining. While Chris Kyle became a symbol of militarism and American rightwing politics, Reppenhagen could be seen as a symbol of human rights advocacy and American leftwing politics that pushes against militarism. This article juxtaposes the histories of these figures, their war imaginaries, and how one works to reinforce the military *dispositif*, while the other works to impede it in the name of human rights.⁴

War Imaginaries

As many have shown, embodied experiences should be central to our understanding of war and militarism as it shows the ways in which the security *dispositif* has 'generative effects.'⁵ Synne Dyvik points

out the embodied experiences of soldiers and veterans “offer narratives of war and combat that should be listened to – not necessarily because they provide ‘the truth’ about war, but because of how they frame ‘their truth’ through the body and numerous potent, prevailing and powerful discursive frames.”⁶ Furthermore, Dyvik goes on to show the ways that biographies and memoirs are embodied texts of war that “contribute to our imaginaries about war.”⁷

While most uses of the concept “war imaginary,” have primarily been within a conception of a “cold war imaginary,” with little theoretical explanation; and by Lilie Chouliaraki who works in visual communications, specifically examining the images around war photographs and films.⁸ What is being discussed here is similar but has a more multifaceted meaning, as it is more spatially diverse. The jumping off point here is from a larger concept, which is that of a “social imaginary.” Manfred Steger poignantly frames the social imaginary, by stating:

Constituting the macromapping of social and political space through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world, this deep-seated mode of understanding provides the most general parameters within which people imagine their communal existence... the social imaginary is neither a theory nor an ideology, but an implicit “background” that makes possible the communal practices and a widely shared sense of their legitimacy.⁹

Charles Taylor, whom Steger is drawing from, goes on to explain that it is “background,” because, “It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature.”¹⁰ With this “unlimited and indefinite nature” in mind, the use of it here becomes a bit more focused, as this essay examines the way in which war is imagined in relation to these two veterans’ stories.

There are a number of aspects to this imaginary, from the image of war to the image of the military apparatus. Furthermore, there is a multiplicity of war imaginaries that relate to and can be tied to the imaginary being proposed here, i.e. the war on drugs, the war on women, the war on men, the war on poverty, the war on cancer, the war on Christmas; the list is again unlimited and indefinite. However, the scope of this essay is focused on the war imaginaries related to Chris Kyle and Garrett Reppenhagen, as they embody similar positionalities yet contrasting narratives that show us significantly different images of war.

The war imaginary can be seen as the *chameleon skin* of the US security *dispositif* as it is a constantly shifting image meant to perpetuate and maintain US militarism. The war imaginary has a

reciprocal relationship with the security *dispositif* as it is formed by and helps to shape the policies, institutions, practices, ideology, and discourse of the security *dispositif*. However, there is not a singular war imaginary within the security *dispositif*, as there is a multiplicity of imaginaries, though it is the security *dispositif* that holds them all together. For example, within the military a soldier who has a racist construction of the war imaginary, who fights so that he can kill Muslims, can fight next to and be intimately bonded with a soldier who has a more liberal construction of the war imaginary, and fights to promote democracy and freedom. The differing war imaginaries are the product of an unlimited number of variables, from personal life experiences to media constructions of war. Cynthia Weber's work, *Imagining America at War*, attempts to capture the multiplicity of war imaginaries within the United States, post 9/11. Her focus is upon film representations of society—primarily around war movies—in order to examine the moral identity and to find out who the “we” is in the American imaginary.¹¹ As Weber points out, the films she examined, “were mobilized in post-9/11 cinema to construct US individual, national, and international subjectivities as well as diverse historical trajectories for ‘becoming a moral American’ and a ‘moral America’.”¹² The movie and book *American Sniper* are definitely a part of creating and perpetuating war imaginaries for others, and the “apolitical” war images that often contribute to pro-militaristic war imaginaries; whereas stories such as Reppenhagen's perpetuates a very different type of war imaginary that can be seen as anti-militaristic while still utilizing a military service narrative. Therefore, similar to Weber's attempt to capture the multiplicity of war imaginaries in film, I do the same here but through genealogical accounts of two soldiers who had similar positionalities in war.

Similar to the war imaginary, Michael Shapiro examines a “presence of war” through an intervention of theory and aesthetic montages. Shapiro shows that there is a “spatio-temporality of war” that cyclically connects war and the homefront.¹³ In this analysis he states:

Both texts disclose not only the way the homefront delivers bodies to the war front but also the degree to which war takes place on the home front. They evince an equivalence that frames ‘war’ within a critical politics of aesthetics inasmuch as they repartition the sense of war as they challenge the boundary between war and domesticity.¹⁴

In other words, there is not only an intimate link between the battlefield and those at home, but there is an affectual relationship between the two. Those at home are driven to war for a variety of reasons, similarly those at war come home to fight for a number of different causes, often there are links to their time in the military.

This essay examines some of these opposing frames of war, though the subjectivities come from similar positionalities. Furthermore, the narratives here are staged encounters with theory that are genealogical, as I seek to create histories of the present. As Foucault explains about genealogies:

We have both a meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights. These genealogies are a combination of erudite knowledge and what people know... we can give the name 'genealogy' to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics.¹⁵

Similarly, my use of the narratives of these veterans and their histories highlights "the discursive construction of social subjects and knowledge and the functioning of discourse in social change."¹⁶ These are not just flat stories, they are dynamic and invite you to think about the theoretical concepts throughout in different ways. Furthermore, similar to how Michael Shapiro describes the creation of an encounter between data or events and theory, I seek to show how these narratives interact with theory, and vice versa, throughout this essay. By juxtaposing these narratives, we go beyond the normative masculine militarized subject narrative to see there is not only a range of narratives that come out of war, but also ones that can be productive for advocating for human rights.

What Does A Sniper See?

The sniper represents one of the smallest and most intimate units of troops within a military force, as it is one to four soldiers on a specific mission to kill the enemy, and it is usually only one soldier who is pulling the trigger while the other three are either visual spotters or there to maintain 360 degree security.¹⁷ They are often armed with a personal weapon each—often an assault rifle—and with a single sniper rifle amongst the group, which has a range that extends up to a mile away.

Michael Shapiro describes the visual accompaniments—in the case of a sniper it would be the scope and the sniper rifle—as a part of the soldier, thus forming what can be seen as a "machinic-assemblage."¹⁸ This assemblage can be clearly seen in the poem at the beginning of this paper, as Garrett Reppenhagen describes an intimacy with the weapon and now that he does not have it, he refers to it as a "ghost limb," as if the weapon was amputated from him. This image of the machine/assemblage is important for understanding the war imaginary because it points towards the multiplicity of the war imaginary and the various ways in which it is constructed of different militarized pieces, from training and indoctrination to movies and aesthetic montages.

The scope is one of the most important aspects of the assemblage as it is what gives the sniper the ability to shoot accurately at long ranges. Specifically, this visual accompaniment is the product of “the evolution of the military’s war *dispositif*—its network of decision-making and implementing agencies, along with the discourses and technologies of militarization that sustain them—is that apparatuses of perception are playing a more important role than those that generate firepower.”¹⁹ The aspect of sight and the ability to scan is stressed in both the book and movie *American Sniper*, as it helps to maintain situational awareness. Shapiro notes that the perceptual field of the soldier is disrupted when faced with the gaze of those being targeted; as the target is able to identify the threat that means to do them harm. However, with a sniper there is no reciprocal gaze as they are often very well hidden and often at a long distance from their target. This disruption due to the returning gaze of the target can lead to what Shapiro calls “empathic vision,” wherein the soldier experiences a humanizing moment that works against the training received to be a machinic-assemblage meant to kill for the military *dispositif*.²⁰ To be clear, empathic vision is counterintuitive to the military *dispositif* and seen as dangerous to the mission of the war machine. With no reciprocal gaze, there is no empathic vision; however, due to the experiences and war imaginaries of each individual sniper the ability for empathic vision to arise is possible. This empathic vision can be seen in the case of Garrett Reppenhagen but is clearly lacking in the story of Chris Kyle.

Two Different Paths

While both Reppenhagen and Kyle were both snipers, most of the similarities end there. Their youths were drastically different, as well as the paths they took to become snipers, and while they had similar goals of helping veterans upon their exit from the military their vision of how to do that varies greatly. This section will examine those nuances that compose their war imaginaries, because as Reppenhagen highlights in his critique of Kyle and the film *American Sniper*, “no single service member has the monopoly on the war narrative. It will change depending on where you serve, when you were there, what your role was, and a few thousand other random elements.”²¹ It is those random elements that create the war imaginary that operates with the military *dispositif*. Examining the divergence of these two stories is not to place value on one or the other, but rather to expose the variety of war imaginaries found within the military *dispositif* and the ways in which they interact with that *dispositif*.

Before the Military

Chris Kyle grew up in North-Central Texas, which can be seen as the heart of what William Connolly terms as a religious resonance machine that promotes a particular brand of patriarchal Christian beliefs that intertwines with hypercapitalist ideals.²² In early chapters Kyle emphasizes his “deep faith in God,” ranking his priorities as ‘God, country, and family’ with the last two being interchangeable.²³ In the same section he highlights his families “work ethic,” and his father’s aversions to bureaucracy, perpetuating the bootstrap myth and highlighting the Christian-capitalist assemblage. Kyle’s father was a church deacon and a Sunday school teacher often instilling Christian conservative ideals in Chris.²⁴ This assemblage is tied to a fatalistic ideal of society wherein the “revenge themes of the Book of Revelations” are prevalent to everyday thought, politics, and rhetoric.²⁵ Furthermore, Kyle exemplifies this ideology when he says:

I learned the importance of family and traditional values, like patriotism, self-reliance, and watching out for your family and neighbors... I have a strong sense of justice. It’s pretty much black-and-white. I don’t see too much grey. I think it’s important to protect others. I don’t mind hard work.²⁶

This rhetoric is a product of the backlash to the gains of the civil rights movement, as the Christian-capitalist assemblage perpetuates the idea that those with non-traditional Christian ideals are “enemies of capitalism, God, morality, and civilized discipline.”²⁷ In relation to the war imaginary this assemblage creates an uncritical construction of why the country is at or goes to war. It also explains why Kyle constantly described Iraqi’s as “savages,” as those who are not Christian are considered the other/savage, which highlights a lack of care for the lives or rights of “the other.”

The Christian-capitalist assemblage can also be tied to his identity of considering himself a cowboy as he not only participated in rodeos, but also loved to emulate the western cowboy movies of old.²⁸ The construct of the “cowboy” identity is distinctly American, tied to ideals of rugged individualism, patriotism, and often-opposed change or modernity. Chris Gibson calls this cowboy identity a hegemonic masculinity, which is “embedded in social life, norms, laws and politics, while simultaneously suppressing subordinated masculinities, femininities, minority identifications, and nonheterosexualities.”²⁹ Finally, his cowboy Christian-capitalist assemblage can probably best be seen in his love for guns, as he received his first gun when he was 8 years old. Both the book and movie *American Sniper* highlight the importance of guns and how learning to shoot was important for Kyle in his youth. As Levi Gahman highlights, the intersection of neoliberal ideology, social

hierarchies, and gun cultures promote particular masculine subjectivities.³⁰ This would come to form a particular war imaginary for Kyle, which would lead to him wanting to become a sniper.

In contrast, Reppenhagen's youth was tumultuous as he moved around the world with his father being in the military. He had a very strict regimen growing up as his father was a drill instructor, causing much resentment towards his father—his father died of complications from his participation in the Vietnam War, while Reppenhagen was entering his teen years. This left his mother to raise three children on her own. Reppenhagen's war imaginary growing up was that of the discipline and punishment from his father, and with the years of strict oversight and no longer having those restrictions, Reppenhagen spent his teen years having fun, missing school, doing drugs, and listening to punk rock music. The punk identity was the antithesis of the cowboy identity, while both seem to rebel against bureaucratic ideals, the cowboy seeks to avoid it, while the punk wants to critically examine it with the possibility of radically transforming it, but if that is not possible, then to smash it and start over. The punk primarily seeks unity and equality, whereas the cowboy wants the individualism and survival of the fittest, though both have interesting and valid critiques of the state, as outlined above.³¹

Both Reppenhagen and Kyle seem to have joined out of a lack of other options. Kyle, wanting to "see action," and to get out of Texas, was immediately drawn to combat arms positions, and was eventually enticed by a Navy recruiter who described that Navy SEALs were often the first ones to be called for any situation throughout the world. A major thing to point out here is a major discrepancy between Kyle's story and the movie *American Sniper*; in the movie, it shows Kyle watching the news and the coverage on the attack of the US Cole, which acted as a catalyst for him joining, the book does not mention this as his motivation. This discrepancy—for dramatic purposes—immediately sets up the movie for a conflict between Chris Kyle and Arab terrorists, automatically demonizing Arabs for what would eventually become his and the movie's antagonist.

Reppenhagen also joined as a way to get out of the town he was in, Grand Junction, CO, to travel the world, and to provide for his newborn daughter. While his initial idea was to get into the intelligence field, past discretions from his youth prevented him from being able to obtain the required security clearance. Instead, he chose to become a Cavalry Scout after a recruiter hyped the job up, and he chose to be stationed in Germany. He also joined with two of his friends from Grand Junction under a program called the Buddy Program. The timing of his enlistment is interesting as he and his

friends signed up two months before the attacks on 9/11 but was in the delayed entry program so they were not scheduled to leave until a month after the attacks. While the situation had changed with the precipice of war so near, he and his friends were still determined to join, as the picture of patriotism, justice, and war was being perpetuated on all fronts, from news and media to the recruiters, as well as friends and family members. Those who joined at this time were seen as brave and hailed as honorable, as there was a spike in the number of enlistments after 9/11, as the war imaginary flourished as a positive force for good. While Reppenhagen did not join for these reasons of patriotism tied to the war imaginary, it became a backdrop for his understanding and critiques of a post 9/11 world. The paths to military enlistment begin to show the variances of the war imaginaries, from their differing world views (the cowboy vs. the punk) to why they joined. This also begins to show how one may more easily form an empathic vision, while the other does not.

In the military

No matter what branch of the military a person joins they have to go through some sort of basic training. This initial training is an indoctrination phase where they break the individual down and form them into a cohesive piece of the military *dispositif* through disciplinary techniques.³² Each branch is different and has different intensity levels. The Marines, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have a general initial “boot camp,” where everyone goes through the same thing; they then go off to their advanced training. The Army—the largest of the military branches—has a couple of different systems for their boot camp. First, depending upon your job in the military you will be sent to a specific boot camp, which are separated by intensity, so if you have a combat arms job you will not go to the same boot camp as someone going into intelligence. There are also a few jobs in the military that have what is called OSUT (One Station Unit Training), where they will complete their boot camp phase and their advanced job training at the same place; with the same drill instructors, which brings its own complications.

While Chris Kyle would eventually become a Navy SEAL, he initially had to go into a different field, so he went into Navy intelligence. Thus, he went to a general boot camp which even he describes as very easy, then went to training for his job, and it was a full year before he was able to try to become a SEAL, which the training was much more rigorous than his initial boot camp. The SEAL training, called BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/Scuba training), was completely voluntary and at any point someone trying to become a SEAL can quit and go back to their original job in the

Navy; this allowed the instructors to push the recruits harder than most occupational trainings. This increased intensity thus becomes a more entrenching indoctrination tool as the disciplinary mechanisms are further perpetuated. This can be seen in the ways Chris Kyle described the ways in which he loved the intensity and the constant feeling of 'getting his ass kicked.'

I would however note that most who go through any of these sorts of trainings, from boot camp to BUD/S training, have a sense of pride after completion of the difficult task they just completed, which is heavily tied to this new identity that the military had transformed the individual into. Depending upon the persons' job, the more or less sense of masculinity is embedded within that individual identity, which perpetuates a particular hierarchy of hypermasculinity. For example, a combat arms job is seen as more "manly," whereas support jobs are often feminized. This hierarchy can lead to a toxic masculinity that has been tied to sexual assault within the military, violence among its members, and even soldier/veteran suicide.³³

Garett Reppenhagen went into Cavalry Scout OSUT training, which is a combat arms job. This training is also mentally, emotionally, and physically demanding, as Scouts are sent out in front of the front lines of battles in order to create a picture of what the battlefield looks like. While there is a higher intensity than many boot camp settings, it does not have the same voluntary nature as BUD/S, whereas if a person quits this training they will be kicked out of the military. Therefore, the dynamics of the training process are not as extreme as BUD/S training, because the military still needs to maintain high numbers of fresh bodies, but it is intense enough to weed out those who cannot handle the stresses of the front lines of battle.

A major difference that took place between Reppenhagen and Kyle came in this training process as Reppenhagen's indoctrination process had been disrupted due to the fact that he was training with two of his friends from home. A major component of the process of stripping a person of their individualism is the use of isolation, then to make them into a part of a military unit they are to create new bonds with other soldiers. Having friends within the training process not only disrupts those new bonds from forming but also creates a link to the old identity, as those friends are able to not only rely on one another when times get tough but also help to remind them of the individuals they once were. Therefore, the indoctrination process was not nearly as effective as intended, as Reppenhagen was able to maintain the punk identity that often resented and resisted the glorifications of the war imaginary within the military *dispositif*. I postulate that this is why the Army has since discontinued the Buddy program. They still continue to utilize a "battle buddy" system, which

pairs soldiers who do not know each other in training to help one another in order to reduce attrition, they no longer allow contracts that will guarantee friends from home will train and be stationed together.

1st Deployment

Upon completion of Chris Kyle's BUD/S training he would be based out of San Diego, California. It would not be until the invasion of Iraq that he would be deployed. His first deployment would start off frustrating as they felt they were not being utilized properly, but after the US forces would settle into Iraq his unit would be assigned to a Marine unit. His missions were often dangerous and ranged from house raids to reconnaissance missions, getting into multiple engagements with hostile forces that threatened his life. While he was dismissive of the affect that his deployment had upon him, his book shows an entry from his wife who described a number of episodes that were clear signals of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, from violent nightmares to high levels of anxiety, upon his return home.

Kyle came back from Iraq angry about the way in which the war was not being talked about by the American public, and that he had heard criticism of the war—which was opposed to his war imaginary of uncritically fighting in war as described above. Instead of critically listening to any of the condemnations, he felt that he was justified due to the hardships he had just faced which reinforced his view of Muslims and that those who were the “insurgents” were solely radical *jihadists* and “savages.” He saw those he was fighting as evil, not at all questioning their nationalistic motivations, the socioeconomic reasons, or even the power vacuum that was created due to the removal of Saddam Hussein.

In contrast, Garrett Reppenhagen was sent to Kosovo for his first deployment from 2002-2003. Because this was a peacekeeping mission, the tactics and missions were different than missions that take place in a combat zone. His Scout platoon was tasked as the QRF (Quick Reaction Force), where they were on call to be ready to go out and deal with any emergency. In Kosovo, while there were difficulties between the Christian and Muslim populations, there was a humanizing aspect to the deployment. It was easy to see the tensions were tied to the older Yugoslav Wars and that they often had to do with local power relations. Much of the violence had played out long ago, from time to time the QRF would be called out on a mission of a local murder—acting as a sort of police force—but for the most part the missions were patrols and check points where the platoon was able to build relations with the people. The

deployment was only supposed to be six months long, but was extended due to the invasion into Iraq, and the military trying to get a National Guard unit prepared to take their place. Being in Kosovo gave the soldiers of Reppenhagen's unit a lot of time to stay informed about the invasion into Iraq, as there were rumors that his unit would be sent to Iraq next. Looking back, Reppenhagen describes that he was proud of his work in Kosovo as he felt that he was fighting for human rights and working to help populations with long histories of violence, as opposed to his deployment to Iraq, which will be expanded upon in the next section.

These two different introductions to the war in Iraq are crucial aspects in the construction of their war imaginaries. While one is in the middle of it, looking out, and feeling disrespected, the other is on the outside looking in, mentally preparing to go there. An important aspect of these two different subject positions is the differential ability to process information. Kyle had a myopic view of the mission, and most of his decisions and thoughts were tied to the adrenalin and emotions of combat. This seemed to shape his view of the war, of Iraqis, and of Muslims. Reppenhagen, on the other hand, was able to be more reflexive of the war, and due to the more peaceful nature of his first deployment a more humane view of Muslims.

Sniper School

All sniper schools consist of similar elements, though they vary in intensity and length. The primary elements include: constant long-range marksmanship to ensure they can make the shots needed; "stalking" or concealed movement to ensure that they can move undetected, and; target cartography, where the area being observed is mapped and distances of objects are recorded. SEAL sniper school is based on Marine sniper training, but more intense, as it lasts three months. Chris Kyle volunteered for this training, and considered it the second most difficult training he received next to BUD/S.

Garett Reppenhagen also volunteered to go to sniper school, in preparation for his upcoming deployment to Iraq, but it was the "United Nations Interdiction Course." This school was one month long, compared to Kyle's three, but the elements that they learned were basically the same. One major difference, which is probably why the SEALs training is more intense, is that they train as a one-man team; whereas most other sniper schools train as two-man teams, a shooter and a spotter. This difference is important, because as Shapiro points out:

...what constitutes ethics is not based on a list of moral imperatives from which rules of engagement are derived... Rather a series of fraught negotiations with the tank and between the tank crew and the outer command structure determine what is

shot at, as the crew responds to the threatening environments that their gaze anticipates (and at the same time their ability to see is radically compromised by the technologies of the weapon(s)). No amount of programing can obviate the complexities that interpersonal negotiations and ambiguous technologies of seeing produce.³⁴

Beyond this, the training process consists of thousands of hours of firing at human silhouettes. As John Protevi highlights the shooting of targets that resemble actual bodies and vehicles raises the probability that soldiers will fire upon real targets when faced with a threat, because the protoempathic identification processes within a person's brain has been bypassed and killing an enemy becomes no different than killing a target.³⁵ Thus, the team structure complicates the way in which targets are chosen and fired upon based on negotiations of each person within that team's war imaginary; whereas a single person team does not have that negotiation process that can conflict with who is targeted. Shapiro further explains that these depersonalized targets creates an ambiguity of the target so that when and if a non-combatant is killed there is less of a legal and ethical impact for those who not only pulled the trigger but also for those who ordered the killing.³⁶ Therefore, if a person shot an innocent civilian, the casualty can be brushed off as collateral damage or forgotten as a silhouette.

Iraq

While Kyle would complete multiple tours of Iraq as a sniper, Reppenhagen would only complete one, from February 2004-February 2005. As Kyle highlights in his book, every sniper has a different experience based upon where they are, because they are not out seeking action, but rather they are usually at stationary points over-watching a targeted area. While Kyle saw so much action that he would become known as the "deadliest sniper in US history," many other snipers would see little to no action. Kyle's high amounts of "action" was exacerbated by his role as a Navy SEAL, whereas he was often assigned to high danger areas that could be anywhere in Iraq that conflict was more common. As a SEAL he was not only injected into more high-risk scenarios, but also had more resources and better intelligence briefs than most ordinary sniper teams had access to.

Reppenhagen on the other hand was a part of his battalion's sniper team, assigned to a specific area of operation. While this area, throughout the Diyala province, was considered one of the most volatile regions of Iraq, the area to cover was too big for one small team, thus making encounters rare. On top of this, the sniper team was not exempt from other base duties, from base protection to being a part of patrol missions throughout the cities. Returning to

the concept of “empathic vision,” this wider range of missions allowed for Reppenhagen to constantly have a reciprocal gaze with Iraqis.

One such example came while Reppenhagen was on gate guard, which is a task of protecting the base from enemy attacks and screening those who are entering the base. While at the gate a car pulled up and an Iraqi man got out of his car sobbing, out of the back of the car he pulled a dead child. A military convoy was passing near the boy’s house when insurgents ambushed them. A stray bullet from the convoy killed the young boy. The man wailed outside the base, and Reppenhagen reported the incident. From inside the base an officer came out to address heartbroken father. The man sought justice, but instead was greeted with a handful of cash from the officer thinking he could buy off the old man, totaling \$100. The grieving man looked at the money and threw it down. The officer not sure what else to do, turned back and returned to the base and did not come back out to further deal with the man. The old man would eventually scoop up the money and slowly return to his vehicle, now not only grief-stricken but also seemingly insulted. Seeing this interaction had a major impact on Reppenhagen as it partially confirmed his suspicion that the intention of his in Iraq mission was not actually to help the Iraqis.

The gaze of the grieving old man disrupted the protoempathic bypass; forming an empathic vision that he would continue to carry with him on other missions and would be a part of future negotiations with the rest of his sniper team. The addition of an empathic vision for Reppenhagen, compounded with his reflexive entrance into the war, would push him away from willingly perpetuating the military *dispositif*. One other poignant moment for Reppenhagen, which he saw as a turning point for him was the human rights violations that took place at the Abu Ghraib prison, as he felt it betrayed everything he believed in as a soldier and was contrary to why we were supposed to be in Iraq in the first place. This would not only cause him to question his role in Iraq, but also pushed him to become the first active duty soldier to join the anti-war group Iraq Veterans Against the War, an organization that works to expose and critique the multiple war imaginaries. His outspoken critique of the mission, as well as a blog expressing his beliefs, would cause him to be removed from the sniper team and to have his loyalty questioned by his chain of command. The consequences were great, as he could have been found as endangering the mission, which could have come with a dishonorable discharge or even a prison sentence. However, because none of his blogs contained any information that would have revealed any sensitive information,

such as troop sizes or movements that could help the enemy, he was only given a warning.

While Kyle would be involved in many conflicts, both at a distance through the scope of a sniper rifle, and also in close encounters, he was unrepentant about any kills that he had. As mentioned above, he saw all those he faced as pure evil in a religious sense. His remorse was that he could not kill more “evil,” which in his mind would have saved more American soldiers. Again, this is an uncritical black and white framing that must be placed within a Christian-capitalist assemblage, as those he was fighting were seen as evil and backwards. It is also a sign that the protoempathic bypass due to years of training and indoctrination in the military was not disrupted in any way, though with the Christian-capitalist war imaginary it seems that it would be much more difficult to disrupt that training as the two ethically align. In these deployments he would lose friends and nearly lose his own life as he was shot in a conflict in Sadr City. This would push him to realize his mortality and perpetuated his growing symptoms of PTSD, partially leading to his exit from the military.

Leaving the Military

Chris Kyle would eventually leave the military due to what he saw as an ultimatum from his wife, which she wanted him to leave due to the signs of PTSD he was displaying, that he was very dismissive of. Like many veterans, he felt that by leaving the military he was letting down his fellow soldiers. He wanted to continue to go to war and felt a constant guilt that he was not going. To cope, like many returning veterans, he turned to alcohol. This continued until he got into a car accident, thus reminding him of his mortality and his responsibilities as a father and a husband.

Kyle recognized that many veterans were coming home with PTSD. While he also displayed many symptoms of PTSD, from a constant high blood pressure to nightmares, his somatic condition improved when he was either in high intensity situations or when he was shooting. This is likely due to his years of training and all of his dangerous encounters where a calm was called for in order to survive. Therefore, he saw shooting as something that was healing for his symptoms of PTSD. To help other veterans, he decided that he would take other veterans out shooting in order to help them also heal from their symptoms of PTSD. The shooting can be seen as a re-entanglement with war, but in a different context as it works to shift the way that the veteran relates with their past experiences, thus reassociating the trauma. This is similar to the way in which the military is using virtual reality simulators bringing soldiers back to the sites of their traumas, in order to reprogram the trauma they

relive through their flashbacks.³⁷ While there is a healing aspect to how Chris Kyle was trying to help other veterans, it was still very much rooted within reinforcing the military *dispositif* war imaginary. So long as there is not an intention to disrupt and deprogram the formations constructed within the military apparatus, there will still be an association with the traumas of war. This possibly can be the reason as to why he was shot and killed by a fellow veteran he was taking out trying to heal.

Similarly, Reppenhagen got out of the military and recognized the affect war had on veteran communities, and he too wanted to help. However, the tactics that Reppenhagen chose were much more diverse over the years since his exit. First was through human rights and antiwar activism. This allowed for veterans to critically examine their experiences and to fight a system that they saw as unjust.³⁸ Second was through peer counseling communities, where veterans would come together and talk about their experiences. It was often much easier to talk to other veterans who have experienced similar things rather than a psychologist who had not been there. This has been shown as a very effective tactic since the Vietnam War and the “rap groups” of veterans that formed to talk about their experiences.³⁹ Third is through artistic communities such as Warrior Writers, which works to take veteran experiences and turn them into art, from poetry to photography, which is where the poem in the opening of this essay comes from. Art and poetry work to reframe the military experience, but in a nonviolent way, which is disruptive to the military *dispositif*. The rearticulation of the war experience through art is transformative, as veteran and artist Drew Cameron stated:

It's like revisiting, returning, remaking sense... To redefine, and transform those memories to your own, to have them, become, to embrace them more, and have them become more understood as a story. Instead of kind of a memory trap. A way of thinking about the same thing again, again, and again, but instead to kind of open it, take it apart, not even to necessarily put it back together but to just to kind of have it in another form. And that's been one of the most helpful things for me for sure. Being comfortable with the experience, and what to make of it, and who I am because of it.⁴⁰

This quote is telling on a number of levels. The art is not only transformative of the memories and experiences but also acts as a source of subject formation. The art becomes an external source of reflection that is not only meant to impact the viewer, but also affects the artist and perpetuates a constant state of becoming.

The final way that Reppenhagen has worked to help veterans is through taking veterans into the wilderness and getting involved in environmental advocacy. In nature, the veterans do not have to deal with the day to day difficulties that comes with reintegrating into

society: there are no questions from ignorant civilians, there is no rush to be anywhere, there is only you and the wild. Though as Reppenhagen once said, “it’s not the wilderness that is wild and crazy, it’s the city.”⁴¹ The healing of being in the wilderness happens by not only getting away from the stresses of everyday life, but also due to a number of different other factors. First, exercise has shown to be valuable in helping to reduce stress for many veterans, which nature and hikes are good at providing.⁴² This exercise does not necessarily have to be done in nature; however, when in nature one is usually getting some sort of exercise. The second factor comes from just being in nature and/or the woods. Over the past 15 years the Japanese have been studying what they call Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing. One study shows the affects of taking walks through forests, and while cortisol levels in the brain rise whenever one goes for a walk, there are higher cortisol levels and they last longer when walking in a forest.⁴³ Furthermore, walking through the woods enacts Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).⁴⁴ EMDR has become a therapy treatment used by psychologists across the country to help veterans with PTSD. When walking by the trees, the eyes are constantly catching new targets to focus on, which makes the eyes rapidly move, which allows the brain to take the traumatic experience that the veteran is dealing with and reassociate it with something less traumatic—especially when walking as a part of a veteran group focused upon dealing with one’s war experiences.⁴⁵ While the actual therapeutic process that is used by psychiatrists is much more involved—in that the therapist is getting the person to focus upon the traumatic experience and is doing cognitive work with the trauma directly—walking through the woods enacts that same eye movement. When a part of a group that is specifically focused upon dealing with these traumas, then it benefits the veterans because they are more than likely thinking about those experiences that they had while in the military. Thus, Reppenhagen’s forms of helping veterans works to dismantle and critique the military *dispositif’s* war imaginary through healing and demilitarizing veterans.

Conclusion

While the two veterans share a positionality as snipers, the two war imaginaries at work here are vastly different. One is rooted in a Christian-capitalist identity that is uncritically unrepentant of the violence he perpetuated. The other is a reflective identity that due to the reflexivity and his empathic vision he developed moral injury, which has many of the same symptoms as PTSD.⁴⁶ Though he also was a part of many traumatic experiences, also having PTSD on top of that moral injury. The opening poem highlights the intersections

of their positionality as both became militarized sniper assemblages, but as the poem discusses the afterlife of their position, no longer snipers, they are detached from the machine, as the loss of their rifle has become their ghost limb. Reppenhagen filled this loss through art and wilderness, Kyle decided to try and replace it through a militarized form of training for other veterans.

The war imaginary that not only created Chris Kyle, would go on to create the movie *American Sniper*, which still works to form others' war imaginaries, from the average American person to those who would join the military that have watched the movie. These formations work to reinforce the military *dispositif*. While the director claims to try and show the complexities of war and the affect on soldiers and their families, it is difficult to have a critical examination of the affect of war without experiencing it, thus it being a part of a war imaginary; just as Reppenhagen's poem adds to a war imaginary of being a sniper.

However, Reppenhagen's larger narrative works to disrupt the military *dispositif* through his activism and can be clearly seen in his criticism of the movie *American Sniper*, which works to unsettle a particular normative masculine militarized war imaginary. As mentioned above by Reppenhagen, "no single service member has the monopoly on the war narrative," highlighting that we should listen to a multiplicity of war experiences, especially those we do not hear as often, like Reppenhagen's. Unfortunately, we do not often hear war imaginaries like Reppenhagen's in popular media, though if we did, it may work to make war seem less glorious and visions of peace may become more imaginable. While both ended up fighting for American empire, Reppenhagen's narrative works to undermine it, while Kyle's works to perpetuate it.

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Notes:

1. Iraq Veterans Against the War, *Warrior Writers*, 47.
2. Beaumont-Thomas, "Clint Eastwood."
3. Pomarède, "Normalizing Violence."
4. A note on methods: The information on Chris Kyle primarily comes from a critical reading of his book and the movie, *American Sniper*. To be clear this is not an essay about *American Sniper*, however it recognizes the ways in which *American Sniper* has a reciprocal relationship to the Kris Kyle war imaginary. The essay is instead a genealogical comparison of two war imaginaries with similar positionalities. The information on Garrett

Reppenhagen come from varied stories about and by him, and many long conversations with him, as well as my own experiences with him; I served in the military with him (in the same platoon) and have known him for over 18 years. He has reviewed this paper for accuracy.

5. Dyvik, "Of bats and bodies," 56; See also Sylvester, "War Experiences/War Practices/War Theory"; Sylvester, *War as experienc*; Parashar, "What Wars"; Åhäll and Gregory, eds., *Emotions, Politics and War*, and; Wilcox, *Bodies of violence*.

6. Dyvik, "Valhalla Rising," 148.

7. Dyvik, "Of Bats and Bodies," 57.

8. Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*."

9. Steger, *The Rise of the Global Imaginary*, 6.

10. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

11. Weber, *Imagining America at War*, 2.

12. Ibid. 5.

13. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*, 154.

14. Ibid.

15. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 8.

16. Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy*, 38.

17. Chris Kyle describes that Navy SEAL snipers are usually alone, while Marine Snipers use a spotter (Kyle, *American Sniper*, 24). I recall that the team Garrett Reppenhagen was a part of was usually a small squad of 3-4 soldiers.

18. Shapiro, *War Crimes, Atrocity and Justice*, 81.

19. Ibid. 86

20. Ibid. 116; Shapiro is reutilizing Jill Bennett's concept developed in her book *Empathic Vision*. However, whereas Bennett is looking at how trauma can be transferred through art, Shapiro is showing the way in which empathic vision is being used in the HBO show *Generation Kill*. The militarized gaze that Shapiro describes acts as a good measure for examining the different embodied positionalities of Chris Kyle and Garrett Reppenhagen.

21. Reppenhagen, "I Was an American Sniper."

22. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*.

23. Kyle, McEwen, and DeFelice. *American Sniper*.

24. Mooney, *The Life and Legend of Chris Kyle*, 27-28.

25. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 36.

26. Kyle, *American Sniper*, 8.

27. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 34

28. Mooney, *Life and Legend of Chris Kyle*, 72.

29. Gibson, "Cowboy Masculinites," 128.

30. Gahman, "Gun rites."

31. For more on punk rock and political ideology see Dunn, "Never Mind the Bollocks."

32. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*; Protevi, *Political Affect*; Schrader, "Auto-Archaeology."

33. Braswell and Kushner, "Suicide, Social Integration, and Masculinity in the U.S. Military."

34. Shapiro, *War Crimes*, 107-108.

35. Protevi, *Political Affect*, 143.

36. Shapiro, *War Crimes*, 104.
37. Väliäho, "Affectivity, Biopolitics and the Virtual Reality of War."
38. Schrader, "The Affect of Veteran Activism."
39. Shay, McCain, and Cleland, *Odysseus in America*.
40. Cameron, (founder, Combat Paper), in discussion with the author, September 2013.
41. Said at a "Hut's for Vets" wilderness retreat that I attended in June, 2014. For more about Huts for Vets, see: <http://hutsforvets.org>.
42. Salmon, "Effects of Physical Exercise."
43. Park et al., "Physiological Effects of Shinrin-Yoku."
44. Arkowitz and Lilienfeld, "EMDR: Taking a Closer Look."
45. Shapiro, *Eye Movement*, 47.
46. Shay, "Moral Injury"; Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in war veterans."

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