

Life, embodiment and (post)war stories: Studying narrative in critical military studies

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Abstract

This paper argues for an expanded conceptualization of narrative as a tool for research in critical military studies. Narrative provides a means of studying the human experience of war as simultaneously ‘embodied’ and ‘storied’, but only if the underpinning conceptual framework can address both aspects. The paper introduces a conceptual synthesis of war, narrative, and the body that aims to bridge existing work on narrative within critical military studies with nascent research on war and embodiment. Drawing on the socio-narratology of Arthur Frank, three core ideas are offered as the basis for an embodied study of narrative in CMS. Together, these ideas demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry for providing detailed, contextualized, and nuanced analyses of war and post-war experiences. Stories are performative: they *do* things. War and post-war stories have personal and political consequences that effect how individuals and societies deal with war’s legacy and approach future conflicts. What kind of story we tell about war therefore matters deeply. Studying narrative in the form of embodied war stories expands CMS’s resources for critically engaging with matters of war, violence, and military experience.

Keywords: narrative; embodiment; war stories; military memoirs; war literature

1 Wars create stories. Stories of heroism, courage and sacrifice, stories of adventure and
 2 coming of age, tragedies, stories of loss and futility, political narratives and cautionary tales;
 3 all abound in the aftermath of war. From ancient times to present day, narrative has
 4 functioned as the primary means of communicating war experiences. Soldiers and veterans
 5 tell personal war stories to claim important, visceral truths about war¹. These stories invoke
 6 the authority of the ‘flesh witness’ (Harari 2009); one who has gained a knowledge of war
 7 through bodily participation, which is a specific kind of knowledge that those not present in
 8 war cannot share. Others – spouses and family members, for instance – tell stories about
 9 caring and intimate relationships reconfigured by the impact of war’s violence (Wool &
 10 Messinger 2012). Whatever their focus and whoever their tellers, stories about war are stories
 11 about *bodies*; about what bodies *do* in war, what they are *made* to do, and what is done *to*
 12 them. Bodies – along with the meanings assigned to them by the interpreting subject – are
 13 witnesses to war, stories an act of testimony that convey the witness’ experience (Frank
 14 2013)².

15 War lives on in people’s bodies in the “corporeal aftermaths and emotional
 16 inheritances of war” (McSorely 2014; p. 122), and yet scholarship on war experience
 17 continues to grapple with the challenge of adequately comprehending and articulating the
 18 effects and affects of war (Bulmer & Jackson 2016; McSorely 2013). There is an oft-repeated
 19 ‘ineffable’ and ‘unknowable’ quality to embodied war experiences which makes
 20 communicating them seem like “a complex, gruelling, and sometimes even quasi-mystical
 21 endeavour” (Dyvik 2016a; p. 57). The experience of war *resists* understanding, at least as far

¹ Veterans tell stories not only of war, but also of military and post-military life; of careers spent honing their skills in preparation for action, mastering the technologies of war, and afterwards, of navigating a path through ‘Civvy Street’ (Cooper et al. 2018; Woodward & Jenkins 2011).

² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting early clarification that it is not only *bodies*, but the meaning we give them as reflective, interpretive subjects which matters, and which contributes to the production of war experience.

as the traditional academic understanding of ‘understanding’ goes (Caddick, Cooper & Smith 2017). The difficulties are complicated further by a politics of knowledge about war and war experience, which insists that only those who have been to war know what it is like and are qualified to comment on it (MacLeish 2016). Numerous authors (e.g., Bulmer & Jackson 2016; Caddick, et al. 2017; Dyvik 2016a; MacLeish 2016) deconstruct this politics of knowledge by arguing that it is precisely the ‘unknowability’ of war that generates different possibilities for engaging with it. In this regard, scholar of military memoirs Synne Dyvik points to the value of stories when she writes that the challenge of communicating war experience:

...can be crudely summarized in the much-repeated phrase ‘You don’t know what it’s like’ – a phrase that has haunted my work with these memoirs throughout.

However, I suggest that there is a logical follow-on to that phrase: ‘But I’m going to try to tell you anyway’. I insist that something productive happens in the *telling and the listening to* these stories that I wish to retain, something that is left out if we only pay attention to the first part of this phrase. (Dyvik 2016a; p. 58, emphasis original)

This ‘something productive’, I suggest, is the capacity of stories to render visible at least something of the visceral, chaotic, sometimes boring and sometimes devastating realities of the body in war. Arguably, this makes the study of narrative compelling as a means of exploring the legacy of war and military life both for individuals and for society.

We feel a need to make the body familiar – to organise and understand our embodied experience – and this need instigates the telling of stories (Frank 2013). Stories are the necessary equipment for communicating what happens to bodies during and after war. Stories *make things present*; they bring personal experience to the fore (Schiff 2017). Stories also

1 stitch together time and make it knowable, joining past to present to future (Freeman 2010).
 2 But for all their ability to convey war experiences, stories are limited in their capacity to
 3 familiarize the body. Telling or writing about people's lives necessarily involves the
 4 compression, abstraction, and translation of embodied experiences into a (supposedly)
 5 comprehensible, graspable form (Baker 2016). Even as stories seek to make the body
 6 familiar, the body "eludes language" (Frank 2013; p. 2). As Frank writes, the body "is
 7 certainly not mute – it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms – but it is inarticulate. We
 8 must speak for the body, and such speech is quickly frustrated: speech presents itself as being
 9 about the body rather than of it" (Frank 2013; p. 2). Despite the intractable difficulties of
 10 representing the body through language, stories are the best equipment we have for giving
 11 voice to bodily experience, and listening carefully to them reveals much about the meanings
 12 that people who experience war attach to their experiences.

13 My aim in this paper is to develop a conceptual synthesis of war, narrative and the
 14 body; a task I undertake in order to expand analytical resources for attending to (post)war
 15 stories and their consequences for individuals and society. As I set out below, we need such a
 16 synthesis in order to reveal war experience as simultaneously narrative *and* embodied,
 17 thereby sensitizing us to the multi-layered composition of experience. Human experience is at
 18 once both corporeal and social, physical and discursive. It is *enabled* by the body but not
 19 *reducible* to it, and therefore we cannot make sense of embodied experience (e.g., sensation,
 20 emotion, affect) outside of social relations, language, and historical and political contexts
 21 (Burkitt 2014). Narrative inquiry *can* be a means of analytically converging these numerous
 22 facets of experience, but only if the conceptual framework supporting it explicitly addresses
 23 them. The perspective on narrative I wish to introduce in this paper is a way of bringing
 24 together existing work on war and narrative – such as Wibben's (2011) feminist narrative
 25 approach, which demonstrates keenly the political consequences of narrative – together with

recent work on war and the body that places an overdue emphasis on war as embodied practice (e.g., Bulmer & Jackson 2016; McSorely 2013, 2014). I focus on (post)war stories; stories told about war and/or its aftermath, from the perspective of those who experienced it. The conceptual arguments – and hence the examples I cite – are inspired by years of reading and listening to the stories of veterans. The core principles, however, are equally applicable to study narratives of other groups who experience war such as ‘ex-combatants’, civilians and refugees, aid workers, families of veterans, mourners, protestors, novelists, journalists, clergy, child soldiers and others (Sylvester 2013).

In what follows, I will first introduce the key terms and concepts upon which I am building this conceptual synthesis. Then in the main body of the paper, I will introduce three key ideas that provide the conceptual apparatus for an expanded study of narrative and (post)war stories in critical military studies. These ideas are not new: as each has already been articulated in the wider social science literature on narrative, it would be an act of sociological amnesia to claim originality. Instead, my task is to present these ideas in a way that forcibly demonstrates their relevance to the study of war and post-war stories. I draw on narrative scholars such as Plummer (1995), Somers (1994), Wibben (2011), and Schiff (2017), but most prominently the work of Arthur Frank, whose socio-narratology (2010) offers a comprehensive understanding of what stories *do*; that is, their capacity to shape meaning, personal experience, embodiment, and social life. As Frank (2010) describes it, “Socio-narratology expands the study of literary narratives – narratology – to consider the fullest range of storytelling, from folklore to everyday conversation” (p. 12). I make no attempt in this paper to offer a guide for conducting narrative analyses, as excellent ones already exist (Frank 2012; Smith 2016). Rather, this article focuses on articulating core principles for what might be considered an ‘embodied’ study of narrative in critical military studies.

1 **Stories, narratives, and embodied meanings**

2 An important clarification is the distinction between ‘stories’ and ‘narratives’. Narratives are
 3 shared templates that provide tropes and plotlines for organizing and understanding events
 4 (Frank 2010). As Frank (2010) put it, a narrative “sets parameters within which predictable
 5 kinds of things happen for similar reasons” (p. 200). Narratives are frameworks that help us
 6 interpret the genesis or causality of events and social circumstances. Whilst they cannot
 7 technically exist without people to convey them, in a sense narratives do exist externally to,
 8 and independently of, any particular individual. They are the *general* templates from which
 9 people tell *specific* stories. Stories, then, are the tales people tell about their lives and
 10 experiences. As Frank elaborates the narrative/story distinction, “Narratives make no mention
 11 of individual persons; stories depend on characters. *Stories* are about particular people living
 12 lives animated by some principle of causality: class conflict, or the tension between fathers
 13 and sons, or the human need for true love” (Ibid. p. 200; emphasis original). Frank
 14 deliberately provides no formal definition of stories, preferring to recognize them by the work
 15 they perform; that is, their ‘capacities’ for action (discussed later in this article). Nevertheless,
 16 there are certain elements that seem to be required. At a minimum, these would include
 17 characters along with an event or action that sets in motion a plot. Since most actual stories
 18 are not “fully formed narratives” (Ibid; p. 26)³, to insist on definitional criteria would be to
 19 impose a rigidity that stories themselves defy.

20 To complicate the distinction slightly, we cannot tell stories without drawing upon
 21 shared narrative resources. No matter how individual or unique we might profess our own
 22 stories to be, we depend on commonly available narratives to scaffold our stories. To add one
 23 more caveat, the words ‘narrative’ and ‘story’, “overlap so frequently that sustaining this

³ Whilst acknowledging wider definitional debates in narratology, Frank maintains that “the boundaries of what stories are should remain fuzzy” (Ibid; p. 27)

distinction in consistent usage proves impossible” (Frank 2010; p. 200). My foremost interest is with the *stories* people tell about their lives and experiences, therefore, ‘story’ will be the more common term throughout this paper. I reserve the more specific term ‘narrative’ to refer to the aforementioned structures and templates, as well as to the object of study, as in ‘the study of narrative’. Though as will become clear (if it is not already so), it is not possible to refer to one without invoking the other.

Stories are told in different forms: to a partner at the end of the day, to a friend in the pub, to a researcher or reporter, through diaries or published memoirs, and through film and documentary, with what gets told and how depending on the context and audience. Stories do not (only) refer to the occasions whereby people recall and recount the experiences of their lives. They are not (just) what we tell, but also what we *live*, and often what drives us. Our stories are our frame of reference for the world and for ourselves. The kinds of stories to which I am here referring are therefore not the trivial or mundane ‘everyday’ stories – analytically insightful though these often are (Bamberg 2006) – but the more significant ones; the ones we tell about our goals and projects, our hopes and dreams, successes and failures, and about ourselves and who we think we *are* (Smith & Sparkes 2008). These kinds of stories are not always ‘told’, or they might be told only in the snippets or fragments that we tell to others and then revise in our thoughts. Nor do we ‘have’ just one story that guides our outlook on the world. As Frank (2010) put it “people are like actors cast into multiple scripts that are all unfinished” (p. 7). According to our stories, we have an idea of how things should go; should they turn out otherwise, the consequences can range from mild irritation to utter devastation. The conception of ‘stories’ I am deploying in this article is one that acknowledges their fundamental importance for making sense of war and war experiences. From an analytical perspective, stories are rich enough resources to represent the complexity, ambiguity and sense of ‘life-in-flux’ of being human.

Studying narrative also heralds the potential to link embodied experience with linguistic structure and meaning in the analysis of (post)war stories. An enduring challenge for scholarship on war and the military is how to hold together an analysis of bodily experience with an understanding of how such experience is constantly mediated by meanings ascribed by culture and society⁴. Within narrative inquiry (as I have argued previously; see Caddick et al. 2015a), there can be a tendency to focus on too heavily on language and discourse at the expense of understanding the fleshy, physical and sentient nature of experience. There are, of course, notable exceptions, for instance Harel-Shalev's (2018) narrative analysis of women soldiers in war rooms shows how women's visceral encounters with the battlespace fed into narratives about 'experiencing war' and 'making war' that are traditionally associated with male soldiers. Studies like this show how the body in war is both *productive of* meaning, but also *receptive to it* in the form of socio-cultural narratives. Generally speaking, however, narrative research seems to lack theoretical integration between narrative and the body. Therefore, I argue that space exists for a conceptual synthesis of narrative, war and the body that treats the human experience of war as simultaneously physical, social and discursive, irreducible to each component alone (cf. Burkitt, 2014; Shilling, 2012).

Bringing together narrative, war and the body

To appreciate the layered complexity of (post)war stories, we need a conceptual synthesis that respects the materiality of bodies whilst opening up the social meanings experience inevitably acquires. In the following, I propose such a synthesis by introducing three key ideas about narrative, war and the body.

⁴ Shilling (2012) makes an analogous point about treatment of the body in social theory. Historically, theorists have treated the body *either* as a natural and material phenomenon *or* as a socially constructed one and have, until recently, neglected to consider a theoretical integration of the two perspectives.

First, *storytelling and bodily experience are intimately interconnected dimensions of life and world-making*. Bodies are the ‘stuff’ of war stories; the terrors and thrills, agonies and ecstasies of physical bodies are integral to stories people tell about war (Dyvik 2016a; Woodward & Jenkins 2013). For people caught up in war, it is their bodily participation – the sense of having been there – that is central to the thoughts, feelings and reflections they develop regarding war’s conduct and its meaning. War stories need bodies in order to be told, and to have something about which to tell. Bodily experience also constrains and limits the stories people can tell about war, since stories cannot transcend the body. At the same time, bodies need stories to enable the expression of experience. According to Frank (2010; p. 81), “stories compel because they express in narrative form what begins in bodies”. Embodied war experiences acquire particular meanings when placed in the context of a story that makes them intelligible⁵. Moreover, language and social relations deepen, extend and restructure our experiences (cf. Burkitt 2014), and we perpetually reimagine experience through the stories we tell to represent and preserve those experiences. Storytelling is no less a part of our ability to experience the world than are our bodies.

We can expand this claim by examining more closely the connection between experience and narrative. For Schiff (2017; p. 67), narrative is an attempt to “speak life”: to articulate the meanings it has for us, and to navigate our way through life experiences that are sometimes shrouded in ambiguity. Schiff writes:

Life and narrative entangle each other in the most intimate sense. The connection between narrative and life is direct but complex, mediated through cultural and social

⁵ Diverse scholarship on psychological trauma asserts that one reason for prolonged traumatic reactions to war is an *inability* to construct wartime events into a coherent, intelligible narrative (e.g., Burnell et al. 2009; Rubin et al. 2004)

circumstances and the person's ability to creatively imagine alternative possibilities.

(p. 68)

Intimate entanglement: Schiff reveals the connection between experience and narrative as one of complex mediation between events that happen in and to our bodies, the social and cultural conditions within which our physical bodies are situated, and our imagination. But how does this complex mediation occur, and in what order of occurrence between narrative tellings and embodied happenings? Frank goes further in describing the experience-narrative connection, by explicitly rejecting commonplace 'mimetic' understandings of narrative. In mimetic understanding, "stories imitate life that has already happened and is now being represented in the story" (Frank 2010; p. 21). Frank troubles mimetic logic by arguing it misses the significant extent to which narrative shapes experience. People know stories – often ones borrowed from the groups and cultures within which they live and interact – and *then* have experiences. Narrative *then* experience; not experience *then* narrative. Yet, we must be cautious about pushing this counter-mimetic logic too far, lest narrative come to resemble a determining social force making people into 'cultural dopes', to use Garfinkel's (1967) famous sociological phrase. Resisting determinism entails respecting the agency of embodied persons, whose physical, fleshy and sentient being initiates events that they later narrate. Accordingly, Frank brings narrative and experience together – avoiding both determinism and naive mimetic logic – by arguing that "mimesis happens, but as a reciprocal process. Life and story imitate each other, ceaselessly and seamlessly, but neither enjoys either temporal or causal precedence" (p. 21). Narrative therefore shapes experience, and experience also shapes narrative, continuously and recursively (Caddick et al. 2015a).

Given this intimate and recursive entanglement between narrative and bodily experience, it makes sense to speak of 'embodied narratives' of war and post-war life. A veteran I met during previous research spoke of 'reading' war on the bodies of other veterans;

in their eyes, the way they carried their bodies, their posture, demeanour and speech. I understood him to mean that bodies carry stories that are recognisable if, knowing similar stories, you know how to read them. The veterans with whom I worked told me remarkably similar stories about the connections they forged with other veterans helping them deal with the traumatic aftermath of war (Caddick, Phoenix and Smith 2015). Such stories were rarely articulated outside of the interview context in which I heard them. Instead, these were *felt*, embodied narratives which, if articulated at all, were usually spoken through coarse jokes and ‘black humour’ reminiscent of military comradeship. Indeed, the power of these stories to ease the pain of war’s memory lay partly in veterans *not needing* to tell them in order to be understood by others whom – everyone assumed – shared the same stories. But the capacity to understand these stories, I argued, was dependent on knowing other stories – specifically, stories handed down by the military (and mythologized in popular culture) about the depth of bonding between men who fight and suffer together on the battlefield as a ‘band of brothers’ (Caddick et al. 2015). Embodied narratives; cultural origins.

Talk of embodied narratives within critical scholarship on the military indicates that the idea already has some currency (Dyvik 2016b; Parashar 2013). For Parashar (2013), bodies themselves are powerful war narratives, able to speak intimately of war’s violence in ways that traditional, ‘disembodied’ war scholarship overlooks in favour of state-level discourse and explanations (see also, Sylvester 2013). “Bodies”, she writes, “convey meaning, identity and symbolism in war. War bodies are not all lifeless and mutilated; some are warriors, injured, crippled, raped, held hostage, spying and spied upon, grieving and even celebrating” (Ibid; p. 621). Some people’s bodies – amputee veterans, for instance – convey vivid, visual narratives about the damage of war. Their wounds are the striking embodied foundation of their war stories. Others – women in particular – also have compelling first-person stories about bodies in war, but are marginalized within wider conflict narratives

(Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah 2016; Parashar 2013). Parashar's broader point is that ordinary people's embodied narratives are "crucial log-books" in constructing knowledge of wars (Ibid; p. 626). By paying attention to these 'micro-narratives' of war, Parashar asks how embodied storytelling can help challenge dominant conflict narratives, and upset traditional assumptions about women's role in war.

We learn more about challenging dominant narratives from Dyvik's (2016b) inquiry into Norwegian veterans' embodied war narratives. Dyvik's point of entry to this subject is the memoirs written by Norway's veterans about their combat tour of Afghanistan. These memoirs evoke the 'warrior culture' of the Telemark Battalion; a culture which puts the veterans at uncomfortable odds with Norway's dominant public narrative of itself as a 'peace nation'. Dyvik's framework for analyzing the memoirs "sees performativity and embodiment as intimately connected" (p. 139). The memoirists *perform* and *construct* warrior identity and masculinity by evoking for the reader the intimate details (both pleasurable and painful) of bodies in war. By focusing on these details, Dyvik reveals why it is that for some young men, 'war is better than sex'. For Dyvik, the statement 'war is better than sex', "is made intelligible as an overflowing of the physical and emotional senses the gendered and militarized body experiences during combat . . . through linking it to the sensory experience of sex associated with desire, euphoric joy, orgasmic relief and ejaculation" (p. 143). The body comes alive in these narratives in ways that trouble Norwegians' beliefs about their military and the role it plays in the international community.

That narrative and the body are intimately interconnected is a truth expressed in the works of scholars like Dyvik and Parashar. This truth is extended by the second claim I wish to make: that *the stories which enable individuals to express embodied war experiences are borrowed from, and situated in, the societies and cultures they inhabit*. People tell stories that are legitimately 'their own', but in order to do so they depend upon the genres, tropes, themes

and metaphors embedded in the ‘public’ or ‘cultural’ narratives which circulate throughout their societies (Plummer 1995; Somers 1994). By expanding the cultural component of narrative, this point develops the idea expressed above that culture infuses embodied experience with meaning. Somers (1994; p. 619) defines public narratives as,

Those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro- or macro-stories about American social mobility, the “freeborn Englishman,” the working-class hero, and so on. Public narratives range from the narratives of one’s family, to those of the workplace (organizational myths), church, government, and nation.

We can clarify this point by returning to the earlier distinction between stories as told by real people about their lives and narratives as the templates, plotlines and resources from which people construct their own stories (Frank 2010). For instance, individuals’ own (post)war *stories* are shaped by public and media *narratives* attached to particular conflicts in which they participated. The Norwegian warriors about whom Dyvik (2016b) writes are *borrowing* their stories from popular culture, as well as from Viking and Norse mythology. Particular borrowed features include the ‘To Valhalla’⁶ cry of the warriors as they head into battle, the names from Norse mythology given to their vehicles, and the Marvel Comics ‘Punisher’ skull symbol adorning these vehicles. These are the symbolic expressions of stories that compel their experiences of warriorhood in Afghanistan. Military memoirists – such as these Norwegian warriors – routinely borrow from cultural scripts to tell stories about military

⁶ ‘Valhalla’ being the Norse mythical home for dead warriors

training as a rite of passage, for example, or about war as transformative personal experience (Woodward & Jenkins 2011). Whilst narrative and the body are indeed intertwined, we add a further, equally intertwined and inseparable layer to this relationship when we think of narratives as social. Storytelling exists as a kind of individual-narrative-society nexus.

Tied to this second claim is the understanding that stories are not only *borrowed from*, but also *situated within* cultural, societal, and political contexts. If the notion of ‘borrowing’ implies too much in the way of freedom to spin culture into personal stories as we please, the notion of stories as ‘situated’ reminds us that circumstances weigh heavily on the kinds of stories we can tell. Put another way, this means that we do not exactly have control over the public narratives that frame our stories and give them meaning within a wider context. As Plummer (1995) wrote, “We human beings are social world-makers, though we do not make our social worlds in conditions of our own choosing” (p. 20). That phrase, “conditions of our own choosing”, of course, harkens back to decades of sociological theorizing about the tensions between structure and agency in the way we live our lives. Written in this context, it suggests that public narratives are invested with social and political *power*; they can be used to pathologise people, to make them into victims, or to transform and empower them. As Plummer continues, “stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process” (Ibid; p. 26). Narrative is therefore intensely political: a site for the exercise of power whereby insistence on *one* narrative to the exclusion of others is its own particular form of violence (Wibben 2011).

The political dimension that situates the telling of (post)war stories is complex, composed of myriad conflicting ideologies, agendas, and processes. At the broadest level are geopolitical processes – militarism, globalization, and conflict – that set the terms under which people’s war experiences happen. Veterans, for instance, as Bulmer and Eichler (2017;

p. 162) suggest, occupy “the space between military and civilian life, war and peace, and the domestic and the international, [they] are key protagonists in the negotiation of relations between geopolitics, the state, the military, and society.” During military service, veterans became ‘geopolitical actors’; deployed or made potentially deployable by nation states to promote international ambitions of democracy and security (Basham 2013). For most veterans, their role as ‘geopolitical actor’ is or was carried out from a position of relative subordination within military and state hierarchies, and most no doubt feel far removed from any capacity to influence geopolitical processes. Yet, as numerous commentators highlight (e.g., Basham 2013; Bulmer & Eichler 2017; Enloe 2007; Woodward & Jenkins 2011), it is the people – the ‘boots on the ground’ – who make up militaries and through whom militarized agendas and policies are enacted most directly. For analyses of (post)war stories, identifying how political processes frame the telling of individual stories is therefore a matter of interest.

Understanding how narratives work on this global political scale can reveal how power and politics situate the telling of (post)war stories. The concept of ‘strategic narratives’ provides one route to such understanding (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle 2018; Roselle Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2014). Strategic narratives, as defined by Miskimmon et al. (2018) are “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international relations” (p. 6). State and non-state actors construct strategic narratives over time in order to influence “the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system” (Roselle et al. 2014; p. 74). Roselle and colleagues outline three different levels at which strategic narratives operate, beginning with ‘international system narratives’. These “describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works” (Ibid; p. 76), with the Global War on Terror constituting one such narrative. Second

are ‘national narratives’ that “set out what the story of the state or the nation is, what values and goals it has” (p. 76). The example they give is of the US as defender and promoter of freedom and democracy (in its own national narrative), or as self-appointed world policeman/bully (in other narratives). Finally, there are ‘issue narratives’ that “set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished (p. 76). Issue narratives define the parameters of a conflict, such as who the key actors are in that conflict and what they consider the best means to resolve it. The securitization of Afghanistan as a battle for ‘hearts and minds’ would constitute one such issue narrative (Duncanson 2013). At each level are narratives that sweep people in wars along with them, while also providing them with templates to formulate their own embodied stories of war and post-war life.

The point in considering strategic narratives as part of the political processes situating (post)war stories is not to suggest that such high-level affairs can explain people’s experiences. Nor should we misapply such narratives as nebulous and totalizing concepts like ‘militarization’ that far too easily convey deterministic accounts of people’s lives. Rather, the point is to acknowledge how the wider socio-political context *connects* and *shapes* people’s personal embodied stories. Like political processes more generally, the formation, circulation and reception of strategic narratives is a fragmented and contestatory process (Roselle et al. 2014). Never fixed and constantly in need of reinforcing, strategic narratives are vulnerable to the influence of *counter-narratives* that claim a different version of events. Tidy (2016) offers examples of veterans in the military dissent movement using their war stories to disrupt prevailing war narratives, by casting themselves as “(anti) war hero[es]” (2016; p. 99) and telling ‘ground truths’ which contest official accounts⁷. Yet even counter-narratives are

⁷ See also Schrader (2014). “With the walls of my ideologies and ardent belief in my government slowly failing, I did not know what to believe anymore” (p. 15). Ben Schrader’s rich and evocative story shows how complex

1 complicated and fragmented. As Tidy notes, the very basis of dissent is the authority these
 2 veterans claim by virtue of participation in the wars they now oppose. How power and
 3 politics situates (post)war stories is thus anything but straightforward.

4 Chris Green is one storyteller who provides a prime example of a personal counter-
 5 narrative situated by and within a larger strategic narrative. Green's memoir, *Spin Zhira*⁸,
 6 recounts the author's experience in Helmand as part of the UK's war in Afghanistan. The
 7 story Green tells is highly critical of the war being fought by international forces; a war
 8 which according to Green, "history will judge them to have lost by almost any measure other
 9 than body count" (2017; p. xi). Green is a reservist (and former regular soldier) who goes in
 10 search of adventure in Helmand when he becomes disillusioned with a life of comfortable
 11 consumerism and a failing marriage. The personal failures of his unfulfilling life and
 12 deteriorating relationship come to mirror the wider military and political failures of the UK's
 13 efforts in Afghanistan. Green is well aware that there is an official narrative about the UK's
 14 role in bringing 'security and stabilization' to Helmand Province. Indeed, he is tasked with
 15 helping to create it. Part of Green's role as an officer in 'Info Ops'⁹ is to construct a narrative
 16 of progress that the local population – as well as the international community – could buy
 17 into and which would convince them to turn their backs on the Taliban insurgents. Yet the
 18 tangled realities of war in Helmand Province mean that he is unable to execute his task
 19 faithfully:

20
 21 Everything I'd seen over the last two months had convinced me that the UK strategy
 22 in Afghanistan was deeply flawed . . . In short, UK policy in Helmand was a goatfuck.

and painful veterans' journeys from war to anti-war activism can be, as well as how war stories are often fraught with interpretive struggle and a "new war" (p. 23) for meaning, purpose and direction.

⁸ Translated from Pashtun as 'old man' in Helmand

⁹ Information operations

1 To my mind there had never been a greater need for a narrative, but I questioned my
 2 own professional capability to unfuck the goat when so many others had clearly
 3 failed. In any event I was so far down the ISAF food chain that I doubted I could have
 4 any strategic impact on the Helmand mission. (p. 262-264)

5
 6 Green provides numerous examples of events that prompted him to this dire conclusion. One
 7 such event being the particularly heavy-handed public arrest of a local businessman by
 8 British Special Forces based, as it turned out, on flawed intelligence. Green recounts this
 9 incident at length because, for him, it is a microcosm of British Forces' ill-fated attempts to
 10 win over the local population. When he attempts to point out to his superiors how this
 11 particular blunder (the captured man is eventually released without explanation or apology)
 12 had damaged their campaign strategy, he is even branded a "Taliban apologist" (Ibid; p. 218)
 13 for daring to criticise. For Green, strategic errors this like one fundamentally undermined
 14 their own narrative that "a better life lay ahead with GIRoA¹⁰" (Ibid; p. 197). Worse still,
 15 Green is made complicit in perpetuating this narrative whilst being fully and painfully aware
 16 that it is divorced from the facts on the ground. By the end of the memoir, Green has shed all
 17 personal naivety about making a difference to the people of Helmand, and returns – jaded and
 18 cynical – to his life as a civilian. His story reads as a bitingly cynical corrective to the UK's
 19 official narrative of its own mission to "help and protect the Afghan people to reconstruct
 20 their economy and democracy¹¹" (p. 412). It also illustrates how personal stories are situated
 21 within geopolitical contexts over which the teller has little or no control.

22 A third idea completes this paper's conceptual synthesis: *stories are 'actors' in the*
 23 *sense that they take on the capacity to shape the thoughts, beliefs and actions of those who*

¹⁰ Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

¹¹ Without stating the exact source, Green attributes these words to former Defence Secretary John Reid – setting out in 2006 a vision for the UK's military involvement in Afghanistan.

1 *are caught up in them*. This idea develops the previous two by advancing a bolder definition
 2 of stories' role in social life. Stories' capacity to act is not a deterministic one, and to argue as
 3 such would cede too much power to stories while underplaying the embodied agency of the
 4 storytellers themselves. Rather, to claim that stories are actors is to acknowledge the very
 5 significant extent to which they form our interpretations of the world and make particular
 6 courses of action seem worthwhile, compelling or necessary. Frank (2010) explains the
 7 manner in which stories act as follows:

8
 9 People do not simply listen to stories, they become *caught up*, a phrase that can be
 10 explained only by another metaphor: stories get under people's skin. Once stories are
 11 under people's skin, they affect the terms in which people think, know, and perceive.
 12 Stories teach people what to look for and what can be ignored; they teach what to
 13 value and what to hold in contempt. (p. 48; original emphasis).

14
 15 Stories, therefore, are *performative*; they *do* things (Frank, 2010). As Wibben (2011) put it,
 16 "...stories matter. They do things. They have political and material consequences" (p. 106).
 17 Analyzing (post)war stories as actors in people's lives advances a central concern with what
 18 stories *do*. Among their many performative functions, stories can be used to report, convince,
 19 incite and indoctrinate, recruit, predict, amuse, inspire, generate sympathy or antipathy,
 20 define actors and attribute motives to them, confer or withdraw legitimacy, suggest
 21 appropriate courses of action, or simply pass the time (Frank 2010; Smith 2005). Frank
 22 (2010) goes on to list thirteen 'capacities' by which stories perform these varied roles as
 23 actors in people's lives. Rather than rehearse the full list here, I will introduce five capacities

that I consider fundamental to an analysis of (post)war stories¹². I am drawing selectively from Frank's list in order to unpack crucial elements of the conceptual synthesis I am proposing. The capacities I select are all interlinked, and together they help demonstrate the power and effect of stories as actors in individual lives and for society.

The first capacity I wish to highlight is 'truth telling'. In addition to the reporting of truths, stories have the capacity to *enact* truth. That is, stories bring new truths into being by depicting events in a particular light. Things happened *this* way not *that*, and *these* are the consequences. In the era of 'fake news', it is worth noting that stories' ability to enact truths is not without limits. One cannot spin a story divorced from material or social fact and expect to be believed. Rather, to claim that stories enact truths is to follow the constructionist argument that the ways in which we collectively think and reason about the world effect the way the world *is* for us (Elder-Vass 2013). Importantly, the truth of stories is often contested by those who tell other stories about events or circumstances; counter-narratives which seek to enact different truths in order to claim a different version of social reality. Stories' truth telling capacity is therefore complicated, bound up with the constant and uncertain social process of establishing 'the Truth' of complex matters like war. Power is integral to this process (Wibben 2011). Stories' capacity to enact truths that *take hold* depends upon the social and political power flowing through their tellers. Stories can be told differently by different groups, giving some stories more credibility than others. As Plummer (1995; p. 29) suggests, "Talk from 'below' may be marginalised and excluded, whilst 'expert' talk from above may be given priority and more credibility". Recognizing that power 'flows' more so than it is ever 'held' in any objective sense, the analyst of (post)war stories should consider

¹² Frank refers to these capacities as "stories' narrative equipment" (Ibid, p. 27): how they do they work that they do. My selection is not intended to imply that the other capacities Frank lists are unimportant or should be neglected, merely that in this limited discussion, several stand out as immediately relevant to an analysis of (post)war stories. Furthermore, Frank considers his own list as incomplete – hoping others will add to it – and merely suggested, not taken to imply that all stories always utilize all capacities.

1 how stories' truth claims lose and gain credibility based on the position(s) occupied by their
2 tellers.

3 Truth telling is a core capacity of (post)war stories precisely because this is what these
4 stories often set out to do. Their medium is testimony about war and its consequences. Stories
5 are a form of 'embodied witness': assuming "a responsibility for telling what happened"
6 (Frank 2013; p 137). In Harari's (2009) terms, they are stories of the 'flesh witness' who tells
7 the truth about war from having lived it. The US veterans whom Tidy (2016) researches are
8 flesh witnesses who use the truth telling capacity of stories to reveal 'ground truths' they
9 hope will persuade others to abandon misguided wars. Their stories testify in a 'speaking
10 truth to power' kind of way by exposing the lies of politicians and military leaders. That their
11 stories can do this is based upon the power these veterans embody as archetypal warrior
12 heroes; definitive 'good citizens' whom political elites struggle to discredit (Sasson-Levy,
13 2003; Tidy, 2016). Having 'fought for their country', these veterans claim a masculine sense
14 of authority that gives their stories credibility and helps them build anti-war momentum
15 among the populace. But at the same time, these stories reaffirm other 'truths' about men's
16 privileged role in the production of violence and war. Frank's aphorism, "stories remind us
17 that we have to live with complicated truths" (2010; p. 5), is proved accurate by stories such
18 as these which *claim* certain truths about war whilst simultaneously *enacting* other truths.

19 Linked to their capacity for truth telling, stories possess *interpretive openness*; "to
20 narrate events in ways that leave open the interpretation of what exactly happened and how to
21 respond to it" (Frank 2010; p. 34). The same story might make different points –
22 communicate different truths – to different readers or listeners. The point a story makes will
23 often depend upon the predispositions, perspectives and values with which a reader or listener
24 approaches and interprets the story. This capacity increases the complexities by which stories
25 operate as truth telling and truth enacting devices. For Frank (2006), stories are like statues in

that they “allow multiple viewpoints” (p. 427) – as you move around them you see them from different perspectives. Chris Green shows that stories have interpretive openness when he writes about how the British narrative is seen through Afghan eyes. At several junctures in his memoir, Green recounts events from the perspective of local people with whom he interacts during his tour of duty. These narrations depict the presence of the British “infidels” or “khareji”¹³ as offensive, unwelcome and disrespectful to the people of Helmand. Green also situates these offenses in the midst of a longer narrative about British invasion in Helmand dating back to the first Anglo-Afghan war beginning in 1839, which as Green reminds his readers, Helmandi society has not forgotten about. He does this not because he shares the Afghans’ narrative depiction of events, but because he acknowledges its existence. The acknowledgement is a recognition that the British narrative is open to multiple interpretations, and a prophesy that refusal to consider the Afghan perspective will lead firmly to failure.

The third capacity is stories’ ability to make a particular *point of view* not only plausible, but also compelling. Being caught up in a story entails seeing things from the perspective of a particular character. This is the character whose ‘side’ we come to take – the hero or heroine of the story with whom we associate. Of course, the more deeply we come to identify with one character’s point of view, the less we are able to appreciate the perspective of others. So it is that when we become too caught up in one particular story, our capacity for thought and action shrinks to fit the mould set for us by that one story and its characters. ‘Victim’ stories use this capacity particularly effectively. Stories that cast veterans as victims of wartime experience do so in order to elicit anger and sympathy from readers and listeners on veterans’ behalf (McCartney 2011). These stories oblige us to share the moral framework of veterans as innocent victims and politicians or foreign enemies (often both) as the

¹³ Respectively, ‘unbelievers’ and ‘foreigners/invaders’

villainous ‘other’. Therein they lock us into the victim’s point of view while obscuring other perspectives. This point of view, however, can injure and pathologise, not just obscure. Whilst victimhood may well confer the political advantage of legitimizing anger and rationalizing suffering (McCartney 2011), it also creates an unwanted and stigmatized identity (Caddick et al. 2018). For veterans, victimhood is the vulnerable antithesis of the stoic masculine warrior; it is objectification by the pity and sympathy of others. The remedy for unwanted sympathy? Different stories, and different points of view.

The fourth and fifth capacities I will introduce together in order to illustrate a crucial means by which (post)war stories act. Stories possess an *inherent morality* and the capacity to arouse *imagination*. Stories’ inherent morality is that they “inform people’s sense of what counts as good and bad, of how to act and how not to act” (Frank 2010; p. 36). This moral quality suggests what we *ought* to do to resolve a conflict or a disruption to the status quo. In suggesting appropriate resolutions, stories bound the possible – in both thought and action (Roselle et al. 2014). Linked to this, stories have the capacity to arouse people’s imaginations; something Frank considers stories’ most significant and compelling quality. Stories, “create imaginations of how the past might have gone differently and the future is open to any possibility” (Frank 2010; p. 42). Particularly so in relation to war and post-war stories, imagining how things might have been and imagining future possibilities takes on great moral significance. In order to know what counts as good and bad, we have to be able to imagine what will be the future consequences of our actions, and what will be the desired ending to our story. Stories help us open up the moral complexity of life. They teach us to reflect on the moral choices that characters in these stories make, and to imagine the consequences had they made different choices.

Tim O’Brien is a storyteller who understands the moral power of (post)war stories to act in people’s imaginations. O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* is his attempt to come to

terms with the memory and experience of the Vietnam War through a series of short, semi-autobiographical stories. His stories seek to tell the truth about what happened in Vietnam, whilst simultaneously asserting that the truth is hard to tell. The truth is slippery and ultimately the truth we are left with is that the moral quagmire of Vietnam is deep and dangerous. One of his stories begins like this:

This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession. Even now, I'll admit, the story makes me squirm. For more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. (p. 39)

O'Brien shows us that (post)war stories can injure, that they can haunt the imagination¹⁴. One way stories do this is by reducing the moral complexities of war to astoundingly simple absolutes. Later in the book, O'Brien tells another story that has haunted him and his comrades ever since the war. The truth this story tells is that one simple mistake in war can have disastrous and lifelong consequences. The mistake in question occurs when O'Brien's platoon are camped out in a field overnight, when the turning on of a flashlight gives away

¹⁴ O'Brien's book has also received its share of criticism for its depoliticization of the Vietnam War. As Neilson (1998) argues, "In attempting to challenge the concept of an autonomous subject, O'Brien writes a text that is obsessed with self; he details the uncertain effects of an unreal war upon an unknowable self but fails to examine its all too real effects upon the Vietnamese" (p. 204). Neilson thereby highlights a larger sense in which O'Brien's stories *fail* to act; that is, to acknowledge the incredible suffering of the Vietnamese people within the overall war narrative.

1 their position precipitating a mortar attack in which one of them is killed. The event is
 2 recounted from the perspective of the young soldier who blames himself for his friend's
 3 death:

4
 5 Like murder, the boy thought. The flashlight made it happen. Dumb and dangerous.

6 And as a result his friend Kiowa was dead.

7 That simple, he thought.

8 He wished there were some other way to look at it, but there wasn't. Very simple and
 9 very final. (p. 169)

10
 11 Herein lies the danger of stories' inherent morality and capacity to arouse imagination. Just as
 12 stories can open up the moral complexity of life, they can also reduce it, fix it, and finalize it.
 13 Frank (2010; p. 41) writes, "The imagination instigated by stories can lead people into
 14 trouble, or it can be their road to greatness". For the soldier in O'Brien's story – as for others
 15 coming to terms with the damage of war – imagination leads very clearly to trouble, with the
 16 imagination that things might have gone differently becoming nothing less than torturous.

17 Together, these interlinked capacities reveal both the possibilities and the dangers of
 18 stories as 'actors'. Stories' possibilities are best realized when they inspire hope, lead us
 19 toward healing, or help us find solutions to intractable problems. 'Good' stories may be ones
 20 that reveal multiple points of view, permit different interpretations, acknowledge complex
 21 truths, unpick moral complexity, and expand rather than constrict the imagination. Good
 22 stories start dialogues and help us see beyond the familiar, worn out categories like
 23 'masculinity' and 'militarization' through which we perceive, explain and too often dismiss
 24 people. One example of stories' possibilities I take from the theatre production 'Minefield'

(Arias 2016), in which veterans from opposing sides of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War come together on stage to jointly share and recollect their experiences of that conflict, evoking profoundly their sense of common humanity. Ever since I watched it, this play has stayed with me as an example of the power of storytelling to engender mutual respect and recognition. Yet the power of stories, regrettably perhaps, as Frank (2010) puts it, is also “the problem with stories: they are far too good at doing what they do, which is being the source of all values” (p. 69). Stories become ‘bad’ when they limit the values that people can hold; that is, when they offer only one perspective or interpretation, lay claim to incontestable truth, and speak in moral absolutes. Bad stories are monological in that they close down conversations and fix people and groups into character types that leave them thoroughly overdetermined (MacLeish 2013). Particularly harmful may be stories told *about* people without the voices of those people forming part of the narrative (Bulmer & Jackson 2016; Caddick et al. 2017). Critically analyzing the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways in which (post)war stories act is, I would argue, central to the narrative impulse for studying war and military experience.

Conclusion

The conceptual synthesis of war, narrative and the body I have introduced in this paper provides initial resources for a detailed, contextualized and nuanced analysis of (post)war stories. There is a lot more that could be said about narrative, and this paper merely scratches the surface of narrative theory. For instance, I have been unable to address the role of narrative in composing the self (Smith & Sparkes 2008), narrative’s function in memory (Randall 2010), how and why people tell stories (Gubrium & Holstein 2009), the co-construction of storytelling as a relational process (Gergen 2009), and ‘small stories’ and what they accomplish in conversation and argument (Bamberg 2006). Nor have I been able to encompass fully the role of narrative in the imagination (Andrews 2014). Rather, I have

1 focused on articulating three ideas central to an embodied study of narrative in CMS, all of
2 which have been developed previously in the literature on narrative, but which remain
3 somewhat unconnected in the study of war and military life.

4 The first idea – *that storytelling and bodily experience are intimately interconnected*
5 *dimensions of life and world-making* – builds on recent social theory which demonstrates that
6 embodied experience is simultaneously, and irreducibly, material, social and discursive (e.g.,
7 Burkitt 2014; Shilling 2012). *Stories* are simultaneously and irreducibly material, social and
8 discursive. The second idea – that *our stories are borrowed from, and situated in, the*
9 *societies and cultures we inhabit* – makes clear that embodied stories do not and cannot exist
10 untethered to social relations and cultural meanings. Personal stories might variously respond
11 to, reinforce, contest, reshape, or counteract wider public and strategic narratives, but
12 however stories relate to wider narratives, they cannot escape these narratives' presence. The
13 third idea – that *stories act* – raises the stakes of narrative by showing how stories have
14 consequences. Stories act on multiple levels: from national narratives that make killing for a
15 cause an acceptable thing to do, to personal stories that act to shape an individual's life and
16 destiny. How war stories act has consequences for bodies, societies, and international
17 relations. The kind of story we tell about war therefore matters deeply.

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