

Home Front Autobiographies of the 'War on Terror'

Narrative Liminality, Tacit Knowledge, and Affective Labor

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Abstract:

*This chapter engages the phenomenon of narrative liminality by zooming in on the genre of home front autobiographies from the so-called 'War on Terror.' It examines three case studies: Jenn Carpenter's *One Army Wife's Tale* (2012), Lily Burana's *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles* (2009), and Taya Kyle's *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* (2015). Written by military spouses, these books draw on readers' emotional knowledge about family and romantic love and use their authors' experiential knowledge as authorization. In the process, they create affective agency for military spouses, manage public feelings about US warfare in the twenty-first century, and invite readers to focus their attention on the domestic sphere—i.e., the home and the homeland—rather than the major battlefields of the War on Terror abroad.*

Introduction

Narratives of war constitute a notoriously male-dominated genre that tends to revolve around the figure of the soldier. With the professionalization of the military in the post-conscription era, the changing gendered culture of the military, and the so-called New Wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (that, among other things, increasingly involve private contractors), narratives of war have seen significant revisions. A plethora of works—fictional, nonfictional, and scholarly—has emerged that prominently feature female soldiers, negotiate warfare in the post-Cold War global order, and/or focus on military families. Especially in the aftermaths of 9/11, there has been a proliferation of texts that center on the military spouse—including songs, fictional accounts (e.g., TV shows, films, literature), self-help books, magazines, and online forums. Military spouses themselves have used autobiographical texts to claim their voices in narratives of war and US

imperialism, to mark their contribution to the war effort, and to narrate their pain, suffering, and sacrifice.

The broad resonance of many of these cultural products attests to the military spouse's central role in the cultural imaginary. She¹ serves, among other things, as a mediator between military culture and civilian society and performs "affective labor," i.e., "labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (Hardt and Negri 108) for the nuclear and extended military family as well as the imagined community of the nation. As Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert point out, the political rhetoric of the US homeland intimately connects the heteronormative family with national(ist) ideology: "The idea of homeland reinscribes the nation-state as the apotheosis and most legitimate form of political organization, and affirms affective attachments to the nation-state through its familial reference" (267). This discourse provides part of the context for the military spouse as a central figure in political rhetoric and cultural imagination; but also, the life of military families itself has changed in the post-9/11 era. Vicki Cody, an Army wife and mother, explains: "The terrorist attacks changed the life of anyone serving in the military or who had loved ones serving. For all of us, it was the beginning of a war on terrorism that would mean multiple deployments, in different countries, for the next decade" (189).

Writings by military spouses are neither central to a corpus of war literature—as their knowledge of war is usually second-hand and focused on the home front—nor do they take up a significant place in women's writing—as their protagonists tend to reinforce traditional gender roles and lack the seemingly more emancipatory potential of female soldiers. Yet, they are crucial to contemporary discourses of US exceptionalism and imperialism. "Home front autobiographies" from the post-9/11 era not only create "affective agency [i.e.] the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects" (Wanzo 3) for military spouses but, more importantly, they also manage public feeling about the 'War on Terror' and bolster dominant narratives about US warfare in the twenty-first century. Readers are encouraged to focus on the domestic in its double meaning of home and homeland and to follow the example of their heroines in supporting the war effort and accepting the limits of their knowledge about things 'outside the home.'

1 Military spouses are primarily imagined as women. This is well in line with the military's gender politics: "The Army is a profoundly gendered institution that places men and women, and masculinity and femininity (to the exclusion of other configurations of gender), in compulsory intimacy with and highly structured opposition to one another. The Army, the profession of soldiering, and the making of war are all ostensibly masculine domains" (MacLeish 18). Despite queer families, transgender soldiers, and male spouses gaining more and more public attention, the dominant image of the military spouse continues to be coded as feminine.

As they navigate the *unnarratability/unrepresentability* of the experience of war² at the home front, these texts draw on and activate readers' emotional knowledge about family and romantic love and they use their authors' experiential knowledge as authorization. These strategies are especially crucial to affectively interpellate a civilian readership that is largely detached from its armed forces and increasingly ignorant of military culture and the effects of war on military families.³ Ultimately, home front autobiographies rely on various forms of tacit knowledge—especially on “bodily knowing” and “emotional understanding” (Shotwell x)⁴—in order to expand the limits of their narrative form and to fuel their highly ambivalent “cultural work” (Tompkins). This work entails promoting US warfare while simultaneously showing its detrimental effects on the home front. It also means empowering military spouses by making their sacrifice and resilience visible while at the same time transposing the war almost exclusively to the home front and potentially losing sight of the battlefields and of the victims of US warfare.

In the following, I analyze three home front autobiographies of the War on Terror that differ strikingly with regard to the symbolic capital of their authors and publication venues, their narrative registers, and their ascribed literary merits: Jenn Carpenter's self-published *One Army Wife's Tale* (2012), Lily Burana's acclaimed *I Love a Man in Uniform: A Memoir of Love, War, and Other Battles* (2009), and Taya Kyle's *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* (2015), which captured media interest as part of what Deborah Cohler has termed “the *American Sniper* oeuvre” (72). Despite

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- 2 “[W]riters about war frequently struggle to convey ideas and experiences for which existing literary strategies and forms seem inadequate” (Haytock 3), i.e., they operate on the limits of narrative form. Experiences of violent conflict and warfare are to some degree even considered to lie completely beyond the scope of (visual) representation and (verbal) explicability. As Elisabeth Bronfen states with recourse to Fredric Jameson: “Our access to the real atrocity of war is only through the textual effects it produces even while eluding their grasp” (12). “[T]he suspicion that war is ultimately unrepresentable” not only draws attention to the narrative liminality that texts about war necessarily navigate but also brings into focus “the impossible attempts to represent it” (Jameson 1533). In other words, the experience of war exceeds the boundaries of the symbolic forms of language and literary genre.
 - 3 The “familiarity gap” between civil society and the US military (Golby et al. 102) has been problematized with renewed urgency in the aftermaths of 9/11 and in the context of the War on Terror (Owens 72-73; Golby et al. 98-99). Recent survey findings suggest that there are “many gaps between the American public and its military” (Schake and Mattis, “A Great Divergence” 4). While the support for the military seems to have grown, the overall knowledge about the armed forces among civilians has decreased: “[T]hough support for ‘the troops’ has become a kind of American civil religion, these ritualized gestures sometimes seem only to emphasize the distance between the military and civilian society” (Brooks 21-22).
 - 4 Alexis Shotwell distinguishes between “practical, skill-based knowledge; somatic or bodily knowing; potentially propositional but currently implicit knowledge; and affective or emotional understanding” (x).

their differences, these three books share (1) a reliance on forms of tacit knowledge as a means to tackle the limits of narratability of their protagonists' experiences on the home front and to authorize their account, (2) an ideological agenda that serves to manage public feeling towards the War on Terror by activating readers' emotional knowledge and thus seeking their sympathy and support for military families and by extension the military and the US nation's (neo)imperial mission at large, and (3) a commitment to drawing attention to the situation and suffering of military spouses at the expense of denying the "grievability" (Butler) of the lives of others.

Deployment and the War at Home: *One Army Wife's Tale*

Jenn Carpenter's *One Army Wife's Tale* was originally published online as a daily deployment journal while her husband Dax was in Iraq. Carpenter writes on her website: "The day after Dax left, I started a blog called One Army Wife's Tale. I started it just for the two of us, but now it's read by people all over the world" ("One Army Wife's Tale"). The self-published book version retains part of the diary format with short chapters that have titles but no dates; and it uses an image of an old-fashioned typewriter for its cover that stands at striking contrast with the text's emergence from a blog, which has since been taken down. In her farewell post on January 16, 2014, Carpenter emphasizes the therapeutic aspect of her writing: "[W]hile I've heard from hundreds (thousands? maybe...) of military spouses over the past few years about how cathartic my blog has been for them, it has been the best therapy in the world for me" ("New Year"). It may well be read by readers from all walks of life, but the text claims to be primarily for the purpose of its author's and her fellow military spouses' well-being, self-assurance, and self-understanding.

Carpenter uses her experience as authorization and, at several points, addresses the limits for others to relate to her situation: "My friends, my family, even my own children can only feel sorry for me. [...] All they can do is empathize, because they've never been through this" (*One Army Wife's Tale* 4). In line with Michael Polanyi's famous dictum that "*we can know more than we can tell*" (4; emphasis in the original), Carpenter claims that "[u]nless you've lived it, it's impossible to understand what it really means to be a Soldier's wife" (52), i.e., that only those who have acquired the tacit knowledge of living as a military spouse can fully understand her situation. "[T]here are no words" for how she feels (155) and her account emphasizes the visceral, bodily reactions to the husband's absence as a form of bodily knowing that can only partially be explicated, if at all. For instance: "I miss my husband with every fiber of my being, sometimes so much that I feel like the entire world is crashing down around me, like my chest is caving in. [...]"

It makes me sick to think about all the memories we could and should be making right now" (158).

One Army Wife's Tale, in implicit and explicit ways, portrays the military family home, and by extension the homeland at large, as integral part of the war effort: "[W]hat keeps [the soldiers] going is what they have at home. What they fight for isn't political, it's primal. [...] we fight right along with them" (23). The War on Terror is transformed from an imperial project of the US nation-state into a 'primal' battle for survival that affects the gendered arenas of the battlefield and the home front alike. In the domestic sphere, routine and ritual, e.g., the daily blog post, household chores, etc., take on a central meaning: "[S]urviving a deployment is done [on] a day by day basis" (85). While the text communicates the experience of war in the US family home by drawing on its readers' "affective or emotional understanding" (Shotwell x), it also asks us to accept the limits of the military spouse's—and our own—knowledge of the war: Dax "wasn't able to tell [her] much, of course, [...]" (87), and Carpenter herself, "[f]or security reasons [...], can't share many details" (226). Army life entails coming to terms with the insecurities of not-knowing: "Always waiting, always in the dark, always being told one thing, then another, then something that completely contradicts the first two things you were told" (169).

In order to convey the trials and tribulations of military spouses, the text resorts to sentimental tropes, including direct address and appeals to the reader, depictions of crying and emotional excess, and a focus on the domestic. It clearly points towards the confines of its narrative form for explicating the experience of its author/narrator: It draws on a tacitly shared emotional understanding about suffering, family, and romantic love in order to make its civilian readers *feel* the consequences of war at home rather than to explain them argumentatively. The diary format enhances this effect as it creates intimacy and suggests direct access to the presumably unfiltered thoughts and emotions of its author. This cultural work of mediating the 'civil-military divide' is particularly relevant at times when people, who "[i]n full hustle mode, hell-bent for whatever scrap of happiness can be grasped, [...] have almost no time to feel the pain of war" (Gilman 8).

One Army Wife's Tale not only intimately connects the battles at home with those in the theaters of war (for instance, when it draws analogies between the deployed soldier's fight and the eldest son's struggle with epilepsy, cf. 72, 139, 313) around a family that "win[s] wars" (72) but also likens the experiences of military spouses to other highly emotional moments readers might be more familiar with. Deployment is described as a "constant grieving process" and as a "nightmare" (1, 143/223); and despite the claim that "there is nothing romantic about a woman sending her husband off to war" (1), the autobiography takes recourse to the romance formula. It presents a "fairytale" narrative, the "great love story" (251) of Jenn finally marrying her high school sweetheart Dax; it labels him a "Prince Charming" (109), imagines Jenn as a "princess," and casts the US Army as the "evil stepmother" (6). After

their wedding, Jenn expects to live “happily ever after” (111). Dax’s deployment to Iraq is described as causing perpetual heartbreak (cf. 82), it is evident that “he’s worth waiting for” (192), and the period of separation is shaped by moments of courtship. The overarching sentimental(ized) narrative of their relationship is embedded in military culture as it revolves around Veterans Day, the day that Jenn claims first prompts her to consider the realities of marrying a soldier, the day of their engagement, and, a year later, a day on which she has become “the proud wife of an Iraq war veteran” (268).

The love story provides affective cues for the reader to sympathize with the Army wife or create a “feeling-with,” which also “implies a kind of distance” (Shotwell 109). *One Army Wife’s Tale* offers a venue for military spouses to feel part of a “sisterhood” (213), but also addresses a civilian readership in an attempt to exercise affective agency and to allow for them to affectively relate to the suffering of military wives: “Our men risk their lives for the sake of our country, and we sacrifice our well being [sic], our happiness, even sometimes our sanity, for the sake of our men” (129). At the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Jenn articulates her discomfort with “all the reporters [...] talking about it like it was over,” because it continues “for the thousands of [...] military families with loved ones deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan” (177). Despite its modest claim to tell only one Army wife’s tale and its focus on therapeutic writing, Carpenter’s story works against this national forgetting as it asks readers to feel along with the author/narrator and imagine the consequences of war for those at the home front.

The Trauma of War on the Home Front: *I Love a Man in Uniform*

Like Carpenter, Lily Burana presents her “take on life as an Army wife as [hers] alone” (4). As a journalist and author of a novel—*Try* (2006)—and an acclaimed first memoir—*Strip City: A Stripper’s Journey Across America* (2001)—Burana is a seasoned writer when she documents her path to army wifedom in *I Love a Man in Uniform*. She offers a detailed account of her marriage and her attempts to find her role and identity as a soldier’s wife—beginning with an ‘unlikely’ romance and a hurried wedding as “a War on Terror bride” (53). This includes two periods of separation, one due to Mike’s deployment to Iraq and another when the couple breaks up and Burana struggles with trauma and depression.⁵ After Mike’s deployment, the war

5 Burana remarks on the different perceptions of these periods of separations: “When a woman is alone because her husband is at war, she’s Penelope pining for Odysseus, prepared to wait an eternity for her beloved’s return. When a woman is alone because she and her husband are separated, she’s just some anonymous schmo wondering if she should sign the divorce papers from the law offices of Loser, Dumb-Dumb, and Wank. It’s the difference between epic longing and epic failure” (264). However, she also emphasizes the parallels when she

recedes further into the background of the narration. First of all, because at West Point,

[n]o one discussed the war. [...] Among the wives, we talked about where the war had taken our husbands, what it was doing to our families, our plans, our careers, our dreams, our psyches, our souls, and our marriages. [...] So the glue that binds the Army community is common experience rather than shared opinion. (154-55)

Secondly, because dealing with the separation and PTSD, it “had slipped below the fold in my life’s big news, bumped by the headline *Rookie Military Wife Has Melt-down*” (259). In the end, the couple is happily reunited and Burana seems to have found her place by Mike’s side and within the military community. In the process, she realized that being an Army wife entailed a specific emotional and embodied knowledge: “[M]ilitary-wife life meant painting with a new emotional palette” (119) and “there was much more to being a military wife than courtesies and customs and regulations—things I couldn’t learn by simply putting my nose in a book” (124). This knowledge cannot be explicated in narrative form and thus also exceeds her own autobiographical account.

While the memoir interpellates its audience as subjects with a shared tacit understanding of love, trauma, and (bodily) pain, Burana also explicitly enters a contract and an intimate relation with her readers that allows her to share “undiluted dispatches from one military wife’s real, imperfect life” (6). She explains early on that there is a “Green Curtain rule in effect when it comes to communicating about the military with people who are strangers to that world” (4). Her account is premised on the notion that there are things about the war and her husband’s involvement in it that neither she nor her readers are supposed to know:

I never asked Mike about anything he’d seen in combat [...]. I didn’t feel it was within my rights to press him for details, and womanly intuition guided me to soothe rather than pry. [...] He was part of a world that I could not—and likely would not—ever know. (63)

Yet and despite these limitations, as a military spouse, i.e., as a civilian who is intimately connected to the world of the military, she is in an ideal position to explain and translate military rules, lingo, and lifestyle to a broader readership, and her memoir takes us along on her initiation into this parallel universe of the US mil-

describes the couple’s breakup with reference to the deployment in terms of its duration as well as its outcome (“we were lucky to have survived. The mission was complete” [278]).

itary.⁶ She emphasizes, time and again, that she was the most unlikely candidate to fall for a soldier and originally had no sympathy for the military at all.⁷ One implication of this narrative is, of course, that if “Anarchy Girl” (2) could overcome her strong ideological reservations towards the military, even love a man in uniform, and do her part as a military spouse—so can we.

She also adds a certain degree of glamour to the military world: Burana compares entering the Army to posing for *Playboy* (cf. 57), not getting involved as a military spouse to “not riding Space Mountain” when going to Disney World (124), and “[m]eeting a general” to “meeting Madonna” (146). Despite its wit and ‘glam,’ the memoir addresses the problems of military spouses during and after deployment, especially issues of mental health that affect war veterans and their families. It creates affective agency for military spouses not primarily by employing sentimental tropes but in a narrative register that relies on irony, defamiliarization, and pop cultural intertexts to make the experience relatable to the readers. “I was supposed to be the suffering Saint Wifey, crying while I adjusted the yellow ribbons on the tree, and instead I was rolling my eyes all the time” (83), writes Burana;⁸ and she does not hide the fact that she did not fully support the War on Terror: “I married into the military-industrial complex, yes, yet I reserved the right to judge. Love is tolerant; it is not at all blind” (89).

She is “upset” about the Abu Ghraib scandal “in a way [she] couldn’t have imagined” and, again, offers an analogy that readers might be able to relate to: “If you’ve ever had someone cheat on you—the feeling was the same” (297). This analogy marks the events at Abu Ghraib as a moral transgression and a breach of trust, yet it also trivializes them. Readers are asked to identify with the shocked military spouse and her feeling of betrayal and disappointment rather than the victims tortured and killed by American soldiers. We are asked to sympathize with Burana’s “visceral, gut-felt battle” between her ideals and military culture (312) and follow her towards reconciliation:

I knew that if I were to ever reconcile the horrors of war and military corruption with the goodness of my marriage—and the military itself—I would have to go

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- 6 Cf. especially the beginning of chapter 2, “Simple as Alpha Bravo Charlie,” which discusses and translates “Greenspeak” (22–24), “the dictionary definition of *hooah*” (31–32), and the explanation of acronyms and (military) rules throughout (e.g., 55, 106–07, 124, 137, 145, 208, 232).
- 7 “I never thought I would say yes to a date with an Army man,” Burana explains and points out her “disdain for authority” and her “passion for alternative culture” (14, 15). She describes her past as “an accidental teenage communist” as a stripper, who—among other things—appeared in *Playboy* (34).
- 8 Still, the memoir also capitalizes on its protagonist’s tears, on showcasing emotional excess and distress, and on the domestic sphere in its double meaning of home/homeland (cf., for example, 95, 97).

beyond Rumsfeld's smarmy advice to overlook the 'few bad apples' and work the grid in reverse: For every crooked soldier, there are hundreds of thousands more who are honorable; for every hurtful military tactic and policy, there are scores more that help. (309)

In the end, Burana finds her place in the military community by merging her past as a stripper and her present as a military spouse:⁹ She starts a burlesque class for military wives called "Operation Bombshell" (328). The emphasis on postfeminist-style¹⁰ glamour and empowerment plays out in line with the confessional mode in which Burana reveals her struggles with loneliness, anxiety, and PTSD (which she calls "post-traumatic spouse disorder" [287]), but it also counters a potentially critical perspective on the war and the military. She relies on a "makeover paradigm" (Gill 262) to create a feeling of control and sense of mission on the home front¹¹: "Could I control the outcome of the war? My husband's safety? The date of his return? No. But I could fit into my clothes. [...] I could choose my battles, and this was mine: Woman vs. Scale, and I was winning" (80). Burana depicts both "self-advancement" and consumption as coping mechanisms during her husband's absence (87, cf. 77).

I Love a Man in Uniform sets out to generate sympathy for military spouses and to draw attention to the suffering of families as it enlists forms of tacit knowledge—emotional and embodied—as an instance of narrative liminality, pointing beyond (verbal) explication, and as a powerful way to connect with a civilian readership. Its protagonist engages with "the pain of those at home who hurt by proxy" (287) and relates that experience with humor but also with a serious agenda. Burana concludes that "[t]he Army asks a lot of its families" (340) and that Army wives are, in a sense, "truly heroic" (348). It is the "sisterhood" (152) of West Point wives, then, that she turns to as "fellow travelers who understood, where so many other people couldn't, exactly what I was going through" (151), because the actual experience of being a military spouse cannot fully be conveyed to outsiders: "[...] when some well-meaning civilian, a neighbor or someone at the gym, would say, 'I know

9 She explains: "I'd kept those two parts of my self completely separate—the wife and the wild girls—as if they might contaminate each other. How nice it was to finally accept that, instead, they complemented each other. I could knit these two halves together, then give them as a gift to other women: Have fun. Be glamorous. Be free. Be yourself. Enjoy" (334).

10 Burana explicates her gender politics: "I'm not one to advocate a retro gender politics [...]. But after two centuries of feminism, I still prefer a man to open the car doors and the pickle jars" (109).

11 Rosalind Gill argues that "a makeover paradigm constitutes postfeminist media culture" and it relies on people—particularly women—"to believe first that they or their lives are lacking or flawed in some way, and secondly that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits" (262, 263).

how you feel,' I'd be so pissed, I was sure my brain would melt and pour out of my eyes. *No, you most certainly damn don't know how I feel*" (86; emphasis in the original).

The Aftermath of War: *American Wife*

Taya Kyle's *American Wife* was published in 2015 when she was already a publicly known figure through her husband's bestselling memoir *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US History* (2012) and its film adaptation *American Sniper* (2014) directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper and Sienna Miller. Written with Jim DeFelice, who had already been involved in publishing Chris' life story, her book not only functions as a companion piece to her husband's autobiography¹² but also covers the time after Chris' death in 2013. It begins with her family history, career, and marriage and continues with her becoming a military spouse, a mother, a public figure, and a widow. Rather than zooming in on the home front exclusively, her memoir includes stories from the battlefield that are based on second-hand knowledge and retrospective accounts¹³ but are presented from a position of authority derived from her closeness to her husband. It evidently seeks to set her husband's record straight and take on the public criticism that has been directed against his military activities, public presence, and political opinions. Taya explains "that the U.S. public was not getting a full view of the war" (34) and addresses various criticisms towards her husband:

Many people not familiar with current military tactics criticized Chris and all snipers for somehow fighting unfairly in Iraq, as if they were hiding far from danger when they went into combat. (72)

People have criticized him for his willingness to shoot a woman and her child who had a grenade and were about to blow up American Marines. (88)

[W]hen he's called a racist or anti-Islam, I just shake my head. (117)

12 *American Wife* frequently references *American Sniper* and its reception, capitalizing on its best-selling status, expanding its perspective, and drawing attention to the intimate connection between the authors as well as the texts: for example, "Chris and I told the story of how we met in *American Sniper*" (10); "[i]f you've read *American Sniper*, you know what had happened to him" (66); "Chris said in his book that the incident was nothing. From his point of view, he was right [...]. But from my perspective, he shouldn't have deployed at all." (67); "[t]he beauty of *American Sniper* is that it is raw" (118). *American Sniper* already included part of Taya's story—according to her, because Jim DeFelice "argued that [her] contribution would make the book truly unique: to that point, no one had included the family in a military memoir, certainly not one involving a SEAL" (114).

13 In fact, Taya Kyle emphasizes that "Chris didn't share most of what had happened on the deployments when he got home" (36) and that during his deployments "[w]ar rarely entered our conversation" (32).

She further tries to appeal to civilian readers' tacit understanding of family relations in order to feel for the soldiers, even if they are unable to fully grasp their specific experience of war:

People have no idea how horrendous war is until they've lived it. [...] It seems especially hard for civilians to understand violent emotions against the enemy. (37)

Imagine if you are out somewhere with your family, and one of them gets shot and killed. The next day, another one gets shot. Then another. Sooner or later, no matter who you are, you will hate the person who is killing your family. And that hatred extends to the others who are supporting him. It runs deep. (38)

Taya's agenda to create sympathy for her husband, but also for US soldiers in general is spelled out directly and more implicitly promoted through the text's reliance on tacit knowledge as a form of narrative liminality:

I think it is one thing to protest the war and quite another to criticize the soldiers [...]. They've given their country a blank check on their lives and the lives of their loved ones; we should at least show our sympathy. (35)

She takes on a role that women have fulfilled at least since the heyday of the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter); she serves as a moral authority that readers are supposed to trust—more than, for example, media reports. In fact, despite her attempts to fashion herself as a modern, independent, and empowered woman, Taya Kyle's memoir could easily be read as a modern reiteration of the four cardinal virtues that dominant image once prescribed for white middle- and upper-class women: She is shown as being pure in her commitment to her husband—even beyond his death—and as being pious in her steadfast Christian faith and her belief in divine providence. She is presented as being submissive, as she is happy to support Chris' decisions—though not always without a fight—and to defend his legacy. As such, she is also shown to be domestic in her decision to become a full-time mother and wife and in her charity work that focuses on the families of first responders and veterans. At the very least, hers is "a very conventional construction of femininity" (Spychala 120) and her identity is predominantly derived from her husband's life and career.¹⁴

Chris Kyle's public image has, from the start, been based on him being an exception and his story has been marketed as extraordinary and readily made for Hollywood. Like her husband, Taya, however, goes to great length to claim that both she and her husband are representative of the military community if not of the nation at large. After the success of his book, more and more people started to

14 Fashioning herself as a reluctant public figure, she remarks, for instance, that she "enjoyed being who I was—wife of an American hero. Chris Kyle's wife. That was my identity; I was wife and mother, but you don't get famous for that. Which was fine" (141).

thank Chris for his service. Taya interprets his public role as a stand-in for the military community: “Thanking him was people’s way of thanking everyone in uniform” (129). She also picks up on his self-fashioning as a cowboy (cf., e.g., 58, 106, or 190), emphasizes his Texan identity, and his “love of the Old West,” which “appealed to him” because of the “clear sense of right and wrong, of frontier justice and strong values” (126). The foundational mythology of the American West and the imperial scheme of ‘going West’¹⁵ are projected onto Chris Kyle, i.e., the modern-day soldier-cowboy, and thereby used to legitimize the contemporary imperial strivings of the US. As a culturally specific form of tacit knowledge that could be explicated, but usually does not have to be explained, it serves as a means to connect with civilian readers within and beyond the confines of narrative form.

The clear demarcation of good and evil that is central to the American Sniper oeuvre further aligns it ideologically with US popular culture since 9/11, which “has broadly presented the United States as a global force for good, a reluctant hegemon working to defend human rights and protect or expand democracy from the barbarians determined to destroy it” (Laderman 5). *American Wife* is steeped in an American exceptionalism that is bolstered by the protagonist’s belief in “God’s plan” (69) and “divine intervention” (231), i.e., a sense of providence, which shapes the lives of both, *American Sniper* and *American Wife*, and thus the American nation.

While the American Sniper oeuvre neither destabilizes the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler) nor the “traditional gendering of the home front as a feminine and the battlefield as a masculine space, it [...] troubles what can be considered war experience and entrenched notions of the home front and the front line” (Spychala 121). As Mareike Spychala observes, “[t]he births of both of the Kyles’ children [...] are included in the part of the book titled ‘War,’ [which mixes] descriptions of life with young children [...] with descriptions of Chris Kyle’s time in Iraq” (120). Taya writes, for instance: “In November 2004, while Bubba and I were negotiating nutrition and breast-feeding, Chris was heading to Fallujah to help Marines retake the city” (51). *American Wife* not only blurs the distinction between home front and battlefield but also describes the long-term effects of war that continue to trouble veterans and military families beyond their active engagement in military conflict. “Leaving the war zone, didn’t translate immediately into leaving the war,” Taya Kyle explains (104), and calls for more attention to the situation of service members after they have left the military (95). The non-profit organization that she founds to honor her husband’s legacy and to support military and first responders’ marriages and families (cf. 226-27, 320-22) puts that call into action. Though her husband was shot by a mentally ill veteran, Taya advocates for being “sympathetic towards the victims of PTSD while not letting them use it as excuse” (266).

15 For an overview of the myth of the American West, see chapter VI in Heike Paul’s *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*.

American Wife includes photographs as well as emails from Chris (cf., e.g., 56-59, 73-77, 81-82, 86-88, 90-91) that offer evidence of her husband's good character and their shared feelings. They create intimacy and humanize the 'most lethal sniper in US history.' Readers are thus interpellated to feel for the soldier and the military spouse by the explicit arguments presented in the text, its (visual) paratext, and its multiple references to a shared tacit knowledge about family and love, (civil) religion, and faith. Once more emphasizing emotional understanding, Taya Kyle praises Clint Eastwood's filmmaking because it "[does not] show and tell everything in an obvious manner; [it] get[s] [its] message across in subtle ways, but make[s] you feel it" (243) and embraces *American Sniper* specifically because it reveals "the deeper truth about what our veterans go through, what their families go through" (307-08). She clearly marks the limits of narrative to capture and to convey the experiences and feelings of military families while also pointing towards the fact that cultural representations—such as Eastwood's films or her own book—may gesture beyond their own symbolic forms: They explicate and implicitly impart some instances of tacit knowledge and affirm the impossibility of fully explaining the embodied and emotional knowledge of military spouses to outsiders.

Conclusion

Albeit in different ways, all three autobiographies engage in the management of feelings, public and private, and they rely on strategies of "sentimental storytelling" (Wanzo). They seek to generate sympathy for military families and raise awareness for the immediate and long-term consequences of war for those on the home front. To that end, they draw on their readers' emotional understanding of love, family, and kinship as well as on their authors' experiential and embodied knowledge. After all, as Alexis Shotwell reminds us, "[t]he implicit is what provides the conditions for things to make sense to us" (x). Jenn Carpenter, Lily Burana, and Taya Kyle set out to prove that they are more than "the stock figures of aggrieved military mother, wife, or widow" (Adelman 27), and they create affective agency for military spouses by appealing to their readers' tacit knowledge and by sharing their experiences within (and beyond) the confines of narrative form, verbal explication, and propositional knowledge.

This, however, comes at a price: Not only do home front autobiographies transpose the narrative of war onto the domestic sphere and, in the process, divert attention from the battlefields and victims of US warfare abroad. They also serve to reinforce what Elisabeth Anker has described as "the melodramatic political discourse" of the so-called 'War on Terror,' which

casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue. (2)

Home front autobiographies by military spouses tend to be complicit in advancing the “imperial ideology [that] has been naturalized in American life” (Laderman 10). Even though their emphasis on the suffering of military families might allow for reading them ‘against the grain’ as documents of the detrimental effects of war on the presumably safe space of the American family home and thus as a subtle critique of warfare, they implicitly and explicitly lobby for their readers’ support of the troops. They affirm the moral goodness of the men fighting for the US, and, at least to some degree, bolster the righteousness and legitimacy of US military actions and assert the nation’s “imperial benevolence” (Laderman and Gruenwald).

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