

COUNTERING THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF MEDIA PORTRAYAL USING CREATIVE  
EXPRESSION: AN EXAMINATION OF VETERANS WITH PTSD AND THE  
COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY GAPS

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## ABSTRACT

Alberto Gonzalez and Sandra L. Faulkner, Committee Co-Chairs

In American culture, we are greatly influenced by the mass media. Much of what we hear and believe to be true about our society is formulated via electronic mediums. However, there is often a distorted or misguided approach being passed from one source to the other. In the United States, men and women of the armed forces are heroes that we proudly support. Yet, many veterans are returning home post war to an environment in which they find difficulty adjusting, specifically those diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These veterans are a part of the most vulnerable populations in our society, and as such deserve to be heard in a way that authenticates their experiences. This research examines creative expression using arts-based methods to highlight veteran voices. It also takes a rhetorical approach to explore misrepresented portrayals of veterans in the media. I argue that organizations centered on arts based methods are using their media platforms to not only raise awareness, but also to provide a different voice of representation that allows veterans to create and convey more accurate messages regarding their own lived experience. The goal of this research is to provide an understanding of the discursive divide between veteran self-identity and the media representations of veterans with PTSD.

Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Rhetorical Analysis, Poetic Inquiry, Media Representation, Veterans, PTSD

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Welcome to a society that celebrates heroism. We clap, cry and hang our flags in their honor. They do a job that we cannot. They are brave and fearless. They are the veterans of the United States military, and they are one of the most vulnerable populations in our country. As military servicemen and women return home post-war, their futures appear bright and promising. Nonetheless, thousands are plagued with a crippling condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a debilitating injury that often disrupts and corrodes the lives of those that are afflicted. Although it is becoming more and more prevalent in our society, many are still uncomfortable with the idea that some of the country's strongest men and women are left helpless and hopeless fighting an inner battle that is too often diminished or ignored. However, this reluctance to acknowledge the problem is creating a barrier to effectively understand and combat this condition.

The United States military has played a huge role in my life, with family members and friends serving across branches and in various combat situations (wars). This close affiliation with both active duty personnel and veterans alike, has given me a different perspective of their experience. It is very easy to sit on the sidelines and minimally support the men and women who so graciously give of themselves to protect and serve their countries. It is also easy to remain complacent and overlook the difficulties veterans face adjusting to post war civilian life, when you are removed from the context of their personal situations. However, when the reality of their combat experience reaches your home front, it may cause a broadening of the mind as you adjust to the reality of their return home. My own very close and interpersonal relationship with a decorated combat veteran diagnosed with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), has led to the development of this research.



**Figure 1 Eric M. Peak (Fallujah, Iraq). Illustration of a service person serving in combat wearing battle gear.**

Veterans like Eric, and others of the United States military are a uniquely represented population in today's society. In a culture that is digital and media driven, much of what we see and understand of this population, and particularly the combat experience, is learned via those platforms. Most often the audience's perception of them limits them to being only men and women in uniform. However, the complexities of the veterans' experience have far reaching implications that go beyond the media's portrayal, and their return home affects much more than the individual. Knobloch and Theiss (2012) suggest that the reentry of veterans into family (civilian) life can be challenging, and understanding those challenges is critical for veterans to become productive members of society. Acknowledging this issue, the focus of my research is guided by the following critical question: *How do the representations of identity through artistic methods challenge the media's representation of veterans with PTSD?*

How much does society really want to know about our veterans? Do we want to walk the walk of pain and shame with them? Or would we like to believe that they've fought a good fight, returned home and picked up the life they temporarily left behind? While this is the ideal outcome, most veterans do not have this glorious experience. Yes, they return home and start or continue families and careers. Yes, they can strive for accomplishments and be successful. However, sometimes the achievements come while fighting an internal beast that most of us cannot begin to comprehend. They live with scars so deep, that those around them are left feeling shut out and abandoned. When the diagnosis of PTSD becomes a factor, it impacts the veteran and his/or family members (Ray and Vanstone, 2009). PTSD trickles over into every area of their life, and without a proper understanding, creates more hardships along the way for this population of veterans.

One of the largest challenges within the community of veterans with PTSD is the negative perception that is placed onto them by society. With this view comes judgment, discrimination, apprehension of disclosure, as well as resistance to seeking assistance. Common stereotypes about this group include: crazy, dangerous, violent, as well as the assumption that veterans are responsible for their conditions.

However, one study found that of all the labeling imposed upon veterans, those that were the most damaging included ideas of violence and dangerousness (Mittal et al., 2013). Researchers also concluded that PTSD like other mental health issues often carries a negative stigmatization, a problem that frequently hinders growth and treatment. However, in order for veterans to heal and live with some life altering mental and physical conditions, as well as move forward to a better state of being, the barriers for receiving help must be eliminated or at the very least, decreased to the point that veterans are not afraid to reach out.

As more and more veterans return home from combat, there has been increased coverage and representation of veterans (including those with PTSD) in various media situations. In an article from Military Pathways, Leccese (2012) discussed the concern that the current focus on PTSD causes a lot of negative press for the military and yet, insists that in order to bring PTSD out of the shadows and to the forefront, there needs to be a conversation. Increasing the level of discussion around this topic may increase the chances that veterans who are suffering with the condition will seek assistance. Veterans have a hard-enough time speaking about their experiences, and more conversation could mean more support which is one way to keep moving this issue forward. As the current generation of combat veterans return home from overseas, we as a nation have a duty to serve those who have served us, and to enhance the quality of care for those with PTSD (Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel, 2006). While addressing PTSD has become more of a concern for the general population, as this research shows, there are a lot of barriers still in place, yet there are also promising alternative courses of action, such as the creative arts that are helping these veterans.

Returning home from the combat environment brings its own set of complications, and communicating may not be as clear as expected. Veterans with PTSD may experience challenges in articulating a narrative that fully explains their trauma in words and may look to other options such as art making, to help provide a non-verbal way of communicating (Collie et al., 2006). *Military Experience and the Arts (MEA)* is one organization dedicated to positively giving veterans a voice to the outside world using artwork, and as such plays in an integral role in my research. MEA operates several publications that encourage veterans to speak out using fictional storytelling, poetry writing, graphic artwork etc. These works of art are displayed digitally on their website.

### **Purpose of Study**

How has the media influenced our views on post-traumatic stress disorder? Every day, citizens of the United States turn to media sources to provide them with information. Some rely solely on those sources to stay abreast of what is happening in the world. As journalists, there is a code of ethics to uphold when reporting and distributing news. However, there is a fine line between good journalism and news worthy stories. Much of mass media today is based on popular culture and trends. The public's perception of what is relevant is often based on an agenda set by mass media outlets. According to Mughal (2013) the media plays a major role in society and greatly influences public opinion amongst the mass majority. The media has the ability to sway the public's opinion based on the objective and current media agenda. The media's emphasis and prominence of certain issues also become primary points of interest for the public; meaning once the media highlights situations in certain ways the audience is likely to take on that way of thinking especially after continued exposure.

For example, the media often leans toward creating a murky picture of the veteran population, one that displays veterans as unstable, dangerous villains that warrant extreme caution upon interaction (Mittal et al, 2013). Veterans are often depicted as enraged, overly aggressive, highly violent, intimidating and out of control. These mental images are often reinforced by visual images such as showing veterans in full combat uniform as in Figure 1, even if the story has little to do with combat. As an attempt to offer a different view, the media may then turn to showing helplessness, victimization, and stereotypes that reinforce pity or charity; often showing veterans as destitute, unhealthy, unmaintained and very often homeless. Both extremes may increase veterans' stigma and create apprehension around interacting with this population. Veterans may then internalize this stigma and accept the public's perspective,

incorporating it into their self-image (Meisenbach, 2010). This self-absorption of stigmatization is damaging to the psyche of veterans, and the risk of being stigmatized can lead individuals to adjust their way of living, selectively choose social situations and avoid others all together (Feinstein, 2015), thereby enhancing behaviors that are already problems in veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, veterans with PTSD don't simply need compassion, they need civilians to have awareness and understanding. This injury is one that can be linked to guilt and shame by both veterans and society, a double-edged sword that appears as both heroism and despair. The United States of America cannot live in denial and awareness is the key. This is an issue that needs attention, discussion and solutions. Our veterans are not evil killing machines, nor are they always wounded beyond hope. They can live productive lives while overcoming a condition such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, to do that, the perception of these veterans must be changed. Thus, we need more realistic representations of the experiences veterans have as they battle PTSD.

As a society, we must do more to raise awareness and consciousness of this injury. It is not enough to sing the praises of veterans or decorate them with medals when all is well; we must support them in every way and that means maintaining that commitment after the reality of trauma has entered their lives. "Defending your country" through military service is perhaps the hardest job in the world to do successfully, and members of our armed services' efforts should be honored and commended, on and off the battle ground. To do this, we cannot cheapen their experience or depict them as vicious killers. Instead, we must use our (media) voices to increase the number of success stories, as opposed to increasing the number of suicide rates, because not enough has been said or done for our veterans.

Awakening our consciousness to the veteran experience will open the gateway for us to hear their voices, in turn allowing a better understanding to take place. The Iraqi and Afghanistan wars have exposed the severe and lasting consequences that military trauma has on individuals, as well as the impact it has on the interpersonal relationships of these service men and women (Monson, Taft and Fredman, 2009). As such, the identity of those veterans is immensely altered, and maneuvering through the civilian world and maintaining relationships is difficult at best, for the individual and family members, friends, co-workers etc. A greater comprehension of the challenges veterans face post trauma, will assist with uncovering the multiple layers of identity that are not only present, but also disrupted in the lives of veterans. Through this work, I explore the way veterans themselves are revealing these jaded and complicated layers of identity, as they navigate the transition from military combat personnel to complex veteran/reintegrated civilian.

Recently, post-traumatic stress disorder appears to be receiving as much, or more press than the Iraq and Afghanistan wars received (Leccese, 2012). However, it is the type of media attention received that is alarming. It continues to be laden with distorted versions of the truth or images so disturbing that we shy away from wanting to know more (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2015). The media, overall, has focused more on the negative outcomes of the veteran's life status, as opposed to discussing the elements that created the necessity of war. As stated before, these images consistently show veterans in a way that limits them as an individual outside of the military, connecting all their identity to their armed services involvement. These images may appear threatening or intimidating, magnifying the tendency to perceive veterans in a frightening or unfavorable position. While there is a clear connect with combat trauma and PTSD, the injury itself does not constitute a one-dimensional form of identity for any individual.



In recent news, former U.S. Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's son "Track Palin," repeatedly had his face plastered on multiple media platforms as he faced serious domestic violence allegations against his girlfriend. However, much of the controversy arose when Palin began to speak out publicly regarding his PTSD status. Many saw it as an excuse to cover his behavior, as she blasted former President Barak Obama for a lack of veteran services support. While others, including leaders of veteran organizations, wanted to be clear that former President Obama wasn't the problem for this public outcry. "It's not President Obama's fault that Sarah Palin's son has PTSD," said Paul Rieckhoff, who heads Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). "PTSD is a very serious problem, a complicated mental health injury, and I would be extremely reluctant to blame any one person in particular" (Siemaszko, 2016, para. 3). While blaming one person is not the answer, looking for ways to combat this injury is a resolution. It is also worthy to note that PTSD itself does not determine acts of violence. Although some veterans who experience the injury may engage in violence, the same is true for many individuals that are not diagnosed with PTSD.

What is evident is that our perceptions and depictions of PTSD are problems, but pointing the finger at one entity does not provide a solution. Post-traumatic stress disorder as related to military combat trauma affects the veteran's sense of self-worth and causes a breakdown within their world (Quinn, 2008). As the number of trauma affected veterans return from war, conducting basic and ongoing research is essential to the maintenance and growth of their adjustments back into civilian life, as well as working on steps of prevention and consequently, treatment for themselves and family members (Monson, Taft, and Fredman, 2009). As a society, we must know more, desire more and do more, in order to tackle an epidemic that continues to challenge veterans, civilians, government officials and health care providers.

### Scope of Study

The media's depiction of veterans, particularly those with post-traumatic stress disorder, often create a different picture than the one veterans have of themselves. Various stories have associated combat veterans with violence and crime resulting in implicit and explicit connections to military service, particularly through combat experience, and have attached those ideas to multiple negative outcomes. Further, those outcomes are reduced to mental health issues such as PTSD, substance abuse, and suicide (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2015). Headlines and stories, such as those from USA Today that read "Police get help with vets who are ticking time bombs" (Johnson, 2012, para 1) and from CNN that reads "Experts: Vets' PTSD, violence a growing problem" (Hayes, 2012, para 1) perpetuate fear and increase stigma associated with this population, and diminish the possibility of other influential factors playing a role in behavior.

The *USA Today* article speaks about a national training program funded by the justice department designed to assist police officers in handling situations involving veterans. While it seems that programs of this nature are important and helpful, many of the phrases used in the story create tension and confusion saying things such as this program is designed "to help police deal with an increasing number of volatile confrontations involving highly trained and often heavily armed combat veterans" (Johnson, para 1) and "there is an "urgent need" to de-escalate crises in which even SWAT teams may be facing tactical disadvantages against mentally ill suspects who also happen to be trained in modern warfare" (Johnson, para 2). These types of statements are misleading, suggesting that veterans are always armed and that interactions with them always end violently. In addition, great discomfort is created by implying that even the most highly trained authoritative officers may not be a match for trained veterans who also have mental illnesses.

*CNN's* story takes a different spin and ends with a plea for more awareness and community effort. Yet, getting to that point in the story is difficult with the previously stated headline, above an image of a young, tattooed, shirtless veteran holding a machine gun that was accused of murder with the caption below it that reads "Veteran Benjamin Colton Barnes, 24, is suspected of killing a park ranger at Mount Rainier National Park on New Year's Day" (Hayes, para 1). How does one make it to the end of the story which offers a different point of view, when the article starts with reinforced stereotypes and other statements such as Shad Meshad's comments "there's a percentage that come back, depending on how much trauma and how much killing they're involved in, they're going to act out" (cited in Hayes, para 5). These types of images and statements that propose the idea that veterans are destined to exhibit poor behavior, are exactly the kind that limits the public from having alternative perspectives. While some of these outcomes or actions have been exhibited in many veterans after combat, the media's framing of veterans in this way may greatly impact the way in which veterans are perceived and received in a civilian society. With a more balanced representation of veterans presented, a greater level of understanding may be achieved.

In this study, I utilize arts-based research and rhetorical analysis as methodological tools to counter controversial media portrayals of veterans with PTSD, by examining how veterans use artistic methods to exhibit a more realistic view of their experiences. Leavy (2009) offers that the creative arts are known for their ability to heighten emotions, demonstrate aesthetic power, as well as captivate and move audiences. I argue that organizations centered on ABR methods are using their media platforms similarly, to not only raise awareness, but also provide a different mode of representation that allows the veterans to symbolically create and convey messages regarding their own lived experience. I examine veteran writing published in the ABR online

platform, *Military Experience & the Arts (MEA)*. In contrast, I consider the messages or discourse presented through the media/television by rhetorically providing an analysis of those representations in the television series *True Blood*. Bitzer (1968) reminds us that situations create the need for rhetorical discourse. In this case, war and its current level of veteran representation has created the situation and/or need to understand the language (discourse) present in these messages.

The artifacts of my research are poetic pieces produced by veterans and episodic content produced about veterans in television programming. Specifically, I focused on the organization *Military Experience & the Arts (MEA)*, which publishes the artistic work of veterans through various online journals and publications. In addition, I examined the formally televised fictional program *True Blood* to establish media representation, and reference other relevant media texts that offer a critical lens. Utilizing poetic inquiry, I conducted a textual analysis of the creative writing pieces from “MEA” and employed a rhetorical approach of reviewing episodes from *True Blood*. The framework of the research is based on a dual-methodological approach using arts-based methods and rhetorical analysis to contextualize, interpret, and critique the discourse derived from both media sources.

In the general attempt to gain a better understanding of the multi-layered identity of veterans, the communication theory of identity (CTI) was utilized to unpack these layers, recognize overlaps and demonstrate identity gaps. CTI recognizes the importance of the dialectic between individual identity roles and communal/social relational roles and suggests that communication is an essential element of identity. Hecht and Choi (2012) assert that communication and identity is a reciprocal relationship, and that communication is the catalyst for building, maintaining and adjusting one’s self identity. The goal of this research is to provide

an understanding of the discursive divide between veteran self-identity and the media representations of veterans with PTSD. Currently, there has been an increase in research about this population. This indicates that there is a need for society to better understand veterans with PTSD, as well as document how to advocate on their behalf. While this research may not address every issue, or answer every question, it is a starting point for comparing self-representation vs. media representation of this select group.

### **Summary of Chapters**

This section of the introductory chapter provides an overview and summary of each subsequent chapter. A short discussion is given to provide a context for each of the remaining chapters. Following the summary is the conclusion for the introductory chapter. This chapter concludes by recapping the importance, purpose and implications of the project.

Chapter two establishes the foundation of the project by providing a theoretical rationale and literature review for the research. It begins by situating veterans as a marginalized group through revealing the composition of veteran identity, and the social constraints placed on them by society. Specifically, it provides a context for terms that are critical to understanding this research and that will be utilized throughout the work. Then, there is a focused discussion on the influence of the media on this population. Next, it explains the role of arts-based methods and rhetorical analysis that compose the dual-methodological approach of this research. Finally, this chapter describes the key components of the project, including: media representation, veteran identity and how the communication theory of identity is utilized to tie the research all together.

In chapter three, the methodology is thoroughly examined providing a map of how and why these concepts mesh together well. I demonstrate the reasoning for selecting ABR and rhetorical analysis as my methodological tools, and how they contribute to the overall meaning

of the chosen topic. This chapter explains how poetic inquiry and textual analysis will be utilized to examine the poetic pieces of a selected group of veterans with PTSD, from the organization *Military Experience and the Arts (MEA)*. In addition, it describes the rhetorical process of analyzing episodes that highlight veteran representation through the fictional television program *True Blood*. Finally, this chapter describes the issues that will be addressed and the residual implications of their complexities.

In chapter four, the collected poetry data from MEA is provided and the analysis/interpretation using poetic inquiry is demonstrated. I present the results from my analysis of the poetic pieces, coding methods, and notes/comments. An interpretive textual analysis was conducted using each of these resources to determine present and consistent themes, as well as to draw inferences between the results and current research. Arts based research and its usage is a systematic process that provides an alternative way of understanding and examining lived experience by researchers and participants (McNiff, 2007). This chapter also provides an explanation of identity gaps and the role poetry plays in helping to close those gaps.

Chapter five focuses on the rhetorical critique of *True Blood*. Specifically, it provides the basis for taking a rhetorical approach to analyze and critique media depictions. There has been increasing concerns of veteran media portrayals by both veterans themselves and their advocates (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2005) which provides a basis for such a critique. I chose narrative criticism as the mechanism to analyze the storyline of the selected fictional television series and its characters, while also considering the concept of vernacular discourse to help provide an understanding for this specific community and culture. This chapter examines the outcomes of the chosen storyline, addresses the results of the character depictions and discusses the impact of media representation on American audiences.

The last chapter concludes by summarizing key concepts, overall findings and implications for adjustments in veteran representation. I discuss the results of this project as well the potential for expanding communication aspects of arts-based research and rhetorical analysis. The qualitative research areas of arts-based methods and veteran identity are flourishing, and the variations of studies that may be conducted are large. As this population continues to grow, there is a necessity in our society to recognize the complexity of veteran identity.

### **Conclusion**

In the proceeding chapters I expand upon the direction and purpose of this project, specifically addressing the severity of misrepresented veteran identity. Arts-based research is making a huge difference in qualitative research and McNiff (2007) asserts researchers are discovering how these creative methods are creating a more informed awareness that may feel more original, accurate and sophisticated than commonly used traditional descriptions of information. Likewise, art-therapy practices are leaving an imprint on veterans and their ability to self-identify. Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel (2006) acknowledge the exceptional results that art therapists have reported from working with combat veterans. In addition, the psychological and neurological factors that theorists have found reveals the range in which art therapy promotes growth and recovery in those diagnosed with PTSD.

While art therapy isn't a "cure" for PTSD, as the recovery process continues in veterans, so does their ability to demonstrate and articulate positive self-identity. Art allows for creativity, freedom and expression. It was a natural fit to use ABR as a research method to explore veteran self-identity through artistic and media driven experiences. PTSD in veterans is often referred to as the invisible wound (Lobban, 2014), and recognizing that concept, this project offers

alternative ways to approach such a complex convergence of veteran identity. As Paul Klee said, “Art makes the invisible visible” (cited in Talwar, 2007, p. 22).

Throughout the research, it was demonstrated that communication and identity are interrelated, and as such makes veteran representation equally important to this study. The way in which we communicate with and about veterans has a lasting impact on their growth and society’s tolerance of this group. As a nation, we are susceptible to what we see and hear through messages we receive every day, and those messages may greatly impact our perceptions.

A rhetorical analysis allows us to critique the meaning of those messages. The choice to utilize this method was also a natural fit for my research when examining the implications of media representation. As a society, we are not only affected by how language is used, but also by the context in which language is used. While creating a discourse around media representation may not erupt instantaneous change, it does allow one to stop, think and consider the effects of such portrayals. Rhetoric has a long-standing place in qualitative research and is considered the art of communication. It is a viable mechanism for understanding and inferring ideas and concepts. Rhetorical critiques help fill in the blanks and connect the dots for audiences that want to think beyond the surface.

At this moment in time, the subject matter present in this study is a relevant cause. The population of veterans with PTSD is expanding and society is left to figure out the best ways of accepting and interacting with the “invisible” injury that is afflicting so many individuals and families. While this project doesn’t attempt to provide all answers or cure anyone with PTSD, the significance of the issue not only makes us a more informed audience, the examination of this topic contributes to the field of Media and Communication.



## CHAPTER 2 STUDYING VETERAN IDENTITY IN JUXTAPOSITION TO MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Veterans of the United States military are a uniquely represented population in this society. Symbolically at some point, all of those who have served their country are viewed as “national heroes.” Yet, that outlook can change and the vision becomes a lot less heroic with the reality of the day-to-day living veterans encounter upon their return home (Feinstein, 2013). In a culture that is digital and media driven, much of what we see and understand of this population is learned via those platforms. The media imposes its views on us politically, socially, and emotionally; often pushing agendas that enforce what to think, not how to think. A great deal of these agendas can be attributed to governmental and corporate interests, and as the public becomes acclimated to media conditioning, these agendas become easier to propagandize and distribute throughout mainstream media (Shah, 2012). This type of media manipulation often causes slanted and obscure portrayals of marginalized groups.

Veterans are one of those groups whose portrayals are questionable, and linked to media politics. However, the complexities of the veterans’ experience have far reaching implications that go beyond the media’s portrayal. The media’s view of veterans, particularly those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often creates a life scenario that is different than the one veterans have of themselves. For example, the media might consistently show veterans as aggressive and excessively violent without provocation while veterans feel their anger is misinterpreted, exaggerated, and embedded in their psyche from their military training. To a certain degree, violence is a part of their culture but one they must quickly learn to abandon after combat. This creates a certain amount of dissonance as veterans live in a definitive state of who they really are in relation to their military affiliation.

This confliction of how veterans are seen, is no doubt problematic. While in the upswing of their career, they receive characterizations such as “national heroes” and “most deserving citizens” categorizing them in one way, but ultimately their changed life circumstances marginally place them in society (Feinstein, 2013) causing a contradiction as to how they are represented. This jaded experience of veterans often leaves them feeling misunderstood and society uninformed. A veteran’s experience after one, two or multiple tours of combat is greatly subjective. It alters their perception of others and inhibits their ability to communicate and/or interact in a civilian world (Quinn, 2008). Although, reintegration is necessary after combat, and finding ways to do that successfully is critical to the wellbeing of the combat veteran. This means we can no longer sit by idle if our goal is for veterans to become productive members of society post war.

However, the issue of veterans with PTSD is becoming more prevalent, as our military personnel have continued exposure of elements that produce this condition. Alternative research methods are helping to bridge the gap in understanding this particular group. While many people have predisposed opinions on the actions and behavior of veterans, evidence is determining that the bulk of society has a rose color tinted view of their actual experience, and that mental health issues continue to affect our communication and human interaction. The public still enforces stigma regarding mental health illnesses, and the social avoidance and assumption that they are dangerous is still a common perception (Mittal et al., 2013). Because of this limited perspective of those with mental illness, people may shy away from learning more, thus perpetuating the problem. Yet, this is a problem veterans cannot afford, as they are already socially stigmatized and perceived as violent and dangerous. This double negative view of veterans certainly causes apprehension in others, which is why we need to be cognizant of what the media demonstrates.

Studies involving groups of people may take on a social research approach, with the goal of addressing social phenomenon and creating representations of social life that are relevant to today's society. Veterans of the United States military, specifically those diagnosed with PTSD are one of those groups. In this project, I addressed the common stigmatization and misrepresentations that many veterans face, both of which affect their social existence. In a society like the United States, an individual's social position is important, and self-perception coupled with the perception of others play a large factor in our way of living. My research concept is designed around veteran self-contested poetic portrayals and contemporary representations of veterans in the media. To conduct the research, my dual methodological approach relied on rhetorical analysis and arts-based research to provide context for the juxtaposing concepts.

In order to situate this research, it was necessary to incorporate literary works that were relevant to the field of Communication and complimentary to my study. In the next section of this chapter, a review of the critical literature utilized provides a foundational understanding for the complexity of the topic. In addition, it demonstrates how utilizing both methods are purposeful and enlightening for this specific project. The remaining organization of this chapter discusses relevant terms for this body of work, illustrates the research approach taken and clearly connects the literature to the topic. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework that shaped and influenced the project's direction, research questions and data collection. As the theoretical framework unfolds, key concepts for the study are thoroughly explained and linked together for cohesiveness. Finally, the chapter concludes with the rationale for exploring veteran identity via a multi-perspective interpretation, and demonstrates the importance for the selected scholarly literature.

### Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Veterans with PTSD have become an increasingly large population of our society. With the recent wars, Operations Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF & OEF) and the ongoing deployment of our military personnel, this group is rising at an alarming rate. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2013) states PTSD occurs in 11%-20% or 11-20 of every 100 veterans who served in either the Iraq and/or Afghanistan wars. Although this is a large enough number, it varies in preciseness, excludes veterans from other wars and does not include the number of unreported or undiagnosed cases. Yet, even with the diagnosed cases, Mittal et al. (2013) claims that upon moving back into the civilian world, veterans may take on and internalize the public's negative perception regarding PTSD and mental health illnesses and thereby forgo treatment options.

One of the largest factors that a veteran with PTSD faces is the inability to communicate consistently. On the surface, trauma survivors look normal but often experience nightmares, flashbacks of the incident(s), fearfulness, anxiety, numbness, avoidance, social anxiety and other issues that aren't easily recognized from their outward appearance (Wylie, 2004). They are often isolated, withdrawn and lack skills to thoroughly articulate feelings. This makes communicating on a daily basis strenuous and complicated. Lobban (2014) offers, "Traumatized people can feel like aliens, with the normal bonds of human interdependence severed" (p. 8). Given the nature of this problem, veterans often lack a strong societal voice. This project explores *Military Experience & the Arts* (MEA), as an organization designed to assist veterans, by providing an outlet which gives veterans a space to speak using creative expression. MEA is a volunteer-ran, nonprofit organization whose primary mission is to assist veterans and their families in publishing creative works of art such as poetry, nonfiction, etc. (MEA, 2015).

Despite the documented need, a substantial proportion of OEF-OIF veterans have not accessed available mental health services (True, Rigg and Butler, 2015). In recent years, studies have shown that art therapy has provided an alternative method for individuals to not only heal mentally and emotionally but also to represent their lived experience more accurately as well. Lobban (2014) suggests that by using art therapy as a vehicle, veterans are able to translate feelings and emotions into language and by doing so finds sense making from their experiences.

Van der Kolk (as cited in Talwar, 2007) claims that the process of retrieving information is a complexity for veterans with PTSD. As a result of reliving traumatic experiences, an individual's frontal lobes become impaired and causes complications for thinking and speaking. "The frontal lobe is the part of the brain that is involved in planning, organizing, problem solving, selective attention, personality and a variety of "higher cognitive functions," including behavior and emotions" (Talwar, 2007, p. 25). When this happens, Wylie (as cited in Talwar) contends that veterans lack the ability to effectively communication with themselves and others. Engaging in artistic expression allows the veterans to vocalize through images and/or creative writing and Talwar (2007) suggests that all art forms represent the mind and voice of its creator. Thus, projecting their experience into art allows the veteran to express themselves openly, and allows the public to gain a greater sense of their reality.

When veterans are unable to clearly express themselves, artistic expression gives them a place of connection. In studying communication and trauma, it is essential to understand why art is relevant to healing, and how it may affect communicative outcomes. Pennebaker (1993) notes that major health improvements are found when individuals who've faced trauma write or speak about those experiences; "art modalities are a means by which people can express themselves, or from a trauma perspective, "break the silence" (Johnson, 2009, p. 115).

### Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

The influx of individuals with traumatic brain injury (TBI) has significantly increased over the years, specifically since the time of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Roughly one million combat veterans were screened for traumatic brain injury between 2007-2015, and of those nearly 10% received the diagnosis following an extensive assessment (DePalma and Hoffman, 2016). While that number is staggering, more than 2.6 million have been deployed, leaving a chance for more than a million veterans who may not have been screened for TBI.

TBI can be described as an injury to the brain's functioning ability sustained after a trauma induced incident. This injury is complex, symptoms vary from person to person, and diagnosis may be difficult to achieve. This range of symptoms, coupled with similarities to PTSD can hinder an accurate diagnosis and course of treatment (Goldberg, 2015). The cases of TBI in combat veterans has increased, as more and more are experiencing the effects of TBI in conjunction with PTSD. According to Alexander (2015) "Brain trauma from blast force is the signature injury of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, afflicting hundreds of thousands of U.S. combat personnel (p. 30).

It is important to recognize that the terms TBI and PTSD are often used together as many combat veterans experience both conditions simultaneously while some only experience one or the other. However, there is some symptom overlap and some veterans are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed with the two injuries. The North Carolina Medical Journal (2015) acknowledges that many patients with PTSD and TBI experience the same symptoms, and some overlaps include impaired memory, anxiety and decreased concentration. Thus, effectively treating one, requires diagnosing and treating the other. Therefore, having some knowledge about TBI is also relevant for doing research work on veterans with PTSD.

### Marginalization

The marginalization of a group occurs when its members are deemed less important than dominant groups and other members of mainstream society. Harding (2014) explains marginalized experiences as those that are ignored and devalued. These experiences and individuals often have little or no voice in society. Harding (2014) insists that the lives and experiences of the marginal as understood by themselves are legitimate, and warrant explanation. These groups are intentionally excluded from things such as decision making, educational systems and politics. Marginalized people lack access to the same opportunities and resources that privileged groups receive. They are denied or deprived of things that would give them the same chances as others to succeed. This puts them at a disadvantage for many things that others take for granted. It also means that in some cases, they have failed even before they have started.

In a hegemonic society, such as the U.S., it is difficult for the voices of the marginalized groups to be heard above the dominant groups. Veterans, particularly those with PTSD are often put into the oppressed category. Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2002) state that contested ideologies demonstrate that some people are repressed, while others are privileged, and consequently one culture's ideology takes on a seemingly natural subordinate position. While veterans remain heroes in active duty the perils of combat aftermath leave many vulnerable with little resources and a digressed life. In U.S. culture, people that have fallen on hard times are devalued and seen as weak or lazy, and thus "less important" members of society. In addition, this culture is less accepting of mental illness in general. This misrepresentation of marginalized groups by the media has presented a cause for research, and further claims insist that the objective of providing voices to marginalized groups contributes to the greater intent of producing knowledge that is both thought provoking and transformative (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011).

### Veteran Affairs (VA)

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the governmental office responsible for coordinating all services that directly benefit veterans and their families including healthcare, financial claims, housing assistance, and much more. The Department of Veteran Affairs is the largest managing veteran health system and “provides acute, subacute, and continuing rehabilitation for veterans using a hub-and-spoke system of hospitals and outpatient facilities” (Howell, Capehart, and Hoenig, 2015, p. 323). Today, there are various local VA centers, hospitals, benefits offices, cemeteries, and loan centers around the country that are governed by the VA. Most often in this research, the term VA refers to the health care system in which veterans receive their primary medical and mental health services.

Although, the VA is often the first line of treatment for many veterans’ health care needs, they are often criticized for the quality of care provided. Kizer and Ashish (2014) “believe there are three main causes for this: an unfocused performance-measurement program, increasingly centralized control of care delivery and associated increased bureaucracy, and increasing organizational insularity” (p. 296). In other words, outcomes are not being adequately assessed and thus quality of care is compromised, there is an increasingly complicated system for veterans to navigate in obtaining resources, and their insular approach to involving/or collaborating with other health care systems often limits seeking care elsewhere; all are barriers to veterans receiving the care they need in an efficient and effective manner. However, while many of these problems exist across the board and across VA systems country wide, it is the single largest (primary) place of assistance for veterans and members of the U.S. military. In that regard, the VA is the only viable option for veterans that are without access to other types of health care and therefore an integral part of veterans’ return home.



### Approach

The use of arts-based research, and specifically poetic inquiry through the lens of textual analysis provides tools for observing and analyzing poetry from a particular group of veterans within the arts-based organization, *Military Experience and the Arts (MEA)*. This organization's objective is to work with veterans and families, to create and publish artistic literary work. MEA offers veterans an opportunity for creative expression using vehicles such as fiction, poetry, nonfiction and visual art. MEA offers free editing, workshops and consultations to artists whose pieces are accepted for publication. Outside of MEA's primary mission, the organization hosts in-person and online writing workshops, and in 2012 and 2015, hosted orchestrated national symposiums. Veterans and their families receive all consultations, editing and workshops free of charge for those whose materials are accepted for publication. In addition, other online workshops and in-person events such as the symposiums are also provided as free or low-cost services for veterans and their families to develop creative and therapeutic art skills (MEA, 2016).

I selected poetry as the format of creative expression to analyze because it allows you the possibility of reflexive interpretation. Poetry helps bring the subconscious to the surface, causing one to reveal internal thoughts and ideas. It grants access into these internalized spaces that may otherwise be difficult to articulate. ABR was used to understand veteran identity and the communication patterns present in their poetry. As a comparison of veteran representation, a rhetorical analysis of a once popular fictional television series, *True Blood* was assessed to offer an alternative perspective. This juxtaposition gave two different points of view and was necessary to give a richer account of how veterans self-identity, and how they are often represented in the media.

Thus, my research was comprised of a mixed-methods approach. First, relying on arts-based methods and poetic inquiry specifically, as a way of exploring the ideas of self-identity and veteran representation. Then the second component of this research stepped outside those bounds and rhetorically critiqued a former popular television program from mainstream media *True Blood*, to help provide a prospective of the representation of veterans. Rhetoric helps shape understanding and Black (1978) argues that “the critic serves both to disclose the enigmas of an artistic product and to sanction, implicitly or overtly, its own methods of disclosure” (p.2). This viewpoint allowed me to render an assessment of the portrayals, and to understand what the discourse was saying and demonstrating. Critique also allowed me to advance my argument regarding how programs can improve upon communication in the future.

Utilizing these methods together provides a balanced picture of the veteran identity experience from the individual and communal perspectives, and analyzes the impact that media has on the broader audience. Arts-based methods and rhetorical analysis are both ways to capture the pieces of the overall picture that is being painted, each having an interest and entry point into the social justice and human experience. As a researcher, arts-based methods are useful because their paths are creative, instinctive and lends itself to self-examination. While the role of a critic is concerned with the complexity and progression of humanity, Black (1978) offers the idea that criticism itself is a humanistic activity, making rhetorical analysis an invaluable opportunity for the exploration of representation. Both approaches center on the humanistic experience and are effective for creating a connection from individualism to collectivism. While arts-based methods provide a more individualist point of view by examining veterans’ voices, the rhetorical analysis provides a more general outlook on how we collectively view and internalize the media messages we receive about combat veterans.

The veterans' poetry in this research serves as a mechanism to provide or clarify the essence of their lived experiences. In addition, it helps to create a more stabilized awareness and conversation by pointing out the discrepancies seen amongst this group. The meaning-making process is essential to analyzing information, and arts-based practices bring it to the forefront (Leavy, 2009) and out of the shadows or background. Viewing the poetry of these veterans is an act of embodiment; it's how we as the audience may take a closer look at the veterans' vulnerabilities, explanations and learned lessons. Other traditional methods of inquiry, with the exception of maybe phenomenology, are less capable of capturing such an individualistic and personal stream of consciousness. Yet in this study, as communication and identity go hand-in-hand, so does my dual methodological approach. While poetry is acting as an agent of identity, rhetoric is acting as an agent of media representation.

Rhetoric is both conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional. It is all around us, in television, film, art, conversations, politics etc. Rhetoric goes beyond the actual words to construct both the implicit and explicit meaning of messages. It allows us to question variances of opinion, to decipher meaning that ideas create, and to determine what may be done as a result of the interpretations. Rhetorical critiques are governed by settings and situations. The way in which individual experiences are shaped and arranged constitute situations which make dichotomous positions difficult to maintain (Hanauer, 2015). However, these dynamics are what create situations of critique or a purpose/context that warrant deeper discussion or reflection. An introspection that as a rhetorician, I find useful when deciphering the exact element of the situation in question. What is it about this scenario that needs further analysis? Why am I concerned with the intent or impact of this message? For me, the largest answer to this in this instance is that the veteran voice is being stifled, and everyone deserves to speak.

## **Veteran Identity**

Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are a distinct group within our society; a marginalized group that faces its own set of stereotypes, inequalities and adversities. With the recent wars, Operations Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, (OIF & OEF) and the ongoing deployment of our military personnel, this particular group is rising at an alarming rate. This injury affects millions of veterans and families, and U.S. society is failing to adequately assist them at growing and recovering. There is an apparent struggle of others understanding veterans' perspectives and complex needs; yet, there is a real need to understand this condition. Empirical research and scientific data has revealed that traumatic incidents not only affect the exposed individuals but can also significantly affect other interpersonal relationships of the survivor, such as family, friends etc. (Dekel and Monson, 2010). This means the residual impact of trauma is greater than the numbers of cases reported; its reach goes beyond the isolated situations.

PTSD has become a taboo topic, and much of today's society battles with handling these veterans. One recent study determined that veterans are aware of the public's uneasiness with them and felt as though they are blamed for their illness since they knowingly volunteered for military service and therefore knew the potential risk (Mittal et al., 2013). However, most veterans do not see themselves in this way, as they view military service as a sacrifice and duty. They challenge the way mass media represents them and express feelings of being misunderstood by the civilian world. Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) note that the public and veterans have different constructed meanings of commonly seen media messages. This difference has caused veterans to feel as though they can only truly be understood by other veterans with PTSD (Mittal et al, 2013).



**Figure 2 Eric's Battalion (Fallujah, Iraq). Illustration of servicemen in command stance.**

Without self-education, society often listens to the other “more powerful” voices, (such as the media) for information and answers. However, does the media and other powerhouse voices hold the best perspective of the veteran’s lived experience? Most media conglomerates are built on old hegemonic (white dominated) practices which leaves their view slanted and obscure. In many cases, those larger voices have done more harm to society than good by perpetuating stereotypes and negativity in a way that creates fear and misunderstanding, as opposed to increasing knowledge and awareness.

However, by listening to veterans’ narratives, society can receive a more direct perception. Veterans are indeed a group of their own, and at one point and time in their careers that cohesiveness was a necessary requirement to survival. Veterans relied on the connection and confidence of each other, as can be seen in the figure 2. However, the return home is an individual experience and transition can cause veterans to feel alone and misunderstood.

Eric's narrative, like many other service personnel, provides a genuine perspective into the veteran experience. As his fellow service men and women have often asserted, Eric wanted to serve and protect his country. Having first enlisted as a sailor in the U.S. Navy, he furthered his military career by completing additional training that allowed him to become a part of the highly-recognized Fleet Marine Force. This was a great accomplishment for Eric and gave him the opportunity to serve alongside some of the United States' finest Sailors and Marines. He faithfully served his country in active duty and the reserves for more than 14 years, completed multiple tours of duty in combat including both Iraq and Afghanistan., and received numerous awards and accolades during and after service.

However, Eric's arrival home, like many other veterans was met with great challenges. He was eager to reengage with family and friends and continue his personal journey. Yet, his return was met with multiple challenges, physical limitations, surgeries, and the diagnosis of PTSD and TBI. Interacting with those close to him proved to be challenging and strained, as he coped with his new reality of medication, doctor appointments and the consistent misunderstanding of his behavior from others. The perception from others saw him as, and compared him to, veterans in the media, often stereotyping him as erratic or "someone to watch."

Yet, just as with cases we rarely see in the media, Eric worked on his individual journey. While never negating or downplaying his military experience, he found a way to separate his military affiliation with his own personal identity. One of the main reasons Eric's story is important, is that he recognizes the inaccurate representations and misunderstandings that many veterans receive and has made it a part of his mission to help others in those situations. Eric uses his voice and experiences to speak out about the injustices that many veterans face, as well as uses his public platforms to provide awareness and assistance for veterans.

Still, if the loudest voice in the room paints a negative image of veterans with PTSD, it enhances the perception that this population is problematic. Scott (2014) attests that when meaning is transparent through the evidence of experience or visible through metaphorical means, it causes a reproduction rather than a contesting of ideological structures. Connell (2013) writes that “marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (p. 259). Relying on hegemonic representation increases the stigma that mental health issues have been known to carry, and prevents U.S. society from finding viable solutions. The marginalization of veterans with PTSD continues to be a problem and has additional implications for this group.

This inequity limits the advancement of treating and comprehending the complexity of veterans diagnosed with PTSD. According to Dekel and Monson (2010) individuals with PTSD often appear disconnected from the outside world, unavailable to friends and family, and at times may seem as if they are exhibiting unusual behavior such as exercising extreme avoidance. This type of isolation and questionable demeanor leads to labeling, misrepresentation and stereotyping. There is a profound consensus amongst this population that the general public (inclusive of family and friends) lacks a real understanding of their experience, and that as stated before, only others in this population share a more complete common knowledge. Many veterans feel that as a result of having faced death, they have a more sophisticated and well-rounded view of existence, one that supersedes their perception of civilians who they believe to be shallow, naïve and immature (Quinn, 2008).

In the military, veterans were a part of a close-knit group, with distinct roles, strict orders, and a valued sense of belonging and thus adjusting to a singular civilian way of life can be problematic and add to already existing challenges (Lobban, 2014). Leaving the militaristic way

of living, coupled with the onset of PTSD can cause veterans to appear aloof and disengaged, mixed with anger and unpredictable outbursts, and suggest that these veterans are uncontrollable and intolerable. Their behavior raises eyebrows and causes concerns, as well as creates fear and shunning without adequate knowledge. However, much of what is demonstrated through their behavior is consistent and common with symptoms of PTSD, such as withdrawal, insomnia, aggression etc. (Feinstein, 2013) individuals with these challenges may modify their lifestyles by selectively choosing to participate in social interactions or avoiding others all together. Since a lot of their behavior qualifies as “abnormal,” seeking help and rendering help, become a double-edged sword for the veteran.

The identity of veterans is complex, and consistently changes as they transition from service personnel to civilian. It is important, as with any prejudgment and stereotyping not to pigeon hole veterans into possessing a one-size-fits-all form of identification. As a group, they share many similarities and familiar experiences with other veterans. However, they are individuals, and while a lot of the residual behavior from combat shapes their identity, so do their personal backgrounds and lifelong experiences. The return of the combat veteran not only affects them as individuals, but it also affects families and other interpersonal relationships as well. Conversely, research has shown that including family members in the treatment process of PTSD is beneficial for veterans (Monson, Taft, and Fredman, 2009). When efforts to alleviate the pressure and distress from the family of a traumatized veteran, it can work favorably in promoting enhanced care for the veteran and reduce tension within the familial structure (Galovski and Lyons, 2004). Therefore, by creating a better-informed public, there is the opportunity to create a better system of support and care, which can ultimately result in a healthier veteran.



### **Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)**

In this study, I use CTI to explore veteran self-identity through the juxtaposition of creative expression and media representation. The communication theory of identity is derived from a culmination of identity theory and social identity practices, recognizing the importance and dualities of individual roles and social relations. CTI holds that communication is formulated through the instinctual self, in collaboration with others through social interaction. It constructs and preserves identity based on individual attributes and the affirmation of others.

According to Stets and Burke (2000) the self is reflexive in identity theory and social identity theory, and can serve as an object that has the ability to identify and arrange or situate itself in relation to social categories or prescribed classifications. This concept is important as one of the most critical aspects of veterans and self-identification is to speak for themselves. They have an interpretation of their own lived experience which is often quite different from society's general understanding or expectation of their identity. Leavy (2015) suggests that part of the objective with identity-based research (studying groups), is to convey the data in such a way that questions stereotypes, provokes compassion and empathy, creates conversation and increases awareness. Taking this into consideration, I follow the veteran through the process of self-identification to that of self-representation.

Self-identity is an integral part of communication. Our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are largely influenced by our individual identities (Hecht and Choi, 2012). Those identities are represented, affirmed, and often altered in collective communication settings. An individual is not only defined by their identity, but by their social roles and communicative affiliations as well (Jung and Hecht, 2015). CTI embraces these ideas by demonstrating that communication and identity work in conjunction with and not separate from, one another.

Communication theory of identity frames this study by uncovering how the multi-layered complexity and consistent salient role shifting of veteran identification creates a gap between self-representation and media representation. Veterans are not merely one dimensional beings molded or transformed by military training, they are agents, individuals with complex identities and existence (Herman and Yarwood, 2014). Recognizing these complexities is vital to understanding how misrepresentation occurs. An individual's identity is co-created through internalization and the negotiating of attributed identities (Jung and Hecht, 2015).

Yet, it becomes problematic when those two ways of identifying vary greatly. For example, society may more easily associate veterans with their communal layer of identity. Thereby, only acknowledging or referencing them according to their military affiliation, which focuses solely on being a soldier, airman, sailor etc. However, upon returning to civilian life, veterans may want to demonstrate more of their personal layer of identity as they adjust to living outside the military. This discrepancy is one of the existing identity gaps that results from stereotyping in the media, when one layer of identity is most dominant and regularly displayed in a negative fashion.

Veterans with PTSD are a unique group, and their sense of identity is complex at best. As they struggle to hold on to their association with the military, yet attempt to adapt to a new civilian identity, figuring out who they are as an individual can be challenging. Individuals obtain a great deal of their identity or sense of self from their affiliated (social groups) categories (Stets and Burke, 2000). Yet self-categorization is equally relevant to the formation of one's identity. Each role assignment carries a certain amount of salience in an individual's life, and each identity (role) is placed in a hierarchy based on value and prominence. Roles that have a higher presence or overlap between identities are the ones that rise to the top.

Theorists have long determined that the roles an individual play have a distinct impact on the way they view themselves. Stets and Burke (2000) found that “in general, one’s identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular *groups* or *roles*” (p. 226). This is fundamentally important for the PTSD veteran who has conflicting salient roles. While serving in the military, their most prominent role was that of military personnel. This organizational membership is a major force in self-identity and creates an influential social identification for many individuals (Scott, 2007).

Upon returning to the civilian world, the role most often shifts into whatever the expected forefront role is, -- husband, mother, partner etc.-- making the adjustment period challenging. Galovski and Lyons (2004) explain the complicated process of role shifting for veterans:

There is an undeniable pressure on the veteran to resume many of his old responsibilities and roles; during this period of reintegration stress, the veteran is still attempting to acclimate to civilian living and does not necessarily feel as if his family has any concept of the change he has undergone. (p. 484)

Although all of our dominant roles are likely to change over time, the veteran with PTSD is internally conflicted with the adjustment. This occurs because the veteran is continuously balancing the personal and communal levels of their identity simultaneously, and responding in a way that seems befitting to society’s expectations, while attempting to separate, yet hold on to their group identification. However, people are hardly ever completely transparent or entirely consistent. An individual’s communication varies, and is reflective of flaws and imperfections (Jung and Hecht, 2004). Thus, making it difficult to rely on one aspect of identity as the determining factor of representation.

According to Hogg and Reid (2006) the social identity perspective provides a sound account of group norms, primarily at a social cognitive level of analysis that focuses on how individuals represent norms. There is more emphasis placed on the group and less on the individual role. Stets and Burke (2000) define social groups as bodies of individuals that share a common familiar social identity and/or see themselves belonging to the same social grouping. Membership in these groups is based on self-categorization and social comparison. Stets and Burke (2000) further explain that through the process of social comparison, people are self-categorized with people who share similarities and are thusly classified as the in-group. When people are looked upon as different from the self, they are considered a part of the out-group. Veterans may deem themselves, or be deemed by others, as an in-group or out-group depending upon the perception and situation.

Identity theory and self-identity theory are tools that help explain the communication theory of identity and its relation to the experiences of veterans with PTSD. Veterans are not only attempting to identify with their current dominant role; they are often attempting to clarify which role is most dominant at any given time. This lack of clarity and direction also makes it difficult for others to accurately interpret their form of communication or identity expression; thereby leaving it up to themselves, and in this case (the media), to formulate a perceived identity based on assumptions and preconceived ideas of veterans.

Upon integrating back into civilian life, veterans find their view of self-identity complicated and difficult to articulate. Often caught between maintaining their military affiliation and filling a new (expectant) or previously held role, determining a solid identity is challenging. The veterans are deeply impacted by their military status, yet they seek independence outside of their service connection. By learning to establish openness, the veteran

is then able to live in a world filled with uncertainty again (Quinn, 2008). However, what can further complicate this are the expectations that are placed on them by family, friends, military affiliations and society as a whole. The veteran's inability to return and fill a previous or expectant role creates stress and slow progression (Ray and Vanstone, 2009). These unmet expectations coupled with poor communication, is the point at which the breakdown occurs affecting their individual and social identities.

Communication theory of identity encompasses both ideas of identity theory and social identity theory by addressing the importance of individual, social and communal aspects of identification. Its goal is to emphasize the interdependency of communication identity. In other words, it recognizes that communication functions as identity, and thus allows for a more complete understanding of self-representation. An awareness of this concept proves that neither identity nor communication is independent of each other, and both fully rely on the other.

In the communication theory of identity, there are four interpenetrated acting frames (layers) of identity (Jung and Hecht, 2004). These frames of identity include: personal, enacted, relational and communal. The personal frame acknowledges individuality and focuses on things such as self-perception, self-image and the definition of one's self, whereas the enacted frame focuses on self-presentation; how one communicates their identity to others. For veterans, the enacted frame may be demonstrated by wearing uniforms and speaking in military vernacular. Military identities hinge more on "doing" demonstrating action and less on "being" or simply displaying existence (Herman and Yarwood, 2014).

Next, the relational frame is a bit more complex. It considers how identity is shaped by an individual's interaction with others and how that interaction or the imposed view of others known as ascription, influences self-perception. The relational frame also considers the direct

influence of relating with others, how one communicates or identifies within relationships and how one incorporates those identities. Finally, the communal frame considers the commonalities or collectivism of a group's influence on an individual. This frame is particularly essential to studying veterans, as a large part of their individual identity is tied to their communal connection, as well as how they carry the expectation of their communal connection from others. This frame will assist in answering the following: How does collective identity influence the self-perception of veterans with PTSD?

The frames of identity do not act alone, and Faulkner and Hecht (2011) assert that all four frames may be present at any given time as they are all associated with one another, and that recognizing this multi-dimensional approach leads to a more well-rounded and progressive way of thinking. CTI deals with these multiple layers, and Hecht and Faulkner (2000) suggest they may produce a controversial resistance or work collaboratively together. It is necessary to study each layer while trying to understand the complexity of veteran identity.

Characteristics of veteran identity cannot continue being swept under the rug. Conversations must persist around this injury, its causes, and viable forms of treatment. In the absence of this attention, there exists the possibility of an entire population of wounded veterans being cast aside due to ignorance and unavailable resources. A population that is often held in such high esteem when they are on the other side of the uniform; before the onset of PTSD and its symptoms: paranoia, nightmares and flashbacks and before reaching a point of overcoming the newly attained identity acquired after injury. This theory helps frame this study by recognizing how these layers, particularly how the personal and communal levels overlap and create conflict within the veteran's self-identity and the identity that is created for them through representations in the mass media.

In more recent times, scholars have made attempts to connect individuals with society, recognizing the connection between communication and identity (Jung and Hecht, 2004). The communication theory of identity is an effective tool to study how multiple layers of identity play a huge role in understanding the post combat veteran that lives with PTSD. Hecht and Choi (2012) acknowledge that it is a viable research approach for the study of health behaviors and for the creation of health-related messages and further confirm that it is important to demonstrate how the four layers can be measured and how they relate to individual behaviors and collective structures.

At times, parts of an individual's identity are more salient (pertinent) than others. Scott (2007) reveals that "communication is relevant not only for shaping when some identities might be more salient as compared to others, but also as an essential aspect of social identity (re)creation and expressions of corresponding identifications" (p. 127). Scott (2007) further explains this is based on the situation, which is defined by both the activities being performed and the interaction of partners involved. For veterans, these situations may shift consistently and communicating and/or expressing themselves may be greatly reduced, thus easily misinterpreted.

Poetry can play a role in helping veterans express themselves and articulate meaning through its usage. This research looks at poetry from a select group of veterans to help gain a different understanding of veteran communication. The poetry produced by these veterans grants us access into parts of their individual and collective identity without conversation or physical interaction. It is important to note that this voice that many of the veterans utilize via this platform, is one that speaks louder than any verbal expression they may have ever given and as such is an opening into their thought pattern, ideas, perceptions, and ultimately their own self-representation.

### Poetic Inquiry

The process of arts-based research may take on many forms; one approach is poetic inquiry. McCulliss (2013) defines poetic inquiry as work that uses poetry and creative thinking to evaluate and conclude evidence in research. It provides a channel for comprehending and disseminating data regarding the studied subject matter. Writing generates units of creative expression that in many cases are therapeutic for individuals that have experienced trauma. Significant health improvements have been found in individuals when they are prompted to share their traumatic experiences through writing or talking (Pennebaker, 1993). Not only can significant health improvements be made, but also positive results are being seen in the veterans' levels of expression, identity, and interaction with others. Trauma affects people in a multitude of ways, and having an outlet such as writing can serve as a mechanism for breaking down communication barriers between the afflicted person and the way they are understood by others.

Although arts-based methods are progressing in general, particularly in health studies, the question often remains: Why use poetry as a mode of inquiry? Poetry is pliable, yet transformative and McCulliss (2013) affirms that poetry gets to the core of qualitative methods, conceivably more than other approaches or scholarly disciplines. It opens a window into the heart of human experience. An objective of this research is to help formulate an understanding of veterans' experiences after a traumatic event has altered their existence. Poetry is the conduit of reflection and interpretation and has the ability to translate imagery and words into language and messaging. It captivates audiences and draws them into the experiences of the author by absorption and intuitive reactions. While the poetry utilized for this research comes from a particular source, there are many other veteran poets that have made a lasting impression on their audience and the veteran community.



Brian Turner's poem *Here, Bullet* captures the heart of the artist, in this case the heart of the veteran, by allowing us a line-by-line glimpse into his personal military experience.

### **Here, Bullet**

"If a body is what you want  
then here is bone and gristle and flesh.  
Here is the clavicle-snapped wish,  
the aorta's opened valves, the leap  
thought makes at the synaptic gap.  
Here is the adrenaline rush you crave,  
that inexorable flight, that insane puncture  
into heat and blood. And I dare you to finish  
what you've started. Because here, Bullet,  
here is where I complete the word you bring  
hissing through the air, here is where I moan  
the barrel's cold esophagus, triggering  
my tongue's explosives for the rifling I have  
inside of me, each twist of the round  
spun deeper, because here, Bullet,  
here is where the world ends, every time."

**(Turner, 2005 p.13)**

In this research, I use the method of poetic inquiry in a textual analysis of veteran poetry published with *Military Experience & the Arts (MEA)*. In the process of poetry creation, its thoughtfulness and reflexive tendency engages both the mind and spirit. It flows toward a more reflective and action oriented way of thinking (Roberts, Brasel and Crawford, 2014). Poems can be employed as catalysts to provoke insightful responses, allowing for a more in-depth and holistic understanding of perceptions for a particular group or population (McCulliss, 2013).

To utilize poetry in research, it must be presented in a way that is valuable and contributes to the assemblage of the project. In this research, poetic inquiry is used to help review the data, and to make sense of the underlying themes present in the poetry produced by the veterans. Taking into consideration the communication barriers present in veterans with PTSD, McCulliss (2013) contests that "this process of poetic synthesis can help uncover contradictions, missing information, and problems with internal validity" (p. 88).

Researchers who have contributed to this field see the many benefits of using creative-arts techniques to fill in the gaps in traditional qualitative research. It has demonstrated both broad and narrow implications, and continues to grow in the area of health services.

The *MEA* platform allows veterans to present their lived experience through creative expression. Through the analysis of poetic pieces obtained through this organization, this study demonstrates that veterans who engage in literary arts are making strides towards constructing a positive self-identity, living a healthier, more productive lifestyle and breaking the barriers of limiting stereotypes. As veterans engage in the arts, and poetry in particular, Lobban (2014) affirms that the creative or artistic process encourages alternative ways of thinking and expressing experiences that shy away from older, less flexible thought patterns.

Herein lies the beauty of poetry. It presents the opportunity to go against the grain and provide unique ways of conveying and understanding the language and experience of others. Faulkner (2009) argues that poetic researchers view poetry as an exceptional method to conceptualize human experience through data collection. It is regarded as a more digestible and compelling approach that may reveal more emotional accuracy than more traditional means of writing. Poetry moves, and using “poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research” (Prendergast, 2009, p. 547). The veterans of *MEA* are writing poetry to shed light on the military experience from their perspective. By using poetic techniques, researchers can honor the whole individual, and tell their story by maintaining a person’s spirit through representation (McCulliss, 2013). In other words, studying the poetry of these artists may create a better understanding of their reality, while holding onto the core element of their interpretation.

## **Media Representation**

As members of American society, the media and popular culture, are largely influential in the way we perceive ourselves and those around us. Members of the veteran community are one group that is often represented in today's media, via television, film, etc. and as such creates a basis for understanding the way in which identification may be challenged. This research provides a catalyst for understanding veteran identity thorough arts-based research, which in turn provides an opportunity to examine, critique and unlearn the conflicting messages portrayed in the media regarding veterans. This study addresses the following: How does self-representation of identity through artistic methods problematize the media's representation of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder?

In Linda Alcoff's (2014) article, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," she examines the idea of what it really means to vocalize the experience of others. After all, this is what hegemonic and patriarchal oppression does, it reproduces a marginalized voice from a privileged perspective; a perspective that often romanticizes and overlooks actuality. This type of structure assumes that the privileged possess the ultimate knowledge on the way members of American society should appear, who should maintain positions of power and who is deemed less valuable. This limited way of thinking allows us to remain enslaved to ignorance, injustice and inequality. It reminds this society of who has the loudest voice in the room.

In her essay, Alcoff (2014) starts by discussing criticism of the notion of speaking for others. Her prevalent concerns are that arrogance and inadequacy inhibits accuracy. First, the argument maintains that the personalization of another's experience as if one contains the extensive knowledge of that experience, presents arrogance. Secondly, she addresses the concern surrounding the source specifically. Several questions are then posed. Are you

equipped to clearly communicate a situation that isn't directly related to you? Better yet, are you able to understand the ramifications of an experience if you've previously held an opposite existence? Does the oppressor really have the ability to speak about the experience of the oppressed? Or, is someone with a different perspective better able to comprehend the situation? All of these questions pose a real problem with most current mainstream veteran representations, which is quite often a perspective of someone other than the veteran.

The challenge remains that clearly defined descriptors of group identity are not always available for every circumstance. Yet Alcoff (2014) states that the solution isn't to simply restrict people from speaking on the behalf of others or to only speak for one's self. Alcoff (2014) points out that the difference between "speaking for" someone and "speaking about" someone is that one provides a voice, and the other assumes one (p. 485). As a means of clarification, speaking about someone often provides only a description of their situation. While speaking for them, replaces their voices with the speaker's voice. Although, many times the line is blurred and it is difficult to determine which act someone is attempting to produce. In either case, there is a choice to represent an individual or a group by conveying information on their behalf. The overarching argument remains, is there ever a time when this practice is acceptable and or effective? The answer is yes, particularly when the voice is used to create change.

This debate is crucial when considering the basis of representations of veterans. As the researcher, am I better equipped to tell the story and explain the struggle of veterans with PTSD, or are they the best voices for the assignment? Alcott (2014) suggests that this has become a social problem in our society. First, it is often difficult to entirely remove our own "self" from a situation. I am informed because of my interpersonal relationship with a combat veteran, yet I have not served in combat. I internalize information based on my own perceptions, feelings and

experiences that can provide a jaded perspective of a situation. Although to some degree, experience plays a role in how I am able to analyze information. In qualitative research, self-conscious relating to others, analysis, and writing is known as reflexivity. Lindolf and Taylor (2011) explain define reflexivity as recognizing the engagement and mutual connection to others. This acknowledgement of self in relation to others, helps fuel the richness of providing an alternative point of view. The researcher embodies the subject and the reality of self simultaneously. In order to create a more effective platform to speak of other's experiences, there must remain an openness to reality outside our own existence.

In a study on the media coverage of veterans, Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) examine contemporary media portrayals of veterans and question how media narratives place emphasis on themes that demonstrate deviant behavior, victimization, recompense and support. While these media frames are often present, they may be problematic without a countering perspective, and without a balanced picture that demonstrates alternative ways of viewing veteran identity. This lack of perspective may inhibit how the public includes veterans in everyday life and specifically, those who have faced mental health challenges such as PTSD. When veterans are socially excluded by the public based on preconceived ideas of PTSD, that stigmatization can lead to an aggravation of mental health complications (Kleykamp and Hines, 2015).

In American society, many have become accustomed to gaining information from the media. However, what Kleykamp and Hines and others interested in media portrayals of veterans have discovered, is that there are indeed some perceived stigmas and generalized stereotypes present of military veterans. While it is important to understand their experiences, it is also important to understand that these men and women are not one-dimensional; their identity is comprised of more than their military involvement.

### Vernacular Discourse

Veterans are arguably a marginalized community of their own with certain customs, rituals and language. One way to understand the identity of veterans is to acknowledge vernacular discourse, or the language that exists within a specific community; usually a community that has experienced some form of oppression. Vernacular discourse encompasses music, art, entertainment, critique and construction of affiliated group communities (Ono and Sloop, 1995). Applied to veterans, I ask: What are the distinctive ways that veterans express their experiences? How do the poetic expressions of veterans with PTSD constitute a unique veteran community through *MEA*?

Historical power relations have dictated a distinct need to study marginalized groups or communities that have been oppressed systematically (Ono and Sloop, 1995). Veterans with PTSD fall into the category but remain in a peculiar place, once having stood on the top of the podium only to descend to the bottom after a “troubled” time of service. By exploring cultural or community discourses and applying intertextuality to those directly involved in the discourse, the negotiation of representations and constructive meanings may take place (Adjei, 2013). In turn, members of a social system or society must willingly challenge and safeguard differences while embracing and accepting them as well (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2002).

This research examines the former fictional television series *True Blood*, and the character representation and vernacular discourse of “Terry Bellefleur” and his battle with PTSD. When vernacular discourse is combined with popular culture, uniquely created implicit and explicit public discourse may be constructed and concurrently affirm and build the culture and community connected to the relative vernacular (Ono and Sloop, 1995). A rhetorical enactment is often textualized by rhetorical criticism. Its goal is to bring attention to intentional,

as well as stylistic and positional tones that highlight the acting of the text (Mascarenhas, 2014). However, the rhetorical critic's role remains one that exposes the power and actions that are embedded in the discourse, making it plain and apparent (Warnick, 1998).

The specific language (vernacular) of veterans is both historical and exclusive. Spoken or written messages often rely on background information formulated through a social structural reasoning to obtain its meaning (Adjei, 2013). To some degree, there must exist a certain amount of familiarity with the military community and culture to derive at the meaning of expressed messages. Mascarenhas (2014) reveals that rhetoric that centers on and about war does not freely express the voice of the warrior that has been morally, emotionally and psychologically affected by combat. Influences from the media and military culture inhibit the veteran's voice in many cases. Alternatively, a vernacular discourse critique serves to discern the assemblage of a community, and in turn how that assemblage operates (Ono and Sloop, 1995). In addition, it examines whether popular culture perpetuates or helps the surrounding problems.

Language in theory, as Tollifson (2011) argues, is inclusive of the idea that its function is simply not for the reason of communication, rather its action is integral to the perception of language as well. The words that we see and hear take on a meaning of their own. Tollifson (2011) further asserts, "verbal language may be thought of as a kind of "filter" or "screen" through which humans learn to see the world, including works of art" (p. 14). Rhetoric or literary persuasion is artistic in nature, and is similar to that of visual persuasion (Leavy, 2009). Arts-based research can shift perspective from a place of blame to explanation, and from painting a picture to creating a vision (Springgay and Carpenter, 2007).

### Summary

While my argument suggests that veteran representation is often obscured by the voice of others, the only way to address this issue is to first draw attention to arenas in which they represent themselves, and second as humanistic researchers, to think critically and encompass the complexities of veterans as a marginalized group. A very important element to remember is that someone's "lived experience" is not your own. While a certain amount of reflexivity may enhance the depth of research, Alcoff (2014) reminds us to avoid speaking for others whenever possible, and instead practice the art of speaking to and with others. Critical research methods such as arts-based research and rhetorical criticism are useful instruments or tools to uncover a voice of reason and to promote advancement of a particular group. Yet, allowing the actual voices of the veterans to become central to the research ultimately creates a more realistic and balanced examination of veterans' experiences.

Qualitative research is flexible and provides the opportunity for studying complex empiricism in an organic fashion (McCulliss, 2013). It is action oriented and lends itself to presenting and providing solutions. Arts-based research is gaining momentum by humanistic researchers, and community-based researchers alike, as an alternative to traditional methods which have shown limitations in engagement with some societal groups (Coemans, Wang, Leysen, and Hannes, 2015). The fact remains that the population of combat veterans with PTSD is growing, and the need to engage and support this group is vital to their successful reintegration into civilian life. As the number of veterans returning from war continues to increase, the need to conduct research is detrimental. It can prove beneficial to their interpersonal processes which in turn affects reintegration. In addition, it is cause for addressing avenues for prevention and treatment options for veterans and their families (Monson, Taft, and Fredman, 2009).



### CHAPTER 3 ARTS BASED RESEARCH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF VETERANS' IDENTITY

The use of arts-based research (ABR) in qualitative research has significantly increased over the years. While it is a methodological approach often challenged, it was a logical choice for my work given its notable evidence for positively working with veterans. ABR is a method in which the arts are an essential part of, and play a distinct role, in any or all steps of the research process (Coemans, Wang, Leysen, and Hannes, 2015). Arts-based research practices are used across academic disciplines and can be defined as a set of methodological tools utilized throughout all aspects of social research, including data collection, interpretation, analysis, and representation of information (Leavy, 2009). I utilize arts-based research and poetic inquiry specifically, for entry into and observation of, a marginalized group (veterans with PTSD); as well as to explore veteran self-identity, and the representation of this group in popular culture or mainstream media.

The use of arts-based research has grown across multiple areas of study. One area of growth is through arts (therapeutic) projects aimed at helping veterans and others through traumatic processes. This project explores how arts-based practices are helping to create a more complete and balanced representation of veteran identity, specifically those diagnosed with PTSD, by demonstrating its usefulness and effectiveness with participants. Using creative expression in a trusting and therapeutic environment may help lessen anxiety, mental anguish and other emotional patterns associated with trauma. A traumatized individual has difficulty relating to others (Lobban, 2014) and adjusting to civilian life can be problematic for some veterans. Since this transition can be challenging physically, mentally, and emotionally, as well as complex for others to understand, negative perceptions are regularly attached to this group.

As a researcher seeking ways to bridge the communication gap of veterans with PTSD and U.S. society, studying the artistic expression of veterans is essential to the formulation of successful communication strategies and positive self-identity within this population. Often limited by the misrepresentation and constraints of society and mass media, I argue that arts-based organizations are offering veterans a way to provide a more realistic account of their lived experience. By doing so, these veterans have a place where their voices are heard, feelings are validated and a system of support is formulated, offering the chance for others to view them in a more positive fashion. Creating awareness is critical with this population and Leavy (2009) notes that utilizing arts-based practices may help create dialogue which is necessary to cultivate understanding and movement.

The impact that art-therapy has made on veterans as a culture was the impetus for choosing arts-based research as the methodology for my project. In recent years, health care researchers and providers have progressively sought the arts for its therapeutic ability, remedy potential and empowering practice (Leavy, 2009). While arts-based research does not implicitly involve art therapy, it provides a foundation for understanding the process of utilizing creative expression as a way of communicating. There are tremendous gaps in understanding the intricacy of communication and trauma. In addition, there is a need to understand how to regain communication skills that have been lost as a result of trauma, such as intimacy, attentiveness and the ability to articulate meaning. Art has the capacity to examine data outside of traditional means and provides the opportunity for emerging knowledge and information to surface (Sullivan, 2014). This research draws a connection between the art itself, the impact it has on the communication of the veteran and the implications it has on society's understanding of its complexity.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how through arts-based practices, poetry in particular, veterans with PTSD, express their self-identity (veteran representation). *Military Experience and the Arts* (MEA), the nonprofit organization dedicated to helping veterans and their families that are living with PTSD, mission is to work with the veterans and their families in creating and publishing various types of artwork. This organization has established its own unique programming and partnerships with other organizations as an effort to increase public awareness and provide assistance to veterans. In addition, a part of its goal is to not only work with veterans on creating their pieces, but to give them an opportunity to share their art and knowledge with a larger body of people, otherwise known as the mass public. MEA allows veterans to publicize their creative art pieces online through electronic journals on their website, giving them an opportunity to present their lived experiences to the world. It not only gives them a platform to speak and a showcase to present their work, art making initiates an elevated way means of perception and insight (Degarrod, 2013).

In this chapter, my goal is to gain a better understanding of how these veterans construct their identity themselves through their use of poetry. In Pennebaker's (1992) research, the author discusses the therapeutic implications of writing and asserts that it can be extremely beneficial to an individual when they write out their thoughts and feelings. As stated before, many health care professionals are looking to this art form to assist with therapy. In addition, qualitative researchers are also noticing the viability of this approach in conducting meaningful and insightful bodies of work. Using art modalities isn't constricted to one type of art; while there are also many studies that focus on visual or graphic art, this research centers on poetry for its aesthetic and empathetic quality. Poetry is known for its self-expressive feature and that works well for this work of identity and representation.

### **Framing Research-An Arts Based Methods Approach**

The use of arts-based research (ABR) in qualitative research has significantly challenged and extended existing paradigms such as positivism and feminism over the years. With the expansion of feminist theory and the need for other social movements, Leavy (2009) attributes the shift in theoretical schools of thought to globalization, coupled with an evolving media and economic landscape. Leavy reveals this thinking has expanded greatly as a result of advances in theory and explains that in recent years, this methodological, theoretical and political divergent paradigm has caused arts-based practices to flourish and rise as a notable methodology. ABR uncovers information using creativity and interpretation and Leavy (2009) further claims that “arts-based practices are particularly useful for research projects that aim to *describe, explore, or discover*” (p. 12). Essentially, the arts and the poetry of veterans easily lend themselves to conquer those three elements.

From the onset of studying identity within the population of veterans with PTSD, I was especially intrigued with an emerging concept of veterans engaging with creative expression, which is gaining momentum for assisting with symptoms of the injury, as well as providing a mechanism to self-identify in a more practical fashion. Much of the decision to use arts-based research is the success that art therapy practices are having on veterans with PTSD. Johnson (2009) “views the art modalities as a means by which people can express themselves or from a trauma perspective, “break the silence.”” (p. 115). Silence can be one of the most challenging issues to overcome with these veterans. While art therapy is not the same concept as arts-based research, it provides a foundation for analyzing creative expression. Leavy (2009) suggests that these methods are flexible, creative and intuitive and communicates information in a way that audiences are able to grasp information and decipher meaning.

This study seeks to point out the differences between the self-identity of veterans and the media's represented ideas of veteran identity. As Leavy (2009) maintains that research encompassing social justice often involves communicating about various experiences related to diversity and difference and is often useful in studying identity. As a distinct population of people from various backgrounds and life influences, veterans with PTSD often possess collective characteristics and shared experiences as well as encounter a certain amount of prejudice specific to their group affiliation. Once a clear self-identity is recognized and demonstrated, key misconceptions and misrepresentations may be diminished.

Art making produces a different channel of perception and an alternative way of looking at knowledge (Degarrod, 2013). The intent of addressing communication barriers in veterans with PTSD using arts-based research allows us to form a more interpretative response. Leavy (2009) asserts that without question, arts-based research methods have been informed by the knowledge obtained through art(s) therapy practices. My research provides a catalyst for understanding veteran identity thorough ABR, which in turn provides an opportunity to examine and unlearn the messages portrayed in the media regarding veterans.

*Military Experience and the Arts (MEA)* is an organization designed from that premise, using creative expression in a therapeutic sense, without clinical therapy. Lapum, Ruttonsha, Church, Yau and David (2011) support this by idea offering that artistic formats in any form, performative, visual or literary can be used to translate experiences for audiences and researchers that they have not personally witnessed or encountered. Revering the arts permits audiences to turn to nonscientific sources of knowledge to frame and enhance knowledge. Sandelowski (1994) points out that the celebration of the arts permits audiences to analyze the representations in a way that best demonstrates relatability to the information at hand.

Utilizing arts-based methods in this research not only lends itself to a population that finds comfort in artistic expression, but also allows the audience to understand identity in a way that counters jaded media representations. It allows for a “going beneath the surface” to view veterans in a nontraditional format.

According to Coemans, Wang, Leysen and Hannes (2015), as of late, there has been an increased interest in using arts-based methods as a humanistic research practice. This method has proved to have a largely contributing impact on qualitative studies and has made headway across a variety of disciplines including, Communication. McNiff (2007) explains that perhaps one of the most attractive elements of arts-based research is the potentiality for creating various tactics to confront some of the most important worldly issues present today. While at times it has been criticized, or challenged based on previous ideologies and traditional conventions, Leavy contends that arts-based researchers aren’t simply “discovering” methodological tools, they are “sculpting” them, forging their own paths.

This distinct group of scholars are finding alternate ways of arriving at information which is valuable to the research community and society overall. Much of the controversy can be attributed to a lack of or misunderstanding of what constitutes arts-based research. As previously stated above, with ABR, the arts are the driving force, and as such is pivotal in each step throughout the research process. The art is used as a way to construct meaning and facilitate knowledge. Art evokes curiosity and this concept is easily transferrable for the prescribed veteran population of this study.

Veterans with PTSD exude a controversial discussion, making arts-based methods an appropriate method of study for multiple reasons. First, it allows for a different, more reflexive conversation. Next, because of the success art-therapy is showing in this particular group, there

is a natural connection that makes this technique a workable approach. Talwar (2007) asserts that art is representative of the creator's mind in all its various forms, and it is this representation that will help verbalize the veteran's self-identity. Finally, while art may allow the artists to express themselves and address a certain silence, it allows the researcher to bring this voice to a larger audience, using a more broadened or developed perspective.

It is common knowledge that veteran identity is difficult to understand, although Mascarenhas (2014) insists that eradicating their identity isn't the solution either, rather it's by confronting and conceptualizing it can resolution occur. Arts-based methods provides this mechanism for a different representation. Tremendous results have been reported by art therapists from their work with combat veterans and psychological and neurological systems have been explored that demonstrate art therapy's ability to further growth and recovery from PTSD (Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel, 2006). While there are clear and distinct differences between therapeutic and research practices, both are relevant to closing the gap of veteran identity and representation.

There are some observable differences amongst research approaches. Arts-based researchers are distinguished from other qualitative researchers by their use of artistic processes and practices as a means of inquiry and as a vehicle to communicate their researching findings and outcomes (O'Donoghue, 2009). The intent of addressing communication barriers in veterans with PTSD using arts-based research allows us to discover a more nuanced response. The purpose of qualitative research, and that of the artists alike, is to represent specific ideas and concepts that demonstrate meaning to an audience (Leavy, 2009). Arts-based methods exemplify this learning in a more reflexive and fluid way, and poetry in particular is one way to explore this reflexivity.

### **Constructing a Rhetorical Analysis**

To many, rhetoric is simply known as the art of speaking. Yet, a complete and thorough rhetorical analysis offers so much more. Rhetorical analysis focuses on symbolism and the use of language. It allows for an opportunity to explore beyond the surface of the text and images to understand meaning through its use of language. As Foss (2009) discusses this technique, rhetoric is defined as the human use of symbols to communicate (meaning). The author further contends that this general definition has three primary concepts. First, it acknowledges that rhetoric was created by humans. Second, it maintains that rhetoric relies on symbols as channels. Finally, it offers that rhetoric's purpose is based on the act of communication. Simply stated, humans are the authors of rhetoric, for which they discover symbols (rhetorical invention), attach specific meanings and formulate the process of using those symbols to construct messages to influence audiences. The objective of rhetorical criticism is to dissect or disassemble communication artifacts to investigate language and discourses that help audiences derive meaning from those messages.

However, rhetoric involves much more than symbols, messages and interpretation. It not only accounts for symbolism but most definitely relies on action. Rhetoricians are as much concerned with the symbolic messaging as they are with the "situation" in which it occurs. Rhetoric seeks to understand the characteristics of the messengers, the context in which the messages were presented, and how that discourse creates or impacts the situation. According to Bitzer (1968) a situation constitutes rhetoric, and its response to that situation is what deems a work "rhetorical." Rhetoric has a long history dating back to Aristotle and Greek philosophy and was originally viewed as a persuasive technique used to sway audiences towards a particular decision. While that still applies, there has been some evolution in rhetoric.



Historically, the speaker, audience and motive were the most important components of understanding rhetoric. Although, some changes have occurred over the last two decades, and Rosteck (as cited in Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) suggests that during this time, the consciousness of rhetorical and cultural studies have progressively focalized on media critiques, institutional challenges and discourses that construct and dictate public and popular culture. Although, the oration of political candidates is still scrutinized, no longer is rhetoric simply a review of speech or publicized oracle events. Rhetoric takes into account concepts like identity, shared knowledge, and power structures as a basis to uncover strategic thinking, critical assumptions and sense making. Rhetoric answers the who, what, where, when and why of the communication process based on experiences, developments and communal engagement.

In the past, many postwar rhetorical scholars and those from related disciplines favored a more formalized critique of discourse (ie. public addresses or publicized speeches). However, a new generation of scholars have emerged beyond those types of situations and embraced beliefs that accentuate liberating politics, highlight ambiguity, and foster audience engagement (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). As a result, rhetoric and specifically rhetorical criticism, has evolved into a much more embodied epistemology of qualitative research. Burke (1951) explains that the old style of rhetoric focused on persuasion and its deliberate composition. While the key concept of the newer style of rhetoric focuses on identification, which includes unconsciousness as a main motivating factor. In rhetorical criticism, persuasion is still an important factor but the “new” rhetoric allows us to think about what is implicitly being said, but also to consider what isn’t being said; and what implications direct and indirect messages have on the audience and society as a whole. Rhetoric is concerned with those efforts that attempt to effectuate change (Griffin, 1952) through forces of persuasion and social action.

A critical rhetorician focuses on creative consciousness, providing explanations, rationale and contradictions to surface appearances. Plec (2007) maintains that the critical rhetoric's aim is to examine discourse that manipulates, exercises and masks systems of power. A critical rhetoric strives to unmask, reveal and debunk that power related discourse (McKerrow, 1989). The goal is to demonstrate a transparency that isn't always apparent in the artifact. The objective is to understand the integration of power/knowledge in society by exploring sites that are present in our daily existence. What the critical rhetoric is trying to undercover is the underlying messages that a particular discourse has on a larger body of people. In this research, the relevancy of veterans with PTSD vs. societal imposed representations will be explored from a critical communicative perspective.

Communication occurs in various ways and we are constantly involved in the process of sending, receiving and interpreting symbolic messages. These vehicles of communication are all around us, particularly in television, movies, political campaigns and everyday conversation among family and friends. U.S. society is filled with sub cultures and groups with limited power that are influenced by those in high political places and privileged race positions. Plec (2007) discusses the idea that the critical rhetoric takes on the responsibility of tackling those critical cultural politics and examines established systems and representation. Critical rhetoricians recognize that popular culture and phenomenality are historically and socially constructed through positions of power (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). When attention is drawn to the historical symbolism of a sub-culture (or group of interest), interpreting such discourse is greatly increased in communication studies and analysis (Gonzalez, 1990). Critical rhetoric considers the social, historical and political construction and residual impact of discourse on society and specific groups within.

As we gain some understanding regarding the concept of rhetoric, the question can be asked, what exactly is criticism from a rhetorical standpoint? How does the marriage of the two work together in a cohesive manner to formulate rhetorical criticism? Criticism is an examination or evaluation of a particular merit that usually results from a specific context or situation. Plec (2007) argues that rhetorical criticism craves substantive situations (ie. crisis, public outcries) that initiate or evoke interpellate responses which then help provide definition (context) of the rhetorical situation.

Black (1978) compares the critic to that of a scientist, stating that both share two highly important commonalities. First, they have the ability to see things with clarity and secondly, they accurately record that which they have seen. In other words, the critic's task is to evaluate and then disseminate information about a rhetorical event. However, the role of the rhetorician is different from a scientist and Black views criticism as a two-part process that involves perception just as much as evaluation. The critic would take one step further beyond evaluation, as they seek to also provide a fair account of justice, which is not a concern of the scientist. While there are some similarities present, there are notable differences between the unearthing that a scientist does and that of a rhetorical critic.

Black offers two other important distinctions that separate the fields of rhetoric and science as a way of understanding the role of a critic. Black argues that unlike scientists exploring experiments that can be replicated, the role of a critic is to examine humanity, their actions and the consequences of such actions. Success is not measured by achieving a specific formula or data equation, rather it hinges on reaction, responding and movement. The other separating factor of a scientist and a critic is their desire to affect society. While scientists aim to make a difference in society, critics aim to create change in society. Black (1978) explains that

the critic translates information (regarding the critical object) for the audience in terms they can understand, and by doing this, educates and levels the playing field of the audience's investment. The audience's ability to understand the situation clearly, encourages a different level of engagement and participation. The critic serves as the liaison between the discourse, the audience and the social impact; and should serve to identify the possibilities of future action available to participants (McKerrow, 1989). In other words, a rhetorical critique is not meant to simply examine or analyze text (discourse) and speakers, rather it should alter or shift a limited way of thinking, provide an alternative perspective on creating change and/or advocate for social justice.

Criticism isn't black or white. Critics do not pass judgement for the sake of judging. A thorough critic provides an investigation of an area of concern, as well as a reflective interpretation. Foss (2009) notes that rhetorical criticism is a qualitative research method concerned with systematic investigation. Its purpose is to provide explanation of artifacts and symbolism that help guide rhetorical processes. It reviews and contemplates a particular discourse for the purpose of providing a rhetorical response. Foss (2009) goes on to offer that there are three relevant extensions to this idea: 1) a systematic analysis is the act of criticism 2) acts and artifacts are the measurements of analysis in criticism 3) acknowledging that the purpose of criticism lies in the stages of the rhetorical process.

First, we are faced with symbolism all around us in our everyday lives. Next, "acts" or artifacts which are the objects of representation, consistently create a purpose for investigation. Lastly, a rhetorical critic demonstrates what is being learned and how the "teaching" can be improved. Rhetoric therefore constitutes the expression of knowledge followed by the orientation of action.

In essence, there must be some reason determined by a set of actions or events that prompt a rhetorical reaction. Bitzer (1968) claims that these rhetorical works are connected to the historical context in which the ideas and subjects of criticism are created. Most often what immediately pops into our minds in terms of rhetoric is political candidates and the speeches they deliver. However, rhetorical situations may be found in film, on television, and in sporting arenas. Bitzer (1968) points out that rhetoric is pragmatic and is born as a result of a meaning that is beyond itself. The role of rhetoric is to incite action or change regarding the imposed situation. Inherently, it functions to perform a task; to make a difference. In a rhetorical situation, Bitzer (1968) suggests that we remain conscious of how a particular discourse comes into existence; that we understand rhetoric's premise is predicated on a specific issue or condition that invites such an expression.

Communication and/or discourse often have underlying messages engrained in their presentation, particularly in media and popular culture. Yet, these messages are quite influential to oblivious audiences. In this research, the once popular fictional television program *True Blood* is reviewed to highlight the messages demonstrated by its representations of military veterans. As a vulnerable population and a subconsciously marginalized group, veterans are frequently displayed in biased ways. Ono and Sloop (1995) contend that "hegemonic discourses are pervasive, so pervasive that the hegemonic constructions of marginalized members of society are created through public media" (p. 24). A rhetorical analysis brings a critical eye to such manipulated discourse and challenges the audience to reflect on other possible perspectives for a given subject. The misrepresentation of veterans in the media is a societal situation, and one that has demonstrated a need or "situation" for rhetorical study. By engaging in conversation around this topic, it promotes the opportunity to have an alternative point of view.

The self-representation vs. media representation of veterans with PTSD is a real concern, yet what do these differences teach us about veterans' identity? What do the larger implications of this discourse mean for us a society? Mckerrow (1989) reveals that discourse in all levels of society is a deliberate tactic of power relations, both internal, external and between institutions, organizations, individuals and groups. A rhetorical critique of the discourse present in this media representation then serves multiple purposes. First, it acknowledges the lack of representing veterans as individuals. Next, it highlights their affiliation of the military as a closed off group. Then, it explores the visceral influence of the media's representation. Finally, it looks at the repercussions of institutional influence, and the injustice it causes military veterans. Bitzer (1968) asserts that rhetoric is one way to alter reality, not by means of direct application. Yet, through the created discourse which causes a change in reality from the negotiation of introspection and action.

It has been proven that rhetoric expands beyond the oratory, and that popular culture is a large target for rhetorical critiques. Rosteck (2001) offers that a rhetorical study of culture offers insight which reveals that every aspect of discourse is an investigation of action upon the audience. It takes place within a specific context and then replicates those contexts through its construction and interpretation. In addition, these rhetorical works consider the elements that constitutes discourse and thereby the role of the audience. Such interaction makes for a conscious and informed state of being, it not only creates a more informed audience it demonstrates that discourse is a worthy rhetorical pursuit. Many of today's historical accounts have proven to be of great rhetorical value, from Ali's rhetoric as a boxer to the cinematic efforts of war on American society, to controversial and gendered political campaigns, there is no shortage of opportunities that warrant consideration and dialogue.

The rhetorical critique of my research examines the narrative of *True Blood*, a former popular culture cable television series and its character depiction of U.S. Marine, Terence Quentin Bellefleur “Terry” played by actor Todd Lowe. It critiques the series’ attempt to portray an Iraqi veteran’s reintegration into society living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by addressing the problematic portrayal of veterans as crazed, indecisive, villainous monsters or pitiful, helpless victims. The messages we see and hear in the media has an impact on perception and internalization. Yet, this impact is often more negative than positive which hinders the audience’s viewpoint. This critique acknowledges the influence of mass media and discusses its illustration of post-war civilian acclimation and the perception it gives the American audience of combat veterans suffering from PTSD.

This exploration questions whether or not *True Blood*’s narrative of Terry and his interpersonal discourse perpetuates the existing veteran negative portrayals or attempts to offer a different perspective of combat veterans. While the story may provide some elements of realism, one of the areas of concern is whether or not stereotypes are reinforced through intentional or unintentional means. Specifically, it seeks to question what this fictional story teaches us about PTSD injured combat veterans and how its representation shapes the way viewers perceive this marginalized population. Are these portrayals more harmful than not for a group of people that are subject to social stigma, yet whose population is consistently growing in this society? Lastly, it questions whether the media’s representation further complicates the complexities of PTSD or provides an opportunity to increase the audience’s knowledge of the injury. There is already a present societal apprehension to discussing and tackling mental health issues, and this state of alarm needs to be addressed in order to counter its effects. Creating dialogue as a result of looking at these representations is a starting point to breaking down barriers.

## Procedure

Identity and representation are the core elements of this research, conducted through the dual methodological approach of arts-based methods (poetic inquiry) and rhetorical analysis. *Military Experience and the Arts (MEA)* is the chosen arts-based site for this research, and as such provides a platform for veterans to engage culturally within a community, yet allows the outside audience an opportunity to explore this “location.” While *True Blood* is the chosen platform (site) for the rhetorical analysis that helps examine the media’s representations of veterans, and the residual impact that these representations have on the general public perception and meaning making.

The proposed ABR and rhetorical analysis study seeks to address the following question:

**RQ-** How do veterans with PTSD enact their individual and collective identity through the use of poetry and problematize the representation of the media’s view of veteran identity?

### Poetic Inquiry

Using poetic inquiry, I reviewed and analyzed 136 published poetic pieces written by veterans and or family members who’ve dealt with military related PTSD, spanning across five volumes and three journal publications of *Military Experience & the Arts*. All of the authors are veterans (and/or family members of those) who have served in combat and have specific military knowledge and insight, and whose original works are published through MEA. I have chosen to use only poetic pieces, as opposed to other forms of art, to derive meaning of veteran identity in this project. McCulliss (2013) argues that individuals or groups that write poetry may represent this affiliated culture and serve as expressive synecdoche. What McCulliss’s argument is claiming, is that utilizing a sample of poems from this or any other culture (group) may indeed help draw conclusions regarding the larger connected body.



Initially, I read through the poems (data) to have an idea of the wording and messages used to construct concepts and meaning. I was looking for consistency, creativity, and ideas that stood out, as well as similarities and differences that helped define veteran identity. I wanted to understand exactly what the poets were expressing through their artwork. After reviewing and analyzing the poems, I recognized data saturation when much of the poetry consistently reflected similar defined expressions of self-identity. Faulkner and Trotter (in press) describe saturation as the point at which researchers may conclude data collection as a result of redundancy in data analysis. Data saturation occurred for me when I noticed repetitious language, references & connotations in the poetry. It is my belief that these poems will not only help us understand the veterans of MEA, but those in the larger community as well. McCulliss (2013) explains that when researchers utilize poetry as methods of study, it allows them to think about data and findings in a more creative way and assists them in revealing themes, and patterns that exists in the organic information.

Collecting data in this way, challenged me to think creatively. It allowed me to gain a sense of the collective identity veterans share of their lived experiences, while understanding that they are still indeed individuals. It is this contradiction of individuality vs. collectivity that often causes the perception of their identity to remain unaligned or out of balance, many times having more value placed on one over the other. Poetry is a form of embodiment and its nature uncovers principles that may not be easily apparent; it's empowering and thought provoking for its audiences (Faulkner, 2014). This study demonstrates that through the use of arts-based methods, and poetry in particular, veterans are demonstrating their truths and displaying a better, more reflective sense of self-identity. Thus, contradicting and making evident, negative representations or misrepresented identities offered to us via the mass media.

## Rhetorical Criticism

As a way to investigate media related veteran representation, I examined 15 episodes that spanned over two seasons of the cable networked television series, *True Blood*. This former series is based on a fictional setting in which humans and vampires learn to coexist in the same community. Although it is set in a fictional and sometimes mystical setting, there are storylines present, particularly with the human characters that contain realism. Each of the episodes examined feature the character “Terry” a former U.S. Marine struggling with the aftermath of PTSD post the Iraqi war. I chose this series based on popular culture, veteran representation and the dynamics of “othering” as humans and non-humans are placed in close proximity of each other (mirroring minority vs. majority) who are faced with the challenge of living together in their community. A part of the media’s function is to bring light and attention to issues that the public should be aware of and in turn help us consider what we think about those issues (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2015).

I determined the most relevant episodes to review based on the presence, discourse, discussion of, and/or interaction between “Terry” and other characters of the series, with that character being the focal point of conversation or demonstrating scene prevalence. Episodes that did not contain “Terry” in a scene alone, in interaction with others, in a flashback, or being directly quoted or spoken about by others did not pertain to the research, and as a result were not included. With PTSD as a focal point of Terry’s persona, Owen (2002) reminds us that cultural or rhetorical researchers may consider popular discourse to “work through” issues of trauma. Analyzing the discourse of and surrounding “Terry” may help us create an understanding of the impact representations of veterans with PTSD has on U.S. society; as well as invite a different form of discourse that is more interested in increasing knowledge and providing solutions.

The dual methodological approach of this research aims to achieve two goals. First, to demonstrate that arts-based methods (derived from art-therapy practices) is a viable means for veterans to voice their self-identification through creative expression, and second, to create a rhetorical discussion that reviews the implications that certain types of veteran representation have on the larger society. The conjoining of these methods illustrates that self-representation can be quite different than the media demonstrated representation of any one group. Yet, this limited perspective of portrayal provides the context for disengagement, exclusion and a continued segregated system that pits one group against others.

While the concept of “art-therapy” is recognized as a vehicle for utilizing creative expression, this research will not provide results of therapeutic practices. It is not meant to analyze the therapy process of veterans, rather to discuss the implications that such artistic engagement has shown to be effective in the self-identification of veterans with PTSD. Neither is this research a claim that all representations of veterans in the media is negative or stereotypical. Rather it is an attempt to create a dialogue that will help us understand the complexities of veteran identity and the problematizing of biased representations. It will help create a clearer picture of the necessity for awareness and action, as we work towards understanding the magnitude of this issue.

American society is divergent and multi-faceted, made up of many types of people, attitudes, morals and popular opinion. However, one issue that can be continually challenged is how accepting this society may or may not be to those in minority groups. Veterans are a unique and growing population whose position in society fluctuates based on various factors of their military affiliation. What this research does is recognize the fluidity of their experience and bring the conversation to the forefront of communication.

## CHAPTER 4 POETIC INQUIRY: AN ARTS BASED APPROACH TO ANALYZING VETERAN POETRY

In this chapter, I employ poetic inquiry to highlight the veteran voice using creative expression by way of assessing originally crafted poems. Poetic inquiry is an insightful methodological tool that increases our ability to review data and draw conclusions from an empathetic and uniquely situated standpoint (McCulliss, 2013). Using poetry inquiry in this way can reconstruct introspection and impart various perspectives. Its unique ability to push poets and challenge readers, is different than in other forms of writing. In addition, it possesses the capability to advocate and proactively inspire social justice, advancements and change (Faulkner, in press). Poetry's strength lies in its ability to affectively sway its audience, as well as challenge them intellectually (Prendergast, 2009), which are both necessary components to set the forward movement wheels in motion. However, because of its interpretative flexibility, some may shy away from its usage but this is precisely the reason why it works in this instance.

In every historical or monumental movement, human curiosity, creative flexibility and the foresight to problem solve have been crucial elements along the way (Sullivan, 2014). The Iraqi and Afghanistan wars have served as significant points in American history and as such yield that type of reflection. The goal of this process is to examine veteran experiences, specifically those with PTSD who were apart of those momentous occasions. It also creates a dialogue that helps orchestrate a different way of engaging with post-combat veterans. The intention of poetry is to inspire reflexive interpretation and mindful understanding based on the experience of the audiences' own personal context or experiences (Lapum, Yau, Church, Ruttonsha, and David, 2015). These poems give us a glimpse into the world of veterans providing us with first-hand accounts of their experience that ask us to embody those responses.

### Utilizing Poetry

My analysis of the poetic pieces from the *Military Experience & the Arts* journals demonstrate the complex layering of veteran identity, particularly after enduring the trauma of military combat. Quinn (2008) argues that combat veterans showing symptoms of PTSD can indeed block a significant amount of experience from their consciousness. Yet this lack of recognition may inhibit others from understanding these veterans. Quinn's argument further claims that entering into the world of a veteran, harmoniously, is to provide an entry to increased awareness of the veteran experience. Poetry and its representation of chronicled life experiences is capable of making that existence accessible by others. It is the replication of these actions that includes details, descriptions, ambiguity, truth and contradictions that clarifies and responds to the significance of life.

There is without a doubt a connection between creative expression and the human condition (Albright, 2015). In our culture, it has been greatly recognized as a healthy outlet to transfer traumatic experiences into words (Pennebaker, 1993). The objective then for poetry's place in the life of a veteran, is to put onto paper what cannot be articulated verbally. The veteran is particularly vulnerable after experiencing a severe trauma, and Albright (2015) reveals that expressing oneself creatively gives these men and women space to personalize their experiences and make sense of war and its moral ambiguities. It also helps to vocalize the residual mental warfare; sharing how combat has caused impact emotionally, spiritually, psychologically. The significance of the PTSD symptomatology is that the veteran does not operate in a vacuum. What he/she does, thinks, and feels directly impacts those around him/her (Galovski & Lyons, 2004). Through poetry, veterans have a way to articulate feelings and by doing so may alternatively provide a gateway for others to understand their disrupted identity.

Self-reflection is variable, and may be expressed in multiple ways, yet the arts are one way to explain affective reasoning (Lapum, Yau, Church, Ruttonsha, & David, 2013). A veteran's perception becomes jumbled after trauma, and connectivity to others and one's self becomes difficult. As a result of the veteran's traumatic experience of combat, some experiences that would have been otherwise separated from awareness and internally shelved, have been forced into the forefront of their stream of consciousness (Quinn, 2008). The veteran's post trauma self-structure is disjointed and difficult to conceptualize. They must look for ways to unravel the disjointedness and piece their identity back together, first in a way that makes sense to themselves and secondly to the larger world. Using poetry for this unraveling is a powerful tool. Roberts, Brasel & Crawford (2014) offer that poetry encapsulates the heart of the matter, experience or occasion. It provides a way to create moments in time with language and imagery.

Further, poetry proposes an alternative emotive voice that differs from traditional means such as interviews or surveys, which may not provide such stirring. (Roberts, Brasel & Crawford, 2014). Poetry is intimate yet revealing, and it is engaging for both the artist and the audience. Veteran identity is multi-layered, fluctuating, complex, inconsistent and difficult to navigate, making poetry an ideal tool to use for gaining understanding. Poetry is often viewed in the same way, demonstrating complexity, ambiguity, abstract thinking and expansive interpretations. Yet, Faulkner (in press) argues that this complexity and ambiguity is precisely what makes poetry distinguishable and useful. Poetry isn't right or wrong, it's raw, it's pliable and it demonstrates one's internal way of articulating truth. Lombardo (2008) contends that the artist's personality makes room for transformation and vision, and grants access into their unconsciousness. By doing so, the artist is able to incorporate his/her own, as well as the audiences' vulnerabilities truly making the experience relatable.

Writing about war can be a challenging feat, filled with agony and pain. Yet, often times it is these very same disturbing situations that can pull out the better parts of oneself (Canfield, J., Hansen, M.V., & Slagter, 2001). The horrific effects of war are not limited to physical acts, but rather the inconceivable psychological and ethical situations that both soldiers and civilians are placed in should also be considered (Hanauer, 2015). The arts (creative expression) help improve the interaction between persons. It teaches us how to release negative attitudes and resist the urge to control others and situations. The arts promote originality and openness in perception and problem solving, obtaining insight and increasing human sensitivity (McNiff, 2007). While expressing emotions externally takes some adjusting on behalf of the veteran, the releasing of internal thoughts assists in advancing towards wellness. Collie, Backos, Malchiodi and Spiegel (2006) contest that the externalizing traumatic memories and events promotes ownership of the trauma, garnering insight and eventually shifting and releasing those memories from the present state to the past.

Often because of their military affiliation and the desire to maintain a certain image, one that may be self or societally imposed, veterans remain silent about their experiences and their emotions. Lobban (2014) reveals that veterans may not admit to struggling due to perceived stigmas and appearing weak. However, according to Poulos (2008) keeping secrets is problematic in that, very often they won't remain silent, and inevitably creep in everyday life (welcomed or not) disrupting the flow of healthful living. These memories and secrets, if left untold, may indeed become crippling and unprogressive. Veterans with PTSD are all too familiar with this concept, internalizing, isolating and withholding from family and friends. Yet, expressive poetry can be transformative, changing negatives into positives and provoking beneficial revelations, causing a better strategy for handling adversity (McCulliss, 2013).

### MEA and Poetic Inquiry

At the forefront of the research is the arts-based organization *Military Experience & the Arts (MEA)* which allows veterans a platform to present their lived experience through various forms of art. This study seeks to understand how veterans who engage in arts-based methods express their identities through poetry. Albright (2015) argues that therapies that involve the arts can provide foundations for military-connected populations to conceptualize military related experience and focus on the value of creative expression. Albright (2015) further claims that immersing oneself in these therapeutic efforts allows this population the chance to formulate a moralistic and spiritual type redemption. In addition, organizations like MEA that are providing public access to this art, are helping to create a clearer understanding of the veterans and their experience, in turn counteracting the negative stigma that is often associated with mental health issues for veterans dealing with PTSD.

MEA operates five journal publications (13 volumes) and accepts multiple types of art including poetry, graphic art, short stories (fiction & nonfiction), and scholarship. *The Journal of Military Experience* is the first publication and a product of the formation of the organization. It is comprised of short stories, poems and artwork. The second publication, *Blue Streak: A Journal of Military Poetry* was taken from the idea of *The Journal of Military Experience* and is an all poetry publication. The next journal entitled *The Blue Falcon Review* is a series of fictional writings that first resulted from workshops put on by MEA. The next publication, *Blue Nostalgia: A Journal of Post-Traumatic Growth* was also created from a workshop concept and features stories that speak to issues of trauma and the process of recovery. Lastly, *As You Were: The Military Review* is a combination of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and artwork. Each of these publications represent a diverse body of work from the veterans involved with the organization.



As a way of constructing this research, I utilized poetic inquiry and analyzed 136 published poetic pieces written by veterans with PTSD experience, spanning across three of the five journal publications of *Military Experience & the Arts*. All the authors published through *MEA* have specific knowledge related to the military, and have served in the armed forces and/or served in combat as well. This selection includes all of *MEA*'s published poetry and is taken from *Blue Streak (only all poetry journal)*, *As You Were: The Military Review (Volumes 1-4)* and *The Journal of Military Experience (Volumes 1 & 2)*.

With poetic inquiry, poetry can be used before the analysis of a project, as the analysis itself and/or serves a part or the whole body of research (Faulkner, in press). Free from academic jargon and other limiting barriers, Chilton & Leavy (2014) suggest that the arts possess a broadened potentiality and can reach diverse audiences through its emotional and political provocativeness. In this research, poetry is being utilized to construct meaning; to carve out and comprehend veteran identity. There are several advantages of using poetry as a vehicle for qualitative research. It can be utilized to make humanity evident, and transmit lived experiences to larger audiences in powerful forms (Faulkner, Kaunert, Kluch, Koc & Trotter, 2016). Poetry can promote new venues for research, be useful to describe new phenomena and research questions, and help us understand experiences, attitudes, and behaviors.

Military veterans are a community within a community with a uniquely shared culture; it is one that has demonstrated a need for dialogue and acceptance from the public. Coemans, Wang, Leyson and Hannes (2015) state that communities are groups of people that share language, beliefs, commonalties, and inherently a particular identity. It is my belief that these poems will not only help us understand the community of veterans from *MEA*, but give insight into the complexity of their multi-layered identity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The communication theory of identity (CTI) maintains that there are four active layers or frames of identity present in an individual which include the personal, enacted, relational and communal frames (Hecht and Faulkner, 2000). Moreover, Jung and Hecht (2015) assert that these identity frames are not always consistent with each other and may overlap or act independently at any given time. These frames can be contradictory or exclusive to each other often resulting in the creation of what are known as identity gaps. Jung and Hecht (2015) define identity gaps as conflictions that occur within, between or amongst the multiple identity frames. However, it is important to understand when these gaps are present and how they operate in relation to identity.

An analysis of the veteran poetry demonstrated this key concept and highlighted the inconsistencies between the self-identification of veterans and the media's representation of the veterans. Jung and Hecht (2015) further explain that identity gaps are pretty much inevitable. They often occur within communication and social connection. Since the act of communication is imperfect, rarely are people completely transparent or always consistent, and thus, identity gaps are developed. I acknowledged that the recurring themes within the poetry worked to reflect expressions of the multiple layers of identity, that are often present, but not always easily recognizable in veterans.

CTI demonstrates that communication functions as identity, and identity functions as communication, and highlights their impact of interdependency. Hecht et al. (2002) reveal that the four frames work together to formulate a thorough landscape of identity and functions individually, as duality or in any varied combination. The frames are interpermeated or interpenetrated, working collaboratively or as dialectical tensions. However, these

interpenetrations are at times problematic when there is conflict between ascribed identities from external relations that do not coincide with self-imposed personal identity (Hecht et al, 2002).

Acknowledging this idea provides a more robust way of viewing veteran self-representation, and asserts that neither communication nor identity is independent of each other, yet often times they complement and coexist together.

This study uses communication theory of identity as a catalyst for creating a dialogue that suggests when veterans participate in art based methods or creative expression, it expands their inhibited way of communicating and simplifies their self-identification. As veterans use art to unpack their complex communication, a comparison is drawn from their poetic interpretations to the media's limited way of representation. This contradiction prohibits receiving a more complete picture of the veteran. The ultimate goal of utilizing this theory is to continue a conversation that is becoming increasingly important in today's society for an ever-growing population of veterans.

In this study, I examined veteran identity through the representation of self-created poetry, challenging the ideas and the various media representations of this population using communication theory of identity as a framework. Performed collectivity occurs as individuals agreeably take part in cultural activity. This performance cultivates a connection that extends beyond normative beliefs, shared interests or conjoined affiliation (Spinggay and Carpenter, 2007). My exploration of this poetry addresses the complexity of identity gaps as a means for misrepresentation and limited perspective of the veteran community and works to answer the following research question. How do veterans with PTSD enact their individual and collective identity through the use of poetry, and problematize the representation of the media's view of veteran identity?

## Analysis

I started the data collection process by reading each poem individually and making internal and external observations. During the qualitative research process the researcher examines, organizes and formulates data using a mindful approach (McCulliss, 2013). While reading the poems, certain information stood out, and that information was recorded and organized into a fashion that would make it easy for others to comprehend; it was recognized that there were some similarities present in the poetry that could be explained later. Communicating data in this way makes the information assessable to a larger audience allowing them an alternate, more digestible view of sensemaking. The examination process produces findings based on the results that the researcher develops and constructs for the audience (McCulliss, 2013). After reviewing the data, what I found most impactful was the discovery of three emergent themes that were present throughout the poetry: experiences, emotions and physicality.

First, experiences were described as moments in time when veterans participated, observed or interacted in various situations. Next, emotions were described as feelings that evoked an internal reaction or state of being. Finally, physicality was described by discussing actual physical attributes of the body. These themes were determined based on the number of repetitive word occurrences throughout the poetry that contained similar meaning. For example, the words that described emotions were based on internal or subconscious feelings such as fear, anxiety, anger, confusion etc. All the words were then grouped together and placed within the three overarching themes. Through the sifting or unpacking process, it was clear that some words fit into more than one theme. For instance, an author might speak about the emotions behind crying, yet producing tears is an aspect of physicality. However, the overlap amongst the themes were present and relevant to the expression of the veterans.

Experiences	Emotions	Physicality
Fertile Soil	Fear	Blood
Freedom	Broken	Flesh
Broken Promises	Honor	Muscles
Piles of Dead Men	Pride	Laugh
Mission	Depression	Heat
Silence	Grief	Shudders
War	Defeat	Bone Fragments
PTSD	Victory	Murmuring Lips

**Table 1 Excerpt of Themes List. It demonstrates common words used in each theme.**

The terms in each list contain words that appeared throughout the poetry in various pieces and were used to describe an experience, emotional or a physical act. Table 1 is an excerpt from the master list of the three major themes and the complete list for each theme can be found as appendix A, B, & C. However, what this table shows are examples of the types of words that defined each theme. These words, along with others, formulate the language used by the veterans in their poetry. The revelation here is that the veterans collectively wrote about three major distinguishing concepts that were high on their list of importance. While they may have referenced other ideas, they most definitely focused on the aspects of experiences, emotions, and physicality.

It was the realization and development of these central themes that helped shape the construction of meaning present in the poetic pieces. I found that the poetry in this research consistently contained a significant amount of imagery, using both literal and metaphorical language, to describe the central themes of *experiences, emotions and physicality*. The poetic pieces articulated meaning in various ways that fit within those categories. As a point of introduction to the data, I began by highlighting key terms that fell within the three categories (themes); grouping together words that have similar connotation. Each theme is discussed along with poetic examples that fit within that specific theme.

The first theme, *experiences*, was a little more fluid than the other two. In this category, the poets described things such as places or spaces they've occupied (foreign land, military training, home, bars, etc.). With this theme, what stood out is that meaning conveyed in this way, was based on periods in time. In many of the poems that highlighted experiences, there was a focus on specific environments. The veterans described places they have traveled to such as military training sites, combat zones, childhood vacation spots etc. or things they have witnessed. In these pieces the veterans transported the audience to places that had some significance in their lives. One of the most talked about places in the poetry was combat sites. They wrote about the sleeping quarters, the differences in foreign & American culture, and lastly, the play by play of warfare amongst other things that were apart of these locations.

In *Meet It There* by Don Caudill, the author uses literal descriptions to describe the experience of interacting with the sun with phrases such as "held out my hands" and "turned my face up." Yet, he speaks metaphorically with "wearing sadness on his face" to describe internal sorrow from the intensity of depression often felt after experiencing the harshness of combat life, and ultimately reintegration into civilian culture (Caudill, 2012, p. 152). While one can't literally wear sadness, the weighted feeling of life's challenges can feel like something that is as attached and apparent as a nose or mouth, something that is present on the face. While Caudill's piece spoke about his experience interacting with the sun for the first time in a different location than he is accustomed, his piece also referenced the other themes of emotion and physicality as well; noting the way he carried the harshness of war on his face (emotions) and the actual act of reaching out with his hands and face to feel the physical feature of the sun (physicality).

The second theme focused on emotions. In *Vietnam*, Lee Ballinger uses the lines "My body came back but not my mind. I will always be ten thousand miles away" (Ballinger, 2012,

p. 139). While it is true that serving in combat areas literally takes one miles away from home, what the author is describing here is the alteration that has occurred in his mental & emotional state which did not change simply by returning home, rather he is suggesting that a part of him, his being, stayed overseas. As noted in Caudill's piece above, many of the veterans referenced emotions in a metaphorical way, explaining an emotion by connecting it to an object or some type of tangibility. Nevertheless, these veterans indeed have felt and expressed various types of emotions and in some cases, a range of them in any one instance.

The third theme reviews aspects of physicality. This is an important aspect of military existence and frequently referenced throughout the poetry. From the onset of basic training to fighting in a war, there is a certain amount of impact endured on the physical body of a veteran. For some, pushing their bodies to the limit in training is only one part of the experience. Others lose limbs, are wounded from gunshots, sustain brain injuries, suffer disfigurement and more. It is equally important to note that while veterans struggle with invisible (nonphysical) wounds, there are obvious physical reminders of their combat time as well. Accessing those traumatic memories can be difficult to express in words, due to the nature of the act (Collie, Backos, Malchiodi, and Spiegel, 2006) and living with those physical reminders increases that difficulty.

Upon taking note of the words that fit appropriately into these categories, I recognized that some of the language did not overtly apply; rather, there were connections within the words that constructed the meaning of these experiences, emotions and descriptions of physicality. Lapum, Ruttonsha, Church, Yau & David (2011) note that in using artistic format descriptions of certain elements might include realistic representations, and thus might provide sensory details, metaphorical imagery allowing for multiple perspectives, symbolism that is allusive and indirect, as well as abstract or ambiguous expressions that discuss attitude and atmosphere.

In order to separate the information into an accessible format, I developed a chart and documented for each poem the areas (three themes) that were addressed. For example, while one poem may have deeply described emotions and experiences, but not physicality, one may have contained only one area or all three. Rachel McWilliams (2014) poem, *The Residue of Trauma* covers all three elements in one line as she writes “the residue of trauma {experience} is in the sounds, smells, visions {physicality}, feelings {emotions} haunting what sleep we find.” (n.p.) In addition to recording which poems fit into the three main areas, the connective words used covertly were recorded as well. The connective phrases were used metaphorically in many of instances, for example, some phrases or statements that were used to connect other meaning included: “deeper into the pit” and “keep their mouths shut.” While these two examples could be speaking about physical attributes (being in an actual pit of dirt, or closing the mouth on your face) what they demonstrated were connections to feelings, i.e.” turning inward/isolating oneself” as well as “remaining quiet or not speaking about something.” After the completion of the individual process, a comparison was made amongst the data to determine similarities between the poetic pieces. This was done to determine if there was indeed consistencies amongst the writing of the veterans.

In this study, the realization of central themes reinforces the idea that veterans and combat veterans in particular, share a sense of connectivity and thusly may provide a voice for this population. The key words that were discovered became indicators in the poems for each of the three overarching themes. From this determination, overlaps and connections between pieces became clear. Poems can indeed help convey information in an easier fashion and McCulliss (2013) notes that poems can provide a way to translate dense, abstract or complex information into digestible material, which makes connecting with audiences less complicated.



## Findings

### Theme-Experiences

In *Two Miles Down the Road* by Ryan Berry (2013), the poet writes about his experience of returning home in which case he battles alcohol issues and refers to the bar as his second home, stating that he is “drowning on his stool alone.” While he is not physically drowning, the notion of using alcohol to cope with his past and present experiences, creates a “drowning” of his sorrows in isolation indicating a spiraling downward concept. This piece also speaks to the idea of “coming home” that is frequently discussed in the poetry, as well as the idea of veterans facing their issues by themselves, both common experiences shared amongst this group (p. 45). McCulliss (2013) notes that poems are honest indications of an individual’s personal limitations and assumptions about one’s own understanding. Yet, poems give us new ways of exploring the familiar with alternative ways to perceive and understand.

Another common experience discussed throughout the poetry was describing the locations of physical places and more specifically, combat zones and war stationed living quarters (military bases). In *Afghan Dust*, by Zachary Willey, (2014) the poet describes the intensity of the heat by asking “this hot Afghani sun--who would live here, anyone?” While there are obviously citizens in Afghanistan, the atmosphere produces a different type of heat than the U.S., which takes some adjustment. He goes on to speak about their {military unit} arrival in this place and discovers that it is “a different world under Afghan skies” meaning not only are there temperature differences, but also the culture and the very act of war itself creates a division between that world and the one he’s always known. Ultimately, he questions “is it dust, or tears, that sting my eyes” as he reflects on his recent deployment and questions the climate vs. the atmosphere reality as the real reason he is in this place and time (n.p).

### Theme-Emotions

The next theme that was frequently described is emotion. This theme covered such feelings as anger, rage, sadness, and fear. Lapum, Yau, Church, Ruttonsha and David (2013) attest that emotions are not limited to affective states of consciousness. Holding back one's emotions or attempting to give a false emotional impression, it is often detected in their word choice as well as in their physiological actions (Pennebaker, 1993). In these pieces, the veterans described emotion with specific words, but they also spoke about the difficulty of expressing emotions, having emotions misunderstood by others, and suppressing or keeping emotions from others. Although some veterans could write about them, the complexity of expressing them appropriately was still a challenge. Yet, feeling one's feelings may not occur that easily. Commonly, many people suppress a lot of their emotions and emotional state. Individuals often stifle or ignore their genuine feelings, as well as resist those feelings that may be socially unacceptable (Kowit, 1995). Often the poets felt the difficulty was not in the expression, but in conveying the range of emotions that persist at any one time.

Many of the pieces reflected the multitude of changing emotions. In Peter Ireland's (2014) piece *Veterans*, he demonstrates the fluctuating emotions that many of them face after they transition back into civilian world. He explains that "the veteran's brain gets scrambled with stuff he can't process." Through this confusion of reality, he talks about the various emotions that take place using language that describes the feelings such as panic, anxiety and fright. Ireland maintains that "the veteran is dumbfounded" at the unraveling of his life that is too dismantled to understand (n.p.). Quinn (2008) reveals that the very nature of combat trauma causes the veteran's defenses to be altered, and what once was a self-protected conscious awareness pre-trauma, is disrupted and brought to surface post-trauma.

### Theme-Physicality

The third theme to be consistently described is physicality. With this theme, the language referred to actual body parts and/or their usage e.g., hand, leg, eyes, heart, head, and seeing. Words were used to give the audience a feeling of relatability, with imagery and specific accounts of physical reactions, eyes-seeing visuals, ears-hearing sounds, heart pounding, hands-touching objects, and skin-feeling the weather such as: “sweat stung eye,” “echoing sounds,” and “dry-cracked lips.” In addition, many of these pieces give visual and vivid accounts of death and dismemberment, such as bone fragments, bodies disfigured and flesh seared. While much of the audience may not be able to visualize themselves in a combat zone, a civilian can visualize the sight of blood oozing from a limb. A lot of the of physical aspects were instantaneous occurrences but some contained aspects that would be further carried into life, and in that regard, would serve as reminders of situations for the veterans.

Poet Ed Coletti (2013) gives a graphic account of what is left of a serviceman after losing his life during combat in *The Poet As Survivor Assistance Officer*. He addresses the offer of the deceased’s family to accept the “Military funeral with flag and bugle” while alluding to the devastation they would feel if they knew that the remains were “comprised of left upper extremity extending from the elbow downward.” He goes on to describe the “ever-so-carefully-gift-wrapping flag of the country” explaining it was the thing that took this soldier away “and left instead a box of unseen bones” (p. 47). This poem has obvious physical indications regarding body parts. It speaks to the incident that caused harm to a body, as well as what physically remained as a result of that situation. It was this internal reflection again that suggests, civilians are left on the outside, with only a small glimpse into the military world, unable to determine the ins and outs of combat life.

### Personification

The most prevalent topic of discussion throughout the poetry was death, which can be personified physically, emotionally or mentally. The veterans spoke of death in a multitude of ways, including witnessing, numbing, sadness, guilt, transitioning, burying, and remembering. In *Damn Agent Orange* by Randall Berg (2013), the author attests to this misfortune by writing “I’ve seen friends die, too many to forget” (p. 87). This speaks to both witnessing the act of death and remembering the accounts in a way that cannot be forgotten. In addition, many veterans drew a connection between internal vs. external death; the feeling of losing one’s self (previous self is no longer recognizable) after a trauma vs. the physical aspect of life ending. Omer Zamir, in *Many a Man* (2015) writes about the return from combat and states “when he came back, mere traces of who he was survived” suggesting that while he physically survived death, he was still faced with an internal struggle which has caused many veterans to consider the alternative of physical death as opposed to living a “death of themselves” (n.p.).

In Heather Sapp’s *Unseen* (2013) she asks this question “would I rather have donated a leg to the battlefield? Some days I would trade my wounds for all unseen” (p. 31) suggesting that the idea of physical death or dismemberment may in reality serve better than staying alive and dealing with life (mentally & emotionally) after combat. In many instances of the “death” concept, the veterans spoke of the untimeliness, gruesomeness or heartbreak of losing a battle buddy. The love and reverence that veterans hold for each other are second to none. Larissa Douglass describes in *Five-Hour Energy* (2015) “we who survive, we live in their place” (p. 20), meaning that the fight continues for the warriors lost in combat. It becomes the responsibility of those that have survived to continue the fight of bravery and courage in place of their fallen comrades. In many cases, the memory of those fallen stays with a veteran for the duration of

his or her life. And for most, the admiration and respect that those veterans feel and share remains one of the most meaningful experiences of a veteran's career and life (Canfield, J., Hansen, M.V., & Slagter, 2001).

Another prevalent personified topic was the description of *combat*. In *Addiction* by Don King (2011), the author bridges together the idea of combat and death as he writes "Iraq, is, in a word, a name spoken to die—life or innocence lost—mine died years ago in this place" (p. 108). This poet is equating the place "Iraq" to death; a place where many have died physically and others like himself, have faced internal dying. Like death itself, combat was also discussed in various ways such as describing the action, questioning the necessity, and justifying the results and methods of survival. Explaining the action of combat in this poetry can be coined "warfare" which replays for the audience the sights, sounds, and smells of the warzone and the activity therein. Vivid descriptions were given of actual gunfire and military personnel vehicles moving about the violent scenes. In *A Little Boy with Bananas*, Travis. L. Martin (2011) highlights some of this imagery with the lines "driver-side mirror vibrates, displaying images of dark black smoke" and ducking down-pinging sounds of metal striking metal-exposed" as scene indicators of war in motion (p. 114).

Yet, combat was also highly spoken about as a state of mind, formulated by the intense military training, physical agility and survival skills that were constantly in play. In *America is Me* by Luke Manual (2011) the author takes the reader from boot camp "I had survived this place called hell" and "the days were long and the training tough" to receiving the notice of deployment "the call had come, and we had landed, and so far from home the battles were waged" (p. 113). While combat was the reality, Manual shares that with his place as a warrior, he was and is a part of America.

In *Combat Infantry Bro (CIB)* by Robert Mooneyham (2013), this poet maintains that in the warzone being a “professional soldier must be your goal, rejecting emotions to save your soul” (p. 33). He explains that one’s military duty is to protect at all costs, prioritizing the effort to physically survive while engaging in warfare, as opposed to focusing on the psychological aspect of war while serving. Quinn (2008) offers that veterans learn to control the natural fight vs. flight response and its potential danger, through their military training and that their job description is one that dictates an action oriented response, remaining in the war zone to fight.

Poems help us bring feelings to the surface, often brought on by images that cause the poet to revisit certain information plagued by recollections or emotions that reoccur until they are expressed (Kowit, 1995). As more commonalities were constructed throughout the poetry, another frequently visited topic was that of memory. Kowit (1995) states that memories can haunt us and generate poetic material. These memories may return when least expected or are familiar beings that have become a part of our natural existence. Like the other major themes, speaking about memory was also done in a few consistent ways such as embedded memory, reoccurrence, absence of memory, and longing to forget. For example, in *Fair Moon* by Mark A. Fulco (2012) he speaks of the contrast between remembering and forgetting “rest oh rest my forlorn body, rest to rid bad memories yet not forgetting the good ones” (p. 142). While *Even the Snow is Loud* by Brady Peterson (2012) demonstrates more embedment with the line “the dead were everywhere, but this one clings to me” (p. 156). Lapum, Yau, Church, Ruttonsha & David (2013) write that reflection and vulnerability can be intertwined, involving deeply warranted introspection. By reflecting on memories good and bad, the veterans are releasing a part of themselves that requires a certain openness and remembrance that isn’t easily accessible. Yet, poetry has allowed such an opening into their lives.

## Poetry and PTSD

Many of the major areas expressed through the poetry are consistent with symptoms of PTSD (flashbacks, sleep deprivation, isolation, hypervigilance, anger, numbing, medication). While some included the term in the title such as *Masks of PTSD* by Judy Bell, *PTSD in a Vietnamese Restaurant* by Doug D'Elia and *Second Generation PTSD* by Mary Julia Klimenko; others used it in a line of their poems, such as the piece *Childhood Psychology of Militaristic Accent* by David S. Pointer (2014) where he names it when questioning the many complications brought on from combat, “as if I held a tactical tool slowing dissecting their suicides, social class, employment exclusions, PTSD, kill-all-that-move-orders” (n.p.). This discovery is important to note, as these veterans have all dealt with PTSD in a direct or indirect manner and speaking about it is important. It is also in line with the reason for selecting arts-based methods (poetic inquiry) in that there is some positive impact for veterans who choose to engage in these practices.

In Michael Lythgoe's *The Helicopters Came* (2013) he describes the poetry of veterans with the line “a veteran's poems on pages, inside, hover: PTSD, VA Hospital. Wounded Warrior” (p. 58). Others simply implied or described affiliated characteristics of the injury with references such as the line in Ryan A. Barry's *Many Minutes* (2015) “my senses would heighten” (n.p.) suggesting hypervigilance. In *Once Again to be a Little Boy* (2015) Dillion Naslund addresses the issue of sleep disturbances and flashbacks with the line “to sleep one night without waking in a cold sweat” (p. 10). All of the PTSD related symptoms discussed in the poetry are issues these veterans continue to fight on a daily basis. The poetry is demonstrating how those symptoms play out in the scenes of their lives, in the past, present, and as they move forward into the future. The discussion of the injury's impact illustrates a clearer picture for the audience.

Examples of PTSD symptoms can be seen over and over throughout the poetry suggesting that living with the injury is not only a part of who they've become but also the reason their identity has become more layered, more complex, to civilians and society. The difference of what separates a symptomatic individual from a healthier individual is not simply the experience of a traumatic event, but rather its consistent and relentless presence of reoccurrence or present reminders of the experience. Meaning, veterans are often faced with situations that don't allow the past to remain in the past, i.e. physical impairments, mental health issues, and emotional scars as a result of PTSD. It is these experiences that make some elements of being a combat veteran unique, as well as help to determine the complexity of their identity. Yet, the writing of poetry helps them comb through and release past experiences as way of working towards a more stable present, and future.

Lastly, and perhaps one of the most essential parts of the findings is the idea that "poetry" itself was expressed in several pieces. Authors made direct references to writing poetry. In *The Helicopters Came* by Michael Lythgoe (2013) he describes "a veteran's poems on pages" as the result of a day in a life of a combat veteran (p. 58). While others drew inferences between poetry and the release it provides. Suzanne S. Rancourt discusses in *Throwing Stars* (2012) the understanding that it provides "in unwavering quiet he listened to words, to poetry, the only one who understood" (p. 150). What the poet is describing is the solace found in self-expression, the ability to convey one's thoughts in a way that isn't inhibited or impacted by someone who is unable to relate to such lived experiences. This act frees the veteran from the complication of being misunderstood by others because of the inability to fully articulate these issues verbally, thus, making poetry and writing in general a viable option to gain the best of both worlds, releasing the feelings as well as discovering a way to give them a voice.



### CTI and Veteran Identity in Poetry

Although all four frames of identity (personal, relational, communal and enacted) are present throughout the poetry, based on the number of repeated occurrences, veterans themselves remain conflicted between their personal and communal layers as in the profound piece, *Unseen* by Heather Sapp in which she epitomizes this confliction with this excerpt:

“My battle still rages  
My war has not ended  
I fight still  
My enemy is unseen

Yet, here I am  
And I may have wounds  
But I am a Warrior still

I AM a Warrior still”

(Sapp, 2013, p. 31)

Often, we speak of veterans as warriors in the sense of fighting and winning battles. However, the battle that many veterans experience is the internal one that goes unseen. Many veterans have said that their time spent in the service was one of the best experiences of their lives, a time of camaraderie, of being in top physical condition and feeling the pride that comes with serving one’s country. Hecht and Choi (2012) reveals that members of groups hold commonly held identities that transcend that of individuals as they have collective memories, shared histories and similar characteristics. In Brenda J.S. Paynewhite’s piece, *Please Don’t Utter a Word* (2012) the poet writes “If I had to do it all over again, I would still defend this wonderful nation—I would do it because of my selfless service and my dedication” (p. 146). Although many veterans would not like to repeat all aspects of their service, they single handedly agree that the memories and experiences encountered during that time was priceless (Canfield, Hansen, and Slagter, 2001).

Throughout the poetry pieces, I saw this confliction demonstrated time and time again, the idea of what it means to be a service person and the continuous references of serving “over there.” In contrast, the veterans speak of adjusting to life on the other side of combat by acknowledging their inability to be who they were prior to deployment, society’s expectations of who they should be, as well as their internal struggle of understanding what all of this means for themselves. During the transition of returning home, most realize that the way they look and feel about life is different than from pre-deployment. While society may have a certain expectation of them, they are struggling to see themselves in a different light. With that struggle, and societal expectation, the veteran is tasked with sorting out their current state of identity. Yet, this isn’t so black and white, “soldiers are more than just passive beings, who are shaped or changed by military training, but are agents with complex identities” (Herman and Yarwood, 2014, p. 42). These complexities are what challenge veterans daily in formulating their self-identification.

However, once they have left the communal aspect of their lives, the expectation of returning to who they were prior to the military is a reality they must face. While they are personally adjusting, particularly those with PTSD and the symptoms associated with it, this inhibits the way they interact with others in their personal world. Veterans are often unable to express or experience emotions, and thus makes engagement with others strenuous, which in turn strains familial, romantic and other interpersonal relationships (Monson, Taft and Fredman, 2009). As veterans work to reintegrate into civilian society, their personal layer of identity is severely challenged. In *My Old Friend* by Travis L. Martin (2011) the author writes “I can never quite pin down where I was when things changed forever again” (p. 116) suggesting that despite not knowing when, where or how it exactly occurred, there was indeed a shift that created a difference in his identity.

Conflict was also present within the enactment layer; bouncing between the way a veteran should be seen or is seen, as a victor, compared to the way they are seen upon returning home from combat as confused and helpless. Despite policy efforts by the Department of Defense, which aim to destigmatize mental health issues and treatment, many veterans, particularly those who've experienced combat, reported hearing from superiors and other military personnel that what happens over there, stays over there as they transitioned from deployment to returning home (True, Rig and Butler, 2014). These innuendos have played a role in the resistance of veterans to seek assistance upon their reintegration. Stigma is often based on prior existence and is enhanced by the public's perception of certain attributed characteristics and behaviors (Meisenbach, 2010). Veterans want to uphold the stance of epitomizing a character of strength and stability. However, the reality of war often leaves them feeling broken in which they feel forced to hide their feelings and put on the persona of what a veteran should display (victor-enactment as opposed to the helpless-enactment).

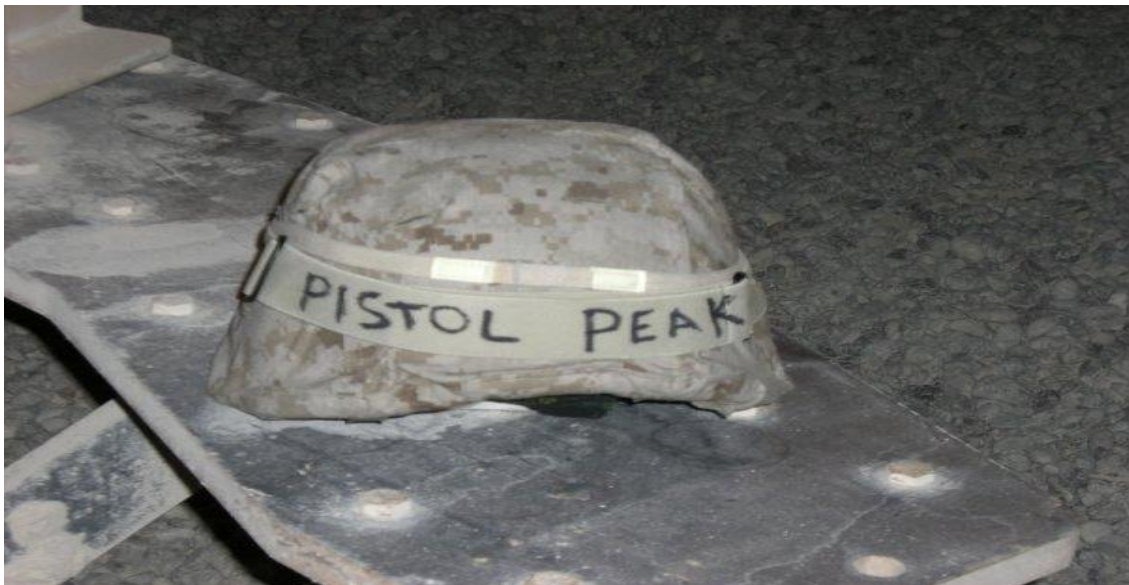
Yet, this is disrupted with the onset of an injury such as PTSD. Complying to the victor-enactment becomes a way to counter the rejection and judgement often felt when society is aware of the veteran's condition. A veteran's concern about the existence of stigma may operate as a double barrier for those experiencing mental health challenges (Feinstein, 2013). A PTSD stigma in treatment-seeking study, indicated that "veterans felt that the public blamed them for their illness because they volunteered for military service and, therefore, knowingly put themselves at risk" (Mittel et al., 2013, p. 89). Although, often times giving way to the enactment or expectation of society to see veterans as the ultimate symbol of military strength leaves them feeling trapped with suppressed feelings, but this appearance is more respected than giving in the helpless-enactment in which society looks down upon veterans.

Yet, how does poetry help this confliction within a confliction. Poetry is reflective, and its intentionality can assist both the poets and the audience in reaching a point of movement, to create a call to action, effectuate change and find ways to make better experiences in the future (Roberts, Brasel and Crawford, 2014). As veterans reflect on how these expectations impact their way of self-identifying, the audience can gain insight into this contention. Faulkner (in press) explains that “the poet uses personal experience and research to create something from the particular, which becomes universal when the audience relates to, embodies, and/or experiences the work as if it were their own.” (p.5). While it is certain that most individuals cannot take on or involve themselves in military culture or the act of combat, what researchers and audience members can do is relate, imagine and embody the veterans reactions, emotions, and lived experiences.

In my own interpersonal relationship with a combat veteran, I wrote a poem that describes watching my veteran deal with the challenges of post-deployment reintegration, coupled with the diagnosis of PTSD & TBI. The difficulties he faces are not limited to the physical aspects such as a damaged knee, shoulder, back, and brain but are also present in his daily existence such as nightmares, memory loss, and hypervigilance, as well as the reluctance and difficulty to engage in relationships with others. *The Other Side of Dark* was constructed before the onset of this research as an attempt to understand the complexity of my veteran’s post combat identity. Yet many of the thoughts expressed in the veterans’ poetry is consistent with the experiences of interacting with my combat veteran. In this piece, the main three themes found in the research poetry (experiences, emotions, & physicality) are present in mine as well. The language used to describe the process includes words that fit within the three themes of the research. In the poem, I refer to his experiences, emotions and physicality.

**The Other Side of Dark**  
**Stormy Trotter**

There's pain in his soul  
Hidden beneath his heart  
Trouble lives in his eyes and in  
His ears and in his sleep  
He's fought too much,  
Too hard and too long  
A battle for the freedom of others  
Scars many of us will never know  
His mind replays the images  
Tormenting him through the night  
But he doesn't lose hope  
He keeps fighting  
His heart is fainting  
The lights go out  
The sounds get louder  
He's dizzy with fear and noise  
It's too much to bear  
But he still doesn't lose hope  
He runs through the hills  
And up the mountainside  
He settles in the valley  
And there he finds peace  
Pride is in his smile and on his face



**Figure 3 Eric's Kevlar. Visual of the protective head gear used in combat.**

In my poem, *The Other Side of Dark*, the language that describes how my veteran was affected by his *experiences* is expressed in the line “he’s fought too much” referring to the amount of time spent deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Next, the line “tormenting him through the night” refers to the distress he faces when his sleep is disrupted by nightmares and flashbacks. Finally, “dizzy with fear and noise” refers to the actual physical experience of being off balance due to headaches and sounds that evoke physical bodily changes. Yet, throughout the piece there are other instances that fall within the overall themes as well.

The similarities in my poem and that of the veterans demonstrate how compelling the differences in their pre/post trauma identity are; that when close attention is paid to the internal and external signals given, a certain amount of recognition takes place that clearly demonstrates that their identities are altered. However, not all of American society has direct access to veterans, and even still, not all understand that the symptoms and behaviors exhibited may be universal and not specific to one veteran. This is also an ongoing battle that many families struggle with, realizing that some of their veteran’s symptoms and behaviors are consistent with that of other veterans. PTSD is an individual injury but has many shared challenges, much like any other illness or mental health condition. Although, if there were a greater awareness and consistently better representation of this community, more solution based conversations could take place. As long as this continues to look like a “your” problem and not an “our” problem, much of the same stigmatizing behavior, and lack of adequate resources and representations will continue in the media and society as a whole.

Poetry and other arts-based methods are not only helping veterans, but veteran supporters as well, such as partners, family and friends. Veterans with PTSD find themselves conflicted with the personal and relational layers of identity, just like with the enacted and communal

layers. Many veterans struggle with maintaining healthy relationships after experiencing combat trauma and a lot of the time this isolation and withdrawal from family members, friends, and familiar activities serves as the catalyst for the veteran to seek assistance with PTSD (Quinn, 2008). The veteran may inherently know there is a problem but not be able to articulate what they are feeling. Family members may recognize this and persuade the veteran to ask for help; this push may be the driving force for the veteran to react. Quinn (2008) offers that at a core level, the individual may inherently know that something has shifted, but he or she may resist or seek help all together for many years. Although, as with any condition, the veteran will be best served with early on treatment. An increased level of understanding, awareness and support may aid veterans in receiving assistance much earlier, giving them a better chance of success.

In the research poetry, many veterans spoke about the problems they encounter trying to establish or maintain relationships. The symptoms previously stated mention how veterans deal with their new existence, including isolation and avoidance, which play a major role in the disruption or severing of relationships. In everyday family life, the veteran's constant need for isolation creates emotional emptiness and a realistic feeling of loss from their noninvolvement. The family can become drained and confused at the veteran's insistent need to avoid harsh stimuli or irritant triggers (Galovski and Lyons, 2004). This type of behavior causes conflicts between how the veteran feels personally and how the veteran is expected to engage relationally or within a familial structure. As the veteran becomes more and more unable to engage, the feelings of distress become stronger as well as the veterans face feelings of failure in fulfilling familial roles and obligations (Galovski and Lyons, (2004). My own account of the breakdown within the personal relationship with my veteran is represented in the piece, *Injury the Mistress* in which I discuss the feelings of distance, compassion and ultimately, support and hope.

**Injury, the Mistress**  
**Stormy Trotter**

Anguish dwells in me,  
 It creeps into my energy,  
 And takes over my thoughts

The monster is under our bed  
 And hiding in corners of our house  
 She lives in your dreams

I am not her competition  
 Neither is she mine  
 But she has stolen your heart

Escape, escape, escape,  
 It rings louder and louder  
 It does not occur, I cannot leave

I cannot leave you in her clutches  
 She will not devour your future  
 She will not run me away

The plea of the monster resounds  
 Her voice is no longer as loud  
 The two of us remember we are one

Can the sun live without the moon?  
 Can one become two...again?  
 And still I ponder.

This piece, also written pre-research, exhibits similarities to the relational pieces that were constructed by the veterans. The title metaphorically speaks to the feeling that PTSD creeps into your life and threatens to disrupt your relationship, serving in a manner that doesn't belong. Examples of these tormenting feelings of displacement and loss is shown in the lines "she lives in your dreams" indicating that his thoughts are consumed by something else. As well as in "but she has stolen your heart" which speaks about the idea that something new (PTSD, TBI, reintegration) has captured the way he thinks, feels and moves about in daily life and as a result has changed parts of him.



Many of the veterans' poetry also spoke about the feeling of being consumed with things (distance, isolation, etc.) that removes the veteran from the relationship both physically and emotionally. In *The Residue of Trauma* by Rachel McWilliams (2014) the author reveals this in several lines such as "fractured friendships and relationships," "failed marriages mourned," the disconnection from reality and those we love," and "the fight to remember and the fight to forget" (n.p.). During the time of deployment, and then upon the return home veterans face challenges in maintaining relationships. Yet, there is a direct correlation from social support to positive treatment outcomes for veterans with PTSD (Ray and Vanstone, 2009). Thus, it makes understanding and providing assistance through avenues such as arts-based methods, critical to the well-being of veterans.

### **Implications**

McCulliss (2013) acknowledges that utilizing poetic techniques can assist outsiders in providing representation that honors the whole person and preserves an individual's spirit. Poetic inquiry does just that, it allows the researcher a means of interpretation while encompassing the embodied experience. My own personal experience with a combat veteran allowed me to spend time reflecting on the way in which this group is received and perceived by others, as well as the way in which they are seen through the lens of a media driven society. Elliott and Elliott (1991) claim that one cannot truly experience what another man feels, that there is no definite comprehension of how they are affected, yet we can conceive how we would/should feel in those situations. This veteran poetry speaks to the need of this embodiment, painting pictures, creating images and giving the audience visuals to consider the complexity of the veteran experience.

In the context of this veteran poetic analysis, the complexity of multi-layered identity was present and demonstrated by specific language and metaphorical messaging in the collective set. Through the lens of the communication theory of identity, an examination of how each layer works independently and together was determined to play a role in the self-discovery of veterans' post combat identity. While the personal and communal levels were upfront and prevalent in many of the pieces, the enactment and relational levels impact the way others see veterans, the way veterans see themselves, as well as how they perceive being seen through the eyes of others. The use of poetry and other artistic therapies with military personnel, veterans, and their families is still relatively unexplored, and "the need to establish and strengthen the evidentiary base of these therapies with military-connected populations is emergent" (Albright, 2015, p. 71).

In qualitative research, poetic discourse has the capability of revealing human experience in a way that traditional qualitative means are unable to accomplish (Roberts, Brasel and Crawford, 2014). Poetic inquiry can transform by "providing new insight, giving perspective, and/or advocating for social change" (Faulkner, in press, p. 28). Poetry writing and reading engages the mind in a reflexive yet thoughtful manner. It moves one towards their own thinking and reflecting, and thus action (Roberts, Brasel and Crawford, 2014). While the identity of veterans may be complex and difficult to totally understand, having a greater awareness of the situation may help society have a better comprehension of this population and in turn, play a role in how the media represents them as characters and real life individuals. In a final look at the impact of veteran poetry, I created a found poem based on the language and meaning found throughout the data. This piece captures some of the most cited and impactful descriptions, explanations and language used to articulate the veteran experience.

**Beautiful, Disrupted Chaos**  
**Stormy Trotter**

Silence  
 Agony  
 Misery  
 Feelings of Being Alone  
 Memories That Haunt My Soul  
 Memories to Forget, Memories to Remember  
 Things Have Changed  
 What is This New Normal?  
 A Place of Deceit, or a Place of Hope  
 Fallen Soldiers  
 Broken Dreams  
 Trapped in Despair  
 Pain, Medication, and Doctors Appointment,  
 That Reinforce Misunderstanding  
 Bandaging Wounds, Internal and External  
 Losing Family and Friends,  
 But Wanting Desperately to Hold On  
 Time is Lost, Time Stands Still  
 This Place Must Change  
 Faith  
 Love  
 Perseverance  
 Spared Life and Existence  
 Valor, Respect and Commitment

This poem symbolizes the ups and downs that many veterans face on their road to recovery. PTSD continues to be a challenge in the military culture, speaking about it, diagnosing it and accepting it for its reality. Yet, poetry has become an outlet for self-identification. It has challenged the world's view of these veterans. No longer can we only look towards one source (media) no matter how large to help define and represent any one group of people, particularly, a group whose identity is as complex and multi-layered as that of a combat veteran. Art-based research and the communication theory of identity has indeed served as a gateway in this research to recognize and understand the unique identity of a combat veteran.

## CHAPTER 5 EXAMINING THE RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MEDIA REPRESENTATION

In popular culture, many television series are designed to depict real life scenarios. With the creation of reality shows, developers are doing more to convince viewers that what they see contains some element of realism. Even the most fantastical programs try to mimic real life situations. In the popular former HBO cable network series, *True Blood*, the writers have done just that; incorporate a fantastical world with a realistic human world. “The relationship between fantasy and reality is a subject of considerable debate in popular narratives of digital cultures as well as in academic theory” (Ferreday, 2012, p. 78). When fantasy and realism intersect, is that interchange able to accurately provide a reliable representation of human experience? While much of media is meant to entertain, the results often have larger implications.

Through a rhetorical lens, this chapter examines the narrative of *True Blood* and the character depiction of U.S. Marine, Terence (“Terry”) Quentin Bellefleur, played by actor Todd Lowe. This series portrays an Iraqi veteran’s reintegration in society while living with post-traumatic stress disorder. In today’s society, one criticism being raised is the way in which veterans are being represented in the media as crazed monsters that invoke fear, as charity cases that evoke sympathy or the alternative of decorated hero, which sometimes dismisses the fact that challenges may persist. The critique in this chapter discusses how these representations in mass media directly influence the American audience and their views of combat veterans struggling with PTSD and the difficult reality they face with post-war acclimation. It examines whether these stereotypes are present in this portrayal, or if it indeed offers a more well-rounded representation. It also discusses whether these types of media representations reinforce ideas of stigmatization or broaden the mindsets of civilians’ knowledge of veterans with PTSD.

### **Veterans in the Media**

The question that one might ask is what does this rhetorical critique offer to the audience? How does it alter, shape or impact the perspectives of the audience and members of the society as a whole? The United States of America is a country that prides itself on its military personnel. These men and women fight for the freedom of American citizens and those abroad. They are the everyday heroes that proudly wear their uniforms and badges of honor. As America has gone to war, more and more veterans are returning home scarred and unable to leave behind the tragic experiences they've faced on the battlefield, particularly those who've served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of those veterans have sustained multiple injuries: physically, mentally and emotionally. Further, a large number of them are plagued by a crippling condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The veterans of the United States military are one of the country's most vulnerable and misrepresented populations. As they return home post-war, the promises of a bright future may be diminished or set back. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have made a lasting impact on American society, from foreign policy to politics, to service personnel; there are many aspects of war to consider. Yet, there continues to be a need for more awareness, more conversation and more results. In this research, what I am most concerned about is the way in which veterans, particularly those who've served in combat, are represented in the media and popular culture. The mass public has seen variations of war and warfare in the media, and based on images and dialogue have formulated opinions regarding the people who serve the government and war itself. Recently, there have been more attempts to display warlike stories as well as military representations in television, film, and in the news. Furthermore, there has been increased research efforts that are centered on the media, veterans, and war.

War has been a part of American history, it amongst other politically driven issues is a rhetorical act (Hanauer, 2014) and representations of war in contemporary films are rhetorical as well. Films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Dawn* have been influential in shaping public opinion about the U.S. military and warfare. Authors Stephen A. Klien and A. Susan Owen address the rhetorical aspect of these films in recent research studies. In “Memory, War, and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad,” Owen (2002) argues that the film acts as a rhetorical response to the national identity crisis of the Vietnam aftermath. It was ultimately viewed as a way to justify to the audience the necessity of the war, but also that in the midst of that necessity to remind audiences that the goal was to place focus on and, indeed “bring the troops home.”

While in “Public Character and the Simulacrum: The Construction of the Soldier Patriot and Citizen Agency in *Black Hawk Down*,” Klien (2005) argues that this film acts as a rhetorical response to reconstruct and legitimize the policies of political and military institutions. As well as provide the potential for an effective citizenry given the aspect of more and more seemingly unorthodox warfare within the post-September 11, 2001 context. In essence, both these films play a role in the way society views war, military participation and political involvement. Klien (2005) continues that “*Black Hawk Dawn* reconstructs the public’s popular perceptions of war and militarism, and addresses the relevant citizens’ response to these ideas. These films turn the attention away from “political warfare” and onto those fighting the war. Yet does so in a way, that the focus becomes the one of human concern for the brotherhood formed in combat and less about the act of war itself. Klien (2005) asserts that *Black Hawk Dawn* picks up where *Saving Private Ryan* left off, continuing the pattern of contemporary war films that diminish the nationalistic reasoning of war to survival and the protection of a country’s citizens.

Although the topic is becoming more and more prevalent in our society, there are those who remain uncomfortable with the idea that some of the nation's strongest men and women are left helpless and hopeless; fighting an inner battle that is too often ignored or misunderstood. As a country, we habitually look to these veterans as heroes but their images are often shattered when PTSD becomes a realistic part of their return home. Because of its nature to alter or disrupt one's personality and behavior, it lends itself to assumptions and judgement from uninformed people. Then in many cases the veteran's image changes from hero to monster, often in a quickened timespan. The overall effects of PTSD often disrupt and dismantle the lives of veterans and their families. Yet, avoiding, lessening the severity or magnifying the difficulties of their battles only allows for a misinformed audience that in turns limits the growth necessary to understand this epidemic.

While the thought of returning to normalcy is ideal, it is a reality that many veterans with PTSD do not have the luxury of experiencing. Yes, many of them successfully return home and start or maintain families and careers. Yet, for some, daily living comes at the cost of conquering an internal beast that few outside the military comprehend which in turn leads to the breakdown of friendships and familial structures, as well as damaged or unattainable career opportunities or possibilities of advancement. According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (2013), PTSD symptoms often occur shortly after a traumatic incident; however, they may not surface until several months or even years later. In addition, sometimes symptoms come and go over extended periods of time making adjustment difficult and inconsistent. Plagued with issues such as sleep disturbance and hypervigilance, daily routines can be a challenge. PTSD is consistently inconsistent, in that while the symptomology may indeed be present regularly, every day in the life of a veteran with this injury may look different.

In order to manage this new way of existing, veterans must find ways of coping with the impairment. For many of them, that means therapists, medication and alternative support groups; for others, it means alcohol, drugs or other forms of self-medication or harm. Because of this, they are often left struggling for survival and feeling abandoned by a country they once served and protected. With the media as our lens into their world, we are usually left with an obscured view of the veteran's adaptation to post-war civilian life, an adjustment that goes beyond the surface of simply returning home. Yet, a supportive lens could provide a more conscientious discourse for this societal dilemma. Owen (2002) offers that cultural and rhetorical scholars may rely on popular discourse to demonstrate the proactive resolve of national trauma. Our nation needs such an action and Ono and Sloop (1995) argue that critiquing powerful discourse has made a lasting historical impact and in that regard, has been the dominant form of critique within the rhetorical criticism structure.

Veterans are arguably a marginalized community of their own with certain customs, rituals and language. One way to thoroughly understand the identity of veterans is to acknowledge vernacular discourse and Ono and Sloop (1995) maintain there is a persistent need to study communities and cultures that have been systematically ignored due to historical and subjugated power relations. Veterans with PTSD fall into a similar category as they are a community of their own that is affected by the subjugation of power. However, they remain in a peculiar place, once having stood on top as heroes only to descend to the bottom after a "troubled" time of service, leaving them to feel "systematically ignored." "Therefore, while positive labeling such as national heroes and most deserving citizens place them in a normalized light, the alteration of their life situations as a result of their experiences place them in a situation of marginalization.



### Popular Culture-Narrative Criticism

As an attempt to deconstruct the storyline of the character Terry, my research utilizes the narrative criticism approach while considering the ever-present vernacular of Terry and his military affiliations. Although it will analyze his interactions overall, it will specifically center on the interactions amongst himself, his wife and two of his fellow Marine Corps infantryman. While Terry maintains one type of discourse with his wife (civilian), that of his two fellow Marine Corpsman (combat veterans) is different. The narrative of these three dyads shift throughout the seasons, and a different perspective is gained from each of the three separate but intertwining storylines. Vernacular discourse can incorporate aspects of popular culture to create a different type of implied and or concrete mainstream discourse that is generally accepted, while concurrently serving to construct and affirm the culture and community that produced such discourse (Ono and Sloop, 1995).

Narratives are organized ways to address our experiences. They help draw conclusions of the people, places and things that make up or shape our lives (Foss, 2009). The goal of this research was to analyze and critique the character Terry and his experiences as a PTSD injured veteran navigating through everyday life. It looks at whether or not the fictional character helps the audience gain a better understanding of a real-life situation. At the heart of every rhetorical situation is a story, and narrative criticism will help us capture the story of *True Blood's* character, Terry. The following questions are considered: What does the audience gain from the narrative of Terry? What does it offer the audience in terms of veteran representation? In what ways does a fictional representation allow an understanding of a realistic injury? This research discovers the outcomes of this particular storyline, addresses the result of character depiction and discusses the implications or consequences of the account on the American audience.

In a hegemonic society such as ours, it is difficult for the voice of marginalized groups to be heard above the dominant group. Veterans, particularly those with PTSD are often grouped into the oppressed category. Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2002) argue that some people are privileged while others are oppressed, and that fundamentally within opposing ideologies, one ideology assumes the role of a superior, dominate authority. While veterans remain heroes in active duty, the perils of combat aftermath leave many vulnerable with little resources and a distressed life. In American culture, people that have fallen on hard times are devalued and seen as weak or lazy, and thus “less important” members of society.

Yet, Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2002) remind us that this process hinders an individual’s ability to view the world from multiple perspectives since historically, the norm is established by the dominant ideology which naturalizes beliefs from that perspective. This idea is what the media (ran by the dominant group) reinforces when it sends out repetitive negative images of veterans that are dealing with the severity of PTSD without addressing its complexity; what appears to be a normal image of those servicemen and women are actually stereotypes that can further suppress this group.

McKerrow (1989) maintains that discourse is an element of powerful strategy implemented throughout the layered system of society, inside and amongst individuals, groups and institutions. The intent of this research is to expose gaps in the discourse between veterans, the media and society; while pointing out the limitations of this group based on power, position and representation. It is not meant to be exhaustive and certainly there remains opportunity for research expansion and alternative rhetorical situations. However, this is a starting point, an entry into the power of perception that an audience may adapt based on an ill informed and subjective mass media.

### Procedure

In the television drama, *True Blood*, Terry Bellefleur exhibits much of what is common in individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder. This critique dissects the characterization of Terry during seasons five and six of the series. At this stage in the series, Terry has been home from Iraq for some time, is married, raising three stepchildren and holding down a job. Throughout the life of Terry's character, his battle with PTSD has been clear and present, although not a main focal point of his identity until the later episodes. All of season five and half of season six highlight the peak of his struggle with his combat related issues. In addition, it demonstrates the impact of his injury on his family and friends.

To complete the analysis of Terry during the highlight of his struggle, I watched a total of 15 episodes over two seasons and captured and recorded the entire scene for each of Terry's interpersonal interactions or internal reactions; including his verbal, nonverbal and visual memory flashbacks. In reviewing these scenarios, the research attempts to explain the communication of each of the three dyads previously mentioned, Terry-Arlene (wife), Terry-Patrick (ex-Marine sergeant) and Terry-Eller (ex-Marine buddy). Terry's interaction with Arlene demonstrates his everyday interpersonal communication struggles. His interactions with Patrick and Eller demonstrate the often-stereotyped representations of veterans; either they are angry and volatile or they are broken heroes that demonstrate the need for an extreme amount of sympathy.

My findings give an overview of the character's narrative discourse. They consist of key indicators and phrases that demonstrate the differences in his communication with Arlene, vs. communication with Patrick and Eller. They also provide an overview of the visual images that Terry encounters that speaks to the flashbacks of the role he played in the war. In addition, my findings express repeated behaviors, both positive and negative.

## **True Blood**

*True Blood* is an American dramatic television series created by Alan Bell, and is based in the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana. It chronicles the lives of humans and vampires as they attempt to co-exist in an increasingly difficult environment. *True Blood* is based on a series of novels by Charlaine Harris entitled *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. The series aired for seven seasons, from the years 2008 to 2014. This tale of vampires and humans was admired by many and instantly became a part of popular television culture. It has received dozens of accolades over the years, with countless nominations and wins including the Golden Globe Awards and People's Choice Awards, demonstrating its fan appeal. The series was known for addressing issues such as discrimination, violence and fighting for equal rights, substance abuse, religious conflicts, identity issues, and the influential control of the media. Many of these same issues are reflected in my work regarding the population of veterans with PTSD.

In this series of vampires, witches, wolves and faeries, there also exists every day hard working humans. Terry Bellefleur is one of the humans on the show. Although he is a human, he works with and befriends others outside his group. Terry is a post-war combat veteran trying to acclimate himself back into civilian life. He has served a stint in the Operations Iraqi Freedom war as a U.S. Marine. Since leaving the war and his time in the military, Terry is looking for a way to live in a world he once knew, which now seems foreign. He gets married, has a family and acquires a job at the local restaurant/bar as a cook. Terry suffers from PTSD in the series and is struggling to survive in the day-to-day world. Throughout the series, we see Terry struggle with his multiple layers of identity as his interpersonal relationships are impaired, his emotional and mental state suffers, and his desire to make sense of and resist the affiliation of his military involvement persist.

### A War Returns to Terry

As season five begins, Terry is visited by his former military sergeant, Patrick Devins. Up until this point, he had limited the amount of contact he had with those that served alongside him. Patrick has arrived in town on a quest to find another Marine (Eller) who was thought to be dangerous, psychotic and obsessed with fires. It was rumored that he had set fire to another Marine's home and killed his family. Patrick was there because he believed that Terry could help him find Eller. Terry was clearly in distress by Patrick's return to his life, but indeed he knew information about Eller and thought that finding him might help put their ugly past behind him. This is the point in the series at which a clear struggle and constant conflict between the four layers of Terry's identity begins.

Soon after Patrick arrived, many of the symptoms he had started to overcome or suppress came crashing back down, frequently and intensely. Terry began having regular flashbacks, sleep disturbances and increased irritability. At times even displaying anger at repeating himself or hearing things that reminded him of war related moments. As Patrick was having breakfast with Terry and his family, he began reminiscing and entertaining the kids' questions about their service together, but Terry made it clear that he does not talk about what happened "over there" especially in front of the kids and he stated that "Terry" was no longer in existence (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 1). In that same scene, Arlene starts to tell Patrick that maybe one day they can have a drink and she can pick his brain about the man she's married to (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 1), implying that he may have more knowledge about her husband than she does. "Terry snaps and says he is the man she married, the man Patrick knows no longer exists, so there will be no brain picking." (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 1) This scene and the tension based discourse between Patrick and Terry sets the tone for their tumultuous relationship.

Among populations diagnosed with severe PTSD, there is a wealth of evidence that supports the idea that active coping or avoidant behavior are expectant symptoms within this population (Boden, Bonn-Miller, Vujanovic and Drescher, 2012). Up until this point, avoidance was a technique that Terry regularly used to disassociate himself from his painful military memories or the communal aspect of his life. Yet, the narrative and interactions of Terry and Patrick demonstrate that while avoidance had been a coping mechanism, there remained unaddressed issues. Later, these issues of avoidance would be confronted in one way or another as their interaction continued over time.

As the season progresses, so does the interaction between Terry and Patrick, thus creating a great deal of internal conflict in him that began spilling out into other areas of his life, including his work and family. Patrick convinces Terry that they must find Eller before he finds them in order to protect themselves from his wrath. He is hesitant to go along with Patrick but feels that the deeds of his past (and his military affiliation) leave him with no other choice. He is looking for any way to right the wrong he committed during his service. As Terry prepares to leave with Patrick, he has the conversation with Arlene that goes this way: "I'm going somewhere with Patrick, and we're leaving right now." She asks where, and he says he can't tell her. She asks what he will do there, and he says he can't say. She asks how long he will be gone, and he says he doesn't know. She says, "Don't expect me to be waiting on you when you get back." He walks towards her, stops and leaves. She is crying, confused and unable to make sense of his behavior (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 3).

Unable to explain to his wife Arlene what is happening in his mind and about the current pact he has with Patrick, he leaves on a quest to revive the soul he feels he has lost. While this may seem insensitive and confusing to his wife, it is common for members of the military to

“complete missions” without being allowed or knowing how to explain the situation to their loved ones. At this point in the story, Terry is constantly being haunted by visualizations of fire and death from a war related incident and is looking for some type of relief. Yet, he’s chosen not to disclose this information to his wife or anyone else outside of his military relationships. Veterans feel that by not revealing their feelings or previous traumatic experiences, they are protecting their loved ones (Ray and Vanstone, 2009).

Terry and Patrick proceed on their journey to uncover the truth behind the allegations of Eller’s involvement with the fire. While Patrick is convinced that Eller has gone off the deep end, Terry is not so sure. As they encounter Eller, they are met with some questionable behavior starting with his surprise announcement of “man armed” (vernacular to let them know that he had entered the space with a loaded weapon). Eller has secluded himself from the world, is erratic and clearly on edge and convinced that he is being haunted. After Eller’s initial captivity of Terry and Patrick, he reveals his account of the fire that killed their fellow Marine’s family. After things calm down between the three of them, Eller, deciding that he can trust them, explains what happened with the incident. He tells them the story of the night in question, only to reveal at the end that he is being haunted by a smoke monster.

“And they were screaming, and then I saw it; it was in the flames looking at me, coming for me. So I jumped out the window, and I ran and ran. I just kept running. I looked it up, fucking googled it. It came right up in the goddamn search engine. It’s called an Ifrit, it means the evil, an infertile being in smoke and fire.” (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 5)

This is where Terry and Eller connect and discover that they have both experienced the same demonic nightmare. However, Patrick is unwilling to support what they have both revealed. This interaction is indeed reflective of a situation that may occur. Often veterans are unwilling to admit their struggles, but will do so with another veteran they feel is having/or has

had a similar experience. Alternatively, Lobban (2015) states that risking the fear of being stigmatized or seen as weak, might and does in many cases prevent veterans from seeking help or even admitting their struggles. Terry and Eller recognized the connection and confided in each other while it appears that Patrick was hesitant to join in on the topic and admit any relatability. Perhaps this was due to his previous superior position, which we saw demonstrated several times by his use of language referring to Terry as “private” and his desire to remain in or give the illusion of control. Yet, Terry and Eller found solace in being able to identify with each other and feel less alone in their battle.

As in the case of Patrick, particularly when veterans have served in leadership roles, this idea of weakness may be reinforced as they have previously been looked upon for guidance and support. Admitting this type of condition may cause them to feel inferior and vulnerable. The self-disclosures displayed in the interactions of the three veterans remind us that Patrick tries to reinforce his previous power as the sergeant by giving orders and controlling the situation. However, with Terry at the crossroads of leaving his communal identity behind and pushing forward with his personal and relational layers of identity, he finds himself resistant to Patrick, an obvious tactic that could not be utilized during his deployment where he was indeed subject to given commands.

Later there comes a point in the storyline where Patrick is forced to confront the very same monster he didn’t believe existed in the minds of Terry and Eller. This is representative of reaching a place in life in which the veteran’s reality becomes something that is unavoidable, and they often find themselves at a crossroad, in a position where the confrontation of their challenges is necessary for moving forward. There is quite a bit of symbolism being displayed in the triangular relationship of the three Marines. While it appears that Patrick is the most level



headed of the three, each of them must acknowledge the residual depths of combat, and like PTSD itself, appearances are not always reality. Patrick surely had suppressed feelings which were later discovered, and the stability of his character was not at all as level headed as he seemed in the earlier interactions.

However, what is really being displayed through these characters and their interactions with each other? First, they were all a part of the same battalion and have all witnessed the same horrific incident that neither of them can seem to forget. Yet, *True Blood* is set in a fictional world, which is where metaphorical and symbolic meaning comes into play. At some point, each of the men were haunted by the Ifrit smoke monster, a supernatural being that presented itself after they killed a group of Iraqis, which included a mother who cursed them as she died in agony. The Ifrit monster is easily recognizable as an internal dilemma carried out in the form of nightmares and flashbacks, and it symbolizes that of a “demon” which real humans face when dealing with PTSD. Each of them needed to find a way to make sense of their previous actions and without a resolution. The Ifrit monster followed them around in their conscious and subconscious minds.

Military combat is an individual and collective experience. Zachary Bell, a U.S. Marine veteran, writes, “My personal battle with PTSD is trying to make sense of my time in the military and developing a better understanding of all that has come to pass” (Bell, 2014, para 3). Like real life veteran Bell, the fictional Marines of *True Blood* also struggled to understand or justify their tour of duty, with the most common justification being that it was their duty to serve and protect as a U.S. Marine. However, Eller battled with believing that combat made them evil, broken and undeserving of anything good. Patrick rationalizes all their previous military experience as something that was obligatory and unavoidable, and Terry tries to find acceptance

with the fact that his horrible deed was done from carrying out a “necessary” order. During his flashbacks of war, we learn that Terry killed an innocent woman (symbolic as the Ifrit monster’s spirit) during an altercation among her son, a group of male Iraqis and Terry’s platoon which ended in the eventual death of that group of Iraqi men, inclusive of the woman’s son. Under the order of Patrick, Terry was forced to “dead check” (vernacular that describes ensuring death) the mourning mother. Although the command was carried out, because he consciously felt it was wrong and preventable, he was never able to find peace with that experience.

Throughout season five, we witness Terry wrestling with the death of this woman and the many other deaths he witnessed in combat while trying to fit in and adapt to civilian living. While Patrick and others tried to comfort him with the thought that “it was war” and bad things, including death, happen in war, Terry’s soul was never at ease. He was crippled with hallucinations, constant vivid images and sounds of the incident, nervousness, hypervigilance, sleep deprivation, etc. Terry never felt at rest in his own skin. This becomes evident as his character is often startled, jumpy, irritable and forgetful. Being unable to vocalize what was happening in his mind, his behavior seemed questionable to those around him and greatly impacted his marriage.

We can observe from various scenes between him and his wife that he is struggling with PTSD symptoms, and that she is at a loss on how to understand and handle him. In Season 5, Episode. 2, Arlene is lying in bed, and Terry walks in the room in a glare-like stance. She is repeating his name, and he doesn’t appear to hear her. As she sits up, she tries to touch his face, and he grabs her arm forcefully. She is a little taken back and mildly afraid. He is saying, “We’re all gonna die. He is coming for us.” Arlene is trying to figure out what he is talking about and is yelling for him to wake up. He is standing there, frozen in his stance and having

flashbacks of his time in combat. She slaps him as a last resort, and he snaps out of it. She then proceeds to question him to no avail, and soon after, he simply states that he's tired and lies down on the bed.

In another example from the same episode, Terry is cooking in the restaurant when he has a vision that the pan is engulfed in flames. He is standing there having flashbacks of combat. As he is lost in thought, Arlene walks into the kitchen, calls his name, and puts her hand on his shoulder. He knocks it off, and she falls into a dish rack. As he is apologizing, she is yelling that she wants him to tell her what is going on and right now. He's claiming that it's nothing, but she's not buying it as she reminds him that he's losing his mind over something, not sleeping and having just attacked her. She believes it has something to do with Patrick, and he says it's nothing, an accident. She insists that he just shoved her across the room. He yells at her that he said it was an accident and questions what part of that doesn't she understand. Frustrated with himself for yelling at her and losing control, he walks out of the kitchen leaving her with more unanswered questions (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 2).

Terry experienced what many veterans face every day, feeling as though their combat involvement somehow eradicates any chance of having a good life, even to the point of feeling like he did not deserve to have a family. "I knew it was too good to be true. Arlene, the kids, Mikey...I just ain't the kinda guy that can have something like that, not for long at least" (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 6). Many individuals with PTSD, consistently live with guilt and shame including {survivors' guilt} and inadequacy to fill expectant familial roles. Yet, how does the media play a role in illustrating the need to understand the multi-faceted veteran experience? Are they helping to address a growing concern of society or are they reinforcing the stigma associated with PTSD?

Some argue that the mass media increases the phobia of PTSD in veterans, headlining news with negative stories of veterans and labeling them with words such as crazy, or loose cannon. It has become the perception that veterans have morphed into deranged monsters, a stigma that is prevalent in the United States (Gourley, 2014). However, the news isn't the only media outlet to tell veteran stories. Is popular culture television reinforcing the same feeling that many feel the news outlets display? A couple of years ago, an initiative entitled "Got Your 6" enlisted Hollywood to help present a more accurate and positive view of military veterans. Members of the initiative felt there was a distinct need to address the underrepresentation of veterans and for utilizing the industry's creative power to shape the public perception of veterans (Elber, 2014).

*True Blood* attempts to offer an alternative perspective with Terry's character, but misses the mark on several occasions. Often perplexed at how to understand her husband, Arlene is shown making comments such as "He's crazy Holly, as in off the deep end" (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 7) and addressing him during her confusion by saying "You've gone off your meds haven't you?" (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 6). Comments like these do more harm than good and reinforce the stereotypes and stigma that is repeatedly played in the media which says that all veterans with PTSD are "crazy" and can only maintain normalcy if they are on prescribed medication. Because of this and without being properly informed, people's reactions may be more harmful than not when dealing with veterans.

Yet, what does an audience gain from *True Blood*, and what does the vampire/human binary represent? The vampires in *True Blood* are like many sub-groups and represent the "others," and Beck (2011) suggests that moving from fear to awakening can cause a shift that allows people to become more encompassing of others or group outsiders. In essence *True*

*Blood* tries to promote tolerance and acceptance among its humans and fantasy creatures. Terry Bellefleur may live on the side of the humans (in-group), but much like viewing the vampires as “different” his character’s challenges make him different as well.

In the fantastical community of Bon Temps, Louisiana, its citizens are learning to live among various types of people (and creatures) and are trying to embrace the very things that make them unique. Like any other society filled with variances in people, whether by gender, race, or religion, there are many obstacles to overcome and many groups that are still very intolerant of “others.” *True Blood*’s portrayal of Terry Bellefleur may help the audience empathize and understand what takes place in the mind and body of a combat veteran dealing with PTSD and cause them to think about the ways in which our differences challenge our existence in a society that is not entirely comfortable with this concept. However, is their attempt of portraying this character successful, and is feeling empathetic really the goal in creating awareness and understanding? By showing similarities amongst the veterans, even in altered ways, it demonstrates their attempt to illustrate consistent themes regarding these characters.

In (Season 5, Ep 2) of *True Blood*, as Arlene goes to speak to Patrick regarding strange behavior that Terry was exhibiting, his reply was “it happens to all of us, it’s tough.” Thus, attempting to show some solidarity among the veterans without divulging any specific information to an outsider “civilian.” However, with this type of statement and the later representations of the veterans, solidarity can assume a negative connotation. If one veteran is shown demonstrating “extreme behavior” it is assumed that they all must house those same attributes or have the potential to exhibit the same behavior. In my own experience, I’ve been questioned about my veteran’s behavior after someone has watched the news or a television

program that depicts them as angry, violent and unpredictable. This type of ignorance again assumes that if one veteran acts in a certain way, they all act in a certain way. While we must converse about this issue, Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) argue that some veterans fear that bringing attention to these issues may produce increased stereotyping and social stigmas.

In addition, the limitation of being an outsider (civilian) means one is rarely privy to a lot of information that may help the veteran overcome some hidden challenges. While Terry fights with his inner self, his battle is portrayed in a way that makes the audience, grieve with him. The visual imagery of his flashbacks allows you to understand the depth of his pain. Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) refer to these visual or verbal reminders of the difficulties veterans face as “victimization,” and Terry suffers constantly with intrusions of those visual images that portray him as a victim of his traumatic experience. Yet, he still does not manage to articulate those feelings and experiences to others outside his communal group.

In American culture, the common moral perspective allows for compassion of the afflicted, and *True Blood* asks that of its audience in some instances for example, by showing Terry adjusting to post military roles as a husband and father. The media has a tendency to demonstrate that injury, as well as mind and body damage, i.e. PTSD, are common occurrences and that any positive experiences that veterans have post military, usually happen despite their victimization, rather than as a direct result of it (Kleykamp and Hines, 2015). However, the authors contend that many sources focus on the negative effects of combat on soldiers, and therefore uses instances of violence as examples of the negative aftereffects of war trauma. In the case of *True Blood*, while certainly the victimization of Terry warranted sympathy for his character, the interaction of the three veterans painted a different picture which reinforced violence and death among them all.

### **Implications**

War rhetoric has often defined the world, its inhabitants and crisis situations as dichotomous opposites: “aggressor and defender; oppressor and oppressed; terrorism and self-defense; victimizer and victim; guilty and innocent; moral and immoral; and good and evil” (Hanauer, 2014, p. 83). With the media as a viable platform for veteran awareness, it must be sure to account for layers of veteran identity through representation. They are not simply soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines; they are parents, siblings, spouses, friends, employees etc. PTSD affects all layers of identity, not just their communal layer or identity affiliation with the military. Whether displayed in news stories or fantastical dramatic television series, we must not cheapen the experience of the men and women who fought for this country or allow it to appear convoluted and one sided. Just as the men and women of the U.S. military have a duty to its citizens, the citizens have the duty to respect and work to understand how difficult the transition from soldier to civilian may be, particularly after trauma.

The industry must be cognizant of the realistic picture of veteran identity and Hanauer (2014) reveals that it’s simple for contesting ideologies on opposite sides of conflict to characterize a veteran who volunteered for military service in those similar dichotomous ways such as “good, a protector, a fighter for freedom and patriotic or as evil, an occupier, a murderer, and an oppressor” (p. 84). Reinforcing negative images can leave the audience intimidated and afraid of those with PTSD. These types of media accounts that link PTSD to acts of violence can reinforce stereotypes that all veterans who may be inflicted with the injury are dangerous, unstable individuals (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2015). Meanwhile only showing the vulnerable “victimized hero” aspect may make them feel weak and disrespected. Veterans are not looking for pity, nor do they wish to be feared; rather, they are looking for compassion and patience.

Certainly, there are extremes in all cases but post-traumatic stress disorder is a serious issue. Our voices in media programs should be utilized to bring awareness to an alarming situation, not create more distance, awkwardness and segregation. The unspoken conversations and failure to support veterans, unfortunately often provide an ending much like Terry's. This character reached his lowest point and sought out the only measure he thought could end his torture. He chose to have someone take his life, and as an untimely twist, it happened just after he received an internal breakthrough (which in a fantasy scripted way, erased his memory of the military and his combat experience). However, it was too late. Terry was unable to cancel the plans with no recollection of his past, the plans were in motion and the hit occurred. Terry's fate was the same as many other veterans facing his circumstances. Suicide is happening at an alarming rate among veterans, and a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2013) report that 22 veterans commit suicide every day. While it isn't the media's responsibility to prevent suicide, it has a large enough voice to influence societal change and must use it to do so.

Recently, there has been an increase in research surrounding this population of people. However, there is still a need for society to understand the implications that the media has on demonstrating reality regarding the PTSD experience, as well as taking the initiative to provide a platform of understanding and forward thinking efforts. Not all veterans with PTSD seek to kill others or themselves. While *True Blood* did portray some very humanistic and typical symptoms of veterans with PTSD, it intentionally or unintentionally reiterated negative stereotypes first by Eller kidnapping Terry and Patrick, next by Patrick killing Eller, then by Patrick attempting to kill Terry which resulted in Terry killing Patrick, and lastly by Terry deciding to have someone take his life. PTSD is not a death sentence, but in *True Blood* it became one for each of the veteran characters.



The media has the ability to frame issues in specific ways, to provide unconscious and subconscious thinking about various topics and subject matters. Much of what we see is based on political influence and constructed social issues. After a long historical battle of constructing PTSD as an illness, it has moved beyond its clinical connotation and is now widely acceptable as a cultural euphuism (Feinstein, 2013) insinuating that it is an assumed “trophy” that comes along with being a veteran who has participated in war activity. Yet people’s perceptions about cultural happenings or phenomes are not inherent, and are often unstable and difficult to express. They may vary based on the intent, situation or cause for public discourse (Adjei, 2013).

Therefore, because a person’s perception may wane and fluctuate, it can be greatly influenced by the media. What this says to us is that the discourse created around this subject is influential and is often internalized by those who take in the information. It not only contributes to how the public perceives veterans with PTSD, but what conversations may be needed to shift that perspective. In the article, *Being in the Second Iraq War: a Poetic Ethnography*, Hanauer (2014) summarizes the conflict within a veteran greatly by acknowledging that it is every service members undoubtingly duty to act morally and ethically. However, based on the design of war in all its uncertainty, chaos, commands, injustice, desolation and survival strategies to return home could cause situations where an individual’s better judgment is severely impaired.

There is no easy answer or solution to fix the problem of completely understanding the veteran experience without walking in the shoes of the veteran. Yet, understanding the current rhetoric and working towards creating a different type of discourse is one action that may help break barriers and eliminate the tendency to stereotype. A different type of conversation is needed in the media and throughout American society in order for our veterans to move forward in living healthier, more productive lives.

## CHAPTER 6 BRIDGING IDENTITY GAPS OF VETERANS AND THE MASS MEDIA

In this chapter, I discuss the related findings of this project, my responses to the findings, draw correlations between examples and references, and summarize the implications of this project and the dual methodological approach taken. Finally, I recommend other avenues of study for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how those bodies of research may enhance arts-based research and rhetorical criticism, but more specifically the field of Media and Communication. My own interest and experience with poetry, and the results that have been recorded for its uses with veterans, is the reason I selected arts-based methods as my first methodological approach. In addition, the contrast of how society perceives veterans as opposed to how veterans see themselves is particularly important for supporting the idea of arts-based methods as an effective tool for examining individuals with PTSD.

Alternatively, I chose rhetorical analysis as the second methodological tool because it allows for a questioning of the present discourse, and its delivered messages surrounding this topic. I am especially intrigued with observing how language is used to construct and/or manipulate knowledge and meaning. There are many innuendos present in the conversation of veterans with PTSD and with mental health issues in general. It is critically important for us as researchers and laymen alike, to collectively address those issues that aren't "quite right" in modern day society. However, the driving force that begat this project is my own interpersonal relationship with a combat veteran that deals with PTSD and TBI. In an effort to understand his challenges, communicate more effectively and seek ways to provide a better quality of life post-combat, this research took form. It is my hope that this relevant research will not only provide a new way of thinking about veteran identity, but drive others to make a difference as well.

The U.S. military is a multi-faceted and tightly-knitted part of our society. Veterans returning from combat are a unique group. They are valued and honored in service, yet become marginalized and stereotyped when they experience mental health challenges such as PTSD. I wondered how this perception changes once personal health information is divulged. Further, how is one veteran representative of the entire group in the eyes of some people? In addition, I wondered why society is so willing to highlight the achievements of veterans in service, but are so quick to dismiss their struggles as a result of that same service? This led to my original questioning of how the media might play a role in this situation.

An individual's identity is created through internalization and negotiation of ascribed identities. I saw this demonstrated in how the veterans so readily struggle with detaching from the communal way of thinking to balancing who they were (service persons), to who they are post combat. In Rachel McWilliams (2014) *The Residue of Trauma*, this is demonstrated in the lines "It is the blackouts and time lost, the battles to achieve independence and self-sufficiency, the fight to remember and the fight to forget" (n.p.). While serving in the military comes with a classification price tag, meaning an attached identity, an individual still has a co-created identity that includes personal and relational aspects that are constantly being negotiated. In turn, this idea reinforces the concept that communication and identity are intertwined. Jung and Hecht (2004) note that communication based perspectives regarding identity confirm the connection between communication and identity and its influences thereof.

What interests me about this concept is that identity and communication go hand-in-hand. We are what we think, who we know, and what we feel. This means that identity alone does not predict how communication will transpire; rather identity and communication are interdependent. The communication theory of identity supports this concept conceiving the idea

that social roles and connections are personalized as identification through the act of communicating (Jung and Hecht, 2004). In part II of Larisa Douglass (2015) *Five-Hour Energy*, the author writes about the journey of military combat, the communication that occurs within, and the expression of identity afterwards. Douglass discusses the loss of a fellow warrior and writes “I loved you and found a voice for him. We have no choice--we who survive. We live in their place” (p.27). This author is illustrating that identity is a part of communication and communication is a part of (military) identity. The veteran’s identity and the way they communicate overlaps and intersects. Apparent in this example that even when they are not speaking directly for themselves, they become the voice for other veterans and thus demonstrating that individuality and their social affiliation matters as a way of identifying.

Individual’s identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior through communication. Identity not only defines an individual, but also reflects social roles and relations through communication. Moreover, social behavior is a function of identity through communication. Knowing that social roles are important factors in how we communicate helped me think about the real challenges veterans face with reintegration. Hipes, Lucas, and Kleykamp (2014) revealed that recent war veterans with PTSD are significantly less likely to be deferred to in a group interaction, meaning they may be less called upon or engaged with due to their military experience.

In Ryan Berry’s (2013) *2 Miles Down the Road*, the poet speaks about the perils of returning home. In the beginning the veteran in the poem welcomes the idea of “Home Sweet Home” but becomes lost inside himself with one social drink which turns into more and more drinks, used as a numbing agent to suppress disturbing memories. The author goes on to discuss the level of his family’s awareness that he is indeed home from war, but hoping that they believe

he is still away “fighting the good fight overseas.” When in reality, the veteran is quite close to home as described “two miles down the road, the grungy bearded vet at the end of the bar, the one no one talks to” (p. 46). While the veteran in the poetry grapples with life at home, it was this statement that reveals the way veterans feel judged and excluded. Too often, veterans are stopped and acknowledged when in full military uniform, but may be looked down upon and left out of conversations when they are unshaven and sitting at a bar alone.

Thus, veterans may have good reason to fear being labeled, as those labels have shown to negatively affect their social interactions. As I alluded to earlier, this concept was present when veterans tried to remain in the victor-enactment perception as opposed to the helpless-enactment perception, often opting out of social situations as to not reveal the condition that will have them looked upon as the latter. Travis Absher’s (2011) *Our Eyes*, captures the essence of this concept. In this piece the author starts by revealing the many difficult things the eyes have witnessed though the combat experience. The memories that are too painful to forget and if remembered for too long would easily produce tears from those eyes. Those memories have caused internal struggle that those (civilians) who have never lived that experience will never comprehend. This piece goes on to describe the brotherhood that is formed in the face of such a life altering moment in time.

Yet, while this piece speaks to the inner battle that many veterans face and work to overcome every day, after speaking about the formulated bond that encompasses vulnerability, it goes on to say, “For we are no longer Members of society, but defenders of the Republic. We have become the protectors of freedom. We are SOLDIERS...” (p.103). The author ends by describing that these veterans put themselves in these positions so others (civilians) will not have to “see” what their eyes have seen. This poet demonstrates the veteran’s daily dilemma, wanting

to be recognized as the hero and not as the victim although internally and individually they wrestle with that very act. This further demonstrates how the personal and communal layers of identity are constantly conflicted.

Arts-based methods ala poetic inquiry may indeed help with the labels or stigma associated with this veteran population. Its alternative way of providing a voice allows for an inside look into the innermost parts of the veteran experience, and by doing so provides a way for understanding that the often lop sided view from the media limits. While it may not eliminate stigmatization, it can certainly cause a reduction overall. CTI helps us understand that without considering the multiple layers of an individual's identity, we may become fixated on one part of someone's being. In the case of the veteran with PTSD, it is often the layer that creates the most contention for the veteran.

As Horowitz (2012) considers the self and identity, he claims that an individual's personal experiences are developed from different principles that are unconsciously formulated ideas that appear dominant at various times and in various cultural settings or social situations. Yet, what does this say about the communication of veterans with PTSD? How does this multi-layered approach clarify why creative artistic expression is effective at helping veterans' self-identify?

First, by considering the influence of identity theory and dominant roles, the poetry shows the veterans alternating back and forth, from one role to the next. For example, as in previous examples the veterans often wrote about having one foot in two worlds, wanting to be in individual, but also holding onto pieces of their military connection particularly if it means the difference in being viewed as a struggling combat veteran or a decorated war hero. Yet, this push and pull process is filled with conflict, assumptions, discord and ultimately, growth.

Fluctuating between these roles can leave the veteran feeling confused and dissatisfied. It can make performing an enacted (preferred expectant) role challenging. Although, with enough negotiation and working through layers, there may be a point when significant growth is shown and role shifting become more apparent.

While a civilian might transform from spouse to parent in one day, in which parent becomes the dominant role, a veteran is acclimating to a role they once possessed prior to the trauma or newly filled after trauma. The public's perception is that acclimation should naturally occur, as the role was previously held by the veteran or is a natural progression, i.e. returning home and getting married or already married and becoming a parent. However, veterans may not necessarily be comfortable with stepping right back into a previously held role or jumping into a newly acquired role as they are conflicted on which role is most dominant at the onset of reintegration into civilian life.

In the piece, *My Old Friend* by Travis L. Martin (2011), the author writes about discovering who he is after his return home, while reflecting on who was before deployment. The context of the poem is the author and a familiar person sorting through pictures and having conversations about pre-deployment. Yet we understand the conflict through phrases like "I sorted through old scraps for you. Who was that boy in the picture?" The author continues "I simply give up on remembering facts. He looked so happy: A simple place to start. If I could only remember how he felt in that picture." These statements address the idea that the veteran is trying to fulfil the expectant role of returning to his pre-deployment self, but is countered with the line "I never can quite pin down where I was when things changed forever again" (p. 116) revealing that his new sense of identity is different than before and immediately returning to the expectant role is difficult because of combat experience. In these situations, what we are not

accounting for is how trauma really impacts one's life or ability to communicate in the same manner as before the trauma occurred. We are not adapting our expectations to the situation.

Next, by considering aspects of social identity theory, we can gain a perspective on what happens with the veterans' identity from a social interaction perspective. Scott (2007) asserts that through communicating with others, we exhibit a certain belongingness (or lack of belonging) to varied collective groups. We then discover the group's prominence and or outward appearance, and the associated costs and value of maintaining the collective identity. Yet those social costs can be inhibiting to the veteran. This demonstrates that if veterans most identify themselves based on their social or societal affiliation, they are more likely to take on the characteristics of the group as their dominant role of identification even though there may be conflicted about such role. Communication is an important element of social identity and serves and helps to determine when some identity roles are more salient than others (Scott, 2007). Yet Stets and Burke (2000) claim that every individual is at one time or another, a uniquely blended mixture of social categories, and therefore the makeup of each person's self-concept or identity is unique as well.

As a theoretical framework, communication theory of identity (CTI) was chosen because I recognized the immense complication of veterans trying to adapt to different parts of their identity. I saw this reflected throughout the poetry as the veterans discussed the various ways in which they saw themselves as servicepersons and as individuals, and how these roles and experiences greatly influence and help shape their identity. Further, this framework has been successful in similar research that explores issues of identity which involve multiple ways of self-representation. The intricacy of veteran dialectic involves acknowledging how all the aspects of communication specifically determined by CTI, come together to formulate an



identity. While this is the case for any person involved in communicative interaction, that of a veteran with PTSD is altered based on a trauma that severely impacts communication, social norms and relational interaction; all are key contributors to the make-up of a person's identity. For example, while many people are readily able to adapt to changes within a social structure, veterans view those changes as disruption to an already fluid system, particularly in post-trauma situations.

However, the media and society in general do not consider the variances that happen as veterans shift from military to civility and from self-image to perceptions. There is an expectation that the ideal veteran seamlessly assimilates into society, putting war experiences behind them, giving thought to these experiences only in instances of patriotism and honor, while eradicating the horrors of war and its particulars (Mascarenhas, 2014). However, this expectation causes conflict within the veteran's self-identity. Veterans struggle with fitting in easily, and dismissing memories that are horrific by nature are not so simply pushed aside never to be revisited again. This notion was carried out in the poetry by the representation of memory in the data. The veterans' memory (act of remembering) as well as memories (unforgettable experiences) were constant references in the poetry. It was widely recognized that veterans frequently recall memories that define their military time but also recall or are unable to forget the memories that are painful reminders of that very same experience.

When considering the aspects of CTI as it relates to the veterans' understanding of themselves, it can be determined that all four layers or frames are present at any given time. Yet, generally the media concentrates on the communal aspect of veteran communication; portraying images, scenarios and scenes that discount the other roles of their being, that may in their mind have a more dominant position. In the media for example, a sailor is first and foremost a sailor

while other roles, i.e., father, husband etc. take a back seat. This idea was present in *True Blood* as well, often using scenes between Terry and his wife to enforce this idea, discounting the marriage and family by reinforcing his military affiliated relationships and practices which took precedence over truth and family obligations.

At times the overlapping of layers is problematic and conflict occurs, for example, if the sailor sees himself as a father first and sailor second. The expectations of himself, his relational identity and that imposed on him by others, more than likely vary in prominence and position in the veteran's life and may shift at times depending on the situation. It is essential to note that ideas of self and identity are themselves problematic. These concepts may insinuate that individuals can only identify in one way and that this limited self-identity is stable and unwavering (Smith and Sparkes, 2008). Yet an individual's identity is comprised of various aspects of one's personality and is influenced by all their life roles i.e. parent, child, friend, employee, teammate etc. (Suler, 2002).

Popular culture emphasizes personal and collective identities and carries them out through forms of entertainment that capitalize on emotional and vicarious entanglements and interaction (Altheide, 2000). We see an example of this in *True Blood* when Patrick, the former U.S. Marine sergeant spoke about having a wife and baby on the way. They were talked about as an afterthought when he and Terry came face to face in a confrontation about how to end the curse that followed them around. It was revealed that the only way to resolve the ghostly reminder was to shed blood with blood. One of them would have to kill the other. In an effort to get to him first, Patrick kidnaps Arlene and as Terry finds him holding her hostage with a gun he states, "Mag's pregnant and I promised her I'd come home. I don't want to do this, shit you know I don't. But there's no other way to end it." (*True Blood*, Season 5, Ep. 9). The bigger

connotation here is that first and foremost, he is a Marine completing a mission (or fulfilling a duty that will clear him of his past). While he acknowledges being a husband and father, it was clearly secondary, even off the battlefield.

Yet Terry was attempting to shift his identity and social roles. He no longer felt that his military affiliation was at the forefront. In fact, he felt that in order to be more engaged in the roles he saw as important, he needed to push the affiliation aside. He was concentrating on fulfilling his roles as a husband, father, and employee, more representative of the personal and relational layers of identity. However, the conflict arose when Patrick returned and his enactment of father, partner, and employee was challenged. It was clear, that the perspective of those around him shifted (to the communal layer of identity) and that the expectation was that he was first and foremost a Marine (as opposed to other roles), and not just a Marine but a “fighting-mission oriented” Marine.

Terry struggled with this idea and ultimately because of his collective and social identification he allowed himself to move into this identity role making it dominant or more prominent in his life than he desired. However, he thought a temporary focus on this part of himself would help to put his affiliation behind him permanently, which would allow him to become more successful at moving forward in other areas of his life that were severely strained as a result of that affiliation. This is particularly interesting to me because it demonstrates how connected and influenced we may be by our group affiliations, and that these layers of identity coexist and bind together to formulate self-identity, even during times of contradiction (Jung and Hecht, 2004). When analyzing and inspecting social behavior, Altheide (2000) reveals that it is crucial to understand the roles and composition of self, identity, and the situation. Perspectives are determined by situations, and that takes precedence of any given moment.

Ultimately this means that what we view temporarily does not replace the embedded messaging we've learned over time. In other words, we see and believe the representation of images that we view even though they may be fictional accounts or short lived viewing experiences. The consequences of what we see may have much more of a lasting impact than realized. Altheide (2000) goes on to say "Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping audience expectations and criteria for self-presentations for themselves and others (e.g., as audience members)" (p. 11). Today's media demands the "proud unbroken hero" or the "broken disturbed lunatic" as a way of viewing service members. This glamorized way of representing veterans to audiences provides a cyclical effect of misinterpreting veteran identity.

Many veterans struggle with the social identity of their military group, wanting to remain affiliated but often consumed by the trauma associated with that experience, an angle that is not generally considered by the mass media. By contrast, many of today's veterans are countering this imposed representation of themselves by allowing a realistic view into their experience through the use of arts-based methods or creative art expression. Identity is composed of an internalized story(ies) that are based on self-reflection and constructed over time, (Smith and Sparkes, 2008) and creative expression is one way to tell these stories. In addition, these artistic outlets not only provide them with a method for articulation and a space to have a public voice, it allows for the inclusion of the many roles they are consistently juggling; roles the media often overlooks and deem less important.

Art gives way to alterative introspection and Lobban (2014) argues that creativity activates unfamiliar ways of processing and expressing information that strays away from traditional and worn out patterns of thinking; thus, moving past stereotypes and assumptions, demonstrating a more balanced, authentic portrait of the combat veteran. Through the poetry, I

learned that veterans really do know their lives, thought patterns and ways of constructing identity is complicated. There is no “one size fits all” frame of identity for the veteran. However, civilians are outsiders to the world of veterans and military culture overall. What is consistent is that veterans identify with each other, not only based on their military affiliation or communal ideas of identity, but based on the collectiveness of shared experiences, trauma that was endured based on an extreme connectedness, public perception and judgment. Finally, what ties them together is the idea that they are all trying to find their own individual paths, post military involvement; and in turn find the direction that moves them beyond a rigid communal connection.

As outsiders, we are often seeking answers as to why these veterans no longer seem like the same person they were before joining the military, and particularly after serving in combat. In addition, we find ourselves making judgments about their newly exhibited behavior. Not only is this a problem interpersonally, but systematically and within those institutions designed to assist with mental health issues as well. Yet, this is a barrier for moving forward. Many veterans complain about the negative treatment and interactions they have with health care staff, and personnel who pass judgment and make assumptions about them as individuals or their military service without having prior knowledge about their experiences or accomplishments while deployed or on active duty (True, Rigg, and Butler, 2014). These negative interactions however, also carry over onto family and friends, making connecting and interacting with others challenging.

Unfortunately, it's the breakdown of communication that appears after trauma that further complicates the veteran experience. When additional help or assistance navigating this process isn't available, we often look to examples in front of us, and that means the media for much of

society. Because unless you have direct access to veterans or other veteran families, there are real limitations in uncovering information; and even with direct access, there are still information barriers. Dekel and Monson (2010) argue that there is a great deal of ambiguous loss when dealing with these individuals, which is a loss that remains unclear for families dealing with veterans experiencing PTSD. These authors contend that the constant uncertainty and often lack of information about the personal status or whereabouts of a veteran is traumatizing and damaging for families and friends (Dekel and Monson, 2010). While this is the reality for many veterans and their supporters, it is indeed a consistent way of interacting (or not), particularly as they work to unravel their self-identification.

Veterans are consistently negotiating and renegotiating their perceived individual identities and their identities associated with their social affiliations. Upon a service member's return home, and during the transitional phase from serviceperson to civilian, the way in which the veteran viewed life may become obscured and tainted after the experience of trauma (Quinn, 2008). As the veteran adjusts and attempts to move into other desired or expectant roles, more transformation occurs. Yet, the overlap and sometimes missing pieces create confliction within the layers of identity. This confliction or contradiction of dominant roles are the determinants for identity gaps.

According to Faulkner and Hecht (2011) the identity negotiation process is comprised of the conflict that individuals feel when identity gaps occur. When their affirmed identities and issues of self-identity remain conflicted with the perception of others and thus demonstrating disharmony and the need to settle the confliction between the contested identities. Jung and Hecht (2004) maintain that identity gaps occur when conflict exist amongst the four frames of identity. This continual conflict is the very essence that causes veterans to feel misunderstood

and misrepresented, as they are in a battle of understanding their own trauma-induced alteration of an already complex, multilayered identity system. In this research, the most prominent identity gap was between the personal/communal layers. It was these two layers that provided the most contention as well as other underlined problems amongst all four layers. Veterans consistently grappled with maintaining an individualistic perspective and way of living, as opposed to communal affiliation and expectations. While trying to adapt to civilian life, veterans are often faced with the choice of embracing reintegration as a civilian or identifying as a member of the armed services. While it is a possibility to represent both, the order of dominance is frequently at play.

Communication theory of identity allows us to look at the whole person in relation to their multiple identities. Jung and Hecht (2004) offer that “one’s personal identity is infused into one’s enacted and relational identities, as well as communal identities, just as the communal identities are a part of personal, enacted, and relational identities” (p. 267). This notion makes it difficult to formulate a perception based on one part of the whole. For veterans with PTSD, this perception can be even more skewed. As shown throughout this research, most of society focuses on their communal frame, while their home life may focus on the relational frame; whether from the media or in social interaction.

Yet, the veteran themselves may bounce back and forth between frames, or consistently integrate frames as they are seeking to understand their identity upon reintegration. This was evident in their poetry as they would often move from personal, to relational, to communal, to enacted in one piece; demonstrating that all layers of identity surface at various times. In *I Keep Moving* by Jennifer Pacanowski (2013), the author speaks about the experience of moving on physical and mentally in life after combat, and addresses each of these identity layers with the

lines “I am surrounded by emptiness” (personal), “no one needs to see me, it only hurts them” (relational), “I long for the days when my buddies had my back” (communal) and “people stare and scoff. Get a job. Lazy. Bum” (enacted) (pg. 63). This poem demonstrates that at any one time, all these layers are present in the construction of one’s identity. Consistent with CTI, these layers may all work in conjunction with or in juxtaposition of each other.

Nevertheless, with the added challenge of PTSD and an unclear dominant role of identity, not only does it challenge personal view of identification, it also increases the likelihood of a misrepresented perception of the veteran from society. Jung and Hecht (2004) explain this by saying that while ideally it may seem that the focus should be placed on an individual frame, since the frames operate collectively and congruently, a more thorough examination would consider them in pairs, as a trio, and/or looking at all four frames at one time. What this means is that a more accurate media portrayal of veterans would take into account the multiple frames of an identity, and represent from a more balanced perspective as opposed to focusing only on one aspect.

As Jung and Hecht (2004) explain, the four identity frames may contradict each other and are not always consistent or exclusive. Yet, the frames can work together to formulate identity, or parts of identity. Essentially an individual operates within these four frames at all times during communication, which further emphasizes why focusing solely on one frame does a disservice to identity portrayal, particularly that of a complex veteran’s identity. If the media and its representations remains a contributor to normative order, then a more nuanced and critical perspective for recognizing and interpreting the media’s activities and dissemination of information is needed (Altheide, 2000). It is our responsibility to understand what we see, and make changes towards the progression of something better.



Some people think of identity as a kind of answer, an ideal or end state, achieved progressively through an ongoing examination of one's character and qualities. Yet, other people view identity as an inquisition, a flexible exploration that continuously fluctuates and develops (Eisenberg, 2001). Communication theory of identity is a practical and sufficient means to examine the complexity of veteran self-identity and media representation. The multi-layered frame approach is a viable method for understanding each facet of an individual's identity and the way in which they overlap, contrast and complement each other. Keeping in mind that communication and identity are not separate entities, this theory demonstrates how the two concepts are interdependent and exist together. In addition, it shows how they expose the limited representations we frequently see of veterans in the media.

While veterans with PTSD face many challenges in communication, this theory allows for an unveiling of the internal conflict that disrupts this multi-layered system even more by recognizing the way each frame is performed singularly and jointly within the veteran's complex communicative structure. In comparison, a veteran's view of self-identity operates in a similar fashion, one that is as much individualized, as it is collective. In lieu of this aspect, it demonstrates why the communication theory of identity was a useful theoretical framework for the examination of veteran identity.

This study uses CTI as a catalyst for creating a dialogue that suggests when veterans participate in art-based methods or creative expression, it expands their inhibited way of communicating and simplifies the demonstration of their self-identification. Veterans may not be able to verbally articulate the explanation of this constant role shifting, which was noticeable throughout the poetry as they expressed being unable to provide language that conveys precise feelings. In addition, they continuously indicated this struggle by repeatedly stating that civilians

lack understanding of their true nature and experiences. These two competing factors alone, greatly impact the representation of veterans. In this regard, art can be used to unpack their complex communication and reveal the difficulties in adjusting to the multi-layers of identity that are ever present and severely impaired by PTSD helping veterans vocalize their experiences while helping civilians formulate positive perceptions.

In comparison, the media's singular way of representation limits the audience in receiving a more complete picture of the veteran. Alternatively, a more balanced picture of the veteran's experience is what's needed in media representation. Critiquing the media and the impact of its messages, is a step in the right direction for creating a shift in how society sees the veteran population. By dissecting the language and images used in veteran portrayals, we can start to fill in the gaps that are missing in those representations. It is important to have conversations that provoke change. Criticism has the ability to formulate or redirect thinking and comprehension. It can transfer ideas into digestible bits of information that seems complex or convoluted, providing insight into various situations.

While this study may not address every component of PTSD, it does account for the ways in which the injury influences and alters the communication of veterans, specifically as it relates to dominant identity roles and self-identification. Yet, as the study has shown communication and identity work best together as neither is independent of the other. The ultimate objective of utilizing communication theory of identity was to create and continue dialogue that is becoming increasingly important today for an ever-growing population of military veterans. A more nuanced approach of veteran media representation is not only helpful for society's understanding of the veteran but also for removing stereotypes and thus promoting the forward movement of veterans.

### Limitations

As the granddaughter, former step-daughter, niece, cousin and partner of United States veterans across multiple branches, I possess a certain awareness of the military experience. While these affiliations present me with a certain knowledge and access to military culture, I have not served in any branch of the military myself. Without serving in the military and/or combat, my perspective of this study is one of a cultural outsider. Yet, as a researcher of media and communication and the reflexivity that my relationships and poetic knowledge offers, my point of view has some validity.

Other constraints of this project include the data sampling utilized in the research. Although the poetry was taken from multiple online journal publications, they were all a product of one source. While all the poetry was directly related to the veteran experience, it was written across age, gender, military position etc. and therefore no correlations or distinctions can be made across categories. Yet, the diversity of these individual poets lends itself to the richness of the project in that veterans from various backgrounds and life situations share some commonalities of experience and identity.

Another limit of the research was utilizing one main source of entertainment media to provide the rhetorical analysis. There are many other television and films (some were referenced) that may provide perspective into the veteran experience. *True Blood's* narrative of veterans within a complex reality (cohabitation of fantasy and human characters) demonstrated the alienation that veterans can feel living in a civilian world post-combat. The creativity of this television show, along with the uniqueness of poetry, was ultimately a dual methodological approach that worked well for analyzing and understanding the media's misrepresentation of veterans with PTSD.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Arts-based research is showing remarkable promise for veterans with PTSD. It is being shown to exhibit a healing component that increases communication and self-expression. While the original concept is having some success, I believe there is room for expansion, particularly in relation to identity work. As supporters of that idea, Smith and Sparkes (2008) claim that identities are constructed over time because of self-reflection and through the formulation of an internalized story of life experiences. Arts-based methods provide a great way to tell a story with opportunities that extend beyond poetry and into other art forms. In telling their stories, research avenues could include involving families into the arts-based practices with the veterans, as relational issues are still fragile topics for veterans.

There is significant research on the impact of PTSD on relationships and families already. However, there is room for more study that deals with utilizing some methods that extend beyond the veteran and into the family in a way that works to help the relationship impairments. For example, a study of poetry from family members that deal with veterans (like I myself engaged in) could provide an interesting alternative perspective to the work that I presented here. It could address how family members see or understand the identity of veterans, and how that might shape their experiences or opportunities for growth.

In terms of rhetorical studies, there is room for increased research around military discourse and the influence it has on how veterans speak about their experience. Mascarenhas (2014) explains “despite some acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder and veteran suicides, public discourse is disturbingly silent about veteran reintegration into civilian life” (p. 83). As it currently stands much of war rhetoric is based on political aims and leaves little room for the voice of the veteran. Mascarenhas (2014) explains the challenges that persist in this area

stating that veterans who make the decision to confront militaristic culture finds themselves in a difficult position, one that cannot rely on the respect of the public or military institutions which is more freely given to servicepersons that do not challenge their service. While it may be difficult for veterans to really speak out about their experiences, personally and publicly, this research does demonstrate why it is necessary to continue having conversations around the politics of war.

After conducting my research, I find it interesting that veterans do indeed question their service as revealed through their poetry and in fictional television. In fact, it was demonstrated that not only did they question their service, but as a result they struggled with clearly competing individualistic and collective identities. This view is often dismissed, as general assumption would not place veterans in the self-questioning category about their volunteered military participation. Although, it is becoming clearer that reintegration is problematic. The hegemonic societal expectation to transition smoothly from military service to civilian life does a disservice to returning veterans by ignoring the strains of managing their dual identities. Veterans play hybrid roles of soldier and civilian (Sturken, 1991).

While these suggestions may be helpful in moving forward in the field of Communication and within the subject matter of veterans with PTSD, there are more avenues to be explored and more conversations needed that can truly work towards making a difference. Veteran topics continue to warrant discussion as many of them are facing this life changing injury. With more awareness, discourse and service implementation, there is endless potential to increase the quality of life for veterans and their families which in turn enhances American society overall.

### **Call to Action**

As citizens of the United States, understanding the veteran population, and particularly those with PTSD is becoming increasingly important. Aside from researching and studying this population, what can we as citizens do to curb this historical challenge? First, we can strive to make some differences through awareness and productivity. One way to do this is by advocating for change in viable ways. For starters, we can work towards policies and procedures that can positively influence our veterans. Art therapy practices is showing tremendously positive results, yet mental health care services are being cut at the same time. Many veterans lack the resources for these types of alternative treatments that are showing promise and as such may miss out on those opportunities. This is a societal problem, as all citizens should have access to healthcare options. In order to combat this issue, it is up to those who can advocate, to do so for those that cannot advocate for themselves.

Creating awareness, and supporting the voice of veterans is admirable and necessary. However, how do we start the dissemination of this information? While certainly there is a critical need to work on public policy such as sufficient healthcare coverage and fair treatment laws. We must work even on smaller scales and on lower levels as starting blocks. In academia, one extremely feasible way to accomplish this is by working with veteran organizations across college and university campuses. Not only is the demographics of college students expanding to include more veterans, but includes a large population of people who are immersed in media and technology. Veterans on college campuses, just like those in the board room and in the combat field have a need to be accepted and integrated into the society they once protected. No longer should these men and women have to suffer in silence for fear of being misunderstood or ostracized by those who simply lack knowledge on the complexity of their identity.

In terms of my own call to action, my veteran partner and I formulated *The Warrior's Peak* (TWP). *The Warrior's Peak* is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide an environment that assists veterans and their families in reaching their full potential through resources, independence and productivity. We will primarily focus on veterans and families that have been diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI yet are readily open and inclusive of all veterans. While the organization is newly formulated, there is an overwhelming response to work with the community of veterans in Southeast Michigan.

As researcher studying the veteran population, and the partner of a combat veteran, I realize there are little resources in our region for supporting veteran families. As I've discovered through my studies, families may be one of the most helpful resources of a veteran's healing process. However, they are also the most likely to be impacted by the post combat transition of the veteran. While recognizing this conflict, along with Eric's understanding of veterans feeling displaced in society, we wanted to find an active way to help these men and women. It was this combination of scholastic knowledge and our actual lived experience that impacted the areas (programs and services) that we decided were of critical importance.

All TWP's programs and services aim to ***Heal Hearts, Restore Hope and Change Lives*** for our community's warriors and their loved ones, and will include: 1) health & wellness classes, 2) resource and advocacy, 3) residential housing assistance, 4) job placement & employment assistance, 5) children & youth camps/activities and other services as needed. Each service area contains relevant programs in that arena. For example, with job placement & employment assistance, programs will focus on resume building, interviewing skills and working with companies interested in hiring veterans.

There are two areas to highlight that have been informed by my research. First, the health and wellness classes will focus on interactive group sessions, individual life planning, recreational, etc. Within this programming, certain elements were constructed by way of my studies. Our interactive group sessions will be peer led, but facilitated by a licensed social worker who serves to answer questions and provide follow up information. Through working with a specific therapist within the therapeutic practice that has offered us space and professional assistance, we are developing an art therapy program for both recreational outlets and if desired, individual sessions with the trained therapist.

Next, in our children and youth services area, we will provide the same creative expression outlets for kids, structured as participatory camps. In those camps, we'd like to offer multiple areas of creativity including poetry, music, dance, etc. for students to engage in that are dealing with veteran parents and challenging life situations. While I have not done specific research on children, it has been noted that the creative arts, and family resources help the veteran's growth experience overall.

My passion for researching and understanding this population is apparent through my studies and my involvement with this community. It is our goal to continue spreading the word and lending a helping hand to the men and women who so courageously served our country. Veterans want to share their stories, they want to be understood, they want their voices heard and we hope that *The Warrior's Peak* will provide an additional platform to provide those opportunities.



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## APPENDIX A POETRY-EXPERIENCES

Rhodesia	Opportunity, See the World
Beautiful Land	Boom, Boom, Bomb
Fertile Soil	Iraqi Babies
Mugabe's Zimbabwe	Sons of a Country
Blood Soaked Soil	Amman
Britain	Sahwa Leader
America	No Thoughts of Turning Back
Africa	Combat Veteran
West	Called Off to War
Spiral	While I am Gone
Lose(st) Control	We Were Fine, Just Fine
Tears	One Call Home
Weirdest Feeling	Fire and a Fierce Ambush
Shouts/Scream(ing)	Fighting for Their Lives
Hollers	Our Rights, Our Free Beliefs
Freedom	Flag
Fight	Inward Journey
Riots	Outward Smells
Get Away Fast	Border
Dead Float	Mission Accomplished
Piles of Dead Men	Launched Missiles
Death/Die	Vietnamese
Mission	Noises
Sneak(ed,ing)	Chinese
Bullets Make Holes	Battalion Headquarters
Pray	Defenders of the Republic
Asleep	Protectors of Freedom
Conflict	SOLDIERS
Unknown	So Far From Home
Unexpected	Death Lurking
Fractured Friendships	Brothers of Mind, of Prayer, and Desire
Failed Marriages	Foul Stench of the Tomb
Disconnection	With No Place to Hide
Self-Medication	A Game for the Mind
Addiction	Oh Brothers of Loss
Self-Hurt	Rushing and Running, Fighting and Clawing
Outbursts	Memories Fade
Unanswered Prayers	Going to the Job; the Military Mob
Broken Promises	America is Me
Unreliable Treatments	Memories Can be so Vivid
Prescriptions	Easily Forgotten
Side Effects	Kill or Don't
Dreams Destroyed	It Will Haunt You, It Will Chase You

Haunting	Italian Village
Blackouts	Lying Alone in the Dark is the Hardest Thing
Time Lost	Iraq
Independence	Dog Tags and Body Bags
Self-Sufficiency	Home Sweet Home, Home at Last
Shot at me	Drowning on His Stool Alone
Car Burning	I've Seen Friends Die Too Many to Forget
War	Left a Lasting Legacy in Me
Came Back Home	Military Funeral with Flag and Bugle?
Silence	A Photograph of Rows of Coffins Draped with Rows of Flags
Suicides	War Tore a Hole in my Heart
PTSD	Powerless in the Wake of War's Madness
Move-Orders	Retelling Stories, Remembering Names
Terrorism Road Trips	Recalling Images of Sweltering Jungle Heat
Explosions	Afghanistan's fields
Lebanon	Following Orders
Attack-Action Orders	Leaving the Demons Where They Lie
Unloaded Weapons	Thousands of White Crosses Stand Row on Row
Pull the Trigger	Your Ups and Downs, Your Ins and Outs
Trigger Breaks	Three Soldiers Died This Morning
Explode(ing)	They Were Wounded Too
Firing	Flag-Draped Cases Slowly Loaded On
Ejecting	Afghanistan is a Noble Cause? Iraq?
Loading	Is it Just a Job, Do They Even Care?
Locking	Heaven Awaits the Brave
Hide(dden)	If Only We Remembered and Believed
Warrior	And the Warriors Die for Nothing
Drugs/Alcohol	With Considerable Force but with no Serious Damage
Memorial	A Village with no Vietnamese Just Sergeants and Aggressors
Search(ing)	Squad Tactics, Search and Seizure
Hot Afghani Sun	Clean Your Wounds
Afghan Skies	I'll Tell Them How Good a Soldier You Were
Driving to Nowhere	Tell Your Comrades to Keep You in Their Hearts
Cancelled Dates	Soldiers Die, I Feel No Pain
Journey	In safety, I remember
Baghdad	Try to Forget Some Things, Try, Do Try to Remember the Rest
Heart, reawakened	Death is Never Yours to Choose
Mojave Sky	Camouflage and Stealth Can't Hide Hate
Fentanyl Homeland Security	Armed for Combat, Trained to Attack

Ambien Green Zone	Professional Soldier Must be Your Goal
No Drug Can Replace	Back on the Street Nobody Knows
Out of Body	All My Belongings Lie Under My Head
Gun Retorts Bleed Your Soul	My Sleeping Bag Wraps Around Me a Cocoon
Explosion Flashbacks	I Long for the Days When My Buddies Had My Back
Operation Meltdown	I Don't Want to be Saved
Deaf in the Distance	What Happens in the Heat of Battle
Homeland's Desert	No One Wants to Talk About as it Has Already Been Spilt
Loud Voices	The Crew Chief Barking at Us
Necrotic chokes	My Wounds Wake Me in Terror
Memory(ies)	My Wounds Attack When You Stand Too Near
Sense of Duty	My Battle Still Rages, My War Has Not Ended
Heavy Price	I Fight Still My Enemy is Unseen
Ear-Popping Pressure	In Concussion, Name Forgotten
Never Spoken	My Brain Too Hazy to be Scared
Hears the Scream	Blank Stare in My Eyes
Survival's Edge	And Now We Wait, Too Worn to Rest, Too Tired to Hate
Suffocation, Killing	We Lie and Wait, Our Sleep Disturbed
Mission's Sacred	My Ear Was Bleeding From the Chaos
Someone's Hit	Always Wishing I Was on My Way Home
Going Home	He Taught Me to Do What I Must
Buried	At Last! I've Got a Battalion!
Hard shell protects	So Now My Career is Behind Me



## APPENDIX B POETRY-EMOTIONS

Humble	Sleepy
Misery	Waiting
Panic	Uncertainty
Anxiety	Rage
Alone	Awakened
Fear/Fright(ened)	Haze
Dumb/Dumbfounded	Laugh(ed)
Broken	Exuberance
Helpless	Woe
Mourn(ed)	Wisdom
Love	Logic Deceive
Worry(ies)	Void
Shame	Glorious
Confusion	Weary
Blame(ing)	Peace
Anger	Unrest
Feelings	Uptight
Sober	Lazily
Honor(ed)	Agony
Patiently	Hollow
Pride/Proud	Happiness
Sorry(ow)	Suffer
Numb	Own Reflection
Depression	Transparent Tears
Stress	Exhausted
Calm(ness)	Sanity Unravels
Tired	Snap
Relief	Sadness
Suicidal Grief	Absurd
Hypervigilant	Gratefulness
Faith	Dismay
Lonely(iness)	Regrets
Guilt	Envy
Suicide Watch	Compassion
Scared/Afraid	Lost
Despair	Inflicted
Trust	Strength
Hope	Courage
Fearless	Dedication
Terror	Cluttered
Heartbreak	Devastation
Disgrace	Excited
Surprise(d)	Vulnerable

Weak	Curiosity
Hopeless	Somber
Anguish	Solemn
Grief	Friendly
Failure	Kind
Joy	Sweet
Soundless	Positive
Remembering	Howling
Dangerous	Redemption
Dignity(fied)	Darkness
Loyal	Hatred
Intelligent	Disrespect
Faithless	Loveless
Listen(end)	Violation
Struggle(d)	Indifference
Defeat	Disgust
Victory	Ashamed
Nervous	Disappointed
Visualize	Gloom
Determination	Accountable
Brokenhearted	Admired
Sacrifice(d)	

## APPENDIX C POETRY-PHYSICALITY

Blood	Blood Run Cold
Pain	Hear the Rolling Thunder
Throw Up	Feel the Melting Heat
Sweating	Smell the Flesh
Heart	I Still Feel the Distant Rumble
Sound(s)/Hear (ing, rd)	Smell Wet Stench
Smells	Sweat-Stung Eyes
Visions	Speak the Chant of Sing-Song Names
Barely Visible	See the Faces in “Rock” Blared Bar-Rooms
Flesh	Smiles
Bones	First Breath
Muscles	I Did Not Know Your Name, or Your Face
Organs	Bodies of Fallen
Cried	It Hurts to Love
Hand	Death had Drained Any Beauty From her Face
Head	Hands Holding Tight
Arms	Bone Fragments
Walk (ed, ing)	Body Parts
Blind	Your Charred Face Brittled on the Flight Mask
Laugh	We Looked for Body Parts
Walks Away	I can Smell Moth Balls for Miles, Jet Fuel for Days
Stings My Eyes	It Sticks to the Roof of my Mouth
Veins	I Can Feel the Inside Tire Blow on a Tractor Before I Hear It
Body	I Hear the Beat of His Heart
Ears	My Head and Heart are Haunted
Dilated Pupils	I Looked at my Reflection
Cochlear	Put Mind to Hand and Hand to Pen
Larynx	Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk
Marrow	Hands Fly Up Salute the Sound
Heat	Left Upper Extremity Extending from the Elbow
Ringworm Itch	A Box of Unseen Bones
Soggy Feet	Boxed Lifeless Bodies
Eyes Do Not See	At Least This Time the Bones Are Boxed Not Bagged
Fatigue	Clothes are Soaked with Blood
Boney Shoulders	Bodies Turned to Bones
Thin Hips	The Blindness of my Eyes Reflect the Darkness of my Heart
Lungs	The Light in my Eyes Never Passes the Doors of my Heart

Body Disfigured	Flesh Seared
Chin	Body Parts Dangling from Branches
Ear Drums Were Punctured	My Eyebrows Frosted
Eyes Were Blinded	Torsos Were Torn Asunder
Unwrinkled Faces	Fallen into the Other's Arms
Shudders	Pools of Blood
Your Body Goes	Eyes Closed to the Faceless Horror
Out of Body	Combat Boots Trample a Proud People
Echoing Sounds	Bloody Siege
Stumble and Stagger	Destroyed Limbs of All-American Hope
Stomped	Avoids his Sons' Scarred Faces
Chomped	Emptiness Overwhelms Anxious Hearts
Boots on My Feet	Belated Thanks from Faceless Crowds
Step and Turn	Rules of Engagement Tied Our Hands
Ankles	Smoke Blindness
Feet	Tears in Her Eyes
Dry, Cracked Lips	Hold My Hand
Heat Left My Body	Call for Someone to Bring Your Body Out
Face	Hands Shaking
My Eyes Saw Red	Death Breath, Deep Breath, Deep Breath
Brown Eyes	They Taught Us to See-Everything
Brown Feet	Locking Eyes
A Twinkle in His Eye	Dreams Still Echo to Crinkle Your Toes
Images of Dark Black Smoke	My Fingers and Mind Busy
Sound of Metal	Metal Ripping into Skin
Running Bodies	Rush to Stop the Flow of Blood
Twinkling Eyes Fill with Flames of Hate	Our Eyes Meet. We Are Both Surprised
Bodies Fly	Stare Deep into My Eyes
Bodies Lie Motionless	No Sound from Your Lips, just a Flow of Blood
A Brown Hand Drops a Green Dollar	The Drug Dog Sniffs and Sneezes
My White Hands Begin to Shake	Downcast Eyes
Breathless-Running So Fast	Close Your Eyes
My Body Came Back but Not My Mind	Keep My Head Down, Don't Look Left, Don't Look Right
Held Out My Hands	Murmuring Lips
Turned My Face Up	My Hand This Weapon
Forlorn	The succulents pierce my hands
Mind, Body, Spirit	Handprints
Genuflected knees	