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ARTICLE



## The affect of veteran activism

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the affects of veteran activism, primarily that of those who are doing work tied to ideals of social justice, and shows that this activism is a process of demilitarization. It asks why these veterans are doing what they are doing and how they are doing it. The answers to these questions come from 22 interviews conducted with veteran activists all around the United States. Throughout these interviews three major themes tied to this demilitarization became prevalent: (1) a part of the veterans' activism is tied to the community and camaraderie of other veterans with similar ideals and perspectives. This process works to form communities of awareness to the processes of militarization; (2) many veterans see their activism not only as a continuation of military service to the nation, but as inspired by their service, which in turn causes a demilitarizing reinscription of patriotism. This service is primarily done through social justice work that is seen as needed for the betterment of the nation that creates a critical narrative of western liberal democracy and US policy; and (3) their activism has become a form of healing, for themselves and for those affected by the violence of war, which becomes a demilitarization of the self.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Indoctrination

We did jumping jacks until we called them side-straddle hops.  
We walked with rucksacks on our backs until we called it humping.  
We fired guns until we called them weapons.  
We accepted punishment until we called it discipline.  
We shouted for death until we called it singing.  
We studied myths until we called them realities.  
We shot at plastic people until we called them the 'enemy'.  
We trained to oppress populations until we called it liberating them.  
We said things about stomping babies until we called them jokes.  
We did the wrong things until we called them right.  
We lived in fear until we called it courage.  
We called it something else until we believed it.

by Peter Sullivan (in *Iraq Veterans Against the War*, 2008)

## Introduction

The US military has been engaged in the ‘Global War on Terror’ for nearly 16 years. Military veterans who fought in these conflicts have been and still are intimately impacted by this war. A majority of these veterans primarily fought in either Afghanistan or Iraq. Today there are approximately 3 million post-9/11 veterans. The diversity of experiences from this group of people is vast, as is where they have ended up upon their exit from the military (“Profile of Post-9/11 Veterans: 2013” 2015).

As soldiers, these veterans were trained and formed in specific ways, for specific purposes, primarily to perpetuate violence (Higate 2013; Basham 2013). While every individual is affected differently by this training, there is a similar process of militarization which has come to light, and which tell us much about the military, the US government, western liberal democracy, the social and individual impacts of war (also known as affect), and subjectivity. Veterans are able to articulate these concepts and ideals differently than civilians because their lived experiences exemplify the ramifications of war and American policy. Often, veterans feel the affects of US policy before society does, thus acting as the miner’s canary. In this paper, I look at veterans who are actively working to address the long-lasting affects of war, militarism, and US policy, through social justice activism. By doing so, I show that the affect of this activism is a process of demilitarization, because as Cynthia Enloe points out, ‘what has been militarized, can be demilitarized’ (Enloe 2000, 291). Thus, veterans’ activism has become a site of critical inquiry as well as a site of healing from the traumas of war and militarism. Furthermore, veterans’ activism is not localized to military issues as they return to a quasi-militarized civilian world; therefore, the activism they are engaged in ranges from issues like immigration to events like Occupy Wall Street. As a result, we can find lessons for veteran healing as well as unique criticisms of militarism and US policy that affect everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

As Victoria Basham points out, soldiers act as ‘geocorporeal actors that are necessary for waging wars that harm some populations while preserving the life of others’ (Basham 2013, 12). Being a geocorporeal actor is partially tied to the function they play in war as those who have been physically trained in a particular way to enforce, uphold, and perpetuate the disciplinary power by the state, which becomes a part of their embodied subjectivity (Higate 2013). If a soldier comes to see their mission as less than honourable, such a perception can lead to post-traumatic stress (PTS) and moral injury (Mac Bica 2015; Meagher, Shay, and Hauerwas 2014).<sup>2</sup> As Robert Meagher, et al. (2014, 2) states, ‘They [veterans] all too often see themselves as criminals, not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced by their own experience of the essential criminality of war’. Being acutely aware of their subject position in relation to US policy (foreign and domestic), many veterans have turned to activism not only to make societal change against the perceived wrongs they once perpetuated, but also as a way to ontologically shift the embodied training that they experienced in the military. This is in contrast to the veterans who have become private military contractors as described by Paul Higate, as they are still relying on their militarized embodied military experience, but instead use their activism to make change through demilitarized nonviolent action, rather than perpetuating the violence embedded within their military training. Thus, the veterans I examine continue to act

as geocorporeal actors after leaving the military, though their aims are often at odds with the goals they worked to achieve while in the military.

While there has been some work on contemporary veteran issues, most have focused on issues around PTS, like Erin Finley's *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD Among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Finley 2012). Many of the veterans I interviewed were dealing with PTS, but often sought alternative forms of dealing with it, as opposed to seeking help from the Veterans Administration (VA). Many of the current engagements with veterans and PTS have been framed either medically/psychologically or administratively (i.e. whether or not the VA is sufficiently meeting needs). Similarly, there are a handful of academic journals that focus on veterans, but almost all are specifically focused on their health – journals such as *Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health*, *Journal of Military and Veteran Health*, and *Military Behavioral Health Journal*. Another main focus of many journal articles around veterans' issues is around veterans' reintegration into society and into higher education. Even in the inaugural issue of the greatly needed and recently constructed *Journal of Veteran Studies*, nearly every article was about the reintegration of veterans, focused upon their mental health issues. However, these works have failed to recognize that veterans are engaged in another agency-driven mode of being, which is the political. Many examinations of veterans fail to fully recognize the ways in which veterans are *subjects* (political agents fighting to reshape the lives of themselves and others) rather than *objects* (waiting for medical/administrative attention). While this sort of veteran advocacy is done with the best of intentions, it unwittingly renders veterans as objects/dependents (helpless and in need), robbing them of agency. This is ironic because the veterans themselves are contesting their militarism through an active de-objectification, through re-humanization, connection/relationship-building, and agency.

Therefore, this paper discursively examines a series of interviews that I conducted with veterans who identify as activists and seek to create this agency, which is a form of demilitarization. Within these interviews, three major themes tied to demilitarization became prevalent: (1) a part of the veterans' activism is tied to the community and camaraderie of other veterans with similar ideals and perspectives. Thus, these veterans were forming communities of awareness to the processes of militarization; (2) many veterans see their activism not only as a continuation of military service to the nation, but as inspired by their service, which causes a demilitarizing reinscription of patriotism. This service is primarily done through social justice work that is seen as needed for the betterment of the nation and which creates a critical narrative of western liberal democracy and US policy; and (3) their activism has become a form of healing, for themselves and for those affected by the violence of war, which is a demilitarization of the self. These themes of veteran activism provide an alternative narrative to the way in which returning veterans have largely been portrayed by the media, as they work to create a positive change not only in their communities, but on a national and global scale as well.

## Theoretical framework

Soldiers and veterans act as sites of inquiry as they are conduits that power passes through; therefore, militarization (and demilitarization) must be seen as a type of affect

(Foucault, Bertani and Fontana 2003; Macleish 2013; Basham 2013). Kenneth Macleish (2013, 14) states that this ‘affect describes what the social “feels like” in individuals and structures, senses and emotions, and desires and reasons without having to privilege any one of these things over the others’. Soldiers’ experiences in war have had physical and psychic affects that are intertwined not only with the traumas of war but also with the structures of power that sent them to war. The military *dispositif* actively works to shape the process of affect through disciplinary techniques; these techniques can be seen in the shaping of the body, as well as the acculturation and indoctrination processes (Foucault, Bertani and Fontana 2003; Protevi 2009; Schrader 2014).<sup>3</sup> As John Protevi points out, the basic function of modern military training is to ‘bypass protoempathic identification in order to desensitize soldiers, which in turn will make them more affective killers’ (Protevi 2009, xvi). Therefore, any action outside of the militarization process that soldiers are indoctrinated with is an affectual process that has the ability to shift the social and embodied experiences soldiers face daily. This is not always a demilitarizing process; however, when the action is directly focused upon the process of militarization, it becomes so.

With the shift to the ‘all-volunteer’ military force, there is a multiplicity of reasons that one would join the military. However, with a neoliberal economy that maintains low wages and few opportunities for many Americans, the military is often seen as a way out of one’s current position in life, since it provides educational opportunities and job skill training – though all too often these job skills do not transfer to the civilian world. Because of the lack of transferability of skills there are high levels of unemployment and high levels of homelessness amongst veterans, which can be seen as an excess within the neoliberal western democratic state. The excess produced – the veterans, whose skills are no longer valued and who thus are unemployed – by the security *dispositif* must find new skills to survive, or return to the military (as a soldier, or as a private contractor, as Higate points out). Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero state that within a security *dispositif* there is a certain paradox where ‘[s]uch biopolitical intercourse simultaneously both sustains and undermines itself’ (Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero 2008, 269). Therefore, there is excess and a lack within the security *dispositif* that work to militarize subjects within it.

War in general, and *dispositifs* in general, are never satisfied, because, as Michel Foucault points out, a *dispositif* is a ‘thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid’ (Agamben 2009). Therefore, the security *dispositif* is a continual cycle, constantly growing, giving, taking, and destroying; those who are in the military are a part of the *dispositif*, and once they leave, they are no longer needed for the continuance of the *dispositif* itself (besides as a rhetorical tool); thus, they become the excess.

Besides the physical and mental traumas that can come with military service, veterans’ whole being becomes militarized; from the ways they navigate space to their social interactions (Wool 2015). As Zoë Wool explains, the affect of the ‘soldiers experience of movement as suffused with the experiences of war zones, the way their experience of being and moving in one place has changed their experience of being and moving anyplace, including when they are not soldiers anymore’ (146). Therefore, the

affect of war and militarization is continually carried in the body and mind long after they have left the war zone, and in a quasi-militarized home front it remains a part of the subject for a long time.

Cynthia Enloe's construction of militarization is useful here. While Enloe examines militarism as more of a cultural phenomenon, in which the militarization of the soldier seems to be a given, it helps lay out the affect of militarization on soldiers. Enloe describes militarization as a:

step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal. Militarization, that is, involves cultural as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations. (Enloe 2000, 3)

Enloe goes on to state that the road to demilitarization is partially tied up with an unraveling of masculinity. A number of issues that come about in militarization processes range from dealing with PTS to issues of masculinity (Enloe 2000; Belkin 2012; Braswell and Kushner 2012; Basham 2013; Schrader 2014).<sup>4</sup> The military does a poor job dealing with these issues once a soldier comes home from combat, as there is little time to heal and no real attempt to deprogramme a soldier from the training meant to dehumanize and lead them to kill the perceived enemies of the state. As one veteran framed the transition to civilian life,

The military is what I know. To me that's reality. This crazy world called civilian life is an oddity to me and it always will be. I don't like not being able to trust people. Not being able to cuss someone out, and not have to worry about my livelihood. (Simms 2013).

Many veterans have expressed similar sentiments in this difficulty to transition, but as I will show, veterans' activism has worked to shift this reality and demilitarize the traumatic affect of their experience.

## PTS and moral injury

Before moving on, it is important to disaggregate some of the broader differences between PTS and moral injury, though without labouring too much on them because while they are important to this paper they are not its primary focus. The two conditions are not mutually exclusive, and indeed where there is one it would not be a surprise to find the other. While PTS is a clinical psychosocial term tied to specific events that can happen to a person in or out of war, moral injury is a newer concept that has been primarily linked to soldiers' 'emotional, spiritual, and psychological wounds that stem from the ethical and moral challenges that warriors face in combat' (Drescher et al. 2011, 12). So while a soldier can experience a traumatic event and suffer some of the affects of PTS, they will not necessarily experience moral injury unless they critically examine different factors of the event and then find the circumstances tied to that event immoral. The variety of immoral acts that occur include feelings of betrayal (by leadership and/or peers), disproportionate uses of violence, facing the morality of killing, and mistreatment of target populations (both enemy combatants and civilian populations) (Drescher et al. 2011; Mac Bica 2015). Some of the symptoms tied to

moral injury are often similar to those of PTS, but also include ‘social problems, trust issues, spiritual/existential issues, psychological issues, and self-deprecation’ (Drescher et al. 2011, 12).

The process of militarization works to erase the moral implications of war through the previously mentioned military socialization, but also through a hierarchical structuring of onus. A soldier’s chain of command is expected to be responsible for ensuring that the war is just (*jus ad bellum*) and that their orders are compliant with the rules of war (*jus in bello*) (Walzer 2006). If a soldier is ordered to do something that is considered unlawful they are expected to not complete the task; however, while this is *de jure*, going against orders is often met with heavy consequences, so following orders without question is the *de facto* situation. As I describe in greater detail below, within the initial training that soldiers receive, one of the primary goals in the militarization process is implementing the hierarchy of the chain of command above all else (Schrader 2014). However, numerous factors can lead to the breakdown of that militarized socialization, which would cause a soldier to question the moral implications that they face in combat. Many of the veterans I interviewed had some sort of moment that caused them to question the things they saw and participated in while in the military, often leading to symptoms of moral injury. So, the militarization process in training, coupled with their experiences in war, had lasting affects that they would face outside of the military. The activism that these veterans participated in after leaving the military worked to lessen the impacts of moral injury, subsequently often helping with symptoms of PTS, and worked to demilitarize the self through creating critical communities and the reframing of their service.

## Methods

Veterans becoming activists, especially social justice advocates, is not necessarily the norm.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to hear these voices because they represent a different view from the typical veteran precisely because their activism is an articulation of an as-yet-unmarked phenomenon: the embodiment of political agency to contest the objectification by the military (during service), and by the VA (through treatment).

To conduct this research I started by compiling a personal list of veterans whom I considered activists; this was mostly a list of veterans who were a part of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW). I then used a snowball method, having them reach out to contact their networks or other veterans they knew who considered themselves activists on any issue. This led to a large list of veterans who were interested in participating in in-depth interviews, with open-ended questions, that discussed their personal history, their time in the military, and their current activism. The interviews typically lasted 2 hours, and at times I spent the day with the participants, observing them in action, which allowed for extensive field notes. I asked each participant if there was someone else they knew who could be interviewed, which led to more interviews. From August to December 2013, I drove from coast to coast across North America (US, Mexico, and Canada) to conduct interviews with 22 self-identified veteran activists. I then transcribed all interviews and conducted thematic discursive analysis, which I coded and compiled, primarily into six different categories of activism that I had found amongst the participants: anti-war, class, environmental, gender, citizenship, and veteran healing.<sup>6</sup>

As I recruited and interviewed participants, my personal identity as a combat veteran helped on numerous levels. First and foremost, many of these veterans were excited to be helping a fellow veteran with a PhD project which they saw as strengthening the community for veterans. Secondly, veterans expressed that they were more at ease in relating their experiences to me, rather than to others they had been interviewed by (academic or media), because they knew that I had experienced similar things and that I not only understood them better but also would not judge them for their past actions. This is partially due to me opening interviews by relating my own experiences and explaining how I came to formulate my project. There was also a lot of interaction within the interviews, as we would often echo to one another similar experiences and stories about our time in service. Thirdly, there was no real language barrier, as many of the acronyms, duties, and structures discussed did not have to be explained to me.<sup>7</sup> Finally, while I did not interview anyone that I had a previous relationship with, a bond of friendship grew within many of the interviews, which led me to form relationships with many of the participants that I still value to this day. Again, this was in part due to our similar experiences in the military, but also due to our ideological views formed after our exit from the military, and our subsequent activism.

As explained above, the interviews began with me telling my story and explaining the project. To explain the project I began with my initial, overall theoretical framework. This led to a number of open-ended questions about interviewees' time before the military, in the military, and after the military. This allowed me to ask a range of questions about their subject formation from civilian to soldier to activist. While most interviews started the same way, they all took on a life of their own, exploring many different paths. Some interviews were held in coffee shops, some at the interviewees' places of business, and at times just after an activist action or event. When possible, I would observe their activism in action, taking field notes of the event, watching the reactions of others, and analysing the literature used to promote or explain the event or cause.

The empirical discussion here, as mentioned above, is a discursive analysis that has been broken up into three parts, examining one aspect of my overall findings as to what veteran activism does for veterans. In the following discussion, all names are the participants' actual names, as veterans wanted their work and activism to be exposed so that others may learn of their work and hopefully be inspired to do the same. However pseudonyms are used for any third-party, non-public figures who were discussed. Furthermore, I will be drawing from selected interviews to make some points; however, many of the other interviews often had similar resonances.

## **Community and camaraderie**

One of the tactics within military training, done primarily in basic training, is the affective breaking down of the individual and the rebuilding or militarization of the soldier (Hockey *n.d.*). Part of that building of the soldier is the formation of the unit mindset (Hockey *n.d.*). Within this mindset is the way in which soldiers not only obey and are a part of a hierarchical structure, but also rely upon and form important social bonds with those they are in a unit with, thus being the objects of power (Protevi 2009;



Hockey n.d.). These social bonds are often seen as strong as familial bonds, as the soldiers are expected and trained to fight and die, with or for, their fellow soldiers (Herman 1997). This ‘brotherhood’ in some ways is lost upon a soldier’s exit from the military, often leading to isolation, and depression, as veterans long to have that familial structure they had while in the military (Wool 2015). There is a further feeling of isolation as many veterans sometimes struggle to deal with those who have not been in the military or those who have not been to war (Gutmann and Lutz 2010). Thus, veterans often seek out communities of other veterans, which range from social clubs like the American Legion (which also has an advocacy/activism element) to the wide range of social justice veteran activist organizations I interviewed. This activism provides a feeling of camaraderie like what they had in the military.

Many of the veterans I interviewed had participated in or been a part of the Combat Paper project, which specifically focuses on the camaraderie aspect of military service by bringing veterans together for multiday workshops. Within these workshops they are taught how to turn their old uniforms into paper. The paper is then used for art, and participants are encouraged to make art related to their military experience. To do so a communal approach is used that builds a sense of camaraderie as a tool for healing (the healing process used by Combat Paper will be discussed further in the final section of this paper). When I asked Drew Cameron, founder of Combat Paper, why he continues to train groups of veterans in how to transform their uniforms into paper, part of his reply was that:

in the past a big part of the [veteran] narrative is this you don’t want to talk about it, come home, keep quiet, get a job, carry on. And now, these days, there seems to be more room and more interest for people to know what it was like, they wanna know.... Being open to that, searching for that, and encouraging that is again a part of finding a community, so you’re communalizing the experience, which is critical for reintegration. (Drew Cameron, interview, 2013)

So, the communal aspect goes beyond solely benefiting veterans in their search for camaraderie, as there is a community presence in some of the workshops and events. It acts as a tool for helping the civilian population better understand the veteran population and the veterans’ lived experience, while at the same time helping the veteran heal through telling their story. This is another example of these veterans shifting from being the objects of power to the subjects of power.

The restoration of social bonds is important as these groups are able to relate stories and experiences, which allows the veterans to know that they are not alone in the traumas that they have experienced (Herman 1997). With the sense of betrayal being a primary aspect of moral injury, which often causes social problems and trust issues, the restoration of these social bonds is crucial, especially for veteran populations whose identity is centred on a group dynamic. Thus, an affectual group cohesion and healing is extended to all veterans’ activist groups that I am looking at throughout this project. As Judith Herman points out:

When groups develop cohesion and intimacy, a complex mirroring process comes into play. As each participant extends herself to others, she becomes more capable of receiving the gifts that others have to offer. The tolerance, compassion, and love she grants to others begin to rebound upon herself. Though this type of mutually enhancing interaction can

take place in any relationship, it occurs most powerfully in the context of a group. (1997, 216)

While Herman is discussing groups specifically geared towards healing, activist circles have many of the same elements involved, from a goal-oriented drive to the need for empowerment. There is also a parallel in this mirroring process to demilitarization, whereas when one heals one can then understand what tactics the military implemented in order to train the soldier to perpetuate violence. There is a similarity between war and healing from war, a mirror of sorts as one works to reveal the other. One example of this that I found came through the organization Veterans Green Jobs, which utilized the military training structure of veterans by taking them to the woods in squads to learn the skills of the green industry. The veterans who participated in this training were able to recognize the style of training, but since the goals were not military oriented it shifted the embodied experience of the original militarized training.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay found similar results in the ‘rap sessions’ he had with Vietnam veterans, in that having a community in which veterans are able to construct a narrative creates a space of healing (Shay 1995). Therefore, this directly fights the excess produced by the military dispositif and through building a community of affective healing also builds one of awareness to the traumas of war, while also critically examining the moral underpinnings of veterans’ experience. By being able to recognize the way in which militarization has scarred them, these veterans have been able to rely less on militarism; they no longer depend for their well-being on militaristic ideas as they are able to let go of those traumas that were produced by the military dispositif.

### **Reinscription of patriotism**

When joining the military, soldiers must swear an oath to uphold the constitution and to defend it against enemies, both foreign and domestic.<sup>8</sup> It is in this oath that a number of veterans have found validation in their activism (Leitz 2014). The oath is meant to show loyalty to the nation, and many veterans still feel that it is their duty to uphold that oath long after their time in the military. The idea of continuing to protect the nation from ‘enemies, foreign and domestic’ through social justice activism is in and of itself a critique of the state. The Constitution’s preamble claims to guarantee an establishment of justice and the promotion of a general welfare, which these veterans feel are not being upheld. Therefore, the state itself becomes a perceived enemy to the Constitution that these veterans swore to uphold. These veterans feel they are continuing their service through the promotion of social justice issues, which is a shift from an embodiment of those who make war to those who create peace through non-violent means – which works to demilitarize not only themselves, but also the country.

The organization IVAW was a jumping-off point for many of the veterans I interviewed. This organization led them to a number of different movements in which they felt they were upholding their Constitutional duties of protecting the country: from antiwar activists in IVAW who feel the war in Iraq was founded upon lies, to veterans involved in environmental activism who feel the nation needs to stop fighting resource wars and should instead seek clean energy solutions.

A good example of this comes from veterans who got involved with the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Broadly speaking, OWS was a reaction to neoliberal policies that intertwine what David Harvey describes as the ‘state–finance nexus’ (Harvey 2011). While this reaction could be seen on all sides of the political spectrum – as the conservative version came via the Tea Party – OWS was seen as more of a leftist movement. These framings cast many of the Occupiers as unpatriotic hippies and anarchists, and the Tea Party as patriots and upholders of the constitution (Rich 2011; Schrader 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). However, many of the veterans within the OWS movement sought to shift that framing, as the geocorporality of the embodied veteran identity, which is often framed as the patriotic body of America, shifted the narrative from hippie protesters to veterans upholding their duty by fighting the injustices created by the state–financial nexus.

As David Harvey explains in an interview,

in parallel with the state–finance nexus is the military industrial complex which is a bit of a misnomer because it is really about the concentration of military and police powers backed by a justice system that is shaped in support of capitalist class power. (Harvey 2016)

Therefore, the veterans fighting this state–financial nexus are also fighting the militarism that is embedded within it, which they are fully aware of, as these veterans highlight the poverty that pushed them into the military, the ways in which the state–financial nexus profits greatly off their sacrifices, and the lack of opportunities and care they face upon their exit from the military. As veteran Shamar Thomas – who became a YouTube sensation while standing up to 10 cops while in his Marine uniform – states about his involvement with OWS:

This is a chance to voice our issues – police brutality, economic injustice, foreclosed homes.... I’m a warrior, I don’t have any fear in the streets. So how do I sit on a couch and watch people fight for our freedom and not do anything about it? That’s cowardice. This is about my freedom and the freedom of my people. (quoted in Levitin 2012)

Thomas would later tell me about his view of the poor treatment of veterans and the economic hardships he faced, such as homelessness, upon his return. Like other veterans involved in OWS, Thomas’ critique of the state is double edged as it works to expose not only the problems with neoliberalism but also its intersections with militarism. Veterans’ involvement led to a number of other splinter groups tied to OWS, that had a sort of ‘Occupy Militarism’ theme, such as ‘Global Veterans of the 99%’, which was coordinated with IVAW, as well as Occupy MARINES, Occupy Navy, Occupy Airforce, Occupy Coast Guard, and Occupy Military Families (Thomas 2013). Furthermore, his participation in these groups acted as an outlet to fight the aspects of militarism that he found immoral.

Finally, veteran involvement with OWS constantly exposed an interesting imbrication of the war front and the home front; this came primarily through the use of military equipment and the tactics of the police. The veterans’ ability to compare and contrast their experiences in war zones to the way in which people were being treated by police forces shows the resonance between the two experiences. This becomes strikingly clear, and ironic, with the case of Scott Olsen who fought two tours in Iraq without injury only to come home and be critically wounded at an OWS protest, which

gave him PTS. He continues to be active within IVAW as it is a critical community that works to fight the injustices of militarism.

These clashes between veterans and police create a moral questioning of the actual democratic ideals of western liberalism. The veterans' participation in these social movements works to shift the idea of dissent from something that is considered unpatriotic to something that is seen as critically needed, while also helping to define some of the aspects that are at the roots of moral injury and militarism. New layers of militarism are exposed and able to be charted so that processes of demilitarization can begin to take place. The more that is understood through this exposure, the more the veteran activists for healing from moral injury can be affective. This is the present aim of IVAW through their current *Drop the MIC* project (MIC = military industrial complex).

### Fight to survive

The trauma of war remains within our minds, bodies, and souls. Some memories are now old, fading scars, while others remain a scab that we constantly pick at. All of the veterans I interviewed experienced some sort of difficulty in their return to civilian life. For some it was nearly impossible to reintegrate in daily life; for others it came more naturally. A recurring theme in the attempt to return to 'normalcy' was the use of different crutches, from drugs and alcohol as many tried to forget, to art and activism as they tried to transform their experience into something positive. As Drew Cameron explains,

a lot of us did all that stuff [go to war] for something that we didn't see as entirely good and now on the other side it's like trying to use that same idea and intention, but for something that we can believe in, that we think is good. I came back from war and I know now I can say intellectually that I did my part but a part of me feels like I didn't. So it's coming around and trying to fulfil some of that, trying to fulfil some of that unfulfilment, that big hole in the gap and also tip the scale of feeling like I did a lot of bad and now I need to do a lot of good. 'Cause I believe inside that I'm a good person and that this world is a good thing. (Drew Cameron, interview, 2013)

As mentioned before, Cameron and the Combat Paper project do this through having veterans turn their old uniforms into paper. With the paper they then write, draw, and paint their experiences; they 'value add', or fill the hole of the unfulfilling nature of war, through this deconstruction, through an examination, through the art and writing that is put onto the paper (Drew Cameron, interview, 2013). This deconstruction and value-adding process is an ontological shift, as the nature and being of the uniform and all that has been inscribed into it are literally and symbolically broken down to their bare fundamentals and reconstructed into something new, with new meanings, ideas, thoughts, memories, etc. Thus, the process makes the uniform a floating signifier, from an embodiment of the soldier to one of an activist. This rearticulation of one's experiences is one way in which the healing process of activism works, in which as mentioned before the veteran is shifting from the object of power to the subject of power, as it is their agency that promotes this process of demilitarization.

Similarly, many of the veterans I found whose activism was focused upon helping other veterans heal often worked to use the veterans' embodied experience and affectively shift the veterans' relationship to war. There are a number of tactics used by these activists, from art therapy to getting veterans out in nature. With an estimated 300,000

veterans returning with symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and PTS (and an unknown number with moral injury as it is not tracked in any way), there must be alternative forms of healing for veterans (as opposed to the VA's prescriptions), especially in light of the 22 veterans, on average, who commit suicide every day (Hawkins 2009; Basu 2014). Furthermore, many of these veterans who committed suicide had reached out for help. All too often the VA prescribes anti-depressants, which do not interact well with alcohol – often the veterans' favourite escape mechanism. These veteran activists work to provide these alternatives, while also exposing social justice issues. As Cameron states about Combat Paper:

Coming home from war is a difficult thing. There is often much to account for as a survivor. A new language must be developed in order to express the magnitude and variety of the collective affect. Hand papermaking is the language of Combat Paper. By working in communities directly affected by warfare and using the uniforms and artefacts from their experiences, a transformation occurs and our collective language is born. (Drew Cameron, interview, 2013)

Similarly, many of these other forms of activism being practised are creating new collective languages, from creating art to environmentalism. These languages directly work to demilitarize the self as they problematize the affects of militarism. Processes once used to militarize are reused in demilitarizing the subject – like the uniform being reused in Combat Paper, the woodland survival skills used in retraining veterans utilized by Veterans Green Jobs, the marching in uniform up and down the border to highlight deported veterans, and even the process of uniformly standing in formation outside a VA hospital to protest the lack of care.

This rearticulation of veterans' experience is a deprogramming of the embodied tendencies that have been driven into them through war and military training. One example of this can be found in many of the environmental activists' intentional tactics with their use of nature, wherein walking through the woods naturally enacts eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR; Arkowitz and Lilienfeld 2007). EMDR therapy works to make veterans not feel the need to be hyper-vigilant, a common symptom of PTS. The military sees this hyper-vigilance as a benefit, as a soldier needs to be able to easily 'switch on' their combat senses (Higate 2013). However, in the civilian setting this can be dangerous for the veteran and those around the veteran. Therefore, this activism works to get veterans out and working in nature, rather than sitting and waiting for a VA appointment, that can often take months, with a doctor who utilizes EMDR therapy. It becomes an alternative form of healing from the embodied traumas of war, and becomes a way to demilitarize the veteran as it works to heal them mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, thus combating both PTS and moral injury. With veterans being the unneeded and unwanted excess produced by the military dispositif, the act of healing, in and of itself, becomes a political act.

## Conclusion

There is a long history of veteran activism, from WWI's Bonus Army, to Vietnam Veterans Against the War, to the contemporary IVAW – veteran activism continues today. The veterans I interviewed who were once geocorporeal actors in times of war continue to be so, though in different ways, as they interact and often resist the

very institutions that they were a part of as soldiers. They all seek to continue the long journey of fighting for what is right, both at home and abroad. Veterans should be encouraged to join these politically active communities that are not only seeking to make positive change, but also to critically engage with the state; in doing so they reclaim their geocorporeality, while also healing from the wounds of war.

Secondly, we see that many of the veterans involved in social justice movements are seeking to expose the militarization of the state–finance nexus. The critique that comes about through their activism shows the clash between neoliberalism and the ideals of western liberal democracy. The codependent relationship between capitalism and militarization has become an obstinate aspect of modernity. Be that as it may, a space of demilitarization is possible as the imbrication of the two becomes clear. This interaction between the state and the veterans' embodied experience also rearticulates leftist dissent from something that is contentious into something that is patriotic and necessary for demilitarization.

Finally, the act of healing – and activism around healing – works to create communities of demilitarization, as they work on the self and issues of moral injury. The activism also works to transform the state, which has created the conditions for that moral injury. In this way, a number of issues that come about in the processes of militarization range from dealing with PTS to issues of masculinity (Enloe 2000; Gallagher 2016). The military does a poor job dealing with these issues once a soldier comes home from combat, as there is little time to heal and no real attempt to deprogramme a soldier from the training meant to dehumanize and lead them to kill the perceived enemies of the state. These communities use the very tools and tactics created to militarize the soldier in order to demilitarize the veteran (i.e. behavioural conditioning, deconstruction of identity, etc.). And again, as Enloe points out, that which is militarized can be demilitarized (Enloe 2000).

There needs to be a space of demilitarization, where soldiers can heal and come home to a safe environment. Activist organizations often provide that space as they disrupt the processes of militarization, and all that comes with it: racism, sexism, hypermasculinity, and dehumanization. Activism not only gives veterans a sense of agency, it also creates healing communities where they can reflect on their experiences and heal from the traumas of war. This political framing makes veterans the subjects of change rather than the objects of it; thus, they are pushing back against the trauma of militarization, against the inevitability of neoliberalism, and against becoming the excess of the security dispositif. As veteran, poet, and activist Paul Abernathy puts it:

Never again must we fall into the belief that a 'band of brothers' is something only achievable while making war on others.... We must see a brotherhood for what it truly is, an ultimate expression of love, and we must remember it is not something we can enforce and foster with a rifle.

-Paul Abernathy (in *Iraq Veterans Against the War*, 2008)

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## Notes

1. I am appreciative to the anonymous reviewer for helping to develop this point.
2. I am utilizing post-traumatic stress (PTS) rather than the normative post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as I am amongst a growing community of veterans who wish to disrupt the idea that it is or should be labeled as a ‘disorder’.
3. Here and throughout I am drawing upon Michel Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif*. A *dispositif* is an overall construct or system; so the military *dispositif* includes not just members of the military, the equipment, the training, the policies, and its standard operating procedure, but also the ways in which the military is seen, understood, talked about, and thought about, as well as its impacts, past, present, and future.
4. While masculinity is a symptom of the problem within militarization, it is not the focus of this paper, as I am focused on the demilitarization process that is broader than issues of masculinity alone.
5. Though if one were to broaden the idea of activism it could come to encompass veterans’ organizations such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars; also, more conservative groups such as the Tea Party and different militias can be seen as activists. This is not, however, the focus of this particular study, but rather an aspect that can be looked at in future research.
6. Some veterans were participants in multiple forms of activism, putting them in multiple categories. Thus, parts of their interviews were put in different categories.
7. There were at times differences due to different branches of the military, but there were often relatable terms. For example, the US Army has medics and the Marines has corpsmen who fulfill the same duties, but many of these differences are often known throughout the different branches.
8. The oath of allegiance reads: ‘I, [state your name], do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God’ (Oath of Enlistment 2012).

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