

09 AN ECONOMY OF SUSPICION / ON THE “MILITARY-CIVILIAN DIVIDE” AND THE NEW AMERICAN MILITARISM

Standing in the White House briefing room in October 2017, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly delivered a defense of his commander in chief. Responding to criticism of Donald Trump for his allegedly insensitive comments on a phone call to the wife of a soldier killed in Niger, Kelly’s remarks were steeped in references to the “military-civilian divide,” even as he did not name it as such. And his was no simple empirical description:

Who are these young men and women? They are the best one percent this country produces. Most of you, as Americans, don’t know them. Many of you don’t know anyone who knows any one of them. But they are the very best this country produces, and they volunteer to protect our country when there’s nothing in our country anymore that seems to suggest that selfless service to the nation is not only appropriate but required.

At the end of his prepared statement, Kelly was willing to take questions only from “someone who knows,” a Gold-Star parent or sibling or someone who knew one.¹ He closed the briefing with the following words: “We don’t look down upon those of you who haven’t served. In fact, in a way we’re a little bit sorry because you’ll have never experienced the wonderful joy you get in your heart when you do the kinds of things our

service men and women do—not for any other reason than they love this country” (*New York Times* 2017).

In the shadow of the ongoing “wars on terror,” the US public domain is saturated with references to the military-civilian divide. So, too, is it replete with talk about soldier trauma. Combat’s psychological afterlife has emerged as a powerful and pervasive framework through which the American invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan appear in the public domain, that is, the framework through which they are discussed, collective responsibility is articulated, and the obligations of citizenship are fashioned. Talk of a military-civilian divide and the discourse of soldier trauma operate in concert to interpellate American civilians to the call of war, I argue, and they do so, in part, by creating an economy of suspicion that haunts the civilian citizen: she who is tarnished by a moral and epistemological lack, she who must support those citizens who have gone off to war and sacrificed themselves in her name.

In *The Image before the Weapon*, Helen Kinsella (2011) develops a genealogical account of “the civilian.” While the meaning of “combatant” has been quite stable since the twelfth century, she argues, that is not so for the civilian. Only in the nineteenth century did the word come to refer to someone “who is not a member of the armed forces” (29). And, as Kinsella rightly insists, the focus on *who* a civilian is belies the more fundamental question as to *what* a civilian is. That question cannot be answered by any simple reference to an individual who is a noncombatant. Kinsella traces the emergence of the figure of the civilian—in different times, in different contexts of warfare—out of “threads” that weave together discourses of gender, innocence, and civilization in distinct ways (7). As my argument unfolds, I will focus on the matter of “innocence.”

If, at the most basic level, a civilian is she who is not a combatant, that means something quite specific in the context of a state that can conduct its wars on someone else’s soil. In the American vernacular and, more specifically, with reference to the “war on terror,” “civilian” refers not to a noncombatant in a war zone but to someone who has never experienced war (the term is often modified in reference to civilians in a war zone, as, say, Iraqi or Afghan civilians). Nor is this civilian simply someone with no experience of war. She is someone *who can never truly know* war. Among citizens are those—soldiers, veterans (and in a different way, their families)—who know war, and those who do not. And the divide is stark. These two kinds of citizens are separated by an epistemological and moral abyss, and all sorts of work about national obligation, responsibility, and

civic value and virtue gets done in the space in between. American civilians are innocent. But theirs is an innocence with a twist. Their innocence is suspect, even pernicious. It is a guilty innocence. The innocence of American civilians operates as an accusation: civilians are naive about the evil that exists in the world, ignorant about what war is really like. Their innocence signals a privilege that those sent off to fight wars on their behalf do not have.

In what follows, I explore this figure of the (American) civilian through a reading of three intersecting phenomena: an emerging public discourse about “moral injury” (a rearticulation of the trauma of combat), the gesture of thanking soldiers for “their service,” and a call being issued to the civilian public to care for soldiers and help them “heal.” I trace discursive practices and demands through which the suffering soldier appears as the only meaningful, the sole *acknowledged* “object” of concern and action (Cavell 1969; Zerilli 2016) in the public domain. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s writings on representative thinking, judgment, politics, and collective responsibility (1958, 1967), I explicate and question an American political common sense in which “we” *must* “support the troops.” And I do so by exploring the forms of care that the support is supposed to take as well as the grounds—epistemological, moral, and political—on which the demand is being made.

In so doing, I shift the terrain of much public political critique. I do not focus on the role of state secrecy in sustaining American militarism and war, that is, that the US security state lied to the American public about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or that it insisted that the American military was making progress in the war in Afghanistan, even though that was far from the truth (Ackerman 2021; Whitlock 2021). For that matter, I query the foundational assumptions of projects such as Wikileaks, that is, that the conspiratorial nature of the US state—the enormous labor that it puts into keeping secrets from its citizens—ensures the impossibility of a robust democratic politics. No doubt, the US security state believes in its own high-stakes game of state secrecy, presumably, that it ensures the American public remains “ignorant” about much of what the United States does in the world. Nevertheless, rather than understanding state secrecy as the only—or even, the primary—obstacle to a critical and participatory democratic citizenship, I suggest it can operate as an alibi for political inaction. The American public, I maintain, knows *more than enough* to engage in a robust critique of American militarism, if only it would choose—and were authorized—to do so.

Caring for soldiers is a constitutive labor of American militarism in the post-9/11 era. The demand to care for the troops functions as an ideological mechanism that attaches American civilians to the war (Terry 2017) and relies on a fundamental misrecognition. While presented as a politically neutral act and an unequivocal ethical good, caring for traumatized (and injured) soldiers captures the American civilian—liberal and conservative, pro- and (presumably) antiwar—in its distinctly imperial gaze. The post-9/11 wars appear only in and through their costs to American troops; no one else, it seems, is of any ethical or political concern.

SOLDIER TRAUMA

In giving an account of stories of soldier trauma in the public domain, I focus here on a particular emergent trauma frame. In 2009, several Veterans Administration (VA) psychologists published a paper questioning whether post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was the suitable diagnosis for many combat veterans coming in for treatment (Litz et al. 2009). PTSD's etiology resides in "life-threatening trauma," they wrote; it describes a fear-based response. But many soldiers suffer from something other than the lingering aftermath of existential threat. According to the VA psychologists, soldiers suffer the psychological consequences of having violated their own moral standards. Killing women and children, of course—but also prescribed killing and the handling of dead bodies, even simply witnessing the depravity of war, can precipitate moral harm. Brett Litz, Nathan Stein, and colleagues proposed "moral injury" as the name for this (other) syndrome and began developing distinct clinical protocols to respond to this particular wound of war.²

While not formally recognized as a distinct diagnostic category, the concept of *moral injury* has traveled beyond the medical domain. As described by Tyler Boudreau (2018), a Marine who served in Iraq and later became critical of the war, "It's a term being used more frequently across the medical community and among political activists, various faith groups, and others. 'Moral injury' is capturing attention in the media and veterans' organizations" (53).

In March 2014, the *Huffington Post* published a three-part essay by David Wood on moral injury among American troops returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It opens with the following words: "How do we begin to accept that Nick Rudolph, a thoughtful, sandy-haired

Californian, was sent to war as a 22-year-old Marine and in a desperate gun battle outside Marjah, Afghanistan, found himself killing an Afghan boy? That when Nick came home, strangers thanked him for his service and politicians lauded him as a hero?" Wood continues,

Can we imagine ourselves back on that awful day in the summer of 2010, in the hot firefight that went on for nine hours? Men frenzied with exhaustion and reckless exuberance, eyes and throats burning from dust and smoke, in a battle that erupted after Taliban insurgents castrated a young boy in the village, knowing his family would summon nearby Marines for help and the Marines would come, walking right into a deadly ambush.

In case we cannot imagine it, Wood does it for us:

Nick . . . spots somebody darting around the corner of an adobe wall, firing assault rifles at him and his Marines. Nick raises his M-4 carbine. He sees the shooter is a child, maybe 13. With only a split second to decide, he squeezes the trigger and ends the boy's life.

As for Nick himself, he concedes the problem: "He was just a kid. But . . . I'm trying not to get shot and I don't want any of my brothers getting hurt. . . . You know it's wrong. But . . . you don't have a choice." Wood tells his readers that Nick is haunted by the boy's death. It has left him "mired in the swamp of moral confusion and contradiction so familiar to returning veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Wood 2014a). That is the essence of moral injury, which is common among those who have fought these latest American wars.

In choosing to describe this particular case, Wood is able to depict a young American Marine's moral injury as rooted in his actions during a battle instigated by a barbaric act. Stories of barbaric acts, culturally incommensurable values, and an enemy who does not recognize the laws of war characterize many accounts of the wars on terror and their "signature wound," moral injury.³ But there are also other kinds of stories, some providing more politically critical accounts, like the one told by an army veteran at a training workshop on moral injury, about how he was shaken to his core by his own cruelty toward an Iraqi child. An adult rushed over to protect the child and this army veteran said he did not recognize himself in the man's terrified eyes. Who had he become? There are the moral injuries caused by the everyday acts involved in carrying out an occupation—

kicking in doors, scaring the family, finding no insurgents at home (see Boudreau 2018). Soldiers tell of mistaking noncombatants for insurgents in the heat of battle or at a checkpoint with a car speeding toward them that fails to stop (see, for example, Fallows 2015). For the most part, these narratives are framed by a conversation about the inevitable moral ambiguities of counterinsurgency wars. Occasionally they are offered—almost exclusively by veterans—as a political critique of America’s wars and its global reach, which they now oppose.

IN OUR NAME

In the preface to a well-reviewed book on moral injury an ex-general asks, “What does the nation owe its citizens—who-become soldiers?” (Sherman 2015, xiii–xiv). That question organizes the discourse about moral injury as it appears in the public domain, often tethered to the “fact” of the growing military-civilian divide. National Public Radio (2011) reported 2,226,883 Americans serving in the US military as of March 31, 2010, less than 1 percent of the total US population (309 million in 2010).⁴ But the divide is not simply a matter of numbers. As of 2015, according to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Some 49% of the 1.3 million active-duty service members in the U.S. are concentrated in just five states—California, Virginia, Texas, North Carolina and Georgia” (Zucchini 2015). In addition to being highly concentrated, “as many as 80% of those who serve come from a family in which a parent or sibling is also in the military.” And “[t]hey often live in relative isolation—behind the gates of military installations such as Ft. Bragg or in the deeply military communities like Fayetteville, N.C., that surround them” (Zucchini 2015; see also Sherman 2015, 29).⁵ It is not surprising, then, if the “US military today is gradually becoming a separate warrior class . . . increasingly distinct from the public it is charged with protecting” (Zucchini 2015).⁶

Talk of the military-civilian divide indexes far more than straightforward statistical facts, however, as Kelly’s performance at the White House press conference makes clear. It speaks to the question of political judgment, in which a virtue attaches to military personnel, and, by way of comparison, a critique of citizens who have not served. Moreover, it stages a call to citizens who have not gone to war to step up to the plate and support those who have. As Nancy Sherman, a philosophy professor

at Georgetown University, put it at a conference, “Even in a city like ours, those who wear uniforms are exotic. . . . So my work is in a sense helping us to come out of the bunker on both sides. I don’t think you can only talk to your fellow buddies over a beer if you’re coming home from war.”⁷

What is involved in coming out of these respective bunkers? More specifically, in this discourse about war, troops, civilians, and moral injury, what kinds of practices, obligations, and responsibilities are called into being? Let me return to David Wood’s (2014a, 2014b, 2014c) essays in the *Huffington Post*. He does far more than elaborate the contours of moral injury. A second theme structuring his narrative is the chasm of knowledge and understanding he sees dividing civilians from soldiers. His articles are an effort to bridge that divide. He notes several distinctive features of life at war. For example, there is a particular closeness and love among the members of a combat unit. Given that intimacy, the “traumatic loss of someone you love [a fellow soldier] is not fully understandable by a civilian.” He quotes Amy Amidon, a psychologist who works with active-duty Marines, saying that “civilians are lucky that they still have a sense of naïveté about what the world is like. . . . The average American means well, but what they need to know is that these [military] men and women are seeing incredible evil, and coming home with that weighing on them and not knowing how to fit back into society” (Amidon, as quoted in Wood 2014a). Or, as Timothy Kudo (2018) recounts in his essay, “On War and Redemption”:

When I returned from Afghanistan this past spring, a civilian friend asked, “Is it good to be back?” It was the first time someone had asked, and I answered honestly. But I won’t do that again. We weren’t ready for that conversation. Instead, when people ask, I make it easy for everyone by responding, “It’s fine.” That’s a lie, though. It’s not fine. (79)

“Thank you for your service.” Critiques of this (presumably) prevalent gesture occupy a lot of space in the literature on war, soldiers, civilians, and homecoming. While no doubt received and interpreted in various ways by (ex-)military personnel in practice, *as a trope* the act stands for the fraught relationship between soldiers and civilians the way the image of civilians spitting on Vietnam veterans or calling them “baby killers” did for that earlier war. Thanking soldiers and veterans for their war service is treated as a sign of support, a signal that the American public has learned the lessons of Vietnam. As argued by Elizabeth Samet (2011):

Whether anyone ever spat on an American soldier returning from Vietnam is a matter of debate. . . . Apocryphal or not, this image has become emblematic of an era's shame, and of the failure of civilians to respond appropriately to the people they had sent to fight a bankrupt war. The specter of this guilt—this perdurable archetype of the hostile homecoming—animates today's encounters. . . . “Thank you for your Service” has become a mantra of atonement. (787–89)

Nevertheless, according to many, this supposed gesture of thanks tends not to be all that well received. As Matthew Richtel (2015) explains, the “thank you for your service phenomenon,” more often than not, “comes across as shallow, disconnected, a reflexive offering from people who, while meaning well, *have no clue what soldiers did over there* or what motivated them to go, and who would never have gone themselves nor sent their own sons and daughters” (emphasis added). Being thanked “can feel self-serving for the thankers, suggesting that he did it for them, and that they somehow understand the sacrifice, night terrors, feelings of loss and bewilderment. Or don't think about it at all.”⁸ David Finkel's (2013) book, *Thank You for Your Service*, now a major motion picture, is an intimate account of veterans who have returned from fighting in Iraq, a portrait of broken lives, of psychological and physical pain that stands in glaring contrast to the book's title. What precisely are we thanking them for? And what are the afterlives of war for soldiers who civilians feel compelled to thank?⁹

In *Afterwar*, Nancy Sherman (2015) unpacks what she calls the “ritual” of thanking men and women for their service. Sherman asks, “How can gratitude be substantive when its expression is so trivialized in a pat, easy-to-say ‘Thank you’” (39)? In contrast to many other commentators, she refuses to dismiss the gesture out of hand, instead thinking about what a civilian is doing when she thanks someone for their service. The ritual is “a public enactment and recommendation of a norm,” Sherman insists. “Our gratitude shows others how to respond” and “in showing gratitude, we ourselves come to feel gratitude” (44). Thanking soldiers for their service is a practice of ethical self-fashioning, the cultivation of a morally appropriate disposition on the part of civilians in the face of those who “have served.” In this spirit, Sherman stages her book as a call to (civilian) readers to engage with those who went off to war. It is “a manifesto for how to engage in moral repair, one on one, with individual

service members and veterans so that we can begin to build a new kind of integrated community” (19). “We’ve been at war while the country has been at the mall,” Sherman reports being told by soldiers, invoking a well-rehearsed trope—or accusation.¹⁰ “Each side feels the distance” between the military and the society in whose name, presumably, it went off to war (19). And in response, Sherman argues for “the moral necessity for each of us to be personally engaged in the largest reintegration of American service members into civilian society since Vietnam. The mil/civ walls have to come down. It is critical for the moral healing of soldiers” (19).

Developing her argument, Sherman asks civilians to step up in the face of a widespread “resentment” on the part of (ex-)military personnel. Rather than recoil from tense encounters, she wants American civilians to understand veterans’ resentment and to fashion a productive response. This is not Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of *ressentiment*, Sherman makes clear. Resentment involves “holding another to account, of demanding respect, of calling out another for due attention and recognition as part of a shared moral community. It is a way of saying another is responsible to you” (26). Implicit in it is the “complaint that civilian fellow citizens . . . fail to assume an adequate degree of moral responsibility for the wars that they (indirectly or directly) help wage, and for the afterwar—the arduous veteran recovery that follows in the wake of going to war” (32).¹¹

I want to unpack Sherman’s account of resentment, civilians, responsibility, and moral healing. She demands that civilians recognize a national collective responsibility for (some of) the afterlives of the ongoing American wars. But what does a “one-on-one” obligation to help soldiers heal entail? And what does it preclude?

CIVILIAN RESPONSIBILITY AND THERAPEUTIC CITIZENSHIP

In *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*, David Wood (2016) insists that healing from moral injury will never happen within a purely clinical setting. Instead, he writes, “True healing of veterans with war-related moral injuries will only come from community . . . peers, neighborhoods, faith congregations, service organizations, individuals. That means it’s up to us” (260).

Whether moral injury is best treated by clinicians, or even framed in medical-psychiatric terms, is far from a settled question. As the concept

circulates beyond clinical practice, many find in it possibilities for rebuilding community and repairing a divided citizenry by getting civilians to engage with and take responsibility for American soldiers returning from war.¹² For others, for example, Tyler Boudreau, the ex-Marine who fought in Iraq and later became a critic of US global military power, the concept opens a space for political engagement. In contrast to PTSD that tends to “depoliticize a veteran’s disquietude and turn it into a medical issue,” Boudreau (2018, 55) argues, moral injury “takes the problem out of the hands of the mental health profession and the military and attempts to place it where it belongs—in society, in the community, and in the family. . . . It transforms ‘patients’ back into citizens, and ‘diagnoses’ into dialogue.”

There is nothing inherent in the concept of moral injury that precludes the possibility of radical political critique.¹³ Nevertheless, Boudreau’s is a rare voice in the public discourse about moral injury. Wood’s (2016) account is far more typical. After arguing that healing needs to come from community, Wood instructs his readers on how to get involved. “*Let’s set aside the question of war itself*,” he begins (264, emphasis added). Even if war is a “criminal waste,” he states, he has “found harmony with those who have fought in combat, for they have the keenest appreciation of the ugly depravity of mass state-justified bloodletting” (265). Criminal waste, depravity, evil: many writers describe the horrors of the wars on terror in such general terms. Others point more specifically to the inherent depravity and ambiguity of (these) counterinsurgency wars. Far less common than either are *political* critiques of the kind Boudreau offers. And when such critiques do appear, they tend to come from the mouths—or pens—of those “who have served” (see also D. Anderson 2018).

Despite the variety in how the “horrors” of these wars are framed, however, there seems to be (near) unanimity on the particular “lesson” of the American war in Vietnam. “We have learned that we are supposed to separate the war from the warrior,” writes Sherman (2015, 3); “we have a sacred obligation to those who serve, whether or not we agree with the cause of those wars and whether or not those who serve agree with them.” In turn, that sacred obligation is to be enacted through a practice of listening. Take the following account by Bill Edmonds (2018), an American adviser and trainer at an interrogation center in Iraq where prisoners were tortured. He asks, “Can warfighters who are unable to reconcile what they’ve seen or done with the person they once were, ever fully come home? That is, can wounds to moral identity ever truly heal?” (49). They

can, although “the obstacles are daunting.” He advises his readers, “listen. . . . Provide for them . . . a safe, nonjudgmental, and compassionate space in which to share their experiences, and an environment where they can, possibly, [engage in] self-forgiveness” (49–50). For his part, Wood (2016) recommends a program developed by a clinical psychologist at Harvard University. “Her idea was to match veterans with volunteer civilian listeners for a long session of uninterrupted, intentional listening” (267), writes Wood. Intentional listening is “listening with validation.” It is “listening without judgment; saying, ‘*Yeah, that was fucked up*. But also . . . *I honor your service*’” (268, emphasis added).

Listening without judgment: What are the political effects of enacting a one-on-one obligation to listen to soldiers and veterans not just regardless of our own position on the wars but also, as Sherman requires, *regardless of theirs*? And what can it possibly mean to take collective responsibility for (a) war and yet simultaneously to “set aside the question of war itself”?

Listening without judgment is fundamental in a therapeutic context, and it takes a specific form in clinical protocols designed to treat moral injury (see Litz et al. 2016). Listening without judgment is also the foundation of pastoral care (see Werber et al. 2015). And that makes sense. But listening without judgment—in contrast, say, to Tyler Boudreau’s call for “dialogue”—may not be as salutary when extended to the demands of (civilian) citizenship. In that context, the admonition speaks of a broad valuation of the soldier as ideal citizen that characterizes the new American militarism Andrew Bacevich describes (2005; see also Lutz 2001). Moreover, as a demand, it indexes a problem of epistemology and thereby returns us to the question of civilian innocence and the problem of—or the obstacles to—political judgment.

There is an unresolvable tension at the heart of this call on civilians to listen. At the same time as civilian-citizens—generally interpellated in this discourse as “we”—are being called upon to listen, the prevailing conviction among psychiatrists and psychologists, among journalists and philosophers, and among many a soldier and veteran is that civilians will never *really be able to hear*, at least not if hearing implies the possibility of actually coming to understand, let alone to know. “The difference between what the . . . soldiers know about the world and what most American civilians know about the world is often at the center of their encounters with each other,” notes Zoe Wool (2015, 192). Or, to return to Amy Amidon, “civilians are lucky that they still have a sense of naïveté about what the

world is like” (Amidon, as quoted in Wood 2014b). This “common sense” echoes through the writings of Wood and Sherman, in accounts by veterans and the psychiatrists who work with them, and in a growing canon of war literature emerging out of these still ongoing wars. As Roy Scranton (2015) has argued, only the soldier knows war, and that truth—his truth—is that of the “trauma hero.”

Joan Scott (1991, 776) has written critically of historiography that attempts to “enlarge” the picture by “rest[ing] its claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others.” If orthodox history as a field is typified by its referential understanding of evidence, then “when the evidence offered is the evidence of ‘experience,’ the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer . . . than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through” (777). But, Scott cautions, “When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge . . . [q]uestions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place—about language (and discourse) and history—are left aside” (777). And as a consequence, “the evidence of experience . . . reproduces rather than contests a given ideological system” (778).

A parallel invocation of the truth of experience characterizes calls upon civilians to listen to those “who have served.” In contrast to historians who firmly believed in their capacity to understand and present experience as history, however, the evidence of experience operates here to reinforce the dividing line. “You who never was there,” to borrow Walter Benn Michaels’s (1996) turn of phrase, can never know. Civilian citizens are called upon to attend to the “individual suffering” of returning troops, to listen to their suffering, all the while refraining from judgment (Was it a war crime? Was the war itself just?) in part, at least, because they cannot know.

What kinds of stories must civilians be willing to listen to? Or, more precisely, what are civilians being encouraged not to judge? If civilians are to support the troops regardless of “our”—or *their*—political position on the wars, are we also enjoined from expressing any political judgment on the war(s)—that perhaps the wars are wrong—even if that judgment is not directed at the soldier per se? And what, precisely, in the things that soldiers and veterans have done or have desired to do should civilians not judge? Killing a thirteen-year-old child holding a gun that Nick Rudolph had “no choice” but to do? Kicking in doors and raiding homes as part of the everyday work of carrying out an occupation? The torture at Abu Ghraib? Does

it also include not judging the pleasure some soldiers take in the work of war and the act of killing? “War is a gift from God,” one of the veterans interviewed by Wood declared one day. “In Iraq we were killing people every day. There’s a lot of satisfaction in the hunt, getting a target, going after a specific person, which I did many, many times, and like I said, I enjoyed it a lot” (Wood 2016, 149–50). And now, he tells Wood, he suffers moral injury.

Many decades ago, Hannah Arendt faced an onslaught of criticism for her coverage of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. One criticism spoke to Arendt’s willingness to hold Eichmann to account: “There was a whole chorus of voices that assured me that ‘there sits an Eichmann in every one of us’” (Arendt 2003b, 59). Under the repressive and terrifying conditions produced by the Nazi regime, can anyone be sure that they would have acted differently? Is any of us sure that we, in contrast to Eichmann, would not have “followed orders”? That same logic structures the demand for civilians to refrain from judging US veterans, and it divides citizens into two (national) kinds: those who “serve,” and those who do not; those who may speak and explain, and those who must listen (at least, when face-to-face with a soldier or veteran); those who really know, and those who cannot know and therefore must not judge. If politics presupposes an obligation to think from someone else’s point of view, as Hannah Arendt has insisted, to have the “willingness to imagine how the world looks to people whose standpoints one does not necessarily share” (Zerilli 2016, 1), in the injunction to listen to soldiers, the obligation is borne by civilians alone. Pace Boudreau’s call for dialogue, this civilian-military encounter is not imagined as real conversation. Soldiers/veterans have the right to talk; civilians have but the obligation to listen.

While calling for one form of accountability, this moral injury discourse renders another ever more difficult to mount and sustain. It dismisses from consideration alternative, antinationalist, and anti-imperial forms of accountability. If we are to exit the national-imperial frame, at the very least we need to maintain one basic distinction. Returning to Wood’s anecdotes, we might want to separate out the “Yeah, that was fucked up” from the “I honor your service.” Certainly, it is plausible to express compassion for someone’s suffering—even if that suffering is born of *what he has done*—without simultaneously honoring his service. Also plausible, appropriate even, is not being able or willing to feel compassion for someone who speaks of the pleasure he took in killing or who believes that the wars are politically or morally right.

The call to “support the troops” and to honor their service regardless not just of our position on the wars but also of theirs is not the correct “lesson” learned from the American war in Vietnam, contrary to what Sherman and so many others insist. That mantra is a consequence of the conservative reconstruction of the US military defeat in Vietnam that framed, in part, Ronald Reagan’s rise to power in 1980 (see Hagopian 2009; Abu El-Haj 2022). It is a consequence of the reconstruction of the military as a professional military with the discipline, virtue, respect, and abilities needed for winning wars. The valuation of the soldier as ideal citizen has become a political common sense, continuously interpellating the American public—right and left, liberal and conservative—into the new American militarism (Bacevich 2005). As Robert J. Lifton put it in an interview, it is “as if serving in a war is the highest and bravest activity a young person can engage in, even if often the kids who serve have nowhere else to go,” and this is regardless of what one “thinks of the wars themselves.”¹⁴ This attitude echoes through articles and books written about moral injury, most of which begin by insisting that the US military is a moral institution, perhaps more moral than any other domain of American society today (see, for example, Litz et al. 2009, 697; Litz et al. 2016). It echoes through the ritual of thanking someone for their service, during which, as Sherman puts it, “we are recognizing character—*courage tied to public service*” (Sherman 2015, 3, emphasis added).

This “common sense” relies not only on a militarist ideology requiring civilians to respect, be grateful for, and thank the troops. It also relies on a fundamental slippage and misrecognition. Despite what are sometimes explicit claims to the contrary, American civilians are being asked to respond to soldiers and veterans as if they occupy the subject position of the victim. Sherman (2015, 49), for example, elaborates her argument about the political value of resentment via an essay by Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor famous for refusing to relinquish his resentment, arguing that only a victim of the Nazi regime can possess “the moral truth of the blows.” Sherman does not draw a simple parallel between what she names Améry’s “moral injury” and what American soldiers and veterans are suffering. And soldiers and veterans tend not to appropriate the victim identity, at least not in any explicit or coherent sense.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as Scranton shows, Sherman fails to recognize that, “if you map Améry’s situation onto the last fourteen years of war, Améry’s ‘moral truth’” lines up not with American soldiers but with orange-suited, force-fed detainees

at Guantanamo Bay and naked, tortured Iraqis in Abu Ghraib” (Scranton 2016, 154–55).

For all the talk of killing and moral transgression that talk of moral injury has brought into the public domain, as a discourse it largely skirts the question of US military aggression, overlooking the acts through which “one person”—the American soldier—“violates another” (Bernstein 2015, 4)—the Iraqi or Afghan individual on whose lands the war is being fought. For Iraq War veteran Tyler Boudreau (2018, 56), “without the Iraqi people, the troops can have no moral injuries to speak of. And the only way Americans can fathom the meaning of this term, ‘moral injury,’ is to acknowledge the humanity of the Iraqis.” Unfortunately, Boudreau’s interpretation does not mirror the prevailing discourse. Only rarely does talk of moral injury move to the humanity of the Iraqi, the Afghan, or, for that matter, the Pakistani, the Yemeni, the Syrian, and the ever-proliferating list of Others on whose territory the so-called war on terror is being waged. Those Iraqis and Afghans whom American soldiers and Marines have wounded or killed, whose villages the Americans destroyed and whose families they have decimated, do appear in this discourse. Their injuries, in short, *are not secrets*; they are hidden in plain sight. The injured Other emerges as but an object lesson in a drama that revolves entirely around the American self. American troops are the (suffering) subjects here. We are told stories of Iraqi doctors shot at checkpoints, children killed, people humiliated, Afghan villages flattened, but we are supposed to hear them for the purpose of understanding what US soldiers and veterans have suffered. The stories call on civilians to identify with—and to care for—the ones who committed the violence.

To be clear: the “facts” of the suffering Other are *known*. Talk of moral injury requires—it presupposes—that US military personnel have injured, killed, and destroyed people and communities elsewhere. After all, moral injury appears only insofar as soldiers speak of—*confess to*—acts of (perceived) moral transgression.¹⁶ The facts are unmistakable. But they do not emerge as objects of public concern; that is, they do not appear in such a way as to merit consideration and judgment (see Arendt 2003b; see also Zerilli 2016). To use Stanley Cavell’s (1969) distinction, the reality that Iraqis and Afghans—and people of all the other countries on the receiving end of American military violence—have suffered the effects of military violence is well-enough *known*.¹⁷ What those who have suffered most are not is *acknowledged*. They remain insignificant facts in the discourse that frames the “war on terror” in the American public domain.¹⁸

The stories of “evil shit” (Scranton 2016, 152) recounted by some veterans and soldiers are often presented as narratives that need to be heard, even revered. For example, a military chaplain at a conference on moral injury instructed the audience to “put down your pens and listen with your hearts,” in his introduction of a panel of veterans. “This is not an interrogation,” he said. “They are making a gift to us.” In bestowing their “gifts,” it is important to emphasize, two veterans expressed profound remorse for what they had done to Iraqi civilians, and they spoke critically of American imperial violence. But throughout the three-day conference those two Iraq War veterans were the only ones to bring up “the Other” with any sense of remorse for what had been done *to them* rather than as part of a call for the rest of “us” to empathize with and listen to the American veteran now suffering moral injury stemming from his own acts (or failures to act). The role of civilians, we learned, was “to bear witness and to validate their [the veterans’] loss and pain,” in the words of one workshop leader. And to be clear, the organizers and most participants at this conference were positioned on the liberal-left of American society. It was not a particular *political* position on the wars that produced the deafening silence about the damage caused abroad by US militarism. The focus instead was on our shared “respect” for those who had served and the unquestioned assumption that those who had never gone to war had no authority or right to judge, or really even to speak.

CARING FOR THE WORLD

In her essay “Collective Responsibility,” Arendt (2003a) sketches the philosophical and theological genealogies on which distinctions between the political, the legal, and the moral rest. I want to focus on the distinction she draws between the moral and the political. For centuries now, Arendt argues, the moral has spoken to a concern with the self; the political, in contrast, has indexed a care for the world. Arendt’s exploration of political and moral standards was driven by a particular history. Writing in the aftermath of Nazi Germany, she was interested in “collective and vicarious responsibility in which the member of a community is held responsible for things he did not participate in but which were done in his name” (154). In a similar vein, the talk of moral injury speaks to the question of collective and vicarious responsibility. But other than in exceptional speech acts—spoken almost exclusively by veterans—moral injury is talked about as a

call for collective and vicarious responsibility on the part of civilians for *those Americans who fought the war*. This is a morality play all about the US imperial self.

It is not just one self being referenced here. There is the self of the soldier who must learn to live with himself. Whether articulated in secular or theological terms, moral injury is understood to signal an unbearable split within the self, echoing Arendt's description of moral conduct in seeming "to depend primarily upon the intercourse of man with himself; . . . not a matter of concern with the other but with the self" (Arendt 2003b, 67).¹⁹ And there is the self of the nation: of restoring unity to a divided house. There is no talk of reparations. There is no talk of a moral responsibility toward others whom American soldiers have harmed.²⁰ The suffering Iraqi or Afghan is mentioned, if at all, as an afterthought, as someone to be gestured toward and then set aside (see, e.g., Wood 2016).²¹

In *The Order of Evils*, Adi Ophir (2005, 26) rightly argues that (any) moral discourse frames "only some of the existing evils and let[s] only some of its victims come into presence and assume their own voice." In the discourse of moral injury, existing evils appear through the figure and voice of the suffering American soldier, and the responsibility for disrupting that order of evil is displaced onto an American civilian public that needs to care for those "we" sent off to war. There is no call for a *jus post-bellum*, an obligation toward those whom "our" troops harmed and whose lands "our" military destroyed. That, after all, would require judgment. We would then not be able to set aside the question of (the) war itself.

The problem of responsibility, both individual and collective, dominated much of Hannah Arendt's thinking, especially in the aftermath of covering the Eichmann trial and the pushback she received for that work.²² However, Arendt did not address collective responsibility from within a moral framework; she did so through the language of the political. Responsibility "is always political," she writes, "whether it appears in the older form, when a whole community takes it upon itself to be responsible for whatever one of its members has done, or whether a community is being held responsible for what has been done in its name" (2003a, 149). And from an Arendtian perspective, collective responsibility requires an act that Wood and Sherman preclude a priori. Along with the many others who call upon "civilians" to just listen, they evade the human responsibility to judge. Yes, we must try to think from others' points of view, which is an *imaginative* rather than an impossible act; but then we also need to deliberate and evaluate together, and in public, with (imagined) others.

The risks of not doing so, for Arendt, were monstrous: “Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one’s examples and one’s company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real stumbling blocks. . . . Therein lies the horror, and at the same time the banality of evil” (146).

What emerges in and through all this talk of war, moral injury, and civilian obligation is what Miriam Ticktin (2011) has named a “moralist anti-politics.” Civilian citizens are called upon to attend to the “individual suffering” of returning troops. Civilians are told they cannot possibly understand—or know—the experiences military personnel have been through. “We” are asked to receive their words as “gifts.” Civilians are told to set politics aside, to set aside the question of war itself. In effect, civilian citizens are called upon to disregard what Arendt calls the “care of the world.” Instead, the (re)engaged citizenship that is presumed to result takes the form of the therapist’s couch.

It is certainly possible to support the need for institutional care for (ex-)military personnel and yet reject the therapeutic model and the moralist antipolitics that undergird the call to civilians to just listen, to help heal those who fought, who perhaps did horrible things, and who may well still think what they did was right. Even if Stacey Pearsall, a combat photographer in Iraq, cannot get herself to say “that Iraq was not worth it, because then I would be diminishing the sacrifices my friends made on the battlefield” (Pearsall, as quoted in Wood 2016, 272), I have no problem saying it. It was not worth it. And it was not worth it not simply, or even primarily, because of the American troops who suffer(ed) and died. It was not worth it because of the tens (the hundreds) of thousands that American troops killed and wounded (directly or indirectly) and because of the everyday worlds they shattered, and that are still in disarray today, two decades on. By any measure, there is absolutely no statistical equivalence between the harms suffered by the Iraqi and Afghan populations and those suffered by American troops. Perhaps there is no moral equivalence either.

This moralist antipolitics is not always what is being asked of the American public by ex-military personnel. And I do not want to imply that there is no space or call for political critique or judgment in the public domain today. As a former Green Beret told Matt Richtel (2015), it is not only that civilians have no skin in the game but that they seem not to have any “real opinions either. . . . ‘At least with Vietnam, people spit on you and you knew they had an opinion.’” For that matter, many of the same writers—journalists, scholars, veterans—who call upon civilians to

step up and listen also ask “us” to step up and take a position on the wars (We are a democracy after all!), just not, it seems, when one is face-to-face with someone “who has served.” There is a profound, perhaps irresolvable tension here: the (figure of the) American soldier cannot be elevated while decrying (the) war. And the truth of war cannot be taken to be the truth of the soldiers’ experience while articulating a robust critique of (the) war. For a nation that has the privilege of fighting its wars on someone else’s soil, the soldier’s perspective is inherently imperial in its epistemological conceit. The war of the other combatants does not appear within its gaze. Neither do the lives, experiences, and perspectives of the other civilians—that is, civilians, subjects in their own right, who are caught in the vortex of the violence of US invasions, occupations, and counterinsurgency wars who certainly and constitutively “know” what war is.

Tim O’Brien, a novelist and antiwar activist who fought in Vietnam, has argued that the ritual of thanking troops for their service is mere “patriotic gloss”; “we’re thanking without having the courage to ask whether the mission is even right” (O’Brien, as quoted in Richtel 2015). But courage is not all that is lacking. Nor is it a matter that the American public is ignorant of the horrors American militarism and war has wrought around the world; or that the expanding domain of state secrecy renders the possibility of a robust democratic politics ever more tenuous. American civilians may not know all the details, but they certainly *know more than enough*. Instead, a constitutive obstacle to judgment, to the possibility of politics—and more specifically, to the possibility of a radical, political critique of American militarism and war—is the lack of epistemic and moral authority among those American “citizens” who are now commonly referred to as “civilians.” In the contemporary American public sphere, combatants are the privileged witnesses to war. They are the nation’s super citizens toward whom the rest of us are obliged. The overriding commitment to care for the troops (rather than, say, to “do no harm to Iraqis”) speaks to the virtue of national “unity” at the expense of all else; and the responsibility for restoring that unity resides with “civilians” who must act in particular ways to re-suture the nation across the abyss that is the military-civilian divide. The citizen responsible for the re-suturing is an always already suspect civilian subject (she who does not serve, she who cannot know), who must listen and never judge, who must care for and console the soldier. The new American militarism has found—and forged—the civilian citizen that it needs.

NOTES

- 1 “Gold star” refers to the loss of a family member in military service.
- 2 There is a far more complex history of PTSD than their account suggests. But by the 1990s, PTSD had become very much a condition of victimhood (see Fassin and Rechtman 2009, although they date the linking of PTSD to victimhood earlier than would I).
- 3 For example, see Goldstein (2015). See also Edmonds (2018). In an account of his work as a special operations soldier training Iraqi troops in interrogation techniques, Edmonds notes that he arrived in Iraq on the heels of the “Abu Ghraib scandal.” He then proceeds to write about his struggle with the different “rules” and “culture” in Iraq, ones in which torture is acceptable. He also confesses that he came to realize that he was “torn about torture myself” (Edmonds 2018, 39). The essay is an account of Edmonds’s struggle with and recovery from moral injury.
- 4 That number includes active duty, National Guard, Air Guard, and the Reserves.
- 5 As of 2015, Sherman (2015, 30) reports, 20 percent of members of Congress were veterans; by way of contrast, post-Vietnam that number was over 75 percent. Following the 2018 mid-term elections, 18 percent of people serving in Congress were veterans. See Leo Shane III, “Veterans in the 116th Congress, by the Numbers,” *Military Times*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/11/21/veterans-in-the-116th-congress-by-the-numbers/>.
- 6 Rita Brock (fieldnotes by author) noted at a workshop on moral injury held at the Union Theological Seminar in New York that while when she began working with military veterans she assumed it was a class draft, she had come to realize how much more complex the sociology of the military actually is: the “bulk are middle class,” she said; there are very few people who come from either real poverty or real wealth. “They want to go to college; they are aspirational.” Moreover, about 60 percent come from families with a history of military service. It’s “a family business.”
- 7 Listening to Trauma: Insights and Actions conference, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., October 20–22, 2016.
- 8 Richtel (2015, 15) then notes, “The issue has been percolating for a few years,” elucidated memorably in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*, a 2012 National Book Award Finalist about a group of soldiers being feted at halftime of a Dallas Cowboys game. The soldiers express dread over people rushing to offer thanks, pregnant with obligation and blood lust and “their voices throbbing like lovers.”
- 9 A staff writer for the *Washington Post*, David Finkel embedded with an infantry battalion of the US army in Iraq in 2007. After that unit came home, Finkel decided to write a follow-up book about those whom he knew

- from Iraq who were struggling psychologically at home. In effect, he re-embedded with some of the same soldiers, now veterans at home.
- 10 See, for example, Ben Fountain's (2012) award-winning novel (and now Hollywood film) *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*.
 - 11 Sherman (2015, 28) points out that the "you" who is addressed" by these feelings of resentment is "a generic civilian, a 'personation' for a group."
 - 12 I deal with this at length in my book *Combat Trauma* (2022).
 - 13 The concept of the trauma of perpetration is not new (nor, for that matter, is the name "moral injury"; see Shay 1994). The psychological and moral pain wrought by perpetration was central to what was initially named "post-Vietnam syndrome," by radical, antiwar psychiatrists working with antiwar Vietnam veterans. And the concept of post-Vietnam syndrome, in contrast to the concept of moral injury, was a decidedly political intervention, even as it was also a clinical one.
 - 14 Robert Lifton is a psychiatrist whose work was key to developing "post-traumatic stress disorder" as an official psychiatric diagnosis. He was an antiwar activist who developed his understanding of combat trauma through his work with the organization, Vietnam Veterans Against the War. See Lifton 1973.
 - 15 I do want to argue, however, that the subject position of the soldier/veteran is emerging as a new form of identity politics, with all the complexities of *ressentiment* attached to it that Wendy Brown (1995) has explored at length (see Abu El-Haj 2022).
 - 16 The language of "confession" is central to theorizations of moral injury as a medical concept. As one of its architects referred to therapy for moral injury: it is "secular confession" (interview with the author, Boston, MA, October 2018).
 - 17 While I don't have the space to go into it here, I want to push back against what I see as an overemphasis on the problem of secrecy—and lies—in the conduct of the post-9/11 wars. Yes, the American public does not know *everything* (although after the Wikileaks document dumps, one could argue that there is an overwhelming amount of information publicly available, if one is interested enough to delve into it). But do American citizens not *know enough*? What else might Americans need to know in order to take a stand, to evaluate the wars—to judge them—and get involved? Secrecy and lies become alibis for inaction.
 - 18 According to the Costs of War Project at the Watson Institute at Brown University, by 2018, over 480,000 civilians had died due to "direct war violence, and several times as many indirectly"; the war had produced 12 million war refugees and displaced persons, and the US is carrying out counter-terror missions in 80 countries. See "Costs of War," Watson Institute, accessed May 11, 2023, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/>.

- 19 Arendt is elaborating Kant's discussion of the moral in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.
- 20 I am mapping here the grammar of a prevalent and powerful discourse, but I do not mean to imply there are no exceptions. See, for example, the Isiah Reparations Project (<http://www.reparations.org/>). One of the founders is a former marine who fought in Fallujah during the second siege.
- 21 Note that in Wood's (2016) description, he draws a moral equivalence between US military personnel on the one hand, and Iraqi and Afghan *civilians* on the other. This is a common move, one that is crucial to maintaining the virtue of the American soldier in contrast to combatants on the other side.
- 22 Arendt (2003a) insists on the distinction between "guilt" and "responsibility." She argues that one can be responsible for things one has not done but that "there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them" (147). "Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal. It refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities . . ."; "We are all guilty' is actually a declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers" (147–48).