

Spring 6-12-2015

“Undone”: a Novella Using Othello to Discuss Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Support

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"Undone": a Novella using *Othello* to discuss
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Support

By

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A scholarly project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

University of Washington Tacoma

2015

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Acknowledgements

Let me start off by thanking my committee. Both Dr. Joe Sharkey and Dr. Andrea Modarres provided classes in literature that fed into this novella. As I developed the plot I often referred to Shakey's plot development graph depicting the differences between tragedies and comedies as well as the multiple marriage scenario at the end of *As You Like It* and how that makes it a comedy. Some of my research about rape narratives in fairy tales reminded me of lessons learned in Dr. Modarres' class. And I am most thankful of Dr. Modarres asking me "what do you want to get from your degree?" That prompted me to write "Undone."

I also want to thank my graduate writing group of Emma Allen, Kari Kennedy, Margaret Braham Lundberg, and Peter Benjamin. What started off as a shaky exchange of papers turned into an excellent source for discussing and developing broad ideas, evolving methods of feedback, and a great source of support built upon the notion of getting through Interdisciplinary Studies. Plus, getting together for lunch and beer was always fun.

Abstract

Amongst the discourse about Veterans, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has become a prevalent, if not dominant, theme. Often this discussion is accompanied by themes articulated in the phrase "Support Our Troops" and framed in the context of the military history and origins related to PTSD. But what often gets overlooked and overshadowed are the correlation between support and treatment or prevention of PTSD, the inadequacy of gestures framed as supporting our troops that do very little to actually support them, non-combat/non-military PTSD, stigmas of PTSD that become an obstacle to getting treatment, and extreme portrayals of PTSD in fiction. Because of these factors, I wrote the novella "Undone" and used Shakespeare's *Othello* as a lens to examine these narratives.

Introduction

At the onset of grad school, I had a vague idea about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in fiction. Whether it was presented in more literal forms in war or veteran-themed movies like *First Blood* (Kotcheff, 1984) or more metaphorical forms like Bruce Banner aka the Hulk in *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), themes relating to adapting to trauma and being changed in a way related to traumatic emotions seemed prevalent in cinema, television, and literature. And as I examined these fictional narratives while researching what therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have published on PTSD, I realized that the ways we present, represent, discuss, and garner support for PTSD can be stigmatizing, problematic, and counter-productive.

And as I did my research, one thought kept coming to mind: "hey, this is similar to something in *Othello*." While I was an undergraduate, I was in a brilliant Shakespeare class and we were discussing *Othello*. More specifically, we-- the class-- were trying to wrap our heads around why Othello couldn't stop himself from killing Desdemona, his wife, in act V scene 2. As people put forth ideas and we sifted through the lines and stage direction for nuggets of evidence that might help explain this, I recalled a news story about a veteran, diagnosed with PTSD, who could not stop himself from committing violence once his fight-or-flight response kicked in. And so along with Othello having been on the tented field since his arms had seven years' pith until 9 moons (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.98-99) before his present age in the vale of his years (Shakespeare, 1993,

3.3.307), I added this notion to the discussion. I remember a couple things from that. The first is that there was an equal amount of cheers and jeers agreeing and disagreeing with this. The second was that the professor (who is also the chair for this project) went “ooh, interesting.” And anytime you mention something that makes a professor go “ooh, interesting” in class, you probably want to use that idea as a starting point for a paper in that class. And I did just that. But afterwards, the notion of Othello having PTSD went to the back of my mind.

But as I continued my research, I would come across some element about moral injury, support, or race as it relates to PTSD, and I would think to myself how there was something similar in *Othello*. An NPR story about a study of boys moved out of poverty showing signs of PTSD (Kessler & Greene, 2014) had elements similar to what it must be like for Othello to move up in the ranks from an enlisted soldier to general and to be a dark-skinned Moor amongst the white Venetians. Moral injury could have been a recurring factor in Othello’s life, such as the he was taken by an insolent foe and sold into slavery (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.159–160). And though perceptions of Desdemona in an affair with Cassio might mean he is considered a cuckold, it also means he would be losing the support of arguably the only one who actually supports him.

And then it hit me: what better way to discuss and illustrate these other aspects of PTSD than through *Othello*? And just as I said it, I remembered another point of interest: the over-saturation of military and combat context in discussions of PTSD. The first time I

had a kind of "ah hah" moment about this was a discussion with a fellow grad student. She was telling me about how after being abused by her husband, she was diagnosed with PTSD-like symptoms by her physician. And then she further (dis)qualified this with "but it isn't *real* PTSD." When I asked her what she meant by it not being *real*, she explained that she didn't think it would be right to tell someone, especially someone who had served in the military, that her condition could have the same value as PTSD acquired as the result of combat. I disagreed with her.

In a different discussion about PTSD with a different fellow student, I had brought up how non-combat PTSD narratives are rarely discussed and that it bothered me. Without missing a beat, my colleague said to me, "I don't think I have ever heard you talk about PTSD in a non-combat context." Of course that prompted me to do a mental rewind of every conversation with her or class discussion about PTSD. And though I couldn't produce evidence to the contrary, it made me wonder, as a retired naval veteran, could I escape my military context on this subject? More importantly, I considered the difficulty of escaping Othello's military context if I somehow used his story as a way to discuss PTSD.

And so I wrestled with ideas about moral injury, support as it relates to PTSD, the theme of "Support Our Troops," non-combat stressors that lead to PTSD, stigmas, extreme portrayals of PTSD, and the stress of trying to figure out how the heck I was going to do my thesis or project. And then it came to me. What if instead of just telling the story of *Othello* I told the story of civilians in a play

production company putting on the story of *Othello* while they explored the theme of "Support Our Troops?" Furthermore, what about the didactic use of one or two members of the company who are civilians with no combat or military experience who have PTSD or similar Post Trauma Syndromes (PTS) as a means for to discuss PTSD without the military context?

And this is why for my project I chose to write a novella about a play production company putting on Shakespeare's *Othello* set in a contemporary setting. This is why I wrote "Undone."

Literature Review

When I initiated my research with a vague notion of "PTSD in Fiction" I realized that I needed to better understand trauma, PTSD and Post-Trauma Syndromes (PTS). The most obvious place to start was literature that would increase my understanding of the condition of PTSD as well as trauma as these conditions are known by psychologists and sociologists. As PTSD has a history that can go hand in hand with war, it makes sense to use texts that relate the history of PTSD to various wars and individual soldier experiences. Since I needed to understand the ways PTSD and trauma are represented in fiction so I could do this myself, I needed to see how others might have already done this. My research yielded two different ways to analyze fiction: as fiction related to a particular era of trauma, and as the analysis of that trauma. Along these lines, film studies were prevalent. I attribute part of this to cinema being about as old as our understanding of an earlier paradigm for PTSD-- Shell-Shock. Probably the most useful texts for my research were those in which either people with PTSD or the health care professionals that work with them use models of fiction to help us better understand PTSD. To me, this meant that narratives help us to express and describe our own trauma, analyze and understand trauma better, and identify with the traumas others have had as we listen to their narratives.

"Well, we all have stories." - Jon Favreau, Swingers

As already mentioned, a necessary preliminary step in this process was understanding how scholars and mental health professionals discuss PTSD and Trauma. One doesn't simply read what the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) says about PTSD and call it good. One thing I find interesting and very useful is that many scholars, therapists and psychologists studying PTSD will describe the experiences of their patients in literary terms. For example: "Personal myths, the imaginative narratives that address life's meanings, and thus an individual's day-by-day decisions, often determine how traumatic experiences will be framed" (Paulson, Kripner. 2007, Ch. 2). We all have stories, and these stories can be exceptionally traumatic when the story's frame doesn't fit what is expected, our stories disconnect from the stories of those around us, or we thought our personal character was capable of more-- especially when these stories are forced to integrate with trauma. And part of weaving our internal narrative involves the external factors from our culture. Many researchers in the fields of trauma and PTSD conclude that factors of sex, race, subculture, family, economic status and other groups we belong to not only add to our narratives, but may also frame how we perceive and understand trauma and our resiliency to that trauma (Wilson & Keane, Wolfe & Kimerling, Manson, Newman & Orsillo, 1997).

The next step of this journey was to see where the crossroad of the Psychology and Sociology of trauma and PTSD intersected with Fiction. The first stop is comparing the narratives of those who have experienced trauma to fictional examples. In his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, Jonathan Shay (1994) compares the stories of his Vietnam veteran patients to the Iliad. Not only does this help us better understand the trauma those service members experienced, but it also gives us models for comparison and contrast as we examine trauma. This also works for those trying to relate their trauma to others. Recent Medal of Honor recipient Staff Sgt. Ty Michael Carter described his own traumatic experience this way:

My mother asked me, you know, what was it like that day and my family has always been big movie buffs so I could say the amount of incoming fire as the first part of *Saving Private Ryan*, the amount of abandon and feeling alone as *Black Hawk Down* and the amount of outnumbered and surrounded as *We Were Soldiers*.
(Bonneville International, 2013)

The key point from this is that Sgt. Carter doesn't rely on just one example for the whole experience. By combining specific elements together, he makes his traumatic experience is compared to invading Normandy alone while surrounded by the Viet Cong. Those that experience trauma can borrow narratives to help convey ideas to others just as those others (viz, therapists, friends and family) can borrow paradigms from culture to better increase their own understanding.

But expressing and understanding trauma is not limited to the confines of a patient-therapist session. Artists may express their own feelings of trauma in their works. And if this trauma was experienced by a large group of people, it is likely these emotions resonate with their audience. This process is very evident in cinema.

In the early days of silent cinema, movies like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Dir. Weine, 1920), and *Nosferatu* (Dir. Murnau, 1922) expressed the emotions associated with the trauma of losing a war felt in Post-World War I Germany (Kaes, 2009). This same kind of trauma felt by a culture can be seen in Post-Vietnam era movies. Movies like *Full Metal Jacket* (Dir. Kubrick, 1987) and *First Blood* (Dir. Kotcheff 1982) can be analyzed to show how the trauma of losing the Vietnam War affects perceptions of masculinity within our culture (Morag, 2009). In turn, this same kind of research can be applied to understanding feelings reflected in the Post 9/11 era and/or other recent conflicts and wars. As John Markert (2011) put it, "Regardless of the era depicted, movies portray attitudes that pervade the social world at the time the film is made" (p. xvi). Ultimately, a better understanding of films, both where they came from and what they mean, will give us insights into the stories of the trauma they reflect. In "Undone," instead of focussing on trauma related to a war, I wanted to step back and make something more inclusive of non-combat stressors while also comparing and contrasting how support over the years might ebb and flow in response to perceptions of victory, war longevity, and a draft military versus an all-volunteer service.

This focused or explicit type of discussion within my own work could be problematic. As exciting as using fictional stories as paradigms to understand personal trauma might be, there is a problem inherent in the use of trauma in fiction.

Though the general public's views toward treatment-seeking seem to be improving, a number of misconceptions remain in the public consciousness due, in part, to pop culture's unrealistic and negative portrayal of mental illness and its treatment. As a

mirror to and shaper of the culture, television and film portrayals of mental illness entail considerable mythology and misconception. For example, pop culture depicts rare disorders (e.g., dissociative identity disorder) as relatively common, mentally ill individuals as aggressive and dangerous, and mental health treatment as melodramatic; electroconvulsive therapy and ethical indiscretions are commonly found in pop culture's depictions of mental health treatment, whereas images of psychiatrists prescribing medication are a rarity. Research suggests that such inaccurate portrayals result in increased levels of stigmatization and a decreased willingness among individuals to seek mental health treatment. (Dickstein et al., p. 226).

On the one hand we can see where extreme portrayals of PTSD might help garner support and encourage getting treatment. But on the other hand extreme portrayals for the purposes of making a more dramatic story serve to increase stigma and therefore separate those who have PTSD from the rest of society and sources of support. *First Blood* (Dir. Kotcheff, 1982) was great for generating support for veterans with PTSD. But by taking John Rambo's PTSD to the extreme as part of the storytelling, the film leaves the movie-going audience with the impression that Vietnam veterans will either destroy a town or suffer a breakdown with only stoic behavior in between. And during the week before Veteran's Day of 2013 it was nice to see many people discussing supporting wounded warriors with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). The downside of this was the language used in this discussion. One prime example of one-step-forward-and- two-or-more- steps-back was in an interview of Bob Woodruff conducted by John Stewart (2013). Though Bob Woodruff is trying to help veterans with PTSD and TBI, his referring to them as "kids," describing a day in a war zone as "simple" and implying that the civilian world is so "gigantic" that service members cannot navigate our way through it is not helping the

conversation. In these terms, the options are to either get help and be treated as children or forgo treatment, so as not to admit weakness or be associated with childlike dependency, just to be treated as adults. And I submit this example as evidence of a deficiency of knowledge about trauma and PTSD that I see in our culture.

This brings to mind one other aspect of the trauma experience—support. Whether it is just part of casual conversation or part of the intense saturation in the media around Veterans Day and Memorial Day, we often say “Support our Troops.” Some might argue that we subscribe to this idea of supporting the troops even in the face of not supporting the war as an act of militaristic patriotism (Martin, Steuter, 2010, p. 280) and that as rational actors we thank service members for their service, shake fists at the VHA and VA when they fail, donate money to wounded warrior charities, and then display various forms of yellow ribbons in part to secure our identity as patriots. And this same mindset helps turn the idea of war recovery into a billion-dollar industry (Finkel, 2013, ch. 3). But what about the support or lack of support that is part of resilience and recovery?

Before getting to all the nuances of support or being supportive let’s look at the extremes of a lack of support. Paulson and Krippner cite a study by Gaha-Sapir and Van Panhuis in describing the impact of societal milieu as a predisposing factor in PTSD:

A cross-cultural study of conflict-related mortality among civilians revealed that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, some 38 countries were engaged in or recovering from a civil conflict. Close study of four of these countries, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and the Congo, concluded that factors such as malnutrition, lack of sanitation, inadequate

water supplies, poor public health services, illness, and death played a more significant part in predisposing civilians to PTSD than the intensity of the conflict. (As cited in Paulson & Krippner 2007 Ch. 2).

Now with that in mind, combine this with the experience of a member of the 101st Airborne that served in Vietnam as he describes what it was like dealing with conditions of jungle rot, dysentery, dehydration, hunger, fatigue, and despair for four to five weeks at a time:

One of the most outstanding things... was that the conditions we had to live under were animal, purely animal. And your thoughts went the same way. You live like an animal, you started thinking and eating like an animal and behaving like an animal. Filthy rotten pig, pig, stink! And then how're you supposed to feel good about anything? Y'know you can't feel good. (Shay, 1994, Ch. 7).

This excerpt comes from a section in Shay's book *Achilles in Vietnam* about deprivation and its relation to the PTSD narratives. One way that I interpret these stories is that when we humans are being pushed to the limits of our ability to adapt, support-- even in its most basic form-- is an essential factor in adaptation to extreme stress. Support can make adaptation better or worse. Plus, living and seeing ourselves as being less than humans and not included in society does not help our self-esteem.

Going without basic needs as a form of lack of support might be so obvious that we don't even think about it. But what happens when the culture provides or denies support. As Manson describes:

Another possibility lies within the interpretive frameworks and activities that culture provides as part of its "meaning-making" function. ... Imagine, then, how the definition of trauma, the degree to which events are acknowledged as traumatic, and the fear or horror associated with them may be shaped by culture and, thus, increase or reduce risk of PTSD. (Manson, 1997, p. 243)

When Manson wrote this he was comparing on a broader scale how one foreign culture might treat a type of trauma or loss compared to another culture. But this plays a factor in our own culture in the United States. One theme that Shay talks about in *Achilles in Vietnam* is the "Betrayal of What's Right" (1994, Ch. 1). This theme as he traced it through the stories of his patients included things like being a good soldier while following bad orders, not being able to trust the military system you are in to do what is moral even though you have to depend on it for everything, and not being able to rely on politicians to follow through on winning the war (Shay, 1994, Ch 1). Each of these things can make a form of stress- even one that is expected- that much worse. One might be able to accept the idea of war, but killing civilians by mistake and getting a citation for that mistake makes it worse (Shay, 1994, Ch.1). Being part of a system that is supposed to adhere to core values that reflect the better parts of human nature only to succumb to institutional racism and sexism lets one know that the group doesn't really have their back and might even contribute to dangerous duties (Shay, 1994; Manson, 1997). And when politicians fail to negotiate the victory that has been handed to them by the soldiers, it leaves those soldiers filled with disgust, rage, and fear, questioning why they suffered and watched comrades die for no reason at all. But in all of these examples, something was given a meaning or a value was made meaningful by the culture to a point that if it was lost or violated, it was tragic.

Let's shift gears a little bit and get out of the realm of combat-related PTSD. Take for example a case study about single

mothers and their children being moved from poverty conditions in the inner city into better homes and better schools through "The Moving to Opportunity Program" run by the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the 1990s. Single mothers were given housing vouchers so they could raise their children in a system with better educational and job prospects (Kessler, 2014). What the researchers found was that though the daughters were accepted into the new culture, the sons were not. And as a result, the sons "were more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder, they were more likely to have conduct problems, if they were in families that were offered vouchers than in the control group that wasn't involved in any kind of move" (Kessler, 2014). The researchers believed that:

The little girls were embraced by the neighborhoods and seemed to have better interpersonal skills, whereas the boys somehow were thought to be a threat by the community, so they were pushed away and in fact in some cases, had worse things happen to them. So they had more exposure to fights and so forth than they might have had otherwise. (Kessler, 2014).

One could probably infer all sorts of explanations for what exactly happened to cause the PTSSs. But my first instinct is to ask if there was a violation of what's right. It's one thing to have a group reject you. But what if you are rejected by a group that you are told you will be part of for good reasons? This is a conflict of narratives that relate to identity. It is interesting to compare the experience of these young boys to that of Vietnam veterans coming back, being spit on and called "baby killers." I think it is fair to compare these boys to people of color or women entering into a white-male dominated military and expecting fair treatment only to find out not everyone lives up to those ideals. In these cases, the internal

narrative or personal myth doesn't match up to the place within the culture causing conflict. To put it bluntly, it is harder to survive in a society that doesn't exactly want you there.

And this brings me to the last area of research. As I researched varying aspects of PTSD and PTSs- trying to figure out what was it about PTSD in fiction I wanted to focus on- I kept coming back to the same story; Shakespeare's *Othello*. My initial link of *Othello* and PTSD centered on Othello not being able to stop himself from killing Desdemona in Act V scene 2. This combined with his combat experience of having been on the tented field since he was seven (Shakespeare, 1993,1.3.98-100) until his more recent being in his midlife or "vale of years" (Shakespeare, 1993,3.3.307) seemed to give credence to a battle-conditioned mindset due to a lifetime of surviving in combat. And as Jonathan Shaw put it "[Othello] is a 'military orphan' whose moral code is derived entirely from his martial upbringing within a culture which is based on trust; for trust is the basis of all soldiering" (2013, p. 200). And this trust linked to survival gives Othello certainty in the word of Iago that Desdemona is cheating on him over anything Desdemona may claim. So when he arrives at the beginning of Act V Scene 2, Othello has already committed to killing Desdemona. Now if he was in a reasonable mood, Desdemona could reason with him and live through the night or perhaps half an hour (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2.100-103). But Othello's line of "Humh" (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2.43) combined with Desdemona's description of Othello "And yet I fear you, for you're fatal then/ When your eyes roll so" (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2.44-45) could imply Othello bearing

down on Desdemona like a feral, growling beast. One could just separate this act from everything else and just call it anger or jealousy. But if we frame it as an overreaction based on anxiety stemming from the loss of love and support or anger from the perceived betrayal of Desdemona we are now talking in terms of PTSs. As Othello said back in Act I scene 3, "My life upon her faith!" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.335) Othello may very well perceive Desdemona as his most important form of support, and he cannot bear to lose her.

But why does Othello need Desdemona's support? As Shaw explains, "As the play begins, he is operating in a social milieu in which he is not a natural fit, and he knows this - as shown by his rueful comments about his lack of courtly language" (2013, p. 201). Not only is Othello a dark-skinned Moor in the more fair-skinned Venetian society, but he is a warrior and general that is "little blessed in the soft phrase of peace" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.97). Just like the boys of the single mothers, he is probably meeting resistance from the new society. After all, it isn't too hard for Iago and Roderigo to get Brabantio's goat by implying "an old black ram/ is tuppung [his] white ewe" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.1.97-98). And in addition to being not fully accepted by the society that wants him for protection, he also has to deal with not being fully supported by the military. Stein points out that Othello, as someone that has gone from the soldier ranks to the rank of general, will probably not have the full support of the military organization, as he has probably stepped on some toes by not going through the regular channels to a commission (Stein, 2005, p. 1409). Stein's point would be that this is why he is more

likely to rely on Iago for intelligence. I see it as another way in which Othello has expectations of Iago, in which Iago does not fully meet. Instead of being supported by people other than Desdemona, Othello is surrounded by structures that either do not fully support him as a general or person or are even a source of counter support. And without the support, Othello has nothing else to rely on but his own battle-hardened survival adaptations, including his fight or flight instincts.

This concludes the literature review portion. The next sections will focus on the basis for the trauma stemming from non-combat Post Trauma Syndromes and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Methods

One of my goals was to show an example of a portrayal of PTSD in fiction that was not to an extreme or perpetuated stigma. Writing a novella about putting on Shakespeare's *Othello* required the discipline of literature.

In order to better understand PTSD for the purposes of more accurate and informed story telling I researched PTSD as it is understood in the social sciences, primarily psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

And though support as it pertains to preventing and treating PTSD falls in the realms of psychology and sociology, the critique on the disconnect between the rhetoric of support our troops and the actions taken stems from Cultural Studies.

Othello's Heartbeat

Chapter 11 covers act V scene 2 of *Othello* in which Othello kills Desdemona. It is during this segment that I include an example of a way to indicate emotions driving Othello's actions by just using a subtle heartbeat sound effect in the play. It should come as no surprise that those with PTSD may suffer from increased arousal indicated by an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, among other symptoms. As overly simplified as it might seem this not only indicates Othello's own anger and fear, it still leaves it up for argument if he is acting this way as a result of PTSD-driven anger or fear or just regular anger and fear that anyone could relate to. Making it more relatable was my goal.

Erin and Rape

Erin's rape as a source of trauma for PTSD serves a couple of purposes. First and foremost, it is an example of a stressor for PTSD that is well outside the context of the military and a combat context. But more importantly, it allows for illustration and discussion of the failures by those around her in getting her justice and the help she needed. Or, to put it in terms from the literature review, it is a way to examine moral injury and the lack of support from those around her.

Obviously, the first moral failing comes from the boyfriend of Erin's mother who rapes Erin. As a side note, though I may sum this

up as "Erin's Rape" I want to make it clear that her mother's boyfriend is the one that raped Erin. He is the criminal. He performed the crime. He is the subject of the sentence "The boyfriend raped Erin." It is an easy pattern to fall into in which we passively make the victims the subject of their rape. This could be due to unknown identities of the rapists and a desire to focus on the victims as a means to support them or old patterns established by our patriarchal culture. But I think that too often it serves to enable and perpetuate a discourse that results in the vilifying of the victims implying that they received their rape as though they asked for it. And though the boyfriend raping Erin was evil and wrong, many of the adults around her made this worse.

After the rape, the first person in Erin's support network that failed her was her own mother. Erin tried to explain to her mother what had happened and her mother only interrupted her, accused her of making up stories, and told her that she should just accept it (Hicks, 2015, p. 67). I will let readers draw their own conclusions for why Erin's mother did not support her daughter on this. Regardless, I offer Erin's dysfunctional mother as one of the first to inflict moral injuries.

Some of the others in young Erin's network are examples of how society fails its victims. The inspirations for these come from Madigan & Gamble's *The Secondary Rape: Society's Continued Betrayal of the Victim* (1991).

When Erin tells Ms. Pruent, the school counselor, about the rape, Ms. Pruent responds by handing Erin a pamphlet from her church. The

subject of the pamphlet was about turning away from sin (Hicks, 2015, p. 68). This is an example of a professional failure to support the victim similar to one of the examples in Madigan's book (Madigan & Gamble, 6). Erin's disinterested principal, that was too busy being an administrator and ultimately sends Erin back to Ms. Pruent, was inspired by the principal from the example in the preface (Madigan & Gamble, ix).

The rationale from Vince's father about the murdered and raped women "asking for it" and Vince's mother insisting on Erin being a good girl to avoid something like that (Hicks, 2015, p. 69-70) is an example of the perpetuation of a narrative about sticking to the safe path and not drawing attention to yourself to avoid trouble (Madigan & Gamble, 66). This is also reflected in Erin's desire to avoid being the center of attention such as when Sarah and Corrine dress her up to look really nice for the opening night (Hicks, 2015, p. 27), her desire to go behind the scenes (Hicks, 2015, p. 73), and her anxiety attack when Dave and Corrine ask her to be the director (Hicks, 2015, p. 75).

Erin, for good reason, believes that if others around her knew she had been raped, they would view her as damaged goods. And because of this stigma associated with being the victim of rape, she finds herself in a double bind that "include[s] not only the inescapability of negative consequences but mystifying behavior on the part of others that fosters an illusion of social support while actually perpetuating the conditions that make trauma inescapable" (Waites, 1993, p. 43). In the case of Erin, she sees that the only way she can still be the

ersatz daughter for Vince's parents is if she is still the good girl that wasn't raped. But as Erin sees it, the adults that provide structure in her life are not interested in her victimization so she presents the world a character she refers to as "Erin the untouched" (Hicks, 2015, p. 71). This could be a dissociative response to her double bind situation. "Ordinarily, inconsistent or contradictory messages arouse anxiety, particularly if decision making is crucial to survival. Disassociation enables one to moderate such anxiety and to deal with maddening contradictions by altering one's perception of them" (Waites, 1993, p. 43). In this case, Erin manages to survive in the world by acting that it didn't happen through use of acting skills. But is as evident from her anxiety attacks and diagnosis of hypervigilance, this roleplay takes its toll on her, except when she and Vince are alone.

Corrine's Burden

For Corrine's back story I borrowed some ideas from Matakis' *Vietnam Wives* (1996). But to be fair, Corrine's trauma does not come from the abuse of trying to stay in a marriage with a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD. Instead, her issues of guilt can be tied to similar values that military spouses are expected to endure. And though in Corrine's case she feels guilty about her fiancé that died in Vietnam, this is similar to a lesser degree to women who have either divorced their abusive veteran husbands or become widows and felt guilty over feeling relief. Even as I compare these examples, I

know that a woman whose fiancé died before being married and a military wife are different, but I know they can be damned by society in the same way for similar reasons. "Military Wives have often been strangled by what the 'good military wife' should do" (Matsakis, 1996, p. 197). And as such, there is a behavior expected from these women by the military and society as an expected militarized patriotism that insists upon every act being framed as supporting our troops lest you not be considered a patriot (Martin and Steuter, 2010, p. 281). But in this case, Corrine thinks that by not standing by her fiancé she has failed him and that by moving on with her life when the letters stopped coming she is just as guilty of killing him as the enemy. And since society can vilify the military wife or soon-to-be-wife as being unpatriotic when not being dedicated or subordinate to her husband, it makes sense that Corrine might connect with the shame of the vilified woman that cheats on her man with "Jody."

Vince

"Vince can be a dick."

- Joe Sharkey, Committee Chair, after reading a couple drafts of "Undone."

Vince is the first person narrator in "Undone." And as many people assumed after reading a draft, Vince and I have many similarities. We are both retired veterans from the US Navy. We both studied PTSD in grad school. As I like to joke when people comment on

the similarities, "Vince is a much better looking version of me" (though, other than being described as a big man (Hicks, 2015, p. 85), there are no other physical descriptions of Vince in "Undone").

Vince's voice reflects a cynical and sardonic outlook on life. One could chalk this up to negative cognitions often diagnosed in PTSD. But, as many of my fellow veterans may claim, the cynical outlook comes with serving.

Like Vince, a lot of people make assumptions about me and PTSD. I think there is an implied connection that if I am a veteran and that I am studying PTSD then I probably have it and it stems from something combat related. I've also heard people make other disqualifiers about how being in the Navy means I couldn't have PTSD since they are on ships. To me, this ambiguity was a fun thing to play with and make a key point in my narration. This ambiguity enabled a discussion about PTSD as it relates to war while also allowing for the bait-and-switch as a red herring and enabling the plot twist with Erin being the one specifically diagnosed with PTSD.

So when James asks Vince if he has PTSD and Vince says that he has not been diagnosed (Hicks, 2015, p. 83), this should reinforce the ambiguity. Has he seen a doctor? Does he need to see one? Was he diagnosed with anger management issues or does he need a second opinion? Is he avoiding discussing this with a mental health professional due to stigmas or other reasons? I'm sure there are other ways to examine this, so I will let the readers form their own.

20 Year Naval Veteran

A lot of this story, Vince's/my perspective comes from retiring after 20 years in the US Navy and then trying to integrate with the civilian world. Some of the early adaptations, struggles, or changes (not having to get up super early, figuring out which clothes to wear, not needing to report to someone for significant events, etc.) now seem silly and trivial. But then there are other aspects about integrating with the civilian world that still perplex me. And many of these have to do with the disconnections in our culture, especially as they pertain to the military and veterans.

I tried to illustrate my perceptions of these disconnections either in Vince's internal monologues, Chuck's playlist, Brooke's montages or any combination of those. My point isn't necessarily to provide the smoking-gun evidence that supports a claim about my views. I just wanted my audience to consider how mass and popular culture present the military from my perspective. And before I go any further, I do not pretend to speak for all veterans, just as I don't think they speak for me. But I do know that some veterans agree with some of my views. And I know some other veterans would be inclined to encourage me to take a long walk off a short pier.

So I ask when you read those sections about the montages, the music, and Vince's inner monologue if there something to this. Did the greatest generation really do something amazing because of old fashioned American values or could they narrate it that way because

they had the luxury of being in charge while oppressing and marginalizing minorities? Did we continue to valorize the military at the close of WWII because we needed to believe in something that could assuage our fears of spreading communism and nuclear annihilation? Did Vietnam act as a touchstone showing us that we were not as dominating as a force as we hoped and as such made us vilify the military because it was better for the majority's esteem? Was *Desert Storm* just a lot of pageantry to make us feel better about ourselves? Do we really support our troops when we spend more time thanking them and then telling them who they are and less time asking and listening to who they think they are, especially when it does not confirm our preconceived biases and beliefs?

In conclusion, I just want to thank you for your time reading "Undone" and listening to me.

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