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Absurdity and Artistry in Twentieth Century American War Literature

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ABSURDITY AND ARTISTRY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN WAR
LITERATURE

BY
BRITTANY B. HIRTH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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OF

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ABSTRACT

Fictional representation of historical war is a contentious subject. Two dominant modes of thought prevail: the realist and the anti-realist approach to representation. This dissertation argues that absurdity is a more constructive tool for investigating authors' artistic renditions of war in the latter half of the twentieth century. The absurd novel contains comic exaggeration, parody, black humor, surrealism, the fantastic, and a general subversion of the traditional novel's form. Absurdity, as an artistic technique, signals to readers that despite the real-life referents for historical war, the author's fictionalization is not *the representation*. Absurdity serves two purposes: first, absurdity signals to the reader that this text is a work of fiction; and second, absurdity enables the novelist to overcome the representational challenges of war.

The absurd functions as an artistic placeholder and enables authors to elide concern surrounding ethics or accuracy. Absurdity facilitates some language for the author's personal perception of his experience, without holding him accountable for documenting the real. The aesthetic freedom of the absurd narrative also provides authors a critical distance that enables their meaning-making for the war experience. For the three authors in this dissertation, their absurd narrative constructions incite social and political commentaries. These remarks that are illuminated by absurdity indicate that these authors continue to work toward an understanding of their chaotic wars in the contemporary moment of their writing; in short, absurdity functions as a placeholder for the representation that has eluded these authors.

Within this dissertation, authors who are writing on three different decades of war are included to establish a study on the evolution of war, as a conception, and to illustrate the narrative absurdity that shifts with the historical context to reflect the aesthetics, ethics, and politics at work in each of these wars. Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, includes a fantastically written meta-narrative that accentuates the incomprehensibility of organized genocide during World War II. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* demonstrates the surrealism and falsified governmental rhetoric that shapes his depiction of the Vietnam War. Ending with the Persian Gulf War, I analyze Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead* to delineate the complications that technologically advanced military strategies create for the conception of war at the end of the twentieth century, especially pertinent as ground combatants were rendered nearly redundant in this war. Combined with the nonstop media coverage of the Gulf War, the subtle absurdity of Swofford's novel illustrates the increasingly convoluted nature of understanding war at the end of the twentieth century. In the conclusion, I extend the possibility of studying absurdity in the context of twenty-first century war through discussion of 9/11 and Foer's second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. In bringing together these authors who fictionalize three different periods of American twentieth century war, I reveal that the absurd is an artistic technique that firmly roots these wars in public memory while leaving crucial questions about representation open-ended.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION: WAR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION AND FICTIONALIZING WAR.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: ABSURD HUMOR, TRAUMA, AND THE FANTASTIC: JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER.....	52
CHAPTER TWO: (RE) WRITING THE “TRUTH” ABOUT VIETNAM: MICHAEL HERR’S <i>DISPATCHES</i>	87
CHAPTER THREE: MISSILES AND MONOTONY: RETHINKING VIETNAM THROUGH ANTHONY SWOFFORD’S GULF WAR.....	135
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL TEMPLATES FOR THE PRESENT NARRATIVE.....	201
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	257

INTRODUCTION: WAR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION AND FICTIONALIZING WAR

“*We are writing...we are writing...we are writing...we are writing*” (emphasis his, Foer 212-3). For a page and a half in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, the phrase “we are writing” is repeated one hundred and ninety-one times and ends with ellipses. This repeated phrase that is connected by and ends with ellipses suggests that there are gaps in what is being written but “we,” the authors, are compelled to keep writing. Written in the present tense, this phrase indicates that there is more to be revealed by the “we” who write. But, the phrase, “we are writing,” does not directly name what has to be written. These lines seem to operate more as a moment of self-reflexivity for Foer to acknowledge the demands of his task to fictionalize and represent the Holocaust, a task he does not master as suggested by his phrase that “we” are still writing. This phrase from Foer’s novel epitomizes the focus of this dissertation: to explicate three authors’ responses to the task of twentieth century war representation.

Although World War II’s the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War are three major but very different war events in the mid to late-twentieth century, these events all share the commonality of representational challenges. To clarify the focus of the project for the first three chapters, the definition of “war” is the active deployment of U.S. soldiers to foreign countries and the subsequent military operations that employ violent strategies against an “enemy” force. For the selected literature of this study, war is the term that carries the connotation of material violence against a

foreign nation.¹ My terminology is purposely vague because of the three wars that I am investigating through literature, World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War, only World War II can be termed a “war” in that the United States publically declared war on the Axis forces. The formal declaration of war did not occur for the Vietnam or Gulf wars. Instead, those “wars” were authorized military engagements, or conflicts. In this project, the Vietnam and Gulf conflicts will connote war.² In the conclusion, I similarly treat 9/11 as an act of war. This dissertation examines war events from decades that illustrate shifts in the conception of war: the Holocaust is referred to as a disruptive event that defies language in scholarship; the Vietnam War was the first war to be broadcast from the battlefield; and the Persian

¹ World War II was a formally declared war on the Axis powers. The Vietnam War was not a formally declared war against North Vietnam. The formally declared war was between North and South Vietnam with the United States aiding South Vietnam. Unlike World War II and its clear delineation of Allies versus the Axis (and comprehensible military operations that occurred, which resulted in clear loss or victory for the Allies: Battle of Iwo Jima and D-Day), guerilla warfare, insurgents, and unclear military tactics add to the confusion of labeling the Vietnam War a war.

After World War II, alongside the technological advances in artillery and broadcasting, the concept of war becomes referentially unstable. The chaotic skirmishes coupled with the military censorship or fabrication of American victories and losses indicates the nebulous concept of war and “truth” for the Vietnam War. For the Gulf War, the concepts of war, fact, and fiction, become increasingly unstable, and harder to define, as media broadcasts simulate the complete narrative for the one hundred day war that was mainly fought by air. In short, in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside technological advancements in war-making and increased governmental censorship, war and its facts become harder to define.

² According to Elaine Scarry, the goal of war is to out-injure the opponent. War belongs to two large categories of human experience: first, it is a form of violence and it is a member of a class whose activity is injuring and, second, it is occurrences that are contests (63). War is a strategic contest in which the winner is declared when the loser is without resources to reinitiate battle, or has been thoroughly injured. Victory in war is declared through material weight of human bodies (Scarry 62). Under Scarry’s ideology of war, operations of individual platoons performing search-and-destroy missions and engaging with Vietnamese guerillas classifies Vietnam as a war in my project. The material violence of the aerial bombardment of Iraq’s military and civil infrastructure and casualties of Iraqi insurgents also qualifies the Gulf War as war, through Scarry’s conception. As war is no longer formally declared in the second half of the twentieth century, war becomes a fluid conception demonstrated by the language of a police action for the Vietnam War, and a television event for the Gulf. This fluid and evolving conception of how language refers to war as a conflict, police action, or media simulation, demonstrates the similarly evolving conception for war and the limitations of language to capture it. As the referential language for war becomes harder to define, artistic responses in fiction become increasingly important to study for the experiential insight. These experiential insights from war writers offer perceptions that the official records or broadcasting cannot capture.

Gulf War was the dawn of technologically advanced warfare. These specific wars and their time periods, establish a focus on the evolving conceptualization of war in relation to advances in media broadcasting, war technology, and the disruptive nature of war to language in the latter half of the twentieth century.³

Representation in literature is the art of taking life as it is lived and recreating it onto the written page. As such, representation concerns an assemblage of aesthetics, theories, and contentions for approaching literature's presentation of a traumatic history. For me, traumatic events that have been determined to have representational limits, such as the Holocaust and war, are defined by what I refer to as prescriptions, or strictures, for the study of literature. In other words, in scholarship the ethics, comprehensibility and the limitations for traumatic events are debated and ordered for what should (not) be represented in fiction, as delineated in the following chapters. In part, this dissertation calls for a move beyond the debates of literature's ability to represent traumatic events in favor of concentrating on the authors' absurd, artistic responses to this traumatic history. By eschewing the traditional novelistic conventions, authors can offer insight and perspective into a war through absurd techniques. This narrative absurdity often reveals political and ethical commentaries for war more overtly than novels concerned with adhering to predetermined representational ordering.

By introducing absurdity to contemporary war fiction, the concern for representational limits can be elided. Absurdity as an aesthetic technique inherently

³ The Korean War and the Cold War are not treated in this project due to the theoretical perimeters of this study on absurdity and tracing the evolving conception of war through three major decades.

subverts traditional novelistic conventions, which arguably negates concern for the ethical representation of historic war or trauma. The absurd mitigates the necessity of ethical representation because absurdity is characterized for the aesthetics of parody, exaggeration, and other elements of the fantastic. These absurd abstractions not only distance the reader from any assumption of the author's veracity in fictionalizing the historic but also gesture to the problematic nature of fiction's ability to capture a traumatic event through writing.

At once, absurdity functions as an aesthetic testament to the limitations of representation and an artistic response to the traumatic event. I refer to the absurd as a placeholder for the representation that has not been comprehensively rendered in fiction. Rather than conceding that the traumatic can never be represented, I argue that absurdity serves as a placeholder for these seemingly "unspeakable" events. Through absurdity, authors are able at once to elide representational concerns and put words to the traumatic experiences. As absurdity underscores the innate artificiality of the fictional novel that portends to offer insight into the historic, the reader can move beyond concern for the accurate representation of the event into the interpretative realm. To be clear, absurdity functions as a placeholder for the traumatic that is not easily depicted in art and offers an author's insight into a war. This insight can range from the experiential knowledge of war that has not been offered in official reports or historical documents, to imploring an audience to remember the very human aspect of war.

In response to these representational challenges that war presents, the absurd as an artistic technique enables the novelist to illustrate the historical without adhering to

a theoretical prescription for representation. In other words, absurdity enables an author to illustrate and emphasize the experiential immediacy of his war. This caveat that the absurd can illustrate a war event but not function as the representation is an important distinction. For some, it may seem obvious that literature is an art form; as such, most readers would approach fiction with the understanding that real-life referents are exaggerated or fabricated to conform to a novel's artistic conventions. However, fictionalizing historic wars through methodic descriptions may blur the otherwise clear distinctions between the fictional and the historical narrative. To be clear, while many readers of war literature may assume that the author's retelling is fictional, the novel may inadvertently emanate an authoritative representation depending on the author's relationship to his material. For example, the line between the fictional and the historical becomes blurred as the soldier-turned-writer narrates his war story with realism and then publishes as fiction⁴: do we read the novel as a memoir? Are all the events in the memoir "true," based on reality, or fabricated? As these novels are deemed fiction, it seems that the answer to these questions should be to treat the text as a work of fiction, since a true account would be published as nonfiction or become catalogued in a historical report or interview.

However, rather than writing nonfiction, the authors in this dissertation who have personal connections to these war events have written fiction. Delineating the art from the historical becomes an important distinction when the assumed realism of a

⁴ Jonathan Safran Foer is, biographically, a third-generation Holocaust survivor, though he publishes a fantastic rendition of his grandfather's history in *Everything is Illuminated*. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* traverses several literary categories in scholarship, such as New Journalism and memoir; I argue that his novel should be categorized as absurd fiction in Chapter Two. Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead* has been categorized as a "personal narrative," and a "Marine's chronicle" of the Gulf War. I will demonstrate that *Jarhead* is an absurd novel in Chapter Three.

novel and the perceived authority of the novelist to write on the event can blur the fictional boundary of the realistic from the artistic. Thus, the absurd responds to the author's predicament of representing war. I argue that the absurd functions as a "placeholder," or that absurdity stands in for the war or trauma under discussion in the fiction. To be clear, I work against the theoretical assumption that absurdity can function as a method of representation. My argument against absurdity serving as a form of representation is two-fold: when absurdity is accepted as the representation of the tragedy or trauma of war as it existed, the real-life victims or soldiers are not accurately depicted. This assumed representation that may not accurately depict the war draws into question the ethics of aesthetics for historic war. Second, an ethical issue arises when an event is accepted as beyond comprehension or depiction and only absurdity can transcribe this incomprehensibility. When absurdity is treated as mirroring the incomprehensible, another question is drawn into debate: if absurdity renders the war unrecognizable from its real-life counterpart in fiction, is the real-life event potentially obscured from history and from cultural memory? Instead, treating absurdity as a placeholder for representation as opposed to *the representation* for war mitigates the conflicting interpretations of the incomprehensibility of war and a possibly ethical depiction in fiction. Absurdity enables language to describe the author's perception of his war without holding him accountable for documenting the real. The aesthetic freedom in constructing a narrative through absurdity also provides the critical distance necessary to begin articulating what the war experience might mean for the author, as opposed to merely accepting that the war is indescribable.

To summarize, the insertion of absurdity as the novelist's artistic technique serves two purposes: first, despite any moments of lucid description, absurdity signals to the reader that this text is a work of fiction; and second, absurdity enables the novelist to overcome the representational challenges of war by circumventing the reality of the event. Opting for absurdity releases the novelist from any perceived authoritative representation of the event while demonstrating that representation for contemporary wars is still an ongoing challenge (especially for authors such as Michael Herr or Anthony Swofford who are writing mere years after their war experiences). Absurdity, as an overt narrative signal for fiction, generates some words for the difficult to articulate wars and incites the novelists' social and political commentaries. These commentaries generated through absurdity indicate that these authors continue to work toward an understanding of these chaotic wars in the contemporary moment of their writing.

In the following chapters, I explicate that as the historical context of a war shifts, the appearance of the absurd also shifts to reflect each event, uniquely. For the Holocaust novel, absurdity often appears as fantastic elements or black humor in response to organized mass genocide. On the other hand, the absurdity within a Vietnam novel operates through surrealism to reflect the chaos of the war and its blurry fact-fiction boundaries of the war's length and battle "victories." But the concept of war becomes harder to distinguish at the end of the twentieth century when technological advancements in war-making reduced the need for as many combatants. Aerial bombing was the primary military strategy during the Gulf War, which negated the need for man-to-man combat. The new military strategies for the Gulf War, such

as the debut of the smart-bomb, coupled with the brevity of the war and the lack of combat for the ground soldiers ensues in an impression that the concept of war became an increasingly abstracted concept at the end of the twentieth century. Or, the concept of war as it had been understood in prior decades becomes harder to recognize and define in the Gulf War, as the military strategies reduced, or nearly eliminated, the human-to-human component of fighting a war.

The following chapters take the tenets of absurdity first discovered in the American novels of the sixties and move the analysis of absurdity into twentieth and early twenty-first century American novels. The contemporary American novelists within these chapters, Jonathan Safran Foer, Michael Herr, and Anthony Swofford, all employ absurdity to depict their experiences with war or a major war-related event, the Holocaust. Importantly, though, this dissertation exemplifies that the same narrative characteristics of the absurd novels from the sixties are present in these contemporary war novels. These novels also reflect the same sentiment from the sixties that “reality cannot be depicted and that experience resists the ordering imagination” (Harris 128). Instead of representing their war events, the authors in this dissertation employ absurdity as part of the underlying commentary that their experiences resist ordering in a novel. But rather than assume that the lack of representation in the novel indicates that the events cannot be represented, the absurdity in these novels offer a placeholder for representation: an overt signal that what appears in the novel is fictional but the author attempts to create meaning from his experience.

Analyzing the absurd moves the conversation beyond the general focus of trauma studies, which either accepts silence or prescribes the strictures for representation, into a discussion that focuses on the authors' commentaries about war and its implications. In other words, tracing absurdity exemplifies that authors narrate their personal perspectives of their wars while maintaining the ethical reverence for the subject-matter. For example, Foer's absurd depiction of the Holocaust overtly signals to the reader that this is a fictional rendition and at once discourages an assumption of the novel's veracity. The absurdity in the novel also detaches the reader from any emotional investment in the characters and evokes confusion in response to the events, which is the goal for the absurd novelist. The combination of the emotional detachment from the life of the novel and the ensuing narrative confusion facilitates the author's commentary. In some instances, a novelist concedes that he cannot capture the war, but the moral, political, or traumatic effects of the war must be related to the reader. In short, the absurd narrative construction enables the author to put some language to war experiences, distances him from any ethical obligations of documentation, and creates an entry-point for the reader to analyze the author's personal perspective of the other cultural constraints and politics at work in depicting war.

Introducing the Absurd to Twentieth Century American War

The absurd is defined by its reinvention or nonconformist approach to narrative structure and language. For Robert A. Hipkiss, the absurd authors "experiment with forms of communication—cartoons, lyrics, jokes, narratives, metaphors, and signs" (4). The key characteristics of absurdity that construct the novels in this dissertation

are: parody, black humor, comic exaggeration otherwise referred to as burlesque, exaggerated or simplified characterization, and surrealism. Hipkiss claims that the absurdist author “finds life’s experiences so contradictory and unresolvable that he can only admit to confusion and express the need for a nonrational means of knowing” (3). The consequence of the inability to “know” the lived experience results in:

...the artist of the Absurd carr[ying] the ideal and its factual inapplicability to an extreme. The result is farce, surrealism, and a violent collapse of the character and his illusory world...the exaggerations of dialogue, action, and scene create symbolic leitmotifs on the appearance-reality theme that engage and puzzle the minds of the audience. The Absurd is nothing if not intellectual art. (Hipkiss 1)

Importantly, for each war, I note that the form in which absurdity appears within a novel shifts with the historical context. Chapter One demonstrates that a Holocaust novel contains more fantastic narrative construction; in contrast, Chapter Three exemplifies that the subtle parodying within a Gulf War novel is harder to distinguish from the media coverage of the Gulf War.

Constructing a narrative through absurdity not only mitigates representational challenges that war presents but also instigates aesthetic, ethical, and political commentary about war. For the novelists of the sixties, selecting absurdity as the narrative construction carries the philosophical assumption that the universe is meaningless; therefore, any absurd text also illustrates the futility of understanding and mimicking life as it is lived in a novel. The absurdist vision, as defined by Charles

B. Harris, is “the belief that we are trapped in a meaningless universe and that neither God nor man, theology nor philosophy, can make sense of the human condition” (17). For theoretical context, the absurd novel of the sixties in America is an analogue to the Theater of the Absurd in France. But the American novels are not as committed to total absurdity as are the French plays nor do the novels completely abandon the use of rational devices (Harris 20). The American absurd novels of the sixties are distinguished from the absurd novels and plays that preceded them by the “new ways [they] integrate subject matter and form” (Harris 20). In other words, unlike the earlier absurd novels and plays, the novels written during the sixties did not abandon novelistic conventions but reinvented them. The novels of the sixties are the first to reveal absurdity through form (incident, characterization, and language)⁵ (Harris 21). Harris explains that the writers of the sixties adopted absurdity as the very form of their novels because the contemporary American novelist who chooses absurdity as his theme “write[s] in an age when absurdity, because it is taken for granted, is no longer taken seriously...if contemporary novelists are to portray absurdity effectively in a world which already accepts absurdity as a basic premise, an everyday fact, they must find new ways to present their vision” (18-9). Novels such as those of Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon reinvented the ways in which the absurd can appear, not as a theme but as the means by which the story is constructed.

⁵ Harris concedes that there are one or two exceptions to his claim that the novelists of the sixties were the first to reveal absurdity through form: the exceptions are Melville’s *The Confidence Man* and the novels of Nathaniel West (21).

More than fully embracing absurdity and abandoning meaning as with the plays from the Theater of the Absurd, the American novelists of the sixties utilize absurdity in order to generate some meaning for their subjects. By exaggerating characterization or parodying plot, the absurd novels create reader disorientation by reinventing the traditional novel's devices. In other words, the construction of an absurd novel still contains plot, characters, setting, and a narrative trajectory, but the story may be exaggerated, parodied, or fantastically presented. By disorienting the reader, the novelist evokes a response to the idea of absurdity (Harris 28). This response is in relation to the absurdist vision for the novelists who "see[k] no reform of a world probably beyond remedy and certainly beyond comprehension" (Harris 30). However, the absurdist "appear unwilling or unable to remain completely true to the vision that life is meaningless. Or at least they do not insist that despair represents the only possible human response to life's absurdity" (Harris 31). In essence, the absurd novelists have accepted that ordering reality is an impossible task, especially in a novel. The human condition is also inexplicable in a "fragmented world of technology that reduces man to the operational and functional" (Harris 17). Therefore, the absurdist reinvent the traditional novel's devices in order to turn the "art back upon itself" (Harris 26) or to rail against the pretensions of literature, history, philosophy, or religion that attempt to present an understanding of life. The absurdist "emphasize the artificiality of art" (Harris 27). But, importantly, these writers also do not concede to the absurdity of life as they embark on meaning-making in their fiction. Updating Hipkiss and Harris's aesthetics of absurdity, I delineate the ways in which three

contemporary authors continue to employ the absurd to form their narratives and deliver a commentary on war.

Beyond Trauma Studies: Absurdity and the Holocaust

While it may seem obvious that fictional novels are always a fabrication, with or without absurdity, the boundary between fact and fiction becomes blurred with novels that involve an historical event. An event as traumatic, devastating, and arguably incomprehensible as the Holocaust would seem to resist any representation, even literary; and yet, there are a plethora of Holocaust novels that are entirely derived of fiction. While these fictional Holocaust novels are not the focus of this dissertation, I note that some of these novels that fictionalize their narratives but center on the Holocaust may threaten to obscure the actual event. In other words, when the subject-matter is particularly traumatic and involves real-life victims or veterans, it seems that there should be a clear distinction between the fictional and the historical record that may not always be obvious in the novel. To exemplify the bridge that absurdity creates between language and the seemingly unrepresentable events, such as the Holocaust and war, I will delineate the strictures that trauma studies set forth for Holocaust study. The Holocaust is often cited in trauma studies as a disruptive event—an event that incites debate about language’s limitations for representing mass genocide and survivors’ trauma. For this project, the Holocaust serves as an example of the supposed limitations for language that are also applied to war in trauma studies. I employ the debate surrounding Holocaust fictionalization as a demonstration of the same representational challenges that war presents. In doing so, my argument about the absurd as articulating the previously unrepresentable becomes important for

understanding how to grapple with literature that depicts the traumatic. In short, the absurd underscores the representational challenges that traumatic events present while articulating some of the experiential knowledge. In reading the absurdity, the conversation can focus on the authorial commentary without deviating attention to the (un)ethical fictionalization of the traumatic.

To begin, a review of Holocaust scholarship provides context for the representational challenges of fictionalizing, and generally writing, war and trauma. Lawrence Langer makes the importance of recognizing Holocaust representation clear:

To whom shall we entrust the custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? To the survivor? To the critic? To the poet, novelist, dramatist? All of them re-create the details and images of the event through written texts, and in so doing remind us that we are dealing with *represented* rather than unmediated reality. For the critic and imaginative writer, this is obvious; for the historian and survivor, perhaps less so. (emphasis his, 26)

Langer groups imaginative writers and their critics together as those who would understand that all written texts are representations, which are subjected to the author's perspective and not the unmediated truth of the event. But, for Langer, the historians and survivors would not view the same detailing or imagery of an event as representative but as documentation. In other words, the historian may come to understand the Holocaust through the records of survivor testimony, while the critic wonders whose stories have not been collected or how the historian has altered the perspective in forming the facts and details into a written account. Raul Hilberg, a

historian, addresses the issue that arises in creating narratives from records and documents. These “recreators of the Holocaust, be they historians, sculptors, architects, designers, novelists, playwrights, or poets, are molding something new...they take poetic license to subtract something from the crude reality for the sake of a heightened effect” (Hilberg 22-3). Hilberg writes of his own experience in collecting the details from records and creating paragraphs, and organizing those paragraphs into chapters, and merging those chapters into books. If he is successful in working with records, Hilberg writes that he will “usurp history” as people “mistakenly believe that...they will find the true ultimate Holocaust as it really happened” (25). No matter the form, historical record or fictional representation, the question remains: has recreating selected details and images through a written text represented the Holocaust?

For many scholars, the Holocaust presented a representational dilemma that has yet to be resolved. Rather than accept any and all Holocaust fiction as a representation of the event, it is imperative to delineate the historical from its fictional renderings. As Berel Lang posits: “there is a significant relation between the moral implications of the Holocaust and the means of its literary expression...Is the enormity of the Holocaust at all capable of literary representation?” (“Introduction” 1-2). In fact, Lang suggests that scholarship “presupposes a definition of the historical or moral uniqueness of the Holocaust when that definition itself remains very much at issue” (“Introduction” 2). For a traumatic event, with real-life victims and survivors, the Holocaust is an event that seemingly demands careful and reverent representation; consequently, the debate of what the representation should entail continues.

With Holocaust literature, and war, there is an inherent moral obligation on the author's part to remember the real-life victims. But even with the published Holocaust fiction, written by survivors and non-survivors alike, as Lang questions, can fiction be claimed to represent the Holocaust? Seven decades later, has any author fully represented the Holocaust in a literary text? Printed just after the turn of the twenty-first century, in 2002, the analysis of Foer's novel reveals that Holocaust representation is still a work-in-progress, as his passage that introduces this chapter implies. Foer's numerous repeated phrase in *Everything is Illuminated*, "We are writing" (212), indicates the perpetual writing process and the correlating struggle to pour the experience out onto the page. Rather than accepting a representational limit, Foer emphasizes the value of the authors who keep writing, despite perceived challenges of imparting the reality of war to the reader. The absurdity that shapes Foer's narrative enables him to put some words to the "unrepresentable" and leaves his novel open-ended for interpreting the moral implications of Holocaust representation, which Lang suggests, is always already a part of the academic discourse on Holocaust literature.

In Holocaust literature, two representational approaches have shaped the narratives. In *Traumatic Realism*, Michael Rothberg defines these two approaches to Holocaust representation as the "realist" and "antirealist." He writes, "By realist I mean both an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe" (Rothberg, *Traumatic* 3-4). This methodology, he claims, has been adopted by historians and other critics who assert the necessity of transcribing the events

according to “scientific” procedures that inscribe these events into continuous historical narratives (Rothberg, *Traumatic* 4). In opposition, the antirealist approach Rothberg describes as “remov[ing] the Holocaust from standard historical, cultural, or autobiographical narratives and situates it as a sublime unapproachable object beyond discourse and knowledge” (*Traumatic* 4). The key difference between the realist and the antirealist is that the realist collapses the everyday with the extreme events, while the antirealist demonstrates that genocide creates an unsolvable rupture between the ordinary and the extraordinary⁶ (Rothberg, *Traumatic* 4).

The absurd bridges these two representational quandaries of the realist or the antirealist approach for the Holocaust, which also applies to war. To accept that an adequate representation for the Holocaust does not exist seems to also accept that language cannot describe genocide; in which case, silence threatens to fade the event from collective memory.⁷ Secondly, accepting a void for adequate Holocaust representation also denies that some empirical knowledge can be drawn from records or survivor testimony and can be presented to the reader (such as in the novels of survivor-writers like Elie Wiesel or Aharon Appelfeld). Arguably, the representational issue that remains for contemporary Holocaust scholarship is not that authors *cannot* represent the Holocaust, but *should* authors represent the Holocaust in fiction? The

⁶ Underlying the debate between the realist and antirealist approach for Holocaust representation are three demands of confronting the Holocaust as an attempt at comprehension and representation. Rothberg identifies these demands as: “a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for the risky public circulation of discourses on the events” (*Traumatic* 7).

⁷ I am referring to collective memory as the shared memory of an event: “memory that may have been initiated by individuals but that has been mediated through networks of communication, institutions of the state, and the social groupings of civil society” (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 15). Although Rothberg is interested in how collective memory tends to obscure events as a competitive model that publically remembers one event in favor of another, I am more interested in how collective memory for these wars are reflected in the artistic responses. I will not explicitly explain how the public remembers these wars but I will gesture to the national narratives for them.

scholarly dilemma of Holocaust representation would then be an ethical discourse as opposed to assuming that language fails in recreating the event. As Lang addresses, one of the objections to Holocaust representation is that the Holocaust writings tend to “echo other art,” which can lead to “generalizing the Holocaust” (3). The Holocaust demands unique representation, one that seemingly has not been achieved as Lang maintains that the defining terms for Holocaust representation are still contentious (“Introduction” 3).

Investigating the absurd elides the common reading of the Holocaust as “unrepresentable.” For some, silence is an appropriate response to the Holocaust when language will inherently fail to encompass the entirety of the event.⁸ For others, mimesis should be attempted by drawing from records or testimony.⁹ In other instances, perhaps the fantastic can function as representation for an ineffable event, especially as Lang asserts that the definition for Holocaust representation is still unresolved. However, none of these common assertions in Holocaust scholarship, silence, fiction, or representation that attempts mimesis, seem to address why authors

⁸ Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman notably write about the silencing effects of the Holocaust that resist language. To suppositions about the “incomprehensibility,” the “unspeakability,” “ineffability,” or “unwritability” of the Holocaust, Berel Lang clarifies that “one might think that the incongruity of these conjunctions would by now have impressed itself sufficiently to force any such allusion to question itself. For understood literally, ‘speaking the unspeakable’ is a straightforward contradiction—it can’t be done—and even if we give the phrase an honorific gloss by calling it a paradox, we only defer the issue of how to reconcile its inconsistent elements” (*Holocaust Representation* 17).

⁹ Terrence Des Pres describes one of the prescriptions set for Holocaust study as “representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included” (217). Des Pres acknowledges that this “prescription” is itself a fiction. Even if testimony were to be considered the “truth” of the Holocaust and an accurate representation, Michael Bernard-Donals suggests that Holocaust testimony is often “extrinsically incredible (the events to which the witness testifies seem impossible, unreal) and intrinsically incoherent (exhibiting gaps, silences, and disjunctions) (11). Even the firsthand witnessing and subsequent act of translating the experience consists of the same representational issues for narration.

continue to write about the Holocaust in twenty-first century fiction, especially if the Holocaust is considered to be an “unrepresentable” or silencing subject.

The answer to overcoming the enormity of representing the Holocaust and addressing the ethical qualms of fictionalizing the real-life referents would be to accept that perhaps fiction has not fully represented the Holocaust,¹⁰ as evidenced by Foer. Despite his familial tie to the Holocaust, Foer engages the absurd to tell his story. At once, the absurd releases the author from the ethical responsibility of portraying the event accurately while enabling him to explore the political, social, or traumatic commentaries that surround the event. The absurdity within fiction centered on historical events emphasizes literature’s ability to interrogate, present alternate views, and problematize the historical while reminding the audience that this is merely the author’s artistic rendition of war. As Rothberg contends that realism can be “understood as persistent responses to the demands of history...these responses are social; they provide frameworks for the representation and interpretation of history” (9), in which case realism seeks strategies for referring to and documenting the world. I offer that absurdity can also be seen as a response to the new representational demands of increasingly chaotic war events. The Holocaust, of course, is well-cited as a disruptive event for representation and comprehension; but I offer that the same can be claimed for wars that no longer look like conventional war in the age of technology. Absurdity serves as an interrogative tool in an era of increasingly abstracted conceptualization of war in the latter half of the twentieth century. In

¹⁰ Michael Bernard-Donals argues that events may be “indicated” but not “recollected” since “the past can make itself bear painfully upon the present but it can’t be brought into the present in representation, or mimetically” (15).

reflecting the elusiveness of conceptualizing technological warfare, absurdity also marks the author's departure from representation in favor of his artistic response that brings an audience closer to the experiential immediacy of trauma. In short, absurdity enables artistic experimentation as a response to the traumatic while leaving crucial questions about representation open-ended. In reading these artistic responses, interpretation can sometimes be restrained by the current representational prescriptions set forth in existing scholarship; but reading artistic responses through absurdity transcends the discourse on representational limits.

Jonathan Safran Foer: Critical Reception and the Role of Absurdity

One remedy for the unspeakability of the Holocaust is to acknowledge that not all fiction offers a representation; some fiction gestures to the ongoing intellectual work of comprehending traumatic history. Jonathan Safran Foer's 2002 novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, exemplifies some of the representational concerns of trans-generational trauma as Foer is a third generation Holocaust survivor. In addition to tackling representational concerns for the Holocaust, Foer must also grapple with his personal connection to the historical trauma. In opposition to the real-life documentarian impulse associated with translating the Holocaust experience, such as photographs, testimony, video footage, and historical records, Foer elects to overtly fabricate his real-life referents for the Holocaust (himself, as a character, and his grandfather, the Holocaust survivor). The overt fabrication, and what I read as absurdity, demonstrates that Foer elides representational concerns in favor of the immediacy of traumatic experience. In other words, absurdity underscores that the

focus of the novel is the reverberations of the Holocaust and Foer's commentary instead of documenting the reality of the Holocaust.

Foer crafts an overtly absurd narrative to emphasize the absurdity inherent within comprehending large-scale and systematic genocide. Importantly, though, Foer has circumvented the main events associated with the Holocaust, such as deportation or concentration camps, and instead details a story about the round-up of Jews in the small, fictional Ukrainian village of Trachimbrod. Foer crafts the narrative mainly from Alexander's perspective, a third-generation perpetrator of Nazi war crimes; his grandfather is involuntarily complicit in the shooting of Trachimbrod's Jews. As Alexander and the fictional Jonathan Safran Foer, a third-generation Holocaust survivor, travel in search of their families' histories, Foer's narrative does not reach a conclusive representation of his family's history; instead he fantastically depicts the Holocaust context and the reverberations of anti-Semitism in his contemporary Ukraine.

A common turn for scholarly discussion of Foer's novel is to refer to his ancestry, or the trauma related to his identification as a third-generation survivor, which is often referred to as transgenerational trauma, or "postmemory" as termed by Marianne Hirsch. I review the existing scholarship on Foer's novel to denote how introducing the absurd into the discussion of his novel can bridge the gap between the silencing effect of the Holocaust and an ethical portrayal. Absurdity facilitates Foer's commentary on the Holocaust without prescribing a representation. In addition, the review of scholarship on Foer contextualizes the departure of my reading for his novel in Chapter One. In Chapter One, I read Foer's text as an absurd novel and not as a

reflection of a transferred familial trauma or a history that impels Foer to write as a Jewish American.

Scholars often approach analysis of *Everything Is Illuminated* through Foer's identification as a Jewish American writer and the corresponding transmissions of Holocaust memory, which is often referred to as the trans-generational transmission of trauma. Victoria Aarons, for one, claims that an "impulse to transmit memory characterizes American Jewish literature" due to a "perceived emptiness, a haunting sense of incompleteness that needs to be filled" (300), which accounts for Jonathan's grandfather's comment within the meta-narrative that the "origin of a story is always an absence" (Foer 230).

Francisco Collado-Rodriguez draws a more overt comparison between Foer's "dual narratives" of the "mythical" shtetl of Trachimbrod and a "realist report" of Jonathan's quest for ancestral roots (I note three narratives), and fiction as an "ethical instrument" (54). Collado-Rodriguez contends that the mythical Trachimbrod storyline and Jonathan's realistic quest, combine to form "the novel's structural experimentation, its combination of realism, and modernism and postmodernism moves toward an ethical aim that tries to illuminate readers by transforming them into witnesses of a real tragedy that appears to have mythical dimensions: the Holocaust" (55). As Collado-Rodriguez acknowledges the controversy surrounding the accurate representation of the Holocaust, he claims that Foer addresses this controversy by combining his "Holocaust drama" with a "quest that favor[s] a documentary-oriented, hence realist bias—while at the same time revising realism in relation to a myth-oriented worldview" (54). The dual narratives, and their opposing narrative strategies,

for Collado-Rodriguez, emulate the strategies that “trauma theorists have pointed out” disrupt the “linear presentation of events [that] are effective devices that work on reader’s emotions and stimulate an ethical reading of a literary work” (56). From the disruptive nature of trauma, taken from Cathy Caruth’s discussion of the intrusive and repetitive disruptions of traumatic events (Caruth 59-62), Collado-Rodriguez further correlates trauma with ethics as he claims that the woman whom Jonathan and Alex encounter outside of Trachimbrod needs Alex to bear witness to her trauma:

Augustine and Alex perform the survivor and witness to trauma, which Collado-Rodriguez compares to Dori Laub’s conception of “bearing witness.” Laub’s theory necessitates a witness who partakes in the “creation of knowledge” because trauma obscures the victim’s mind (Laub 57-62). The witness-victim relationship of Alex to Augustine becomes a “joint responsibility” of “the source of the reemerging truth” (Collado-Rodriguez 62) as Alexander pieces her story together in English.

Aside from cherry-picking some of trauma theory’s broadest terms and loosely applying them to scenes or characterizations in the novel, Collado-Rodriguez claims that the ethics of the novel reveal that “Foer clearly sides with those who maintain that the Holocaust is not utterly unrepresentable and that keeping silent about it is not the most ethical response to the Jews’ annihilation” (61). Further, Collado-Rodriguez also implies that the readers also have an:

...ethical obligation in reflecting on the...reported events, Foer starts to mix Jonathan’s and Alex’s contrasting literary perspectives...The blurring of borders between the two literary modes, combined with the persistent difficulties of referentiality, accentuates the ambivalent character of the end of

the novel...presented now by means of memories and recollections...which steadily resist full disclosure. (61)

Although Collado-Rodriguez attempts to directly address some scholars' conceptualizations of trauma, the necessity of a witness, and disruption of the traumatic event's linear narrative, he concludes that Foer was compelled to write in the absence of experiential and familial knowledge of the Holocaust because silence cannot be an acceptable approach to Holocaust narratives. Collado-Rodriguez offers a contrary reading as many trauma theorists advocate silence as the appropriate response to catastrophic traumatic events, such as Cathy Caruth or Shoshana Felman who "read" the silences, or absence of words. Like Victoria Arons and Elaine Safer, Collado-Rodriguez also acknowledges the role of memory in the novel, even if the memory resists "full disclosure."

Elaine Safer also approaches the analysis of Foer's novel through memory. Her reading of the novel relies on Hirsch's "postmemory" (5-6), which is essentially the transmission and reemergence of trauma in subsequent generations. In other words, "postmemory" is the inherited trauma of the second and third-generation Holocaust survivors. For Safer, the "ineffable" loss of Jonathan's traces of heritage and "loss of families in the Holocaust" (114) relies on mythical or fantastical elements. Safer claims that this narration is a common turn for Jewish American second or third-generation survivors who feel compelled to write about a family history they never experienced (113) by "piecing together scraps and fragments that relate to lost communities" (112). Importantly, Safer lightly addresses the use of comedy within the novel in a few places in her article to demonstrate that comedy can emphasize the

“ineffable” trauma in Foer’s novel. For her, “the comic is never far away from the tragic” (129). Safer writes:

Foer complements epic devices with the postmodern effect of black humor, a tone that is created by a swift movement from laughter to sorrow, farce to horror so as to disorient readers and often cause them to laugh with tears in their eyes. Some critics have faulted Foer for writing a Holocaust novel in which there is slapstick and comedy. Instead it can be argued that the comic by contrast emphasizes the tragic. (117)

Safer interprets Foer’s insertion of comedy in his novel as a method to cause readers to become “emotionally involved in the tension between the value of the tragic and the comic” (123). The emotional investment of the readers through the dislocating method of the tragically funny moments in the novel is what Safer claims to be “Foer’s major way of engaging one in the machinations of the novel. And one’s engagement calls forth the ability to sympathize with the great sense of loss at the center. Thus does Foer help one to move toward the inexpressible” (123). Inevitably, Safer’s loose connection of the humor in Foer’s novel to the sense of his overwhelming loss of family during the Holocaust as a third-generation survivor concludes with a common trope of trauma theory that the Holocaust is an unrepresentable event. Essentially, Safer claims that the combination of the tragic that is emphasized through the juxtaposition of humor not only incites active sympathy from the reader but also gestures at the “inexpressible.” For her, humor accentuates that which cannot be represented.

In agreement with Safer, I offer an example of Alexander who acknowledges humor in the novel. Alexander, as Foer's character and mouthpiece, directly refers to the role of humor. When writing a letter to Jonathan, Alexander states, "I know that you asked me not to alter the mistakes because they sound humorous, and humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story..." (Foer 53). When writing Jonathan, Alexander mistakenly inserts a synonym for an English word that does not quite fit the context of the sentence, such as when he says "counterfeit to be happy" (Foer 67) instead of "pretend" to be happy. The result of the "mad-libs" style sentence structure presents humor in the foreground of the plot's somber World War II history and provides the comic relief that some readers can often find necessary in tragic stories. And as Safer reads, the comic can emphasize the tragic, prompting the reader's engagement and reflection on the Holocaust.

However, I offer that Foer's novel has not represented the Holocaust. Collado-Rodriguez's reading classifies the Holocaust as having "mythical dimensions" (55), and Safer claims that the Holocaust is "inexpressible" (123). Both of their readings threaten to obscure the collective memory of the Holocaust if the event is relegated to the realm of the mythic, or fantastic, and cannot be expressed in words. Rather than merely gesturing to the inexpressible as Safer claims, I offer that Foer gestures toward the absurd in order to express his commentary on the event. In a reading of the absurd, Foer has not failed representation nor is the Holocaust inexpressible. Foer acknowledges representational limits by articulating the debate surrounding Holocaust fictionalization; in one such scene, his character, Alexander, directly mentions the ethical issue of being "nomadic with the truth" (179), as he and Jonathan are writing

about their trip to discover Jonathan's history. Alexander admits to Jonathan that he edits the chapters that Jonathan sends to him for feedback with "more funnies, and more inventions" (226). Reading the absurdity within the narrative construction implicates that the Holocaust is not unrepresentable; Alexander and Jonathan are purposely fabricating their Holocaust story with clear narrative clues in their letters, such as the appearance of black humor in their conversations.

Chapter One explicates how reading *Everything is Illuminated* through absurdity elides the representational challenges of the Holocaust and enables Foer's articulation of some of the Holocaust's residual trauma. In other words, absurdity functions as a placeholder for representation and obliquely expresses the trauma of the Holocaust, argued to be unspeakable by trauma scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. At once, absurdity facilitates some meaning for the Holocaust and its traumatic reverberations without invoking representation—an important distinction as the metaphoric story at the end of Foer's novel indicates that the implications of history are subject to an ongoing negotiation.

Herr's Critical Reception: Fact, Fiction, and Trauma Readings

Next, I review scholarship and common approaches to Michael Herr's Vietnam novel, *Dispatches*. In reading this text through absurdity, productive discussion about Vietnam can be prompted, rather than accepting some of the generalizing readings that allocate narrative disruption and traumatic silence as the appropriate representations for this war. In Chapter Two, I analyze *Dispatches* through absurd narrative techniques and elucidate Herr's testament to the representational limits of Vietnam.

Absurdity enables Herr to write a reflective discussion of Vietnam while distinguishing this novel from *the representation* of the war; a distinction that is especially important as the scholars that I discuss often read Herr's *Dispatches* as *the* "authoritative account" of Vietnam. In diverging from scholarship that mainly lauds Herr's text as an authentic portrait of the war, in Chapter Two I offer that Herr employs the absurd to negotiate the blurring boundaries of fact and fiction and his own experiential instability for witnessing the Vietnam War.

Dispatches narrates Herr's deployment as a correspondent to the Vietnam War. Consisting of a narrative oscillation between present deployment to the war and post-war meditations, Herr's text largely consists of war vignettes from soldiers, other correspondents, and his own reactions to war-related events, such as attending official press conferences. Aside from a couple of skirmishes that Herr witnesses from the periphery, the narrative mainly consists of soldiers and correspondents sharing their war stories with Herr. Inevitably, the "war" presentation, or "reporting," in this novel often appears as secondhand accounts always told to Herr as a past event. Herr's novel is often read as the "authentic account" of Vietnam and categorized as a work of New Journalism (an experimental genre, popular in the 1960's and '70s, that mixes personal perspective and fact into the narrative). For some scholars explicated in this section, Herr's subjective perspective provides an alternate narrative that the official documents for the war could not record. Essentially, for some, Herr's war narrative, as witnessed from the periphery of war engagement, records the alternate view of history: essentially, the Vietnam War was a chaotic event for which American soldiers were

ill-prepared, thus resulting in battle defeats that the official reports did not acknowledge.

While *Dispatches* is an acclaimed Vietnam text, it often only receives superficial treatment in scholarship, especially when compared to other Vietnam novels and novelists. At least three lengthy publications are monographs on Tim O'Brien's Vietnam novels,¹¹ while a critical article published solely on Herr's *Dispatches* is difficult to unearth (mostly scholars use *Dispatches* as contrast or complement to other novels in their articles¹²). Scholars may be dissuaded from primarily analyzing *Dispatches* as a work of literature due to the presumed realism within Herr's journalistic style. In thinking about the journalistic style of *Dispatches*, scholars often read the text as the authentic representation of Vietnam. For example: Michael Spindler labels *Dispatches* as "reportage, collected in book form" (25), Mark A. Heberle writes that Herr achieves a more "authoritative account than anyone else has" (xv), and Perry Oldham, writing about his experience teaching *Dispatches*, claims that "[the novel's] disjointed narrative frustrates [the students'] desire for orderly sequence. But...a fragmentary narrative, we conclude, is the ideal vehicle for a story of Vietnam" (56). For Spindler and Oldham, Herr's journalistic and anecdotal

¹¹ Steven Kaplan's *Understanding Tim O'Brien* (1995), Tobey C. Herzog's *Tim O'Brien* (1997), and Mark A. Heberle's *A Trauma Artist: Tim O'Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (2001).

¹² Jon Adams discusses *Dispatches* alongside David Rabe's *Streamers*; Robert Hamilton includes Herr in an article that explicates the role of photojournalists during the Vietnam War; Perry Oldham reflects on teaching Herr amid Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, James Webb's *Fields of Fire*, and O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*; Evelyn Cobley compares Herr to the "documentary realism" of the first World War I novels; Peter McInerney compares Herr to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*; Meghan Lau only discusses *Dispatches* but explores Herr's method of autobiographical writing through the lens of New Journalism. Marshall Van Deusen also focuses his brief article on *Dispatches*, but Van Deusen is concerned with reading the text for how Herr reveals the "unspeakable language" of death and its representation. Only Michael Spindler, Jon Thompson and Ty Hawkins center their articles solely on *Dispatches* and interpret the novel as Herr's alternate or experimental retelling of his Vietnam experience.

style perfectly captures the Vietnam War experience as a chaotic, disjointed narration that reflects the same disorder of the war. And for Heberle, Herr's detailed reporting achieves *the* authoritative representation.

But for other scholars, despite Herr's journalistic approach, *Dispatches* reads more like a work of fiction. For example, Evelyn Cobley, claims that due to the "considerable difficult[y]" of "translating experience into a work of literature," documentary war literature especially "compounds" "this problem" that "even the most basic facts seem to resist direct transcription" (97). She further claims, "In Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a book generally considered to be one of the best to come out of the Vietnam War experience, fantasy and experience tend to feed each other so that the narrator often finds it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction" (Cobley 97). For Cobley, the blurring of fact and fiction results from Herr's "lost confidence precisely in the accessibility and authorizing function of factual assertions," as Herr is a "witness narrator" who circulates knowledge but knows "his authority is not easily established" (97). This self-consciousness arises from what Cobley reads as Herr's unwillingness to: "render the carnage of war through artificial and calculating means of literature. Witness narrators consequently explain apologetically that they are driven to writing because official records would or could not 'tell it as it was'" (98). Cobley furthers her argument about the witness narrator by asserting that Herr seems compelled to report on war and the resulting traumatic effects on the soldiers, while simultaneously acknowledging the innate "artificial" quality of literature. Therefore, Herr's motivation in writing about Vietnam seems to be "not to produce literature but to set the records straight by providing an alternative history which is scrupulously

accurate in its depiction of everyday events” (Cobley 98). I draw attention to Cobley’s assertion that Herr’s “scrupulous” description is of “everyday events,” not war, a point I will return to later in Chapter Two. Inevitably, Cobley reaches the conclusion that Herr seems compelled to write a competing narrative to the official documentation to illustrate what official records could not but, at the same time, she claims Herr’s inability to establish himself as an “authority” on the war and his narrative structure unravels Herr’s ability to accurately document. She writes:

For Herr the attempt to produce a "secret history" is not just a process of setting the record straight; *Dispatches* makes the more significant contention that facts can never speak for themselves because they are always already somebody's interpretation. On the most basic level, the experience of Vietnam convinces Herr that information does not necessarily produce understanding...*Dispatches* is above all Herr's attempt to sort out this overload of information in order to discover its underside. However, beyond the suggestion that meaning is the product of interpretation, Herr also conveys how culturally inscribed or overloaded his own experiences are...The documentary account of *Dispatches* is ultimately fictive not because Herr invents facts but because he cannot escape telling a story. (Cobley 100)

For Cobley, *Dispatches* proceeds like a typical novel, with the main narrative operating as Herr’s looking for the “truth” to report on Vietnam; in this case, Herr’s “story” is the information that was not explicitly reported by the government, such as his discussion of how casualties were verbally mitigated with the emphasis on recent “victories” in the press conferences that he attended. However, Herr’s attempts to

construct a counter-narrative to the official governmental narrative is inevitably fiction as “meaning does not wait passively to be uncovered; it must be constructed on the same slippery foundations as all fiction-making” (Cobley 101). At once, Herr’s “reportage” is already made subjective through his stringing-together of war anecdotes to create “meaning,” or his counter-narrative operates like a fictive narrative in the storytelling. In my estimation, the subjectivity and occasional poetically rendered passages demarcate *Dispatches* as a fiction, as the “fiction-making” or meaning-making does for Cobley.

Ty Hawkins also reads Herr’s text as a quest for “truth.” Hawkins outlines two aesthetic approaches for American authors writing about Vietnam: “one a realist aesthetic that harks back to traditional war literature, foregrounding verisimilitude, and the other a postmodern aesthetic that tends to immerse readers in an individual’s singular, subjective experience of the war, employing a deconstructive emphasis on dissonance both literal and psychic” (130). In his interpretation, Hawkins suggests that *Dispatches* defies both the realist and postmodern genres in claiming that “for all of its aesthetic experimentation, *Dispatches* is deeply essentialist” (132). He argues that Herr mainly illustrates how combat results in “a degree of transcendence” through which there is a reconciliation of opposites: creation and destruction, action and submission, life and violent death (Hawkins 132-3). Hawkins’s essentialist reading of Herr’s novel as traversing opposing categorizations results in his claim that *Dispatches* is a “simple story” of “men hunting men” which reveals a “Truth.” This “Truth” is that the mainstream media “never found a way to report meaningfully about death” (Herr 215); a task that Herr set out to reconcile in reporting on violent death. Within

Dispatches, Herr writes about the “death-face” which Hawkins concludes is the “transcendent escape from ambiguity into a realm of absolutes—life and death, kill and be killed, hero and coward” (141). Essentially, *Dispatches* is a resolution of ambiguities and disparate categorizations into simplistic absolutes (Hawkins 133). In other words, against the common interpretations of Vietnam narratives, that a text is either operating within a realist or postmodern tradition, Hawkins suggests that Herr adopts neither tradition and instead immerses himself in telling the story that the media would not: that combat is “destructive horror *and* reconciliatory allure, ironically enough, of violent death” (emphasis his, 132). Hawkins’s interpretation supports implications for *Dispatches* as an “aesthetic experimentation” and a text that does not rigidly adhere to the same literary traditions as other Vietnam literature, such as the “realist” Philip Caputo memoir, *A Rumor of War*, or the “postmodern aesthetic” through “subjective experience” as in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.

Other scholars read *Dispatches* through a trauma lens. For scholars like Cobley and John M. Jakaitis,¹³ Herr’s function as a traumatized witness, or at least a narrator who experiences post-traumatic stress, renders *Dispatches* more a work of inherently subjective fiction than it is objective reporting. In opposition, Spindler and Oldham agree that Herr’s style captures the disjointed, fragmented nature that was the Vietnam War experience. To be clear, Herr’s use of traumatic memory or faulty witnessing does capture the experience for some scholars who contend that the war itself is hard to comprehend, but other critics read the faulty witnessing or reflections of PTSD as

¹³ John M. Jakaitis reads Herr as a traumatized witness. In his article “Two Versions of an Unfinished War: *Dispatches* and *Going after Cacciato*,” Jakaitis investigates the causes of “delayed stress syndrome” and explicates some traumatic effects for Herr within the novel.

symptomatic of a trauma that cannot be articulated; therefore, Herr may not create authentic representation of the war but he accurately captures the traumatic aftermath. Essentially, in Chapter Two, I read against the binary of whether *Dispatches* is or is not an authoritative account by treating Herr's narrative as operating through absurdity. Tracing the absurdity exposes *Dispatches* as a fiction but still a novel that nonetheless imparts valuable insight into the traumatic impact of the war (despite not authoritatively representing Vietnam). Although Herr cannot represent Vietnam, the absurd rendering of the war creates a dialogue about the tension of depicting lived experience amid the censored military reporting about the Vietnam War: Herr depicts personal anecdotes that were not usually reported by the military press conferences but these are also moments that Herr cannot fully depict; hence, Herr's disjointed and occasionally hyperbolic proliferation of war anecdotes throughout the novel exemplifies the lack of a coherent narrative for the Vietnam War.

Chapter Two recuperates *Dispatches* from an "essentialist" reading like Hawkins's that reduces *Dispatches* to a commentary about violence within the text. This chapter also demonstrates that there are only a handful of "violent" accounts within the text as such the novel mainly does not portray combat-violence. Instead of attempting to force this experimental text into a realist or postmodern oeuvre, a reading of the absurd insertions, which outnumber the scenes of violence, may prove more productive to think about the ways in which *Dispatches* crosses and complicates several literary traditions,¹⁴ a point I will elaborate in Chapter Two. After all, the

¹⁴ *Dispatches* has been read through a postmodern aesthetic, memoir writing and the overarching assumption by some of the aforementioned scholars, such as Spindler and Lau, that *Dispatches* is an exemplar New Journalism text.

absurd authors do not “imitate ‘life’ at all but other novels, other forms, other styles” (Harris 23). The absurd elucidates why *Dispatches* seemingly encroaches on multiple literary conventions and reveals the multitude instead of singular ethical implications for the Vietnam War in ongoing attempts at representation.

Against the common perception that *Dispatches* is a realistic and authoritative account of Vietnam, as is the assumption from scholars such as Heberle and Spindler, I argue in Chapter Two that *Dispatches* is an absurd novel, one that attempts Vietnam representation but ultimately falls short: *Dispatches* is a fiction akin to any other fiction published on the Vietnam War. This categorization as fiction contrasts the scholarship that has been centered on reading Herr’s text as a compilation of war anecdotes or journalism. In fact, Vintage International categorizes the 1991 edition as “Military History/Vietnam” on the back cover but “personal narrative” in the Library of Congress cataloging (this categorization reflects the multiple genres that *Dispatches* seems to intersect, which calls to question which aspects of the novel are “true” and which are creative non-fiction/fiction). A text arguably cannot function as both “military history” and “personal narrative” due to the assumed objective versus subjective narratives for these respective genres. In other words, I am underscoring the problematic categorization of labeling a text both history and personal narrative (otherwise known as a memoir, or creative nonfiction). However, if the reading of *Dispatches*, and the subsequent categorization, is approached through analyzing Herr’s narrative technique of absurdity, the categorization dilemma can be resolved by understanding that Herr’s experience is not represented verbatim in the text. To be

Don Ringnalda writes, “...when it comes to *Dispatches* the lines separating fact, fiction, journalism, memoir, history, and autobiography become extremely blurred” (74).

clear, *Dispatches* is a work of fiction: despite Herr's occupation as a journalist and his "reportage," the fabrication of events or the insertion of media allusions for his informational "gaps" exemplify what he is unable, or perhaps unwilling, to depict.

Investigation of the absurd also reconciles some of the interpretations of the "truth" that Herr reveals within *Dispatches*, such as Cobley's assertion that Herr is writing a counter-narrative to official reporting, or Hawkins who argues that Herr essentializes the "truth" of war to a transcendent and alluring event that "operates nowhere else in human experience" (133). If approached through absurdity, Cobley and Hawkins's divergent readings of the "truth" could potentially complement one another as the "truth is not ambiguous, but multiple" (Harris 26) in an absurd novel. However, Chapter Two later unravels the notion of assumed objective fact or singular moral commentary within the novel and instead moves the conversation forward about the disparate readings of "truth" in claiming that Vietnam representation is an ongoing process, as demonstrated through the appearance of absurd insertions into the narrative.

To summarize, the lack of overt artistic innovation or exaggeration, the lack of linear plot or character development, just the written "snapshots" of men serving, leads Heberle and perhaps many readers to the impression that *Dispatches* is more of a nonfiction report than a novel and thus serves as an accurate representation of the Vietnam War. However, it is this meticulous attention to detail in any scene that underscores this account as an absurd attempt at representation: Herr has tried to recreate the scenes so realistically, with such precision, that much of the military strategy or real-time fighting is not depicted. While there are ample descriptions of

corpses decaying in the street or the wounded in the hospitals, Herr does not participate in nor does he write about the actual fighting of the war. Seemingly, Herr's focus on the recreational time in the towns between attacks or the lives of the soldiers and their brief retellings of Vietnam battle experience take precedence over the written accounts of tactical missions—ending with the impression that Herr has sidestepped the most gruesome, active scenes of combat-violence, entirely. The absurdity within *Dispatches* emphasizes the surrealism inherent to a war chaotically fought in the jungles under the cover of night and by air. Even if Herr were invited to witness a mission, could he capture a war characterized by guerilla-style fighting in dense jungle through words? The absurdity of Herr's narrative responds to a new challenge for war representation when war is no longer defined by clear military strategy, or at least observable strategy. Chapter Two also introduces the influence of the media on war perception, and the new challenges for the novelist to generate meaning by writing a counter-history to the official reports.

Defining the Gulf War: Media Coverage and the Evolving Conception of War

Unlike the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, the Gulf War discussion requires clear definition and historical context. To understand the absurdity within *Jarhead*, especially as the absurdity within Swofford's novel can seem indistinguishable from the media's real-life portrayal, I provide some background information in this section about the Gulf War and its reporting that is necessary for understanding the absurd context in Swofford's narrative. The Gulf War shares with the Vietnam War the same murky terminology as an "operation" or a "conflict" and the overt censorship of media coverage. However, having learned the lessons of broadcasting the Vietnam War to

the domestic audience, Gulf War coverage was increasingly censored and controlled. The combination of the unclear denotation as an operation, the sanitized media coverage, and the introduction of advanced smart-bombs results in a harder to distinguish line between the real and the surreal. This fading line between the real and the surreal is best summarized by Jean Baudrillard's assertion that a war did not happen, which he explicates in his essay, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place." The basis for Baudrillard's argument is his perception that this "war" only seemed to occur on television, not in actuality. In line with Baudrillard's assertion that a war did not take place, the absurdity in Swofford's novel accentuates this farcical version of a war. Absurdity facilitates Swofford's examination of this "new" version of war at the end of the twentieth century, as he questions if what he witnessed could be classified as war.

To begin defining a war that does not have as much mention in literary scholarship as World War II or the Vietnam War, a major aspect that sets the Persian Gulf War apart from previous wars is its short length and the technological advances in warfare. Stacey Peebles defines key features of this war in *Welcome to the Suck*:

The Gulf War was, officially, a brief affair. On 17 January 1991, coalition forces launched the air campaign of Operation Desert Storm, which featured, to some acclaim, the F-117 Nighthawk Stealth Fighter, one of the first aircraft to bomb Baghdad in the early morning hours. The war ended on 27 February 1991, a mere one hundred hours after the ground campaign below. As a whole, the Gulf War was a show of overwhelming American force and technology; civilians at home watched round-the-clock, real-time coverage of smart bombs

gliding soundlessly into their appointed targets. The United States could do anything, it seemed, even conduct a painless war with surgical precision.

Media coverage assured the public that the war was just, efficient, and, after late February, over and done with. (35)

Operation “Desert Shield” was the strategic operations defense of Saudi Arabia and lasted about six months. Desert Shield sought to stabilize or at least “deter further Iraqi aggression” against Saudi Arabia (Haass 66). About five hundred thousand American troops were deployed to the region and were joined by about two hundred thousand troops from other countries (Haass 67). Unable to diplomatically withdraw Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Operation “Desert Storm” was the combat phase the U.S. initiated against Iraq that lasted for about six weeks of air war followed by four days of ground action.

From the outset, the combat phase of this war was the shortest of any war in the twentieth century. In his article, “The Gulf War: Its Place in History,” Richard N. Haass notes: “That all this was accomplished in some seven weeks of combat was extraordinary. The war cost less than 200 American lives” which, for him, serves as a testament to the “servicemen and women and to their ability to take advantage of intelligence and technology” (67). The Gulf War’s denotation as a “clean” war was due to the advanced weaponry that quickly decimated key targets. However, the American advancement in bomb warfare matched against the Iraqis’ archaic tanks and out-dated Soviet-era Scud missiles creates an impression, at least for Baudrillard, that American “victory” would be imminent before the air assault even began. He writes:

It is as though there was a virus infecting this war from the beginning which emptied it of all credibility. It is perhaps because the two adversaries did not even confront each other face to face, the one lost in its virtual war won in advance, the other buried in its traditional war lost in advance. They never saw each other: when the Americans finally appeared behind their curtain of bombs the Iraqis had already disappeared behind their curtain of smoke...The general effect is of a farce... (Baudrillard, "The Gulf" 62)

Although Baudrillard relies on figurative language, his observation is concrete: the Americans and their "virtual war" out-strategized, or out-bombed, their opponents who were without the same war technology. As a result, the "...war thus ended up being a massacre of the Iraqi military in a total mismatch through which the most powerful high-tech military machine ever assembled slaughtered a Third World army" (Kellner 381).

Due to the brevity of this war, scholars such as Baudrillard argue that the Gulf War was not a war at all but the United States' practice with advanced weaponry and an exercise in the exertion of its military power.¹⁵ Baudrillard claims that: "Since this war was won in advance, we will never know what it would have been like had it existed...But this is not a war, any more than 10,000 tonnes of bombs per day is sufficient to make it a war. Any more than the direct transmission by CNN of real time

¹⁵ Douglas Kellner claims that "the Persian Gulf war was thus the perfect war to test Pentagon weapons and strategies; to deplete their overstocked supply of weapons and to create the need for new ones..." (387). He also caustically writes that the result of the Gulf War is not quite an ethical victory: "The great military victory celebrated by the media and the public was thus really nothing more than the slaughter of a third-rate military force by the most massive and lethal military force ever assembled" (290).

information is sufficient to authenticate a war” (“The Gulf” 61).¹⁶ Essentially, Baudrillard argues that the Gulf War was not a war as it had been defined in earlier decades—the direct engagement with another country in combat. Instead, he argues that the media simulated a war through the live broadcasting. In agreement with Baudrillard, Chapter Three demonstrates that the six-week war seemed more of a “farce” or even a parody of battle as the American and Iraqi armies barely engaged each other in the traditional connotation of “war.”

Further complicating the terminology of the Gulf War as “war” was the media coverage. Due to the governmental restriction of the war zone, deployed but hotel-bound journalists essentially copied reports from the journalists allowed into the field, or they watched CNN for information to report. The first war that “broke out on television” (Taylor 31) was also paradoxically informed by the television broadcasts. As Victor J. Caldarola explicates in his article, “Time and the Television War,” television was “favored” by the military over other news sources. Caldarola writes that “military briefings at allied Central Command in Riyadh and at the Joint Information Bureau in Dhahran were always *televised* briefings, and were broadcast *live* twice each day for the first two weeks of the war...The live television briefings from Saudi Arabia effectively circumvented critical journalism, and ensured that the war would be portrayed in the desired manner” (emphasis his, 103). As Baudrillard suggests, the media simulated the Gulf War narrative as televised news reports became the basis of

¹⁶ As context for Baudrillard’s claim, what took place in the desert “beyond the reach of the TV cameras” was “not a war” because “the disparity between U.S. and Iraqi forces with regard to method and military technology was so great that direct engagement rarely took place, and when it did the outcome was entirely predictable” (Patton 17-8). The Iraqi forces were ready for a ground assault but the U.S. and allies “sought a rapid conflict based upon airpower, high-technology intelligence, and weapons systems, and the extensive use of electronic warfare” (Patton 18). As a result, the Iraqis were unprepared to engage in war with their “technologically inferior tanks” (Patton 18).

other reports.¹⁷ In other words, news outlets prolifically distributed and redistributed the same highly-censored information and video.

To reiterate, although Vietnam War coverage was subject to censorship as Herr illustrates, a different sort of censorship and tactic for maintaining continued public support for the Gulf, or to at least dissuade dissent, was to minimize the human casualties. Compared to earlier wars in the twentieth century, the Gulf War was not casualty-heavy as only about two hundred Americans were killed. Of course, thousands of Iraqis were killed in this war. Nonetheless, the media coverage was mostly centered on the technology in an effort to obscure any death that might transpire: “During the war, the Pentagon teamed up with cable networks to inundate the American public with spectacles of Stealth bombers, Scud missiles, Patriot missiles, Tomahawk missiles, and smart bombs in action. The highly censored media coverage obscured the region’s geography and erased the suffering of combatants as well as civilians” (Wright 1677). By concentrating on the war machines instead of the destruction that they wrought, especially by censoring the human victims, the coverage becomes sanitized. Tom Engelhardt makes this point clearer:

In this war, the only statistics of death were to be ‘weapons counts’ (how many Scud missiles, tanks, or gunboats had been put out of action); the only destruction seen was to be of the inanimate (hence the repeated video footage

¹⁷ Mimi White exemplifies the ensuing complications for accurate reporting when the warzone is restricted. In her article, “Site Unseen,” White writes that CNN correspondents stationed in the Al-Rashid Hotel were in the middle of battle and yet had little access to information beyond what could be seen or heard from the hotel suite (128). In fact, reporting usually consisted of journalists describing bombing from their limited viewpoint from a window and they “frequently resort to figural language. The exploding bombs and tracers are repeatedly described as looking like fireflies, sparklers, and fireworks” (White 129). Relaying only what action could be seen from a window through figural language is not exactly an advantageous, clear perspective of the war.

of bridges and buildings blowing up); only tanks and airplanes were to be ‘killed’; and there would be no visible bags, for there would be no visible bodies. (88)

For the first time in an American war, technology became the focus of a television-created war image.¹⁸

In short, I argue that the conception of war, as understood in prior decades, becomes harder to distinguish from a media simulation in the age of advanced technology. The combination of reduced soldier involvement in direct combat and the increasing governmental control of information mirrors artistic absurdity. As the absurdists contend, truth is not singular but multiple. The absurdity within Swofford’s narrative enables him to start uncovering what the media did not broadcast, the other truths. John J. Fialka, a frontline reporter for the Gulf War, further validates this governmental censorship and the lack of objective “truth” within the media’s narrative for the Gulf War in *Hotel Warriors*. He explains that:

Much of what [correspondents] wrote and videotaped out there remains unread and unseen to this day because the “100-Hour War” was presented to most

¹⁸ The difference between the focus of Vietnam and Gulf War reporting: “If the main characters of the first living-room war [Vietnam] were the soldiers, the main characters—and heroes—of the second were the experts and the weapons themselves. Again, it should be remembered that the journalists had relatively little access to the soldiers and that the latter did little fighting on the ground. Overwhelmingly the dominant images of Persian Gulf coverage were the images of triumphant technology...” (Hallin 56). For the Gulf War, reporting shifts from soldiers to concentrating on the military experts or reporters who mostly discussed the weaponry. Basically, deployed Gulf War correspondents “reported” on technological advancements in war-making, which reinforced the governmental narrative that this was a “clean” war. Swofford’s novel also demonstrates the media’s reporting on the technology, such as in this minor comment: “The potential Scud interceptor, the Patriot missile, is a darling of the American press” (176). Significantly, Swofford writes that the Patriot missile is the “darling” and the focus of the media, not the soldiers. Again, the media’s focus on the technology was due to the strict censorship in reporting and the supervision of correspondents who interacted with the soldiers.

viewers and readers in a tidy, antiseptic package. It was a finely orchestrated burst of high-tech violence where smart bombs landed precisely on the cross hairs; where generals made Babe Ruth style predictions that came true in real time; where the “news” and its accompanying imagery were canned, wrapped, and delivered before the shooting was over. (Fialka 1-2)

In this passage, Fialka acknowledges the differences in covering this war compared to prior wars: the “antiseptic” packaged, “truth” of the war before it even ended, and the journalists’ reports and videos that remain concealed. In fact, of the about sixteen hundred journalists sent to Saudi Arabia to cover the war, only ten percent were allowed out to the field. Most journalists were “provided with the heightened illusion of being near the war” in the hotels where they had access to televised briefings, the pool reports from returning in-field journalists, and CNN (Fialka 55). Again, as Fialka acknowledges, the problem with restricting access to the warzone is that: “The ‘truth’ for most news consumers during the war came from Pentagon-produced videotapes or on the fancy charts prepared to explain each bite-size chunk of the war” (2). In other words, through limited and controlled information, an illusion of a comprehensive war narrative was emanated but the majority of reports and footage collected by correspondents remains “unread and unseen”—only the same limited information from the field was repackaged and disseminated by the media. Swofford’s absurd narrative construction emphasizes the evolving connotation of war that poses new representational challenges and enables him to interrogate his war experience in an effort to find some meaning for the Gulf War that the media narrative did not present.

Jarhead: Critical Reception and Implications for Vietnam

Anthony Swofford's novel, *Jarhead*, consists of his Gulf War memories, his post-war reflections, and some discourse on the politics of his war. His novel's subtitle, "A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War," seemingly promises a memoir about war deployment. However, the narrative proceeds in a disjointed manner that oscillates between Swofford's childhood memories, post-war stories, and his own authorial intrusions in commenting on what he cannot remember about his war. Hence, I delineate the ways in which Swofford's narrative is not a "chronicle" or a "memoir" but an absurd experimental novel that offers his commentary for the Gulf War but does not represent it.

I note that there is a limited amount of scholarship on *Jarhead*. Swofford's novel was published in 2003 and was quickly adapted to the screen for Sam Mendes's 2005 version. Most of the scholarship on *Jarhead* often appears as context for another Gulf War novelist, or the scholarship concentrates on the film version of Swofford's novel.¹⁹ Another trend in the scholarship that must be acknowledged is that current criticism has shifted to the wars in Iraq. The twenty-first century wars in Iraq have obscured the focus on the Persian Gulf War, as the Gulf becomes merely a precursory event to the current tensions in the Middle East. Secondly, none of the scholarship on Swofford utilizes an absurd lens to demonstrate the complicated nature of representing technological warfare. Concentrating solely on Swofford's novel and

¹⁹ Jenna Pitchford examines how masculinity is represented and challenged in Gulf War and Iraq War narratives, specifically Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (2003), Tom Paine's *The Pearl of Kuwait* (1997), Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) and Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2004). She examines the literature of these wars to determine the impact of "technowar" on the masculinity of soldiers in the Gulf War, and the later Iraq War. Michael Charles and Keith Townsend critically read the film version of *Jarhead* against Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Kelly Wilz interprets how *Jarhead* rehumanizes the Iraqi "enemy" in the film version. None of these scholars solely analyze Swofford's novel.

analyzing the absurdity within the Gulf War may prove useful for examining the evolution of war (especially relevant as twenty-first century war becomes increasingly technologically and politically complicated in the context of new drone-conducted warfare and emerging terrorist groups).

Generally, in placing *Jarhead* into conversation with other Gulf or Iraq War writers, current scholarship examines the effects of technology on the war narrative, an analysis of masculinity, Swofford's trauma, or a comparison between Vietnam and Gulf War narratives. In her article, "Writing against the Vietnam War in Two Gulf War Memoirs," Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton compares Swofford's *Jarhead* to Joel Turnipseed's *Baghdad Express*. Her focus on these two Gulf War novelists delineates Vietnam's influence, and how these two authors aim to distinguish their Gulf War service experience from Vietnam representations. Within her analysis, she claims that:

Because the Vietnam War and the narratives that emerged in its aftermath did not, of course, resolve these conflicts, soldier-writers like Swofford and Turnipseed carried them into a new war, the 1990-1 Persian Gulf War...[there is the] impulse to map the new war onto the former—to write the Gulf War in the vocabulary of Vietnam—and the impulse to make sense of the individual experience in a new kind of war. (Piedmont-Marton 258)

Piedmont-Marton's observations about Swofford who uses the vocabulary of Vietnam to map his Gulf War experience informs my observation later in Chapter Two that Swofford utilizes popular Vietnam representations to "train" for the Gulf War. This means that Vietnam is seemingly inextricable from Gulf War representation, which

illustrates my assertion that an ongoing search for a unique Gulf War representation continues (at least in Swofford's novel). Piedmont-Martón maintains the "war that lasted barely one hundred days, acquires legitimacy by its association with the narratives of Vietnam, but it also struggles for its representational autonomy" (260). Piedmont-Martón's commentary about the struggle for "autonomy" will be explicated later in Chapter Three to demonstrate how Swofford's searches for the "meaning of his war" through comparisons to Vietnam. After all, *Jarhead*'s penultimate scene is Swofford's interaction with a Vietnam veteran during a post-war celebration parade for the discharged Gulf War soldiers.

However, unlike my inclusion of the absurd lens to delineate the representational issues within *Jarhead*, Piedmont-Martón is less concerned with the war's representation in the novel. Instead, she argues that *Jarhead* is a "recovery narrative" which "locate[s] [the] war memoir in a culturally resonate stream about recovery from family trauma, struggles with substance abuse and addiction, and depression and suicide" (267).²⁰ What Piedmont-Martón does not address in claiming that "war is part of...neither all nor the sole cause" of Swofford's "troubled psyche" is

²⁰ Piedmont-Martón astutely catalogues a long list of Swofford's personal traumas: his "war-damaged, undemonstrative and ultimately abandoning father [a Vietnam veteran]; a needy and manipulative mother; institutionalized suicidal sister; domineering and deceitful brother; unfaithful girlfriends; prodigious drinking habits; and suicidal impulses of his own" (267-8). Indeed, this list containing family dysfunction and alcohol abuse indicates that Swofford has more to work-through than just his war trauma. However, I disagree with Piedmont-Martón when she claims that the "war is part of—neither all nor the sole cause of—a journey through a troubled psyche" (267). She further claims that Swofford does engage the discourse of war but situates himself in "the making and unmaking of the self in the language of childhood and family trauma; addiction, recovery, and depression; and anxieties about the individual body as site of economic exchange in employment and in relation to government and corporate entities" (271). For Piedmont-Martón, war becomes the template for Swofford to delve into other troubling issues from his personal life.

that war may have exacerbated the existing traumas in Swofford's past.²¹ To claim that the war plays only a role in addition to Swofford's other traumatic episodes elides the novel's major theme.²²

In a similar vein, Stacey Peebles places Swofford in conversation with Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* in her book, *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*. Like Piedmont-Martón, Peebles only reads Swofford in conversation with another war novel; however, she compares Swofford's Gulf War to Buzzell's War in Iraq novel. For the sections on *Jarhead*, she mainly analyzes the representation of masculinity. In particular, she reads the "war" scenes in which the soldiers are never able to fire their weapons as impotence. Like Piedmont-Martón, Peebles also addresses the military contract and the resulting lack of agency that frustrates Swofford and his platoon mates within the narrative. Both scholars are interested in reading Swofford as railing against the military contract that negates the soldier's agency, a commentary that does not address the representation of the war.²³

²¹ Piedmont-Martón also ignores how war pervaded even Swofford's earliest childhood memories in that the Vietnam War "damaged" Swofford's father (267). Additionally, the girlfriend's infidelity is a result of Swofford's indeterminate deployment to war. Not to mention, after the war, Swofford's own heavy-drinking and depression is seemingly a reaction to mitigating PTSD from his service. Piedmont-Martón ignores the casual relationship of trauma for Swofford in that each of his struggles has been instigated by a war, such as his father's Vietnam War PTSD that affected his childhood or his own from the Gulf War.

²² Piedmont-Martón's focus on *Jarhead* as a "recovery narrative," one she admits does not end with the "self-dismantling yet ultimately therapeutic journey toward recovery" (268), while simultaneously not addressing the war context for his trauma, seems to emphasize the personal details of Swofford's pre and post-war life rather than the key feature of the narrative, the Gulf War. Inevitably, at the end of her article, the reader is left with two questions: how does *Jarhead* serve as a "recovery narrative" if the narrator indicates that he does not, in fact, recover? And to what extent has the Gulf War exacerbated the narrator's already "troubled psyche"? After all, it becomes more difficult to examine a veteran's traumas without contextualizing them explicitly within the war, as PTSD generally incites veterans' post-war struggles with addiction or depression.

²³ In comparing Swofford's Persian Gulf War novel to an Iraq War novel, Peebles does not address the war, but focuses her analysis on how these newer technological wars have different representational

Diverging from the existing scholarship, instead of reading Swofford's narrative as a "recovery" journey or a commentary on masculine agency, I recontextualize the war in relation to Swofford's post-war meditations on his experience. In my estimation, most of what fuels Swofford's psychic trauma is the struggle to process and understand what he experienced during the one hundred day war. A firm context for understanding what Swofford thinks he experienced in "battle" within the narrative seems to be the necessary grounding for investigating what other residual traumas affect Swofford. In other words, it seems that scholarship should focus on Swofford's commentary for his war before considering how his narrative involves a recovery narrative, a commentary on masculinity, or a soldier's reaction to becoming a contractually-bound manifestation of military ideology. Again, scholarship focused on analyzing Swofford's war representation is nearly absent from the scholarship concerning *Jarhead*, except for Peebles who is interested in how advances in technology has further complicated the war narrative. Clarifying the absurdity within Swofford's Gulf War narrative exposes the complicated nature of representing the Gulf and understanding trauma in the age of technologically advanced warfare. Absurdity facilitates Swofford's investigation of his role within a media-

concerns than previous wars. She demonstrates that technology such as the internet and the prevalence of blogs, as well as the ability to communicate live from the battlefield on video, complicates the "newer" war narrative. In other words, the "recent development in digital technology" changes the war story as it can now be told through a "kaleidoscope of lenses" (Peebles 47). Thus, Peebles is interested in the ways in which technology has created a plurality of war narratives in various media formats. While Peebles is concerned less with the representation of the war, itself, she argues that "however war does 'look' in its ongoing representations, the experience of real war always exists outside of the frame" (47-8). Although Peebles is concerned with the shifting narratives of the "newer" wars, her commentary that remains relatively untouched in the conclusion of her chapter seems pertinent to discuss within Chapter Three: the "experience of real war always exists outside of the frame." Arguably, Swofford's novel promises an attempt at narrating the experience that has happened outside of the media's "frame"—a point that Peebles does not investigate and to which I will return in Chapter Three.

centered war and addresses some traumatic effects without prescribing *the* representation.

For America's first "technowar" (Kellner 186) the absurd appears in Swofford's novel through: the meticulous detailing of weapons and training without a coherent narrative, the parody of "scripted" actions of the ground soldiers that exemplifies comic exaggeration and their performative roles for the media, and some of the black humor that is common in absurd novels. While these absurd insertions exemplify representational issues for the Gulf War, Swofford's allusions to World War II, the Vietnam War, and other literature titles serve as a template that he utilizes for comparison and contrast. The contrast of the Gulf War to World War II and the comparison of the Gulf War to the Vietnam War, alongside allusions to other absurd literature within the narrative, signify Swofford's search for the meaning of his war by reflecting on these existing templates. The discussion of these wars and literary titles enable a starting point for Swofford to begin articulating his experience without arriving at a conclusive literary representation of his Gulf War. Swofford's novel brings World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War into one discussion of fiction's interrogation of history through absurd techniques.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I bring this study full-circle in analyzing Foer's second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Within this novel, Foer compares 9/11 to World War II bombings. In analyzing the absurdity in Foer's second novel, I explain the ways in which history reverberates in the twenty-first century and the implications for the study of future wars. As the conclusion explains, 9/11 is another disruptive event in American history that, again, called into question

language's limitations and the national narrative for explaining another attack on American soil, an event that has not happened since Pearl Harbor. Reading Foer's novel through absurdity reveals the nature of repetitive historical events and his ensuing commentary about them. In closing this dissertation with 9/11, the study of artistic responses, such as writing and memorial spaces, can be extended into the twenty-first century in order to investigate the continued national rhetoric and representation for remembering war, a task I will only begin in the concluding section with a reading of war memorials in Washington, D.C.

CHAPTER ONE: ABSURD HUMOR, TRAUMA, AND THE FANTASTIC:

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

“We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think that this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred?” (emphasis his, Foer 179). This quote from Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, published in 2002, self-reflexively refers to Foer’s act of fictionalizing the Holocaust. This question asked by the novel’s main character, Alexander Perchov, interrogates Foer’s creative choices in narrating his family’s Holocaust history. Alexander’s question is one that can be answered by investigating the absurdity found within the narrative. Through absurdity, Foer is not “nomadic with the truth” (179) but artistically presents his commentary on the Holocaust and the anti-Semitism that continues to reverberate in present-day Ukraine. In fact, the title of the novel already portends an absurd rendition of the Holocaust as “everything,” an already hyperbolic word choice, is “illuminated,” or brought into the light of understanding. This is an ironic title for a novel that illuminates nothing about the fictionalized (and real-life) author’s familial relationship to the Holocaust.

Everything is Illuminated is constructed through three alternating perspectives, with an overarching theme that encompasses World War II history. The first part consists of Jonathan’s journey to a Ukrainian town in the hopes of discovering a woman, Augustine, who may have saved his grandfather from Nazi persecution (for clarity, I refer to Foer’s fictionalization of himself as Jonathan). The second part of the story is told through the epistolary technique, as Alexander writes letters to Jonathan after he returns to the United States: Alexander receives book chapters from Jonathan and Alexander responds by adding details, or questions Jonathan’s authorial choices in fictionalizing the Ukraine trip. The third part of the story contains the chapter drafts of

the fantastical novel that Jonathan is writing about his journey to his grandfather's former Ukrainian village, Trachimbrod. Foer's writing of the story is interpreted to be happening as the novel unfolds: Jonathan sends Alexander a book chapter, and Alexander sends Jonathan a letter with feedback. Aside from the three distinct parts of the novel that consistently switch the perspective throughout, a dislocation of time also occurs as Foer alternates between the present moment of undertaking the journey to find Trachimbrod, Alexander's letters to Jonathan after the trip, and the current fictional novel that is written in pieces and sent to Alexander for feedback: a novel that is also presently unfolding in front of the reader. However, even the presentation of these chapters is interrupted with shifts in time and authorial intrusion as Alexander critiques Foer's chapters.

Foer's 2002 novel reflects the creative impulses of the absurd as first conceived by 1950s dramatists, defined by the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet. Martin Esslin first created a working terminology for playwrights of the 1950s, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Although Esslin discusses the absurd specifically within plays, these definitions can also apply to the narrative construction of contemporary novels, such as Foer's. Charles B. Harris and Robert A. Hipkiss later investigate the absurd in American novels of the 1960s, such as those of Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon. Although Esslin, Hipkiss, and Harris differentiate their subcategories and nuances of the absurd, they all share similar understanding of the tension between the fantastic and realism and between violence and humor. Entering into the same tradition as the 1950s Theater of the Absurd in France, *The American Absurd* "strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational

approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (Harris 20). Although the American authors seek “new ways to integrate subject matter and form,” the absurdist novel of the sixties does not completely abandon the “use of rational devices” as the Theatre of the Absurd often does (Harris 20). This is to say that the novels of the American absurd offer new novelistic form as they subvert and reinvigorate the already existent narrative form.

The structure of the absurd novel is reinvented but not unrecognizable—although characters and plots may not be linear or logical, a narrative form and structure is discernible. The important distinction between the American absurd and its European inspirations is that the “American novelists of the absurd, on the other hand, while they sometimes exaggerate ‘reality,’ seldom feel the need to distort it beyond recognition. In fact, they usually don’t imitate ‘life’ at all, but other novels, other forms, other styles” (Harris 23). To reiterate, the absurd novelists mock the narrative of a conventional novel by ironically utilizing the traditional novelistic devices. For example, an absurd novel includes characters, a plot, and a narrative trajectory, but the characters are not well-rounded and the plot is not linear, or even of a consistent temporality in the novel. Since Foer’s novel reflects the same artistic impulses as the absurd novelists of the 1960s, investigating the absurdity within Foer’s novel underscores the representational challenges inherent to fictionalizing the Holocaust, as discussed by the introduction. By utilizing the absurd as a placeholder for Holocaust representation, Foer is at once able to illustrate the event and offer some insightful commentary without the complication of writing an ethical representation for genocide. To be clear, by explicating the absurdity within Foer’s novel, I offer that his

narrative overtly declares itself a work of fiction and not a representation, not even a representation through abstraction. Instead, the absurdity indicates that the representation is yet to be determined for the Holocaust, but Foer's fiction offers some discussion that keeps the Holocaust situated within the reading audience's collective memory.

Realism, the Fantastic and Art of the Absurd

To begin, the absurd is usually characterized for its reinvention of or nonconformist approach to narrative structures and language. For Hipkiss, the Absurd authors "experiment with forms of communication—cartoons, lyrics, jokes, narratives, metaphors, and signs" (4). The absurd usually appears in novels as elements of the fantastic or whimsy, through either characterization, setting descriptions or both. However, the absurd does not necessarily always function as hyperbolic or fantastic development; absurd description also can appear as a sort of hyper-vigilant detailing of reality. According to Esslin:

By transcribing reality with ruthless accuracy, the dramatist arrives at the disintegrating language of the Absurd. It is the strictly logical dialogue of the rationally constructed play that is unrealistic and highly stylized. In a world that had become absurd, transcribing reality with meticulous care is enough to create the impression of extravagant irrationality. (230)

Although Esslin is writing about the dialogue in plays, this technique of meticulous description can be applied to the absurd novels that attempt to mimetically capture "lived experience" in certain scenes of the fictional worlds. This technique of

meticulously transcribing logical dialogue in plays for irrational effect also can be exemplified in the description of some of Foer's scenes in which plot action is described as a logical progression of steps. This process-oriented description creates the impression of irrationality due to the juxtaposition of the mimetic recreation of the scene against the larger backdrop of the fictional and abstract world. In other words, the abstract or whimsical setting juxtaposed against ordered and concrete plot details reaffirms the absurdity of the entire work, as the two techniques simultaneously oscillate between the abstract and meticulous descriptions to create the novel's elements of plot, setting, and characters.

Harris applies this same principle of "meticulous" description to the appearance of violence in an absurd novel. The violence in these novels is "presented in a calm, precise, and logical prose style. Rather than reflect absurdity, such treatment seems in conflict with the absurdity being presented" (Harris 28). In the fantastic setting of Foer's meta-narrative, the town and its people are exaggerated caricatures; however, violence is portrayed through realistic prose. In particular, this absurd novel couples the fantastic setting with scenes of violence that are often described with "precise" and "logical prose style," or, in essence, realism. One scene in which the fantastic world melds with the "precise" narrative of violence involves the Kolker who marries Brod (the mysterious girl who emerged inexplicably from the Brod river as an infant and founds the town's mythical beginnings) and works in a mill. In this scene, a saw unhinges from the rest of the machinery and embeds into the Kolker's skull while he is eating lunch. The saw incident is described as:

The Kolker was eating a cheese sandwich on a makeshift stool of stacked flour sacks, lost in thought about something...oblivious to the chaos around him, when the blade hopped off an iron rod...and embedded itself, perfectly vertical, in the middle of his skull. He looked up, dropped his sandwich to the floor...and closed his eyes...the Kolker was barely hurt at all. He had regained consciousness in only a few minutes and had been able to walk himself, parade himself...to the office of [the] Dr. (Foer 125-6)

The scene proceeds in a step-by-step process narrative: the Kolker eats a sandwich, the saw blade embeds, he drops his sandwich, and he closes his eyes. There is no graphic description of blood spurting nor do the onlookers react to the injury, as the “chaos” that surrounds the “oblivious” Kolker likely refers to the saw coming loose and not the resulting accident. In fact, the Kolker, completely unhurt, walks himself to the doctor. Word choices such as “perfectly vertical” and “middle” indicate the location and degree of injury in precise terms and emphasize the absurdity of the injury rather than explain the accident after which a man is “barely hurt at all” by the saw blade embedding into his forehead. The literal scene that is unfolding is fantastic or otherwise absurd as a man cannot realistically sustain a skull injury of the described magnitude without bleeding profusely nor would the “few minutes” of unconsciousness be a simple or quiet process of closing one’s eyes. And yet, the absurdity of the scene is not translated at the sentence level; the juxtaposition of the absurd situation with the precisely described imagery creates an ironic notion of the absurd. In other words, one would expect the scene to be chaotic and graphic, but the calm, precise description attempts to capture the explicit process of the injury. This

scene is also an exemplar description of how absurdity functions in the novel: this scene is minor, unrelated, and otherwise unimportant to the larger Holocaust theme, yet, entire paragraphs are dedicated to relating this arbitrary accident to the reader. This same level of narrative dedication to relating precise details of a minor character's injury is also utilized for the major theme of the novel, the Holocaust.

The Nazi scene contains more graphic violence than other passages in the novel, but the killing of the Jewish people in Trachimbrod ensues with the same meticulously precise description as the saw injury scene. The woman that Jonathan, Alexander, and the grandfather meet in Trachimbrod, who they call Augustine, narrates the Nazi invasion to them. She describes the scene and Alexander translates her words to Jonathan: “‘They made us in lines,’ she said. ‘They had lists. They were logical.’ I translated for the hero as Augustine spoke. ‘They burned the synagogue.’ ‘They burned the synagogue.’ ‘That was the first thing they did.’ ‘That was first.’ ‘Then they made all of the men in lines’” (Foer 185). The conversation is translated and each line appears twice as the woman does not speak English; Augustine's Nazi story realistically appears as a conversation with the assistance of a translator would proceed. The very word, “logical,” appears in the description of the scene as the Nazis execute the Jewish community members in an ordered fashion. The conversation begins with the Nazi General unrolling a Torah in front of the Jewish people and demanding they spit on the sacred text or be executed. Augustine's father refuses the Nazi's command and his wife and two daughters are shot, as Augustine/Alexander relate: “‘And he killed her.’ I will tell you that what made this story most scary was how rapid it was moving. I do not mean what happened in the story, but how the story

was told. I felt that it could not be stopped” (Foer 186). The phrasing in the entirety of the execution passage appears without poetic aesthetics or elaborate imagery; Augustine just narrates the order of events. The repetition of the sentences by Alexander reinforces the gravity of the situation as the words are literally spoken twice. The doubling of the sentences also acts as a kind of mimesis, or imitation, a term from trauma theory as discussed later. It is not the imagery of the scene but the very idea that genocide happened that disturbs Alexander; and, indeed, the story “could not be stopped,” as the rest of the story that involves Alexander’s grandfather’s complicity in the Trachimbrod round-up is revealed in another chapter. The “scary” aspect of Augustine’s story is not the violent content, but the very idea that history could not be “stopped,” or metaphorically assuaged.

Essentially, as with the previous passage about the Kolker’s embedded saw, the absurdity of the Nazi scene appears within the content. In this more significant scene, the absurdity is the systematic and senseless execution of all of the Jewish community members. The precise and matter-of-fact description of the event juxtaposes the absurd notion of mass execution with a simple and linear narrative—description without rationale or exposition, just a simple listing of steps about how the shooting was conducted. Both the embedded-saw and the Trachimbrod mass execution scenes operate in the same way to portray violence. As Esslin claims that the absurdity of precise dialogue generates illogicality, the absurdity within the mass execution of Trachimbrod’s Jews is also portrayed through meticulous or precise description. I emphasize the similarity of the precise description in the two unrelated scenes as the narrative structure is the same for two absurd actions; however, the saw scene is

outside the realm of rational reality and the mass execution of entire towns actually did happen during World War II era round-ups of Jewish communities. This is to say that the two narrative events are artistically treated the same, even though one event is a clear work of imagination and the other has a real-life counterpart. Similar narrative techniques between the fantastic and historically-based scenes further perpetuate the ambiguity of fact and fiction in the absurd world of Foer's novel, which also underscores fiction's inability to mimetically capture the lived experience. Foer's description of the fantastic saw injury and the Nazi round-up demonstrates the absurd technique that dislocates and distances the reader from assuming the representation of the Holocaust is realistic. In other words, the same narrative technique that illustrates both the fantastic and the realistic emphasizes that the entire novel is an artistic commentary. This is an important distinction as the assumed realism of the Nazi passage may inadvertently emanate a representation of the historic, but Augustine's mimetically translated conversation actually exemplifies the irrationality of the dialogue. The absurdity of Augustine's conversation that is literally repeated twice but does not comprehensively portray the Holocaust signals that Foer's novel is merely a work of fiction and not the historic representation. In short, Augustine's precise but limited knowledge of this one round-up does not represent the Holocaust.

In addition to meticulously described realism, irrationality can also appear in the absurd text as myth. The irrational can appear as the description of dreams and characters' psychological states. Esslin traces the appearance of myth and dreams: "Equally basic among the age-old traditions present in the Theatre of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical, and dreamlike modes of thought—the projection into

concrete terms of psychological realities. For there is a close connexion between myth and dream; myths have been called the collective dream images of mankind” (301). Of Esslin’s definition of psychological realities, the “concrete terms” of the description are important as defining characteristics of the absurd. In other words, psychological states such as dreams, or even traumatic anguish, are abstract, complex, and often the scenes of dreams or trauma are only made available to the conscious mind in fragmented pieces. For an author to present psychological states in complete and precise terms, the passages become irrational as the mind cannot, realistically, process dreams or trauma in a linear or coherent narrative. Essentially, concrete descriptions of psychological states belong to the realm of the absurd as the conscious mind does not linearly process information, thereby leaving the author with the creative license to present dreams and psychological states in both fantastical settings and with precise terminology.

The later conceptions of the absurd, after Esslin, in Hipkiss and Harris’s studies also investigate the use of myth and dreams in American novels; however, Hipkiss and Harris are more concerned with what these fantastic elements reveal about the ability to “know” lived experience. Harris asserts that the fantastic presented with realism becomes fundamental to the American novelist because “if contemporary novelists are to portray absurdity effectively in a world which already accepts absurdity as a basic premise, as everyday fact, they must find new ways to present their vision” (19). Basically, these authors who embrace that the universe is already absurd must find innovative approaches to portraying this absurdity in their novels.

In Foer's novel, the absurd universe appears in a meta-narrative that reflects his inability to transcribe the Holocaust: after his research trip to the Ukraine does not reveal any familial history, Foer creates an overtly fantastical meta-narrative of Trachimbrod's mythical beginnings and its inhabitants. The novel that Jonathan writes, piecemeal and with Alexander's collaboration, begins with his great-ancestors and the history of Trachimbrod in 1791. The first chapter of this meta-narrative describes a death in the first sentence that appears alongside a cartoon of a horse and wagon toppling into the river. The passage below the cartoon reveals that the wagon fixes the driver to the bottom of the Brod River. From the beginning, the whimsy and the uncertainty of the meta-narrative is apparent when Foer writes, the wagon "did or did not pin him to the bottom" (8). The character who confirms that the driver was pinned to the bottom of the river is the "mad squire." Already, in the first moments of this meta-narrative, Foer tugs at the conventions of storytelling by explicitly acknowledging the tension between truth and fiction by writing that this event "did or did not" happen, and in writing that the witness to this accident is mad. The townspeople later place a plaque near the river that reads: "This plaque marks the spot / (or a spot close to the spot) / Where the wagon of one / Trachim B / (we think) / went in" (Foer 93). The townspeople satirically and officially create a memorial to document where they believe a person might have died, or not: a myth that the entire town of Trachimbrod is founded upon. The mythical world of Trachimbrod contains absurd events but proceeds with meticulous and realistic description as the townspeople write that the event did and did not happen, thereby capturing the "truth" of the event. Foer finds an innovative approach to fictionalizing the Holocaust by

creating a town that is as unbelievable as the real-life event of mass execution but also contains the common documentation impulse that is often assumed of Holocaust fiction in recreating “reality” through his meticulous description. However, even the meticulous description does not relate exactly what happened to Trachim B, which underscores fiction’s inability to transcribe the lived experience. The comically drawn cartoon that appears next to the passage also negates the gravity of the supposed death. If the reader is meant to assume Foer is representing the Holocaust, this is not quite an appropriate tone for the foundational story of a town that later faces execution from the Nazis; hence, my assertion that the mythical foundation story for Trachimbrod is one of many signals that indicates this novel is completely fictionalized. In this mythical story, Foer parodies the documentation-impulse associated with the Holocaust in precisely memorializing what the townspeople believe may have happened.

Although Hipkiss is generally writing about life, his assertion can also be applied to the Holocaust, which has been conceived of as “unrepresentable.” Hipkiss claims that the absurdist author “finds life’s experiences so contradictory and unresolvable that he can only admit to confusion and express the need for a nonrational means of knowing” (3). The consequence of the inability to “know” the lived experience results in “the artist of the Absurd carr[ying] the ideal and its factual inapplicability to an extreme. The result is farce, surrealism, and a violent collapse of the character and his illusory world...the exaggerations of dialogue, action, and scene create symbolic leitmotifs on the appearance-reality theme that engage and puzzle the minds of the audience. The Absurd is nothing if not intellectual art” (Hipkiss 1). In

Foer's case, in a very postmodern oeuvre, he inserts himself as a character into his own novel. Although the insertion of author-as-character has appeared in fiction before, such as Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* (1993), it is fascinating to note that Foer does not take control of his narrative. Foer's methodology of inserting himself into his fiction is in opposition to other author-characters, like the Philip Roth character in *Shylock*. Foer's fictional character, Alexander, controls the narrative of Jonathan's journey to Trachimbrod and edits the order of events in his letters to Jonathan. As Hipkiss claims, in the absurd novel there is the collapse of the character and his illusory world; this collapse occurs when Foer inserts his real-life identity into the illusory world of the fiction as Jonathan. The insertion of author-as-passive-character in a book about his family's history does create a sense of "surrealism" as Foer operates Alexander as the narrative control of the novel instead of himself; Jonathan ironically becomes a witness to his own story.

The fantastic also overtly appears in Jonathan/Foer's crafting of his grandfather's history for which he did not uncover any answers during the Ukrainian trip. Without any biographical information gathered from the archival trip, Jonathan writes a fantastical work of fiction. In the meta-narrative, he claims that his grandfather had a shriveled hand that enticed women rather than disgusted them: Jonathan's grandfather, Safran, engages in multiple sexual encounters with various types of women throughout the chapters. Instead of writing a story about his grandfather's history in relation to World War II, Jonathan fictionalizes an odd and exaggerated story about his sexual prowess. And most of his chapters do not depict Safran at all, since most of Jonathan's chapters outline the mythological beginnings of

Trachimbrod, again, also an exaggerated fiction. Perhaps the Trachimbrod story even works to parody myths and the foundational beginnings of towns and their histories. The appearance of these fantastical tangents within the meta-narrative supports Hipkiss's assertion that the author who is faced with the inability to "know" the experience can only express the inexpressible through "nonrational" means, such as the surrealism of the fictional Trachimbrod.

As a response to the fantastic elements in the story, Alexander's reaction to Jonathan's first Trachimbrod chapter is seemingly one that the reader shares: "There were parts that I did not understand, but I conjecture that this is because they were very Jewish, and only a Jewish person could understand something so Jewish...Are you being a humorous writer here, or an uninformed one?" (Foer 25). Foer-as-Alexander confronts the uncertainty and fantasy of the book's chapters and acknowledges that the reader would be confused, a desired effect of the absurd author who wants to dislocate the reader's sense of the novel's reality. Alexander's question also addresses the "reality" of the novel: Jonathan-as-Foer arguably creates a complete work of fantasy in the absence of truth (as the novel reveals that Jonathan does not learn anything about his grandfather's past). Perhaps Foer is as "uninformed" as he is humorous. But aside from the authorial, overt clues that the narrative is a work of fiction, despite the character bearing the author's name (who has real-life familial ties to the Holocaust), the meta-narrative reveals the absurd conventions that illuminate the tension between reality and fabrication in a work of fiction.

Absurd Humor

In a novel that features the Holocaust, humor seems a questionable addition to the narrative, especially if the reader presumes that Foer's fiction is a representation, albeit abstract, of Holocaust events. However, humor features prominently in an absurd novel. This section explicates the black humor within Foer's novel that enables him to pursue a commentary about the Holocaust and its representational challenges. The black humor within Foer's narrative hinders the reader's emotional investment in the characters, thereby allowing the author's commentary to become the foreground of the narrative.

Esslin explains that the repetitive and nonsensical use of clichés within the dialogue of plays results in comedy (299-300). He describes the use of cliché as a “kind of nonsense, which relies on a contraction rather than an expansion of the scope of language. This procedure, much used in the Theatre of the Absurd, rests on the satirical and destructive use of cliché—the fossilized debris of dead language” (Esslin 301). Although clichés based on puns or double entendres are humorous, Esslin underscores the destructive quality that recirculated, meaningless language can have on idea expression—thereby creating the essence of absurdity when the language, literally, means nothing. Later in the contemporary absurd novels, clichés also serve a comedic function; but in Foer's novel, clichés and other nonsensical language appear from an already exaggerated character. Harris defines absurd characterization in the novels of the sixties as a form of burlesque:

... the ultimate absurdity of life is suggested by a series of preposterous and ridiculous events, by characters who—although described with apparent gravity—are distorted, exaggerated and caricatured, and by language which

makes use of...lexical distortions, meaningless puns, and insistent repetition of empty words, clichés, exaggeration, and deliberately misplaced particulars, and juxtaposed incongruous details. In other words, absurdity in these novels is revealed primarily through the device of comic exaggeration—in a word, burlesque. (22)

Moving the reading of clichés beyond *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Harris explains that the characters in an absurd novel are created as caricatures in order to generate comic exaggeration. The added layer of an exaggerated caricature complements the absurdity of the clichés and puns that appear throughout the novel (the already exaggerated character also speaks in nonsensical phrases). Alexander's exaggerated characterization, his burlesque, appears through his affected English. The Ukrainian character who studied English at a university makes frequent and humorous mistakes with the language. For example: instead of the American English cliché, "you're killing me," Alexander says "spleen," as in "Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!" (Foer 1). "Dub" occurs frequently in Alexander's dialogue instead of "name" or "label." Alexander also signs all his letters "guilelessly" (Foer 26), instead of "sincerely." Or he writes "enough of my miniature talking" (Foer 53) rather than the colloquial phrase, "small-talk." And throughout the novel, Alexander often refers to "humble pie" when he is embarrassed as a repetitive cliché that accommodates his limited English; instead of explaining the source or effect of the embarrassment, Alexander just repeats the "humble pie" idiom. As Esslin claims that clichés are limitations rather than expansions of language, Alexander's frequent mistakes hinder rather than elucidate the events he writes about to Jonathan. While Alexander's

language barrier limits his expression, or his representation, of events in his portion of the narrative, his language mistakes also provide humorous moments alongside the more somber Holocaust scenes in the novel. Although it might seem that these humorous language mistakes allow for some needed comic relief when discussing the Holocaust, Alexander's language barrier also simultaneously hinders the description of the Holocaust.

In addition to the empty clichés that Alexander employs, the grandfather and Jonathan, the other two main characters in the novel, are also exaggerated in their characterization, resulting in a secondary comedic effect juxtaposed against the Holocaust theme. Alexander and his Ukrainian grandfather perform the exaggerated and stereotypical behavior of Eastern Europeans as they eat meat and potatoes at nearly every meal and drink vodka throughout the trip. The Ukrainians are in disbelief when they eat their first meal with Jonathan who informs them that he is a vegetarian and will not eat the food; the grandfather pantomimes becoming nauseated over the commentary that Jonathan will not eat sausage (Foer 65). The American Jonathan finds ordering food difficult since the Ukrainians will not make food substitutions for his meals. Their Ukrainian-ness is exaggerated through the inability to understand why someone would *choose* not to eat meat, the choice that prompts Alexander to call Jonathan a "schmuck" (Foer 65). This response is an added layer of burlesque as Alexander newly learns this Yiddish word from Jonathan, and Alexander turns the phrase back onto the Jewish Jonathan.

Performing the tourist role in a burlesque fashion, Jonathan also wears a fanny pack to keep all his documents close to his body, and he insists on speaking to other

Ukrainians even when Alexander tells him to remain silent (Alexander knows that the Ukrainians overcharge Americans for hotels and services) (Foer 63). In a sense, Jonathan performs the role of the overconfident and ignorant American who believes that he is well-informed after reading a travel guide about the Ukraine. In one scene, Jonathan thinks that the Ukrainians want Marlboro cigarettes for tips because he read in his guidebook that Marlboro cigarettes are hard to find. The Ukrainian man whom Jonathan attempts to tip with cigarettes for his directions is confused about the transaction, and the grandfather explains to the man that “he does not eat meat” (Foer 109) as an answer that, again, signifies the Ukrainians’ distinction from the American vegetarian. The language errors, clichés, and exaggerated behavior of the characters performing their European or American roles emphasize the absurdity of the novel through the ridiculously comedic characterizations.

Exaggerations in characterization, or caricature, consequently do not fully develop the characters, and black humor results from the limited or flat character development and dialogue. This exaggerated but also limited characterization can lead to a lack of reader investment in the characters or their fates. As explained by Harris, “The use of two-dimensional characters affords these writers one way to emphasize the artificiality of art, which, as we have seen, is one of their aims. Their use of caricature also indicates their rejection of the assumption underlying realistic characterization that human beings can be accurately formulated” (27). This is to say that rather than attempt to fully flesh-out a character in the hopes of accurately capturing the essence of personhood, the absurd author caricatures the human condition to emphasize the inability of art to capture life. Harris further defines the

result of black humor: "...we remain detached from the often flat, two-dimensional, and unreal characters...our disengagement, in fact, explains much of the so-called black humor of these novels. Often we find ourselves laughing at the various cruel and violent events that fill their pages" (27-8). In short, the reader who potentially does not emotionally invest in the characters will laugh at the character's unfortunate or tragic misfortunes—resulting in a dark humor within the novel.

Secondarily, Hipkiss also claims that the "Absurdist's [humor] is black" because black humor verges on despair but also maintains a sense of the individual's resolve: "the victim is not noble but holding on, grim and pathetic but determined" (3). The "victim" in the novel is arguably Jonathan since this narrative intends to describe his journey to uncover his family's Holocaust history. Jonathan does have a slight "pathetic but determined" aura of his characterization: despite the fact that none of the leads that he follows in the Ukraine provides any clues about his family's history, Jonathan still progresses forward in the hopes of finding some semblance of answers for his book-in-progress. And, indeed, the reader can laugh at Jonathan's misguided efforts to assimilate to Ukrainian culture and Alexander's ignorance about America. Importantly, though, analyzing the absurd conventions demonstrates that a novel which promises but never delivers a story about a third-generation Holocaust survivor and his family's history, further abstracted by empty clichés, burlesque characterization, and black humor, is not a representation but a commentary on the arduous task of Holocaust representation.

Expressing Trauma through the Black Humor of the Absurd

Humor, especially black humor, seems inappropriate in a Holocaust novel, even an absurd one. In fact, Foer has been criticized for the appearance of comedy in his novel (Safer 117). However, in my estimation, the reader should laugh at seemingly inappropriate moments as the absurdity of the novel reinforces the inability of authors to mimetically capture life; therefore, the fantastical descriptions emotionally distance the reader and enable her to laugh at the characters. Despite Safer's assertion that humor can create an emotional connection to the reader (123), black humor can also distance the reader. Arguably, the ability to laugh at the characters' shortcomings or misfortunes, as previously explained by Harris, accentuates this novel's representation of traumatic history as a work of fiction. In other words, it seems justifiable to laugh at exaggerated characters and fantastical events that are far removed from their historical counterparts.

In one such scene of outlandish commentary from the novel that can only be met with the guilty laughter that accompanies black humor, Alexander is speaking to a waitress and asks her to go to the discotheque. The waitress asks if Alexander will bring "the American." Alexander, perturbed that the waitress might be showing interest in Jonathan, retorts that, "he is a Jew." The waitress then says, "I have never seen a Jew before. Can I see his horns?" (Foer 106-7). The anti-Semitism is evident in this scene as Alexander immediately labels Jonathan as "the Jew" so that the waitress will not show any more interest in him. This anti-Semitic moment has some levity as the waitress sincerely asks to see the horns that she believes Jewish people to have, and the reader is meant to find her ignorance humorous. The grandfather also has moments of black humor in relation to anti-Semitism, such as in one scene in which he

insists that it is not possible that he has named his dog, Sammy Davis Jr. Junior after a converted Jewish man. As black humor, a moment that could have been potentially unfunny is layered with the darker absurdity as the grandfather yells in Ukrainian, “‘Sammy Davis, Junior was not a Jew!’ he hollered. ‘He was the Negro of the Rat Pack!’” to which Alexander replies that, “‘The Jew is certain of it.’” The grandfather then calls for “Dean Martin, Junior” to join him in the front seat (Foer 58). Referring to Sammy Davis, Junior as, “the Negro,” and then promptly renaming the dog, Dean Martin, after discovering that Sammy Davis, Junior converted to Judaism, is rife with irony. Judaism and not race (although racism is apparent in “negro”) is the factor that prompts the renaming of the dog—in a Holocaust novel, no less.

The black humor in this novel is paradoxical in that the comedy is tinged with anti-Semitism and aimed toward and created by central characters who have direct connections to the Holocaust: Jonathan is a third-generation survivor, the grandfather unwillingly participated in the Trachimbrod executions, and Alexander inherits a third-generation tie to a perpetrator. For many scholars, comedy should not appear in a Holocaust novel because this horrific, unprecedented, and traumatic real-life historical event necessitates a grave and serious approach to representation.²⁴ However, Terrence Des Pres asserts that humor can have a healing effect. Des Pres writes: “...toward matters of the Holocaust the comic attitude is irreverent, a mode that belittles or cheapens the moral severity of its subject. At the same time, no one

²⁴ Terrence Des Pres outlines three key “fictions” that are accepted in Holocaust studies and set “limits to respectable study”: The Holocaust should be represented, completely, as a unique event, representations should be accurate to the factions and conditions of the event, alterations should not be allowed (including for artistic purposes), and the Holocaust should only be referred to with seriousness and solemnity as other responses might obscure the enormity or dishonor the dead (217).

disputes its survival tactic. In dark times, laughter lightens the burden” (218-9). Des Pres exemplifies the need for humor as a coping mechanism, especially when the event under discussion is as “extreme” and “gigantic” as the Holocaust (218). For Des Pres, fiction already attempts to “usurp the real world with a world that is imagined” but with the inclusion of humor “the revolt is more pronounced” (219). This revolt is necessary as he claims that novels that attempt to realistically reproduce the Holocaust “fail” as they never quite seem “complete.” Comedy results in a subversion of representation that is “hostile” to the world it depicts, which enables the author to escape the same “liabilities” to reproduce the event that realistic works cannot (Des Pres 219). In other words, Des Pres asserts that fiction cannot encompass the whole of the experience or the entirety of Holocaust representation; fiction, as always inherently artistic, falls short of recreating the event, even with realism. As Des Pres explains:

...we recognize that texts and fields cannot go forward without grounding in attitudes that are themselves groundless...writing [that assumes techniques and procedures to create discourse] depends on fictions, on principles of organization that cannot be proved or even accounted for, is perhaps apparent; it is also, with the agony of Auschwitz in mind, a little shocking. For as soon as we ask if the field of Holocaust studies is, like other fields, ordered by an uncertified set of assumptions and procedures, we have to concede that it is...we conform to the fictions that underwrite our enterprise. (216-7)²⁵

²⁵ Des Pres recounts Foucault’s assertion that knowledge depends on methods that are “officially prescribed” in the techniques and methods that are given value in the “acquisition of truth” and those who are given the authority to determine “truth” (216). Des Pres emphasizes that the entire academic field of creating discourse and theory is founded upon the system of practice and belief that, objectively, cannot be proven—in short a myth or a fiction. The theory and writing practices that

Taking Des Pres's view of fiction as a revolt against the lived experience into account, I move the idea of fiction as a revolt further in claiming that fiction is the commentary on the horrific event and not the representation. Humor, for me, is what enables readers to easily conceive of the distinction between fiction and realistic accounts of the Holocaust. Even though Des Pres's interest lies within the healing power of humor in relation to Holocaust fiction, I emphasize Des Pres's word choice of the inclusion of humor in a Holocaust text as a "revolt." I find this significant as Holocaust fiction seems to be a revolt against the "unrepresentable" event itself, an opportunity to parse through the emotional ramifications but also an opportunity to attempt to understand the "unspeakable" event. Absurd Holocaust fiction, complete with its black humor, overtly bears the label of fiction; yet, the existence of the real-life Holocaust in a complete work of fiction (that merely reflects some biographical "truths" of the author's life) does more than just remind the reader that the event happened. The overt fictional rendering of the Holocaust forces the scholar to confront the limits of representation and to expand study to illustrations that can stand in for the contentiously "unrepresentable" events, no matter how fictitious. As the very theories that founded Holocaust studies are essentially accepted and studied fictions centered on the "tradition of high seriousness" (Des Pres 220), why not also accept the overtly fictitious renderings as equitable commentaries for that which has been declared "unspeakable"?

scholars accept as the "regime of truth" is itself a fiction, an important distinction for Holocaust studies that follows a seemingly prescribed order for writing and understanding the Holocaust (216).

The issue of accepting realistic depictions as Holocaust representations and other fictions as “graven images” in Holocaust studies²⁶ (Des Pres 218) extends into trauma studies, more generally. The absurd humor in Foer’s novel underscores the fictionality of the text, and arguably humor is the “revolt” against the common turn in Holocaust studies that the Holocaust is to be only approached with seriousness. The comedy, even black humor, within Foer’s novel illustrates the illogicality, or ridiculousness, of the anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust and still exists in Foer’s contemporary Ukraine. Therefore, the comedic aspects of Foer’s narrative do not threaten Holocaust representation as the comedy underscores Foer’s overt fictionalization; these comedic moments incite commentary on the Holocaust’s reverberations into the present day.

While there are genuinely humorous moments that work as comic relief in Foer’s novel, almost always, the comedy is also tinged with slight insidiousness. In one such scene, the vegetarian Jonathan, after much deliberation with the waitress at a restaurant in Lutsk, is able to have two potatoes with his sausage meal and drops one potato on the floor. The grandfather picks the dirty potato from the floor, cuts each of the characters a piece, and says, “Welcome to Ukraine,” to which all the characters laugh “with much violence for a long time” (Foer 67). Although this is meant to be a moment of levity in the novel, I note that Alexander’s lexical mistake is to describe their laughing as “violence.” Symbolically, at the sentence level, this humorous

²⁶ Des Pres summarizes the common viewpoint in Holocaust studies that one of the accepted “truths” of the study of the Holocaust is the need to “affirm historical authority...a strict fidelity to the memory of the camps and the ghettos. Our way of saying Never Again is to insist that the Holocaust took place, and then to ensure—through the act of bearing witness—that this unique evil and pain are wholly with us even now” (220).

moment literally states the word, violence, and echoes other scenes in which humor interplays with violence, such as in scenes when Alexander occasionally refers to his father who drinks and punches him in the face. In one such scene, Alexander witnesses his little brother crying after their father hit him; he says, “I did not know why I was laughing, but I could not stop...My brother persevered to a little less than cry, which made my silent laughing even more...it was the same laugh that I had in the restaurant in Lutsk, the laugh that had the same darkness...” (Foer 69). Referring to the earlier scene in which the three characters laughed over the fallen potato, Alexander claims that his laughter at his brother’s expense, the laughter that mocks the little brother for crying over his father’s brutality, has “darkness” to it. In other words, the laughter in this novel is ominous and contains the undertones that the scenes are funny precisely because much of the novel’s content does not lend itself to comic exaggeration, such as the Nazi invasion of Trachimbrod. Again, these guiltily humorous moments emphasize the unfunny aspects of the Holocaust and distance the reader from assuming realism.

As an answer to the controversy of presenting comedy in a Holocaust text that Des Pres discusses, the laughter does not need to serve as a healing effect in the absurd novel. Absurd conventions render the laughter “darker” than the jokes told in camp ghettos that were meant to be genuinely light-hearted in ominous times. In an absurd novel, the comedy meant to counteract the serious Holocaust material, paradoxically, provides guilty comic relief. However, at the same time, the comedy works to acknowledge residual trauma from the Holocaust as it seems inappropriate to laugh at the inherently unfunny violence of punching a child in the face, despite Alexander’s

claim to find this incident funny. In other words, the black humor in this novel reflects exactly what is also unfunny about the novel's Holocaust theme, as Safer and Collado-Rodriguez also suggest. The (un)funny/anti-Semitic humor throughout the novel makes the reader uncomfortable, just as the Holocaust theme should. However, while Safer and Collado-Rodriguez view the function of humor as comic relief and as testament to the verbal void that the Holocaust created, I observe that the inclusion of black humor, as an absurd convention, is a response to the question of representation for the Holocaust. Foer's humor is not the emphasis of the void but the appropriately absurd reaction to the absurdly tragic Holocaust. The comedy within the novel fills in the representational gaps for the Holocaust with an overtly absurd reaction to tragic events. Importantly, the humor is not the representational tool for the Holocaust because comedy, plausibly, would not be the ethical representation for mass genocide. Foer's black humor reflects the representational crisis of the Holocaust and some of the underlying issues surrounding the Holocaust, such as anti-Semitism, without offering a realistic representation. As such, the black humor overtly declares that this novel is not a work of history but an intermediate commentary on the Holocaust representation that has not yet been reached by Foer.

Burlesque into Traumatic Mimesis

In many instances, the absurd conventions not only stand in for the Holocaust representation that is not currently available to Foer but also indirectly articulates trauma. This section explains the representational obstacles associated with depicting trauma and the mimesis that can occur between the victim and witness that is depicted through burlesque in Foer's novel. The next section brings together the burlesque,

black humor, and trauma to demonstrate how absurdity can stand in for the seemingly inexpressible.

Further connecting absurdity as an answer to the representational crisis of the Holocaust, as defined by trauma theory, burlesque as comic exaggeration sometimes appears as doubling or imitation of characters; this imitation of characters correlates to the mimetic nature of trauma's effects. Ruth Leys contextualizes traumatic mimesis as a byproduct of early hypnosis treatments for trauma. The trauma victim would be hypnotized and had a tendency to "imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do [which] provided a basic model for the traumatic experience...the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to the state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance" (8). For Leys, relating Sigmund Freud's early conception of trauma as an inability to cognitively understand or recall the moment of trauma becomes a mimetic imitation or identification with the scene or aggressor (9).²⁷ This mimetic identification during a hypnosis session occurs in the previously mentioned scene in which Augustine is narrating the Nazi invasion and Alexander repeats her story; the novel repeats each line, twice. Although reversed in which Alexander, the third-generation perpetrator is identifying with Augustine, the victim, and imitating her, the novel reflects trauma's mimetic effects and the importance of the witness to the victim's trauma. Similarly, there is the mimetic identification between Alexander and Jonathan.

²⁷ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes that the trauma victim cannot remember the entirety of the traumatic experience, thus the victim is "obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past" (19). Dominick LaCapra later terms this phenomenon "acting out" in *Representing the Holocaust*.

Analyzing the appearance of burlesque as imitation in the absurd novel alongside the mimetic theory of trauma reveals that Alexander and Jonathan, as third-generation perpetrator and victim, identify with each other. The absurd imitation that occurs between Alexander and Jonathan relates to traumatic mimesis in that the two reflect the blurring or ambiguity of Holocaust victims and perpetrators that is often accepted among some trauma theorists (the ambiguity of victims and perpetrators is discussed by scholars such as Giorgio Agamben and Debarati Sanyal, and Cathy Caruth who claims that a non-victim can identify with and experience a victim's trauma).

The mimesis that occurs within Jonathan and Alexander's characterizations, in the fashion of the absurd, indicates that a traumatic identification between Alexander and Jonathan occurs, especially as the novel reveals Alexander's familial ties to the Holocaust. The exaggeration of their characterizations and the slight but distinct difference between Alexander and Jonathan reveal the necessity of bringing together the absurd and trauma theory to differentiate between the novel's representation and the real-life occurrence.

Ostensibly, Alexander and Jonathan are burlesque imitations of one another: while Jonathan is clueless about Ukrainian society (he offers cigarettes for information, or does not understand that rejecting meat may be offensive) Alexander is just as clueless about American society. For example, Alexander asks Jonathan if "Negro" or homosexual accountants are in America to which Jonathan replies that Alexander should not use the "n-word." Alexander, perplexed by Jonathan's response, asks why he cannot use that word since he "dig[s] Negroes" because "they are

premium people” (Foer 70). This response indicates that Alexander’s questions are not meant to be homophobic or racist; he is simply ignorant about American culture, evident as Alexander inquires further about the cost of coffee in America and whether women are promiscuous or not (Foer 70-1). Alexander’s genuine inquiry into American society is further supported by the earlier information that he wants to move to America and become an accountant someday (Foer 69).

Further exemplifying the similarities between Jonathan and Alexander, although Alexander is Ukrainian, tall, and not Jewish, the two characters share the same birth year: 1977. Alexander also functions as Jonathan’s role in telling Jonathan’s story of the trip through his epistolary portion of the novel. Ironically, Jonathan’s book chapters are fantastical fiction while Alexander clarifies the realistic events that happened during their trip to Trachimbrod. To interpret, Alexander identifies with the victim and maintains reverence for the subject-matter as he discovers that he has ties to the Holocaust. This further accentuates the irony in the novel: this Ukrainian trip that was meant to help Jonathan discover information about his grandfather’s past instead uncovers a story for Alexander who learns about his grandfather’s past in Trachimbrod. This trip helps Alexander fill in the gaps in his familial history, thus it is Alexander who takes narrative control of Jonathan’s trip. As Alexander narrates Jonathan’s trip, the empty-handed Jonathan fictionalizes a fantastical history of the town and grandfather that he never knew.

Burlesque imitation between Jonathan and Alexander occurs through their shared birth year, familial ties to the same town’s history, and similar ignorance to one another’s cultures. In fact, the two have a conversation that hypothesizes that if World

War II had never happened, then Jonathan would have also been born Ukrainian. If Trachimbrod was never destroyed by the Nazis, Alexander and Jonathan would have been born in the same year and in the same town (both of their grandfathers resided in Trachimbrod during the same time period). Importantly, Alexander and Jonathan also share their grandfather's names as three generations of Alexander's family are named Alexander (Foer 5) and Jonathan bears the middle name Safran for his grandfather. Further, Collado-Rodriguez claims that Alexander also wants to be a writer (56), which if this reading is accepted adds another burlesque characterization; however, I point out that Alexander tells Jonathan he wants to become an accountant when they first meet (Foer 69). Perhaps Alexander's epistolary responses, later censorships, and his finishing of Jonathan's story can be read as an uncontrollable mimesis through which Alexander becomes the writer of the story that Jonathan, the self-proclaimed writer, cannot create in the absence of his familial historical discovery. In short, the characterization similarities become burlesque as Jonathan and Alexander reverse their initial narrative roles when Alexander assumes Jonathan's role in the story. Jonathan then becomes a witness to Alexander's history, just as Alexander was initially employed to accompany Jonathan on his archival trip. In discovering his familial link to a Holocaust perpetrator, Alexander mimetically identifies with Jonathan.

I suggest that the mimesis, from trauma theory, that occurs within Foer's narrative would be more ethically illustrated if read in the context of absurdity. Burlesque, and not a literal traumatic mimesis, alleviates a connotation that Alexander can assume Jonathan's role as a third-generation victim of Nazism. As Leys points out, complete mimesis, especially between victim and perpetrator, not only removes

individual autonomy but also carries the inherent risk of dislocating the connotations of victim and perpetrator to the extent that mimesis could result in the “mimetic-contagious transmission of psychic suffering to others” (17). And if suffering is to be accepted as a contagious phenomenon, then where and with whom can the origins or effects of the traumatic event be located? The novel’s reflection of traumatic mimesis in the form of burlesque emphasizes my argument that the Holocaust, indeed, incites a crisis in representation. But the novel’s absurdity, burlesque, and other absurd literary devices such as black humor, reiterate that the novel is an exaggeration. Quite literally, the novel is a work of fiction and should not be approached as a document to be read as one would read a real-life trauma victim for hypnotic effects. The fictionalized mimesis reminds the reader of the difficulty of articulating the traumatic experience, while the absurdity reinforces that a kind of response is *possible*, even if it may not be *the* representation of the Holocaust. Rather than accepting that Jonathan and Alexander are blurred to the point of indistinguishable perpetrator and victim, both carrying the traumatic, inherited aftereffects of the Holocaust, burlesque underscores the ethical and theoretical quandary of translating fiction’s characterizations and plots to literal conclusions about the Holocaust.

Conclusion: Absurdity as a Placeholder for Unarticulated Trauma

Bringing together trauma theory and aspects of the absurd as a novelistic technique demonstrates that Foer’s novel offers a response to the Holocaust, an illustration that is not meant to mimetically reflect the real-life event. Many of Foer’s scenes can be analyzed through a trauma theory lens, but coupling trauma theory with the analysis of the absurd acknowledges the representational crisis of a trauma while

also offering some language for the event. In other words, absurdity stands in for the trauma that may resist traditional narration. The absurd illustrates but does not offer a representation of trauma, or what I refer to as a placeholder for representation. The absurdity cannot represent but can offer a commentary on or an abstract illustration of the traumatic event.

An overarching instance of coupling the absurd's black humor with trauma theory is Alexander's grandfather's blindness. The grandfather claims to be blind, yet he is the driver for the family's touring company. The black humor conveys the grandfather's loss that is not directly articulated. Early in the novel, Alexander narrates that his grandmother died of brain cancer and in the aftermath of her death, the grandfather claims that he is blind (Foer 5). Alexander states: "Father does not believe him, but purchased Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior for him nonetheless, because a See Eye Bitch is not only for blind people but for people who pine for the negative of loneliness" (Foer 5). Alexander clarifies that the dog is not a trained service animal but is meant to keep the grandfather company, to counteract his loneliness. The grandfather's blindness is a manifestation of the emotional trauma he experiences after the loss of his wife. The grandfather is not actually blind, but claims this imaginary ailment because he does not directly display the effects of grief (Alexander claims to have only seen him cry once about his wife's death). Instead, the grandfather laments a physical ailment that stands in for his articulation of the loss he experiences. As Harris claims that black humor exists for the reader to laugh at the tragically (un)funny, the reader cannot help but laugh at the grandfather who claims to be blind while driving and relies on the "services" of an insane dog in many of the novel's

scenes. Although the grandfather does not exhibit his emotional reaction to his wife's death, his complaint about blindness and the corresponding humor of a "blind" tour guide and driver demonstrates the stand in representation for the unarticulated trauma.

The fantastical meta-narrative of Trachimbrod, an unrealistic retelling of Trachimbrod's inhabitants, and supposedly Jonathan's early ancestors, is also an absurd technique that stands in for the family history that Jonathan cannot uncover during his Ukraine trip. As Jonathan does not emerge from the journey with any concrete facts, he employs the fantastic as a replacement for the missing history—a complete work of fabrication as opposed to a fictionalized but realistic reimagining of his family's Holocaust ties. The overt magical-realism-esque quality of the meta-narrative clearly illustrates that this meta-narrative is not a retelling of his grandfather's Holocaust story.

And lastly, Alexander and Jonathan's burlesque imitation of one another leads to shared historical trauma as Alexander learns of his grandfather's past and his personal tie to a Holocaust perpetrator. As Jonathan and Alexander already share similar traits, this discovery of Alexander's grandfather's involuntary role in aiding the Nazis to execute Trachimbrod's Jewish villagers further accentuates the similarity of their characterizations one last time. Alexander inherits the third-generation tie to the Holocaust and his family's past is revealed, as Alexander claims he and Jonathan are "reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?" (Foer 144). Toward the end of the novel, Alexander claims that the dual narratives that he and Jonathan are separately writing have become one story; it is Jonathan that aimed for illumination during his trip, but it is Alexander who receives the familial knowledge

and writes the main narrative. In the penultimate scene of the novel, Alexander's family's history and its narration stand in for the unarticulated trauma of Jonathan's grandfather's Holocaust story when Alexander's grandfather finally admits that he was complicit in mass execution. The very last scene does not conclude with Jonathan's family but ends with Alexander's grandfather's suicide note, as the grandfather becomes the unexpected center of Jonathan's Holocaust story. The last lines of the novel do not, in fact, end, which further perpetuates the concept that the story is not finished, literally. The very last line reads: "I will walk without noise, and I will open the door in darkness, and I will" (Foer 276). No punctuation mark completes the sentence in which the grandfather is narrating his last actions of going to commit suicide in the bathroom. Literally, there is no conclusive ending to this novel.

Foer seemingly acknowledges the chaos and difficulty of representing the Holocaust while simultaneously offering a response. Absurdity makes an ethical illustration of the Holocaust's residual trauma possible, as some of the novel's moments of blatant fantasy signify that the fiction is not meant to be interpreted as a literal recasting of victims or the event. Rather, the absurdity becomes a placeholder for representation, which gestures toward both the difficulty of articulating the Holocaust and the continued attempt to put some words to the experience. Importantly, the absurd techniques in Foer's novel remind the reader that the representation is not meant to be a mimetic reflection of the event. As I have argued, only applying a trauma theory lens to fictional characters risks misinterpretation of the real-life events surrounding the Holocaust, especially when perpetrator and victim are

assumed to equitably share historical trauma; it is debatable that fiction can even represent the trauma of these real-life victims. Worse, competing readings that assume the Holocaust is an “inexpressible” event risk silence and forgetting. The Holocaust is an event that demands careful critical treatment. Therefore, this chapter calls for an interpretation of Foer’s Holocaust novel through absurdity in order to demonstrate that the absurd techniques stand in for the Holocaust representation that cannot, by Foer and others, presently be expressed. As Holocaust representation remains a contentious subject, absurdity enables a response to the Holocaust that maintains ethical reverence. Absurdity signals the author’s inability to capture the lived experience, thereby enabling the reader to ignore the crisis of representation in favor of uncovering what the author did express.

In Foer’s case, he has illustrated the reverberations of the Holocaust that continue to shape our world. Unfortunately, in Foer’s contemporary Ukraine these reverberations are cultural ignorance and intolerance. He indicates throughout his novel that anti-Semitism is still an existing cultural attitude. But just as the absurd novelists did not succumb to the despair of a meaningless world, Foer symbolically offers that the perpetrator and victim can work together to uncover the past and learn from it because “there is still time” (271) for interrogating and working to understand our roles in history.

CHAPTER TWO: (RE) WRITING THE “TRUTH” ABOUT VIETNAM:

MICHAEL HERR’S *DISPATCHES*

As explored in the previous chapter, absurdity overtly appears within the untethered, confused, and darkly humorous narratives that center on World War II. In contrast, the absurdity within the Vietnam War narrative appears more subtly. The Vietnam War was the most documented war to its date; in fact, footage from the frontlines was broadcast nightly into American homes. This hyper-vigilant documentation from the Vietnam frontlines lends itself to an interpretation that the Vietnam War was a “media spectacle.”²⁸ As such, the absurd functions in a Vietnam novel to accentuate the illogicality of mass documentation that ultimately does not represent the war. In other words, the sheer amount of film, photographs, and reports from Vietnam indicates that the War is well-documented and yet somehow still inexplicable.

Michael Herr’s 1977 novel, *Dispatches*, narrates his deployment as a correspondent to the Vietnam War. Consisting of a narrative oscillation between present deployment to the war and post-war meditations, Herr’s text consists of war vignettes from soldiers, other correspondents, and his own reactions to war-related

²⁸ I am using the term, “media spectacle,” to refer to the barrage of reporting from the Vietnam warfront. Susan Sontag also refers to the effects of constant footage from war: “Newer technology provides a nonstop feed: as many images of disaster and atrocity as we can make time to look at” (108). Sontag’s interpretation of television’s effect on the viewers is that “in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous” (105), which means that the more viewers are given images of disaster to consume, the less the images affect the viewer; essentially, constant exposure to violent images can desensitize an audience to violence. Michael Rogin defines “spectacle” as “spatial pleasures of contemporary visual entertainment...spectacle contrasts to narrative, for the postmodernist, as fragmented and interchangeable individuals, products, and body parts replace the subject-centered story” (507-8). In short, the “media spectacle” is the proliferation of televised reporting on the Vietnam War through which deconstructed, violent images were delivered to the audience.

events, such as attending official press conferences. Aside from a couple of skirmishes that Herr witnesses from the periphery, the narrative mainly consists of soldiers and correspondents sharing their war stories with Herr. Inevitably, the “war” presentation, or “reporting,” in this novel often appears as second-hand accounts always told to Herr as a past event. Herr’s novel is often read as the “authentic account” of Vietnam and is often categorized as New Journalism (an experimental genre, popular in the 1960’s and ‘70s, that mixes personal perspective and fact into the narrative). For some scholars explicated in this chapter, Herr’s subjective perspective provides an alternate narrative that the official documents for the war could not record. Essentially, for some, Herr’s war narrative, as witnessed from the periphery of war engagement, records the alternate view of history that the Vietnam War was a chaotic event for which American soldiers were ill-prepared, thus resulting in battle defeats that the official reports did not acknowledge. For some scholars, Herr’s alternate history, as a counter-record to the official documents, functions as the authentic representation. However, I read this text as fiction, not as journalistic reporting. Herr is not a reporter within this novel but a character; and his narrative contains the same fictional techniques as other works of absurd fiction. This distinction that *Dispatches* should be considered a fiction is important since the absurdity within Herr’s novel can potentially obscure the real-life referents for the Vietnam War.

Herr attempted reportage from the Vietnam frontlines within his narrative, but *Dispatches* contains the same surrealism and hyper-vigilant detail that is found within the experimental novels of the 1960s-70s. For example, Herr, an embedded correspondent, writes about other correspondents and film crews; symbolically, Herr

documents the documentarians. In particular, when Herr reports on the press reports, he often inserts media allusions like book and film titles into the narrative. These references to books, movies, and movie stars create a surrealism that emphasizes Herr's insertion of absurdity in lieu of explicit accounts of Vietnam battles; in other words, Herr fills in the gaps in information about the war with allusions to other popular media.

Surrealism, as a key feature of absurdity, functions in *Dispatches* as it does in other absurd novels through a loss of “reality” or the “collapse of the illusory world” (Hipkiss 1). The surrealism within *Dispatches* occurs through the historical allegories that transport a particular scene in Vietnam across time to an earlier moment in American history. Herr further collapses the character-author fictional boundary as he eschews the typical conventions of a narrative by inserting himself into his own story as a character. To some readers, the insertion of surrealism or other absurd techniques may render an appropriate response to the issue of Vietnam representation; or that an absurd event is accurately represented through an absurd fictional rendering. However, in this chapter, I explicate that absurdity functions as *attempted representation*. This incomplete representation rendered through absurdity also functions as a literary strategy to distance the real-life war from its fictional depiction, which enables a critical distance to engage in reflection on this historic event. In other words, accepting absurdity as representation for Vietnam threatens to reduce the war to an incomprehensible event due to the absurd's correlation with the fantastic or other overtly fictional techniques. If absurdity is the representation for Vietnam and other politically complicated wars, this absurd representation may result in conflating

Vietnam with all of the other similar war events that seem beyond comprehension. In short, I am emphasizing that treating absurdity as the representation may become as reductionist of an interpretation as the trauma readings that offer silence as the only appropriate representation for traumatic events, as explored in Chapter One through Holocaust readings. Although this dissertation exemplifies that three different wars can be illustrated through absurdity, interpreting absurdity to be *the representation* for all of these events creates a problematic understanding that these distinct wars can be treated under the same theoretical framework; the issue inherent to correlating absurdity as the representation for these wars may conclude in the same generalized interpretation that war is absurd and always already beyond comprehension. In this conclusive reading, absurdity as representation for all of these wars does not bring readers closer to understanding the war and, plausibly, threatens to blur all of these wars together under the same framework of incomprehensibility.

Instead, I argue that the absurd appears as a placeholder for representation; in other words, absurdity signifies that the war representation remains incomplete. The absurdity within a Vietnam novel appears within the same theoretical framework first introduced by scholars like Martin Esslin, Charles B. Harris, and Robert A. Hipkiss. However, as the war context shifts throughout the decades, politically and strategically, the absurd appears through nuanced differences for each war. For example, the absurd for the Holocaust and the Vietnam War both operate through hyper-vigilant narration, but some absurd characteristics for the Holocaust appear more overtly fantastic for genocide scenes than for the Vietnam War scenes. Importantly, these divergences in how absurdity appears within the context of a

particular war accentuate the corresponding uniqueness of the particular war under discussion. Investigating how the absurd appears within a war novel illuminates certain political or cultural stakes within a particular time period and resists a broad generalization that all war can be considered absurd. To accept absurdity as *the representation*, again, threatens to potentially obscure the real-life victims and war from collective memory and understanding. Rather, investigating the commonality of authors who struggle to articulate their wars and insert absurdity, in the absence of a cohesive narrative, exemplifies that words must be put to contemporary war in order to resist collective forgetting. At the same time, the absurdity within these novels also calls for an audience to understand that the fictional renderings of the wars are, in fact, a fiction and are not to be approached as the representation of the real-life wars. Absurdity, as a fictional technique, enables authors and their audiences to reflect on the implications of the war from a critical distance (as absurdity overtly signals that this is not the representation) and also keeps their wars firmly planted in contemporary memory.

Instead of interpreting Vietnam literature solely through investigating the traumatic aftereffects of the war, as scholarship cited in the Introduction has, investigation of the absurd culminates in a more productive conversation for understanding contemporary war and its implications. If Vietnam literature, especially by veterans or other eye-witness accounts, is approached solely through trauma theory, the interpretation may only reveal that the author suffers from PTSD and therefore the lack of representation is reflected in the text, which might lead to a generalized understanding of the complexities within the Vietnam War. Representing Vietnam is

especially complicated since it is common in Vietnam War literature for writers to elude directly writing about the war (such as Herr and the preeminent Vietnam War writer, Tim O'Brien). This evasion of writing about war, especially by veterans, results from Alex Vernon's assertion that:

[Military fiction writers and their critics] often want to capture war accurately. Yet war fiction, even when written by a veteran, does not always primarily concern war, as writers frequently employ war as a metaphor for something deeper about human nature and human institutions. The metaphoric effort potentially obstructs a faithful, authentic portrait of war and the military, and it severely complicates the task of interpretation. (29)

For Vernon, representation through metaphor obscures the "authentic portrait of war" because figurative language adds authorial interpretation to the war portrayal. But, importantly, Vernon emphasizes an aspect of writing military fiction that holds true, even for journalistic style such as Herr's: authors concern themselves less with depicting war and are seemingly more interested in what these wars reveal about human nature or politics. The distinction between "accurate" representation and interpretative metaphor leads to a conclusion that the contemporary author's task of writing about war may not be to "faithfully" capture the experience but to interrogate the ethical or moral underpinnings of war; hence, the importance of my assertion that investigating absurdity as a war writer's technique provides a template for interrogating the ethics of portraying a historical war, while also maintaining that absurdity is not *the* representation. In other words, absurdity signals that, despite the mention of real-life referents, this fictional rendering should not be confused with a

historical representation; this narrative tactic detaches the “reality” of the event from the fiction and results in a critical distance for an author to explore the complications of representing the war and its ethical implications, without offering a definitive account of the event as it realistically happened.

Herr ostensibly does not model the whimsy of the more conventionally-defined absurd novel as his account has a firm basis in reality from the author’s lived experience: Herr’s participation in the Vietnam War is as a paid correspondent. Ironically, while Herr does reflect some symptoms of PTSD in *Dispatches*,²⁹ he is presumably in a position to write the uncensored and “true” account of Vietnam as a reporter who did not directly participate. But, paradoxically, Herr did not experience the combat-violence as a soldier did, since the position of the paid reporter who volunteers to deploy and write about Vietnam is a very different experience than that of the active combatant. Consequently, Herr cannot write an experiential account from a soldier’s perspective. As a journalist, and in lieu of active participation, Herr absurdly captures the “media spectacle” that was the Vietnam War through his

²⁹ Herr claims that he sees dead Marines in his room at night after having a nightmare about Vietnam “three or four times.” However, he says that the nightmares eventually left him: “Some guys come back and see their nightmares break in the streets in daylight, some become inhabited and stay that way, all kinds of things can trail after you, and besides, after a while my thing went away almost completely, the dream, too” (Herr 244). This is to conclude that Herr mitigates his PTSD in the novel or perhaps does not feel as entitled to it as those who have served. Mark A. Heberle suggests Herr suffered a “post-Vietnam breakdown in the years after his months in the war” (xv), but Herr’s writing in the chapter “Breathing Out” gives the author “posttraumatic release.” Heberle claims that this “release is attributed to: “*Dispatches* achieves personal, literary, and historical closure with the [North] Vietnamese victory in 1975, freeing...Herr to write books on Las Vegas and Walter Winchell” (xv). Herr’s quote and Heberle’s interpretation both reflect post-traumatic stress as a phenomenon to be overcome, which is usually not the case with veterans. If Herr’s comment is to be understood literally and he “overcame” his PTSD, he arguably would be in a position to write an objective and realistic account without the interference of traumatic memory. The inclusion of this moment on reflecting on a traumatic nightmare seems to indicate that Herr is, in fact, admitting to being affected by the war, despite not being a combatant, which draws his portrayal of the war as an “accurate” account into question.

allusions to movies and other novels within his narrative; an artistry that reveals that Herr's account is only as accurate as his faulty memory.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Herr inserts media, literary, and historical allusions to comment on the Vietnam War as a placeholder for the war experience that he cannot quite articulate in his novel. The allusions that stand in for representation, importantly, often refer to World War II literature or film. The struggle to represent Vietnam is reflected in the authorial choice to refer back to World War II in an attempt to understand Vietnam, and World War II references also illustrate an absurd characteristic: history is symbolically repeated within this novel. The insertion of the absurd implicates that there are challenges for the author to represent a current war in its contemporary period; but, as an authorial technique, the absurd also gestures toward putting words to the experience rather than not depicting the war at all. References to World War II, as a war that precedes Vietnam and has its own plethora of literature and film,³⁰ become a template to begin thinking-through Vietnam. To be clear, I interpret Herr's inclusion of media and historical references as absurd insertions due to the surrealism that accompanies articulating a war through a film reference (the loss of "reality" as characteristic to absurd novels) or another moment in history, as historical events become symbolic signifiers for one another despite different contexts and time periods. The surrealism of the media spectacle emphasizes that the "journalistic" text is fiction and mimics the real-life absurdity of broadcasting

³⁰ Although the Korean War immediately precedes the Vietnam War, there are no references to it within *Dispatches*, only World War II. I would argue that the sheer volume of World War II literature, when compared to the Korean War, may be a factor for Herr's inclusion of World War II references. Importantly, World War II is also the last "just" war, or "good war" (Rogin 516), in which American forces aided the defeat of Nazism, which sets-up an interesting binary between the "justified" World War II and the unpopular Vietnam War.

a war in “real-time.” Including references to other historical moments of American imperialism amid a media spectacle ultimately demonstrates that *Dispatches* is more of an exploration in documentation and its representational challenges than an authoritative representation of the Vietnam War; in other words, Herr’s absurd attempt at meaning-making for Vietnam that I will explicate in the later sections.

***Dispatches* and Elements of the Absurd**

As a marketing strategy, a publisher’s blurb is meant to entice readers into buying the book. Ironically, there is a blurb at the end of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* for *Dispatches*. While a blurb does not hold any academic or critical weight, I still underscore the publisher’s word choices. The blurb for *Dispatches* by Vintage reads: “These pieces portray the frightening, grotesque, and absurd aspects of a senseless war as seen from the trenches.” The word, “absurd,” describes Herr’s scenes of the Vietnam War and connotes the inability to articulate the “senseless” war; the style of the novel is described as “pieces” already indicating that this novel does not contain a coherent narrative. What is particularly remarkable about the publisher’s wording is that the “pieces” “portray” the scenes of violence, “grotesque” at that, at least for this advertiser. This brief sentence, meant to sell the book to the masses, is particularly interesting to consider in light of the actual style of the novel. Herr, a journalist, writes his observational novel as a reporter for this war as “seen from the trenches.” In the same vein, Evelyn Cobley terms Herr’s style as “scrupulous” attention to the “everyday” (98), which means that the novel centers not on the fighting or tangible warfare but on military logistics or equipment; or, to be blunt, Herr’s narrative is about taking cover in a trench during sniper-fire. Much of the novel illustrates the dirty

camps, makeshift field hospitals or a few brief passages about corpses, aftermath of the mostly unobserved violence, and the soldiers that Herr interviews in the “downtime” from missions within the barracks. Seemingly, nothing is ostensibly absurd about this novel in the theoretical sense of the term. And yet, the blurb not only reflects public opinion of the Vietnam War, with the absurd carrying a colloquial connotation (senseless death and vague political underpinnings therefore connoting an absurd war), but also perfectly captures what Herr’s meticulously detailed and realistic account of Vietnam is: absurd in his attempt to recreate the soldiers’ experiences through vignettes, essentially, a hyper-vigilante attention to detail without a linear narrative.

As explored in Chapter One, the absurd does not necessarily always function as hyperbolic or fantastic; absurd description can also appear as hyper-vigilant description of details to create a sort of fictional reality. In relation to hyper-vigilante detail, *Dispatches* exemplifies the conventional elements of the absurd as defined by Martin Esslin. According to Esslin: “By transcribing reality with ruthless accuracy, the dramatist arrives at the disintegrating language of the Absurd. In a world that had become absurd, transcribing reality with meticulous care is enough to create the impression of extravagant irrationality” (230). This technique of a dramatist’s meticulous description (Esslin is writing about The Theater of the Absurd from the 1950s) can be applied to the absurd novels that attempt to mimetically capture “lived experience” through precise detail in certain scenes of the fictional world. One exemplar passage represents Herr’s typical style for the novel: “Four kilometers northwest of Khe Sanh was Hill 861, the hardest-hit of all the sector outposts after

Langvei, and it seemed logical to everyone that the 1st Battalion of the 9th Marine Regiment should have been chosen to defend it. Some even believed that if anyone but 1/9 had been put there, 861 would never have been hit” (121). Herr’s writing of the precise location of a sector outpost simply catalogues information as the lack of context or explanation for the military jargon results in details that ultimately report but do not explain what Vietnam is like, a sort of documentation impulse that illustrates nothing about the experience. These lucid and detailed paragraphs ultimately do not represent the jungle-fighting that characterized the Vietnam military tactics but, instead, list anecdotal experiences as Herr travels from camp-to-camp, seemingly always on the periphery of active combat.

Herr is the journalist and the war *happens to him*, as a result, there is the utter lack of a soldier’s perspective of the fighting, other than the stories that the soldiers share with him. The soldiers’ stories are always a retelling of the event, thus Herr does not witness many first-hand accounts of battle. In other words, Herr is a paid journalist and not an enlisted soldier; despite Herr’s deep engagement with the soldiers’ war stories and his own experience of sharing barracks and withstanding incoming fire with the soldiers, Herr is *not* a soldier: Herr has a sort of agency that a typical soldier does not have in the sense that when Herr does not want to remain in a particularly dangerous location, he can board the next helicopter to another village. Herr is not conscripted to fight, an important distinction when he voluntarily chooses to participate in a couple of firefights.

Specifically, Herr takes a rifle and provides cover for some soldiers in one particular scene, but much of the novel is Herr’s stories collected from soldiers about

fighting—he does not engage in war violence like a combatant. No matter how deeply embedded Herr may be to the Vietnam “experience,” he is not actually fighting the war thereby accentuating Herr’s role as a spectator to the soldier’s experience. Herr can listen to and record what a soldier is willing or able to tell him, and he can write about his observations in the barracks and from the trenches, but Herr does not experience the war like an enlisted combatant and does not gain a soldier’s experiential knowledge. This distinction between Herr and the soldiers is always clearly defined in the novel as soldiers attempt to make the barracks more comfortable for him. In one such scene in a trench: a soldier has been shot and Herr accidentally leans on his wound. The soldier profusely curses at Herr until someone tells him that Herr is not a grunt, to which the soldier says, “very quietly, ‘Be careful, Mister. Please be careful’” (110). In reading just this minor scene in the novel, characteristic of many, the soldiers are consistently separating their experience from Herr’s; in this instance, the wounded soldier might have continued to scream at a fellow grunt but Herr, the reporter, receives a sort of apology. In a metaphorical reading, perhaps the soldier recognizes Herr’s inexperience with combat and realizes that he has to tell Herr to mind his wound, twice. Herr’s narrative is always one-step removed from the experiential knowledge of a soldier; Herr occupies a separate category from the soldier on a symbolic and linguistic level as his press credentials continue to affect the soldier’s responses to him. Even in withstanding the same incoming fire as the soldiers, Herr’s experience is different than the average grunt’s. The effort of the sentences and the all-inclusive details attempt a representation, but one of Herr’s absurd techniques appears through the meticulously described scenes of minor battle-

action while the larger narratives, such as observing a tactical mission, are missing. In other words, this text that many scholars interpret as authoritative Vietnam representation ironically misses most of the battle-action, an especially salient point in remembering that Herr was deployed to Vietnam primarily to observe the war.

Further, in a book that contains precise descriptions, Herr ironically often does not give specific dates or years, such as he typically refers to the “third week of May” (240) or other such vague denotations of time. Precision with naming periods of time is arguably important for consistently orienting the reader in a war that spanned nearly twenty years. Years or dates appear on less than a handful of the Vintage edition two-hundred-and-sixty page novel. The disorienting references to time or place, as Herr shifts from village-to-camp, to helicopters, to post-war reflections throughout, creates a dichotomy between the meticulous detail of the novel and Herr’s subtle acknowledgements of the complexity of writing the Vietnam experience through his vague denotations of time. In one such early passage Herr writes, “This is already a long time ago, I can remember the feelings but I can’t still have them...Memory print, voices and faces, stories like filament through a piece of time, so attached to the experience that nothing moved and nothing went away” (28-9). Herr publishes portions of *Dispatches* in 1967-8 in *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. These articles were later collected and published in novel form in 1977 (Hawkins 18). The majority of *Dispatches* was written when the war was not yet over and within a year of Herr’s return to America in 1967, yet he writes that his story is “already a long time ago” (28). Herr’s war experience is simultaneously articulated and is also not as Herr can remember but not “feel” the war, less than a year after returning and writing the story.

The generality of time and Herr's meditation on memory is further convoluted by new language for ethnicities and towns: "Charlie" and worse racial slurs for the Vietnamese, and "Dangers" for Danang or "Saigers" for Saigon (Herr 240). The slang terminology blurs the referents for the war as the proper names are replaced with a newly invented language because "Vietnam has spawned a jargon of such delicate locutions that it's often impossible to know even remotely the thing being described" (Herr 91). Of course one of the most interesting language-inventions is the term, "acute environmental reaction," for shellshock³¹ (Herr 91). This term sprang from the clear distinction of the (in)tangible wounds in the camps: "They'd talk about physical wounds in one way and psychic wounds in another" (Herr 58). The invention of the term not only delineates the "newness" of tactically fighting this war as opposed to previous wars but also concurrently mitigates the trauma of the war as an "environmental reaction" is a less jarring term than shellshock, which symbolically carries material violence with the terminology (shelling that shocks). The new nicknaming, the military jargon, and oscillation between objective fact in recording precise details and the murky memory of Herr's reflections, lead to an absurdity characterized by the hyper-vigilant attention to banal details while the important context of the fighting is missing from the novel; during the few times when Herr does engage in active shooting, his coherence becomes disrupted when he attempts to process the violence that he did experience. The brief and infrequent moments of

³¹ Battle trauma is still referred to as shellshock during the Vietnam War. In 1980, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is first used for the psychological aftermath that Vietnam veterans suffered in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*" (Leys 5).

active fighting that are briefly treated in the novel³² importantly contain elements of the fantastic which fill in the “gaps” in Herr’s narrative, a point I return to later.

Referring back to the publisher’s blurb about Herr’s novel as “pieces” and Heberle’s comment that Herr’s book is a collection of anecdotes, the novel contains a fragmented narrative trajectory: the anecdotes do not develop individual soldiers as characters, and Herr breaks-up chapters by large chunks of information that he broadly titles. Such chapters are named, “Khe Sanh” for a Vietnam village they are stationed in; or “Hell Sucks” which encompasses the Vietnam “experience” of leveled towns and bodies in the streets; or “Colleagues” in which he devotes an entire chapter to chronicling anecdotes about fellow war correspondents. The anecdotes move from one to the next but do not culminate in a tethered account of the war. The seeming cohesion of the narrative only builds from the clarity of the descriptions of individual moments strung together into a novel.³³ What some scholars may read as a coherent, realistic depiction of soldiers’ experiences during the war, I read as an absurd war novel: Herr attempts to understand and write the war through careful observation, a kind of meticulous detailing that actually functions more like surrealism. As Herr collects and reports war stories from soldiers, almost always tangential personal

³² Only one scene in the novel contains a description of Herr providing cover-fire for Marines in an active moment of battle. Most of the novel does not contain active violence, and the few scenes that do contain war violence are told from Herr’s perspective of taking cover in a trench while being shelled or sniper-fired upon.

³³ Spindler places Herr’s novel into the category of New Journalism, along with Tom Wolfe. In this genre he claims there is a “blurring of traditional generic boundaries” as “reportage blends into autobiography; history is rendered in fictive modes of narration; evaluative criteria such as accuracy come into opposition with formal autonomy and old-fashioned ‘poetic license’” (26). This New Journalism seems to have more in common with creative nonfiction than the documentary reporting that inherently carries an assumption of objective recording. But more than just a “poetic license,” I argue that Herr employs fantastic elements and media references that blur rather than elucidate historical understanding of the Vietnam War; these narrative techniques operate through surrealism rather than merely blending a little fiction with objective fact, as is the case with New Journalism.

stories that occasionally dovetail combat aftermath, he does not illustrate what fighting in Vietnam was like for the soldiers who fulfilled the day-to-day fighting and tactics. This is not to say that Herr's novel would be a "complete" or "realistic" Vietnam account if he had witnessed strategic operations or engaged in active combat. However, I emphasize that a large portion of active fighting or contextual military strategy in Vietnam is not discussed within the novel. Instead, Herr has collected personal anecdotes of the average grunt's common concerns of fighting in Vietnam: the fear, boredom, or excitement over infrequent skirmishes, but he does not witness a combat mission.

The discussion of *Dispatches*'s blending of genres and its narrative construction ultimately leads to my assertion that *Dispatches* is an absurd novel, one that not only reflects the meticulous detail that Esslin claims for the Theatre of the Absurd but also encompasses the absurdity that Harris and Hipkiss later develop through the analysis of experimental novels from the 1960-70s. Hipkiss writes, "the artist of the Absurd carries the ideal and its factual inapplicability to an extreme. The result is farce, surrealism, and a violent collapse of the character and his illusory world" (1). In the attempt to create the ideal, the Absurd "artist" ultimately recognizes the inability to factually convey that "ideal" and instead opts for fantastic or exaggerated literary renditions. Although Herr's novel is not overtly fantastic, unlike Jonathan Safran Foer's whimsical novel, subtle elements of surrealism appear. Surrealism includes fantastic and incongruous details or irrational juxtapositions of imagery, and Hipkiss discusses this surrealism through novels that contain cartoons, lyrics, and metaphors. I employ the same methodology as Hipkiss for surrealism, but I

further apply surrealism to the appearance of historical allusions and the collapse of the journalist-as-observer into a character in his fictionalized world. Although Hipkiss treats surrealism as a separate category from the collapse of the character and his illusory world, he clarifies that both work together through “exaggerations of dialogue, action, and scenes that create symbolic leitmotifs on the appearance-reality theme” (1). Essentially, I treat the collapse of author-as-character into his world as an element of surrealism because an author’s insertion of himself into his fiction blurs the fiction-fact boundary, as is common in absurd novels.

Although she is writing about *Apocalypse Now*, Margot Norris claims that the “power of the surreal” is “to express irrationality, absurdity, incoherence, fragmentation” the result of which “forcefully convey the war’s incomprehensibility” (208). Norris’s commentary is pertinent as Herr wrote the screenplay for *Apocalypse Now*; but her assertion that surrealism operates as Vietnam representation in the film also emphasizes the representational limits for the war, in general, as surrealism culminates in the interpretation that the Vietnam War is beyond comprehension. However, my interpretation of surrealism within Vietnam novels, and film, differs from Norris as I claim that the surreal may fill in for the gaps of comprehensive representation for Vietnam. In particular, authors and filmmakers still continued their attempts to comment on the war despite the assumed “incomprehensibility,” such as in films like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* which do not operate through overt surrealism. Surrealism may point more to an attempt at representation rather than surrealism-as-representation, and the continued interest in creating Vietnam films may indicate the ongoing effort to represent the war.

In particular, Hipkiss's delineations for the absurd, "surrealism" and the "violent collapse of the character and his illusory world," apply to Herr's narrative strategies. As previously mentioned, Herr is not a combatant but there are a handful of scenes in which he joins the soldiers in defending their location by providing "cover." I maintain that while Herr does handle a firearm in a few scenes, he is still not an enlisted soldier—a distinction that is reiterated even when Herr engages in some active fighting. Herr writes:

...they were my guns, and I let them do it. I never let them dig my holes or carry my gear, there were always grunts who offered, but I let them do that for me while I watched, maybe for them, maybe not. We covered each other, an exchange of services that worked all right until one night when I slid over to the wrong end of the story, propped up behind some sandbags at an airstrip in Can Tho with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands, firing cover for a four-man reaction team trying to get back in. One last war story...we were in the Alamo, no place else, and I wasn't a reporter, I was a shooter. (67-8)

Herr claims that he never let the grunts do the menial camp tasks for him but also contradicts that statement immediately with the vague phrasing of "I let them do that for me while I watched." What Herr "lets" the grunts do for him is unclear, whether he is referring to carrying his gear or providing him cover as his "guns." In either case, Herr is again relegated to a different and more privileged category than a grunt. But within this same paragraph, a narrative shift happens when Herr implicates himself as a participant in exchanging "cover" "services." At this point, one might read Herr as becoming an active combatant until Herr writes that he "slid over to the wrong end of

the story.” The phrasing indicates that Herr recognizes that he is performing the wrong role: he is now participating in the violence that he should be observing. Herr’s narrative shift “over to the wrong end of the story” concludes with the declaration that he is not a reporter but “a shooter.” Linguistically, Herr declares himself a shooter (but not a soldier) as he arguably inserts himself into his narrative in a character role, “a shooter,” that he has crafted for this scene. This is a scene in which there seems to be a collapse in Herr’s journalism “world” as he inserts himself into this narrative and thus breaks from his original role as reporter to actively engaging in some of the “plot.” As Hipkiss asserts, the absurd “artist” blurs the distinction between character and the fictional world. I assert that Herr is crafting more fiction than fact as his vague referents and commentary blur what a reader can pull as objective “truth” from this text. Instead analyzing the absurdity within *Dispatches* provides context for these vague commentaries or moments in which Herr seems to break from his role as a journalist and instead inserts himself into the narrative; absurd insertions underscore that this is a fictional novel that operates through feigned objectivity, an illusory world as crafted by the author.

More explicit surrealism occurs in the previously discussed passage through the reference to the Alamo: “we were in the Alamo, no place else” (Herr 68). The scene occurs in Vietnam and yet Herr asserts that they could not have been anywhere else but the Alamo, a metaphor for American forces defending an outpost against an insurmountable enemy. More than a mere historical allusion, Herr’s insistence that they were “no place else” juxtaposes the Vietnam scene against the nineteenth century Battle of the Alamo. From the description and the Alamo allusion, a reader might

suppose that an incredible battle scene has occurred only to later read that twelve Vietnamese were killed by Herr and his Marines. Herr's narrative strategy in this passage not only affirms a subtle surrealism as Herr juxtaposes this scene with the Alamo; but more so than just alluding to the Alamo, Herr insists that they could not have been anywhere else but in the Alamo—a linguistic move that juxtaposes this scene with one that occurs over a century earlier. Whether the Alamo is intended as a facetious or literal allusion is debatable; in either case, the allusion adds surrealism to the passage that does not elucidate the “facts” of this “battle.”

The Alamo allusion also demonstrates another important characteristic of the absurd novelist, as Hipkiss claims the “Absurdist have less faith in human progress and tend to see history as repetitive” (3). Essentially, the Alamo allusion within a Vietnam context creates the comparison between the failure of American forces to secure a newly acquired outpost in Mexican territory in the nineteenth century to the similar comparison that could be drawn to the American forces' inability to secure Vietnamese territory in the twentieth century—a repetition of history. A more overt commentary on the cyclical nature of history occurs in a scene in which Herr writes, “you couldn't use standard methods to date the doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along...” (49). In a relatively quick reference to history, Herr compares the current American involvement in Vietnam to the same political motivations for the Trail of Tears in the nineteenth century when white Americans relocated Native Americans from their lands to reservations. Without delving into the explicit analogies, Herr offers two brief connections of Vietnam to another moment in already-lived American history—an element of the absurd as

history becomes cyclical through the metaphoric repetition of American imperialism events that occur from the nineteenth century to Herr's current moment. In other words, for Herr, Vietnam is merely repeating moments from American history, such as the Trail of Tears and the Alamo, with all of the political and ethical implications that these historical events incite as commentary for Herr's current war.

To strengthen the assertion that surrealism and a "violent collapse of the character and his illusory world" occur in Herr's novel, as an affirmation of absurdity within *Dispatches*, one scene emphasizes his insertion of subtly fantastic elements. In the scene that immediately follows the previously mentioned passage in which Herr provides cover for a four-man reaction team, Herr writes:

In the morning there were about a dozen dead Vietnamese across the field there where we'd been firing...It all happened so fast, as they say, as everyone who has ever been through it has always said...until the whole night had passed and I was looking at the empty clips around my feet behind the berm, telling myself that there would never be any way to know for sure...I worked all the next day, not [as] a reporter or a shooter but a medic, unskilled and scared...And for the next six years I saw them all, the ones I'd really seen and the ones I'd imagined, theirs and ours, friends I'd loved and strangers, motionless figures in a dance, the old dance. Years of thinking this or that about what happens to you when you pursue a fantasy until it becomes experience, and then afterward you can't handle the experience. Until I felt that I was just a dancer too. (68)

As previously discussed, Herr has these moments of narrative shifts when he is no longer the journalist but what I claim is his becoming a character within his own story; Herr crafts roles for himself that fluidly shift, especially in this one passage as he moves from “not [a] reporter or a shooter but a medic” and then a “dancer.” Within this one paragraph there is a temporal shift in narrating the immediate aftermath of covering the four-man reaction team to six years later, amid the four separate labels for his position within this war. Ultimately, these fairly concrete labels like “shooter” or “medic” give way to the more surreal label of “dancer,” through which Herr abstractly meditates on the difficulty of writing his experience. These details are incongruous or surreal as Herr creates the metaphor of a dance yet these figures do not move. The “old dance” that Herr refers to when people from the war become “motionless figures” is arguably the repetitive war violence, due to the absurdist’s vision of repetitive history. Herr’s final naming of himself as a dancer, too, ultimately conflates his position as a war correspondent with everyone else that he had known during the war, and even extending the metaphor beyond the war into history. By adopting this label of dancer, Herr seems to ultimately abandon his ability to conclusively speak for or about the war and simply joins into this “old dance” of repetitive violence. In alluding to earlier moments of violence American history, Herr simply acknowledges this cyclicity without definitive conclusion.

To further interpret the surreal quality of the previous passage, the juxtaposition of concrete and intangible details merge as Herr lucidly describes the caliber of his firearm and the operation “behind some sandbags...with a .30-caliber automatic in my hands” (67), to “It all happened so fast...until the whole night had

passed and I was looking at the empty clips around my feet behind the berm, telling myself that there would never be any way to know for sure” (68). Throughout the passage the concrete details become vague as “it all happened so fast” to the point that Herr declares “there would never be any way to know for sure.” What Herr is attempting to “know” is not clarified in this passage and is further convoluted by the statement: “you pursue a fantasy until it becomes experience, and then afterward you can’t handle the experience” (68). As Herr’s concrete details become ambiguous commentary toward the end of the passage, the most important collapse of Herr’s illusory world of Vietnam coverage occurs as he states that he pursued a “fantasy until it bec[ame] experience.” At the language level, Herr has characterized his “reportage” as “fantasy,” or the fantastic, that has replaced the experience he could not “handle.” Herr’s “reportage” is actually a novel in which his character, the dancer, has entered the illusory world of “one last war story” (67). Herr may not craft an overtly fantastic world like the experimental novels of the 1960-70s, but elements of surrealism are subtly and numerous imbedded into his text.

Vietnam’s Absurdity: Media Spectacle and “Truth”

In an earlier passage explored in the Introduction, Mark A. Heberle has labeled *Dispatches* a “true” and “authoritative” account (xv): readers can experience Vietnam for themselves if they read Herr. This paradoxical statement is further convoluted by the idea that Herr is “true” because in the contemporary age, Heberle argues that “*Dispatches* then becomes synecdoche for Vietnam, replacing the outdated battlefield maps, official reports, mere journalism, and linear views of history...For better or worse, most Americans in the twenty-first century and thereafter will come to

understand Vietnam through *Dispatches* or *Going After Cacciato*—or through *Rambo* and its imitations” (xv). This is to say that Heberle, and perhaps rightly so, claims that in a media-obsessed culture, the fiction and the movies about Vietnam become the primary sources for subsequent generations to learn about this war.

However, this interpretation of *Dispatches* as an authoritative fiction that subsumes real-life footage or reports becomes a Mobius-strip of logic when one realizes that Herr, himself, refers to movies and other forms of media to describe his observations. Fascinatingly, the novel that is referred to as the epitome of war journalism and is highly regarded as an “authentic” Vietnam account contains the elements of absurdity as outlined in this dissertation. The appearance of absurd techniques renders this novel an attempt at representation and not the common, scholarly assumption that this novel is Vietnam represented. Not to mention the obvious humanistic folly if *Rambo* becomes our contemporary Vietnam “historical” understanding.

Unlike the Holocaust novel which may have overtly fantastic elements, the Vietnam novel has a subtler type of fantasy. The consistent, nearly overbearing reporting from Vietnam made every American civilian a spectator to the war in Vietnam; watching broadcasting from the warzone was a new advancement in media coverage (aerial or battle photographs of World War II were not as widely dispersed as Vietnam news reels). The absurdity in Vietnam novels appears as a surrealism that

operates through a media spectacle.³⁴ Much of this “media spectacle” was, of course, due in-part to the advancements in technology and the inexperience of the news organizations in broadcasting war coverage. This “media spectacle” resulted in an unforeseen impact of uncensored Vietnam footage (such as images of dead, uncovered soldiers on network television) on the American perception and understanding of the war.³⁵ Norris also distinguishes the Vietnam War from previous wars by claiming it was a “video war,” unlike World War I, which she claims was a “literary war” (208).³⁶ The “video war” came to be understood through documentarian-style reportage from journalists and their cameras as opposed to the literature of previous wars.

This accessibility and prevalence of media coverage generates absurdity as the general ratio of observable, chaotic fighting to reporting seems incongruous or even irrational. In other words, the media reportage becomes almost surreal in prolifically delivering “news” without battle action. For example, in a lull in attacks on American forces, a captain in *Dispatches* says, “We’ll take you out to play Cowboys and Indians” (Herr 61). In the absence of violence to report on in this scene, the captain offers to take Herr and his colleagues out to the battlefield. This commentary is one that appears throughout the novel as officers want the correspondents to see some

³⁴ Donald E. Pease refers to the “Vietnam syndrome” of “negative” media images: “body bags, critical commentary, civilian casualties, jungle warfare, faulty technology, [and] guerilla insurgents” that needed to be “displaced” from Gulf War coverage (559-60).

³⁵ Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, claims that: “The war waged in Vietnam, the first to be witnessed day after day by television cameras, introduced the home front to new tele-intimacy with death and destruction. Ever since, battles and massacres filmed as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen entertainment” (21). She suggests that the power of these images influences public opinion and action: “public attention is steered by the attentions of the media—which means, most decisively, images. When there are photographs, a war becomes ‘real’” (104).

³⁶ Norris treats World War II as a war that defies traditional art representation; she claims that “the artistic challenges posed by World War II were recognized as foundational ethical challenges to the functions and prerogatives of art itself” (99). As discussed in Chapter Two, the Holocaust rendered a unique representational dilemma for authors, scholars, and artists.

action and write their stories: “everywhere [Herr] went people said, ‘Well, I hope you get a story,’ and everywhere you went you did” (Herr 29). On one level, it seems natural that Herr would want to “find” a story since reporting is his paid profession, but it is ironic that the soldiers are also seemingly excited by the prospect that Herr and company are there to report on them, or that the soldiers are eager to appear as characters within Herr’s “story.” On a secondary level, the captain referenced in the previous passage says that he will take Herr and others to go play “Cowboys and Indians.” This metaphor has replaced the “reality” of war with a mythical allusion, assuming that the U.S soldiers are the “Cowboys” and the Vietnamese are the “Indians.”³⁷ This allusion brings to mind the “winning the West” mythology of early Americans in claiming territory and killing Native Americans, a nod to Manifest Destiny. Again, a return to a previous moment in history exemplifies the absurdist’s vision of repetitive history. Jon Thompson reads this Cowboy-Indian metaphor more explicitly in “Ferocious Alphabets: Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.” He claims:

The extension of the Cowboy and Indian metaphor is allowed the full play of its grotesque implications in order to indicate the degree to which it has colonized our assumptions. Reality as theater, as an essentially histrionic process: the Vietnam War is made to become a re-enactment of the Cowboys and Indians myth. A diorama of history which has escaped the diorama.

(Thompson 577)

Correlating Vietnam with America’s violent history, as Thompson suggests, this metaphor exemplifies that Vietnam “re-enacts” aspects of mythology, an assertion that

³⁷ Daniel C. Hallin claims that “correspondents used the language of the frontier. Americans in Vietnam, for instance, referred to Vietcong-controlled territory as ‘Indian country,’ a phrase that reporters sometimes adopted” (46).

supports Hipkiss's claim that the absurd writer also views historical moments as repetitive. However, I argue that absurdity operating as the allusions to repetitive history actually demonstrates that soldiers and correspondents search for a pre-existing template to illustrate Vietnam. The Vietnam War is a politically complicated contemporary war and yet also reminiscent of other American "colonization" events. Since Vietnam is not an exclusive act of imperialism, the Cowboy-Indian metaphor elucidates the politics but also blurs the representation of this particular war by drawing comparisons to American mythology: defending American interests in Vietnam as akin to the origins of America during which Native Americans were executed or removed from their own lands. This allusion emphasizes the absurdist's underlying commentary that history is repetitive but also maintains that the Vietnam War does not have its own unique representation, yet.

In another anecdote about the "excitement" that officers express about the presence of the media, which emanates a sort of surrealism as war becomes more performance than "real," Herr and his colleague, Tim Page, are reprimanded for not saluting a passing officer to which Page replies, "'We're not men... We're correspondents.' When the commander heard that, he wanted to throw a spontaneous operation for us, crank up his whole brigade and get some people killed. We had to get out on the next chopper to keep him from going ahead with it, amazing what some of them would do for a little ink" (Herr 7). Herr often identifies himself as a correspondent to soldiers to ensure that he is not mistaken for a serviceman.³⁸ Page's

³⁸ The self-identification as journalists becomes necessary to avoid been shot at near the frontlines. This identification is one that Herr often feels a form of guilt about when a soldier makes camp accommodations better for him because he is a journalist, such as when a grunt offers Herr his mattress to sleep on (128) or his blanket because he thinks that Herr is cold (137).

earlier comment that they are not “men” but correspondents illuminates this clear distinction that Herr maintains throughout the novel; they are not soldiers. But more so than strengthening the notion that Herr and his war correspondents are not directly involved in the war, the reaction of the aforementioned commander is a typical reaction that Herr and his colleagues experience whenever they arrive at a new camp: the officers and some soldiers always want to produce action for them to report or are eager to share their latest violent war story. The irony of the commander’s commentary is his willingness to strike-up an unplanned operation just to get a “little ink,” or some sort of “glory” in appearing in a news story. However, I emphasize from this passage that the commander would “stage” a battle almost as a performance rather than calculated military strategy.

Within the novel, some officers potentially want to place Herr in unnecessary peril just for a story. Or in the absence of battle, the soldiers will create one just for the media, a kind of “staging” of a war that emphasizes spectacle instead of military strategy. Norris addresses the spectacle of news coverage and journalists by claiming, “...the presence of the camera warped putatively documentary film and video footage in Vietnam, by interpolating self-consciousness into the pressure and opportunity to act the scenes that were relayed to the home front” (233). In Herr’s novel, this “self-consciousness” is seemingly the high-ranking officers’ desire to find some action for Herr to report, or to create violence if it cannot be found. After all, in the absence of major action, what can Herr report? The corpses, being fired upon in a helicopter, being fired upon in a trench, running for cover on an airstrip, the eye-witness accounts of the battle-weary soldiers, and reports on the press conferences that Herr attends.

This self-consciousness of maintaining optimism for the American public about Vietnam is reflected in one scene in Herr's novel during which a correspondent directly confronts a general: "'What about the Marines at Khe Sanh?' someone asked. 'I'm glad we've come to that,' the general said. 'I was at Khe Sanh for several hours this morning, and I want to tell you that those Marines there are *clean*!' There was a weird silence...not one of us could imagine what he'd meant" (150). The general technically answers the reporter's question by literally describing the state of the Marines' living conditions. The general's answer is a positive spin on an otherwise difficult question to answer for the American press, without acknowledging the military's strategic errors. Mitigating American military losses in Vietnam in the official reports, as is apparent within the general's answer in this passage, obscures the "facts" about Vietnam. The self-consciousness that Norris claims the media's presence in Vietnam incited for the military correlated to a "pressure" for the soldiers to "act the scenes" (233). This "pressure" to present a positive perception of American involvement in Vietnam is further clarified by Michael Spindler's assertion that the American "experience" naturally obscures some of the "truth" of Vietnam. He writes:

The war is presented solely in terms of American experience; the war *for the Vietnamese* is typically absent.³⁹ And, particularly in the mass media, unpalatable features (military defeat, the first in the history of the United States, being one of these) are denied or evaded. In dealing therefore with

³⁹ Spindler explains that the American-centric representation of Vietnam is due to the "pervasiveness of English, the cultural hegemony of the United States, and the dominance of Hollywood in world cinema, because of the difficulty of Vietnamese, the slowness of translation, and the inaccessibility of the Western mass market to Vietnamese books and films, it is American representations that almost entirely predominate" (25).

representations of Vietnam one has to be critically alert to the limitations of the American perspective, to the evasions or distortions it encourages, and to its ideological presuppositions concerning not only the Vietnam War but war in general, presuppositions that underpin the constructed image of the war in any text. (emphasis his, 25)

Spindler's use of the words "limitations," "evasions," "distortions," and "constructed image of the war" are particularly important. These descriptors support my reading of *Dispatches* that argues Herr's allusions to media and cultural references stand in for what cannot be articulated, whether the subject that is evaded is military defeat or war trauma. In short, in Herr's novel, popular references operate as metaphorical placeholders for the violence that cannot be articulated and the facts that are presented from an ethnocentric perspective. For Spindler, the evasion of Herr's Vietnam representation reflects the impulse to mitigate American military failure. For me, the evasion reflects the inability to articulate a representation of Vietnam due to the necessity of latency, a critical and emotional distance, before one can represent war. In both interpretations the end result is the same: Vietnam representation is altered, evaded, or fabricated. The result of altering facts, skewing information, or avoiding the "unpalatable features" of the war leads, arguably, to a sense that the Vietnam War becomes difficult to articulate for Herr.

In the absence of clear battle "victory," officers occasionally fabricate the "truth" within *Dispatches*; one example is Herr's recounting of a Special Forces captain who told him that he killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. The captain says, "Next day the major called me in and told me that I'd killed fourteen VC and liberated

six prisoners. You want to see the medal?" (Herr 172). In this anecdote, the major raises the number of Vietnamese killed and Americans rescued to create an impression of progress in Vietnam. For Herr, the evasive official reporting and the soldier accounts of misinformation prompt him to say, "It took me a month to lose that feeling of being a spectator to something that was part game, part show" (168). Vietnam, unlike previous wars, included a new military "strategy": fabrication of information for the "informed" public. Thompson reads this same passage that exaggerates the Special Forces captain's victory as "the need for America to always be good [which] is deeply rooted in Americans (since the Puritans, we have been a uniquely 'good' people; necessarily good because we were a *chosen* people); hence the seductions, and perils, of lying to ourselves as a nation" (emphasis his, 571).⁴⁰ Competing with the exaggeration of victory is the same impulse to portray American forces as righteous, a fabrication that skews record or reportable fact. Even Herr, a correspondent who wants to report the war as it happened, acknowledges the inability to transcribe the war with true objectivity. Spindler explains that during the Vietnam War there was a different kind of "censorship" than in previous wars:

The war correspondent has been plagued by the dilemma of how much of the realities and practices of war to expose and how much to conceal when those realities and practices discredit one's own people. Patriotism and objectivity often came into direct opposition and governments usually ensured the triumph

⁴⁰ Thompson is referring to Manifest Destiny, "which is itself but a new name for the righteousness the Puritans possessed, fortified as they were by the belief that they were fulfilling God's mission to create a New Jerusalem in the wilderness, to wrest a 'shining city on the hill' out of the devil's territories" (576).

of the former over the latter by means of censorship...There was no direct censorship of reports in the Vietnam War, but there was social censorship as editors refused to run stories or print photographs that showed American forces in a bad light, and there was enormous pressure from the US military establishment for reporters to “be on side.” (28)

This “social censorship” resulted in the inherently coerced cooperation of the journalists to also reflect the positive images of American involvement in Vietnam that the military disseminated.

In one such scene that portrays this “social censorship” that occurred during the Vietnam War, Herr and other reporters witness the defense of Dak To. Herr claims that Command added Dak To to their “victory list, a reflexive move supported by the Saigon press corps but never once or for a minute by reporters who’d seen it going on” (46). When further irritated by the reporters who would not corroborate the “victory” of Dak To after witnessing some of the casualties, the commanding general proclaims as a loud aside that he thought that they were “all Americans in this thing together” (Herr 46). This comment causes Herr to respond that “for sure [they] were” and he immediately moves into this next sentence: “...Wow I love it in the movies when they say like, ‘Okay Jim, where do you want it?’” (46), which leads to a brief description of *Fort Apache*, starring Henry Fonda, and the closing comment:

...this colonel is obsessed, brave like a maniac...he’s a professional and this is a war, the only war we’ve got. So he gives the John Wayne information a pass and he and half his command get wiped out. More a war movie than a Western,

Nam paradigm, Vietnam... ‘Nobody dies,’ as someone said in another war movie. (46)

After being reprimanded by the colonel who wants Herr and company to write about Dak To as an overwhelming victory, Herr’s very next sentence is a reference to a Western movie. Herr’s movie reference implicates the officers’ attempt to “stage” information and conducting the correspondents’ reporting like a movie, “where do you want it?” (Herr 46). The staging of information leads Herr to a debacle: instead of fabricating the truth about Dak To, he inserts a vague allusion to a war movie, “someone said in another war movie” (46). The combination of Herr’s decontextualized sentences and the stage direction metaphors reflect the “social censorship” that even the war correspondents felt pressure to enact. But instead of fabricating the information, Herr inserts the line “nobody dies” from “another war movie” as a stand in for the casualties or losses that he cannot write.

Herr acknowledges this task of skewing information about Vietnam in claiming that even his writing is operating like a movie:

In any other war, they would have made movies about us too, *Dateline: Hell!*, *Dispatch from Dong Ha*, maybe even *A Scrambler to the Front*, about Tim Page, Sean Flynn and Rick Merron, three young photographers who used to ride in and out of combat on Hondas. But Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward...so we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine. (188)

In this passage, Herr underscores the unpopularity of this war, and the commentary that no one would want to see a movie about Vietnam, let alone a movie about the war correspondents. This passage also reinforces that Herr writes an absurd novel as the aside that his writing about Vietnam is his “movie,” alongside all the other correspondents who are also making their own “movies” about Vietnam. Effectively, Herr acknowledges that even the most steadfast reporter is writing a fiction.

In the Absence of “Truth”: Surrealism through the Media Spectacle

To this point, I have delineated the absurd characteristics within *Dispatches* in order to exemplify how Herr’s narrative techniques problematize treating this text as the “authentic” representation of Vietnam, either through investigating the text against a tradition of realism or critical readings that presume the text is representative of Herr’s processing trauma from his time in Vietnam. The analysis of scenes in which Herr writes about press conferences which mitigate American losses, the high-ranking officers who want to create battle-action for Herr to report, and Herr’s own inclusion of repetitive historical allusions all culminate in my assertion that these are instances in which “objective fact” has been skewed, fabricated, or obscured; these aberrations of “fact” result in an interpretation that everything within this text is a fiction. However, more so than corroborating that *Dispatches* is a fictionalized novel, this blurring of fact and fiction (and the loss of historical referents for Herr’s current moment in Vietnam though historical allegory) results in a surrealism that is typically found within the absurd experimental novels of the 1960s-70s, though, I maintain that *Dispatches*’s surrealism is not as overtly fantastic as those novels.

For *Dispatches*, the media allusions linguistically turn the current Vietnam War that is being experienced within the novel into a movie, a kind of surrealism that accentuates the media spectacle of the Vietnam War. As previously mentioned, the Vietnam War began the videography documentation-impulse that has generally continued onward into contemporary war coverage. To reiterate: the presence of the media, and their cameras, resulted in a “pressure,” as Norris states in a previously explored passage, that often led to the expectation that soldiers would perform for the camera, or at least they would report positively on American progress in Vietnam. Herr’s fiction reflects this “pressure” generated from the media’s presence in Vietnam and results in frequent asides from Herr and the Marines he interviews who treat Vietnam, literally, as a movie within the narrative. This insertion of Marines referring to themselves as actors within scenes, or Herr’s juxtaposition of an observed Vietnam scene to a movie allusion emphasizes how the “reports” collected from Vietnam appear more as works of fiction than fact. The inherent absurdity appears as Herr reports on press reports or writes of the soldiers who have also lost their realistic referents for this war experience, in which case the surrealism also illustrates the loss of reality within this Vietnam novel.

In one scene, a grunt named Mayhew, exemplifies the loss of a referent for “reality” when he says that he is never going to get “hit in Vietnam.” When asked why, Mayhew claims that “[Vietnam] don’t exist,” which Herr clarifies is “an old joke, but this time he wasn’t laughing” (Herr 125). This conversation reveals the intangibility of understanding the war and its realities: it doesn’t “exist.” The complexity and uncertainty of even a typical soldier’s nighttime “jungle operation”

culminates in the perception that Vietnam is paradoxically somehow not “real” to the soldiers or to Herr. The uncertainties of the war even leads Herr to the blunted observation that even the dead did not seem real: “[a sergeant] pointed to all the bodies of all the dead Americans lined in two long rows near the chopper pad, so many that they could not even cover all of them decently. But *they were not real* then, and taught me nothing” (emphasis mine, Herr 168). These lines demonstrate Herr’s delayed emotional processing of the scene, “then,” and arguably the lines indicate that Herr can only view the bodies as “real” in hindsight—a complicated reflection as memory is distanced from the actual experience. When the bodies are more “real” in memory than they were in real-life, a loss of referent or the reality of the lived experience has occurred.

While I concede that Herr’s allusions may be considered minimalistic by other readers, the film and cultural references are undeniably present in Herr’s anecdotes. And as previously explored, the soldiers are always aware when the correspondents enter a camp and want to create a spectacle for the reporters. The lack of direct or observable information leads to some of Herr’s inclusion of media or other real-life references to tragedy or war. To be clear, the cultural references become the descriptors in an absence of information. In one such example Herr refers to Lewis Carroll to describe the posturing of the American military: “The Mission Council joined hands and passed together through the Looking Glass” (Herr 71). This reference to the fantastical novel about Wonderland, *Through the Looking Glass*,

implies that there is madness or delusion within the Council's language for the press.⁴¹ The delusional briefing is further reinforced by what another reporter says about the Council: "A British correspondent compared the Mission posture to the captain of the *Titanic* announcing, 'There's no cause for alarm, we're only stopping briefly to take on a little ice'" (Herr 71). Similar to the real-life captain of the *Titanic* who was reported as attempting to alleviate fear over the inevitable sinking of the ship, the British correspondent is claiming that the military attempted to lessen the severity of American losses and evade the anxiety about not securing Khe Sanh (which leads to the surprise attack and numerous casualties associated with the Tet Offensive). The combination of the "mad" reference to Carroll and the human folly of the *Titanic* allusions underscore the ambiguity of communication about military strategy and accurate reporting but also generate surrealism in explicating a Vietnam scene through a fictional and historical context. The Carroll and *Titanic* references, on the same page, are a literal interruption and juxtaposition of Vietnam with seemingly unrelated allusions that do not represent Vietnam or convey information. In the case of the Carroll reference, the implied surrealism of Wonderland is overt as Vietnam becomes Wonderland and the Americans attempt to meander through the informational chaos, while the mention of the historic *Titanic* reorients Vietnam as an implied miscalculation of war strategy.

⁴¹ Meredith H. Lair explains that "veterans' memoirs are peppered with references to stepping 'through the looking glass' or dropping 'down the rabbit hole' when they set out for Vietnam. These nods to Lewis Carroll's vivid, surreal creation frame the war as Wonderland and cast American soldiers as Alice, the wide-eyed innocent who observed Wonderland's amazing phenomena while searching for a way out of the chaos" (193).

These moments in which Herr inserts film or media references alongside the current moment of writing Vietnam exemplifies the surrealism common to absurd novels, as Harris writes: “American novelists of the absurd...while they sometimes exaggerate ‘reality,’ seldom feel the need to distort it beyond recognition. In fact, they usually don’t imitate ‘life’ at all, but other novels, other forms, other styles” (23). In moments of surrealism, Herr imitates other styles in the form of literary and historic allusions as in the previously mentioned passages in which Herr refers to *Through the Looking Glass* and the *Titanic*. Surrealism also occurs when Herr literally refers to movie techniques such as his stage directions in his *Fort Apache* allusion. For example, in the previously explored passage when Herr writes that high-ranking officials tell the correspondents what to report, Herr refers to *Fort Apache* and says that he loves “it in the movies when they say like, ‘Okay Jim, where do you want it?’” (46); this passage contains stage-direction that indicates a pressure to skew or implicate information as positive progress for the American audience. Literally, this passage features the insertion of film techniques that function as surreal allusions, which implicate the military’s overt censorship of the information that the correspondents are to report.

In other passages, Herr includes the stories of soldiers who refer to themselves as actors in a movie. For example, one “kid” says to Herr, “‘Here man, write this: I’m...just up there walkin’ the ridgeline like a movie star and this Zip jumps up smack into me...I got my whole clip off ‘fore he knew how to thank me for it. Grease one’” (74). This comment reveals surrealism as this “kid” compares to his assignment to being a “movie star” or play-acting.

In addition, Herr includes the signifiers “life-as-movie, war-as-(war) movie, war-as-life” (65) early in the novel that indicate the art-as-life paradoxical portrayal of the war that appears throughout his anecdotes, such as in this one: “...a Marine with minor shrapnel wounds in his legs was waiting to get on a helicopter, a long wait with all of the dead and badly wounded...sniper rounds snapped across the airstrip, forcing us to move behind some sandbagging. ‘I hate this movie,’ he said” (Herr 188-9). The Marine refers to his own war situation as a movie, perhaps to illustrate the loss of reality that results from being consistently fired upon by snipers month-after-month, as the Marine’s comment relays the routine behavior of consistently dodging sniper-fire every day. But I emphasize that the Marine’s response indicates that he does not even, linguistically, refer to his own war participation as “real” anymore. For the Marine, reality and fiction conflate for his Vietnam experience in his declaration that he hates “this movie.” Herr’s narrative imitates the conventions of movies and their techniques as an absurd technique that gestures toward his inability to comprehensively articulate a representation for Vietnam. Herr’s narrative absurdity is also a technique that exemplifies the documentation impulses associated with this war.

The most explicit reference to pop culture or the media’s influence on soldiers and correspondents during Vietnam is toward the end of the novel when Herr begins to conclude the novel with some cultural commentary. The lengthy but important passage illustrates the near-delusion of the soldiers who play-act but also the correspondents who become inundated to the violence in referring to the war spectacles already familiar to them from movies. Herr writes:

I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks...those few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras. A lot of correspondents weren't much better. We'd all seen too many movies, stayed too long in Television City, years of media glut had made certain connections difficult. The first few times that I got fired at or saw combat deaths, nothing really happened, all the responses got locked in my head. It was the same familiar violence, only moved over to another medium; some kind of jungle play with giant helicopters and fantastic special effects, actors lying out there in canvas body bags waiting for the scene to end so they could get up again and walk it off. (209-10)

The "media glut" of watching too many movies creates a sort of template, an imitation, of the war experience for the correspondents who were already desensitized from the "fantastic special effects" that they had seen in the movies, alongside the Marines who are influenced to fight for some "guts-and-glory" by these war movies. The blurring between media representation and real-life is also conflated by Herr, the observer, when he writes that:

A lot of things had to be unlearned before you could learn anything at all, and even after you knew better you couldn't avoid the ways in which things got

mixed, the war itself with those parts of the war that were just like the movies, just like *The Quiet American* or *Catch-22* (a Nam standard because it said that in a war everybody thinks that everybody else is crazy), just like that combat footage from television ('We're taking fire from the treeline!' 'Where?' 'There!' 'Where?' 'Over there!' 'Over WHERE?' 'Over THERE!' Flynn heard that go on for fifteen minutes once; we made it an epiphany), your vision blurring, images jumping and falling as though they were being received by a dropped camera, hearing a hundred horrible sounds at once—screams, sobs, hysterical shouting, a throbbing inside your head that threatened to take over, quavering voices trying to get the orders out...(210)

This passage is dense and interspersed with reflections on two novel references and a chaotic shift to a news coverage scene. The two media references: *The Quiet American* (1956) (adapted to a film in 1958), centers on the first French war in Indochina (the Vietnam War is sometimes referred to as the second war in Indochina), and *Catch-22* (1961) (adapted into a film in 1970), which is centered on World War II, are both from previous wars that are now reminding Herr that there is difficulty in "un-mixing" Vietnam observations from media representations of previous wars. Fascinatingly, *The Quiet American* is an anti-war novel as is *Catch-22*, a novel that essentially states that one must be insane in order to be discharged from a war and applying for discharge from a war implies that one is sane (in other words, soldiers who want to stay at-war are insane). Therefore, the Marines and correspondents who have adapted these novels and films into their "guts-and-glory" war perception have ironically missed Graham Greene and Joseph Heller's anti-war commentary; or, at least the soldiers have

adapted an antithesis to Heller's point that insanity is a desirable or inevitable trait for the combatant.

On the other hand, the blurring or "mixing" of media representation and real-life also ironically seems fitting as the previous passage also highlights the inability to properly report on sporadic attacks as Flynn witnesses the reporters argue for fifteen minutes about where the sniper-fire was originating from. Herr calls this an "epiphany" when they cannot locate the gun-fire as vision blurs, images "falling as though they were being received by a dropped camera, hearing a hundred horrible sounds at once" (210). The epiphany that emerges from this scene is the understanding that Vietnam cannot be clearly documented, even by a camera crew. Herr's word choice that they "made it an epiphany" reflects their intention to try to craft understanding from the chaotic scene. However, even though movie references may supply Herr and others with the ability to articulate the experience through cultural references and allusions to the media spectacle, these metaphors are not the representation of the Vietnam War. To reiterate, surrealism as representation problematizes rather than elucidates the political or ethical stakes within the Vietnam War. Jean Baudrillard writing about the film, *Apocalypse Now*, for which Herr wrote the screenplay, claims that:

...the war in Vietnam "in itself" perhaps in fact never happened, it is a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and of the tropics, a psychotropic dream that had the goal of neither of a victory nor of a policy at stake, but, rather, the sacrificial, excessive deployment of a power already filming itself as it

unfolded, perhaps waiting for nothing but consecration by a superfilm, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war. (*Simulacra* 59)

In their readings of the film *Apocalypse Now*, Baudrillard and Norris both address the surrealism within this film and its effects as an answer for the equitably surreal fighting of the Vietnam War. However, Baudrillard complements the scholarship that is cited earlier within this chapter on *Dispatches*: the surrealism seems to be a reflection of American imperialistic efforts in Vietnam, a surrealism that accentuates the “mass” media spectacle “effect of this war,” which is more or less a reflection of an exertion of “power.” More so than documentation, the film references within Herr’s Vietnam literature seems to highlight America’s ethnocentric worldview and the corresponding need to be “good,” as explained earlier by Thompson. The surrealism of the media spectacle more importantly indicates that representation for Vietnam is still a work-in-progress as a “psychotropic dream” arguably does not culminate in a satisfying representation for Vietnam.

For those like Jakaitis and Heberle who read Herr as depicting authentic Vietnam representation, Herr’s style is reminiscent of a coping mechanism, one has to “breathe out” or move “beyond” the war to articulate it, whether Herr is successful in his endeavor of overcoming the aftermath of Vietnam in writing his text is debated: Copley claims that literature innately has an “artificial” quality, one that Herr attempts to work against in his cataloguing of precise details and events. While Copley’s claim that Herr’s motivation for writing about Vietnam is his desire to articulate what cannot be found in official record, is likely accurate, Herr still does not encompass the whole of the war experience. I read Herr’s journalistic approach as an attempt to attest to

Vietnam but also reaffirm his representational limits. Absurdity operating through the surrealism of the Vietnam media spectacle allows for reflection on the war without authoritatively prescribing that this is an authoritative account. The combination of historical fact and personal fiction, and the interrogation of these polemical accounts, arrives at an artistic reimagining but not the representation of the event. The numerous historical allusions combined with the surrealism of the narrating the novel through film techniques culminates in a metaphorical interrogation of the politics of this war.

Conclusion: The Absurdity of Watching War through a Screen

Unlike any war that came before, the Vietnam War was the “first television war, an expression typically understood to reference uncensored footage beamed directly from the battlefield into American living rooms” (Lair 188). The Vietnam War was also the first time that a soldier at the front could watch the war unfold from the villages or barracks. Meredith H. Lair illustrates in *Armed with Abundance*: “American soldiers [were] dressed in fatigues relaxing in front of a television set while the war booms in the distance” (188). Essentially, Lair asserts that the war experience becomes complicated in the era of television when soldiers have access to lived first-hand combat or firefights *and* the immediate information about the war from media broadcasts. Or in some cases, soldiers who were not at the frontlines could also watch combat unfold: “AFVN radio was the U.S. military’s official mouthpiece in Vietnam, broadcasting news reports on the hour, including updates about the shooting war. Starting in 1966, AFVN-TV produced original programming in-country to educate soldiers about the enemy they faced” and to familiarize them with “the activities of American combat and combat-support personnel” (Lair 187). The series *This is*

Vietnam aired episodes such as “Viet Cong Atrocities,” “Army of Vietnam Units,” and “Vietnamese Refugees” (Lair 187). The *This is Vietnam* series aired by AFVN-TV was broadcast solely to the soldiers in order to educate them about the war and the Vietnamese, all while constantly updating them about the status of the war. For the first time in history, enlisted soldiers could watch their war unfold through a screen and away from the frontlines.

Although the loss of “reality” is characteristic of an absurd novel in which the lived experience is not distorted beyond recognition but is exaggerated, I argue that the absurd appears within Vietnam as media references to books and to other wars’ movies. Herr’s inclusion of metaphors involving movies or film techniques and the insertion of himself as a media correspondent-turned-character emphasize the absurdity within the Vietnam War: a war that documented the documentation. In *Dispatches*, the absurdity of prolific documentation in the absence of material violence accentuates Herr’s inability to capture the war. Comprehensively representing Vietnam is a seemingly impossible task to begin with as Lair asserts that:

...Interpreting collective experience, especially one shared by millions of people, is a vexing historical problem, one made more difficult in the Vietnam context by vast differences in soldiers’ tours of duty. Some have argued that the Vietnam War was so dynamic that it is best understood as many separate wars, with American escalation or North Vietnamese and Viet Cong offensives demarcating each new phase of the conflict. (15)

Depending on the phase of the war for a soldier's deployment—with 1961-1965 as the most perilous as proper evacuation processes for the injured had not yet been established (Lair 15), the branch of service and the role that a soldier was assigned (combatant or support personnel) resulted in vastly different war experiences. As such, Lair concludes that "there probably is no dominant soldier experience for the Vietnam War, but even if there were, the numbers confirm that it would not be the infantrymen humping the boonies on ambush patrol that *Platoon* and other popular treatments have enshrined in public memory" (15). Importantly, Lair draws attention to popular, mainstream representations of Vietnam. In many instances Vietnam film, and even novels such as O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, the dominant trope seems to be an illustration of American resilience and sacrifice as servicemen bear their burdens and endure the incoming sniper-fire day-after-day. And yet, these popularized depictions of Vietnam were not the dominant experience for the average Vietnam veteran as "the majority of soldiers—perhaps 75 to 90 percent...labored in supporting roles, out of danger and in relative comfort" (Lair 5). Fascinatingly, what most Americans have accepted as dominant representations of Vietnam in collective memory, the struggle, combat and trauma, are the perspectives of only about a quarter of the deployed soldiers who experienced active combat.

Ironically, Herr, the journalist, had a better first-person viewpoint of the battlefield than most of the enlisted soldiers, and yet, it is important to remember that he was not an enlisted soldier (thereby undercutting any authorizing function Herr may have in writing a wartime memoir; he was an observer who chooses the scenes he wants to cover as opposed to the conscripted combatant). The result of the ever-

present correspondents in Vietnam, who were deployed to broadcast and write about the chaotic skirmishes, the very length of the decades-long war, the various roles for (non)combatants, and the miscommunication between government officials, soldiers, and reporters, all lead to the somewhat simple conclusion that the Vietnam War is complicated to represent, complicated even further by the television broadcasts that added a new dimension to depicting this war in real-time.

War is a unique event that contentiously defies traditional methods of representation due to the complexity associated with political motivations and the traumatic aftereffects of war. Arguably, war representation is not easily achieved, not even with precise or detailed passages. However, to accept the readings of trauma theory that culminate in interpretations that the Vietnam War is unrepresentable, or that the author is too traumatized to fully represent Vietnam, seems also to choose to silence or obscure the event from collective memory. For Vietnam, a clear distinction should be drawn between historical record and experience, or the “emotional truth” of an author’s perspective. The absurd impulses throughout Vietnam fiction indicate that there should be reflection and some attempt to share the experience while maintaining the clear distinction between literary interrogation and historical record. At the same time, the surrealism of crafting Vietnam fiction through a media spectacle and references to other historical moments incites reflection on the politics and the “historical account” of what is documented for this war. Absurdity may very well invite a conversation about the assumed “objectivity” of historical record as much as it inspires reflection on literary war representation. Importantly, absurdity also emphasizes that comprehensive or cohesive representation for Vietnam has yet to be

achieved in literature or film. The “truth” of the Vietnam War may take decades to fully unravel, as demonstrated by Herr who immediately pens his war experience from America as the war still carried on in Vietnam. Inevitably, absurdity underscores the fictional quality of literature and enables the critical distance necessary to explore the collective memory and understanding of this particular war in conversation with other wars. The next chapter explores the Vietnam War’s influence on the Persian Gulf War media coverage.

CHAPTER THREE: MISSILES AND MONOTONY: RETHINKING VIETNAM THROUGH ANTHONY SWOFFORD'S GULF WAR

Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (2003) narrates his service in the United States Marine Corps Surveillance and Target Acquisition (STA) platoon during the Persian Gulf War. Swofford's position within the Marine Corps is elite and requires specialized training: his mission should have entailed acquiring and sniping enemy targets. However, much of Swofford's novel centers on his training, boredom, and his feelings about dissemination of governmental rhetoric and media censorship. This novel that promises a "chronicle of the Gulf War" actually narrates Swofford's training for deployment and subsequent lack of battle action as he patrols the desert.

The Persian Gulf War was fought using technological advances in warfare, such as a more sophisticated means of aerial bombing. For this war, aerial bombing became the most efficient means of acquiring and destroying targets, and the need for ground soldiers became nearly redundant as a military strategy. Swofford's novel relates the frustration of becoming a highly trained sniper and never engaging in active combat, or at least not in the concept of combat as it had been defined in other wars. His narrative is meant to be a "Marine's chronicle of the Gulf War" but is without any discernible action, as Swofford writes primarily about training for a war in which he does not directly participate. Inevitably, the novel reveals the ironic rigor of the elite Marine training for the monotony of completing training exercises and clean-up missions while at war.

Like Herr's *Dispatches*, *Jarhead* is not an absurd novel in an overtly fantastic composition. The novel is importantly subtitled, "A Marine's Chronicle," and narrates Swofford's subjective experience of serving in the Gulf War. *Jarhead* is often referred to as a memoir or Swofford's autobiography in scholarship. However, against the common treatment in scholarship, I argue that Swofford's memoir is actually an absurd novel due to its absurd aesthetics that I will delineate in the following sections. The absurdity within Swofford's "Marine's Chronicle" is subtler; I assert that as the context of a war shifts, absurdity operates differently for each war. For the Holocaust novel, absurdity often appears as fantastic elements or black humor in response to the incomprehensibility of organized genocide. On the other hand, the absurdity within a Vietnam novel operates through surrealism to reflect the chaos of the war and its blurry fact-fiction boundaries of the war's length and battle "victories."

In one respect, there is the intrinsic absurdity of a highly trained Marine-turned-Gulf War novelist who never saw combat but offers a "chronicle" of the war. But the subtler absurdity within *Jarhead*'s narrative exposes the problematic nature of the media's portrayal of the Gulf War in news reports. In Swofford's novel, a scene in which reporters visit his platoon absurdly reflects the real-life reporting that was broadcast live.⁴² Swofford's insertion of the media into his narrative instigates reflection on how the Gulf War was broadcast to the American public in real-life. To be clear, the reporting from Swofford's novelistic war zone exemplifies the absurd

⁴² In her article, "Site Unseen," Mimi White clarifies the role of the media during the war: "The Persian Gulf War is widely considered the first war fought 'live' on television, differentiating it from the Vietnam War, which was fought on television but on news film rather than live. It is also widely known that the news reporting that brought the historic Persian Gulf War into American—and other—homes 'live' was highly managed and restricted by the U.S. government" (122).

Gulf War representation that occurred in actuality: nightly reports from the Gulf War disseminated a barrage of information to the American public as events unfolded.

Similar to the Vietnam War, some of the absurdity found within this novel appears as a media spectacle: nightly reports allowed the domestic audience to witness the war unfold, in real-time. Although there was more news coverage for this war than for previous wars, there was not a coherent media narrative for this short war. Some of the incoherence within Gulf War reporting, as a media narrative, is explicated through several factors: Correspondents had limited and chaperoned access to soldiers and their camps, and soldiers were given instructions for interacting with reporters.

Decontextualized images of newly devised bombs and aircraft were also looped and broadcast. These snap-shots of advanced war technology alongside limited information from journalists were strung together in the broadcasts under the guise of coherent news coverage. In short, the restricted warzone, barrage of decontextualized footage, and the chaperoned soldier interviews emanate absurdity as fragmented pieces of news reporting are incoherently pieced together for a news report.

The composition of Swofford's novel also illustrates these representational issues found within real-life reports of the war as it became a media spectacle. In other words, the consistent but restricted broadcasting from the war emphasizes the inherent absurdity within the real-life media narrative that Swofford need only replicate for his absurd illustration of the Gulf War. Despite the in-country but censored real-time barrage of decontextualized images of aircraft, bombs, and the limited reporting on the soldiers, the underlying impression of Gulf War coverage is that "there was no way to combine these isolated sequences into even a passing narrative of war" (Engelhardt

90). Michelle Kendrick affirms the lack of a coherent narrative for the Persian Gulf War as she writes that it “is extraordinarily disorderly, harboring within its structure many loose ends that resist compaction into a clean narrative form” (62). Swofford reflects this real-life incoherent media narrative in his own disjointed novel as he oscillates between pre, post, and current wartime, amid his interspersed reflections on other historical wars. *Jarhead*’s composition indicates that despite the novel’s subtitle of a Marine’s “chronicle” of the Gulf War, Swofford’s narrative reflects the absurdity of the first war that was created by the media and broadcast in real-time on CNN.

In the context of the Gulf War, the absurdity seems indistinguishable from the real-life war, the media broadcasts of the war, and Swofford’s literary representation of the war. As the Gulf War was fought primarily through new advancements in war technology, especially smart-bombs, the understood conception of “war” shifted to an emphasis on the weapons of war and not the humans. This shift from humans to weapons as the focus of news coverage generates an aura of absurdity as war becomes a more abstract concept. This means that as war becomes increasingly technological, and not combatant-centered, the understood connotations of war as bloody, graphic, soldier-to-soldier, or on-the-ground fighting, are removed from the war theater. When these previously understood descriptors for war are eliminated in the age of technological fighting, war, as a concept, becomes harder to define.

Even twenty years later, the contemporary scholarship on the Gulf War is still delving into some of the politics and the effects of technological warfare that complicate the previously understood connotation of “war” from earlier decades. The absurdity within *Jarhead* illustrates some of these representational complications

within the media's restricted presentation of the twentieth century's shortest war. Although Swofford's viewpoint of the war as a ground soldier provides a perspective that was absent from the media broadcasts, he also focuses some of his narrative on the weaponry. By mirroring the media's construction of reports that focused on the Gulf War weapons, Swofford illuminates the absurdity of this war. In other words, Swofford exemplifies but also interrogates the inherent absurdity of America's first "technowar" (Kellner 186). When technology, and not the soldiers, becomes the center of the war narrative, aspects of absurdity are reflected in real-life and in Swofford's literary presentation. However, Swofford's commentary implicates that the absurdity does not satiate his quest for the "meaning" of his experience. Through the lens of the absurd, this novel exemplifies that the evolution in technological war posed new representational quandaries for an author to address.

Through absurdity, Swofford reveals some of the ethical, political, and cultural significance of this war without prescribing *the representation*, as the ending of the novel indicates that his Gulf War commentary is not conclusive. In short, Swofford's conclusion resists a definitive end; there is no symbolic closure to the experience, a point to which I will return. Instead, Swofford's novel is an investigation into the implications for the Gulf War, which will be further explicated in the concluding section of this chapter. Essentially, *Jarhead*'s fictional absurdity mirrors that which was absurd in real-life: the media's presentation of this brief war to television audiences. However, I assert that *Jarhead*'s depiction of the inherent absurdity within this war is not his conclusive representation. Swofford's depiction of the Gulf War through absurd narrative techniques indicates that neither the real-life reporting nor his

fiction has fully represented this war. The absurd lens enables the representational challenges for the Gulf War to be exposed while also functioning as a placeholder for events that are not well-articulated in the novel, such as Swofford's own trauma; arguably, the difficult process of attempting to explain both the war and his trauma are an ongoing process for Swofford by the novel's conclusion.

***Jarhead*: Critical Reception**

Swofford's novel was published in 2003 and was quickly adapted to the screen by Sam Mendes in 2005. The scholarship on *Jarhead* is limited and is almost always in the context of another Gulf War novelist or concentrates on the film version of Swofford's novel.⁴³ Another trend in the scholarship that must be acknowledged is that current criticism has shifted focus to the wars in Iraq. The more current wars in Iraq have ostensibly obscured the Persian Gulf War, as the Gulf becomes merely a precursory event to the current tensions in the Middle East. Secondly, none of the scholarship on Swofford utilizes an absurd lens to demonstrate the complicated nature of representing technological warfare. Analyzing the absurdity within Swofford's Gulf War novel may prove useful for examining twenty-first century war (as contemporary warfare becomes increasingly technologically and politically complicated).

Generally, in placing *Jarhead* into conversation with other Gulf or Iraq War writers, current scholarship on this novel examines several themes: the effects of

⁴³ Jenna Pitchford examines how masculinity is represented and challenged in Gulf War and Iraq War narratives, specifically Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (2003), Tom Paine's *The Pearl of Kuwait* (1997), Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005) and Evan Wright's *Generation Kill* (2004). She examines the literature of these wars to determine the impact of "technowar" on the masculinity of soldiers in the Gulf War and the later Iraq War. Michael Charles and Keith Townsend critically read the film version of *Jarhead* against Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Kelly Wilz interprets how *Jarhead* rehumanizes the Iraqi "enemy" in the film version. None of these scholars solely analyze Swofford's novel.

technology on the war narrative, an analysis of masculinity, Swofford's trauma, or a comparison between the Vietnam and Gulf War narratives. In an article that compares the Vietnam and Gulf War experiences, "Writing against the Vietnam War in Two Gulf War Memoirs," Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton compares Swofford's *Jarhead* to Joel Turnipseed's *Baghdad Express*. Her focus on these two Gulf War novelists delineates Vietnam's influence on Gulf War representation. Within her analysis, she claims that, "[there is the] impulse to map the new war onto the former—to write the Gulf War in the vocabulary of Vietnam—and the impulse to make sense of the individual experience in a new kind of war" (258). Piedmont-Marton's observations about Swofford using the vocabulary of Vietnam to map his Gulf War experience informs my observation later in this chapter that Swofford utilizes popular Vietnam representations to "train" for the Gulf War. This means that Vietnam is seemingly inextricable from Gulf War representation, which illustrates my assertion that there is an ongoing search for unique Gulf War representation (at least in Swofford's novel).

Diverging from the existing scholarship, I re-contextualize the war in relation to Swofford's post-war meditations on his experience. In my estimation, most of what fuels Swofford's psychic trauma is the struggle to process and understand what he experienced during the one hundred day war. A firm context for understanding what Swofford thinks he experienced in "battle" within the narrative seems to be the necessary grounding for investigating what other residual traumas affect Swofford or how he employs the vocabulary of Vietnam. In other words, it seems that scholarship should focus on Swofford's war commentary, first, before other concerns such as: how his text reveals a recovery narrative, a commentary on masculinity, or a soldier's

reaction to becoming a contractually-bound manifestation of military ideology.

Exposing the absurdity within Swofford's Gulf War narrative illustrates the complicated nature of representing the Gulf and understanding trauma in the age of technologically advanced warfare.

For America's first "technowar" (Kellner 186) the absurd appears in Swofford's novel through: the meticulous detailing of weapons and training without a coherent narrative, the parody of "scripted" actions of the ground soldiers that exemplifies comic exaggeration and their performative roles for the media, and some of the black humor that is common in absurd novels. While these absurd insertions exemplify representational issues for the Gulf War, Swofford's allusions to World War II, Vietnam, and other literature titles serve as a template that he utilizes for comparison and contrast. The contrast of the Gulf to World War II and the comparison of his war to Vietnam, alongside allusions to other absurd literature within the narrative, signify Swofford's search for the meaning of his war by reflecting on these existing templates.

Meticulously Detailing the Data

The barrage of censored reporting from the warzone demonstrates that the media's portrayal of the Gulf War is a disjointed representation.⁴⁴ As such, Swofford's

⁴⁴ Part of what I am arguing is the media-construction of a war is the incessant reporting on the war in the absence of observable battle. CNN attempted to construct a whole narrative for the event: CNN's "Crisis in the Gulf" program began as a half-hour segment and was expanded into hour long segments four days later (Kellner 86). Kellner writes that "...the constant flow of military images on CNN's "Crisis in the Gulf" and the extremely positive images of the U.S. troop deployment that was most supportive of the military option to the crisis. Night after night, CNN, and the other networks as well, broadcast an incessant flow of pictures of troops, airplanes, ships, tanks, and military equipment, with interview after interview of the troops and their military spokespeople" (87).

absurd novel need only reflect and emphasize some of the absurdity apparent within the media's war reporting. Although this dissertation does not serve to thoroughly explicate the media's impact on war broadcasting, it is worth noting that improvements in technology advance not only warfare but also the reporting on it. As such, civilians and soldiers alike perceive contemporary wars through reportage. In short, part of what complicates the soldier's perception of the Gulf War is the contrast between what the media broadcasted and his lived experience. The conflicting reports from the media that constructed a victory narrative from incongruent details amid the soldier's experience, as a combatant who is deployed to war and does not fight, results in an unresolved understanding of what transpired during the war. This conflict is exemplified in the novel by an unresolved question for Swofford: "was that combat?" (239). The Gulf War incites an increasingly harder to determine line between the experiential facts for the soldier and the media's crafted narrative for contemporary war. If the media reports and the soldier's account conflict, which one has accurately presented the war?

To clarify, despite the aura of authority in presenting the "facts," Swofford also acknowledges the uncertain "truth" that accentuates this novel as a fiction—these narrative signals are important as a veteran-writer seemingly generates more authority on war. This is an important distinction since the subtitle for *Jarhead, A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*, assumes a connotation that Swofford's account is a record and not fiction. The Library of Congress cataloguing also lists the novel as a "personal narrative," which promises authenticity of an individual's

experience. However, this novel, which claims to be a memoir or a chronicle, reflects the absurd tradition in its narrative construction. In replicating the absurdity within the media's presentation of the war, which "chronicled" details without the war context, Swofford signals that his novel is just as incongruous. Swofford's gestures to specificity and precision in detailing his training actually capture the incoherence and pointlessness of the war it claims to "chronicle." Swofford at once exposes the media's faulty coverage of the war and his own limitations in writing the war experience having never participated in battle. The irony within Swofford's account is that he claims that "as a lance corporal in a U.S. Marine Corps scout/sniper platoon, [he] saw more of the Gulf War than the average grunt. Still [his] vision was blurred..." (2). In the novel's very first pages, Swofford incites representational complications, despite his potential status as one of the closest witnesses to the war. Swofford's witnessing of a war that never seemed to commence combined with his murky memory, his "blurred" vision, results in my assertion that his written "chronicle" of the Gulf War should be designated an absurd novel.

Aside from underscoring the representational challenges for the war author who did not experience battle, absurdity also becomes valuable for elucidating the implications for the Gulf War that neither the censored reporting nor Swofford has comprehensively discussed (as treated later in the chapter). The Gulf War may have been pointless due its brevity and quick military "victory," depending on the perspective; it certainly was for Swofford. However, absurdity would not, ethically, represent this event in its entirety. Acknowledging that absurdity is not *the representation* for war is an important distinction for the real-life veterans who

experience(d) very real PTSD from their service. Determining that the war was pointless and unrepresentable may be a disservice to the real-life victims and real referents. Absurdity as the placeholder for a representation resolves the ethical dilemma of accurate representation by emphasizing that this “chronicle” is war fiction. Absurdity secondarily serves as an artistic technique that enables critical distance to determine the significance of this war as presented by Swofford.

Like the other absurd novels, *Jarhead* exemplifies meticulous detail in an effort to create a coherent narrative that ultimately does not reconstruct the war. As previously discussed in the first two chapters, Martin Esslin asserts that, “...transcribing reality with meticulous care is enough to create the impression of extravagant irrationality” (231). This painstaking transcription of “reality,” which generates absurdity, is demonstrated within Swofford’s narration of the weapons and his training. An early passage exemplifies the meticulous detailing within *Jarhead*:

Also on August 2, my platoon—STA (pronounced *stay*), the Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon, scout/snipers, of the Second Battalion, Seventh Marines—is put on standby. We’re currently stationed at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base, in California’s Mojave Desert. After hearing news of imminent war in the Middle East, we march in a platoon formation to the base barber and get fresh high-and-tight haircuts. (Swofford 5)

Swofford typically proceeds throughout the novel with a process narration that lists specific information; essentially, this is meticulous detailing as the informative pieces do not form a coherent narrative. Stylistically speaking, the above passage is a choppy

progression of sequenced facts: Swofford lists the exact date, his geographic location, and the very pronunciation of his platoon, “*stay*.” The procedure for acquiring the jarhead haircut is even described as occurring in an orderly platoon march.

Aside from the highly meticulous detailing that leads to irrationality as the narrative does not seem coherent despite the listing of information, questionable “facts” also appear within the description. The one, lengthy sentence that precedes the previous passage is:

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops drive east to Kuwait City and start killing soldiers and civilians and capturing gold-heavy palaces and expensive German sedans—though it is likely that the Iraqi atrocities are being exaggerated by Kuwaitis and Saudis and certain elements of the U.S. government, so as to gather more coalition support from the UN, the American people, and the international community generally. (5)

Coexisting with the precision of dates and geographic location within this one sentence is the uncertain politics motivating the U.S.’s engagement with Iraq. Swofford confronts the complicated politics of this war within the first few pages as he acknowledges that perhaps the Kuwaitis, the Saudis, and the U.S. are exaggerating information to rationalize the American intervention in the Middle East. Instead of parsing through the “reality” of the information, Swofford, as with the other absurd

authors, briefly mentions the multiplicity of “truths”⁴⁵ and “facts” that can be modified depending on the source,⁴⁶ in this case from three sources.

Another example of meticulous transcription, which creates irrationality rather than realism, also metaphorically exemplifies that Swofford perceives his war to be inherently absurd. In one scene, Swofford becomes the platoon’s scribe during boot camp. The scribe assignment requires him to record sick-call reports, training schedules, and travel manifests—reports that are not part of a coherent whole but are pieces of meticulous documentation. These administrative tasks are not necessarily absurd in their design, as office support personnel routinely complete these documents, in reality, without generating absurdity. However, Swofford’s retelling of one of his tasks as a scribe demonstrates the absurdity of his position in recording just pieces of information for the platoon. In this scene Swofford relates, “My first task required me to draw on the barracks chalkboard the proper layout of our footlockers. Drill Instructor Burke handed me a photocopy of the footlocker display and ordered me to create a masterpiece” (27). Absurdity is inherent to this task as the instructor hands Swofford a photocopy and tells him to recreate that same image on the chalkboard. Seemingly, this is already a meaningless task as the soldiers could have received the same photocopy that Swofford is meant to copy in chalk, or a first-hand instruction with a model locker. The absurdity of the task becomes clear when Swofford fails to precisely copy the photocopy and the instructor orders Swofford to prepare his own footlocker as a model for the rest of the platoon (30). The order to

⁴⁵ Charles B. Harris writes that for the absurdists truth is: “... multiple; that it is not merely elusive, but, as quantum physics tells us, by its very existence uncertain” (26).

⁴⁶ Swofford acknowledges that the early reporting on the politics involved with this war would change “depending on what paper you read” (9).

meticulously copy the photocopy is only made more ridiculous by defaulting to the model after Swofford's inability to diagram. Metaphorically, this scene illustrates that merely writing down the replica of the footlocker is not enough for the platoon to comprehend the footlocker's order, despite Swofford's remark that he cannot draw. In the same vein, this minor scene illustrates the larger representational issue within the novel: Swofford's meticulous and anecdotal written snapshots of training do not generate a coherent narrative. No matter how (un)talented the artist, perhaps meticulous transcription of reality is not enough for the audience to *understand* the model, experience, or war, a representational complication that absurdity emphasizes.

But the most meticulous scene of this novel is in a standalone section. As an isolated chapter, Swofford titles the two pages, "Care and Cleaning of the M40 A1 Rifle System and Optics." Within this chapter are the five sections of: "Tools and materials authorized, When to clean the rifle, Optics, Optics operations in cold climate, and Optics operations in hot, humid climate and saltwater atmosphere" (Swofford 121-2). These lettered subsections list proper procedure for handling and maintaining the weapon. In the two hundred and fifty-seven page novel, this section on the M40 A1 Rifle is in the middle of the book on page one hundred and twenty-one. This reproduction of the rifle's procedural manual quite literally interrupts the narrative and places textual focus on the sniper's weapon in the center of the novel. This chapter is without context or discussion by Swofford, and the numbered subsections simply detail the appropriate care and operations for the rifle.

Swofford's focus on the rifle, with the placement of its decontextualized instruction manual in the middle of the narrative, reflects the real-life media coverage

of the war that typically listed details about the weaponry. Daniel C. Hallin writes that

Overwhelmingly the dominant images of Persian Gulf coverage were the images of triumphant technology: the Patriot streaking up to hit a Scud in the night sky; the cruise missiles arching gracefully toward their targets; the jet fighters landing at sunrise or sunset (a favorite TV visual) with soldiers watching and giving the thumbs-up sign; and most characteristically, the smart-bomb video. (56)

In real-life, the media focused on the advanced technology as decontextualized images of war without the war. Similarly, Swofford's relaying of the care and cleaning of the rifle, without explanation, does not enlighten the reader about the function or the importance of the rifle to the war. In a scene that I analyze in a later section, Swofford's platoon plays football in full combat gear for reporters to demonstrate their suits' performance. The rifle manual and the football game are instances of meticulous detail and visuals but are only small pieces of war context. To be clear, when Swofford's platoon plays football for the reporters in an effort to convey their combat suits' performance, the audience cannot know that gear is protective against chemical warfare, in the same way that the audience cannot understand "war" if Swofford lists the features of his rifle. The absurdity of these scenes in the novel mirror the real-life absurdity of "informing" the public about the Gulf War by televising images of missiles sailing across a night sky. All these decontextualized images culminate in an impression that the Gulf War is not quite represented through the presentation of lists, visuals, or reports, either in real-life or in the novel's world.

Blurring the Fact-Fiction Boundary

To review, the real-life Gulf War censorship of information and barrage of technological imagery, which Swofford also depicts in *Jarhead*, indicates that networks did not convey images of war but images of U.S. advancement in war-making. In short, the media's concentration on the war weapons rather than the war exemplifies meticulous reporting on only one piece of the war—an illogical attempt at constructing a coherent narrative. Neither Swofford's novel nor the real-life reporting capture "war" as it had been previously known in the twentieth century; few reporters were deployed to the frontlines for the ground campaign⁴⁷ and many soldiers did not experience active engagement in battle (as is true in Swofford's case). At the end of the twentieth century, the Gulf War reinvented the way war was conducted: war technology advanced and human casualties were minimized, and virtually unreported, compared to previous wars. But within a technologically advanced war, in which targets and not people were killed and smart bombs quickly eliminated "enemy" infrastructure, the idea of "war" lost its material conception and became an abstracted concept, even for the deployed soldier.

The media-constructed war diminished referential information for understanding the war context; similarly, the referents for reality are also blurred in Swofford's *Jarhead* (as is common in absurd novels). Again, the real-life reporting and the fictional conventions of Swofford's novel become nearly indistinguishable. Through absurd techniques, Swofford attempts to construct his view of the war as a

⁴⁷ Due to the military control and censorship of the warzone, the nearly sixteen hundred reporters "mainly camped out in high-tech hotel lounges and makeshift press centers in Dhahran and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, watching the war on TV just like the viewers at home" (Engelhardt 87).

deployed Marine, but his text reflects the illogicality of recreating a war that may not have “happened” at all, especially for Swofford as he ends his tour without ever firing his weapon in combat. Although it may seem that a war that was absurd in real-life to scholars and soldiers could be represented through absurdity, Swofford’s continued struggle to find meaning within the narrative suggests that absurdity is not a satisfactory portrayal of his service.

To reiterate, assumed realism or the authenticity of this novel, for some, may arise from the knowledge that Swofford was a deployed soldier. As he is a veteran-turned-writer, an audience may assume that this novel is an authentic eye-witness account of Swofford’s experience. However, early in the book, as is often the case in absurd novels, there is the narrative “signal” that what follows is purely Swofford’s experiential knowledge, or what little he can coherently remember. The paradox of witnessing the war but still finding it difficult to represent, a mere decade later, is illustrated in the novel’s opening pages; Swofford writes:

As a lance corporal in a U.S. Marine Corps scout/sniper platoon, I saw more of the Gulf War than the average grunt. Still my vision was blurred—by wind and sand and distance, by false signals, poor communication, and bad coordinates, by stupidity and fear and ignorance, by valor and false pride. By the mirage. Thus what follows is neither true nor false but *what I know*. I have forgotten most of the statistics and must look them up. I remember the weapons, though not their capabilities, so I must look those up as well. For the place names I refer to maps. For unit deployments and order of battle, I must consult published charts. I search through congressional reports and presidential

statements at the Federal Depository Library. I remember most of the names and faces of my platoon mates...I remember some of the lies and most of the questions ...I remember being told I must remember and then for many years forgetting. (emphasis his, 2-3)

Two pages into the novel, Swofford blurs the fact-fiction boundary as he explicitly writes that this account is “neither true nor false.” Despite claiming to have seen more of the war than the average soldier, the series of “I” statements contradicts Swofford’s authoritative position. Swofford’s “I” statements declare that his account is not explicitly eye-witness due to his comment that he will look up charts, reports, and statements at the library for what he cannot remember—ostensibly the average reader could gain this Gulf War knowledge without having to deploy. Within the passage, Swofford linguistically distances himself from objective accountability of fact by underscoring that his text will be what he “knows” as the phrase “I remember” is repeated. Particularly fascinating about what Swofford remembers is “the weapons,” “most of the names and faces of [his] platoon mates,” “some of the lies and most of the questions.” Of these aspects of war that Swofford remembers are the lies and questions, not facts, and the men he served with. However, even these declarations of memory are murky as Swofford says that he remembers “some” and “most.” The one definitive memory is the weapons, as this is the only statement within the passage without a caveat other than his not remembering their exact capabilities. This passage not only arguably signals to the audience that authenticity of the account cannot be assumed but places an early emphasis on the key feature of the Gulf War: the weapons. Arguably, a war in which the weapons are more important to report than the

human involvement becomes absurd as the “reality,” or common perception of war, becomes distorted. The distortion of “war,” as a concept, is exemplified by the phrase, “the mirage,” which appears a handful of times throughout the novel.

In the previous passage, the “mirage” interferes with Swofford’s memory. I interpret the mirage as an allegorical device for the psychological effect of his service. The mirage becomes allegorical for the memories that Swofford cannot, or will not, remember. Allegorical devices also appear within the Theatre of the Absurd; Esslin writes, an “age-old tradition[n] present in the Theatre of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical and dreamlike modes of thought—the projection into concrete terms of psychological realities” (301). Whether a mirage is a “concrete” term or not is debatable; nonetheless, Swofford attempts to give his murky memory a label that is somewhat concrete: a mirage calls a real-life referent to mind for the audience, while simultaneously not labeling a trauma. The mirage-as-psychological-turmoil is abstractly named and becomes an absurd allegorical device that numerous reappears and interrupts the narrative. To interpret, the mirage becomes an allegory for posttraumatic reaction or confusion in memory. For example, in a later scene Swofford writes, “The mirage interferes, even long after the Gulf War” (75), and the mirage is “unknowable” (83). A mirage in a desert is the clichéd concept of visualizing objects that are not realistically present; similarly, Swofford seems to be relating his experience in the Gulf War as intangible by naming what he cannot remember, or understand, the mirage. The most important aspect of the “mirage” which “interferes,” though, is that the mirage operates as a textual clue. The multiple instances of naming the mirage indicates that this potentially fact-derived novel (as

Swofford states that he will turn to reports for the facts that he cannot remember) is still not to be confused with a document or a memoir on the Gulf War. The mirage, and the various psychological effects that it may symbolize, accentuates the representational issues for the veteran-turned-author.

Like the other absurd novels, *Jarhead* also demonstrates the “violent collapse of the character and his illusory world” (Hipkiss 1), which disintegrates the line between fact and fiction. Swofford, both character-narrator and the name of the author, refers to himself simply as a “jarhead” at one point in the narrative. This label equates Swofford to all the other jarheads who have served and reduces them all simply to a symbol:

The sad truth is that when you're a jarhead, you're incapable of not being a jarhead, you are a symbol...Though you might be an individual, first you are a symbol, or part of a larger symbol that some people believe stands for liberty and honor and valor, God and country and Corps...That jarhead with the high and tight haircut, the Disneyland T-shirt, acid-wash jeans, farmer's tan, poor grammar, and plain stupid look on his face, he is you...And the jarheads fighting and warring and cussing and killing in every filthy corner of the godforsaken globe, from 1775 until now, they are you. (119-120)

Aside from the narrative confusion of the character-narrator named for the author, Swofford further complicates his role within the novel's illusory world when he transgresses time and character role. “Jarhead” becomes a signifier for everything that a Marine seemingly stands for as a member of the U.S. military: liberty, honor, and

valor. But blurring even the signification of the symbol is the contradiction of the warring, cussing, and killing current Marines and the veterans with the stupid looks on their faces and poor grammar. The jarhead is simultaneously the embodiment of honor and service to his country and also the brawling and drunk veteran in the bar (Swofford 81). Aside from the contradictions of the jarhead's symbolism, Swofford maintains that the jarhead, regardless of ostensible similarities in embodying the signifier or not, is always "you." The Marine is always the jarhead, a symbol "first" that has endured since before America was even founded⁴⁸ to the present moment. The jarhead-as-symbol blurs the individuality of Swofford and others across time and current soldier/veteran status. This symbolism indistinguishably equates jarheads, despite any educational or lifestyle differences. Although the "you" of the passage likely indicates that Swofford is only referring to other Marines, the second-person style of the passage, "you," also breaks a fictional boundary as Swofford becomes an interlocutor to the reader.

In another symbolic moment, which collapses the character and his fictional world, Swofford does not merely extend the jarhead-as-symbol to contemporary servicemen but even further across time and fictional boundaries. When training with his platoon Swofford writes:

The school-trained snipers wear a hog's tooth—slang for the boat-tail projectile—around their neck...I stow mine in my pocket, and just as old punished philosophers and characters from fiction have done with stones, I

⁴⁸ Swofford writes the Marine Corps "ideology": "Marine Corps birthday? 10 November 1775, the Marine Corps is older than the United States of America" (14).

often take my hog's tooth into my mouth and suck on it. The taste is of the earth and I recognize the sweat and labor of the first rifleman, wherever he stood and fought and crawled and died on whatever battlefield, for whatever sorry cause. (134)

In this passage, Swofford claims to “taste” the sweat and labor of the first rifleman. In extending sensory detail to symbolism, Swofford is further connecting his current service to all other military men, ever. But more so than merely becoming surreal in blurring his current training into other wars through the symbolism of the bullet, Swofford further abstracts the passage by identifying with the rifleman who stood on “whatever battlefield” for “whatever cause.” The sensory details have given way to the more abstract commentary on war. Moreover, in just these few lines, Swofford extends the symbolism into other fiction as he claims that he is enacting the same behavior as “characters from fiction have done with stones.”

Among other instances in literature, Swofford may be alluding to Vietnam veteran-writer Tim O'Brien's short story, “The Things They Carried,” in which Lieutenant Jimmy Cross “carrie[s] the pebble in his mouth, turning it with his tongue, tasting sea salt and moisture” (8). Cross's romantic interest sends him a pebble in a package and claims it originated from the Jersey shoreline. When O'Brien's Jimmy Cross takes the pebble into his mouth, he thinks he can taste the shoreline in the same way that Swofford “tastes” the history of the rifleman. In these few lines, Swofford has connected his current sniper training to past riflemen and then to a character from fiction through the bullet's symbolism. Metaphorically, Swofford has collapsed his character into the mere symbol, “jarhead,” to signify past and present Marines, and

extends this symbolism to the very beginnings of American riflemen through the taste of a bullet. Collapsing the reality of the novel further, Swofford also extends his experience of carrying the bullet in his mouth to the characters who enact that same behavior in stories. In three lines, Swofford collapses and blurs the fictional boundary three times: he folds his character's identity into a mass group as a jarhead, then his experience as a sniper-in-training to fictional characters, all while linguistically transferring his training experience to the very commencement of American war.

Absurd Imitation of Vietnam

Without Swofford's experience of active combat, Vietnam movies become representational placeholders for the Gulf War in the novel. Piedmont-Marton claims that the Gulf War writers have carried the vocabulary of Vietnam into their narratives (258). Within *Jarhead*, Vietnam movie references, as "the vocabulary of Vietnam," serve as a representational template for Swofford to begin articulating his war.

Swofford and company draw a connection from popularized depictions of Vietnam to the sort of war that they are expecting in the Gulf. For example, Swofford relates that "The most often repeated sniper stories came from Vietnam" (56), and Swofford and his platoon mates return to Vietnam stories and movie scenes throughout the novel.

Metaphorically, the Vietnam movies that Swofford and his platoon watch fill in for the active battle that they do not experience. In other words, watching Vietnam War movies and their subsequent play-acting of the movies' scenes results in the Vietnam representations serving as a proxy for the combat Swofford's platoon does not experience. However, through absurdity, the soldiers' imitation of the Vietnam movies becomes exaggerated.

Vietnam movie references numerous appear throughout the novel as Swofford writes that the platoon “get[s] pumped” and “prepare[s] [themselves] for killing” (65) by watching these movies. The soldiers’ watching war movies within the narrative exemplifies the exaggerated “reality” that is common to the absurd novels. To reiterate, Harris writes: “American novelists of the absurd...while they sometimes exaggerate ‘reality,’ seldom feel the need to distort it beyond recognition. In fact, they usually don’t imitate ‘life’ at all, but other novels, other forms, other styles” (23). Swofford and his platoon mates are imitating another “form,” the movies, as they play-act the fictionalized Marine’s role. Swofford and his company’s imitation of the Vietnam movies as a form of preparing for their war is an already absurd gesture. By emulating “another form” of the Vietnam movie, Swofford’s “imitation, because [it is] ironic, transcends mere mimesis and becomes a comment upon the artificiality not only of art, but of life as it is usually lived” (Harris 23). Imitating these Vietnam scenes serves as a metacommentary on the “artificiality,” or futility of Swofford’s training for the Gulf War. For example, before the Marines deploy to the Gulf War, Swofford writes:

...we send a few guys downtown to rent all of the war movies they can get their hands on. They also buy a hell of a lot of beer. For three days we sit in our rec room and drink all of the beer and watch all of the damn movies, and we yell *Semper fi* and we head-butt and beat the crap out of each other and we get off on the various visions of carnage and violence and deceit, the raping and killing and pillaging... We rewind and review famous scenes, such as Robert Duvall and his helicopter during *Apocalypse Now*, and in the same film

Martin Sheen floating up the fake Vietnamese Congo; we watch Willem Dafoe get shot by a friendly and left on the battlefield in *Platoon*; and we listen closely as Matthew Modine talks trash to a streetwalker in *Full Metal Jacket*.
(5-6)

In this passage, Swofford demonstrates an innately “artificial” quality to these scenes that the soldiers watch and, distinctly, these are not scenes of active battle. The imitation of these war scenes becomes additionally absurd as the soldiers rewind and re-watch Martin Sheen on the “fake” Congo (*Apocalypse Now* has also been interpreted as a reenactment of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—another layer of surrealism as this film illustrates Vietnam through an allusion to a novella). Specifically, the soldiers also watch a scene with a prostitute, and a soldier who is shot by a member of his own platoon. These iconic scenes from Vietnam movies are dramatic but are not exactly battle. Only one of the three scenes that Swofford mentions, when Dafoe is shot by a platoon mate, seems characteristic of Vietnam’s skirmishes. But seemingly a casualty from friendly-fire does not seem to enact an audience’s common perception of war in that scene (though, many casualties were attributed to friendly-fire in the Vietnam War). Swofford’s Marines become excited to participate in the American history of war by watching atypical war scenes. Their subsequent play-acting thus seems farcical as they become excited by mainstream media’s production of war. The absurdity of watching Vietnam movies becomes apparent in that the platoon’s expectations of and preparation for their war are based on imitating soldierly behavior from popular culture versions of war. For me, the

artificiality of the Vietnam War movies highlights the similarly atypical connotations of war for the Gulf.

Swofford's very narrative is heavily influenced by Vietnam movies; even the lens through which he views his own war is through Vietnam representations and cultural reverberations. Swofford's "training" for the Gulf War through Vietnam movies not only illustrates the seeming artificiality of war fought primarily by machines but also provides some meaning for Swofford's difficult-to-articulate war. Returning to Piedmont-Marton, she writes of an "impulse to map the new war onto the former—to write the Gulf War in the vocabulary of Vietnam" (258) because "[Vietnam] wrote the master narrative within which Swofford and others will understand their experience" (260). But more so than the language of Vietnam serving as mere context, Piedmont-Marton observes that Swofford imitates the very style of Vietnam representation. In short, she argues that Vietnam movies are the stylistic inspiration for certain scenes in Swofford's novel. For instance, Piedmont-Marton asserts that the scene in which Swofford reunites with his platoon mate for a drunk night on the town is "a startlingly faithful reenactment of the 1979 film *The Deerhunter*" (261). She reads this one scene as "indicative of a larger tendency in the book to merge, or even submerge, the narrator's experience in the now-canonical stream of the Vietnam War narrative" (261). Inevitably, in my or Piedmont-Marton's reading, Swofford has borrowed the Vietnam style or form to shape his Gulf War narrative. This borrowing from Vietnam for narrative style is what I refer to as Swofford's absurd imitation of the Vietnam narrative and exemplifies that Swofford's Gulf War representation is incomplete, a point to which I will return.

Comic Exaggeration and Performing Black Humor in the Desert

The previous sections exemplified the narrative constructions within *Jarhead* that relate to traditional concepts that define the absurd novels from the 1960s-70s: the meticulous detailing that results in illogicality rather than a coherent narrative, and the author's complication of the fact-fiction boundary in entering into his own novel as a character-narrator, named for himself. Absurdity also appears through the imitation of another form, such as the characters who play-act Vietnam movies or in the very structure of Swofford's Vietnam-inspired novel. These facets of absurdity alongside Swofford's vague terminology for trauma and the soldier, the "mirage" and "symbol," all undermine clear referents for Swofford's service and the war's aftereffects. Of course, as with other absurd novels, the storyline is not linear or chronological as Swofford switches from pre and post-war anecdotes in addition to attempting to recreate his experience presently with the narrative.

In this section the comic exaggeration, which results in parody, and the black humor that is common to absurd novels will be explicated to demonstrate that Swofford's "chronicle" is an absurd novel. Harris contends that the American novelists of the absurd "sometimes exaggerate 'reality' [but] seldom feel the need to distort it beyond recognition" (23). In creating an exaggeration of reality, "the contemporary novelists of the absurd often turn to parody" (Harris 24). Serving in the Gulf War, as a media spectacle, becomes a performative role for the soldier. In a particular scene, through a "performance" for reporters by Swofford and his platoon mates, their soldierly roles are parodied. Within this scene with the reporters, there is also the reflection of the real-life journalists who visited the barracks and the resulting

chaperoned interaction between soldiers. Although subtle, the “staged” interaction between the press and the Marines becomes an additional parody of news reporting, both for this novel and for what occurred in real-life.

Swofford comically exaggerates, or parodies, the role of “soldier” by playing what he has seen in Vietnam War movies. When Swofford and his platoon mates watch Vietnam movies and become excited for war, the soldier’s role simplifies to a killer who welcomes senseless violence. For example, Swofford writes: “Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man” (7). The soldier who wants carnage, and “scream[s] for war” (10), and even sexualizes it, exemplifies a parody, especially in light of the governmental rhetoric of the American soldier as an instrument of diplomacy in stopping Iraqi war crimes. A soldier who desires carnage to a pornographic extent seems comically exaggerated to ridiculous ends for the narrative. In another passage Swofford quite bluntly writes: “As a young man raised on the films of the Vietnam War, I want ammunition and alcohol and dope. I want to screw some whores and kill some Iraqi motherfuckers” (7). Swofford has linguistically reduced the Vietnam War to ammunition, alcohol, dope, acquiring prostitutes, and killing. Ironically, three of the five aspects of the Vietnam War that Swofford wants to imitate are recreational. While the other actions that Swofford “wants” are “pornography”: rape, pillage, burn, which are commonly perceived to be shameful war actions. By desiring to replicate these behaviors that are mostly not linked to military strategy, Swofford arguably parodies the effect of the popular Vietnam film representations on the soldiers who watch them. Of course, if the reading of the soldiers’ desire for war is interpreted as literal, without

parody, then there are other qualms about the media's influence on the soldiers' desire for violence at stake in this novel that this chapter will not address.

In a more explicit parody, Swofford includes a scene in which the correspondents arrive at his platoon's camp. This scene accentuates the real-life absurdity of reporters who were meant to observe and inform the public but instead merely reinforced the approved governmental rhetoric.⁴⁹ Swofford writes:

Knowing the reporters will arrive soon, we shave for the first time in a week, pull new cammies from the bottoms of our rucks, and helmet-wash... We've known about the press for a few days, and Sergeant Dunn has already recited a list of unacceptable topics. We're prohibited from divulging data concerning the capabilities of our sniper rifles or optics and the length and intensity of our training. *He's ordered us to act* like top marines, patriots, shit-hot hard dicks, the best of the battalion. (emphasis mine, 13-4)

Swofford writes that the soldiers were given instructions for interacting with the media, days in advance. Some of the Sergeant's instructions seem reasonable as the military would not want to divulge the weapons' capabilities, lest that information be

⁴⁹ One of Swofford's platoon mates, Kuehn, reacts to the list of unacceptable topics for the reporters by saying, "This is censorship. You're telling me what I can and can't say to the press. This is un-American." As we begin arguing about the gag order, Staff Sergeant Siek arrives. He says, "You do as you're told. You signed the contract. You have no rights, you can't speak out against your country. We call that treason. You can be shot for it" (Swofford 14). Kuehn's comment at once emphasizes the censorship that did occur within the Gulf War but also demonstrates that the soldiers are also embedded within the military and must also accept the military's ideology. This sentiment is further reinforced by Swofford who writes: "I want to come to the defense of free speech, but I know it will be useless. We possess no such thing... Reporters are arriving to ask me what I think about sitting in a desert, waiting for war. I'll answer that I like it; I'm prepared for anything that might come my way; I have supreme confidence in all of my leaders, from my team leader to the president" (14). In essence, this scene illustrates the "script" that soldiers were instructed to perform for reporters.

accessed by enemy forces. However, blatantly within the passage is the language that the Sergeant “ordered [the soldiers] to act.” Swofford and his platoon mates have been given a script to follow by their Sergeant thereby turning Marines more into actors than combatants, who are staging a “performance” for the reporters. The performative aspect is also subtlety indicated by the soldiers’ washing and putting on clean uniforms with the stage direction to act like “top marines.” The freshly uniformed and the conscripted-to-be-confident Marines are a media-friendly image to broadcast on the civilian networks rather than the dirty, overheated, and bored soldiers of whom Swofford later writes.

Once the press arrives at camp, the Marines are instructed to play football in their full combat gear and gas masks (Swofford 17). The Sergeant wants to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new gear and the ease with which the soldiers can play football. The absurdity in this scene is, of course, within the inherent illogicality of an order to play a game in the middle of the scorching desert wearing combat gear. But this absurdity is only further reinforced by the fact that this is the only time that the soldiers actually wear these suits. The soldiers’ actions highlight the absurdity as the brand-new equipment malfunctions during their football game. One of Swofford’s platoon mates, Kuehn, yells, “I’m fucking dead already. The cap is broken on my canteen. If I drink this, I’m gonna drink some fuckin’ mustard gas.” To which another Marine, Vegh, replies, “My drinking tube is broken. I’m not going to break the seal on my mask, because that would kill me. I’ll die of dehydration. Sir, thank you, sir.” Finally Swofford chimes in, “I requested a new gas mask four months ago. My drinking tube fell off in the gas chamber at the Palms and Kuehn stepped on it. And

we have unserviceable filters in our masks. We're all dead. We are the ghosts of STA 2/7'" (20). The succession of soldiers who tell the sergeant about the malfunctions in their suits progresses further into humor as the dialogue continues: Kuehn begins with the simple statement that his equipment has a break in the seal consequently negating its protection against mustard gas. Vegh adds a slight joke to narrating the defects by claiming that he would rather dehydrate to death than let the hypothetical mustard gas seep into his suit. By the time that Swofford adds to the dialogue, the malfunctions in the technologically advanced suits have a tinge of both physical and black humor as he states that clumsy Kuehn broke his drinking tube in training but concludes that the faulty filters in the suits are going to kill them if used during a chemical attack; the black humor is evidenced in Swofford's assessment of the suits when he articulates that the Sergeant is looking at the "ghosts" of the battalion.

This scene began with the ridiculousness of wearing combat gear while playing football in an effort to give reporters material to write about, likely to demonstrate how prepared and protected the soldiers are; but the illogicality is revealed by the scene's end in which the soldiers accentuate the failures in the new technology. The absurdity is further illustrated by Swofford's remark that the suits, the MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear, is meant for the desert but Swofford writes, "The MOPP suits are in jungle camouflage, so we look like a moveable forest, something from a Monty Python skit" (18). Obviously, the jungle camouflage is pointless against the desert setting, and Monty Python is a cultural reference to a British comedy troupe known for their absurd humor and hyperbolic skits. This simple allusion to Monty Python illustrates the "performance" that Swofford's platoon is staging for the media

in their defective and conspicuous gear. Later, when Swofford participates in a mission, he writes that they “were supposed to have received new desert camouflage MOPP gear before the ground assault started, but this didn’t happen. So we look like mulberry bushes marching through the desert” (220). The platoon was supposed to receive more appropriate camouflage but instead acquires more jungle camouflage. From a moveable forest to marching mulberry bushes, the soldiers who don the MOPP suits are farcically costumed as the gear is not effective in the desert.

In exaggerating the defects in the uniform in a dialogue, visually evoking a Monty Python skit, and then playing a football game in full combat gear that turns into a light brawl, I argue that this scene is comic exaggeration of combat-readiness. In a sense, the comic exaggeration within this scene is a parody of the stereotypically expected behavior of the well-trained Marine. The staged scene was meant to demonstrate that the soldiers are well-equipped, and perhaps alleviate domestic anxiety about the danger for American soldiers as the journalists watch them engage in a recreational activity while in a warzone. But aside from the Sergeant wanting to demonstrate the new gear, Swofford does not elaborate on the rationale for the game. After lamenting that all of their equipment is broken, the soldiers are still ordered to play. What starts out as traditional football game turns into Marines punching each other and then a pile-up as “the half-speed fight degenerates into a laughter-filled dog-pile, with guys fighting their way from the bottom to climb back to the top, king of the pile, king of the Desert” (Swofford 20). Ironically, the soldiers were meant to model the capabilities of their suits through a game and instead become a parody of field-

testing combat gear when football degenerates to a literal childhood game of “king of the mountain.”

The end of the press scene also exemplifies the black humor that complements the parody of modeling the combat gear. When the soldiers are done performing, they strip-off their suits and throw them in a trench to light them on fire. Before striking the match, Kuehn says “May God please save us, because these MOPP suits won’t” (Swofford 22). These soldiers are making jokes about the defective equipment that could lead to their deaths. With the black humor in absurd novels “there is a fading line between reality and fantasy, a very fading line. To write comic fantasy [a term used interchangeably with black humor] today, all one need do is report, journalistically, the current scene” (Harris 19). As I asserted earlier, the fantastical elements in the Gulf War context is subtler, arguably, because it was a war fought primarily through technological bombing, unlike the earlier twentieth century wars that were primarily waged by soldiers in trenches or in the jungle. In an already absurd context in which the human aspect of waging war has been diminished, Swofford need only report journalistically to express the absurdity. In the press scene, Swofford merely includes a simple dialogue among the soldiers that reveals, through black humor, that the technologically advanced war may not be so precise.

In a later scene, Swofford’s performance of the “soldier role” elucidates the parody of deployment to the desert, literally and metaphorically. When Swofford and his platoon mate go for a run around their base Swofford relates, “It’s absurd to be in the desert and at the same time confined” (72). Despite the vast desert, the Marines are

absurdly confined to running their perimeter. Further in the scene, the illogicality of running the base's perimeter becomes surreal when Swofford states:

Our boots slap the sand with the sound of a theater curtain falling. And we are actors running around the stage. We are delivering our lines as we run. We are proving to the great theater director of All Time that we are ready for war or whatever. We can run all night, and we will run all night, through the sand, in circles around our fake encampment. The wagons are circling. We are the wagons. (73)

In this passage, there are clear references to a play in the word choices, "theater curtain," "actors running around the stage," and "delivering lines." But Swofford has linguistically transformed the role of a soldier into a play-actor, and the performance is the repetitive running. In this moment, the men attempt to prove that they are ready for war or "whatever" as they incessantly run circles, literally, not traveling anywhere. Metaphorically, the nearly unnecessary⁵⁰ ground soldiers are running meaningless circles in a "fake encampment." Within the scene, the images of "encampment" and

⁵⁰ My terminology for the "unnecessary" or "redundant" soldiers hinges on the interpretation that the presence of ground soldiers was simply a secondary strategy in case the strategic bombing did not cripple Iraq's infrastructure, as was the primary military strategy. The "unnecessary" factor of the ground soldiers is exemplified in a scene in which Swofford's platoon is out testing a new rifle. The point target maximum effective range for the Barrett (rifle) is advertised at two thousand yards but another weapon cuts down the range to sixteen hundred (155). In discussing the new Barrett with the commandant, a marine who tested the weapon says, "I don't care about the four hundred [yards]. I don't think we'll need it in this war. Hell, I don't know if *we* 'll be needed. The war's going to moving too fast. Sixteen hundred yards is nothing. Sixteen hundred yards was two weeks of fighting in Vietnam and a whole goddamn week in World War One. It'll last five minutes out here, if you ask me" (emphasis his, 158). To which Swofford writes, "...he's brought up what everyone else was talking about—the possibility of our obsolescence" (159). In this scene, Swofford's platoon mate draws a clear distinction between the current Gulf War and previous wars—the advanced technology has sped-up the timeframe of a war as military goals are achieved faster, without the need for as many human combatants when compared to past wars.

“wagons circling” also call to mind the idea of forging the American frontier. Just as the Vietnam War has been interpreted as a sort of reenactment of Manifest Destiny, Swofford alludes to the pioneer mythology as the newest generation of American soldiers set-up camp in the desert. Like Herr who describes joining the “old dance” of providing cover-fire in Vietnam and taking on an active role of “dancer,” Swofford metaphorically becomes the wagon: “we are the wagons.” This phrase indicates that he has adopted the symbolic vehicle of American “colonization” into his performance. The scene is surreal as Swofford describes the simple action of a night run as a play, then as an audition, and then transitions into becoming the vehicle of early American pioneering, himself, the wagon. The surrealism of the passage also exemplifies the performative role for a Gulf War soldier. In this war, the ground soldier who runs meaningless circles around the camp perimeter symbolizes the performative aspect of the soldier who “acts” for the news cameras but does not engage in combat.

Did the Gulf War Take Place?

Further accentuating the complicated task of representing the Gulf War is the notion that machines, not the soldiers, mostly enacted battle strategies. This advent of a technologically-fought war further abstracts what could be considered Swofford’s battle experience. This section illustrates key features of Swofford’s commentary that reveal that the inclusion of the absurd techniques signify that this novel is fiction and an attempt at representation.

One of the most perplexing aspects of the Gulf War for Swofford was that he was deployed to the warzone, but he never engaged in battle; thus, his mission to

acquire and snipe enemy targets is never fulfilled. Toward the end of the novel, Swofford articulates his confusion about serving in this war:

The months of training and deployment, the loneliness, the boredom, the fatigue, the rounds fired at fake, static targets, the nights of firewatch, and finally the letdown, the *easy victory that just scraped the surface of a war*—all these are frustrating and nearly unendurable facets of our war, our conflict. Did we fight? *Was that combat?* When compared to what we’ve heard from fathers and uncles and brothers about Vietnam, our entire ground war lasted as long as a long-range jungle patrol, and we’ve lost as many men, theater-wide, as you might need to fill two companies of grunts. (emphasis mine, 239)

As previously mentioned, the idea of “war” as it had been known in the earlier twentieth century did not seem to apply to the Gulf War. Swofford makes this distinction clear when he questions whether the soldiers engaged the “enemy” or not. Certainly compared to what had been known about fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, was the Gulf a war? Combined with a sense of “easy victory” was the lack of concrete markers for violence. For example, Swofford draws attention to only a few hundred American war casualties—a stark contrast to Vietnam during which a whole platoon could be lost in a single mission. Aside from questioning the very definition of war, Swofford also questions what his purpose within the war might have been when “battle” seemed more like a mere simulation of war as machines executed the brunt of the target acquisition.

For Swofford, combat becomes harder to understand as an enlisted sniper who never fires his weapon. Inevitably, the changing strategies for waging war that primarily operate through technology alter a soldier's perception of his role in battle. Harris writes in the first chapter of his 1971 critical text on absurdity:

Modern existentialist philosophy warns that we face a loss of self in a fragmented world of technology that reduces man to the operational and functional. Each of these theories seems to lend support to what certain writers have believed for a long time, that ours is a disintegrating world without a unifying principle, without meaning, without purpose: an absurd universe. (17)

In thinking about my claim that absurdity is more subtly presented in the Gulf War novel, it seems reasonable to conclude that Harris's assertions about the "absurd universe" in 1971 continues to hold true for *Jarhead*, a novel from 2003. A war that is fought primarily through and reported by technology has reduced "man to the operational and the functional." While World War II had a political rationale to eliminate Hitler, it also had a heavily ethical rationale for American involvement. However, in the Gulf War, a war motivated strictly through politics and manipulating reports of Hussein's war crimes, the ethical rationale is not as easily discerned; in this case, the soldier becomes merely functional in protecting natural resources for later capital gains⁵¹ and manning bomber planes. This "loss of self," occurs in a

⁵¹ The colonel briefs Swofford's platoon and says that their mission is "to protect, to shield, Saudi Arabia and her flowing oil fields" (10). Swofford says that the Marines, "joke about having transferred from the Marine Corps to the Oil Corps, or the Petrol Battalion...to protect oil reserves and the rights and profits of certain American companies, many of which have direct ties to the White House and oblique financial entanglements with the secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, and the commander in chief, George Bush, and the commander's progeny. We know this because Kuehn, one of our

metaphorical sense as the soldiers are unsure of their moral or literal purpose in the war. Early in the novel, Swofford states that the STA Marines “consider [them]selves highly trained and [their] talents indispensable” (85). Ironically, these ground soldiers have been made virtually unnecessary in the era of technology. This “loss of self,” or the soldier’s role, is most apparent in *Jarhead*’s concluding chapters in which Swofford loses his opportunity to snipe a target to the mortar bombs. It is important to remember that a head shot is desirable for the sniper and he does not feel a sense of relief that a bomb has taken an “enemy” life; the sniper wants to eliminate the target. Explicitly, Swofford writes, “To be a marine, a true marine, you must kill. With all of your training, all of your expertise, if you don’t kill, you’re not a combatant, even if you’ve been fired at...” (247). For Swofford, to be a true marine, and later a war veteran, he must execute the kill-shot. This is a thought that plagues him post-war, too: “You consider yourself less of a marine and even less of a man for not having killed while at combat” (247).

Swofford’s inability to fire his weapon and his ensuing confusion over his battle experience becomes clear in the climactic scene of the novel. In this scene, Swofford radios for approval to snipe Iraqi soldiers in an air control tower. The captain tells him, no, because if Swofford and his partner snipe some of the Iraqis the airfield will not surrender. Swofford says:

I know the opposite of the captain’s assertion is true...I can’t help but assume that certain commanders, at the company level, don’t want to use us because

representatives from Texas, says, ‘All those old white fuckers from Texas have their fat hands in Arab oil’” (11).

they know that two snipers with two of the finest rifles in the world and a few hundred rounds between them will in a short time inflict severe and debilitating havoc on the enemy, causing the entire airfield to surrender. The captains want some war, and they must know that the possibilities are dwindling. The captains want war just as badly as we do. (230)

The scene resolves without the use of the snipers as Swofford watches the “combat engineers blow two breaches” (230) in the fence. As the infantry assault company moves into the airfield, Swofford listens to the “confusion” over the frequency: he claims that it “sounds as though a few grunts have shot one another, that one fire team rounded a corner of a building and shot up their buddies, because they couldn’t see to know that the movement they heard came from their own platoon” (230-1). Shortly after relating the confusion heard from the radio, Swofford states that he can see a “...a platoon of Iraqis appea[r], waving white towels and smiling...the airfield assault continues and the fence-line platoon of surrendering Iraqis remains, some of the men smoking casually and eating canned rations” (231). After the Iraqi infantry has surrendered, more mortar bombs are called-in and the assault continues even as the Iraqis have basically declared the war over by picnicking at the fence. In Swofford’s earlier remark, he claims that the captains “want[ed] some war,” which might account for the captain’s order for Swofford to not efficiently snipe the tower officers and the overuse of mortar bombs hours after the Iraqis’ surrender. This scene illustrates that with the human-factor of the grunts infiltrating the Iraqi airfield, confusion and error ensue when Swofford claims that it sounds like two teams shot each other in the low-visibility. Ultimately, it is the bombs that level the airfield and ensure “victory.” But

these same bombs are an act of war that the commanders manipulated into taking place; the more logical strategy in this scene would be allowing the undetected Swofford and partner to quickly eliminate the key officers in the air tower. Instead, the commanders have called-in bombs and “a few more hours” (231) of assault on the airfield.⁵² Again, the unnecessary continued air assault is most clear when the Iraqis have already symbolically ended the war: “The [Iraqis] sit and stretch out in the sand, as though the war is over” (231).

This scene in which technology has out-strategized the chaotic grunts, the “loss of self” in the era of technologically-driven warfare has happened for Swofford. Without his head shot, as he claims earlier, he is not a “true marine.” Aside from not completing the mission he was assigned, the sniper’s head shot epitomizes that the Marine has been well-trained and fulfilled a purpose. As Swofford states:

When the sniper looks through his tenpower Unertl, he’s looking through the history of the sniper, the history of the art. The recticle is his window onto sniper history, and if he’s lucky, the picture of his future, and in that picture will emerge the figure of the enemy—the quartered head, the medulla shot, pink mist, the confirmation that the sniper’s training and history and tactics are not all for naught. (Swofford 57)

In looking through the sniper-scope, Swofford claims that he can look into the “history” of the “art” that becomes the “picture of his future.” These are all artistic phrases for what is otherwise a violent act of war; frankly, shooting someone in the

⁵² This scene also exemplifies some of the scholarship in the Introduction that asserts that the Gulf War was merely a military exercise and not a “war.”

head becomes an art form to the highly-trained sniper. These phrases also add surrealism to the passage as Swofford compares looking through a scope to acquire a target to looking through the sniper's history.

Incidentally, when the captain denies Swofford his chance at achieving the "pink mist," his training becomes implied as meaningless and for "naught." Swofford never fires his weapon in an act of war, which creates the existentialist debacle that Swofford attempts to understand within the narrative. The platoon's uncertainty about its purpose in the war is clear at the end of the novel when Swofford and company are deployed to Kuwait in a "freelance operation" (237) to sweep enemy barracks. As part of the clean-up mission after the bombing campaign has ended, Swofford's platoon is told that they can discharge the enemy weapons in approved shooting zones (244). Importantly, I note that Swofford's platoon mates are firing the enemy's weapons and not their own in the warzone. Swofford writes: "...I fire, and next to me my platoon mates fire, from the hip, with no precision, as though we are famous and immortal and it doesn't matter that we'll likely hit nothing firing from such an absurd and unstable position, but we burn through the magazines..." (244). Ironically, the trained snipers are shooting from the hip, which calls to mind the stereotypical "Wild West" stance, another slight nod to Manifest Destiny (just as the earlier wagon commentary alluded to American pioneering). More notably, the elite STA platoon discharges the weapons "without precision." This final act of emptying "enemy" gun chambers does not even result in an act of accurate target practice—STA's training is utterly wasted.

Further in the scene Swofford writes, "We fire and fire the AKs, a factory of firepower, the fierce scream of metal downrange and discharged cartridges and sand

flying everywhere, now all of us shooting in the air, shooting straight up and dancing in circles, dancing on one foot, with the mad, desperate hope that the rounds will never descend..." (244). The soldiers switch from aimlessly shooting, to shooting straight into the air. Again, the soldiers are not aiming at anything but are engaging in their last "performance": dancing with the Iraqi weapons that the platoon never engaged in battle. Of this scene, Peebles writes: "...the soldiers here express their aggression, fear, desire, and in this case the lust for identification with their beloved movie heroes, but shooting at the sky is an equally impotent gesture. It stands in for the killing that, at least in Swofford's case, wasn't done..." (34). Peebles identifies the violent Vietnam movies that Swofford's platoon mates desire to replicate for their subsequent disillusionment of serving in this war. And, for Peebles, shooting at the sky "stands in for the killing" that Swofford and his platoon do not experience and their subsequent frustration. For me, the Vietnam movies that Swofford and his platoon imitate forms the basis of this final act of "dancing" with enemy weapons as one final, mad performance akin to the surreal imagery of a Vietnam movie—or another instance of Swofford's imitation of the Vietnam form. For example, this scene is reminiscent of a death scene in *Platoon* in which Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) drops to his knees and screams at the sky. After Elias has been shot point-blank by a friendly, he somehow stumbles out of the jungle to die dramatically in a field. Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), the protagonist, and others aboard a helicopter witness Elias's last visually enraged, death-throes toward the sky. Elias literally throws both arms up with his face upturned to the heavens before falling to the ground. Just as Elias symbolically rails against the injustice of being shot by a friendly, Swofford and his company are also seemingly

railing against the military that rendered them redundant. Albeit that the military's training of highly skilled but unnecessary snipers is a different sort of injustice than being shot by a friendly. However, I emphasize that Swofford's visual demonstration of the injustice suffered by his Marines is reminiscent of the iconic *Platoon* scene. Perhaps unsurprising, after explicitly watching *Platoon* as a prewar ritual, the soldiers engage in one last Vietnam performance in the desert.

WWII as the “Good” War Foil and Vietnam as a Template

For scholars such as Esslin, Harris, and Hipkiss, absurdity is representation for that which is also absurd within the world. In other words, the absurdists accept that the world is “without a unifying principle, without meaning, without purpose: an absurd universe” (Harris 17). Thus, the absurd author abandons and reinvents traditional novelistic conventions in order to represent this absurd universe. However, I diverge from these scholars in claiming that absurdity is not the representation but a starting point for thinking-through chaotic or traumatic material, such as war. This assertion is based on my observation that war authors who insert absurdity into their novels also place their war into conversation with other moments in history or popular culture references. This discussion of past wars within the context of a current one may indicate a search for existing templates to begin articulating the current war. This search for meaning among other historical referents or literary allusions indicates that these authors have not yet arrived at their final representation of their wars. This is an especially poignant distinction for Swofford's novel as he still questions the significance of his experience when he writes *Jarhead* a mere decade after his service. Since the Gulf War's “mirage” complicates Swofford's memory, he compares and

contrasts his war to World War II and Vietnam ostensibly in an attempt to comprehend the Gulf War's significance within American war history; after all, the subtitle for *Jarhead* indicates that this novel is also "a Marine's chronicle" of "other battles." Historical wars become a familiar referent for Swofford to juxtapose his deployment experience against in an effort to process the Gulf War. To accomplish this, Swofford dovetails the absurdist principle of the meaninglessness of existence and the absurd concept of history as repetitive: Swofford literally inserts his war into conversation with other wars (pointing to an American history of repetitive, or recurring, wars). However, rather than aligning with the absurdist notion that the world is beyond comprehension, Swofford's discussion of other wars in conversation with the Gulf War enables some meaning to be extracted from his experience.

In the media, the Gulf War was established as continuing a tradition of American military successes. The Bush administration worked to assure the American public that this war would not be a repeat of Vietnam and the corresponding media censorship reinforced this message. During the Vietnam War, the idea of "victory" or "progress" was never clear and therefore the war seemed to be bloody and violent without much cause, sentiments that the broadcasts often captured.⁵³ In crafting a "clean" war rhetoric for the Gulf War, a sense of a rational and clearly demarcated strategy to "win" the war was implied through the images of the advanced weaponry,

⁵³ Essentially, Gulf War broadcasting was censored in an effort to not repeat the reporting mistakes of Vietnam: "Eventually one of the things that may have soured the American public on the war in Vietnam was the fact that it was a war of attrition, without fronts or fixed objectives, and therefore appeared irrational: it was never clear whether any given battle or operation should be considered a victory or defeat, or how it contributed to the achievement of more general strategic objectives" (Hallin 48).

which helped to illustrate that the U.S. had superior technology and soldiers; hence, impending victory should have been obvious to the viewing public.⁵⁴

In speeches, World War II became the metaphor for American heroism while the Vietnam War was the contrast to the Gulf War. In press reports and media coverage, World War II phrases were employed to remind the American public about the “good” war and its corresponding sense of patriotic heroism. But the Vietnam War was discussed as an American war anomaly that would never happen again, especially with the Gulf War’s clear strategy for a quick victory.⁵⁵ Swofford also returns to these wars to begin articulating his war but with different perceptions than the rhetoric broadcast by the media. For Swofford, World War II operates as the traditional conception of “war” to juxtapose against his own experience, but he does not align the “patriotism” of World War II with his war. Instead, Swofford more closely aligns his war with Vietnam; this comparison between Vietnam and the Gulf War is most apparent as his platoon “trains” on Vietnam movies, and his novelistic style is inspired by Vietnam representations, as previously discussed.

⁵⁴ In fact, some scholars have recirculated Bush’s comment that the Gulf War ended the Vietnam syndrome. For example, Michael R. Gordon claims in his article, “The Last War Syndrome,” that “the dominance of American forces on the battlefield enabled the United States to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome, the immobilizing fear that the commitment of ground troops would ensnare the military in a bloody quagmire” (114).

⁵⁵ *In A Century of Media, A Century of War*, Robin Andersen discusses the framing of war for the general public through the media; she writes: “Avoidance of a bloody ground battle with few American casualties was considered an astonishing success at the end of the war. President George H. W. Bush proclaimed that the country had arrived at the end of the Vietnam Syndrome. In the years since Vietnam, fighting wars from the air and preventing media coverage of the theater of battle had been the military strategy of choice. Quick interventions with few casualties that no one saw prevent the public from turning against military adventures” (191).

The World War II references within Swofford's narrative reflect the real-life rhetoric of the Gulf War media coverage.⁵⁶ Hallin explains that "references to World War II returned in Persian Gulf War coverage. Gulf War coverage, moreover, stressed patriotic themes far more heavily than Vietnam coverage did..." (53). Kendrick explains that when attempting to boost public morale for the Gulf War, the Bush administration used the World War II phrase "never again" as "the allegory of choice" in explaining to the American public that the Gulf War would not be another Vietnam (60). But, in her discussion of Gulf War rhetoric, Kendrick does not acknowledge that "never again" is not merely a phrase that refers to the entirety of World War II but refers specifically to the Holocaust. Fascinatingly, there is slippage in the use of the phrase "never again" by the Bush administration as the reference to never allowing large-scale genocide to reoccur in order to assure the American public that another Vietnam will not repeat in the desert. Vietnam was a bloody war but was certainly not a systematic genocide. Seemingly, as a rhetorical strategy, the Holocaust becomes overshadowed by the more patriotic concept of "winning World War II." The appropriation of the Holocaust phrase combined with the patriotic sentiment of World War II linguistically elides the Vietnam syndrome as Vietnam becomes the anomaly in an otherwise "victorious" succession of righteous American wars. These real-life rhetorical moves demonstrate the ethical implications of obscuring or heralding one war over another. In particular, these rhetorical moves also obscure the number of Iraqi victims in the Gulf War. The importance of maintaining separate reverence and

⁵⁶ Bruce H. Franklin writes, "Although the media were largely denied access to the battlefields, the Gulf War nevertheless gained the reputation of the first real-time television war, and the images projected into American homes helped to incite the most passionate war fever since World War II" (41).

representation for each war is made especially apparent as the phrasing of “never again,” a call-to-action of never allowing systematic genocide to reoccur, becomes a reassuring rally cry for the new war. This appropriation of Holocaust phrasing also highlights my assertion throughout this dissertation that absurdity becomes a valuable critical tool to parse through the representational complications for contemporary war and implores the necessity of finding unique and comprehensive representation for each historical event.

For Swofford’s novel, World War II serves as a foil to emphasize the irrational causes of his war and the newly developed version of warfare. Like Herr, Swofford writes a counter-narrative to official statements in cynically referring to the patriotism of World War II and the public’s excitement over the “victory” of his war at the end of the novel, a point to which I will return. World War II with its high toll of human casualties and violent warfare, not to mention its designation as a formally declared war, emphasizes the Gulf’s new technological warfare that resists a traditional connotation as war. In other words, is smart-bombing still “war” as it had been understood decades earlier?⁵⁷ Airstrikes were part of the battle strategy in World War

⁵⁷ Elaine Scarry places emphasis on injury as a key component of war; the goal is to “out-injure” (63) the opposing side: “Although both sides inflict injuries, the side that inflicts greater injury faster will be the winner; or, to phrase it the other way around, the side that is more massively injured or believes itself to be so will be the loser” (89). By this definition, despite the inattention to the human casualties in the media, the technological Gulf War would still be “war” as the airstrikes “out-injured” by leveling Iraq’s infrastructure. However, the obscured human casualties of the Gulf War complicate the public’s perception of battle: “Although there were a few images of wounded U.S. troops, there were no images of the slaughter of Iraqis...There was also little discussion of the extent of Iraqi casualties in the mainstream media” (Kellner 404). Despite the inattention to human casualties during the war, journalists later found the “Highway of Death,” the highway leading from Kuwait City to Iraq. This highway was littered with military and civilian vehicles fleeing Kuwait City; these vehicles and their human casualties were bombed in “one of the most massive slaughters by air power in history” (Kellner 404-5). Swofford also relates the conception of “winning in a war”: “We know that the only things relevant to the debriefing are the corpses. The count of the dead: many of them, many fewer of us. This is a good count, these are good numbers. Let’s go home” (237). Although the media obscured the

II and in Vietnam, but those wars still relied heavily on the “human” aspect of soldiers who directly engaged, or came face-to-face with, shooting at the “enemy” forces.

Swofford’s text emphasizes the confusion of what defines contemporary “war” when technology has reduced and nearly eliminated the need for as much human-to-human combat.

The first allusion to World War II appears in the scene in which Swofford first starts the Surveillance and Target Acquisition sniper indoctrination training that takes place in Okinawa. He writes: “We spent most of five days on a forced march through hundreds of miles of trails in the Northern Training Area, where some of the most vicious battles of World War II had occurred. They teargassed us and stripped us and starved us. During moments of high delirium, I thought I heard screaming from the jungle, the voices of Japanese and American dead” (Swofford 59). This scene transposes the soldiers training to fight the latest war against a backdrop of the former World War II. Within this passage there is the subtle but surreal quality of Swofford thinking he might have heard reverberations of battle “ghosts.” Ostensibly, Swofford’s inclusion of World War II commentary is a narrative foil for thinking about his war. World War II as the “good” war functions as a contrast for thinking about the Gulf War.⁵⁸ If the Gulf War is a harder war to define, perhaps comparing it to World War II sets-up a clear distinction between the two events. Equally important, even if the Gulf

human aspect of fighting this war, the later press reports and Swofford’s brief encounters with death in the novel resituate the Gulf War back into a war context, as material violence. Interestingly, though, Swofford’s novel only contains two scenes with corpses that illustrate the aftermath of technological bombing.

⁵⁸ Steven Casey illustrates the public perception of World War II: “In a nation so haunted during the 1920s and 1930s by the Western Front casualties, World War II ultimately became a surprisingly popular conflict for the United States. In fact, it is widely remembered as the ‘good war’ fought by the ‘greatest generation’—a war so different to the awful trench slaughter that preceded it, not to mention the ‘bad’ conflict in Vietnam that came after” (38).

War is not directly comparable, World War II has been incorporated into Swofford's platoon's training thereby firmly situating the Gulf War into the history of American war—a necessary contextualization as Swofford contemplates whether he was involved in a war due to his inexperience with combat.

Aside from situating his training within a World War II context, Swofford also includes an anecdote about the common perception of World War II versus his war. In this scene, Swofford reads in a café, post-war, when he encounters two, young German tourists who want Swofford and his former platoon mate to be their tour guides and escort them to the next town. While on their way to the town, one of the German women says, "...World War II, *that* was a war, not an 'operation' with boys returning home complaining of false ailments because they hadn't fought long or hard enough" (emphasis his, 114). Again, in this passage, there is clear attention to World War II as a foil to the Gulf War. The German tourist implies that the bloody warfare of World War II understandably resulted in veterans' trauma while the "clean" Gulf War does not have the same perceptible empathy for the soldiers who did not engage in active combat. The German's comment also recalls the same connotation of the Vietnam War as an "operation." While the German's comment contrasts World War II to the Gulf, it also metaphorically compares the Gulf to Vietnam. But, more importantly, the German tourist's comment reinforces the assertion that World War II was a *war*, as the last formally declared American war in the twentieth century. For Swofford, the contrast of World War II as the "good" war to his war also illustrates the distinction between these events. Peebles writes that "...World War II was a terrifically popular setting for inspiring stories of bravery and courage, young men

fighting for ‘something greater’ that justifies even the most extreme sacrifice” (6). This “something greater” of fighting to end Nazism directly contrasts the more blurred causes for fighting the Gulf War. According to some reports, the Iraqis had committed human rights atrocities against the Kuwaiti people, thereby rationalizing the U.S. intervention to stop the war crimes initiated by Saddam Hussein. However, the most prominent rationale for confronting Iraq was to protect the price of oil, among other capitalistic gains.⁵⁹ This political and only vaguely ethical rationale for U.S. involvement in an “operation” to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraqi occupation complicates the soldier’s awareness of his role in this war. Swofford’s references to the formally declared and “good” war emphasize the contrast to the ambiguities associated with the Gulf War: was it a “war” or an “operation” or a “conflict”? These World War II references also illustrate the psychological complications for the deployed but not battle-tested combatant: can a soldier who did not fight claim post-traumatic stress disorder? In the above passage, Swofford seems to acknowledge post-war trauma when he inserts the German tourist’s remark that the Gulf War veterans complain because they did not fight “long or hard enough.”

Since World War II functions as a narrative foil to the Gulf War, the Vietnam War works as a comparison to elucidate the similarities in the soldiers’ confusion about the Gulf’s battle strategies and murky politics. As with World War II,

⁵⁹ Iraq and Kuwait disputed the price of oil; Kuwait had been selling oil below the agreed upon price thereby driving down the price of oil for Iraq. In addition, Kuwait refused to settle a long-standing border dispute with Iraq. On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded and seized control of Kuwait City. The “Iraqi seizure of Kuwait was of immediate interest to the western capitalist societies because Iraq and Kuwait together would control approximately 20 percent of the world’s known oil reserves. With the potential wealth generated from future oil sales and control over oil prices, Saddam Hussein could play a major role on the world’s political and economic stage” (Kellner 12-6).

comparisons between Vietnam and the Gulf War were also drawn in the media. As discussed in Chapter Two, newer technology allowed reporters and networks to broadcast graphic images from the Vietnam frontlines. As a result, the media had been blamed for broadcasting these images that caused the Vietnam War to become unpopular with the public.⁶⁰ With Gulf War reporting, the government censored and prevented disturbing material from being broadcast. Despite the real-life government and military leaders who assuaged the nation that “this war was not going to be another Vietnam” (Kendrick 59), Swofford includes several parallels to the Vietnam War in his commentary: the soldiers’ perception of themselves as play-actors trained on Vietnam movies combined with the canonical Vietnam representations that reverberate in Swofford’s style, and the uncertain politics and unclear “victory” that characterized both wars. In aligning the Gulf War with Vietnam, and rejecting the media’s narrative that the Gulf was another “successful” American victory akin to World War II, Swofford attempts to find some meaning for his experience through the Vietnam War.

The Struggle for Meaning-Making through Absurd Novels

The war “universe” is discovered to be absurd by Swofford; his war becomes an utterly purposeless experience for the elite but not battle-tested STA platoon. Swofford’s inability to find purpose or order for his experience is in line with the absurdists who illustrate that the universe is meaningless. In addition, the “Absurdists... tend to see history as repetitive” (Hipkiss 3). Similarly, Swofford

⁶⁰ The “[Vietnam War was] the first war to be televised into tens of millions of American homes. The glimpses of the war’s reality were so horrendous and so influential that these images have been scapegoated as one of the main causes of the U.S. defeat” (Franklin 33).

inserts his war into commentaries on two other wars: World War II and Vietnam. In some respects, inserting the Gulf War into conversation with other wars demonstrates the absurdist view of the repetitive history of war. However, diverging from the absurdists, I argue that the insertion of the two previous wars is a starting template for articulating his experience and not just a cynical insertion about Swofford's lack of faith in human progress. His comparison of the Gulf War to these two previous wars demonstrates that the reverberations of these wars are present in the Gulf War. By referring to these wars within his current war narrative, Swofford begins the process of thinking-through the cultural impact of this war by examining the Gulf's relationship to other wars, either as a foil or as context. In other words, even if Swofford's insertion of World War II and Vietnam within his Gulf War narrative indicates the absurdist vision of repetitive history, Swofford's commentary separates the Gulf from these wars as a unique event; thus he diverges from the interpretative futility of the absurd tradition.

For much of the novel, Swofford replicates the same artistic impulses and commentary as the absurdists. As Harris contends, "...the contemporary novelist of the absurd seeks no reform of a world probably beyond remedy and certainly beyond comprehension" (30). In a conventionally absurd novel, the author acknowledges that absurdity may well serve as representation for a world that is beyond comprehension. However, Harris warns that "This affirmation should not be confused with the kind of affirmation found in works of existentialism. Contemporary novelists of the absurd begin with the same basic premise as the existentialists—the world is absurd. But they are post-existential in their view of man, generally lacking the existentialist's faith in

the human character” (31). While the existentialists maintain that man must become self-reliant, the contemporary absurdists view man as “too puny and helpless for self-reliance” (Harris 31). In other words, the existentialists may view the world as beyond remedy or understanding, but there is still a sort of faith in the human spirit or perseverance. In contrast, the “Absurdists have less faith in human progress and tend to see history as repetitive” (Hipkiss 3).

Swofford seemingly demonstrates the absurdist’s lack of faith in human progress when he writes: “I remade my war one word at a time, a foolish, desperate act...while sitting and writing, I am alone and full of despair—the same despair that impelled me to write this book...What did I hope to gain? More bombs are coming. Dig your holes with the hands that God gave you” (254). Of course, within the passage Swofford acknowledges the ineptitude of writing his experience as the absurdists “comment upon the artificiality not only of art, but of life as it is usually lived, of mass society...” (Harris 23). In this excerpt, Swofford, again, exemplifies the artificiality of the art, “rema[king] [the] war one word at a time, a foolish, desperate act,” but he also comments on mass society when he claims that “more bombs are coming.” This figurative language indicates that there will always be impending wars. Like the other absurdists, Swofford suggests that American war history is repetitive and perpetual. In fact, his penultimate chapter consists of just four simple sentences: “Some wars are unavoidable and need well be fought, but this doesn’t erase warfare’s waste. Sorry, we must say to the mothers whose sons will die horribly. This will never end. Sorry” (255). In passages such as these Swofford’s commentary aligns with the absurdist’s perspective of society and the faithlessness in man’s ability to break the “waste[ful]”

and repetitive cycle of war. Literally, the novel ends with the word, “sorry,” and these last sentences cyclically double-back to the word, “sorry,” as a futile response to war.

However, despite embodying aspects of the absurd novel, *Jarhead* does not seem to end with the commentary that the world is “beyond comprehension,” meaningless, or that man is too helpless for self-reliance. Specifically, Swofford acknowledges that articulating the war proves difficult but is his continuing task. He writes: “There is a wreck in your head, part of the aftermath, and you must dismantle the wreck...It took years for you to understand that the most complex and dangerous conflicts, the most harrowing operations, and the most deadly wars, occur in the head” (Swofford 247-8). In this passage, close to the novel’s conclusion, Swofford indicates that there is a “wreck” to be dismantled, which implies that the “war” Swofford currently experiences is in fighting the psychological post-war effects. But more than merely recognizing that even the “clean” war resulted in veteran trauma, Swofford denotes that he still attempts to figure out, to dismantle, the war experience. For this novel, the absurd techniques emphasize that there is still work to be done in representing and comprehending contemporary war. In particular, this ongoing search for meaning appears within *Jarhead* through allusions to other absurd literature.

Swofford attempts to understand his position within this war as he inserts literary allusions that accentuate the absurdity of a media-created war.⁶¹ In addition to

⁶¹ Part of what I am arguing is the media’s construction of a war is the incessant reporting on war in the absence of observable battle. CNN attempted to construct a whole narrative for the event: CNN’s “Crisis in the Gulf” program began as a half-hour segment and was expanded into hour long segments four days later (Kellner 86). “...the constant flow of military images on CNN’s “Crisis in the Gulf” and the extremely positive images of the U.S. troop deployment that was most supportive of the military option to the crisis. Night after night, CNN, and the other networks as well, broadcast an incessant flow

the World War II and Vietnam examples that appear within the text, Swofford also draws absurd literary allusions into this novel, such as *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. But more than just reiterating the absurdity within this war, these absurd literary allusions also signal that Swofford searches for meaning for his experience. In one scene in the novel, Swofford is sent to coordinates in the desert and awaits testing the new Barrett .50-caliber semiautomatic rifle. As he waits for instructions, he sits “in the back of [the] Humvee and read[s] *The Iliad*” (154). Although not an absurd text, seemingly Homer’s *The Iliad* serves as an ironic reference to the epic battle (the Trojan War) that is not occurring within the Gulf War. Swofford employs these references as placeholders for meaning: quite literally, he reads these novels as he tries to make sense of his experience.

In one scene, while setting-up camp in the middle of the desert, Swofford returns to the two aforementioned titles; he writes: “I read from *The Iliad* and *The Stranger*, choosing a page randomly and reading aloud and then stopping and by memory trying to construct the story before and after the page I’ve read, as though closing a wound” (213). Within the passage is the analogy of piecing together another story from memory in the same way that Swofford is attempting to understand his war. In reading the novels, within the novel, there is only the present page that Swofford knows and then the cognitive work to remember the pages before and after the page he has just read. The same impulse to create a coherent narrative for his war experience is demonstrated by the beginning of his novel when he writes that he will draw

of pictures of troops, airplanes, ships, tanks, and military equipment, with interview after interview of the troops and their military spokespeople” (Kellner 87).

information from government documents and press reports. Swofford's attempt to write concluding chapters for the post-war years in *Jarhead* is perhaps a gesture at "closing the wound" in order to try to understand what the war encounter meant. These absurd texts also function as an indication that he struggles to "clos[e] his wound," the trauma, as the reconstruction of the literature's storyline becomes an analogy for his attempt to heal his post-war psyche in the novel.

The struggle to comprehend his war and acknowledge the resulting trauma through reading literature, to "tr[y] to construct the story," is further established in another scene. After returning from war, Swofford and a platoon mate spend time in a café and Swofford "...back[s] [him]self into a corner of the café with a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *Death on the Installment Plan*, content to read and reread and attempt to understand" (113). In this excerpt, Swofford writes that he "reads [in an] attempt to understand" or that in some abstract way the literature might elucidate what is his role in the Gulf War may have been. I draw attention to his literature selections as these novels are not war novels but absurd selections. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus establishes that man's search for the meaning of life is futile. *Death on the Installment Plan* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline centers on Céline's alter-ego, Ferdinand's, search for happiness by exploring the suffering within the human condition, a search that is ultimately metaphysically empty. Swofford's attempt to understand is literally though an absurd literature lens.

Significantly, Swofford specifies that he "attempts to understand" (113) not that he *does understand* through reading the absurd texts. Within Swofford's already absurd novel, there appears to be a meta-fictional moment in which absurd novels

illuminate the farce of Swofford's service in a war that was constructed by governmental rhetoric and media broadcasts. The insertion of his reading through the absurd literature within the narrative and his "attempt to understand" indicates that there is still interpretative work to be done, as these allusions function as placeholders for representation. Inevitably, the allusions serve as a gesture toward a meaning of Swofford's war experience that he struggles to articulate in the novel.

Conclusion: War without End

Although multiple facets of this novel demonstrate the same techniques as the experimental texts of the 1960's-70's, in my interpretation, *Jarhead* does not simply end with the interpretation that the Gulf War was an absurd simulation of war and Swofford's representation accurately illustrates the illogicality of this technologically-driven war. Rather than replicate the emphasis on technology as the reportage did, Swofford chose to center his novel on the human perspective. Geoffrey A. Wright claims, "In contrast, the literature and film on the [Gulf] war emphasize the human rather than the technological dimension of the fighting. Veterans and veteran correspondents employ a language of sensory experience to tell their stories about infantry life and combat, stories abounding with the minutiae of training, sleeping, eating, patrolling, and fighting" (1677). Swofford does include many descriptions of life in the barracks: the mess halls, the recreation rooms, training with weapons, and the boredom that necessitates his reading in the desert. In some instances, *Jarhead* reads a lot like *Dispatches* in that the grunts are the center of the story, but the technology and battle strategy are at the periphery of the Gulf War narrative. While *Jarhead* does resituate humanness into the war perception, paradoxically, the narration

from the ground soldier's perspective also reveals that the Marines were just as perplexed as to what took place as the real-life journalists who could not answer "the question that kept Americans glued to their television sets and devouring newspapers: What was going on in the battlefield? With few exceptions, the lead stories were drawn from pool reports or official briefings..." (Fialka 46). Like Herr, Swofford is not just writing a counter-narrative to the media's presentation of his war; he is also attempting to make meaning from his experience. Again, the confused ground soldier is in stark contrast to the media's "packaged" and "clean" representation of the war.⁶²

The absurd insertions that facilitate Swofford's illustration of his Gulf War experience in *Jarhead* also overtly demarcate that this narrative is not *the* representation for a war that he is still psychologically processing. The subtle absurdity in this Gulf War novel is due to the real-life surrealism of a war that seemed to have been fought live on television as networks strung-together images and expert testimony in an effort to create a coherent narrative; in short, the Gulf War was a media-constructed spectacle. In the realm of such real-life absurdity, the author need only mimic this form in his fictional illustration, hence my assertion that the absurdity in a Gulf War novel is more subtle as life and art become absurd imitations of one another. However, it is important to be clear that the media spectacle is only a simulation of the war that was waged beyond the news cameras; thus, Swofford's novel imitates and creates a parody of the absurdity in the real-life news reporting that reduced war to decontextualized images of technological advancement. For some,

⁶² Kendrick writes that CBS and CNN videos have an "emphasis on narrative coherence [and] represents the Persian Gulf War as orderly." Later packaged and sold, the summaries of the videos produced by CBS and CNN "promise viewers the complete story of the Persian Gulf War" (62).

Swofford's imitation of the absurd real-life reporting would seem to be the accurate representation for this virtual war. However, Swofford's commentary indicates that there is more work to be done in discovering the rest of what happened in the desert: the information and events that had been censored and scripted for even the deployed combatant.

As *Jarhead* aligns with features of the absurd novels, this novel is not necessarily a memoir but a fictional exploration of that war through Swofford's memory. However, unlike the absurdists who opt for the fantastic as representation, this novel indicates through the absurd literature allusions that a search for meaning is still ongoing by the novel's end. Aside from all the complications of real-life censorship and the media creation of the Gulf War spectacle for the public, confusion also remains for the soldiers. Toward the end of the novel, when the soldiers are actually given a combat assignment, a platoon mate, Kuehn, says "I didn't think it would happen. All those deadlines, all that talk," to which Swofford replies, "I didn't think it would happen, either. We've been here too long. It's our home, so how can it all of the sudden be a war zone?" (179). For Swofford, the desert barracks had been comfortable: they trained, ate, slept, and watched war movies in the relative comfort of "home,"⁶³ without battle-action. Throughout the novel, aside from the air control tower scene in which Swofford is denied his head shot, there is only one explicit war scene; to be clear, this scene is war aftermath:

⁶³ Meredith H. Lair writes: "Oppressive heat, water and food shortages, and hostile acts plagued troops actually engaged in combat, and every soldier suffered the loneliness, stress, and isolation of deploying far from home. But material deprivation and physical trauma were hardly the norm, since most military personnel lived on well-stocked, heavily fortified bases. In fact, just as in Vietnam, living conditions in Iraq were surprisingly comfortable, and consumer goods even more prevalent..." (225).

I've never seen such destruction. The scene is too real not to be real. Every fifty to one hundred feet a burnt-out and bombed-out enemy vehicle lies disabled on the unimproved surface road, bodies dead in the vehicles or blown from them... This is war, I think. I'm walking through what my father and his father walked through—the epic results of American bombing, American might. The filth is on my boots. I am one of a few thousand people who will walk this valley today. I am history making. Whether I live or die, the United States will win this war. I know that the United States will win any war it fights, against any country. If colonialism weren't out of style, I'm sure we'd take over the entire Middle East... (Swofford 221-2)

Swofford claims that this scene is “too real” and “this is war”—the destroyed machines and bodies from American bombs. This scene also connects the Gulf War to the other wars as Swofford acknowledges his own familial history in war (he writes that his father is a Vietnam veteran, and his grandfather is a World War II veteran). On the other hand, this one explicit scene of war's destruction is not only a counter-narration to the media's “clean” war image but also relates Swofford's disorientation from finally viewing war violence. The inability to process the scene's visuals suggests that Swofford, who was relatively unengaged in the war, does not have the precise language to illustrate the scene. The inability to describe the scene becomes apparent as he quickly shifts from tangible, precise description in the first few sentences to abstract concepts such as he is “history making” and “the filth,” or culpability, is now on him by walking through the destruction. The figural language also implicates a sardonic tone as Swofford writes that the “United States will win any

war” and “if colonialism weren’t out of style, I’m sure we’d take over the entire Middle East” (222). These phrases combined with the imagery of “filth” on his boots of “American might” suggest a struggle to articulate the war’s purpose: was this another war inspired by imperialism, as critics have suggested about the Vietnam War?

Regardless of “victory,” or what the goal in the Gulf War had been, at the end of the war “...the troops of the Persian Gulf were celebrated as national heroes who returned to hyped up parades and victory celebrations, costing millions of dollars...” (Kellner 387). This celebration occurred mostly because “...one can easily imagine a sort of synthesis of the ‘lessons’ of the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War: a view that war is still a good thing, a ‘positive experience’ for the nation, as long as patriotic spirit is displayed and as long as machines and not people do the fighting” (Hallin 56). At the end of the war, Peebles claims that the public welcomed home the troops because the:

Media coverage assured the public that the war was just, efficient, and, after late February, over and done with. Subsequently, however, reports and images would leak out that indicated otherwise: the carnage on the Highway of Death, the collateral damage of misdirected attacks, the illness that would come to be called Gulf War syndrome. Questions lingered, just as they did for Swofford. What happened when those ‘smart’ bombs missed their intended targets, as happened, it turns out, the majority of the time? Why was Saddam Hussein still in power, if victory had been as total as it seemed? What exactly had been the role of the media in packaging that victory for an enthralled public? (35)

Peebles's questions highlight the contradictory information that the media disseminated and the subsequent uncertainty over what was the "victory"? If eliminating Hussein as "another Hitler" was a goal, then why was he not captured or removed from power? And if technology reduced the need for ground troops to engage in active combat, obscuring the war casualties in the media did not erase the collateral damage that was inflicted on soldiers and Iraqi civilians alike.⁶⁴ But most important of all, if the Gulf War was meant to end the "Vietnam Syndrome," then why did the newest soldiers develop neuroses known as Gulf War syndrome?⁶⁵ Consequently, the physical and psychic effects of warfare were yet to be determined⁶⁶ when Swofford writes *Jarhead* in 2003. Even now, the effects may continue to emerge as soldiers are only beginning to tell their war in Iraq stories.

⁶⁴ Despite the media's concentration on the advanced technology, Kellner explicates the damage inflicted by the bombing campaign: "In the most relentless bombing campaign since World War II, the U.S. dominated multinational coalition systematically destroyed Iraq's military and economic infrastructure and inflicted terrible suffering on the Iraqi people. The Pentagon worked to project an image of a clean, precise, and efficient technowar war, in which the U.S. military was controlling events and leading the coalition inexorably to victory" (186). After the war, the Pentagon admitted that "70 percent of the bombs missed their targets" which lead to significant numbers of civilian casualties and destruction of non-target infrastructure (Kellner 234). Swofford corroborates this sentiment in the novel: "They're forgetting the mission of the military: to extinguish the lives and livelihood of other humans. What do they think all of those bombs are for?" (172).

⁶⁵ Generally, the media did not portray the soldiers as suffering from battle trauma or physical ailments. As Kellner claims, the soldiers "too were victims of George Bush's Gulf war. Many had to spend months in the burning and then freezing Saudi Arabian deserts, subject to incredible discomfort and horrendous fears...In addition, the troops in the desert were exploited in one of the largest medical experiments in history, in which they served as guinea pigs for untested drugs against chemical warfare agents" (387). Swofford addresses these experimental pills: "They haven't even told us what's in these pills. They tried it on rats, and they say it might be an antidote to nerve gas!" (159). Swofford rationalizes the pills as another governmental tactic for generating support for the war: "So the political soldiers had to find something that would promote the public sham of a Pentagon dedicated to the safety and welfare of its troops: enter PB pills. None of this has anything to do with the individual lives that might be lost to nerve gas—the immediate casualties—and everything to do with the public relations battle, the real battle occurring in America" (183).

⁶⁶ James F. Dunnigan and Austin Bay claim in their text, *From Shield to Storm*, "...after Vietnam, thousands of veterans are killed or disabled each year by diseases they contracted in the jungle. The Arabian Desert may prove to be even more lethal to the veterans of the Gulf War. Many of the diseases in Arabia are difficult to detect immediately and take months or years to do their damage" (390).

So if Swofford's Gulf War is not as righteous as World War II, comparable to but not quite explicable through Vietnam, akin to the dark absurdity of a Camus novel, and only beginning to be comprehended through historical and literary allusions, what is the significance of the Gulf War? At the end of the novel, some meaning is generated when Swofford as a Gulf War veteran directly confronts his war's contrived comparison to World War II and Vietnam: "We arrived in California, and the bus trip from San Bernardino to Twentynine Palms took many hours because along the desert roads thousands of citizens had gathered to welcome home the heroes. I recalled pictures from World War II victory parades in New York City, and our twenty yellow buses rambling through the high desert were a letdown in comparison" (250). Albeit in stark contrast, Swofford directly aligns his post-war "victory" celebration to World War II at the end of the novel. This scene also emphasizes the governmental rhetoric that lauded the patriotic justifications for fighting this war and the subsequent "letdown." But, more significantly, this scene is also when Swofford confronts a Vietnam veteran:

As we neared Twentynine Palms, Crocket pulled a Vietnam vet onto the bus, a hard Vietnam vet, a man obviously on and off the streets for many years, in and out of VA hospitals. The man had no shoes on his dirty feet and wore tattered jeans and a faded camouflage blouse of indeterminate origin. Tears fell from the man's eyes and rolled down his deeply wrinkled and hurt face, the surface of his face not unlike the topography of the Desert. The man was somewhat drunk, but obviously less drunk than he was used to being...He

closed his mouth and licked his cracked lips and yelled to the bus, “Thank you, thank you, jarheads, for making them see we are not bad animals.” (251)

The veteran’s substance abuse and homelessness, evident within the passage, reflects the real-life suffering of Vietnam veterans. But more than merely drawing attention to the Vietnam veteran’s suffering, Swofford indicates that the veteran’s face reminds him of the “Desert.”⁶⁷ The phrase, “his face not unlike the typography of the Desert,” is a final connection between the two wars as Swofford metaphorically sees his war in the Vietnam veteran’s face. In this scene, the Vietnam veteran also thanks the Marines for seemingly redeeming the concept of the military man, as these Gulf War veterans are enthusiastically welcomed home in opposition to the treatment of Vietnam veterans.

The end of the Gulf War generates some significance when Swofford confronts the Vietnam veteran; he writes: “I hoped that even though the spectacle of the excited citizens was worth nothing to me, it might help the Vietnam vet heal his wounds” (251). For Swofford, “The desert is everywhere. The mirage is everywhere” (15), and he does not develop a comprehensible representation by the novel’s end. Perhaps the “mirage” has not quite focused to a coherent representation within the novel because as Swofford declares: “...the importance of a war is never decided within years and certainly not within months, but rather in decades, or even centuries” (114). Ostensibly not enough time has lapsed to enable Swofford to parse through all the politics, ethics, and psychological anguish that converged in serving but this novel begins that work.

⁶⁷ Swofford writes: “*The Desert* will become the popular moniker of Operation Desert Shield and the forthcoming Desert Storm, the Gulf War, the Operation to Free Kuwait—whatever else the war, the mass staging and movement and personnel and weapons of destruction might be called, it is the Desert” (emphasis his, 15).

And perhaps, just as the Vietnam War has allowed Swofford a template to begin articulating the war experience, arguably the murky politics and Gulf War syndrome may also create additional perspective for rethinking the ethics and politics of the Vietnam War and “heal [some] wounds.” Perhaps after all, no matter the political and ethical dilemmas, at least the veterans may be recuperated from their Vietnam discernment as “bad animals” in a conversation alongside the Gulf War.

Only now, after the second Iraq War, veterans are telling their trauma stories on television, such as in 2007’s HBO documentary, *Alive Day Memories: Home From Iraq* (Peebles 137). Meanwhile veterans from the Persian Gulf War (often referred to today as the first War in Iraq) are only beginning to write their stories, as is the case for Swofford. Part of the reason for the limited attention on Persian Gulf War veteran stories may be the latency necessary for these soldiers to process and express their stories (the explosion of Holocaust fiction and scholarly interest peaked in the 1990s, decades after the end of World War II). Or perhaps latency is necessary to process the soldiers’ continued confusion over the strategic goal for the Gulf War. As Haass points out, the “victory” in the Gulf was not in accomplishing something concrete but to prevent further strife in the Middle East: “the Gulf War was significant but not transformational. It was and remains more important for what it prevented than for what it accomplished or brought about. Had it not been waged it could have been transformational, but in the negative sense, ushering in an era of Middle Eastern politics and international relations far more violent tha[n] what has transpired” (82). Like the Vietnam War, chaos ensues in the narratives when the purpose or rationale for waging war becomes convoluted and the “victory” of battle becomes just as

difficult to discern. However, unlike the Vietnam War, this surgically-precise, “clean” war had different modes of censorship and convolution of information. As Philip M. Taylor reiterates, there were two wars waged in the Gulf War:

The war itself, fought by the [international] coalition’s combined military forces against the regime of Saddam Hussein, and the war as portrayed by the media. The latter did not necessarily reflect the reality of the former. It will take some time for an authoritative history of the ‘real war’ to be written, a task which will be possible only when the official records are opened to public scrutiny, just as it will require the benefit of a broader timespan than what allowed here to evaluate the wider international significance and consequences of the conflict. (7)

Taylor, writing his critical text on the Gulf War in 1992, illustrates an important aspect of understanding the significance of a war: time is necessary in order to comprehend the larger effects. But time is also necessary in an era of overt media censorship to begin accessing all the information that has been denied, obscured, or rewritten for the news consuming public—a task that Gulf War veteran-authors may just be starting to undertake.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL TEMPLATES FOR THE PRESENT NARRATIVE

The perception of war shapes many aspects of American culture, such as collective memory, memorialization, and even nation-making. After all, the United States was born of war and has engaged in war for every major period of its history; notably, most literary movements are marked by a war. From World War II into the twenty-first century, America has participated in a war in every decade.⁶⁸ The narratives for war are significant because as Gulf War correspondent John F. Fialka claims, “wars and how they are perceived affect us all” (3). In particular, our perceptions and national narratives shape the continued collective memory of these historical wars. How war is recorded in history and reimagined in fiction matters, as war forms an integral part of America’s national identity.

For this dissertation, I selected authors with different degrees of war experience to demonstrate that they all employ the absurd to narrate their stories. These three authors are diversely different in their personal relationship to the material, and yet they all utilize the absurd as a narrative technique. For example,

⁶⁸ Richard Gray refers to 9/11 as “the fall,” a shift in cultural time during which an event perceived to be a “crisis” ensues in a “descent from innocence to experience” (2). He cites several other wars as indicative of “falls” that have been reflected in the dominant narratives; he writes, “There is a recurrent tendency in American writing, and in the observation of American history, to identify crisis as a descent from innocence to experience: but the crisis changes, the moment of descent has been located at a number of different times in the national narrative, most of them associated with war” (2). Gray goes on to compare the crisis in language incited by the events on 9/11 is comparable to the same “descents” for World War II and Vietnam (3). For 9/11, this shift from innocent to experience, a disruptive crisis to the national narrative, is the moment of realization that America’s borders are not impenetrable: New York could become a “battlefield.” Of this, Gray writes: “To have war brought home was an unusual experience for America, to have the mainland not only invaded but attacked from the skies and devastated was not only unusual but unique” (Gray 4). As Gray explains that 9/11 incites the same disruption to national narratives as previous wars, I include 9/11 in the discussion of World War II, Vietnam, and the Gulf that have inspired similar commentaries on the limitations to language and representation for war.

Swofford is a combatant during the Gulf War; Herr is a deployed war correspondent; while Foer is distanced by two generations from the Holocaust. I demonstrated through these disparate authors that no matter the proximity of the author to war, absurdity is a common aesthetic method that illustrates war events and enables authors to elide issues of ethical representation. In bringing together three different periods of war in the latter half of the twentieth century, I exemplify that the absurd continues to be a narrative technique in American literature, despite the height of its study ending in the early 1980s. Reintroducing the absurd not only reengages a method for reading the aesthetics of contemporary literature but also reinvigorates new interpretations for war and for approaching questions of representation.

As the historic context for each war shifts, the absurd techniques also shift to reflect the political and experiential stakes of each particular war. In short, each author's emphasis on a different absurd technique illustrates the distinctive commentaries for each war. For the authors in this dissertation, absurdity counters the dominant narrative of America at war; in essence, the national war narrative tends to focus on the noble effort of American soldiers. Meredith Lair explains that when referring to war, Americans tend to automatically mitigate any attention to foreign casualties in favor of crafting a narrative that focuses on the American struggles and losses during war. Lair writes, "Since World War II, Americans have excelled at making war, becoming so good at it that fewer and fewer of them are needed to serve in combat.... Yet Americans nonetheless cling to the notion that their soldiers are

plucky underdogs just barely making it through” (22).⁶⁹ Aside from the overt governmental censorship that obscures information, Americans writing about Americans at war tend to align with a nationalized and accepted perception of American war, both correspondents and, arguably, many writers. However, the authors who fictionalize war through absurdity rebel against censorship and altered perceptions of American war; the absurd authors expose some of these nationally perpetuated fictions and offer their experiential knowledge and cultural commentary.

A brief recounting of this dissertation’s included authors’ experiential knowledge and their resulting artistic absurdity follows. After I review the work this dissertation accomplished in analyzing absurdity for twentieth century war, I will demonstrate the artistic absurdity that has continued into the twenty-first century’s first war event, 9/11.⁷⁰

Jonathan Safran Foer is a third-generation Holocaust survivor, twice-removed from the experiential knowledge of the concentration camps. Plausibly, Foer is at the

⁶⁹ Lair explicates the number of American casualties from war that are emphasized while the enemy casualties are ignored; this trend to only acknowledge American deaths thus perpetuates an American fiction of the “plucky underdog.” She writes, “The violence U.S. forces can rain down on their enemies defies comprehension...In Vietnam, some 2 million Vietnamese people were killed (including about 250,000 South Vietnamese troops who fought alongside the United States), compared with 58,000 Americans, with a majority of the massive civilian casualties attributed to American bombing and artillery. In the Persian Gulf War, American forces suffered 382 dead, while Iraqi soldiers and civilians suffered losses in the tens of thousands. In the Iraq War that began in 20 March 2003, American forces suffered 139 dead during ‘major combat operations,’ which ended on 30 April of that year. During that period, between 10,000 and 45,000 Iraqi civilians and combatants were killed. The obvious conclusion to draw from the United States’ ability to create so much devastation at so little cost is that it is a superpower the likes of which history has never seen before. Yet Americans nonetheless cling to the notion that their soldiers are plucky underdogs just barely making it through” (Lair 22).

⁷⁰ As 9/11 has been compared to another Pearl Harbor, a war-metaphor is invoked. Of the war-metaphor Richard Slotkin writes, “Once invoked, the war-metaphor governs the terms in which we respond to changing circumstances. It spreads to new objects; it creates a narrative tension for which the only emotionally or esthetically satisfying resolution is literal rather than merely figurative warfare” (650-1). Indeed, the literal and symbolic act of war in the form of the attacks on the towers resulted in a war in Iraq thus supporting my inclusion of 9/11 as an act of war into context with other wars.

advantage of having direct familial ties to the event but also enough critical distance to attempt to capture the Holocaust, as it occurred in reality. Instead, Foer opts for fabrication and fantasy as a response to the perceived insurmountable task of representing the Holocaust; an undertaking that his naïve character realizes will not be a simple history to unearth. Rather than accept the silencing effect of the Holocaust, Foer offers insight and commentary on confronting and remembering the past. For the Holocaust, the absurdity mostly manifests as the fantastic or black humor, which function as a response to genocide. A common turn in Holocaust scholarship is to acknowledge the limits to representing genocide on this mass scale. The fantastic testifies to this limitation for Holocaust representation while also offering a placeholder illustration for remembering the event, as critics continue to dispute the ethical and comprehensive representation for the Holocaust.

Michael Herr, arguably, had the perfect vantage-point for writing about the Vietnam War as a deployed correspondent who gets into the trenches with the soldiers but also does not have to directly engage in combat. The paid correspondent who does not serve during the war would seem to avoid the physical and traumatic effects of war while being front-row for the battle action. However, Herr does not see much of the war, only a few skirmishes. His narrative reflects the chaos of attempting to report on a war that took place throughout the jungle, in scattered missions, with the added confusion of limited strategy or accurate reports from the military. The chaos of the war's structure and the governmental rhetoric that obscured rather than elucidated the truth about Vietnam leads Herr to develop his narrative through surrealism and other absurd conventions. The surrealism that Herr employs provides some perspective from

the periphery, his counter-truth about Vietnam, while simultaneously commenting on the inability to know the whole “truth” about Vietnam. In other words, surrealism illustrates the uncertainty of the Vietnam War: the jungle terrain as an opaque battlefield, especially at night (often characterized as dreamlike by Herr and other Vietnam writers such as Tim O’Brien) and all the unknown or fabricated information that was distributed by the government to mitigate or falsify the magnitude of victories or losses. Secondly, the selection of this novel also demonstrates that even an author such as Herr who attempted reportage from the Vietnam battlefield, as a correspondent and not a novelist, also utilizes the absurd to illustrate the confusion and facts that still need to be sorted out about Vietnam. Herr’s novel is often praised as “the authentic account” of Vietnam in scholarship but, as Chapter Two demonstrates, all the absurd conventions within Herr’s account indicate that he has written a fictional illustration of Vietnam.

The third chapter focuses on an author who had direct contact with war as a veteran-turned-writer, Anthony Swofford. As a recent war that is now only beginning to be fictionalized, not many authors select the Persian Gulf War as their subject. In fact, the Gulf War has already been overshadowed by attention to the twenty-first century’s wars in Iraq. The collective attention to or forgetting of a war begins with the media’s construction and governmental rhetoric that inform a war’s perception. World War II can be remembered as the “good war” for several reasons: the war was a clear victory for the Allies, World War II was fought for moral as well as political reasons and, most importantly, while there may be some photographs and film reels, the technology was limited for World War II coverage. In opposition, the

advancements in broadcasting brought the Vietnam War, and its violent carnage, right into American living rooms. These violent images coupled with unclear battle strategies and murky politics led to the impression that the Vietnam War was a national disgrace, an image that took decades to reverse (the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall honors and remembers the veteran casualties; it was constructed in 1982).

Learning from the broadcasting mistakes of Vietnam, networks looped brief images of the new advancements in war technology and obscured the carnage that these new war-machines wrought. In limiting and concentrating on images of the advanced technology and concealing the enemy casualties, the Gulf War results in an impression of a “clean” and quick war that was won and over in less than one hundred days. In an age in which war seems to be captured neatly on camera with a complete narrative to explain it, the differences between simulated and experiential war become convoluted; a convolution best exemplified by Swofford’s own confusion about being deployed to a war that, for him, never seemed to commence. The absurdity within Swofford’s narrative exemplifies the difficulty of representing the shortest war that seems, especially for scholars such as Jean Baudrillard, to have only occurred on network television. The Persian Gulf War can be understood as the first technologically advanced war fought on television and packaged into neat narrative form by the media. In short, the Gulf War was already won before it began, with the “complete” narrative available for purchase on video. The absurdity for the Gulf War appears far more subtly than for the others wars, as the absurd depiction of the war in

Swofford's fiction mimics the absurdity of a war that was constructed in real-time on television.

In following the Vietnam discussion in Chapter Two, the Gulf War chapter demonstrates that the Vietnam War's outcome inspired the government, and media, to craft a supportable rhetoric for war. For the Gulf, this rhetoric was a quick, precise, and a seemingly casualty-less version of technological war. As Swofford provides the soldier's perspective that was lacking for Gulf War coverage, he delineates the government's censorship of the "truth," as did Herr. However, Swofford's chapter demonstrates the ensuing complications for understanding war as he witnessed the new era of targeted bombing. Thinking about the Gulf War in tandem with Vietnam emphasizes the contrast of war as a political action that was formally declared during World War II to the slippage of referential language for Vietnam and the Gulf: these wars were often referred to as "police actions" or "conflicts." The abstraction of referential language and the soldiers' uncertain experiential knowledge demonstrate the newer representational challenges that Vietnam incited and were reverberated in the Gulf War. Ending the twentieth century with a discussion of evolving war and its representational complications, invites further study for the twenty-first century—a version of war that now entails multiple terrorist regimes and drone airstrikes amid ever improving war technology.

In bringing together these authors writing on three different periods of American twentieth century war, I established that the absurd is, still, a commonly occurring technique in contemporary fiction. All of these authors, in varying degrees of proximity to their wars, utilize absurdity as an artistic technique to illustrate their

experiences and firmly root these wars in collective memory while not prescribing a representation. Absurdity as a narrative technique thereby enables the authors to bridge their depictions of the war further into a discourse of the implications for their wars. Foer exemplifies echoes of the Holocaust in contemporary society; Herr reveals the paradox of reporting on war and being caught in the midst of falsified governmental rhetoric; and Swofford interrogates the very conception of what war means at the end of the twentieth century if soldiers no longer primarily perform the brunt of battle.

To reiterate the perception of war in fiction and the ensuing representational complications for war authors and their critics, I return to a passage from Alex Vernon; he writes:

Both military fiction writers and their critics...want to understand war from these several perspectives. Both parties often want to capture war accurately. Yet war fiction, even when written by a veteran, does not always primarily concern war, as writers frequently employ war as a metaphor for something deeper about human nature and human institutions. The metaphoric effort potentially obstructs a faithful, authentic portrait of war and the military, and it severely complicates the task of interpretation. (29)

Vernon underscores the representational limits for war writers. Specifically, for Vernon, metaphor impedes the realistic depiction of war. However, Vernon also asserts that most war authors are more interested in the deeper commentary that their wars indicate about human nature. In this case, the artistic techniques that Vernon

views as “severely complicat[ing]” the task of interpretation are actually interpretative assets when read through the absurd lens. The absurd authors of the 1960s employed the aesthetics of absurdity to implicitly comment on the human condition. When combining war and the absurd lens, the metaphors and other abstractions elucidate the author’s commentary on war.

Extending my study of absurdity into the twenty-first century, I end this dissertation with the first war-related event of this new century and era of American war: 9/11. For this, I conclude with a reading of Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2005 novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Foer’s novel takes place in the months after 9/11 and implicates what Richard Gray terms “after the fall,” a disruptive event that alters the national narrative. 9/11 and other wars are all disruptive events for which language fails. Gray writes of 9/11: “If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd” (1). In concluding this dissertation with Foer’s absurd novel, his response to 9/11, I demonstrate 9/11’s importance to discussing contemporary war. The 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center launched the U.S. into another decade of war. In other words, 9/11 was the precursory event to the two wars in Iraq. Analyzing 9/11 potentially extends this study of twentieth century absurdity into twenty-first century American war literature for further investigation.

As my study of absurdity in twentieth century war literature has revealed, the absurd conventions became more surreal and indistinguishable for Persian Gulf War fiction. Technology-centered combat and pervasive media coverage made the “reality” of the war harder to distinguish from the crafted media narrative. I also reiterate that

when machines and not men enact most of the battle strategy, the concept of war becomes a fluid definition that changes with the historical context. In short, as war becomes increasingly technology-driven and not combatant-centered, the conception of war becomes fluid.⁷¹ 9/11 has additionally been referred to as the disaster movie come-to-life: a moment in which the real-life towers' destruction seemed more surreal than an act of war. Quickly responding camera crews made it possible to watch United Flight 175 crash into the South Tower in real-time. The common turn for witnesses to compare the 9/11 scene to a disaster movie demonstrates how absurdity transforms in the age of media and technology.⁷² The real appears more surreal when the media informs the vocabulary for narrating experience.

9/11 is also an event that has incited a reflection on history as it has been referred to as another Pearl Harbor,⁷³ and military intervention was readily supported

⁷¹ Lair outlines the basic definition for war in the twentieth century: "The U.S. military of the twenty-first century is the most lethal instrument in the history of warfare, but only a small fraction of its personnel actually engage the enemy directly. As American warfare becomes increasingly mechanized, 'combat' consists of a broad range of activities. The foot patrol by 'door kickers,' who walk contested areas and enter the homes of suspected insurgents, remains the most intimate, traditional form, but air strikes by remote-controlled drones over Iraq and especially Afghanistan suggest the battlefield's high-tech, impersonal future" (223).

⁷² Efraim Sicher and Natalia Skradol claim in their article, "A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11," "9/11 has been imagined before in countless hijack or terminal disaster films such as *Blade Runner*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Independence Day*. Slavoj Žižek presents the TV coverage of 9/11 as the Hitchcock moment of horror that is actually happening; it is the intrusion of the real into fiction. This is what made similar scenes in horror movies unscreenable in the immediate weeks after 9/11 and sent the CIA scurrying after Hollywood scriptwriters in order to try to understand the terrorists" (151). Christina Rickli writes in her article, "An Event 'Like a Movie'? Hollywood and 9/11" that "Already on the day of the attacks, the simile 'like a movie' was voiced. One minute after the second plane hit, Jennifer Overstein, an eyewitness to both plane collisions with the towers of the World Trade Center, was asked to describe what she witnessed live on the NBC newscast. She exclaimed in a frantic voice: 'It looks like a movie!' And a few seconds later she added: 'I couldn't believe my eyes, watching it right above me' (*NBC News Coverage*). Overstein, unable or unwilling to believe her own vision, does not resort back to imagery of nightmare, but to film."

⁷³ It took the events of September 11, 2001 to transform the contemporary public's attitude toward supporting war, "With thousands killed, Americans demanded action. According to one poll, a massive 92 percent believed the United States had to respond militarily to the 9/11 attacks—a figure that only dipped to 72 percent if military action resulted in thousands of U.S. battlefield casualties. At long last the Vietnam syndrome seemed dead. Or, as one official emphatically put it, 'History starts today.'"

(just as military response was compelled by Pearl Harbor). Some of the iconic 9/11 photographs also inspire a comparison to World War II. One of the iconic photographs from 9/11 of firefighters erecting the American flag amid the towers' rubble mirrors the iconic image of soldiers raising the flag in Iwo Jima.⁷⁴ 9/11 seems to repeat common events and images from history: a second attack on American soil from a foreign force that would draw America into another war, the imagery of bravery and valor of servicemen as reminiscent of the soldiers' struggle over Iwo Jima. Even the phrase associated with memorializing the event, "Never Forget," echoes the rhetorical remembrance for the Holocaust, "Never Again." This comparison of 9/11 to World War II, though rhetoric and images, demonstrates a repetition of the past in which 9/11 becomes illustrated through a return to the familiar events of Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima. By illustrating 9/11 through World War II historical moments, I assert that 9/11 depiction operates through absurdity as a repetition of past events, or that 9/11 echoes similar events from World War II; this repetitive history is a key feature of the absurd tradition.

Aside from historical familiarity in that 9/11 reminded commentators of Pearl Harbor, other scholars have explained a different sort of familiarity with 9/11 through

[President] Bush fully agreed. Just before he went to bed on September 11 he jotted some thoughts in his diary. 'The Pearl Harbor of the twenty-first century took place today,' he began, and as with the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the United States was now at war" (Casey 210).

⁷⁴ Marianne Hirsch describes the rationale for the iconic 9/11 image: "four photographers interviewed on the Charlie Rose program agreed that the [9/11] icon would be the picture of the three firemen raising the flag on top of the rubble because it echoes the famous prize-winning photograph of American GI's raising the flag at Iwo Jima. In their search for the one lasting iconic image, they were looking for the conventional, the coded, not the new" ("I Took Pictures" 85). Hirsch suggests that these photographers select an image that reminded them of Iwo Jima as a preference for the familiar rather than embodying a new image for the recent tragedy. I interpret this preference for images that recall other historical moments for illustrating contemporary tragedy as a placeholder for representation.

media representations. Robin Anderson explains that part of the complication in representing 9/11 is that we have already seen it. She writes:

The inability to fully grasp [9/11] events as they occurred in real time was further hindered by the field of images familiar to media culture, the ones most readily available as frames of reference. Fictional narratives of computer-generated action films, the stuff of summer blockbusters, routinely draw on urban mutilation and destruction to entertain audiences sitting in air-conditioned comfort. *Independence Day*, one such cartoon-like filmic adventure, features aliens attacking New York and Washington... (Anderson 199)

As filmmakers have already destroyed New York City many times over on film, watching New York City encased in fire, smoke, and ash, paradoxically seems harder to articulate in reality. Complicating the cognitive delay in processing a recent experience is the idea that 9/11 seems to have already happened as a media simulation. In this instance, 9/11 seems more like a reenactment of the fiction than the real. Statements like these highlight my argument that the absurd tradition is at work in explaining 9/11, as absurd authors parody or simulate other forms and media.

The absurdly repetitive World War II allusions and the comparison of 9/11 to a disaster movie, which is a media simulation, serve as what I call a placeholder for 9/11 representation in that 9/11 does not ostensibly have its own unique representation, yet. As Gray contends, 9/11 was a “global media event” (6) and illustrates the increasingly complicated nature of understanding war in a media and technology-driven age. A

reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* affirms the disruption to the national narrative, as Gray asserts, that ensued from 9/11. As America launched into a new era of war, Foer's 2005 novel demonstrates a return to the familiar World War II context for illustrating the very recent 9/11, while his absurd narrative illustrates the disruptive force of 9/11 on language.

Absurdity within *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

Scholars tend to read *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* through trauma studies or to concentrate on the photography within the novel.⁷⁵ I diverge from this existing scholarship in reading *Extremely Loud* as an absurd novel. By contrasting such existing scholarship that reads Foer's inclusion of photographs as a reflection of a child's method for coping with trauma, I argue that the appearance of photographs in Foer's novel reflects the absurd tradition: decontextualized and unrelated images of turtles, gems, and astronauts, literally, interrupt the 9/11 narrative. Moving analysis of Foer's novel beyond scholarship that traces the transference or witnessing of trauma among Foer's characters, I assert that Foer's absurdity moves 9/11 into the interpretative realm of discovering its implications for collective memory. Although trauma factors prominently in this novel, I interpret the absurd as serving as a placeholder for the trauma that is not explicitly articulated in Foer's novel.

Like the other novelists in this dissertation, Foer relies on the aesthetics of absurdity such as exaggeration, parody, black humor, disruptive narrative, and images,

⁷⁵ Philippe Codde reads Foer's inclusion of photographs as the reflection of a child's search for trauma representation. Ilka Saal reads the novel as reflective of the transference of collective trauma. Lewis S. Gleich and Aimee Pozorski read the images of falling in Foer's novel, among other scholars interested in Foer's intersection with photography. Foer has also been discussed by Naomi Mandel for the tension between historical fidelity and fictional reimagining within the novel.

to reinvent the traditional novel. In this section, I will read through a brief accounting of Foer's return to the absurd tradition to form his second novel's narrative. The rest of this discussion will concentrate on how absurdity has evolved to fit the context of twenty-first century war and what it reveals for Foer's 9/11 commentary.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close offers a three-part narrative that encompasses the lives of nine-year-old Oskar and his grandparents. The main storyline comes from Oskar's point of view as he grieves the loss of his father, who died on September 11th in the North Tower's restaurant, Windows on the World. In the months after 9/11, Oskar and his mother struggle to move on with their lives and bury an empty coffin to mark the father's death. Ostensibly, due to the lack of emotional closure instigated by the strictly ceremonial burial,⁷⁶ Oskar attempts to understand his father's death through a "mission." Upon discovering a vase in his father's closet that contains a slip of paper with the singular word "Black" written on it and a key, Oskar believes his father left him a clue for a scavenger hunt. Recognizing "Black" as a last name, Oskar decides to meet every person he can with that last name in New York City's five boroughs to discover what the key unlocks. Throughout his scavenger hunt, Oskar encounters many people who similarly experience grief and loss in post-9/11 New York.

The other two narratives that interrupt Oskar's main narrative are written by his grandparents, who are both Dresden bombing survivors. The grandfather's narrative is comprised of the letters he writes to his unborn son; these letters hope to

⁷⁶ On the way to the funeral Oskar declares, "...it's not like we were *actually* burying him, anyway" (emphasis his, Foer 4).

explain his experience of the Dresden bombing, his attempts to cope with life as a survivor, and ultimately why he will not be present for his son's life. Oskar's grandmother constructs the third narrative through letters to Oskar explaining her life during World War II and losing her son, Oskar's father, on 9/11. In short, these other two sections, mostly narrated through the epistolary form, complete the story in which the grandmother and grandfather's narratives about surviving a World War II bombing and their struggles to cope and maintain normalcy in their lives complements Oskar's narrative of attempting to cope with the loss of his father.

The protagonist of the novel, Oskar Schell, is a parody of a nine-year-old child. Oskar is precocious, as he is a child versed in existentialism and armed with his own business card that reads:

Oskar Schell: Inventor, Jewelry Designer, Jewelry Fabricator, Amateur
Entomologist, Francophile, Vegan, Origamist, Pacifist, Percussionist, Amateur
Astronomer, Computer Consultant, Amateur Archeologist, Collector of: *rare coins, butterflies that died natural deaths, miniature cacti, Beatles memorabilia, semiprecious stones, and other things.* (emphasis his, Foer 99)

Although he concedes on the card that he is an "amateur" of several specialties, the average, realistically invoked child character would not have the vocabulary or the nuance to write such a comedic business card. Foer develops Oskar to be an autonomous elementary school-aged child who contemplates Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, and even writes a letter to Hawking asking to be his protégé (11). In fact, Oskar narrates that he knows that Hawking has "amyotrophic lateral

sclerosis” (11). Oskar does not have the vocabulary or the thought process of a typical child; this characterization can be read as Foer’s exaggeration of a child character.

Similar to other absurd novels, Foer’s hyper-vigilant descriptions emanate absurdity rather than realism. These hyper-vigilant descriptions appear through Oskar’s outlandish and detailed plans for various inventions. In one such scene, Oskar narrates, “What if the water that came out of the shower was treated with a chemical that responded to a combination of things, like your heartbeat, and your body temperature, and your brain waves, so that your skin changed color according to your mood? If you were excited your skin would turn green, and if you were angry you’d turn red...” (Foer 163). Oskar precisely narrates a plan for how the invention would work and its intended results. This precise description renders absurdity as the detailed process for this invention does not mirror reality nor does it reveal information about Oskar or 9/11. Not to mention, Oskar’s precise design plans always reveal a plainly absurd invention.

In line with the other absurd novels, Foer’s second novel also has the disjointed narrative that is told through three perspectives and oscillates between the past and present. The narrative is riddled with images in the form of drawings, photographs, and letters. On average, about every fifth page of text is interrupted with an image or a change in the typography of the novel. The very conclusion of the novel is comprised of images that form a flipbook and feature an iconic image from 9/11, Falling Man. Foer follows the absurd tradition as Robert A. Hipkiss contends that the Absurd authors “experiment with forms of communication—cartoons, lyrics, jokes, narratives, metaphors, and signs” (4). Of all the novels discussed in this dissertation,

Extremely Loud is the most experimental and prolific with the relationship between text and image. I read this as an invocation of the documentation impulse surrounding 9/11.⁷⁷ Not only was the event itself broadcast in real-time (United 175's contact with the South Tower and both towers collapsing live on television) but in the weeks after 9/11 the media continued to circulate the footage and photographs of the day. Memorials featuring photographs of the victims also sprang-up all over the city. Foer's novel emulates this documentation impulse as Oskar collects photographs that document aspects of his life and includes them in his scrapbook, *Things that Happened to Me*. In instances for which Oskar's language fails him, these images seem to fill in for the gaps in meaning-making. For example, Oskar still puts language to his experience, but the language has a limitation. He refers to 9/11 as "the worst day" (Foer 11) and his own grief as "heavy boots" (Foer 2). When he has a hard time articulating the repression of his feelings, Oskar says that he is "zipping up the sleeping bag of [him]self" (Foer 6 and 37). These metaphors all serve as language for articulating some of the sentiment of grief, and yet do not precisely name the emotions. At once, these metaphors reveal that there is a limitation but still a necessity to put language to a traumatic experience. In addition, for all that cannot be directly articulated in the novel, the images fill in some of the narrative gaps. In short, although this project is not concerned with the role of images, the photographs within this novel dislocate or jar⁷⁸ the reader as these images interrupt the narrative and

⁷⁷ Marianne Hirsch contends that "commentators have agreed that the September 11 attacks were 'the most photographed disaster in history'" ("I Took Pictures" 69).

⁷⁸ Harris writes that in adjusting to an absurd novel, the reader reacts to the absurdity: "Accustomed to the mimetic tradition in the novel...confusion results, but it is calculated confusion, for the novelist is attempting to evoke in the reader some response to the idea of absurdity" (28).

reflect the confusion and ensuing documentation impulse that surrounded the 9/11 scene, in real-life.

The jokes within *Extremely Loud* are too numerous to concisely catalog, but one such instance of black humor complementing an otherwise traumatic experience is a scene in which Oskar meets with his therapist. After his father's death, Oskar's mother takes him to Dr. Fein to process his grief. Oskar narrates: "...I had to go to Dr. Fein. I didn't understand why I needed help, because it seemed to me that you *should* wear heavy boots when your dad dies, and if you *aren't* wearing heavy boots, *then* you need help. But I went anyway, because the raise in my allowance depended on it" (emphasis his, Foer 200). An otherwise somber scene in which a child readies himself to divulge his emotions to a therapist is coupled with a joke that reflects a child's concern for his allowance. The combination of the metaphorical "heavy boots" and the humor enable grief to be articulated but not precisely named.

For the absurdist author who already believes that ours is a world "probably beyond remedy and certainly beyond comprehension" (Harris 30), the aim of the absurd novelist is to accept the senselessness of the human condition, accept it freely without illusions, and to laugh at it (Harris 30). In one such example of laughter as an analgesic to the absurdity of life, and trauma, Oskar wants to tell the limousine driver a joke as they drive to his father's funeral. Oskar says to the limo driver, "'I kicked a French chicken in the stomach once,' because if I could make him crack up, my boots could be a little lighter... 'It's a joke. Do you want to hear another, or have you already had *un oeuf*?''" (emphasis his, Foer 5-6). As an analgesic to trauma, the humor, common to absurd novels, seeks to lighten an otherwise solemn occasion of driving to

symbolically bury a parent (like real-life victims' families, Oskar and his mother bury an empty coffin in the absence of a body). The joke is absurd, operating through a pun that relies on word-play: the French word "un oeuf" sounds like "enough" and points back to the French chicken Oskar claims to have kicked. "Un oeuf" also translates to "the egg" and further parodies the absurd joke as a chicken-or-the-egg allusion.

In adhering to the traditional aesthetics of absurdity, Foer has offered laughter as an analgesic for resuming life post-9/11. Aside from the laughter that functions as a response to the absurdity of life, "a temporary analgesic for existential pain [is] love...[which] offers some consolation to those who suffer" (Harris 31). Foer's novel revolves around human relationships: Oskar's family is reunited with the grandfather who went missing decades ago, and the grandmother finally tells Oskar her whole life story. And, Oskar learns to accept his mother's consolation over the death of his father. In fact, Oskar's whole key "mission" places him into contact with numerous other characters who suffered traumas. Amid all these relationships that appear in the novel, the text is rife with jokes, puns, and black humor. While love or human relationships do form some of Foer's narrative, absurdity shifts in the context of 9/11. To be clear, Harris's claim for the importance of human relationships to the absurd authors of the 1960's is more complicated for 9/11. Foer offers more than just healing from a traumatic event through personal relationships, or coping (or rebelling) through laughter. Instead, Foer offers as his final scene in the novel the suggestion that 9/11 resists closure and a unified meaning. 9/11, like war, is not easily captured by art, as indicated by the plurality of meanings for this novel's conclusion, a point to which I will return. Despite the referential limitations for language to reach a definitive

conclusion for 9/11, Foer's artistically absurd response to 9/11 reveals implications for what war reveals about human nature.

Absurdity: Repetitive History as Fictional Illustration

As Chapter Three demonstrates, the absurd becomes harder to distinguish in the age of technology. For 9/11, continuous broadcasting made the real seem more like a disaster movie: the same images that were already familiar to an audience were now on the smaller screen. As the previously mentioned scholarship gestures both to the indescribable nature of the 9/11 scene and its simulation of previous imagery from fictional movies, 9/11 remains difficult to articulate. This section exemplifies that Foer's World War II narratives, already familiar war scenes, fill in for his currently unavailable 9/11 representation.

Foer's creative decision to bring World War II and 9/11 into one narrative demonstrates how one event can serve as a template for another more contemporary event, especially when articulating this current war scene seems elusive.⁷⁹ As 9/11 occurs a mere four years before Foer writes his novel, the Dresden narrative serves as a template to articulate a newer moment of war bombing, as a more familiar or studied

⁷⁹ Kristiaan Versluys writes that to describe 9/11, people must work from the symbols already familiar from their culture. He writes, "There is no way even something as indescribable as what transpired on that sunny Tuesday morning can stay out of the reach of symbol and metaphor. Willy-nilly, the event gets absorbed into a mesh of meaning making. This most real of all real events—220 stories crashing down, thousands of tons of steel collapsing—demonstrates, if not the primacy, then at least the inevitability of discourse. The event would not exist and could not exist outside the interpretative schemes that are imposed upon it...simply in order to cope, people have no choice but to rummage through the symbols that the culture puts at the disposal of the distraught individual" (Versluys 3). Versluys asserts that the language surrounding 9/11 exposes its own limits and suggests that "September 11 is ultimately incommensurate and beyond full comprehension" (15). While I cannot agree with Versluys that 9/11 is beyond full comprehension, my concluding chapter validates Versluys's observation that a traumatic event inspires authors to reach for already familiar symbols to describe the destruction. In Foer's novel, he uses the symbolism and description from World War II to inform and describe the aftermath of destruction in his post-9/11 novel.

moment from the past (treating 9/11 as an act of war). Although, as explored in Chapter One, World War II events such as the Holocaust still have contested representations, World War II serves as a memory that the reading audience can readily recall and contextualizes 9/11 in the absence of contemporary and distinctive representation. Inevitably, Foer's concern seems not to be accurately illustrating war, but depicting the aftermath of war for civilians and the collective memory of traumatic events. Essentially, these former war events enable Foer to begin articulating the 9/11 experience that currently presents a representational limit; to reiterate, 9/11 is commonly described as another Pearl Harbor or the disaster movie come-to-life.

An author's allusion to a previous war that works to illustrate a newer war becomes a symbolic repetition of the past in which events begin to echo one another—a key feature of the absurd tradition.⁸⁰ Within the grandfather's narrative is the explicit recounting of the Dresden bombing (Foer 210-6), a narrative that he begins with "I knew that something unimaginable was about to happen" (210). The grandfather's word choice for Dresden as "unimaginable" echoes the same phrasing used by scholars such as Kristiaan Versluys when referring to 9/11 as "indescribable" (3).⁸¹ Another allusion to World War II bombing appears through a brief interview with a Hiroshima survivor. Inexplicably, Oskar has this recorded interview that he plays for his class, and the transcription of the Hiroshima survivor's testimony appears in the narrative. During the recording, the interviewee, Tomoyasu, recounts looking for her daughter amid the atomic bomb's aftermath (Foer 187-9). The interview that recounts

⁸⁰ Hipkiss contends that the "Absurdist... tend to see history as repetitive" (3).

⁸¹ Versluys writes that 9/11 is "indescribable" (3), as it is a "limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis" (1).

a mother's search for her daughter parallels the grandfather's narrative search for his lost girlfriend after the Dresden bombing and also Oskar's search for his father's clues post-9/11. Both World War II narratives, Dresden and Hiroshima, serve as a comparison to 9/11 and demonstrate the repetitive nature of war. These World War II narratives also serve as a placeholder for the absent 9/11 depiction in that these bombing narratives stand in for the unrepresented 9/11 destruction scene.

Juxtaposing 9/11 against World War II provides an intriguing inversion of the war-bombing narratives that have occurred in the twentieth century. The Dresden bombing, during which the Allies targeted the mostly civilian population in Germany, is a moment in which America executes the bombing. Foer juxtaposes Dresden to 9/11, an event in which American civilians are bombed with civilian planes. Foer's narrative provides an additional perspective for thinking about 9/11 as a destabilizing event in the context of other wars: in the twentieth century America mostly executed the bombing, but on 9/11 America shifted back to being a site for foreign attack—an event that has not happened since 1941. Just as World War II was paradigm shifting for how Americans perceived military intervention, 9/11 also resulted in renewed patriotism and a seemingly justified war (or at least what began as the hunt for Osama Bin Laden in the Middle East). Even colloquially, it is not unusual to refer to American culture as post-9/11; in which case, 9/11 is the disruptive event that results in new terminology for American culture after the attacks on the towers.

But Foer is not merely comparing World War II to 9/11 as a reflection of 9/11's destabilizing effect, or a moment as shocking as Pearl Harbor. Foer does not select Pearl Harbor bystanders to construct two of the narratives; he selects Dresden

survivors who were enemies of America during World War II. Foer also crafts a scene in which Oskar brings a recorded interview with a Hiroshima survivor to his class. These scenes exemplify victims' perspectives of American bombing; in the case of the Hiroshima interview, a survivor's testimony of the devastating nuclear bombing. In selecting the "enemy" victims' stories to complement the 9/11 narrative, Foer reaches across history to demonstrate, first and foremost, that history is absurdly repetitive in which bombing, war, trauma and civilians coping with survival have been the effects and aftermath of war and will reoccur. But Foer is also linguistically giving each perspective, even America's war enemies, equitable attention in his narrative. Consequently, Foer comments on the often overlooked result of war: the affected civilians who live through the war experience. Just as Herr and Swofford have attempted to narrate some of what went unreported about war in the media, Foer also draws attention to what trauma means for the war-torn civilian survivors that were underreported in official documentation, or even missing from most American fiction.

The underlying commentary for Foer's fictional exposure of the victims' stories is that war is traumatic, destructive, and always imminent. A minor character who is only briefly mentioned, Mr. Goldberg, exclaims in one scene before the Dresden bombing, "We go on killing each other to no purpose! It is war waged by humanity against humanity, and it will only end when there's no one left to fight!" (Foer 128). This sentiment of never-ending war is followed-up with another minor character's commentary about war. A minor character who Oskar meets on his journey, Abe Black, has reported on almost every war in the twentieth century as a war correspondent, and he is the only person alive who fought in both world wars

(Foer 154). Oskar asks Abe in one scene, “Did you know that in the last 3,500 years there have been only 230 years of peace throughout the civilized world? He said, ‘You tell me which 230 years and I’ll believe you!’” (Foer 161). Abe’s commentary implies that war has always been an intrinsic component of human civilization.

But more than just admitting to the futility of learning from history as war becomes a repetitive feature to civilization, Foer emphasizes the victims’ stories in an effort to underscore war’s experiential impact. Arguably, a soldier’s perspective of fighting would enlighten readers about the experience of being at a war’s frontlines but often the enemy is obscured. For Herr and Swofford, the Vietnamese and Iraqi perspective, the enemy casualties, is largely missing from their narratives. The Vietnamese are missing entirely from Herr’s account, except on the receiving end of sniper-fire or mortar bombs. And the only appearances of the Iraqis in Swofford’s account is the charred remains of Iraqi soldiers and their camp from an airstrike, and the surrendering airfield in which Iraqis await the end of the American bombing. As with *Everything is Illuminated* in which victim and perpetrator are involved in the storyline, Foer also blurs the distinction between victim and enemy in his second novel. In *Extremely Loud*, the Dresden bombing survivors emigrate from Germany to America post-World War II and become American citizens. During World War II, the grandmother and grandfather were considered the enemy and were bombed by the Americans. Post-war, the grandparents move to America and become 9/11 bystanders, or American “victims,” having witnessed the attacks on the towers first-hand on television. Foer’s blurring of the enemy into American citizenry demonstrates how time and context shift perception and understanding. In one decade, the grandparents

were the enemy; a few decades later, they are New York neighbors to other Americans and experience the loss of their son on 9/11.

Arguably, Foer's point is that the politics of war undermine the human component. Although Foer does not write this word, commonly, opposing forces in war are referred to as the "enemy," or other terms that linguistically remove any connotation of a human being on the end of a bomb. In the military, this rhetorical move of referring to the "enemy" is logical as, realistically, soldiers will have to kill to win a war. However, Foer is resituating humanness into these fictional war narratives. The formerly enemy, Axis grandparents are now American victims who lost their son on 9/11. And the Hiroshima victim's testimony is not a tale about war, but a harrowing journey of a mother trying to find her child amid the bomb's fallout. The end of the Hiroshima interview encapsulates what Foer's commentary seems to point toward: war is destructive, no matter which perspective is narrated. Tomoyasu says at the end of her interview, "That is what death is like. It doesn't matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing. It doesn't matter how good the weapons are. I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore" (189). Combined with Mr. Goldberg's exclamation that people will continue to kill each other until humanity is destroyed, Tomoyasu's end remarks read like a plea to the reader to consider the very human aspect of war; Tomoyasu's interview provides the victim's perspective that the real-life media often censors by eclipsing carnage or praising the technological war strategies that promise precision-like bombing.

9/11 Media Simulation within *Extremely Loud*

Despite the familiarity of 9/11 in the context of other similar historical events, an ongoing negotiation continues for interpreting meaning for the 9/11 experience. In this section, I exemplify that in addition to the World War II narrative that serves as a template for illustrating 9/11, Foer also illustrates 9/11 as a media event. Foer's only description for 9/11 appears through the grandmother's perspective of watching 9/11 unfold on television. In replicating the media's broadcasting of the 9/11 scene in his narrative, Foer at once offers an illustration of destruction while simultaneously not promising a representation. Again, the simulation of the media broadcast is a form of absurdity as the absurd authors often imitate other forms for constructing their narratives.

As previously mentioned, real-life witnesses and scholars have referred to the 9/11 scene as a disaster movie. I read this as the media's pervasiveness in forming the perception of war through image and broadcasting. Although fictional, these comparisons to 9/11 as a disaster movie are repetitions from the media's portrayal. The live 9/11 footage, looped and repetitively played, mimics the absurdity from the media's portrayal of the Gulf War. In short, news broadcasting created a 9/11 narrative based on looping and replaying the same footage, repeatedly. As with the Persian Gulf War, these decontextualized images were strung-together with anchor commentary under the guise of a coherent narrative. Of course, these 9/11 images were also censored as the jumpers or other images of American dead were not shown on the newscasts, another similarity to the censorship that transpired during the Gulf War.

In one such reflection of the media's influence on the public perception of 9/11, Foer includes a scene in which the grandmother watches the live coverage of the attack on the towers. The grandmother narrates:

The same pictures over and over.
Planes going into buildings.
Bodies falling.
People waving shirts out of high windows.
Planes going into buildings.
Bodies falling.
Planes going into buildings.
People covered in gray dust.
Bodies falling.
Buildings falling.
Planes going into buildings.
Planes going into buildings.
Buildings falling. (Foer 230)

On the page, the above description appears as a slender column, each phrase has its own line. On the opposing page, a similar, repetitive description occurs. Between the two pages, the description generates a visual of the twin towers through the typography as the grandmother narrates the 9/11 broadcast. This description that visually replicates two slender columns, what I read as the towers, recreates the twin towers at the same time that the description in the simplest form narrates their destruction. The sentences are simple and concentrate on the bodies, planes, and

buildings, as phrases are literally repeated numerous times. The repetition mirrors the media coverage that continued to replay the same basic images of the planes hitting the towers and the moments of the towers' implosion. Aside from reflecting the media's broadcasting which reduces 9/11 to a few surreal scenes that seem to mimic the movies, Foer reflects the limitation of language to capture the scene with his short, basic sentences. I emphasize, though, the repetition of the phrases do not indicate an acceptance of the limitation of language. These simple and repeated phrases indicate the ongoing attempt for the author to express the scene of destruction and loss of life, even if his language cannot encompass the totality of the experience.

Writing: Absurdity and Meaning-Making

The previous sections have demonstrated the ways in which *Extremely Loud* can be read as an absurd novel, and how the repetition of historical war or the simulation of media broadcasts function as placeholders for 9/11 representation. In this section, the appearance of writing in Foer's novel demonstrates the intention of putting words to traumatic events, even if language may not capture the complexities of the experience. In this section, I contend that writing serves as meaning-making and a testament to the victims and resulting traumas that may be obscured or limited in historical records or other means of recording war.

Foer reflects the limits of representation in a scene in which the grandmother, newly arrived in America, sees Thomas in a bakery. The grandparents both fled Germany but had not seen each other since the Dresden bombing. Upon seeing Thomas again the grandmother states, "The seven years were not seven years. They

were not seven hundred years. Their length could not be measured in years, just as an ocean could not explain the distance we had traveled, just as the dead can never be counted” (81). In this passage, the grandmother comments on the futility of numbers or dates to calculate the human experience. Time and the number of miles they traveled have ceased to hold meaning for the Dresden survivors who struggle to resume their lives after losing their families in the bombing. This passage holds literal and symbolic meaning as bombing, or any mass death, sometimes results in the difficult task of determining the exact number of dead. The number of Holocaust victims who perished in the camps or field executions, the number of those who perished in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and even the victims of 9/11 are all estimated numbers. Literally, Foer indicates that with mass death, the victims cannot be accurately counted. Symbolically, he also implies that the magnitude of loss for the survivors cannot be measured. However, despite representational challenges, Foer has exposed the often obscured perspective, the extent of war victims’ suffering, and offered some language to illustrate the traumatic aftermath of war. Foer’s fiction has offered the perspective that most American memorials, war coverage, and most fiction does not: civilian populations who are often the victims of war bombing and are obscured from media reports.

Aside from resituating humanness into a war narrative, Foer’s novel as a written commentary on 9/11 and the characters’ letter writing within the narrative demonstrate that writing is a form of meaning-making. Writing serves as a way to express the sentiment of the event in an attempt to process the experience. In

expressing some of the experience, the goal, especially for the absurd author, is to generate a response from the reader.

Writing is a form of thinking. As with his first novel, Foer's second novel emphasizes the necessity of writing. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer repetitiously features the phrase "we are writing" (212-3) as a symbolic reflection of the authors who will keep writing in an effort to understand the Holocaust. For the authors who embrace the absurd tradition, writing fiction is one method for illustrating and simultaneously investigating the human condition. Traumatic experience may have representational limits in art; but absurdity is one method of transcending these representational limitations in favor of transcribing some of the complexities of experience. Writing in spite of the referential limitations of language is one means of maintaining a war's role in collective memory and ethically responding to its aftermath, without the theoretical strictures associated with adhering to an accurate representation.

Similar to his first novel, Foer creates a character for *Extremely Loud* who embraces writing as one way to "speak" after trauma has, literally, limited his language. The grandfather develops aphasia soon after surviving the Dresden bombing. In one of his letters the grandfather writes, "...I never thought of myself as quiet, much less silent...I don't know, but it's so painful to think...I started carrying blank books like this one around, which I would fill with all the things I couldn't say, that's how it started...I would write..." (17). The grandfather develops a muteness that renders him unable to speak, so he writes down sentences that others can read to communicate with him. In one instance the grandfather blatantly writes, "It's

unspeakable, write it!” (124). For me, Foer’s characters who translate traumatic experiences through writing, mostly letters, exemplify that writing is key to processing experience. For example, in *Extremely Loud*, the grandfather confesses all of his motivations and emotions surrounding his choice to abandon his family in his letters.

Likewise, the grandmother confesses her inner thoughts in letters to Oskar, and Oskar keeps a scrapbook in which he expresses his grief in losing his father, his bruising himself to cope, and pictures that seem helpful in visually processing his experience.⁸² Oskar also writes letters to famous people as he states, “A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don’t know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter” (Foer 11). At the end of the novel, Oskar finds emotional closure for his father, Thomas’s, death in digging-up his empty coffin and filling them with the letters that his grandfather wrote to Thomas. The grandfather, having not been a part of Thomas’s life, buries the letters that he hoped would fill in for his physical absence, or at least the letters could serve as a rationale. Oskar, unable to express his loss, buries the letters to fill in for the father’s body that he can never bury. Metaphorically, the language of the letters seeks to articulate the characters’ emotions but never satisfactorily represents the trauma: the grandfather can never ensure that his son understood his absence and cannot absolve his trauma from Dresden, and Oskar cannot literally or metaphorically bury his father. The grandfather’s letters, essentially apologies to Thomas, also stand in for the phone

⁸² Marita Sturken writes that “photographs seem to have played a dominant role in the response to 9/11, far more than the television images. Unlike the television images which defined the media spectacle, the photograph seems to aid in mediating and negotiating a sense of loss. In the first months after 9/11, in addition to the proliferation of photojournalism, there was a frenzy of amateur picture taking in New York and an obsession with looking at images” (188).

conversation that Oskar regrets not having when he did not answer his father's last phone call from the burning tower (Foer 15). The characters who bury the letters replicate the desire for language to represent the traumatic experience. This necessity of letters, other language, to stand in for what cannot yet be articulated in the present moment exemplifies the representational complications for 9/11.

The lack of closure in Foer's novel implicates the lack of closure for 9/11. Foer's novel concludes backwards: the last pages of the novel are written from Oskar's viewpoint of a typical day. Oskar runs through all the routine activities in a day with his father, all while repeating that all these activities would be done "backward" (325-6). After Oskar has linguistically prevented his father from leaving the house on 9/11, the last line of the novel reads, "We would have been safe" (326), followed by fifteen pages of the iconic image from 9/11, Falling Man. The Falling Man image is manipulated and framed differently for each page; the staging of this image and flipping through the pages results in "floating" Falling Man upward toward safety. The ending of this novel illustrates a child's wish to have his father back, a reimagining that the day would have never happened, as reflected in the manipulated images that Falling Man would be saved from jumping. This is not unlike the general sentiment about depicting 9/11 victims in real-life, considering that one of the iconic images from 9/11 is Falling Man, an image that captures a jumper still alive in mid-descent.

All of these writing situations demonstrate the need to express the trauma of an event, even if the writer cannot encompass the whole of the experience or reach a definitive conclusion. Although the language cannot recreate the whole of the event,

the writing provides an insight into an experience, albeit fictional or sometimes abstract.⁸³ This fictional insight into experience enables the author to comment on and interrogate the role of war within its historical context and for its cultural commentary. In other words, writing is a means of processing experience. For the writers who take on nonfiction, literature, and the memoir genres, these are all entry-points into processing and creating meaning for traumatic experience from different perspectives. But for the writers who utilize the absurd technique, a commentary on the human condition is often explicit, which may not appear in other genres. The absurd authors often incite a reflection on cultural implications for their subject. For Foer, his commentary extends 9/11 into the larger conversation of war, in general. By juxtaposing 9/11 against historical echoes, these similar war events that have already happened, Foer exposes a commentary on humanity's penchant for waging war.

Writing in 2005, Foer writes at the beginning of the twenty-first century that has commenced with war. By absurdly illustrating the never-ending cycle of war, Foer also indicates the increasingly blurry distinctions for war and the struggle to articulate what 9/11 means. After all, 9/11 coverage made the world tele-visual bystanders to this act of war. The struggle to articulate 9/11 representation also incites a reflection on the same struggle to represent the Persian Gulf War: how does one represent an event that already has a "complete" narrative crafted by the media? Disaster movies

⁸³ Part of the discursive responses to 9/11 included 1,910 short biographies of the victims that appeared in *The New York Times*, first published under the heading, "The Missing," and then reprinted under the title, "Portraits of Grief" (Versluys 8), and the outpouring of 9/11 poetry on Websites (Versluys 9). The biographies of the missing-turned-victims of 9/11 were immediately commemorated or documented in language, though, only through a brief snapshot of their lives. And poetry, as aesthetic language, processed the emotion of the event. These responses, like the absurd novel, offer glimpses into the immediate sensation of the experience but ultimately gesture toward language's instability as it is revised and undermined. In just this instance, *The New York Times* revised the context from the biographies as referentially "the missing" to the experiential "portraits of grief."

have already blown-up New York as a simulation. Not to mention the news reports already fed the television audience live feed of the attack on the towers, in addition to the rebroadcasts of the repetitive images of the towers collapsing. An additional complication for representation is that 9/11 had only happened a few years before authors such as Foer, Don DeLillo and John Updike wrote their 9/11 fiction.⁸⁴ Seemingly, these 9/11 narratives do not promise to represent 9/11 so much as they reflect current American cultural responses to the event in their historical context. I note that the majority of 9/11 genre fiction centers mainly on life post-9/11.⁸⁵

Implications for 9/11: Interrogating the Historic through Absurdity

The previous sections have outlined Foer's artistic absurdity, the result of which demonstrates that writing offers insight into some experiential knowledge. In addition to offering experiential insight, absurd fiction incites interpretative implications for these historic wars. In this concluding section, I will offer one of the many potential interpretations for Foer's novel—after all, the absurd authors are committed to the plurality of truths and meanings.

⁸⁴ In responding to the task of representation for war writers Alex Vernon claims that a latent time-period between the experience and author's presentation of it should occur: "Indeed, one might argue that most artistically solid and original works by American war veterans appeared only after the veteran-authors achieved sufficient distance from their experience, a distance of roughly a decade" (35). I do not readily agree that there can be a prescriptive time-period, as Vernon suggests a decade, though I agree that time enables a more critical distance from the experience.

⁸⁵ The only exception from the onslaught of 9/11 fiction published mere years after the event is Frederic Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*. This French writer fictionalizes the towers collapsing. I note that American authors largely center their novels, post-9/11. Very few American authors, such as Don DeLillo, include minor flashback scenes to the towers collapsing. This suggests that American authors writing about 9/11 are compelled to put language to the experience to mark its importance in collective memory in the years following the event. However, these authors have elected to fictionalize rebuilding social normalcy after 9/11 as opposed to describing the actual event. I read this pattern in 9/11 fiction as the authors writing too close to the occurrence of the event to have the critical distance necessary to describe 9/11. This can also be interpreted as an ethical choice to not force the reading audience to relive this traumatic moment so close to its occurrence in real-life.

Foer's novel, a mix of text and image, oscillates between past and present narratives, and mirrors the chaos and struggle of understanding American war and culture post-9/11. Through the complicated narrative that is often interrupted with images, the reader is consistently disoriented from a chronological or linear narrative; this disruption, as discussed earlier, is a desired result of the absurd author who hopes to generate a response to this absurdity. For Foer, this narrative chaos and reinvention of the traditional novel form renders 9/11 communicative through language while also underscoring the artificiality of a novel to encompass the whole of the experience.⁸⁶

As 9/11 representation remains elusive, Foer utilizes the absurd techniques of black humor, puns, and images that stand in for narrative gaps, as this novel is centered on the aftermath but does not depict the 9/11 scene, aside from the grandmother watching the news broadcast. Despite absurdity gesturing toward the limits of representation, Foer has offered an illustration of the traumatic aftermath. In which case, the absurd illustration for 9/11 is a placeholder for representation, as absurdity overly demarcates this artistic presentation to be a commentary on the event.

As previously discussed within the first three chapters, absurdity enables a placeholder representation for an event that remains elusive to full comprehension or depiction in art. However, absurdity puts language to an experience in order to

⁸⁶ Versluys reads the titling of Foer's novel as "a signal in and of itself an event that language can barely contain—something so extreme and incredible that it defies description. The disruptions in the texture of the text, the strangeness of its tone, and the pyrotechnic visual devices serve to underscore the incommunicability of experiences of extremity" (81). Where Versluys reads a limitation and incomprehension for language to communicate a traumatic experience, I read these authorial choices as following the absurd tradition. In which case, Foer acknowledges representational limits but utilizes absurdity to transgress these limitations. Absurdity as an art form that underscores artificiality enables Foer to comment on the event, without necessitating an awareness of adhering to a complete or ethical representation. Instead, Foer points to the limits in order to transcend describing the event in favor of commenting on the implications of the experience.

resituate and firmly root an event in collective memory. Absurdity, as an overtly artificial or fictional form, also enables the critical distance necessary to analyze what the event illuminates or might explain about the human condition, without also necessitating a concern for an ethical depiction of the event. Through absurdity, an author can capture some of the experience or sentiment surrounding war without necessitating a concern for maintaining reverence for victims and survivors in his fiction. In short, absurdity underscores the artificiality of the novel that attempts to capture life as it is lived.

For me, absurdity reflects the limits of language while it simultaneously offers the author's response to war. These artistic responses to representational limitations, even as the language is undermined through exaggeration or parody, indicate that war must be interrogated for its implications. These literary responses are significant as Harris claims, "...even though contemporary absurdist novelists mock literature, they have some faith in its efficacy" (29). In their best form, Harris asserts that:

...these novelists are able to have it both ways. In these instances the novelist refrains from overt moralization or preachment, allowing the form of his novel to act as his surrogate. The incidents themselves, plus the ways in which the novelist manages his language and other artifices of style, allow the twin themes, absurdity and the need for human love, to grow organically from the novel...these novelists succeed in blending both nihilism and the belief that love can be efficacious...their belief that certain human relationships can achieve a small degree of meaning. (32)

In describing war, a phenomenon that inherently contains experiential instability for the perspective, such as the sometimes contrasting narratives of the soldier, the witness, the war correspondent, the military report, or the news coverage, absurdity reflects this increasingly harder to define concept of war in the twenty-first century. Essentially, absurdity within a novel self-reflexively declares the limitation of language in its unstable narrative form. However, reading the exaggerations, parody, black humor, and other absurd elements enables the investigation of the author's artistic response: what is the political or ethical influence of this war? What does a war's presentation in literature demonstrate about cultural attitudes or the collective memory of a certain war?

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that novelistic absurdity shifts with the changing historical context for a war. In *Extremely Loud*, Foer inserts absurdity in order to demonstrate the incessant repetition of history as wars have and will continue, a sentiment shared by the absurd novelists of the 1960s. But comparing 9/11 to World War II also illustrates what I interpret to be Foer's point: 9/11 was considered to be indescribable, as Versluys contends, and the disaster movie come-to-life, as Efraim Sicher, Natalia Skradol and Christina Rickli, among others, have claimed. However, 9/11 does not seem to overtly defy representation as it is an event that we are already familiar with from other historical moments and media simulations or broadcasts. In drawing from World War II bombings to compare to 9/11, Foer demonstrates that this is an already familiar traumatic moment; as such, 9/11 awaits its own representation. However, these World War II events can help the reader reflect on 9/11's implications

for history and culture. For this, I read Foer's commentary for 9/11 as a call to the audience to reflect on social progress after 9/11.

By interpreting *Everything is Illuminated*, Foer's commentary about implications for the Holocaust on the contemporary moment is indicated through his depiction of the anti-Semitism that still permeates his fictional Ukraine. In *Extremely Loud*, Foer illustrates the hatred that influenced the hijackers to kill thousands of Americans and the resulting anti-Muslim expression in America.⁸⁷ In one scene in which Foer reflects the post-9/11 anti-Muslim sentiment, Oskar states:

Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (36)

⁸⁷ In one scene Foer simplifies the hijackers' rationale for 9/11 to hate. Oskar who is looking out of the Empire State building's observation deck claims, "...the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. I didn't want to, but I couldn't stop. I imagined the last second, when I would see the pilot's face, who would be a terrorist. I imagined us looking each other in the eyes when the nose of the plane was one millimeter from the building. I hate you, my eyes would tell him. I hate you, his eyes would tell me" (244). Aside from xenophobia and other cultural tensions, Foer is drawing out the basic premise of terrorism as inspired and fueled by the basic human emotion of hate. This simplicity is interpretatively complicated as the reader is invoked to reflect on hate and its prevention; in essence, the continued message of tolerance.

Oskar catalogues the daily activities and habits that seem harder to resume post-9/11, exemplifying the disruptive nature of 9/11.⁸⁸ Paranoia about war and future terrorist attacks is reflected by Oskar's panic to be in potentially targeted areas, such as the subway, a bridge, tall buildings, and airplanes, and the methods of terrorism, such as the sound or appearance of fireworks and abandoned bags in public areas. His anxiety about germs may imply a fear of future biological weapons. Underlying Oskar's paranoia about future attacks is the repeated anxiety of seeing "Arab people" in public spaces, such as in a restaurant or on the subway. Even a turban as a symbol for Arab people panics Oskar. Foer reflects the American paranoia and xenophobia that continues to pervade cultural understanding of terrorism as Americans, symbolized by Oskar, claim that they are "not racist," and yet might not want to travel on a plane with a Muslim person (as exemplified by the new airport screening procedures and accusations of profiling by TSA post-9/11). Through absurdity, the more uncomfortable aspects of 9/11 understanding, such as the paranoia and aggression incited by racial profiling, are exposed in Foer's novel; ultimately, Foer exposes these basic human emotions like hatred and racial aggression that often result in war. In addition to situating war and its victims firmly in the collective memory of war, Foer and the other absurd authors also seem to incite interrogation of history's influence on our contemporary moment.

For Foer, understanding some of the historical implications for 9/11 starts with reflecting on tolerance and reverence for all human losses, American and enemy,

⁸⁸ Versluys reads Foer's intent for the novel as: "The whole task of Foer's novel is to describe a normalcy that has been brutally interrupted...Oskar's quirky sayings are dodges and evasions, inspired by his simultaneous need to face up to his situation and to repress it" (101)

victim and perpetrator, alike. For Swofford and Herr, understanding war starts with a reflection on the social perception of war and an awareness of governmental censorship. All of these wars and authors share the commonality of experiential knowledge but referential language that limits its articulation. Although I have offered interpretative closure in asserting that these authors essentially utilize absurdity to incite reflection on these traumatic events, their open-ended narratives can incite a plurality of potential interpretations—the ultimate goal of the absurd author.

For Further Study on Artistic Responses to Collective Memory: Commemorating War through Memorial Sites

This final section extends the discussion of literature as a response to war to a reading of war memorials. Interpreting memorial spaces connects the correlation between a national rhetoric for wars and collective memory. War and its public perception affect the collective understanding of history and America's role in global political affairs. For example, my choice to include the Gulf War, the shortest war in the twentieth century, as a contrast to World War II and a comparison to the Vietnam War was inspired by a sub-focus on the real-life implications for this dissertation: the role of collective memory. Why is one war lauded while the other is obscured? In the third chapter, I recuperated the Gulf War as an object of study, primarily as context for the new twenty-first century wars in Iraq and for future study of tracing technological war in its continually evolving conception. Although the Persian Gulf War is still too contemporary to fully understand how it will compare to other wars in the twentieth century, my impression is that it is already forgotten. This impression is one that Swofford demonstrates in his novel as he consistently draws his war into comparison

and contrast with World War II and the Vietnam War. I read this consistent discussion of the Gulf alongside other American wars as Swofford's struggle for recognition and legitimacy of his war experience.

In analyzing World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, this dissertation has resituated the Gulf War back into a discussion of twentieth century American war as emerging twenty-first wars threaten to obscure it. Contextualizing the Gulf War into a study of two major American wars in the latter half of the twentieth century also underscores literature's importance for collective memory. In the public sphere, why would a Gulf War writer struggle for recognition while the World War II veteran is, still, celebrated? Essentially, literature enables authors to provide additional perspective that official documentation does not reveal; secondarily, literature allows authors to write against the national narrative for their wars (such as Swofford who writes a counter-narrative of the media's portrayal for the Gulf). The importance for writing as contrast to nationalized rhetoric for war becomes clear when certain wars are publically celebrated and lauded instead of the less publically supported or ostensibly insignificant wars. Literature becomes essential for resituating wars, even the seemingly forgotten ones, back into collective memory. Although historical documents record the information and some perspectives of these wars in American history, literature provides the alternate or competing narratives and the experiential knowledge that some records cannot capture.

In the last section of this conclusion, I trace the reflections of national rhetoric and public perception for these wars in memorial spaces.⁸⁹ Memorials are essentially representations of war, meant to inspire remembrance and reflection, and I explicate how the dominant narratives for these wars resonate in these memorial spaces. In doing so, the representational challenges that authors elide in presenting wars through absurdity in literature indicates the importance of writing and its ability to transcend or reconsider the dominant narratives for these wars. Particularly, literature has the potentiality of restoring otherwise shameful or forgotten wars back into the collective memory, especially important if memorial spaces do not exist for them (such is the case for the Persian Gulf War).⁹⁰ Even if there is a memorial for remembering a war, literature can emphasize or give equal attention to wars that may have a modest or less-trafficked memorial space.⁹¹

In reading these memorial spaces, I rely on Marita Sturken's assertions about the intersection of cultural memory, tourism, consumerism, paranoia, security, and kitsch that has defined American culture for the past two decades. In particular,

⁸⁹ I read the memorial spaces for World War II, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Vietnam Veterans Wall to exemplify the war rhetoric and public perception for these war events in the nation's capital. This same process could be applied to reading the memorial space for 9/11 in New York City. I preliminarily note that the 9/11 Tribute Center relies on some of the same techniques as the Holocaust Museum: artifacts, films, images and personal stories, which aim to generate a cathartic response to the destruction and tragedy of 9/11. For the purposes of this project, I will concentrate on the memorials in Washington, D.C. for their well-established national narratives and the proximity of these sites to each other.

⁹⁰ Veterans of the Persian Gulf War have been advocating for a memorial space in Washington, D.C. As of 2016, a memorial has not been built. NDSWM.org is a petition site for gathering support for The National Desert Storm Veterans War Memorial. After twenty-five years, it seems that plans for a memorial space are underway. This seems reminiscent, to me, of the controversy and work to establish the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

⁹¹ Erika Doss writes in her book, *Memorial Mania*, that memorials are flourishing in contemporary America. She attributes this attention to memorials as "an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts. Today's growing numbers of memorials represent heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered in America" (2).

Sturken argues that we adopt a tourist's vision of a history through a national tendency to see U.S culture as somehow distanced from and unimplicated in the troubled global strife of the world. She defines a "tourist of history" as:

... a figure who embodies a detached and seemingly innocent pose. In using the term "tourists of history" I am defining a particular mode through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments, a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic "experience" of history. (9)

In particular, Sturken underscores the subjectivity of the tourist: the person is once or twice removed from history; engages in a mediated and reenacted experience; and these tourists visit sites where they do not live, distant as outsiders, mere observers whose actions are believed to have no effect on what they see (10). These visits allow tourists to come close to a site of national tragedy but from a distance. Sturken writes, "The visits of tourists to places such as Ground Zero and the site of the Oklahoma City bombing are acts that intend to create a connection between the tourist and the site of trauma...tourism can often take on the meaning of a pilgrimage...[which] implies personal transformation" (11). Sturken explains that people visit these memorial sites for a cathartic experience of history, a distant but participatory view of a traumatic event, and ultimately the expected personal transformation through reflection. Importantly, these memorial spaces operate through catharsis and encourage the tourist to view American culture as "depoliticized and exceptionalist [in] relationship to the broader issues of global history and politics" (Sturken 11). Although my

interpretation is based on personal observation, I validate Sturken's assertion about the tourist's view of history with my own experience of Washington D.C's memorial sites.

When starting my own tour of history, I started with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Although I did not spend much time collecting these observations, I still wanted to briefly gauge some visitors' reactions to exiting the museum. Although this is just one field observation, one particular family exemplifies Sturken's claim about memorials and consumerism: a family of four with two elementary school-aged children exited the museum, somber, not speaking to one another, as the adults carried bags from the gift shop.

Two observations about this family struck me: the parents looked afflicted, and they had purchased something from the museum's gift shop. Sturken connects the role of consumerism to these memorial sites as having a role in collective memory. She writes that consumerism and the distanced proximity of the tourist to the tragedy:

...enables a sense of innocent and detachment yet provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event, that one has experienced it in some way. In these sites of tourism, history is understood to be something that is consumed and experienced through images, memory is thought to reside in commodities such as teddy bears, and memorials are accompanied by gift shops. (12)

The last stop in touring the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is to exit through the gift shop.⁹² In the gift shop, books and other educational resources about the Holocaust can be purchased. But other items are also for sale such as coffee mugs, totes, and inspirational rocks that say “believe” and “hope,” which ostensibly do not carry any direct correlation to the Holocaust. Sturken connects the tourist of history’s consumerism impulses to closure of the cathartic experience of the memorial space; and indeed, the U.S.H.M.M tourist can feel connected to the Holocaust experience by taking home a remembrance item that bears the museum’s name. Wanting the full tourist of history experience, I purchased a coffee mug, the one I felt was most out-of-place in a memorial site about genocide yet was prominently displayed dead-center in the mug display. The clear glass mug is covered in colorful butterflies, interspersed with the words “Life,” “Courage,” “Beauty,” and “Change” with the logo “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum” in the lower right-hand corner. In a conscientious interpretation of the mug’s message, life and the beauty of courageous struggle is memorialized instead of death. Perhaps the word “change” printed on the mug implicates the “Never Again” phrase printed prominently on the gift shop’s plastic bags. But in a less generous interpretation of the mug, the gift shop is marketing a beautiful mug that is likely to be purchased, regardless of the item’s ability to convey remembrance (as demonstrated by the butterflies that are in the foreground of the mug, with the museum’s logo obscured at the bottom; the butterflies

⁹² I note that visitors may bear right and walk down the staircase, past the gift shop, and head toward the museum’s exit. However, the gift shop entices people to peruse the merchandise as the visitors descend the final main exhibit staircase and face the gift shop. The gift shop also becomes unavoidable if the visitors want to tour the temporary exhibit. The huge painted sign, “From Memory to Action,” can be seen when first descending the staircase to leave the museum; an interested visitor *must* walk through the gift shop to enter this temporary exhibit.

are also more colorful and vivid than the light yellow lettering of the logo). I note that this gift shop was also full of people: every visitor that walked the end of the museum with me took a passing glance through the merchandise; and many people, myself included, bought something (in my case, for research purposes).

The consumerism that is encouraged by ending the museum tour in the gift shop implies a simple response to otherwise complicated and difficult to comprehend genocide. Of the consumerism impulse when touring history, Sturken writes, “American cultural responses to traumatic historical events enable naïve political responses to those events. They do this precisely because these cultural responses allow American history to be seen in isolation, as exceptional and unique, as if it were not part of the rest of world history and as if it were something simply to be consumed” (12). In the case of the Holocaust museum, the politics of World War II are largely ignored in favor of the more affecting survivor testimonies. The most comprehensive explanation of the World War II context for the Holocaust can only be found in the history books for sale in the gift shop. I corroborate Sturken’s point about American exceptionalism and cathartic responses in the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Affecting exhibits such as the “shoe room,” a room filled with shoes collected from executed Jews or the replication of Auschwitz’s gates take precedence over the more obscured placards that describe basic contextual or historical information. The museum that forefronts human suffering and aims to elicit emotional response has a gift shop before the museum’s exit that encourages the tourist to buy, or consume, a part of that cathartic experience through a decorative item. Importantly, this

merchandise, such as the aforementioned mug, is absent of any ostensible ties to political or historical implications, a point to which I will return.

In thinking about the purpose of commemorating war in the nation's capital, Sturken writes that the impetus for memorial construction was:

...the fallout of the 1960s, in particular the tragic consequences of the Vietnam War, [which] brought cultural memory into the forefront of national consciousness. With the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, it seemed as if the mourning and memory that had been held in check were suddenly released in a national embrace of remembering. Out of this emerged not only the construction of many memorials—including the Korean War Memorial, the U.S. Holocaust Museum, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the World War II Memorial—but also an intense and highly volatile debate, replete with conspiracy theories and culture wars, about how twentieth century American history has been officially told or mistold, remembered or forgotten. (14)

What is “remembered” through these memorial sites in the nation's capital is interesting as, in my perception, American involvement seems to be left out of these sites’ “narratives,” again, indicating Sturken's assertion that memorial sites encourage a perception of American exceptionalism.

This view of American exceptionalism can be gleaned from the U.S. Holocaust Museum. The U.S.H.M.M is the largest memorial combined with the typical conventions of a museum. There are four floors that start at the top with charts that

depict the Jewish populations in various parts of the world before World War II, pictures illustrating the rise of Nazism in the 1930s and Kristallnacht, among other pre-war artifacts. The middle floors offer the viewer some insight into the concentration camps, as one must literally walk-through a cattle-car and the replicated gates of Auschwitz to continue on the floor. But, in particular, I was struck with the limited information in the museum. Of course, the information must be brief and accessible to accommodate the flow of traffic and the average visitor who may or may not have a firm understanding of World War II history. The museum, organized through limited chronology and data (in the form of simple placards) seeks to educate visitors in an effort to convey the “Never Again” message of preventing mass genocide in our contemporary world. This is a participatory lesson as the temporary exhibit next to the gift shop offers an interactive experience.

In this temporary exhibit, the illustrations and placards aim to educate visitors about global genocides that occurred after the Holocaust. On one side of the exhibit room, a glass table with an attached projector is set-up. At this table, a visitor can write one way that she will help prevent genocide. The simple card that is reminiscent of a “comments card” for a business features the question, “What Will You Do?” Below the question, this phrase appears, “I pledge to help meet the challenge of genocide today by,” after which the visitor is given space to write a response on the provided lines. The visitor then inserts the slip of paper into a machine collecting the responses. Some of these papers are scanned and projected onto a large screen behind the machine. In combination with this temporary exhibit that can make a visitor feel as though an active contribution has been made for preventing contemporary violence, if

only on a slip of paper, the goal of the U.S. Holocaust museum is to remember and honor the victims but also to seemingly reassure the public that mass genocide will “never again” happen. After all, the card refers to genocide simply as a “challenge” that only needs to be “met” with individual “pledges,” or good intentions. My observation about the museum offering reassurance is supported by Sturken’s observation that the:

...culture of mourning and memory has converged with the concepts of healing and closure that are central to American national identity. American mythology clings tenaciously to the belief that one can always heal, move on, and place the past in its proper context, and do so quickly. The memorial culture of the United States has been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture, in which particular citizens, primarily veterans and their families, have been seen as coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories. (14)

Even though contemporary forms of genocide are still occurring, such as the recent chemical attack on civilians in the Syrian Civil War, the temporary genocide exhibit arguably offers a sort of reassurance that we can prevent large-scale genocide from happening again; or at least that we can make “peace” with the genocide that has occurred by individually pledging to help prevent its reoccurrence.

Through four floors of exhibits, this museum, metaphorically, offers visitors a chance to begin the tour by confronting the past, and coming to terms with the difficult memories as told by the survivors, themselves: the last room of the main exhibit offers a place to sit and listen to survivor testimony. In exiting the museum, visitors are

confronted with harrowing stories as told by survivors, offered the chance to buy a souvenir and are encouraged to pledge to end contemporary genocide. These last rooms serve as plausibly “therapeutic” spaces in which visitors purge the mourning encouraged by the museum’s main exhibits and make “peace” for the future.

However, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is not the only World War II memorial. Directly across from the Lincoln memorial, separated by a lengthy reflecting pool, sits the World War II memorial. In the style of a classically inspired amphitheater, each of the states and the U.S. territories, marked by the Atlantic and Pacific theaters for the war, are honored with separate pillars. This memorial to World War II is meant to be walked-through and encourages people to sit within the space as numerous benches are located throughout.

For me, the separation of the U.S. Holocaust Museum from the larger World War II memorial signifies the perceived uniqueness of the Holocaust, as Holocaust studies elaborates. Genocides have and will continue in our contemporary moment, but the Holocaust is a twentieth century genocide event that is treated with separate reverence, both within the memorial site and in the plethora of literature it has inspired. This separate reverence may be explained by the patriotic sentiments that every American can support: the American aid to end the spread of Nazism, the liberation of the camps and the influx of Jewish refugees who came to live America, including famous survivors such as Elie Wiesel. In analyzing the national rhetoric represented in these memorial spaces, I reiterate that two memorial spaces inspire reflection on World War II in the nation’s capital. This attention to World War II may be inspired by the observation that Steven Casey offers:

In a nation so haunted during the 1920s and 1930s by the Western Front casualties, World War II ultimately became a surprisingly popular conflict for the United States. In fact, it is widely remembered as the “good war” fought by the “greatest generation”—a war so different to the awful trench slaughter that preceded it, not to mention the “bad” conflict in Vietnam that came after. (38)

A war fought primarily for easily discerned moral reasoning as opposed to merely political, fought by the “greatest generation,” results in a national nostalgia for the only “good war” of the twentieth century. The memorial was consciously placed between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial to reflect the importance of World War II in preserving the democratic ideals that were fought for by George Washington and upheld by Abraham Lincoln. As the World War II memorial is spatially aligned with the Lincoln memorial, it is worth noting that the Lincoln memorial is also depoliticized. The Lincoln memorial serves as a commemoration of the liberation of slaves; perhaps the World War II memorial, as situated across from Lincoln, is also meant to inspire reflection on America’s efforts to liberate Europe from Hitler. Of course, as Sturken notes, these memorial spaces are free of political implications; for example, the Lincoln memorial obscures the historical context that the slaves were liberated from other Americans. Instead, these spaces celebrate American liberation of the oppressed, decontextualized from the political implications—a moral celebration of American heroism without the historical context.

However, there is nothing “cathartic” within the World War II memorial, especially illustrated by my observation that tourists were simply lounging around on

the benches and the lawn when I toured the space. The World War II memorial is strikingly abstract as the states and territories are commemorated in simple pillar form.⁹³ Perhaps as the “good war” there is less impetus to remember the casualties associated with the victorious battles. Especially, poignant is what is purposely forgotten at this site: the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings are not mentioned; only the abstract labeling of one side of the amphitheater, the Pacific, acknowledges the Pacific theatre for World War II. I read the vastness of the World War II space and its sheer size, both length of the space and the height of its pillars, as reflective of the national narrative for the “good war.” Seemingly, separated from the Holocaust, a World War II memorial need not remind visitors of the bloody casualties, as these losses were in support of the nobler task of ending Nazism. Instead the size of the memorial inspires reverence and awe for the “good” war. Importantly, these stark pillars are a limited or abstracted representation of the individual efforts of states and U.S. territories in the fight against Nazism; a sort of visual isolationism that encourages tourists to lounge among the pillars free from ethical qualms of political representation.

The next site I toured was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, which was built to elicit some reaction. As Sturken claims, “the memorial culture of the United States has been largely experienced as a therapeutic culture...coming to terms with the past and making peace with difficult memories. This is the primary narrative generated by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” (14). Something about the Vietnam Veterans Wall struck a chord with visitors as Casey elucidates, “In 1982 the Vietnam dead even

⁹³ I concede that World War II was casualty-heavy and plaques containing names would prove difficult to install on a memorial.

received their own national monument. Conceived in controversy, the memorial's moving simplicity soon proved a hit with families, veterans, and tourists alike—so much so that it rapidly became Washington's most visited monument" (202). The simplicity lies within the simple granite walls in which names upon names are carved, arranged by the year of death. The largest number of names is located in the middle of the Wall labeled, "Escalation," by which the tourist is dwarfed by the towering list of names. Like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, a linear narrative has been constructed by the chronology. However, the chronology moves outward from 1975 and then from 1959 as the beginning and the end of the war, 1959 and 1975, form a right angle. The result of forming a right angle with the beginning and end of the war, with the largest number of names in the middle, results in the aesthetic effect of drawing the visitor into the walkway of the Wall, as the height of the Wall slowly escalates. The result of this aesthetic is that the viewer seems overwhelmed by the enormity of the Wall's center that displays each, individual veteran's name. A symbolic "therapeutic" aesthetic operates through the confrontation of each veteran death as the tourist literally and symbolically faces the names: the surface of the Wall is reflective so the viewer can, plainly, see herself on the Wall. I read this as a symbolic connection of the tourist to the veterans in "seeing" oneself on the Wall, or the reintroduction of the humanness of the veterans. Despite the overwhelming height of the Wall in the middle of the memorial, there is the "closure" that occurs by the end of the space as the names dwindle down, and the height of the Wall recedes back to ground-level. The Wall in its symmetrical design ends the listing of names cleanly and

in an organized fashion, much unlike the real-life ending of the Vietnam War. As such, the Wall offers a definitive and clear closure that the actual war resists.

Casey credits the popularity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall to the subjectivity of the design; he writes, “The main reason why the Vietnam Memorial has been such a success is that it not only gives a sense of the size of the human tragedy but also rescues the individual victims from anonymity” (205). Indeed, the Wall remembers each person that served during the Vietnam War. The impetus for remembering the individual casualties may result from the national shame of this war; essentially, Vietnam was a defeat—one that is not readily reflected in national narratives. By concentrating on the individual, the Wall does not incite the politics or other unpopular sentiments about this war.

By concentrating on the Vietnam veterans, the outcome of the war can be ignored in the memorial space. Meredith Lair suggests that:

If Vietnam was not an aggrandizing victory, the argument went, then at least it was a noble struggle. The presumed suffering of American soldiers, rather than the war’s outcome, earned Vietnam a place on the rolls of heroic, nation-defining conflicts that runs, in the collective imagination, from the snowcapped battlements of Valley Forge to the windswept deserts of the Middle East. (13)

Although this is, again, a personal impression, my perception of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall is that it is the most conservative memorial. World War II has an entire amphitheater and a separate Holocaust museum. As a comparison, the Korean War has a more elaborate memorial space than Vietnam. In the Korean War memorial

there are nineteen metal replicas of military men, re-enacting a mission formation as they trudge through juniper bushes meant to simulate the Korean terrain. These larger-than-life replicas of servicemen lead from the entrance of the memorial to a fountain and a canopied space with benches for reflection. There are no names and few things written on the granite walls that surround the reflection space; but one phrase is prominent, "Freedom Is Not Free." The Korean War memorial is ornate compared to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, especially since the Wall is, in essence, a simple, granite memorial carved into the green, lush grass like a gray gash on the earth. The construction that is flush with the earth behind it actually obscures the memorial space from the other side: if facing the memorial from the other side, one would not see the Wall. While the memorial itself is stark, every serviceperson who has died has his/her name recorded on the Wall. The memorial is not decorative, but as Casey suggests, the Wall does reintroduce the human aspect back into the memorial: the sheer volume of names on the Wall can create a sobering effect when walking the memorial's perimeter and confronting each veteran's name. In essence, the Wall incites the perception of American exceptionalism that Sturken describes as encouraging the tourist to view herself free from the politics of the war and instead to participate in the cathartic moment of literally facing the casualties of the Vietnam War, albeit abstractly through their names. Or, in short, the Wall enacts a typically funerary design, which I interpret as simplifying the political complexities of fighting the Vietnam War to memorializing individual deaths.

These memorials aim to commemorate wars and inspire reverence for their victims in the nation's capital. In the aforementioned descriptions of memorials, I have

explained my experience that demonstrates how a tourist of history can readily interpret which wars are lauded in American culture and which wars are obscured just by visually inspecting the sheer space, location, and presentation of the war memorial. Importantly, these memorials elide political implications and obscure the literal violence that these wars engaged (I note that the Holocaust museum aims to elicit cathartic response but corporeal violence or death imagery are largely absent; one must purposely choose to lean over the few sectioned-off video displays that play footage from the concentration camps). While remembering the victims of war, these memorial spaces elide representations of violence; an interesting observation considering the nature of war and the graphic violence that ensues. What these memorials do inspire is cathartic responses to the abstracted idea of victimhood, consumerism, and therapeutic closure for collective memory, as Sturken suggests. More importantly, these memorial spaces reflect the dominant narratives for these wars, a rhetoric that remembers the American participation in World War II as heroism in aiding the liberation of the concentration camps and the “plucky underdogs” that nobly struggled to fight Vietnam.

Writing becomes an important tool to reconsider these dominant narratives, especially as most Americans do eventually make their way to visit these memorial sites and may misremember these wars through their misrepresentation in memorial spaces. This is not to say that these memorial spaces have completely fabricated the collective memory in these sites, but a sort of misrepresentation has occurred in which the whole history is not considered in their presentation (such as in the example I noted for World War II: there is no indication of remembrance for the Hiroshima and

Nagasaki victims). The absurdity that this dissertation explicated demonstrates that authors utilize the aesthetics of absurdity to draw attention to the lesser known histories for their wars: Herr writes about the misinformation disseminated by official reports of the victories and losses in Vietnam—a rhetoric that results in Americans perceiving themselves as the struggling underdogs in the national narrative. Foer includes the foreign civilian victims’ perspectives that are often entirely absent from national narratives. On the one hand, one may argue that it would be unpopular to represent foreign casualties in national memorial spaces, but I assert that all victims require remembrance in history. In order to understand future implications of war, one must confront the more uncomfortable moments of history in which America is the aggressor. Swofford has accomplished interrogating many aspects of his war, but the very act of his writing demands public attention to the Gulf War in an era in which wars are obscured in collective memory. Writing enables an author’s introspection and interrogation of war, and novelists ultimately deliver the counter-histories, perspectives, and sometimes the information that is often missing from the national narratives to their audiences.

Most important of all, in contrast to the memorial spaces that offer visitors the ability to buy or consume history, as a materialistic closure to the cathartic experience of war, writing counters these simplified responses to war. Negotiating responses to these wars continues to be an ongoing process that is not yet subject to cathartic closure in collective memory, as indicated by the novelists in this dissertation. The act of writing and the resulting study of literature enable a multiplicity of responses to war and encourage a reflection on these wars. Absurdity facilitates further questioning of

the information that has been hidden from the public sphere or whose perspectives have not been considered for these wars.

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