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“The War Was Easy... It Was the War of Words ...
That Was Tough”: Countering Combat Trauma
and Restoring Individual Identity through
Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Fiction

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“THE WAR WAS EASY... IT WAS THE WAR OF WORDS... THAT WAS TOUGH”:
COUNTERING COMBAT TRAUMA
AND RESTORING INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY
THROUGH TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Judith Lynn Britt McNeely

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Title: “The War Was Easy ... It Was the War of Words ... That Was Tough”:
Countering Combat Trauma and Restoring Individual Identity through Twentieth
and Twenty-First Century Fiction

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This dissertation explores how fiction writing can repair individual identity and mend communal bonds, which can aid in healing from combat trauma. Iconic representations of the ideal soldier and the damaged combat veteran inhibit the healing process by shaping how these individuals are perceived. These iconic images harm individual identity and interfere with the society’s ability to perceive the soldier’s unique character and experience. Such perceptions interfere with narrative expression, which is necessary for the veteran’s post-combat reintegration. War fiction writers establish discursive resistance strategies, such as using point of view to position the reader alongside the combat soldier, thereby facilitating a visceral experience designed to inspire empathy. These authors use techniques that restore the soldier’s individual identity, which, in turn, helps restore him to the community from which combat experience has ostracized him. Through fictional re-construction of combat events, the writer can assert cognitive power over traumatic memories. In addition, the individual, both as author and character, can repair his sense of community by creating a fictional combat community and by establishing a community of readers who are empathetic to his needs for societal attention and acceptance.

Chapter One analyzes Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* to illustrate how veterans have treated these iconic expectations and the

resulting master narrative in novels. Chapter Two incorporates Heidi Kraft's memoir, *Rule Number Two: Lessons I Learned in a Combat Field Hospital*. Kraft's Iraq war memoir complements Kevin Powers' novel of the Iraq war, *The Yellow Birds*. This chapter also includes discussion of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In Chapter Three I analyze Karl Marlantes's novel *Matterhorn* and Larry Heinemann's novel *Close Quarters* to show how techniques specifically available in fiction enable the veteran to resist the master narrative's silencing effects and use fiction in various ways to heal trauma's effects.