

## ‘War Ink’: sense-making and curating war through military tattoos

Article (Accepted Version)

Dyvik, Synne L and Welland, Julia (2018) ‘War Ink’: sense-making and curating war through military tattoos. *International Political Sociology*, 12 (4). pp. 346-361. ISSN 1749-5679

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## **‘War Ink’:**

### **Sense-Making and Curating War Through Military Tattoos**

#### **Abstract**

Veterans have long sought to make sense of and capture their wartime experiences through a variety of aesthetic means such as novels, memoirs, films, poetry and art. Increasingly, scholars of IR are turning to these sources as a means to study war experience. In this article we analyze one such sense-making practice that has, despite its long association with war, largely gone unnoticed: military tattoos. We argue that military tattoos and the experiences they capture can offer a novel entry point into understanding how wars are made sense of and captured on the body.

Focusing on a web archive – ‘War Ink’ – curated and collected for and by US veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, we analyze how tattoos perform an important ‘sense-making’ function for participating veterans. We focus on three recurring themes – loss and grief, guilt and anger, and transformation and hope – demonstrating how military tattoos offer important insights into how military and wartime experience is traced and narrated *on* and *through* the body. The web archive, however, not only enables a space for veterans to make sense of their war experience through their tattoos, the archive also does important political work in *curating* the broader meaning of war to the wider public.

#### **Introduction**

Tattooing, war and the military share a long history (see Scutt and Gotch 1974; Bradley 2000; DeMello 2000; Govenar 2000). Across the globe, particular tattoos and motifs have for centuries offered non-verbal means to signal belonging to fighting forces, as well as serving as badges of honor or as ‘proof’ of war experience. While historically these were not always voluntary (Govenar 2000), in this article the term ‘military tattoos’ refers to tattoos voluntarily acquired in order to mark military and/or wartime experience.

The article examines how war experiences are made sense of, communicated and *curated* (Sylvester 2017), by and for the veterans themselves and the wider public through military tattoos. Drawing on a US based web archive – [www.warink.org](http://www.warink.org) – we analyze a series of veterans’ tattoos and their accompanying narratives in order to unpack what meanings these tattoos hold for the carrier and how the practice of tattooing can form part of a wider process of reflecting, communicating and curating war. While we argue that tattoos themselves function as sense-making enablers for veterans, the War Ink site also performs important communicative functions. Not unlike the work of a museum curator, this web-archive selects, frames and displays individual veteran tattoo narratives within a wider schema of militarized aesthetics. In so doing, War Ink participates not only in creating a space for veterans to reflect on their

experiences, but also curates and interprets the meanings of these experiences to the wider public.

The article begins by situating our argument within the recent ‘turn’ to embodiment and experience in International Relations (IR), often driven by feminist interrogations of the discipline, as well as within work on aesthetics in IR. This scholarship on war and militarism is less concerned with explaining wars’ occurrence and its causes per se, but with capturing it’s lived and felt consequences. The aesthetic realm and its ability to conjure the emotional and sensuous is therefore a productive site through which experience can be explored. While scholars have previously made use of art, poetry, music and film in order to study the politics of war (for example see Weber 2006; Bleiker 2009; Hast 2016), military tattoos as an aesthetic expression of war experience have thus far remained unexplored within IR, despite their historically important relationship with war and militaries.

The article then proceeds in three parts. First we provide a short background into the history of tattooing with an emphasis on its established association with militaries and war. Drawing on recent work on embodiment, experience and aesthetics in IR, we argue that the contemporary practices of military tattooing should be considered as one such embodied and aesthetic expression of war experience. Second, we situate the War Ink web-archive within wider processes of militarization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and efforts to make service personnel and veterans visible in the US public sphere through particular discursive frames. Warink.org is expressly designed to “honor” veterans and to “bridge the divide between veterans and the civilian communities” (War Ink, Intro). In so doing, this web-archive curates a particular, albeit by no means straightforward representation of war and the embodied experiences it conjures. Third, through an analysis of the tattoo narratives displayed on the site we identify three recurring ways in which war experiences are made sense of: loss and grief, guilt and anger, and transformation and hope. In each case, the tattoos featured on the site function as a means through which the veterans process, capture and communicate a multiplicity of emotional and physical experiences.

While the curatorial imperatives of the War Ink site may be to “honor” the featured veterans, with the site working through (and rearticulating) a number of familiar war and military narratives of heroism, sacrifice, bravery, and loss, the tattoos themselves and the accompanying testimonies from veterans reveal a less straightforward and more ambiguous politics of war. In the multitude of ways that the featured veterans choose to depict their wartime experiences through their tattoos and in the telling of their stories, what emerges is not a neat or coherent

‘war story’ or framework of understanding between civilian and military worlds. Rather, what is revealed is the ultimate *unknowability* of war and its experiences – both for those who witness it at distance *and* for those who practice it. What manifests from the site and the experiences it captures, is that even when one has lived through and in war’s sphere, what war is and what war means resists neat depiction. In this way, War Ink offers another site in which the meaning of war is curated and re-curated (Sylvester 2017) by the participating veterans, the creators of the website, and the viewing public. Featured veterans are given the opportunity to (re)tell their war experiences, while viewers are provided the opportunity to ‘read’ them. For both, however, the tattoos and accompanying narratives depicted exceed the framing structures they are placed within, signaling instead to the messiness, contradictions and ambiguities of contemporary war.

### **Aesthetics, art and military tattoos**

As Victoria Basham has noted, research on war and those responsible for enacting it has traditionally not been concerned “with the feelings, emotions, ideas and experiences of those whose bodies are trained in violence” (2013: 8). As such, the micro-processes and practices of war, as well as the everyday lives of those involved in it, have gone relatively unexplored within a discipline overwhelmingly concerned with attempts to justify, explain, and regulate war. However, in recent years there has been a ‘turn’ within IR towards conceptualizing and seeking to understand war and its associated practices through the prism of experience (for example see Sylvester 2011 and 2013; Basham 2013; Parashar 2013; Dyvik 2017). Taking place predominantly within feminist scholarship, this research seeks to shift the focus of the study of war and militarism away from abstract and disembodied debates about strategies of warfare, weaponry, and the political ideologies that enable war, to exploring how people themselves experience war.

If, in the turn to the experiential, what is attempted to be captured are the feelings and sensations of war, then ‘traditional’ empirical sources – elite actor speeches, policy documents and ‘official’ briefings – are often inadequate. For scholars in IR who work with aesthetics, this concern with thinking about how war is *felt*, as opposed to trying to fully understand or explain its occurrence, is precisely what engagement with the aesthetic realm offers. Because the aesthetic realm’s engagement with war is concerned not only with depicting and representing it, but also with conjuring the feelings, emotions and sensations associated with it, aesthetics can offer insights into the experiential aspects of war that other sources or methodologies may not.

For example, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* – arguably the most well-known anti-war piece of art – became a powerful symbol of the horrors of war not because it was a life-like representation, but because it captured “a certain emotional truth about the atrocity of the [Spanish] civil war that no factual account could ever hope to achieve” (Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008: 132; see also Danchev and Lisle 2009: 777). While art (Sylvester 2005), poetry (Bleiker 2009), fiction (Darby 1998, Park-Kang 2015; Welland 2018), film (Weber 2006), video games (Robinson 2016) and music (Baker 2015) all have the capacity to represent an external ‘reality’ or experience, they also crucially capture our human and emotional relationship to that experience (Bleiker 2009: 25; see also Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008: 132). For scholars to engage in “aesthetic sensibility”, therefore, is for them to pay “analytical attention to affect rather than reason, judgement rather than fact, [and to] sensation rather than intellectualism” (Moore and Shepherd 2010: 299). Thus far, however, military tattoos as an aesthetic expression of wartime experience have remained an unexplored site in IR research.<sup>1</sup>

Histories of body decoration and tattoos can be found in almost every society,<sup>2</sup> where they have played a variety of social, political and symbolic functions (Deter-Wolf et. al. 2016; Gell 1993). In his ethnographic survey of Polynesia, Alfred Gell (1993: 1) argues that tattoos were integral to the organization and meaning of warfare, politics and religion, with similar histories of tattooing embedded into the functioning of societies in parts of Africa (Vaughn 2007) and North America (Deter-Wolf and Diaz-Granados 2013, Balvay 2008 and Mifflin 2008). Playing less of a determining social, cultural and political role in European history, the European – and more broadly the ‘Western’ tattoo – has “been free to roam at will” (Caplan 2000: xv), taking on a variety of meanings at different times. As such, tattooing on the European continent has gone through instances of popularity and acceptability (for example on the bodies of pilgrims and aristocratic Victorians), as well as being signifiers of dishonor and enslavement (for example the branding of soldiers, convicts, prisoners and slaves) (see Caplan 2000 for further examples).

The invention of the tattoo machine in the late nineteenth century meant that tattooing became “less painful, cheaper, and easier and faster to administer” (DeMello 2000: 50), and it followed that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the numbers of men and women

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in our search of IR literature, we came across just one discussion of tattooing at all: Stuart Croft's brief discussion of tattooing practices in the immediate post-9/11 environment in the United States (see Croft 2006: 93).

<sup>2</sup> The global practice of tattooing can be traced in the word ‘tattoo’ itself, coming from the Tahitian *tatu/tatau* and first imported to the English language when Captain James Cook returned from his colonial voyage in 1771 (Caplan 2000).

getting tattoos in the US and Europe had significantly increased. Many of these tattoo customers were members of the military, and the Navy in particular (ibid: 50-51),<sup>3</sup> with this relationship between tattooing and the military increasing during the twentieth century. Within the armed forces, 'rites of passage' such as completing basic training or returning from war were often marked by specific tattoos (see Govenar 2000), and the military has also been influential in terms of "setting [wider tattooing] trends in imagery, style, and placement" (DeMello 2000: 63). Throughout the twentieth century and to this day, popular designs amongst US service personnel include patriotic themes such as flags, eagles and military slogans; navy motifs such as ships and anchors; sea themes such as mermaids, dolphins and whales; and 'girlie tattoos' including nude women, hula dancers and sailor girls.

Despite an absence of attention to tattoos in IR, there have been a number of historical, psychological, sociological and anthropological investigations into tattooing (see: Sanders 1989; Gell 1993; Caplan 2000; Kosut 2000; DeMello 2000; Atkinson 2003; Back 2007; Fenske 2007; Lemma 2010). For the sociologist Les Back, tattoos are a means to "speak beyond sound" (Back 2007: 71), a form of non-verbal communication and expression that can be open to numerous interpretations dependent on placement as well as historical and sociological context. Not unlike other forms of body modification, tattoos are "mechanisms of social communication" that work to provide "symbolic information" (Sanders 1989: 20-21) about an individual. As communicative devices, tattoos can offer important insights into a person's experiences and lifeworlds, as well as being markers that enable wider society to 'read' (however in/accurately) particular identity 'cues' such as class, social status, aesthetic preferences, and broader life experience. Among these are war experiences, and military tattoos often aim to aesthetically capture, symbolize and communicate these experiences.

While, as Kate McLaughlin argues, war itself "resists depiction" (2011: 6), those who fight them have long sought to assert control over and make sense of their own experiences within it. Poetry, art, film, novels and music are all means through which individuals have told war stories. Military tattoos can be understood as part of this tradition, and by 'writing' wartime experience on the body they offer service personnel the opportunity to

[...]impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict[...]to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others; to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialise; to

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<sup>3</sup> The art historian, Matt Lodder, argues that sailors' long history of marking military service on their bodies has to do with the nature of their service. Given that sailors cannot easily 'mark' or leave traces on their battlefield – the sea – they have instead sought to leave visible testimonies behind through creatively moulding 'their environments, their possessions, and their bodies alike' (Lodder 2015: 199).

inform civilians of the nature of battle[...]; to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning, to promote peace (McLaughlin 2011: 7).

As a form of war storytelling, however, military tattoos are distinctive. Unlike stories narrated in and through galleries, books or in films, war stories and experiences depicted in military tattoos are ‘written’ directly on the body. Further, unlike other physical manifestations of war on the body, such as amputations or scars, military tattoos are voluntarily and permanently embodied traces of war experience.

Alan Govenar (2000: 226) argues that there historically are several motivations behind military tattoos:

Tattoos were a means of establishing group solidarity among the members of platoons, divisions, and particular branches of the military. In some instances, tattoos were used to commemorate accomplishments and missions. Some tattoos were a way of expressing devotion to wives, children, family, and country, and easing the separation from home. Others fortified the masculine egos of the wearers or vented the frustrations and anxieties of war.

These historical motivations resonate with contemporary practices of military tattooing,<sup>4</sup> and the tattoo narratives we analyze below reveal veterans’ attempts to appropriate and assert control over wartime memories and war’s effects.

### **The War Ink Project: “See their ink. Hear their stories”(warink.org)<sup>5</sup>**

The tattoos and narratives discussed in this article are taken from the War Ink website ([www.warink.org](http://www.warink.org)). A collaborative project between Chris Brown at Contra Costa County Library, California, and Jason Deitch, a US Army veteran and military sociologist, War Ink is described as both a virtual exhibit and a forum through which Californian veterans are invited to “share their stories” (War Ink, Intro). The creators see tattooing as a “secondary language in

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2014 and in response to a tightening of regulations pertaining to tattoos in the US Army, there was criticism from many serving soldiers. Josh Smith, a soldier who was stationed in Afghanistan during the proposed regulation changes, reflected on the regulation change and the long history of the military and tattooing practices:

[...] tattoos definitely have a long history in the military and in the Army and they often mean a lot, personally, to soldiers in a way that may not always be the case in the civilian world. For example, soldiers, it’s not uncommon for them to put symbols from their units or as the wars have dragged on, often will have tattoos in memorial of fallen fellow soldiers (Smith quoted in NPR 2013).

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the warink.org site itself, an accompanying sister Vimeo site entitled ‘11 for 11’ has been drawn on as well. The veterans featured on the latter site are the same as those featured on the original warink.org site. See: <https://vimeopro.com/murga/war-ink-project> and <http://www.warink.org>

images”, and in relation to veterans it is a language that needs to be heard and understood “if we want to bring these men and women with this war inside them all the way home” (Deitch 2014).

Displaying the tattooed bodies of 24 US service personnel from all branches of the military, all of which – with one exception – have served in the recent wars in Afghanistan and/or Iraq, the website positions itself as an opportunity for dialogue between veteran and civilian communities. Organized around four ‘chapters’ – “We Were You”, “Changed Forever”, “Living Scars” and “Living Not Surviving” – War Ink exhibits veterans’ tattoos in photographs and videos, alongside the written and spoken words of participants. The website gives featured veterans a space to communicate their experiences of military life, war, and their return to the civilian sphere. For the project creators, “the striking visual medium of tattoo art” is an “ideal entry point [for] exploring veterans’ experiences”, as tattoos “capture the attention” and make “viewers want to learn more and listen longer” (War Ink, About).

Like all forms of storytelling and representation, the War Ink project is profoundly mediated. Not only is it made up of a relatively small number of (self-)selected Californian veterans, but the website is explicit in its intention to “honor” them (War Ink, Intro). For the project creators, “[t]he experiences of combat veterans returning home have serious cultural significance. They need to be told” (War Ink, About). In this way, War Ink can be viewed as fitting into a broader trend of seeking to valorize military service, which has increasingly been seen within the US (as well as in a number of the other ‘Western’ troop-contributing nations of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts) in the aftermath of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. For many, this valorization has been identified as an example of a growing militarization present within the contemporary US (Lutz 2003; Enloe 2007; Caso 2016; MacLeish 2013; Sylvester 2017). From airport lounges reserved for military personnel, to applauding the troops at sports games, the public honoring of ‘Gold Star Families’, and to the recent claims by both prominent retired military officers and President Donald J. Trump that NFL players “taking the knee” during the national anthem disrespect the US armed forces (Cahn 2017), the reach and influence of military power can be seen across US society (Lutz 2003).

However, while both War Ink’s intention to “honor” US service personnel and the broader discursive frameworks surrounding the armed forces in US society does shape how the veterans and their tattoos are displayed and represented, the War Ink site does not tell a straightforward story of military heroism. Indeed, the site’s creators position War Ink not as (another) public spectacle of military support, but rather as a tool for creating dialogue and understanding



between civilian and veteran communities. The site explains that while veterans “yearn for true recognition” this does not come in the shape of “parades and medals”, but through “an acknowledgement of their wartime experiences, losses, and struggles” (War Ink, Your Role). Many of the veteran narratives on the site relate experiences of pain, loneliness and broken familial and personal relationships in the wake of war. While several talk about the military as their “family” (Lord quoted on War Ink, Chapter 1) or the “camaraderie” and “best friends” they met within it (Glazier quoted on War Ink, Chapter 1), others reflect on what war and their time in the armed forces has cost them – their fiancée, their mental health, their legs.

Ultimately, then, War Ink is a site that participates in sense-making about war and about those who have fought in war. For the creators, the website is an attempt to “understand...our veterans” (War Ink, Intro). Each “chapter” begins with a short introductory section about the aspect of military, war or veteran experience to be explored, with its “unknowability” to and for civilians frequently emphasized. ‘Changed Forever’ states that for civilians, what happened in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq is “difficult to grasp” (War Ink, Chapter 2), while ‘Living Scars’ notes that the public remain “unaware of the *real* experiences that make up the real people inside the uniforms” (War Ink, Chapter 3, emphasis added). For the featured veterans, it provides one site where they can narrate and (re)construct their experiences as service personnel and war veterans. In the telling of their war stories through their tattoo narratives, veterans are given the opportunity to reflect on and make sense of their war experiences. As will be detailed below, veterans featured on the site variously explain their tattoos as homages to their time in the armed forces, as dedications to those who they served alongside (and oftentimes lost), to commemorate particular battles, and as personal messages to themselves ‘after’ war. Not only, however, does War Ink offer a space for an understanding of, and sense-making for, veterans, but also works to *curate* how war and war experiences are understood by the wider viewing public. Through the displayed tattoos, the narratives featured and the framing of the website, particular experiences, sensations and feelings of and about war are expressed, cultivated and curated by both the veterans themselves and the War Ink project.

Curation is a practice typically associated with museums, exhibitions and art galleries. It is also a practice that until the end of the twentieth century received little, if any, critical attention (see Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Understood in its conventional sense, to curate – a museum, exhibit or art gallery – is to select, pull together and organize a range of objects, artworks or documents for presentation. While there are curators who find ways to offer viewers the opportunity to construct and impose their own interpretations (see Fewster 1990), conventionally, power relations within museums and galleries are skewed towards the collecting subject and curator

[...]who makes decisions in relation to time, space, and visibility; in other words, as to what can be viewed, how it should be seen, and when this is possible. For the public, interaction with the collections other than at the level of looking at fully completed and immaculately presented displays is generally severely curtailed (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 7).

Curation, however, occurs not just in museum halls and art galleries. In her exploration of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, Christine Sylvester writes about the everyday practices of “ordinary curatorship” (2017: 3) that take place at the memorial. Veterans, family members and friends of the 58,318 killed service personnel engraved on the memorial walls go to the site daily and leave objects and mementos – photographs of grandchildren never met, a favorite drink or snack, wrapped Christmas presents – which, every evening, are collected by the US Parks Department, who take all the non-perishable objects to a warehouse in Maryland, where there are vaults containing the thousands of items left over the years. As Sylvester notes, the memorial becomes a museum, “with pop-up exhibits that are usually on view only for one day. Every evening an exhibit ends. The next day another one starts” (ibid: 7).

Although, unlike the objects left at the Vietnam Memorial, tattoos reside permanently on the skin and body, they too (and their display on the War Ink site) can be understood as a practice of ordinary war curatorship. Unlike the exhibits of professionally curated museums, these “ordinary curators” – whether a memento-leaver or tattooed veteran – seek not necessarily to “teach viewers about the war through their exhibits [or tattoos]”, they do shed light on the ongoing lives of those who have lived through and survived war (Sylvester 2017: 7). Like the “pop-up exhibits” found at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the tattoos displayed on War Ink and discussed below offer fragmentary and contending versions of war. These “ordinary exhibits” lead us not towards an officially sanctioned story of war, but to stories that fill “some of the gaps” in “memory, myth, and memorialization of...war” (ibid. 9). The military tattoos discussed below, in filling these gaps, perform communicative and sense-making functions both for the featured veterans and the viewing public.

### **“Long after the war, the ink remains”<sup>6</sup>**

As noted above, beyond the importance of “honoring” and “hearing” war stories told by veterans, the War Ink site is by no means straightforward in the kinds of war stories it tells and

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<sup>6</sup> This phrase opens up the promotional video for the ‘War Ink Project’ to be found here: <https://vimeo.com/156191324>

the featured veterans make sense of war in their own particular and individual ways. Recurring themes and experiences, however, can be traced and here we identify and examine three: war as loss and grief; war as guilt and anger; and war as transformational and hopeful. As told through their tattoos and the accompanying narratives, all three of these war experiences are profoundly embodied and carried both (figuratively) *in* and (literally through the tattoo) *on* the body long after the individual has left the warzone. Although these themes reiterate familiar tropes and narratives of war, working with the idea of ‘ordinary curatorship’, the marking and carrying of war experiences on the body through military tattoos speaks to the specificity of how these tropes are (re)interpreted, made sense of, and told to the wider public. While familiar, the ways in which veterans individually *curate* their own bodies to carry, display and communicate their war experiences, as well as how the War Ink project organizes them, is significant as the aesthetic capturing of experience through tattoos and their display on the website demonstrates their important sense-making function for both veterans and the viewing public. For the veterans featured on War Ink, their tattoos are a way in which they seek to assert agency over their war experiences and a return to civilian life that is often riddled with difficulties, while the site as a whole operates to shape and (re)tell particular stories and understandings of war and veterans. Analyzing these tattoos and their accompanying narratives gives us insight into not only the multitude of lived experiences felt by those who practice war, but also to how it continues in the ways it is made sense of, represented and communicated.

### ***War as loss and grief***

Experiences of loss and grief feature prominently in the tattoos displayed and narrated on the War Ink site. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the loss most frequently depicted and spoken about is the loss of friends and comrades in war. Many of the featured veterans directly relate the design and/or placement of their tattoos with the deaths of those they fought alongside during deployment in Afghanistan and/or Iraq, with the tattoos often described as working to memorialize, honor or represent those who lost their lives. While some of the tattoos featured commemorate a single or specific loss, others are dedicated to a series of losses, and others still to the more generalized loss of all the “brothers and sisters that we lost over there” (Miliam quoted on War Ink, Chapter 2). Alex Dietrich-Smith (Army) has a tattoo on his forearm that is identical to one he himself tattooed on his roommate in Iraq the day before his roommate was killed by an improvised explosive device (IED) while out on patrol. Dietrich-Smith describes it as a “tribute” to his “brother” (quoted on War Ink, Chapter 3). Russell Toll’s (Army) tattoo – a

pair of hands brought together in prayer, clasping a rosary, and surrounded by stars and the words “gone, but not forgotten” in Latin – is in remembrance not of a specific death of a friend or comrade, but rather of all of those in his battalion who had “fallen in combat” during their 15 month tour in Iraq, with each star (of which there are over twenty) representing a “fallen” man (War Ink, Chapter 2). In these tattoos, the bonds, camaraderie and “warrior brotherhood” so frequently discussed in debates surrounding military service (see Harrison and Laliberté 1994; Whitworth 2004) is inked onto the skin, with familiar narratives of sacrifice, honor, and remembrance displayed and embodied.

In addition to the loss of life and comrades, the loss of limbs is also captured in the tattoos of two of the veterans featured on the site. Both John Bailey (Army) and Joel Booth (Navy) lost limbs through IED detonations while stationed in Afghanistan, with Bailey losing both legs, and Booth losing his right leg. In many ways Bailey’s tattoo is a literal representation of the moment he was injured: the black and white tattoo features a Humvee truck, engulfed in flames with the sky opening up above it. Between the sky and the truck is a pair of shoes, fashioned with wings and seemingly flying upwards towards the opening in the clouds. Bailey explains that “the one on my chest has my feet with wings. They’re in Chuck Taylors<sup>7</sup> with wings. They’re going to Heaven, so it’s like my feet are going to Heaven” (Bailey quoted in War Ink, Chapter 3). Similarly, Booth sees his tattoos as being about “documenting life experiences” (Booth quoted in 11 for 11). On Booth’s torso is a large black and white tattoo of a baby with one hand held by an angel and his right leg caught by the ‘Grim Reaper’. Below this supernatural struggle is a tombstone with Booth’s birth date and a crossed out 2007 – the year he stepped on the IED. While the leg of the baby in the Grim Reaper’s grasp is just bones – representing that his lost right leg is “dead in a sense” – in the angel’s hand is a chisel, signifying that 2007 was “not my time yet” (ibid).

While both these tattoos document the physical loss of a limb or limbs, neither Bailey nor Booth specifically position their physical loss as significant in their own narratives. Bailey recounts the IED explosion and subsequent loss of legs in a matter-of-fact, laconic fashion, identifying not this moment, but the aftermath of (his) war as the most difficult time. Upon returning home Bailey states that he “[...] got married, bought a house, got divorced a year later”. His “rock bottom” came after the war when he found himself with a gun in his mouth on more than one occasion (War Ink, Chapter 3). Booth, meanwhile, viewed the worst effect of

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Chuck Taylors’ are the original Converse ‘All Star’ shoe.

his lost leg as that of being taken away from his battalion, but also saw its loss as a corporeal and tangible sacrifice for the men he served alongside with:

Understand I would do anything, anything, for the guys in my squad and platoon, for that matter. I would have given more of my body. I'm proud of taking that IED out, so that one of my Marines didn't step on it. That's why I wanted to be a Corpsman. I wanted to be in that brotherhood (Booth quoted in War Ink, Chapter 2).

Significantly in Booth's 'sense-making' the loss of a physical part of his own soldiering body would be nothing compared to the loss of one of his comrades, the loss of a part of the "brotherhood". For him, the bodily sacrifice that war demanded of him meant that he saved his brothers from a similar fate.

The final loss and sense of grief reflected on by veterans participating in the War Ink project is the loss of their own selves. In these mediations, it is something less tangible than the loss of comrades or parts of a veteran's body, instead, participants reflect on the loss of the promise of what war was supposed to hold, of who they were before they deployed, as well as a grief of losing the capacity to experience particular feelings and emotions. Jeff Slater<sup>8</sup> (Army) talks about how his exposure to violence meant he lost his ability "to interact with the world, to understand feelings and emotions, love and care, and trust, and treatment of others" (quoted on War Ink, Chapter 3). For Slater, war made him feel "invincible, [while] at the same time it brings you to nothing" (ibid). Jose Cruz (Marine Corps), who has the US Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fi*,<sup>9</sup> tattooed across his shoulder blades talks about how combat "chips away at you...mak[ing] someone come back a little less of a person than they were before" (quoted on War Ink, Chapter 2), while Mike Ergo<sup>10</sup> (Marine Corps) similarly explains how "you feel like your soul leaves you...[and] a part of you dies back there" (Ergo quoted in War Ink, Chapter 4).

Loss and the grieving it leaves in its wake, suffuses the War Ink site and the experiences of the veterans featured. For a number of veterans on the site, their tattoos are a means to record and document these losses. Whether it is through the symbolic marking of their lost comrades or through the more literal recording of their own experiences of (physical) loss, the tattoos work to make permanent their wartime experiences. As Toll states in relation to his own tattoo:

It is an attempt to make concrete what is sometimes in my mind ethereal and what is sometimes very tangible. It's the recording of message that I intend to persist, and that message is that I

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<sup>8</sup> Slater's tattoo is described in the 'transformation and hope' section below.

<sup>9</sup> *Semper fi* is the shortened version of the Latin *semper fidelis*, meaning 'always faithful'.

<sup>10</sup> Ergo's tattoo is described in the 'guilt and anger' section below.

won't ever forget. That I acknowledge that your memories and your names and your sacrifices are a part of me that I can't erase (quoted on War Ink, Chapter 2).

The tattoos discussed both write loss onto the bodies of the veterans and into the war story that War Ink (re)constructs. These stories and tattoos of loss and grief – or “exhibits” to use Sylvester’s term – fit both within broader, more familiar war stories (of individual sacrifice, brotherhood, commemoration), and offer insights of personal, more fragmented experiences – the loss of loved ones, the breaking down of relationships, and the loss of self. Thus, through the tattoos themselves and the War Ink site, war stories of loss and grief are (re)curated as participating veterans seek to make sense of their war experiences, and narrate these experiences to the viewing public.

### *War as guilt and anger*

Running alongside and intersecting with experiences and expressions of loss on the War Ink site is the theme of how war yields feelings of guilt and anger. The most common expression of guilt is tied to that of survival, and of having come home from war when those you had deployed and fought alongside did not. Often this feeling appears to be compounded by the seeming senselessness of the deaths they have witnessed – chosen, as Toll states, “by a force [he didn’t] understand, to have fallen in combat” (quoted on War Ink, Chapter 2). For some of the veterans featured then, tattoos become a way in which to make sense of the senselessness of war and the feelings it conjures up as part of a wider process of healing.

Jonathan Snyder (Army) articulates this latter point most explicitly. Snyder’s tattoo is a familiar military motif – the ‘soldier’s cross’ – and consists of a helmet, machine gun and a pair of boots placed together to resemble a cross. During his tour of duty in Iraq, the battalion he fought with lost 14 men in nine months and like Toll, Snyder voices incomprehension as to why his fellow soldiers died and he survived. His tattoo works to commemorate their loss. For Snyder, however, the process of tattooing itself is one that helped him process his loss and make sense of his grief.

When I came home I didn’t know how to feel about the fact that my friends died and I was just fine. So I turned to tattoo for therapy. I wanted to get something to try to take the pain away. I felt like I owed them something, ‘cause you know they gave everything. So I dedicated my back to them [...] My tattoo artist is pretty much like my therapist. Honestly when I got the tattoo done I

just felt great. I just had this huge weight lifted off my shoulders (Snyder quoted in War Ink, Chapter 2).

In this narrative, Snyder emphasizes the tattoo imagery, its placement, and the corporeal act of acquiring it as all performing central roles in his personal healing process. Such an articulation resonates with what psychoanalyst Alessandra Lemma found in her study of tattooing and body modification, where it is not only the content of the tattoo that carries meaning, but the very act of marking the skin itself (Lemma 2011: 155). Thus it can be through the very physicality of tattooing – “the piercing of the skin, the flow of blood, pain, the forming of a scab, the healing of the wound and visible trace of this process of incision and closure” (Back 2007: 73) – that tattoos can perform a therapeutic function. For Snyder, the external and physical process of tattooing mirrored and assisted an internal and emotional one.

Beyond the guilt personally experienced and described by veterans featured on the War Ink site, the framing of War Ink and its curation of war can be read as working to conjure feelings of guilt for the (assumed) civilian viewing public who have not had to make these sacrifices or to endure the hardships of war. While there are numerous historical examples of political, governmental and military interventions appealing to emotions such as guilt as a means to ensure recruitment,<sup>11</sup> the guilt the public may experience while viewing War Ink is less about a failure to sign up and serve, and is instead tied to the impact of war on those veterans who have exerted violence on behalf of society (Bulmer and Jackson 2016: 27). This symbiotic relationship between society’s responsibility for declaring war and the consequences it has on those who serve is captured in Mike Ergo’s tattoo narrative. Inked onto his left wrist is an image of the angel St Michael holding the ‘Scales of Justice’. The angel is standing on the face of a dead Iraqi that Ergo explains he came across while clearing a house in Fallujah, Iraq. Ergo describes,

For a long time I saw this person’s face every single day, sometimes for every single hour of the day [...] If I had to see it, then everyone else had to see it. It was a tattoo I got out of anger (Ergo quoted in 11 for 11).

Ergo goes on to explain that he “felt confused and didn’t know how to think about how disconnected to Iraq or Afghanistan or my experiences” wider society was (Ergo quoted in 11

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<sup>11</sup> For example, during the First World War one recruitment poster featured a worried looking father seated in a chair, his daughter on his lap and his son playing with toy soldiers at his feet, with the slogan ‘Daddy, what did YOU do in the great war?’ written across the bottom. This poster, along with handing out white feathers to men yet to sign up worked to confer guilt through appealing to a sense of ‘virtuous masculinity and national service’ (White 2009: 662).

for 11), and his 'anger tattoo' was expressly taken to mitigate this disconnect and to enable communication. The communicative functions of tattoos have been long noted by those who have studied them (Sanders 1989; Kosut 2000; Back 2007), and on War Ink, wars' experiences and meanings are being curated not just for the veteran themselves, but also for the viewing public. Through their functioning as "diary entries and public announcements, conversation pieces and...memorials to the dead, [and] reminders to the self" (Mifflin, 2013: 147), the tattoos document and attempt to make sense of the oftentimes senselessness of war, while their display and framing on the War Ink site communicate and curate war for the viewing public.

### *War as transformational and hopeful*

That war is transformational is a common refrain (Harari 2008). As a phenomenon, war destroys, breaks apart and turns life upside down. Yet war is also a "generative force" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011) which can (re)produce, start anew and (re)make. While, as noted above, a number of the veterans featured on the War Ink site speak to a loss of a sense of self, or of being left with guilt and anger, war is also positioned as the catalyst for a more positive sense of personal transformation by several of the veterans. For example, Jonathan Snyder, whose commemorative tattoo is described above, talks about how his experience of fighting alongside gay service personnel shifted his political beliefs and morals. Recalling that while prior to his deployments he had been a conservative, now, he "can't do that anymore" (Snyder quoted on War Ink, Chapter 4). Snyder mentions a gay medic he served alongside, who got injured and is now confined to a wheelchair. That this man could not go home and "marry the man he loves" (ibid), forced Snyder to reconsider his previous beliefs.

For other veterans, their war experiences served to re-orientate their lives in even more profound ways. Tracey Cooper-Harris (Army) displays two tattoos. The first, on her right wrist, is a quote from President Theodore Roosevelt, which states,

Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure [...] than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.

The second, on Cooper-Harris's back, shows a phoenix rising from the flames with the words "Still I Rise" - taken from the title of a Maya Angelou poem - in Arabic underneath. Cooper-Harris, a gay woman who deployed as an animal expert with the US Army to Iraq, details a



number of challenges she faced during her time in the military and while on deployment, and what her tattoos signify in relation to them. Speaking first to her wrist tattoo, Cooper-Harris talks about being deployed prior to the repeal of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' (DADT). When Cooper-Harris got into combat situations she became unsure whether her "cousin" would be informed if something happened to her, prompting her to make the decision to leave the Army and focus her attention on changing DADT. For Cooper-Harris, to "dare mighty things" is to have the courage to "just go out there and do it" (Cooper-Harris quoted on 11 for 11). The phoenix tattoo and Angelou quote is symbolic of Cooper-Harris's survival: "[...] symbolic of surviving Don't Ask Don't Tell, surviving relationships, medical issues I've had, and I'm still I'm here" (Cooper-Harris quoted on War Ink, Chapter 4). Reflecting on her experience as a gay woman veteran of colour, Cooper-Harris talks about how she does not look like how many expect a veteran to look and how her war experiences have been called into question. The phoenix tattoo, therefore, is a reminder that "nobody can beat you down" (ibid).

Like Cooper-Harris, Jeff Slater explains his tattoo in relation to the challenges he has faced and the personal transformation it symbolizes. Tracking the whole way across the top of his chest and blending into tattoos that follow the length of his right arm, the center of Slater's tattoo is a hand grenade with the pin pulled and the word 'serenity' written above. Sprouting either side of the grenade are two feathered wings, and on his arm, illustrations of bombs, butterflies and flowers. Slater frames his time in Iraq as the "background" to his tattoo. He talks about his exposure to violence, how it "became second nature", and that when he returned home he lost everything: "I lost my fiancée, I lost my friends, I couldn't relate" (Slater quoted on War Ink, Chapter 3). His tattoos serve both as a symbol of who he is and who he wants to become. The hand grenade signifies,

[...] who I am in this world as far as, I feel like a grenade with the pin pulled. You never know when it's gonna go off, but you know eventually it does. And the wings were supposed to be my journey through this world (ibid).

Slater's tattoos, however, are not just symbolic of who he is and how he feels. They are – in his words – a way of "putting your personal goals on your body" (Slater quoted on 11 for 11). For Slater, his goal is the "creat[ion of] a new me" (Slater quoted on War Ink, Chapter 3). Speaking again about his grenade tattoo, Slater states:

I don't know who said it, but someone said, "Serenity is not freedom from the storm, yet it is peace in the storm". And that's how I feel my life is, that it's not ever gonna be perfect, and it's

gonna be battle after battle after battle [...] My job is to maintain calmness, and my emotions, through this battle (ibid).

The way the tattoo symbolizes a personal transformation in the aftermath of war is significant here. Unlike Snyder's tattoo which worked "to take the pain away", Slater's transformation – his 'new me' – is something that he is yet to achieve; a work-in-progress, and something that only began after he *left* Iraq and the Army. His tattoos are a corporeal manifestation of a self-transformative process, working as a map to, and a reminder of, the person he wishes to become: "I feel like the bomb, but I want to develop into that butterfly" (Slater quoted in 11 for 11).

For both Cooper-Harris and Slater, then, their tattoos map a self-transformative process that took place in their afterlives of war. Their tattoos curate their war experiences – of violence, DADT, facing mortality – as not something to memorialize or fix, but rather as something to overcome, move on and transform from. War, in these instances, is made sense of as a "generative force" (Barkawi and Brighton 2011) that although destructive and damaging simultaneously provokes or makes possible a new becoming or making anew.

It is not, however, just the featured tattoos that document and guide transformation. For the creator-curators of the War Ink site, Deitch and Brown, the War Ink project itself is framed as having the capacity to generate transformation, both for the individual veterans involved and between wider veteran and civilian communities. So while many of the stories documented on the site may describe the loss of friends and comrades, injury, familial and personal breakdown, and experiences of grief, guilt and anger, Deitch and Brown believe that through participation in the project veterans can begin to reclaim the "stolen happiness...stolen joy...[and] stolen life", taken from them by war (Deitch 2014). This sentiment is echoed by at least one of veterans, Jeff Slater, who says of his experiences of participating in the project:

I smiled a lot today, I don't usually smile a lot. It made me pretty happy and made me feel a lot more beautiful than I normally ever feel. I feel like a disgusting person most of the time, today kind of took all that away. I couldn't have asked for a better day (Slater quoted in 11 for 11).

Furthermore, given the site's explicit intention to promote understanding between veteran and civilian communities, for the creator-curators it is instrumental in transforming what they understand as the "fissure between the veteran community coming home from war and the civilian community" (Brown 2015: 491). Citing the 31,000 visits to the site in the first six months, 40,000 messages and comments on their Facebook page, and coverage from a range of

media outlets, Brown describes the project as an opportunity for dialogue between civilian and veteran communities (ibid: 488-89).

However, while War Ink may provide a space for veterans to tell their stories of what they have “experienced, witnessed, and endured” (ibid: 488), the transformative potential of the site may come less from the neat packaging of their tattoos and their tales in the site’s ‘chapters’, and come instead from the simultaneous ultimate “unknowability” of veteran experiences featured (Bulmer and Jackson 2016: 27). After all, the struggle for an understanding of war and its experiences is borne not just by those who have not seen or practiced it, but through a recognition that wars’ meaning is also continually struggled and negotiated by those most intimately connected to it. As war itself “resists depiction” (McLaughlin 2011: 6), the ambiguity of military tattoos as well as the messiness and contradictions of the complex assemblages of guilt, pain, loss, anger, hope, friendship, recovery and transformation they capture is testament to this. The meaning of war invites continuous curation and re-curation (Sylvester 2017) and War Ink – both because of and in spite of its profoundly mediated archive – engages in this for veterans themselves as well as the wider civilian community.

## **Conclusion**

Experiences of war do not end when an individual returns home from the battle zone or leaves the military institution. Rather, war lingers in and on the bodies and lifeworlds of those who have practiced it. Wars’ experiences can be traced in the bodily movements and responses of those exposed to combat (MacLeish 2013); in the disabled and disfigured bodies of veterans (Wool 2015); and in the fragmenting of personal and familial relationships (see Howell and Wool 2016). In this article, we argue that in addition to wars’ experiences being expressed in poetry, fiction, film and music, they can also be traced in the tattoos military service personnel ink into their skin. Military tattoos are aesthetic and embodied sense-making practices that positions the recipient not merely as subjected to wartime experience, but one who actively embodies them and seeks to assert control over them.

The War Ink project displays and documents the tattoos of 24 Californian veterans of the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Analyzing this website, the tattoos featured, and narratives of participants, we identify three recurring themes of wartime experience: war as loss and grief; war as guilt and anger; and war as transformation and hope. While these themes

reiterate familiar wartime tropes and narratives, they are significant here through the important sense-making function they perform in concert with the aesthetic representation of the tattoo. The tattoos featured commemorate, memorialize, document, atone and guide the war experiences of the wearer and their military afterlife. As such, they variously provide an outlet for grief and the senselessness of war, document and fix fleeting and ethereal experiences, honor those who died and those they served alongside, and map personal journeys to and away from war.

Sense-making through the displayed tattoos and the War Ink site, however, does not just occur in relation to the participants. Veterans willingness to feature on the site, provide narratives for their tattoos, and have their tattoos ‘read’ as military and war tattoos, suggests there is also a ‘sense-making’ taking place on the part of the viewing public – both of the veterans themselves and war more broadly. While (all) tattoos have communicative features, in this instance, it is not just the imagery and bodily placement of the tattoos that communicate, but War Ink as a project, which acts as a vehicle and ‘frames’ the tattoos and narratives of the veterans. The site selects, organizes and frames the tattoos and their narratives for the viewing public, rendering veterans visible and attempting to make war intelligible.

It is in this sense that both the featured veterans and the War Ink project as a whole can be understood as “ordinary curators” (Sylvester 2017) of war, through their exhibiting, communicating and shaping of war stories. As ordinary curators the tattooed veterans and the War Ink site tell not the “state’s story of war”, but “enlarge the scope of war as a range of experiences that extend forward and backward from that soldier” (Sylvester 2017: 10). While War Ink does – in-line with broader post-9/11 North American national discourses – valorize, honor and praise military service, stories are told not just of battlefield exploits, but also of war’s long reach and “touch” (Sylvester 2013), as well as the multiplicity of its e/affects. The stories are as much about how war is carried (and continued) far away from where it is fought, and how it continues to shape the lives of those who practice it. “Paying heed” to these ordinary curators and their knowledge (Sylvester 2017: 11) is therefore important for they not only remind us how “international relations manifest[s] in [and on] the bodies and actions of those who are out in the often violent international” (ibid: 10), but also of the impossibility of ever truly fixing or knowing these experiences. War Ink thus offers a site both to curate and re-curate war and the opportunity for veterans and viewers alike to trace its messiness and ambiguities, and with this ensure that the experiences, bodies and individuals of war remain central to our thinking and imagining of it.

### **Acknowledgements:**

The authors wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article, as well as the editorial team at IPS for their support. We would also like to thank the participants of ISA Atlanta 2016 where the beginnings of this article was first presented, and to Kevin McSorley for drawing our attention to this website in the first place. Julia Welland would like to thank The Leverhulme Trust whose Early Career Fellowship (ECF-2016-513) has allowed her to carry out this research.

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