Women, War and Home in Contemporary American Drama

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Stanton B. Garner Jr., Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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Dixie L. Thompson
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Women, War and Home in Contemporary American Drama

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Coralyn Foults Nottingham

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Abstract

This dissertation explores an emerging body of work in dramatic literature: the woman-authored war play. Building on the overlooked tradition of women’s war writing, a number of contemporary American women playwrights have written theatrical responses to war, particularly the Vietnam War and the conflicts in the Middle East. These plays share a common theme: home. Although most of them address war by dramatizing soldiers, civilians involved in the war, or actual war settings, these plays also comment on families or domestic issues, complicating depictions of soldiers and the war itself. This dissertation places women’s war plays within broader conversations about American war culture, the myth that war belongs to men, and the question of what constitutes authentic war narratives. Because dramatic war literature continues to have a dialogue with itself and culturally embedded ideas about war, chapter one explores David Rabe’s Vietnam War trilogy, a pillar of contemporary American war literature. By challenging the masculinized view of war, Rabe’s trilogy anticipates the concerns of contemporary women playwrights in terms of gender and the domestic. Chapter two considers how Emily Mann, Lydia Stryk, and Quiara Alegría Hudes each depict men’s relationships to their families after they return from war and the family’s role in their reintegration. Chapter three argues that women playwrights—Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage, and Danai Gurira—take up the inheritance of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage* by rejecting top-down narratives of war. Instead, they portray war from the perspectives of those without control over its events, particularly women. Finally, chapter four examines women-authored plays with female soldiers. Plays by Ellen McLaughlin, Helen Benedict, and Lindsey Ferrentino extend the critique of traditional war narratives by considering the experiences and concerns of these soldiers. Although women dramatists have received theatrical accolades for their war plays, it is
important that their contributions be incorporated in scholarly discussions of contemporary U.S. drama.
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Introduction

When I read Quiara Alegría Hudes’ *Water by the Spoonful* (2011), I was struck by two things. First, I was excited that a play featuring an Iraq War veteran addressed the issue of opioid addiction alongside the more “expected” issue of veterans who carry the ghosts of war. Second, I am chagrined to say that I was surprised that a woman had written a war play. This response warranted further exploration, which has been a goal of this project. Women have written about American wars at least as far back as the Civil War. As is often the case, women’s literature about war tends not to be included in the canon. In her book on women’s writing during the Civil War, Elizabeth Young addresses this issue with the example of Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*. Crane was born after the war had ended, but his novel was then lauded as “the most ‘authentic’ of Civil War novels” by the subsequent generation (2). Although women wrote many Civil War texts, Young argues that their writings were not accorded value due to the form they took—letters and diaries—and that, because of this, the Civil War was later masculinized in fiction. Young counters this narrative by pointing out that women wrote about the war while it was going on, while the masculinized literary tradition did not exist until after the war ended.

Compounding the issue of authenticity, the editors of the essays in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* link the process by which the canon was created to the exclusion of women’s wartime writing, which had “passed into obscurity” (13). They argue that the world wars changed war literature because authors like Wilfred Owen “were so imbued with the classics, they became the new keepers of the canon. And despite the fact that their writings exposed the mythical quality of received notions of masculinity, they could not help creating fresh myths that were also identifiably masculine” (Higonnet et. al 13). When women did write about war, they “rel[ied] on indirection, or writing ‘slant’” in order to write on “forbidden
subjects,” like gendered violence (Higonnet et. al 15). While these texts have been forgotten, men’s intense narratives of war from their own experiences “passed directly into the canon of twentieth-century war literature” (Higonnet et. al 13).

Although women have produced literary and non-fictional responses to war, the cultural assumption is that men write about war because men can be soldiers and have a privileged access to war even when they have not seen it firsthand. The issue, then, seems to be a notion of authority rooted in gender assumptions. Readers and audiences trust men to provide an “authentic” war experience in their fiction. In the published version The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel (1971), David Rabe describes the war experiences that led him to write the play. In fact, as Toby Silverman Zinman points out, the “biographical notes” for Vietnam War plays always include a comment about war experiences if the playwright is a veteran (“Search and Destroy” 7). But women, too, are attuned to a culture at war and write fiction about it. The very first paragraph of Quiara Alegría Hudes’s introduction to Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue (2005) essentially gives her credentials. Her uncle and cousin both served, and the character Elliot is based on her cousin. Yet even when both men and women playwrights offer their credentials men’s accounts are trusted and receive less negative criticism, whereas women’s accounts of war often remain buried in history. The issue of who is “allowed” to write war fiction raises two points that I hope to address over the course of my dissertation: the assumption that war belongs to men and the relationship between home and war, a topic that is central to women’s exploration of war.

**War as the Domain of Men**

In the prevailing cultural imagination, war is the purview of men. Men have historically been soldiers, generals, and leaders. Boys left home for war to become men. Accordingly, Jennifer Haytock argues, the male perspective on war and the idea that war makes men out of
boys is a major feature of war novels and the culture that produced it. In many of the World War I government propaganda texts that Haytock analyzes, women were expected to support the war effort through good domestic practices—but not with direct participation. Women, it was assumed, were the watchers of war from the home front. As Jean Gallagher points out, war is a gendering activity, and when wars are being fought, gender roles fall along traditional lines: women watching and men participating. Gallagher argues that women have been positioned to be the privileged spectators of war throughout history (3). However, as Haytock and others point out, women have participated in war as nurses, clerks, and volunteers to support the effort (xvii). Women were first given an official position in the military in 1901, with the creation of the Army Nurse Corps. (Iskra 163). It was not until 2016 that they were allowed to take combat roles, even though many found ways to participate in the fighting. Although these and other women have written about war, however, their accounts are more easily (and perhaps intentionally) forgotten and erased.

Cinema has contributed significantly to the masculinization of war and combat since World War II. The view of war that its films advance persevered even though the moral certainties about war would change with subsequent conflicts. As Andrew Pulver comments in his article about Hollywood’s fascination with World War II films, although the war ended in 1945, “the film world has never stopped fighting” by continuing to make movies about it. In his book *Guts and Glory: The Making of the Military Image in Film*, Lawrence Suid comments that until the mid-60s, most Americans felt like they lived in a “peace-loving nation” that only went to war out of necessity, even though that same country detonated a nuclear bomb to end World War II (2). Suid goes on to say, “As long as the nation remained unvanquished on the battlefield, this ambiguity in its national character could be safely ignored” (2). Thus, World War II movies
were pro-military because Americans felt that their involvement in the war was just, necessary, and, best of all, resulted in a decisive victory. Many of these great World War II movies (such as *The Great Escape* [1963] and *A Bridge Too Far* [1977]) continued to be made in subsequent decades and shown on television because they offered a vision of a morally righteous country in contrast to the moral ambiguity of the nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War. Moreover, the images of war and military excellence that World War II films perpetuated was profoundly influential on the next generation of soldiers who would go on to fight in Vietnam. In his essay on Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series and other World War II propaganda, Ian Scott quotes Douglas Gallez writing about World War II propaganda during the Korean War saying, “Much of the content of *Why We Fight* hits us with great impact even today” (qtd. in Scott 243). The “great impact” of military propaganda, in the case of Capra’s films, and the vision of a competent, righteous military campaign shown in many World War II films created a generation who thought their war would be like their parents’ war: good and just. The constructed image of war from World War II films and documentaries, however, did not prepare soldiers for Vietnam. Vietnam did not have the same moral certainty and instead demonstrated how corrosive and devastating war can be for everyone involved.

While Vietnam War movies, such as *Platoon* (1986) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978), often critiqued the morality of that war, they still perpetuated the idea that war belonged to men. In his introduction to the essay collection *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, Michael Anderegg notes, “Cinematic representations, in short, seem to have supplanted even so-called factual analyses as the discourse of the war” (1). The essays in this collection note that Hollywood *created* an image of the Vietnam War experience because this was preferable to actual accounts of that war. As Susan White argues in her essay on Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal*
Jacket (1987), the vision propagated by these films was overwhelmingly masculine, and it contained the “violent rejection of the female, of the radically ‘other’” (206). As the essays in Why We Fought: America’s Wars in Film and History and other studies such as The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture by Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard argue, this cinematic perspective, in particular, has molded our contemporary construction of war. Although there have been fewer films made about the Vietnam War than World War II, Hollywood nevertheless produced enduring films, such as Apocalypse Now (1979) and Rambo (1982), that were commercially successful and influential. It is hard to imagine that the playwrights that I will discuss in this study were not influenced by this omnipresent construction of war in American culture. World War II, Vietnam, and other war movies glorified combat and military prowess, along with masculine spaces and male comradery. The masculine war experience has always existed, but films solidified the male emphasis in the twentieth century and continued to exclude women in a culture that was primed to absorb such a narrative uncritically. Contemporary theatre, this dissertation argues, challenges the masculine war narrative, in conjunction with the narratives of women involved in warfare, such as the female soldier.

War and Home

Among the women-authored war plays written about the Vietnam War and the wars in the Middle East there is a dominant theme: home. War and home, obviously, have a close relationship. Wars have been fought to preserve, protect, or expand the home. Plays since the 1990s demonstrate, among other ideas, that war has become part of the fabric of American society and, too, part of American domesticity. Although most of the contemporary playwrights covered in this study address war by dramatizing soldiers, civilians involved in the war, or actual war settings, they also comment on families or domestic issues, complicating depictions of
soldiers and the war itself. These plays are not necessarily anti-war plays, such as Terrance McNally’s one-act *Botticelli* (1968), which takes place on a battlefield and comments on the atrocities American soldiers committed in Vietnam, or John DiFusco et. al.’s *Tracers* (1985), which seeks to tell the terrible truth about the Vietnam War while describing the soldiers’ experiences in the war zone. A good example of the relationship between home and war in contemporary war plays is *Water by the Spoonful*. By following a soldier’s reintegration to American society, Hudes’s play deals with the consequences of war on the character’s life and on his family. While its plot centers on Elliot, an Iraq veteran who works at a sandwich shop while addicted to opioids due to a war injury, it also includes the death of Elliot’s mother and the unresolved conflicts within the family itself. In other words, war is in conflict with and superseded by the family drama in the play. The second and third plays in Hudes’s trilogy (*Water* and *The Happiest Song Plays Last* [2013]) are much more concerned with the family dynamic rather than Elliot’s military service. Elliot’s service functions as a through-line for the trilogy, then, rather than the center of the plot. Similarly, Naomi Wallace’s *In the Heart of America* (1994) demonstrates the ways in which hate flourishes on the home-front of America, even as hate and fear fuel actions on the war-front. Heather Raffo’s *9 Parts of Desire* (2003) draws attention to women living in Iraq and the consequences of war for them, and the play portrays the daily lives of these women though monologues. War plays written during the Iraq and Afghanistan war period exhibit a dynamic relationship between the home front and the war front that is developed further than in the Vietnam War plays. The increased attention on home in these and other plays by contemporary women playwrights reflects the normalization of war on the home front, changes in the relationship between war and home, and the increased gender inclusion (introduced by female soldiers, playwrights, and spectators).
Brief Historical Overview of the War Play Genre

The twentieth and twenty-first century plays this study examines draw upon a long history of western war dramatic literature. In many ways, war plays are as old as theatre itself, as many of the earliest surviving Greek plays focus on war and its aftereffects. In Agamemnon (458 B.C.E.), the title character returns from the Trojan War and suffers from the consequences of his wife’s anger because, on the way to the war, he sacrificed their only daughter, Iphigenia, to ensure a safe journey. In Antigone (442 B.C.E.), the events of the plot follow from a civil war in which two brothers, Eteokles and Polynikes, died fighting. War is even a subject for that baser form, comedy. In Lysistrata (411 B.C.E.), the women of Athens and Sparta stop the Peloponnesian War through domestic means by refusing to have sex with their husbands and occupying the Acropolis. The women seek to return social order to the way it was before the war, further demonstrating the complex—and dynamic—relationship between home and war. War continued to be a fertile ground for plays throughout the Renaissance. William Shakespeare’s plays often feature war. From the histories (Henry IV, Part I [1596-1597] and Henry V [1599]) to the tragedies (King Lear [1605-1606] and Macbeth [1606-1607]), the actions men take and the decisions they make in war reveal their characters and their flaws. In Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (1587), an unnamed conflict between Spain and Portugal becomes the context for the revenge play. War also provides the play with its narrators—a Spanish knight killed in battle and the allegorical figure of Revenge. Like Shakespeare’s Henry V, Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine (1587-1588) uses the historical figure of the warrior king to explore human emotions and motives, which are exacerbated in this case by Tamburlaine’s social status and his willingness to wage war. With the beginning of the twentieth century, war continues to be a generative setting and plot device, in plays such as George Bernard Shaw’s Arms and the
Man (1894) and Heartbreak House (1919), and the destructive effects of war spurred movements, such as Futurism and Dadaism.

**War Play Scholarship**

Despite their prominence throughout history, however, war plays are under studied by theatre and drama scholars. *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolutions in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era* by J.W. Fenn is a rare book-length study of Vietnam War drama and the theatre movements associated with it. Fenn groups the Vietnam War plays into three broad categories: plays of initiation, experience, and homecoming. Fenn’s analysis provides a way of comparing how the women-authored contemporary war plays I examine converse with and comment on the war play genre. Fenn argues that the Vietnam War-era plays often derived their “dramatic tension…from the frustrations caused by the clash of cultural perspectives” (196). Women playwrights writing on Iraq and Afghanistan have built upon the genre that Fenn examines. For example, Lydia Stryk’s *American Tet* utilizes a clash of perspectives, but not between Americans who ignore the war and veterans, as the Vietnam War-era plays often depict. Instead, *American Tet* shows that there are perspectives about war (both the Vietnam and Iraq wars) that cannot be reconciled, but what can be agreed upon is that war is damaging to everyone involved. There are even fewer critical works available on war plays written in the last twenty years. Jeanne Colleran’s book *Theatre and War: Theatrical Responses Since 1991* discusses this group of plays in terms of the spectatorship of war, as displayed by the media and news outlets. She investigates the intersections between war, politics, media, information, theatre, and performance in order “to investigate how the media, beginning with the Persian Gulf War, has altered political analysis and how this alteration has in turn affected socially critical art” (6). According to Colleran, in other words, media and politics alter the perception of war for
audiences back home in the U.S. The year 1991 marks a historical moment because “the media not only conveyed information about the war but also became the instrument of it” (13). Theatre and War covers a wide range of war plays, and it is tightly focused on media and war. However, it is also important to bring the focus back to the plays themselves. What can this body of work say about war, home, and various people’s perspectives on this experience? What, why, and how are female playwrights asking audiences to “look here” on stage with their war plays?

Asking the audience to “look here” is an important aspect of contemporary women-authored war plays. In addressing the issue of spectatorship and war, I have been influenced by Wendy Kozol’s discussion of photography and photojournalism, Distant Wars Made Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing. In this study, Kozol tackles the problem of whether “visual advocacy,” which for her includes photography featuring people who suffer during conflicts, is effective (7). She concludes that it is effective because, among other reasons, photographers can redirect attention away from media generalizations and the pronouncements of nations “toward the ground, to pictures of casualties and destruction” that everyday people suffer—as well as “normative” depictions of peoples’ lives in conflict zones (199). As a result, the visual advocacy and rhetoric of the photographers she discusses demonstrates “how visual cultures of war can and do enable acts of recognition (potentially) less invested in Western, white, and heteronormative framework” (206). Kozol advocates an ethical spectatorship that circumvents or interferes with “a narrative of victimization” being put upon the subjects of human suffering in photographs (5). As photography documents these sufferings and “expose[s] the human costs of military conflict,” the subjects of photographs “retain powerful cultural authority as embodied witnesses” (6). The line between an ethical spectatorship and a spectatorship that victimizes people who are suffering or have suffered from a military conflict is thin, Kozol suggests.
Theatre is a powerful medium for ethical spectatorship because it gives voice to those who have suffered and allows them to speak for themselves, which subverts the dynamic of victimization and other types of categorization. In her discussion of onstage violence against women in Lynn Nottage’s play *Ruined* and a performance piece by the Indian-American Navarasa Dance Theatre Company, Ketu Katrak argues that both theatrical encounters position the audience to be “active witnesses” (31). These performances, she maintains, elicit emotional responses from her audience in order to transform them from spectators to active witnesses who will begin “working outside theatre for social justice” (31–31). *Ruined*, as I will describe in chapter three, was explicitly written with this idea in mind. According to Katrak, the power of *Ruined* results from Nottage’s own attempts to be an active witness and to make space for the stories of women involved in conflict. While not all the plays and playwrights under discussion here went to the lengths that Nottage did to give a voice to disenfranchised women, women playwrights are often driven by social injustice and unheard perspectives on war, which range from the abuse that women suffer at the hands of their veteran husbands to criticism of the military from its own members. Positioning the audience to be witnesses for the narratives is something that theatre does well when it comes to trauma and violence, as the playwrights discussed here demonstrate.¹

**Gender Parity in Theatre**

The subject of women playwrights is also important because theatre remains one of the places in American society in which the gender gap remains wide. In 2002, Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett released their research into the status of women in theatre, which was funded by the New York State Council on the Arts. Although their research reached back to 1975, the

¹ I am thinking of Graley Herren’s article about trauma in Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*. He argues that the woman who is abused by her uncle from an early age is able to take control of her story through the performance of her memories and, therefore, resist traditional ideas about victimhood, particularly those that surround sexual abuse.
most recent season they looked at (2001-2002) showed that 17% of plays being produced in regional and Off-Broadway theatres were written by women and 16% of directors were women (Jonas and Bennett). The highest numbers in their statistics for women’s involvement in theatre came in the 1994-5 season, with 17% for women playwrights and 19% for women directors (Jonas and Bennett). More recent numbers have been published for the last few years by American Theatre. In the 2017-2018 season, 36% of new plays were written by women and 53% by men, with 11% cowritten (Weinert-Kendt, “The Gender Count”). However, only 26% of the total 1,917 productions—which includes the new, revival, and classic play categories—were written by women. In the following season, the numbers continued to improve, according to American Theatre. In the 2018-2019 season, women wrote 30% of the 2,085 plays being produced, and 40% of the new plays produced (Weinert-Kendt, “This Year’s Gender”).

Although the gender gap has narrowed since 1975, forty-five years is quite a bit of time for the total percentage of produced plays written by women to not reach at least 50% and consistently come in at about 30%. True, the number of new plays by women demonstrates an increase—by six percentage points since this project began—but theaters are still producing many more plays by men. Jonas, one of the authors of New York State Council on the Arts report on gender in theatre, wrote an article called “The Other Canon” about her own lack of exposure to women playwrights in her education and career. This “long miseducation,” she argues, was a product of the focus on canonical plays in American theatre, which are largely written by men. At the bottom of both pages of the article, Jonas provides a list of plays by women, which comprised a syllabus she created for a class on women playwrights at New York University. The list, she says, “is not comprehensive. It hardly makes a dent in the wealth of material. But perhaps it is useful as a primer or point of entry” (53). Furthermore, Jonas argues, studying “the other canon”
of women playwrights is “inseparable from advocacy for living female playwrights” (53). While gender parity is still a dream and a goal, from the latter part of the twentieth century through the early twenty-first century, female playwrights have received more attention and accolades, as the Pulitzer Prize in Drama demonstrates with its nominees and award winners. The uptick in women receiving attention from the Pulitzer committee, which is only one measuring stick of success, began around 1998 when Paula Vogel won the award. Subsequently, Margret Edison won in 1999, Suzan-Lori Parks was nominated in 2000 and won in 2002, Quiara Alegría Hudes was nominated twice before winning in 2012, and Lynn Nottage won in 2009 and 2017.

At the same time that women playwrights began to receive positive, critical attention the U.S. entered its longest conflict. When Hudes was nominated for the first play in her trilogy about an Iraq veteran in 2007, the U.S. had been in Afghanistan for six years and in Iraq for four. By the time she won the Pulitzer for her second play in her trilogy in 2012, the U.S. had wound down the mission in Iraq, officially ending that war in December 2011, and started shifting away from its combat mission in Afghanistan. Sharon Friedman had already noticed a trend of women writing war plays in her 2010 article “The Gendered Terrain in Contemporary Theatre of War by Women,” a rise she attributes to women using war to talk about the visibility of women in conflict and “to foreground ideologies of gender inscribed on bodies and transformed into brutal practices in communities engaged in violent conflict” (594-5). Theatre, she concludes, brings awareness to gender violence and the harm that war often brings to women (Friedman 595). Friedman’s article most directly answers the feminist question, “Where are women during war?” Simply put, women are writing war plays to bring attention to the plight of women in

2 Although feminists often ask this question, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention Cynthia Enloe in connection with this question in a dissertation about women and war. Enloe’s groundbreaking work in political science and history started with that simple question, and since 1983 when Does Khaki Become You? The
militarized zones, to scrutinize the militarization of women’s lives, and to discuss “the sexualized dynamics of armed conflict in which women’s bodies become weapons of war” (Friedman 594). Women and the home do not exist apart from the front lines of war in contemporary plays.

**Chapter Outlines**

The aim of this study is to take stock of war plays written by women and to explore the issues engaged by this emerging body of work. The chapters that follow place women’s war plays into a larger conversation about American war culture, the myth that war belongs to men, and the question of what constitutes “authentic” war narratives. Women are bringing their perspectives of war to the stage, and as people who live in a culture at war, they are attuned to issues and narratives that deserve critical attention. What is at stake with this project is that women’s war writing has been historically erased. Although women are receiving accolades for their plays, their works must be studied in order to solidify the importance of their experiences and perspectives in contemporary U.S. drama.

Although this dissertation focuses on women-authored war plays, I begin, somewhat counter-intuitively, with a male playwright. David Rabe’s plays are pillars of contemporary American war plays, and playwrights who write war plays after his can be seen as having a long, continuing dialogue with his works. I do not mean to suggest that U.S. playwrights writing about war speak directly to Rabe. Instead, this dissertation finds that war stories converse with each other because the U.S. has a deeply embedded idea about what war is, what it does, and what it looks like. Because Rabe is a central figure in the Vietnam-era reassessment of these ideas, his plays are a useful starting point for applying them to theatre. In important ways, I hope to show

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*Militarization of Women’s Lives*, Enloe has continued to answer that question. Many feminist scholars have set out on the path she forged.
Rabe’s male-oriented depictions of war anticipate the concerns of contemporary women playwrights in terms of gender and the domestic. Focusing on Rabe’s Vietnam War trilogy—*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971), *Sticks and Bones* (1971), and *Streamers* (1976)—I demonstrate that even in plays by men, home can be a place that supports and bolsters the male soldier. In Rabe’s combat play, some of the characters see home as a place to continue their close male bonds that were developed at war. Moreover, home is not an exclusively feminized space, and men, too, need a place where they belong and people who care for them. However, the possibility that home can serve as the antidote for the trauma of war is unfulfilled across the trilogy. Home can be a dangerous place, especially when the people who reside in it are more interested in keeping the war from infiltrating their home life. To put Rabe’s gender-fluid conceptualization of home into relief, I explore Sam Shepard’s *States of Shock* (1991). Shepard places the root cause of war squarely on the shoulders of men’s perceived inferiority and the timeless battle between fathers and sons. Essentially, war is about men’s violent relationships with each other, which follows the traditional, male-oriented approach to war.

The second chapter examines how women playwrights depict men’s relationships with home and their family after war. Homecoming narratives have been part of the war play genre since the Greeks, but the plays under discussion in the chapter offer fresh, relevant perspectives on this tradition that concern women as well as men. Another foundational Vietnam War play, Emily Mann’s documentary-style play *Still Life* (1980) connects domestic violence to the war. In a series of interconnected monologues that were created from interviews Mann did with a veteran, his wife, and his mistress, the characters relate their experiences of the veteran’s unsuccessful reintegration. In the play, Mark has returned home from Vietnam, met and married his wife, and has had trouble adjusting to domestic life. He abuses his wife and tells the audience
that he has made his home into a battlefield. Twenty-five years after *Still Life*’s premiere, Lydia Stryk’s *American Tet* (2004) portrays how one Vietnam War veteran has fared with his homecoming and his attempts to assist his active duty son who is home on leave. One of the things that make this play and Stryk’s approach to the subject interesting is that she examines the war from the perspective of those who are inside the military culture and those characters offer critiques of war. What is more, the Vietnam War veteran in Stryk’s play uses the domestic practice of gardening to help cope, which is a strategy he tries to pass onto his son. Around the same time, the first of play of Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Elliot Trilogy* also premiered. With the numerous productions and accolades that the *Elliot Trilogy* has received, Hudes’s trilogy provides another foundation for contemporary war plays. Not only does the trilogy follow the reintegration of a soldier and how his family helped him in that process, it is another trilogy about war. As Rabe’s trilogy did for the Vietnam War era, Hudes captures concerns that are particular to U.S. conflicts in the Middle East. Elliot’s story imagines how a veteran can successfully reintegrate into society. Though he cannot be relieved of the guilt he feels for his actions at war, he finds a way to live with it and takes up a role in his community that will help others. My analysis throughout the chapter draws attention to domestic practices that are performed to assist the soldier in his reintegration and the role of his family in this process.

In my third chapter, I explore how women playwrights have utilized two important aspects of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the most well-known modern war play and one that uses a woman character in its war critique. Contemporary women playwrights have taken up two important threads presented in *Mother Courage*. The first is the bottom-up approach to war narratives, which rejects the top-down view of war in many historical accounts of war. Like *Mother Courage*, the plays I use to explore this thread—Paula Vogel’s *A Civil War*
Christmas (2008) and Suzan-Lori Parks’ Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3 (2015)—focus on the events and outcomes of war for those on the bottom. Both plays are set during the Civil War and provide different accounts through the eyes of the most vulnerable. Vogel dramatizes the last, harrowing steps towards the North and freedom for an enslaved woman and her daughter, along with their eventual reunification in Washington D.C. Vogel also shows how one man extends his hand to his enemy, providing a hopeful model for peace from those on the bottom rung of war. The second thread comes from the first in that women’s experiences of war are different from men and deserve to be narrativized. To explore this thread, I use Lynn Nottage’s Ruined (2008) and Danai Gurira’s Eclipsed (2009). After listening to the stories of Congolese refugee women, Nottage dramatized parts of their experiences and used Brecht’s Mother Courage as inspiration for the play. Like Courage, Mama Nadi tries to make a living for herself and the women who work for her while living in a strip of contested territory. Mama Nadi makes the rules in her bar and navigates the shifting tides of war that eventually intrude upon her space. The women in Ruined have suffered, and the play reveals how these disenfranchised women bear the heaviest cost of the war and survive on the margins. Set during the Second Liberian Civil War, Gurira’s Eclipsed also portrays disenfranchised women who bear the cost of war and gives them a voice. The play follows a fifteen-year-old girl after she is brought to a warlord’s hut in which his “wives” live. After she is raped, the girl becomes a wife and tries to break out of her situation by following in the footsteps of another former wife to become a fighter. At the end of the play, the war is ending, but the fate of the women depicted is unclear. What is clear is that no matter what choices they make, those who are most vulnerable bear the lasting costs of the war. These plays reject the top-down, traditional war narrative and make space for women who are also in warzones and have been harmed by its violence.
In the fourth chapter, I turn my attention to the female soldier. This figure has become a lightning rod for many issues, including military culture, sexual assault, and gender roles. The female soldier puts the domestic on stage in a way that male soldiers never will. The plays with female soldiers that I will discuss are Ellen McLaughlin’s *Ajax in Iraq* (2008), Helen Benedict’s *The Lonely Soldier Monologues* (2009), and Lindsey Ferrentino’s *Ugly Lies the Bone* (2015). These plays and the female soldiers in them continue to address themes that are explored in the first three chapters, particularly concerning the importance of veterans’ families and depicting those who bear the cost of war. However, portraying female soldiers adds to these issues. In both *Ajax in Iraq* and *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*, war has changed these female soldiers, but in a way that is different than men; the plays dramatize the sexual assault and harassment that women soldiers experience from their male comrades. McLaughlin compares the rape and betrayal that A.J., the female soldier, suffers at the hands of her sergeant to the betrayal that Sophocles’s Ajax suffers. The play is a mash-up between these stories (and others regarding the Iraq War), and A.J. and Ajax synchronously commit suicide at the end of the play. Continuing the documentary-play tradition, Benedict created her play from interviews that she did with female U.S. soldiers who served in Iraq. Many of the women experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault and had a difficult time reintegrating after their service. The final play under discussion, *Ugly Lies the Bone*, is a departure from the other plays because it centers on issues other than sexual assault. Jess, the recovering veteran, must navigate the changes in her life back home and in her identity. I conclude the dissertation with the female soldier because she closes the arc that began with Rabe’s male soldiers, furthering and transforming the rejection of the traditional war narrative. Moreover, these plays demonstrate, sexual assault is only one of the many issues that surround the female soldier. Finally, at the end of this chapter, I consider whether the female-
authored war play can be considered its own genre and the themes that have emerged in this investigation of women-authored war plays.

**Conclusion to the Introduction**

The first part of this project brings together plays written about Vietnam and during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. These periods can be paired quite well because these conflicts are the longest in U.S. history. Moreover, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Afghanistan War all denied the U.S. a decisive victory. The common narrative regarding Vietnam is that it still haunts the U.S. With the Vietnam War, something significant happened on the home front and to the way that Americans looked at their identity as a country, especially since the nearly twenty-year war was a divisive conflict at home. The same statement can be made about the U.S.’s involvement in the Middle East. These changes had pronounced cultural consequences. During World War II, as Elaine Tyler May argues in her book *Homeward Bound*, Americans practiced containment culture—the idea that stability within American homes and family units would translate into security for the nation—as a way to mitigate fears about nuclear war (9). “The domestic ideology [of containment culture],” she explains, “encouraged private solutions to social problems” (199). However, as the Baby Boomers came of age and were forced to contend with Vietnam, the war of their generation, containment culture “began to crumble under its own weight,” as “postwar domesticity never delivered on its promises” of a safer country (199). As May argues, containment culture ended with the Boomers and the culture wars that sprang from the residence to its domestic ideology, particularly among women. However, May contends that the ghost of containment culture and the Cold War has come back to haunt the U.S. with the “war on terror.” The Cold War provided a “model” for the administration of President George W. Bush (May 218). She goes on to say that Bush quickly declared war, even though “the
criminals responsible for the attacks represented no country…. As has been true of all wars waged by the United States since World War II, Congress did not declare war. But few politicians or commentators questioned the president’s unofficial declaration of war” (May 219).

At home, May points out that the Bush administration used “the language of the cold war” to urge Americans to become “citizen-sentinels” and protect their homes, once more directing Americans to “contain” their families as a way to mitigate the danger presented by external threats and the war on terror (226). While the plays discussed in this dissertation do not comment on containment culture or, with some exceptions, the frustrations of an unwinnable war, they insist that attention must be paid to soldiers returning home and supporting their reintegration. Moreover, as I have mentioned, these plays ask audiences to look at the injustice and harm that war causes.

What also makes the Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan war periods important to this study is the increasing number of plays being written and produced about them. Refusing to allow us to look away from war or its consequences, these plays demonstrate that war has become part of the fabric of our society. Since the early 1990’s, there has been an upward trend in the number of plays about war, with a sharper turn upward in the 2000’s. In 2012, theatre critic Don Aucoin commented on the rise of war plays, explaining the trend by observing that the U.S.’s activities in Iraq and Afghanistan provide “no shortage of dramatic material for contemporary playwrights” (Aucoin). In another indication of the increasing number of new war plays, American Theatre published a special issue dedicated to the subject in March 2017. The issue discussed veterans coming home and participating in theatre as actors and as playwrights, as well as the creation of theatre-therapy for veterans. Brad Pitchford, a veteran turned playwright, made a call for plays that dramatize veterans’ and soldiers’ lives beyond PTSD. As part of this general
“surge,” war plays by women are being written and produced in increasing numbers. The time is right, I argue, for a full-scale consideration of these works.
Chapter 1: Encountering Home in War Plays by Men

In contemporary society, home and domestic spaces carry the idea of a location in which a family resides, with the affects and effects of home like love, care, and the kitchen table. Traditionally, that space has been feminized. In the introduction to their edited collection of essays *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*, Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows historicize the gendering of the domestic and private sphere, saying that with the formation of the private sphere and the identification of it with women in the late eighteenth century, “domesticity emerged as an ideology that legitimized these new gender inequalities” that were created within the private sphere in Anglo-American culture (3). Thus, “the private sphere was imagined as feminine—the ‘proper’ place for women,” and the practice and elevation of domesticity followed (4). Good domestic habits became a moral imperative and part of social status (Gillis and Hollows 5). However, the spheres are not as clearly divided as the cultural narrative makes it seem. Indeed, Ann Romines argues in her book on domestic labor in women’s 19th century novels that domestic habits became an art for women to practice and in which to take pride (18). Romines suggests that attending to domestic tasks became a way for women to add to their cultural value, thus making their writing about women’s private tasks political. The delineation between private and public is much greyer than it appears. Jean Gallagher contends that war is a gendering activity, making the central claim in her book on women’s art during the world wars that men wage war, and women are positioned to be the spectators of war (3). Although Gallagher takes up the idea of spectatorship when examining her subjects and explores the female gaze on war, her introduction makes clear that when war happens, society stratifies gender roles on traditional lines, especially in American and European societies. Thus, when looking at war plays, it is important to examine the emergence of home and domesticity within
them because they should be examined just as thoroughly as the war elements; war has gendered both the home front and the war front, and both are constructs of ideology. Gender and systems of power intersect on stage in war plays, making home a necessary and powerful analytical lens on socio-political reality.

The tension between the reality of war—in that both men and women are involved in it—and cultural narratives reinforced by dominant ideology converge to create contradictions about the place of home while at war, particularly for masculinities associated with the military. My analysis and examination of how David Rabe’s plays explore soldiers’ relationships to home and domestic tasks draws upon research done by Jennifer Haytock. In her book *At Home, at War: Domesticity and World War I in American Literature*, she contends that domestic novels written during World War I should be read intertextually with war novels, as they rely on domestic concepts to make their critique of war and demonstrate their disillusionment with the war (118). Haytock argues, “Home is a powerful, compelling construct, and the rituals that it requires and evokes make profound statements about the social, political, and emotional needs of the people who exist in it. Home defines and is defined by its social and political context” (117). Haytock’s research echoes my historization of feminism and home. Haytock examines novels and focuses her attention on how war novels and their male authors must use domesticity. She argues that domesticity is complicated and full of nuance, but also that the idea of home is something that both men and women need. Still, “[w]ith the gendering of the home comes a value inscription by which the home becomes secondary to whatever world is defined as ‘masculine’” (118). Haytock found in her research that the domestic was treasured because it is “the known, defined, and predictable,” while “war is the unknown, unexpected, and unpredictable” (118). She found that domestic tasks and actions on the war front “fulfill human needs for meaning, security, and a
sense of belonging,” like they do at home (118). Likewise, a home should bring to mind feelings of community, care, and a sense of belonging within the world. War complicates these feelings. However, as Susan Jeffords writes in the introduction to her influential book, masculinity can be “used to refer to the set of images, values, and interests held important to a successful achievement of male adulthood in American cultures…it remains consistently opposed to the ‘feminine’” (xii). Therefore, feminine “characteristics must be discarded in order to actualize masculinity” (xii). If home is deemed to be feminine, then it and its associative tasks and feelings must be sacrificed to the masculine pursuit of war. A character like Rabe’s Pavlo Hummel would certainly agree with this, and his constant rejection of what he deemed to be feminine attributes contributes to his death.

Therefore, it is even more important to analyze how Rabe treats the subject and concept of home within his war plays. Most of the plays in this dissertation treat war as a problem, but it is a problem we have not yet solved; neither do these plays provide the answer. Although Dorothy Chansky takes up domesticity from a different perspective than I do in her examination of domestic labor on the 20th century American stage, she comments, “If drama and performance have not offered solutions to large cultural problems manifest in the unremittingly gendered status of domestic labor, they have provided some of the most provocative, unforgettable, and multifaceted renderings of the problem” (Chansky 28). War is a societal problem that we have not been able to figure out, and as Rabe demonstrates, war brings other societal issues with it to the stage, as it cannot exist apart from the idea of home. Rabe’s plays, then, are provocative renderings of the problem of war, the issues that surround it, and the gendering of home. As Rabe suggests with his trilogy, home is a problematic or horrifying place and is not a comfort for soldiers fighting wars. Only in Streamers are actions associated with the home (specifically,
cleaning and caring for vulnerable people) presented as beneficial and necessary. However, those domestic actions are not a panacea for the fear and violence that men experience because the bonds that are created are fragile. Home is not idyllic, nor do soldiers see it as a refuge from war trauma. Still, Rabe does provide a more gender-inclusive reading of home and domestic actions than other male playwrights writing war plays. At the end of the chapter, Sam Shepard’s *States of Shock* is used to contrast with Rabe’s plays, demonstrating reasons why Rabe’s gender-inclusive reading of home is significant and relevant.

**David Rabe’s Vietnam War Trilogy**

Rabe is a foundational, canonical figure for contemporary U.S. war drama. However, as N. Bradley Christie acknowledges in 1991, Rabe has never been a “Broadway playwright,” and Christie believes part of that is due to the subject Rabe is best known for: the Vietnam War. Throughout his article, Christie argues that as a society, the U.S. has devalued the Vietnam War and everything that went along with it (99). As is evident in the lack of critical attention Rabe’s later work has received, Rabe remains “stuck” in the Vietnam War, or to use the title of Christie’s piece, he is “still a Vietnam playwright after all these years” (97). Christie implies that Rabe remains associated with the Vietnam War and therefore has been forgotten along with it. Because these plays resonate with me as I work with them, I continue to be surprised that Rabe’s plays are not produced more often, especially given the number of U.S. international conflicts since Vietnam. In an interview with Rabe and the cast of a 2014 production of *Sticks & Bones*, Rabe was asked by the interviewer if he had more people interested in producing the play as the U.S. had been in Afghanistan for some time. Rabe replied, “I would have to say no. I don’t fret about it too much, because I can’t do anything about it” (qtd. in Collins-Hughes). For all that the run was successful, the *New York Times* titled the article “Acting Out a Take Before Their Time”
because the actors being interviewed were very young during or born after the war. Still, the title of the article and the ways the actors consider their roles emphasize Christie’s point. Rabe carefully avoids direct reference to any particular war in Sticks & Bones, yet it is considered just one more Vietnam War play. Christie’s words remain true today. However, Rabe’s Vietnam War trilogy has been part of the foundation for U.S. war plays. Those that came after Rabe’s work can be read as having a long, sustained conversation about war with Rabe. Rabe provides unsolvable, difficult versions of the problems with war, senseless violence, and the apathy of the home front. Rabe was born in 1940 and went to college at Loras College for his undergraduate degree (Lahr). He himself began writing plays, instead of acting in them, during graduate school at Villanova, but he dropped out, feeling “suffocated” (qtd. in Lahr). In 1965, Rabe was drafted and sent to Vietnam, returning in 1967. Playwriting helped him to process Vietnam, particularly as he was angry and frustrated by the home front’s lack of attention, saying, “I started to feel that nobody over here had anything at stake…. There was just nothing in jeopardy” (qtd. in Lahr). Rabe is very clear in that his plays are not anti-war because a play cannot have a “large-scale political effect” (“Introduction” xxv). However, his goal with the Vietnam War plays was “to diagnose, as best I can, certain phenomena that went on in and around me” (“Introduction” xxiv). Consequently, Rabe’s plays stage unresolved problems with war and apathy from people at home.

*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*

The plot of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971) follows a soldier of the same name after he is killed in a brothel when he catches a grenade. As he gets up—already dead—Ardell, a soldier, appears to guide him through his military experience until his death in a brothel in Vietnam two years later. Phillip D. Beidler expresses the general analysis of *Pavlo* by
scholars: Rabe wanted to show how wasteful the Vietnam War was: “Pavlo Hummel is a mad, inexhaustible pastiche of American experience of Vietnam in the fullness of its commingled banality and terrifying waste” (114). That is, Pavlo’s lack of growth and inability to understand his situation when he dies is only one part of the play. Beidler argues a point different from mine, focusing on the idea that Pavlo provides a good representation of the American soldier’s Vietnam War experience. Still, he provides a useful way to examine the play, saying that Pavlo provides a series of “master images” of the American experience of the Vietnam War (Beidler 114). However, within those master images, Rabe also leaves room for a discussion of how Pavlo and the other men in the play encounter home while at war. Further, accepting the idea that the play is a series of master images, Pavlo is a sort of master cliché of an eager and “wide-eyed” young man—borrowing from Rabe’s description—who is ready to go to war but does not understand the implications of his action (89). In interviews, Rabe says he knew men like Pavlo during his time in Vietnam (Gussow 43). Although the depiction is authentic, Pavlo is a frustrating character, and the frustration the audience feels is by design. Reviewers have expressed their frustration with the character, while acknowledging that he is a victim of his environment. In 1971, Clive Barnes, the first New York Times reviewer of Pavlo, suggested that “[r]aw boned and awkward, good natured but stupid, Hummel goes through the play like a stifled cry of pain, going to his death like a slaughtered lamb” (25). I also appreciate Robert Asahina’s description even though I disagree with much of what he argues in his article:

Rabe deliberately designed the character of Pavlo to be a cipher—a literal nobody instead of an Everyman. The net effect was to make his brutalization and anonymous death almost meaningless: The progressive dehumanization of someone scarcely human to
begin with involved so little dramatic motion that the play was less revealing of the cruel irony of Pavlo’s empty existence than of the bareness of Rabe’s imagination (35).

Asahina does not hold back his critique on most of the Vietnam War plays he discusses, but I hold Rabe’s work in higher regard because Pavlo’s character reveals much about Rabe’s critique of war. If the audience is frustrated with Pavlo’s lack of awareness, Rabe, too, is frustrated by the audience’s unwillingness to see the Vietnam War as a waste of resources and human life. Part of the way Rabe carries out that task is to take a lost man and put him in a war where he constantly searches for his identity and cannot attain the identity he wishes to embody—the tough-guy street kid. For this play, home is a domestic site that Pavlo visits after basic training and a set of feelings and people who do not have a place on the battlefield. While Pavlo is the closest of Rabe’s trilogy to war, soldiers encounter and treat home throughout the entire play. Pavlo believes that home represents the feelings that must be rejected—love, family, community, and a non-violent way of life—in order to become the tough guy he wants to be. However, he cannot let go of home because his aspirational identity is tied to it. What is more, home is seen as a place with its own problems that will not alleviate any problems caused by war.

As a character, Pavlo is conflicted about home from the beginning of training. He must use fictional exploits to support his projected identity of the tough street kid he wants to be. Pavlo hopes that stories from home—like outrunning the police while stealing cars in New York—will allow his comrades to see him as the man he wants to be. He tries too hard to embody this identity, and by clinging to it, he impedes his progress in basic training and cannot become the man the army is training him to be. The army wants trainees to replace their ideas about who they are with another version, an army issued identity. The process depends upon a degree of de-humanization, which the drill sergeant begins immediately. In the first master
image of basic training, Sergeant Tower, the unit’s drill instructor, lines up the trainees in their ranks and begins the verbal brutalization that the master image of basic training employs. The first concept Tower drills into the trainees concerns their families. In order to become an army grunt, the trainees must act as a group under the direction of their commanding officer. To that end, Tower tells the trainees that in the coming weeks they are “gonna see so much of a me, let me tell you, you gonna think I your mother, father, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and children—if you got ‘em—all rolled into one big black man” (10). He goes on to tell them that their first names are “trainee,” and they “live in the Army of the United States of America” (12). Tower ends the first image of basic training by leading the trainees into the first marching chant of the play: “MOTHER, MOTHER WHAT’D I DO? / THIS ARMY TREATIN’ ME WORSE THAN YOU!” (14). As Tower makes clear, they are to think as he does and do whatever he asks, which means they must accept this new version of themselves. Instead of rejecting all of who they are, he replaces home and family—key parts of identity—with army-issue versions. Everyone may need an image or belief in home, to borrow from Haytock, and the army supplies a substitute for what the trainees will lose during the process of becoming soldiers. Pavlo’s image of himself, rooted in the stories of home that supply his tough-guy credentials, cannot cooperate with the identity shift that is being asked of him. Looking beyond Pavlo to examine the way men encounter home in war, the marching chant is also important. However individuals may interpret the chant, it still assumes that trainees would be ill-treated by their mothers and that home is not a place of comfort—just less terrible treatment. From the beginning of this play, home, then, is not an idyllic place of comfort or peace.

Unable to understand that he needs to let go of his aspirations to become a street-tough guy in order to cohere with his unit and comrades, Pavlo continues to be noticed for his
individuality and, as a fellow soldier opines, for being “weird.” Pavlo wants to be the best trainee he can be, and in attempting to do so, he alienates himself from his peers. When he is not receiving the affirmation of his masculinity—of the identity he wishes to possess—from his comrades, he tries to manipulate Tower into offering it. Tower, however, is probably the last person who would care to hear about Pavlo’s family. During the process of telling his story, Pavlo exhibits a vulnerability that belies his identification with the tough-guy image he has tried to perform. Pavlo respects Tower, even as Tower seeks to shame and humiliate Pavlo into becoming a de-individualized military grunt. While trying to impress Tower, Pavlo seeks approval for his behavior when he left home. Instead of saying goodbye to family members and treasuring that final moment together, Pavlo tells Tower that he gave his mother the incorrect train time so that he did not have to see her. If she had been there, Pavlo says “she would have wanted to hug me in front of everybody. She would have waved a handkerchief at the train. It would have been awful” (23). Pavlo did not want witnesses to any potential emotion, from himself or his mother. Tower remains silent. When Pavlo frantically asks, “Was I wrong?” Tower leaves (23). Although the moment can be read as Pavlo’s performing the role of trainee incorrectly by asking Tower to approve of any actions beyond the scope of basic training, it is a moment when Pavlo communicates an emotional need that Tower ignores. Pavlo desperately wants someone he admires to tell him he did something right, so he goes to Tower—as though Tower is the paternal figure his opening speech claims he would be. Once more, Pavlo reads the situation incorrectly and looks for approval from a representative of an entity that seeks to break Pavlo down to accept the new identity of Trainee Hummel who lives in the Army of the United States of America and is, as Tower says, in “harmony” with his unit (12). Tower neither praises norpunishes Pavlo, refusing to acknowledge any feelings, as he is not there to meet Pavlo’s
emotional needs, but in this moment, it is important to recognize that Pavlo has unmet emotional needs that he does not understand. Neither does Pavlo understand that Tower cannot be the paternal figure he wants him to be. The army is not an adequate substitute for a family because it, as a national entity with Tower as its representative, is not concerned with meeting soldiers’ emotional needs. Moreover, Pavlo has denied himself and his mother an important rite of passage, as the journey to war is seen as a way for boys to become men. The goodbye is also a way for soldiers to hold onto one more moment of “home” before they go to war. Pavlo looks to remake himself and find a new identity, so any reminder of home would have been a threat to his new image as the tough guy. This is ironic because Pavlo cannot let go of his aspirational identity, which relies on his fabrications of his life at home.

Family emerges again at the beginning of act two when Pavlo returns home after basic training and before shipping out to Vietnam. As with the train incident, Pavlo simultaneously wants to show others how manly he is while rejecting his family and the emotions they hold. That is not to say that Pavlo’s family is loving or displays their affection for him. They display a lack of care for Pavlo and do not try to meet his emotional needs, as family members might be expected to do. Mickey, Pavlo’s brother, embodies the tough-guy womanizer that Pavlo wants to be. \(^3\) He clearly admires his brother in the beginning of the scene, saying that his brother is a tougher person than his fellow soldiers. Yet, like the other men in Pavlo’s unit, Mickey sees through Pavlo’s lies about his time in basic training and calls him a liar and a weirdo, echoing his comrades. When Pavlo does not get the respect he feels he deserves, he tries to cut ties with his brother, saying, “I don’t need you anymore, Mickey. I got real brothers” (55). Pavlo tells Mickey

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\(^3\)Zinman posits that Mick, Pavlo’s brother, could be Pavlo himself, and, therefore, Pavlo is conversing with himself in this scene (“What’s Wrong” 43). If the play is happening in Pavlo’s mind, his family is his perception of who they are and more a reflection of Pavlo’s thinking rather than a comment about the home front.
that he does not need his brother’s admiration or respect because Pavlo has an army full of brothers, which is a complete fabrication as well. The men Pavlo trained with treat him like an outsider. By this point of the play, the audience sees Pavlo as a liar, too. The story he tells Mickey about a comrade, Kress, hugging him, when Kress actually tried to beat him up, demonstrates how Pavlo warps reality to suit his need to own the male identity he wants to find in the army. Carla J. McDonough argues that Pavlo performs his gender and does not or cannot understand its implications (107). Pavlo wants to show his brother that he has become an army man, complete with the intense male comradery that he does not receive from his brother (McDonough 109). Pavlo seems to hold his brother in high esteem, but their interactions deteriorate into an argument because Pavlo does not feel like this brother respects him, and he becomes defensive. Pavlo attempts to use his military service to gain respect, and he clearly feels that his brother remains a better womanizer. Pavlo seeks to strip himself of his pre-basic training identity, so he can be what he thinks the army wants—a man whose only family is his military brothers. Pavlo, again, cannot reconcile the contradictions he faces. He wants to be the tough guy but cannot surrender to the army’s process. He seeks to divorce himself from his family and be a man who has other military brothers, but the men in his unit do not accept him as part of their family. The army cannot be a surrogate for Pavlo’s family, as they do not respect or accept him either. As Rabe has emphasized many times, Pavlo is lost. His continued interactions with his family provoke more conflicts with home and the people who inhabit the space.

With Pavlo’s mother, Rabe seems to make a critique that is carried on in Sticks & Bones about the home front’s lack of awareness of the horrors of war. While Pavlo is home, he calls his ex-girlfriend’s mother and his own mother interrupts the call. In contrast to the view the audience might have of her after Pavlo tells the story of their good-bye to Tower, Mrs. Hummel is not a
paragon of motherhood. Instead of behaving like a mother who is worried for her son’s health and expressing her love for him, she launches into a monologue—after telling Pavlo they need to talk. She tells Pavlo a story about a woman she works with receiving the news that her son has died. This is the horror she can imagine—appearing ill-equipped to receive news of her son’s death, though not his actual death. She reassures Pavlo that “I know what to expect” (60). She can now perform the grieving mother because she has witnessed it. During her monologue—Pavlo has put the phone down so he will not hear her—she provides her own perspective of what a mother’s purpose is: “children should be as a tree and her branches […] A mother spends […] but she gets […] change” (60). Her metaphor is both natural and economic. Women do not benefit from being a mother; instead she grows branches that require her life to sustain and that make her poorer for the exercise. In this view, a woman will never recoup the efforts and resources she spent on her children.

There are two ways to examine Pavlo’s conversation with his mother: as Pavlo’s encounter with home, and as the home front’s encounter with war. Considering the first option, Pavlo cares so little for his mother, her feelings, or anything that she wants to communicate that he puts down the phone and walks away from the conversation, hearing none of it. After a period of time in which he feels she has exhausted what she wanted to communicate, he gets back on the line and demands to know who his father was. Underpinning Pavlo’s actions and dialogue, he reacts to the idea that he is lost, and his search for a father is a way to be found. By seeing a male role model in the image of Pavlo’s aspirational masculinity—that both his brother and his drill sergeant have already failed to be—Pavlo could feel like he has a place because there would be someone like himself. Instead, his mother tells him that he “had many fathers, many men, movie men, filmdom’s greats…they were all your father” (60). Pavlo’s father is just as fictional, then,
as Pavlo’s identity. Subsequently, home also becomes a fiction for Pavlo. His encounters with home leave him emptier, echoing what his mother suggests about motherhood. The other way that this scene can be read has to do with Mrs. Hummel’s reaction to her son going to war. Regarding this point, it is useful to consider Toby Silverman Zinman’s point that the play as a whole could be happening in Pavlo’s mind (‘What’s Wrong” 43). Or, Pavlo just has a terrible family, which is also likely. If one assumes the former option, Pavlo believes that an important purpose of the home front is to mourn soldiers; thus, Mrs. Hummel details her preparation for that occasion. Pavlo could think so little of his family and the idea of home that he can only imagine his mother being interested in behaving correctly when he dies—because that is her purpose to him. If the play is not in Pavlo’s mind, then the home front is conflicted by war and its effects on families. The truth becomes that the home front is ill-prepared for the death of a son or does not want to incorporate the soldier back into its society if he lives—which is an idea explored in Sticks & Bones—because he is now “changed” and worth less than what he once was.

Before following Rabe’s argument into his subsequent play, I will explore one other way that men at war encounter home—as a place to continue the intense connections that soldiers have with one another. As discussed above, Pavlo cannot attain the sense of belonging that a fighting unit would give him because of his unwillingness to conform—as a grunt or comrade-at-arms—and let go of his tough-guy identity. Rabe uses two other characters to illustrate the idea that a bond between men who have shared a trauma can transfer to the home front. In a situation like Rabe’s own, Pavlo is assigned to work at a hospital in Vietnam. There he is taking care of Sergeant Brisbey, who has been severely injured in combat. It is unclear which limbs have been amputated, but Brisbey calls himself a “living feeling thinking stump” (70). His friend Sergeant
Wall goes to the hospital to visit, with a pint of whiskey in hand. Brisbey rambles throughout the scene, making jokes and asking his audience if he told them a story about Magellan. Wall does not get much of a chance to speak, but asks how Brisbey is feeling and tells him that he himself is no longer on the front line, implying that they were hurt in the same battle. Still, Wall—no longer the soldier he was either—suggests to Brisbey that “You’ll be goin’ home soon. I thought […] we could plan to get together […]” (68). Brisbey provides a witty reply, and Wall responds with a poor choice of words: “Jesus Christ, Brisbey, ain’t you ever gonna change? Ain’t you ever gonna be serious about no—” (68). Brisbey explodes, pushing back at Wall: “You blind or so somethin’, askin’ me if I changed” (68). In this short exchange, I see two men trying to figure out the next steps forward after being injured at war. Brisbey would like to kill himself, and he is not ready to accept that he has been disabled and his life will change. Wall cares enough for their friendship to see him in the hospital and metaphorically extend his hand to Brisbey to extend their friendship, their brotherhood, to the home front. To Wall, the natural step forward for him is to be friends with Brisbey and maintain the connection they have. Wall does not see Brisbey as a “stump” and sees only his friend, while the lack of limbs is all Brisbey sees. In his anger, frustration, and grief for a life he will not have, Brisbey rejects the simple human connection that Wall offers. The answer seems to be that home is a place where Brisbey’s perceived lack will change his life in ways he does not want to face, so he wants to commit suicide—even asking to “hold” Pavlo’s gun (67). Wall sees how their continued friendship would benefit them both when they get home. This small interaction between these two injured men is one of the few explicit

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4 Pavlo certainly thinks that Brisbey has gone crazy, but the story of Magellan speaks to Brisbey’s despair and links to an astrological metaphor made in other parts of the play. Moreover, Howard Stein argues that Rabe often uses humor when a character who is lost tries to seek “relief” from those feelings (28–29).
examples of men talking about a positive bond in the whole play, and it is a small moment that is also heartbreaking because of the rejected friendship.

By the end of the play, Rabe demonstrates that not only is war not a place where a lost man can find himself, but also that a feeling of community or belonging continues to elude him at home and at war. Through Pavlo, Rabe demonstrates a view that many soldiers returning home could have had: home is not a place of comfort. For Pavlo and the men like him that Rabe saw during his time at war, home and its affects must be rejected to realize a version of masculinity. Pavlo does not realize how tightly the identity he wants to embody is invested in his (fictional) experiences that can only be had on the home front. His aspirational identity is also rooted in individuality and a freedom that cannot exist at war and in combat, and his adherence to it leaves him even more excluded from the community that the army could give him. Through the chants that trainees are led through, home is not seen as a positive place; it has its own problems. At least within the army and at war, soldiers can continue to be brothers and comrades; when they go back home, that option is less likely to be available to soldiers because war injures them, mentally and physically. David in Sticks & Stones becomes a good example of a soldier without brothers to support him and his emotional needs because they are likely dead or disabled, as he is. Although Sticks & Bones does not elaborate on David’s lack of comrades, it is an important point of connection between the first plays of the trilogy.

Sticks & Bones

As the home-front play of the trilogy, Sticks & Bones dramatizes a familiar story, the injured soldier returning home to his family. Picking up almost directly from Brisbey’s hospital bed to the trip home, David Nelson returns home to his family as a blind man. Rabe has said that Sticks & Bones is a hard play because it is autobiographical in part, based on his experience
returning from Vietnam to find the “shocking indifference” and “business as usual” attitude back home (Casebook 118). There is real anger driving the play, which manifests itself in nearly every line and action. Even at the time of its initial production, audiences were uncomfortable with the content. Joseph Papp, who first produced it at the Public Theatre in 1971, said, “It’s hard for audiences to deal with. They resist it. It disturbs them. But good plays are not easy” (qtd. in Cooper 613). Rabe wanted to disturb an indifferent American society and make people feel enraged over the continuation of the war. What Rabe was feeling was not unusual, and he gave voice to what many Vietnam War veterans would communicate after returning home. Nearly twenty years after the end of the war, Tracy Karner found through interviews with veterans that they felt betrayed by their country and were still alienated from society because they had “seen and felt and done what the rest of society could only imagine and most preferred to avoid” (90–91). The avoidance of thinking about the war is a major feature of Sticks & Bones.

As Pamela Cooper finds, Rabe accomplished his goal of shocking Americans out of their apathy and disturbing them in a few ways. First, Rabe names the family in Sticks & Bones after the real Nelson family who acted as themselves in the 50’s and 60’s television show The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, including their adult sons, Rick and David. Rabe presented his characters as caricatures of the typical TV family. Rabe makes his critique of the media and the American values through the fictionally real Nelson family. The Nelsons do not want to acknowledge the war, and Rick, the character most consumed by American’s war avoidance, seeks to hide the war behind the façade of a TV family. Second, beyond the disturbing actions and tableaux the play provides, Rabe’s anger operates on a linguistic level and shows, in Cooper’s words, “the tendency of psychological violence to issue not only in verbal abuse, but also in physical brutality, first within the family and then in the international arena of war” (623).
The hate taking place at a familial level does not stop there, as that same hate and verbal violence often carries out into the world. Rabe picks up the critique that Mrs. Hummel provided in *Pavlo*: the home front is not equipped to handle the changes that war has made to the people they know, and the home front willfully does not want to do so.

Continuing the critique Rabe offered in *Pavlo* using Mrs. Hummel’s rehearsal of her son’s death, *Sticks & Bones* asks two questions. First, how does the injured veteran treat home when he returns? Second, how does his family—his home—treat David, as he has been changed by war? Simply put, the answer to both questions is with hostility. Whereas *Pavlo* only briefly stages a battlefield, *Sticks & Bones* is one long battle that begins as soon as Sergeant Major drops off David to the Nelsons’ living room. The play begins when David is delivered to Ozzie and Harriet’s door after being discharged. He has been injured while serving in an unnamed war. Trouble starts when Ozzie and Harriet have no idea about how to treat David after the war, and David obviously does not want to be home with them. Indeed, over the course of what many have called a dark comedy or satire, David starts to work on taking over the home and killing his family. In return, the family tries to make David “happy” and restore the family to a normal, typical family. When David’s hostile takeover of the house begins and the family’s campaign for normalcy fails, Harriet, Ozzie, and Rick coerce David into cutting his wrists in a ritualized suicide—after Ozzie kills Zung, the Vietnamese woman David fell in love with who has been a ghost in the house until Ozzie strangles her.

In keeping with a play that models itself on an idealized family show, *Sticks & Bones* is filled with domestic details and actions. Harriet tries to feed everyone—from juice to eggs—and Rick always seems to be going to the fridge for some fudge, like the teen he is not. Ozzie is obsessed with trying to fix the television. Harriet wants Rick to take photos of the family
members at various (and very odd) times. Harriet and Ozzie often adopt TV family language when talking with their children, which serves to infantilize them and make the transition into adulthood—as when Rick comes home from a party talking about how he “had the greatest piece of tail” (162)—particularly startling for the audience. The family vacillates between willfully ignoring things that others have said and spouting lines that could have been lifted from a 1950’s TV show. Each of these domestic actions is a metaphoric shot being fired by the family.

Throughout, David is treated like a toxin to the perfect American family, and, to be fair, David’s goal is to conquer the house and kill his family. His “victory” depends on firing his own shots, meaning David willfully upsets his family. Like Rabe trying to shock people out of their apathy, David uses his horrific war stories as a weapon aimed at the heart of his family, as in the scene in which David takes over movie night by describing the “movie” he saw while in Vietnam. The projector flickers and seems to malfunction, as David relates the killing of a Vietnamese family, including an unborn child. Although the war David fought in is unnamed because Rabe wanted this play to stay relevant, the descriptions of mutilated civilians resonate with the similar stories and images that were shown on family TVs during the war, particularly after the anti-war movements started to gain momentum. The descriptions Rabe provides are more graphic than any in either of his other Vietnam War plays. With veiled threats and harsh words, David wages his war on his family, trying to make them see the horrors he saw. In the movie night scene, Ozzie nearly falls into the despair that David created with his stories. Ozzie is the most susceptible to his son’s trauma and the weakest link among the remaining Nelsons. The plot moves forward as Ozzie continues to doubt—in subtle ways—that they should be trying to resist David’s hostile takeover in that he seems most sympathetic to his son. Therefore, it is up to Harriet and Rick to win the family war.
Two scenes detail how Harriet and Rick use domestic actions to combat the destructiveness that David has brought into the home and how those efforts fail. Both happen near the end of the play. The first is a disturbing parody of a mother’s care for her son. Harriet goes to David’s room with a basin of water to give him a sponge bath and literally combat his filth. The sponge bath is an intimate effort to persuade him to succumb to the domestic efforts she has made up to this point. The sponge bath can also be read as Harriet’s trying to recall the relationship she had with her son when he was a small child. As a child, there were few injuries she could not remedy for him, and he would have trusted her to have the right answer for his problems. After she attempts to soothe David by telling him that all his parents have ever wanted in life was for Rick and David to participate in normal American society with “lovely children, a car, a wife, and a good job,” David returns fire by stoking Harriet’s own racist tendencies about the “yellow people,” and describing how Vietnamese women solicited G.I.’s during the war.

Earlier in the play, Harriet and Ozzie rage over David’s relationship with Zung and try to normalize the relationship by classifying it as something all young men do while at war. Harriet tries the same move again saying, “No. All you did was something normal and regular….All hundreds of boys [sic] have done it before you. Thousands and thousands” (163). The odd phrasing that Harriet uses speaks to her inability to wrap her mind around the horrors that David has faced at war and the ways he has been changed. Still, she continues trying to reverse the ways the war has changed her son. Harriet attempts to remove the filth from David’s body with the bath and from his mind by normalizing abhorrent behavior. By doing so, she rejects David’s war experience as he articulates it to her and fails to understand it because it is an attack on her typical American family ideals. Clearly, David means to hurt Harriet, and this is not a meaningful attempt to articulate trauma; in a different play, Harriet’s ploy could have worked.
Still, with a racist apologist for a parent, there would be little hope of having any meaningful trauma treated seriously. David wins this battle after chasing her from the room, and according to the stage notes, David has taken over the house. From the top of the stairs, at the highest point of the set, David then proclaims, “I’m home, Little David. Home” (165).

David’s possession of the house is, however, short-lived, and the counterattack from the family is severe. Throughout the play, Rick is almost a minor character. He contributes to Rabe’s parody of the TV family by repeatedly entering and exiting the house, which necessitates a clichéd response. Whenever Rick enters, Harriet and Ozzie both say “Hi, Rick!” and see him off when he leaves. If he’s not entering and exiting, he comments that he cannot wait for things to return to normal. In Pamela Cooper’s analysis of the language in Sticks & Bones, she finds that Rick has “in Rabe’s terms, the lowest level of linguistic usage. He is the quintessential consumer: a virtual eating machine” (620). This may be why Rick is an insidious character. Vapid on the surface, Rick is the essence of the apathetic, business-as-usual attitude that seeks to eradicate threats to that image of American life. Rick enters the final scene with a big “Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad” and is perplexed when the routine is not reciprocated (168). Seeing David in combat fatigues standing in front of his kneeling parents, Rick reaches his breaking-point saying, “Honest ta God, I’ve had it. I really have. I can’t help it, even if you are sick, and I hate to complain, but you’re getting them so mixed up they’re not themselves anymore” (168). Rick’s greeting routine has been his own domestic practice to uphold the values that existed in the house before David returned with his war toxins. David has changed the domestic setting, and Rick must reinstate the previous social order.

However, before Rick helps Ozzie and Harriet to assert themselves and regain control, David has another horrifying vision that exemplifies how he, as an angry veteran, encounters the
home front. Just after Rick—acting as a more assertive character than he has at any other moment—warns David to leave their parents alone, David asks the family if they hear the trucks rumbling. The trucks that delivered David are back to deliver the dead: “[t]hey’ve stopped bringing back the blind” like David (169). He orders his parents to open the front door to make way for the bodies, saying:

We’ll stack them along the walls…Pile them on the floor…The one with no name is ours. We’ll put it in that chair. We can bring them all here. I want them all here, all the trucks and bodies…They will become the floor and they will become the walls, the chairs. We’ll sit in them, sleep in them. We will call them ‘home.’ We will give them as gifts, call them ‘ring’ and ‘pot’ and ‘cup.’ No, no; it’s not a thing to fear […] we will notice them no more than all the others. (170)

In a play full of disturbing images and power games played between the seemingly perfect TV family and the disease that is David and his war experiences, this pronouncement gets lost in the text. While this is understandable given the fact that the family kills David in a ritualistic fashion shortly after his momentary taste of power, it is an important moment for Rabe’s critique of American society and my analysis of home in U.S. war plays. Considering a traditional view of war, David’s words depict Americans, particularly his family, as ungrateful or unaware of the efforts and lives lost that allow families to have a home and a safe place in which to sit, sleep, and give gifts. In the context of Vietnam and Rabe’s semi-autobiographical rage (it is not a coincidence that the returning soldier shares Rabe’s first name), this passage makes the characters and audience aware of the injured and dead soldiers coming home from a conflict that was unpopular on the home front—and even going so far as to portray the idea that the home

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David’s lines are broken up by responses from Ozzie, but as David seems to be talking to himself and does not hear Ozzie, I have decided to present them as a monologue.
front betrayed those soldiers. I would suggest that Rabe argues that the dead have always been part of American homes, as they were used to build the liberties Americans enjoy. Therefore, it is even more appalling—to David and Rabe—that Americans were apathetic to the war. To demonstrate this, Ozzie begins to respond to David’s vision for their home but quickly becomes distracted by his domestic task. Forever trying to fix things in the house, Ozzie “scurries to the TV” saying that “I’ll get it fixed. I’ll fix it” (170). He uses his particular domestic task to distract himself from the height of David’s war toxins. Ozzie’s eye lock onto the TV after denying that there are others—other returning soldiers—and, with his attention focused on the TV screen and his task, Ozzie can reject David’s new reality. The family begins to turn away from assimilating David back into their ranks and treat him as a high-level threat to their way of life.

After helping Ozzie take up his position as head of the house by strangling Zung, Rick immediately returns to his normal conversational topic, telling his parents “I saw a really funny movie last night” (171). He then turns to David to say “Hey, Dave, listen, … I just gotta say my honest true feelings[,] and I’d kill myself if I were you, Dave. You’re in too much misery. I’d cut my wrists. Honestly speaking, brother to brother, you should have done it long ago” (173). Parodying a family gathering to resolve a conflict or console a member, Rick then helps David cut his wrists, and the family echoes Rick saying, “You might as well” and “You’ll feel better” (173). The lines are plucked from the mouths of a concerned TV family. Perhaps the most disturbing and powerful aspect of Sticks & Bones is that, although the characters are caricatures of an American family, their actions up to this point are recognizable ones that family members could take toward each other (feeding, caring, and a family meeting). Rabe, however, parodies and mocks them, if one agrees with Robert Asahina’s assessment that the family’s actions are “the elaborately self-deceiving rituals of domestic existence” (36), but such rituals are not
necessarily self-deceiving, as home and family hold the key to easing the destructiveness and disease of war. With this typical TV family, however, the actions are meaningless because the characters are empty. They are ironic, and irony does not usually lead to empathy or care for others. In a home where the war is willfully ignored, trauma cannot be expressed in a meaningful way.

*Streamers*

Rabe’s final play in the Vietnam War trilogy is his most realistic. *Streamers* is set in the barracks; the men are in limbo between basic training and the war in Vietnam. Unlike the previous two plays, the characters in the final play have not been to war yet but are terrified about what it will bring. This is a multifaceted, provocative rendering of the problem of war—to borrow Chansky’s words—and it is one that cannot be solved; it can, however, be further explored in hopes of an eventual solution to a societal problem. The plot is deceptively simple: three men share a barrack while they wait to be shipped to Vietnam, and the main conflict evolves from concerns about some of the characters’ sexuality. However, along the way, every man expresses his fears about the future and the war they are going to be fighting, whether they willingly signed up to do so or not. Conflicts and fear lead to the death of a soldier at the hands of a comrade. Indeed, as critics and scholars agree, the play is about those men’s fear about the future and the actions they take because of their fear. In his review, Charles Isherwood calls the play “a plaintive essay on the brutal, unavoidable fact of death, the fear of it that shapes men’s lives, and how it renders all the conflicts that set men against one another—questions of sex and pride and class—more or less meaningless in its shadow.” I would add that their fear exacerbates their issues and builds until their fear becomes something insurmountable, leading to the senseless killing of a soldier. As scholars such as J. W. Fenn and McDonough suggest, the men
on stage represent a microcosm of the “reflected stresses inherent in the greater American culture” (Fenn 163). McDonough goes further and astutely frames the men’s differences as versions of American masculinity at play in a confined space: “*Streamers* employs homophobia and racism to explore the schisms that exist in any would-be monolithic concept of manliness, such as that which the army seeks to establish” (115). The fact that *Streamers* deals less with war and more with the parts of society that push these men to their limits has made this play popular. In his review of the 2007 revival, David Rooney argues that *Streamers* “continues to resonate more than 30 years after the first play was seen.” What is more, *Streamers* shows that manliness and military expectations do not prohibit characters from performing domestic activities and using them as a bonding activity and a way to care for others, ideas that—according to more traditional ideas about the military and masculinity—should not be able to exist in harmony. Although the domestic activities are not enough to overcome the fear they collectively feel about being sent to war or the stresses in American culture that are brought into the barracks, Rabe provides a gender-fluid view of domestic tasks because men can re-cast an activity, like cleaning, or a gesture, like bringing someone a snack from the mess hall, as a bonding activity. The men who live in the barracks room participate in a re-casting of domestic tasks in order to make something like a home with a feeling of community, family, or place of belonging. Still, the physical space of the barracks room where they create their “home” does not retain or sustain them when they leave for war. Their bonds depend on the other men because they are not anchored by a place, making those bonds already fragile. So, when the pressures of American culture complicate their interactions with each other, their fragile, clean peace and place are overturned.
The structure and setting of the play lend themselves to an analysis of domestic practices and how these men encounter the idea of home. The entire play takes place in the room that Richie, Roger, and Billy share. Carlyle, another soldier and a bisexual black man, looks to build a bond with these men but does not perform the domestic practices with them. Billy and Carlyle come to blows after a racist and homophobic exchange, fueled by Carlyle’s immense rage and frustration at being drafted and forced to fight for a country he does not consider his own. This dynamic is reflected in those moments when the room is being cleaned and when someone disrupts the cleaning process. Rabe takes pains to describe their cleaning actions and designate when someone enters it “filthy,” as Carlyle does when he is first seen (6). Roger, who first initiates the cleaning, uses it as a way to fill time, but the result of the domestic practice is that the men are willing to talk with each other about their lives and express vulnerabilities. The domestic task makes room for the kind of talking they do with each other, which is a necessary step towards making a small community and supporting each other. The significance of their efforts to create a community cannot be overstated. As Fenn points out, the men are largely strangers and “alienated from each other” in a temporary location (152). To add to his argument and borrowing from McDonough’s discussion of the play, these men are in an alienating, limbo environment and exhibit different masculinities that need to be reconciled to some degree in order to create a community. That is not to say there are no tensions within the group, particularly between Billy and Richie. Roger and Billy seem closest to each other, and for one moment in the play Richie and Billy overcome their different world views to be friendly. If the play were just about these three men, the ending might be happy; both Roger and Billy tentatively accept Richie’s sexuality before the conflicts with other characters reaches its climax with Billy’s death. But the dissolution of their community is complicated and has many moving
parts. Billy is racist, homophobic, and classist. Richie enjoys mocking Billy and forces Billy to encounter ideas that disturb him. Roger tries to be welcoming to all, while sympathizing with Carlyle and his rage as another black man, but he does not like to make waves. Roger misjudges the intensity of Carlyle’s rage and does not act in time to intervene between Billy, Richie, and Carlyle. Other scholars have discussed how the play treats sexuality and racism within American culture, and how those forces are pressurized within this small barracks room. My discussion focuses on the ways domestic tasks provide space for their homosocial bond to deepen because they can be truthful and vulnerable with one another, yet they are not able to withstand the societal issues that cause the dissolution of their bonds.

The first time Richie, Billy, and Roger participate in a room cleaning exercise—which is early in the play—comes on the heels of a verbal argument about Richie’s sexuality, but during the cleaning, they are able to connect with each other. Before the cleaning starts, Roger and Billy obviously have an existing bond. They joke with each other and complain about their limbo status waiting to be shipped out to the war, which Roger jovially refers to as “Disneyland” (9). Billy and Roger, then, imagine what the conditions they will be fighting in will be like, betraying their anxiety about the unknown task ahead of them. Richie returns to the bunk after caring for a friend and starts to undress to get ready to take a shower. Even though Billy’s first act of the play was to bring a piece of pie to the room for Richie, he becomes nervous when Richie begins to undress. Richie senses that Billy is uncomfortable and pushes him by tousling his hair, an action

6 To be clear, I think everyone is at fault to some degree, but I do not think Carlyle is the villain of this play. He is angry and frustrated. His toxic masculinity aligns with Syed Haider’s description of how masculinity—in an effort to uphold and enforce patriarchy—leads to violence and then rage (558–59). In many ways, this is a naturalist play because each man is a product of his home environment, making the play a petri dish of American masculinity clashing.

7 See Fenn’s Levitating the Pentagon, McDonough’s Staging Masculinity, Robert Vorlicky’s Act Like a Man, and Brady Owen’s “Blackness and the Unmanning of America in David Rabe’s Streamers.”
that Billy reacts to severely. Roger attempts to diffuse the situation when Billy makes a sexually charged joke about showers as Richie leaves: “I think we oughta do this area. Mop and buff this floor” (12). Billy does not take the bait and continues to voice his anxiety about the way Richie is teasing him and his concerns about fighting with a “queer” (12–13). Finally, he agrees to “get some buckets and stuff” (13). The cleaning then continues for quite some time, and when Richie returns from the showers, Roger invites him to help them clean. After bickering back and forth, Billy directly tells Richie that he can do his “business” of being gay but tells Richie not to do the “cute shit” of sexually teasing him (19).

With their cleaning task to keep them busy and the taboo subject directly addressed, the men start to open up to each other. Roger talks about a bisexual man he knew from home, as a gesture towards accepting Richie’s sexuality. Billy and Richie both express fears about going to war and dying. Just before Sergeants Cokes and Rooney burst into the room drunk, Richie and Billy seem to be on good terms, and Roger puts on music for them to finish cleaning. Richie, who has not been an enthusiastic cleaner, asks Roger why Roger and Billy worry about keeping the dorm clean, but he phrases the question by wondering why they take their army tasks “so seriously” when the real army—in a war zone—will not need these tasks performed (22). Roger feels they are upholding military precision and order, but I see this as a way Roger re-casts domestic order as military order. The cleaning brings them all together and diffuses their strife. What is more, Richie reveals to Roger that he is envious of the friendship Roger and Billy have, saying “I never had a friend like that ever” (22). Roger takes the moment to confirm with Richie that he is not actually gay and that it has all been an act to tease Billy. Richie gives him a thoughtful response that is full of vulnerability, admitting the faults in himself, and Roger comforts him. Roger’s domestic task allows the men to be honest and genuine with each other,
while they offer up their anxieties and self-critiques. Without the common task, the teasing would have continued. Instead, they have all formed a tentative bond, and it is more believable that Billy would be concerned about making sure his bunk mates have a slice of pie. This tentative bond pays off when the Sergeants leave, and the room is dark: Billy trusts the other men to know why he is so anxious about homosexuality because one of his friends was gay. Without the bonding exercise, and the darkness, Billy would not have felt comfortable enough to express feelings and tell a story that causes him pain. The men seem to trust each other, at least more than others in the barracks, and they form what I see as a family-like group. They can joke and tease with each other, but they can also express hard feelings to the group. Plus, they all have a right to the space because they were assigned to the room, and as the idea of who belongs in the space becomes an issue, I think the right to the space is important and helps to define the core family-like group.

Carlyle recognizes the bonding these men have done, and he identifies with two of them—Roger as a black man and Richie as a gay man—so he decides to try to make space for himself in their “home,” a word Carlyle uses to describe their room (32). Billy is the odd man out here in that he does not have empathy for Carlyle from an identity position, and they are like oil and water in their personalities. Billy is white, heterosexual, and a college graduate. Carlyle is black, bisexual, and less educated than Billy, and both men have alpha male personalities, which become flammable when combined with Carlyle’s rage about fighting for a country in which he does not feel he belongs. In Robert Vorlicky’s excellent discussion of Streamers, he suggests that Carlyle and Billy are “actual and ideological foil[s],” and their point of “friction, predictively, involves homosexuality” (166). They cannot overcome this difference, and Billy provides the flame to Carlyle’s escalating rage. However, before the fight that kills Billy, Carlyle’s integration
with the group is rough. Carlyle demands that they make room for him, and then he starts to
stake his claim by identifying with Roger, goading Richie into having sex with him and literally
inhabiting the space against their wishes. Just after Billy tells his painful story, Carlyle stumbles
into the room drunk and unable to find his bed. He tells Roger, “You got a little home here, got
friends, people to talk to. I got nothin’” (32). Throughout the play, it is very clear that Carlyle is
looking for a community and a place where he belongs. He has not found this in the army or the
country he is being trained to fight for. The cumulative stresses that Carlyle experiences lead to
many expressions of his feelings, like the passage I am quoting from in which Carlyle calls their
space a home. Carlyle’s jealousy is a break from his anxiety over being sent to war to die, and
thinking that his country is trying to kill him, he asks the others, “WHAT’S THE MATTER
WITH ALL YOU PEOPLE?” (32). Although Carlyle is expressing anxiety in the room to people
with whom he wants to make friends, he is also drunk. His vulnerability is drug-induced and
does not provide space for the sustained human connection that he needs to grow. The men take
pity on him, and Roger makes a bed for him “on our freshly mopped floor” (33). Before they all
nod off to sleep, Billy chastises Richie for “doin’ that stuff,” which in this case means covering
Carlyle with a blanket and patting his arm. Richie recognizes another lost man and has the most
empathy and sympathy for Carlyle. Billy’s chastising, then, can be interpreted as concern that the
touching is inappropriate or sexual. However, Richie’s actions are simply caring actions, a little
like tucking someone into bed in a real family home. Richie cares for Carlyle like a relative or
member of the space. It is a domestic action that Billy misinterprets, but one that also leads
Richie to act more sympathetically to Carlyle, even as Richie initially does not want to start a
sexual relationship with Carlyle. Still, the bonding with Carlyle is skewed after this scene, which
builds the foundation for the fight.
Carlyle entered the play angry, and as a black man he has dealt with others trying to take things from him and force him to act a certain way. It is no wonder, then, that his way of bonding with the other men looks more like forcing them to accept him and taking space in their room rather than participating in activities that would help make space for him. Carlyle enters the room in act two looking for Roger, but Richie is alone in the room. Rabe indicates that Carlyle is nervous and disappointed not to find Roger. Still, Carlyle wants Richie to know that the version of himself that slept on the floor “ain’t the real Carlyle was in here” but that “[t]his one here and now is the real Carlyle. Who the real Richie?” (38). Carlyle seems to want to save face in front of Richie. The night before, Carlyle was mad and hurting, and the alcohol helped him to express feelings. Being vulnerable and emotional in front of new people scared Carlyle, but in the morning, he denies his previous self. Carlyle’s backpedaling does not, then, solidify the burgeoning bond. However, it does help Carlyle feel more comfortable that Richie wants to continue talking with him, like a friend. Carlyle has his foot in the door. He has asserted himself as a man—a man who does not cry on the floor of other people’s rooms—and he begins to assert verbal dominance over Richie after he misinterprets the tentative olive branch of friendship that Richie offers him. Carlyle yells at Richie, saying “DON’T YOU TELL ME I AIN’T TALKIN’ WHEN I AM TALKIN’!” (39). Anger bubbles underneath the surface of this frustrated man. In his present state of rage and confusion over his place in the military machine, the kind of vulnerability and willingness to encounter difference needed to foster friendship is not something that Carlyle is capable of revealing. Carlyle’s next move in his plan to become part of the men’s home and community is to force them to give him space when he is sober. During this interaction with Carlyle and Richie alone in the room, Carlyle participates in sexually charged teasing, and Richie seems to come around to liking Carlyle. However, I think that Carlyle’s need for sex
covers his need for a community. So, my interpretation of Carlyle’s “takeover” of Richie’s bed has to do with forcing someone in the room to concede his space so that he can inhabit it and make space for himself. Indeed, Carlyle thinks that Richie is sexually gratifying Roger and Billy, and he wants to participate in this arrangement—therefore making him part of the “family” in more than spatial terms (42). Unbeknownst to Carlyle, his plan nearly works. After Carlyle leaves, Billy tells Richie that if “Roger decides to adopt that sonofbitch,” he will move out (43). Once more, Billy misinterprets the situation because Richie is much more likely than Roger is to adopt Carlyle at this point.

The issue of Carlyle’s place in their home and family-like unit comes to an end after Billy and Roger feel as though his relationship with Richie violates the kinds of bonds they have tried to make thus far. Carlyle comes back, after getting his foot in the door, to take the men out on a group bonding activity that has nothing to do with the home space of their room and is more traditionally masculine—that is, partying and drinking. Carlyle is able to get all three men to leave the base with him to go drinking. When they return, Roger and Billy are lying on their beds, while Carlyle is lying on Richie’s bed and Richie is sitting on the floor leaning on a footlocker. Carlyle and Richie’s conversation becomes flirtatious, and Billy and Roger become uncomfortable with the fact that the two want to have sex. Richie asks Billy and Roger to take a walk, so he can have sex with Carlyle. It is soon revealed to the group that Carlyle assumes that Richie had sex with the others, adding more evidence to the idea that Carlyle thinks he has found people like himself—bisexual and frustrated with the army to some degree—and craves their company and a place in their room on a level he cannot acknowledge. Instead, the consequences of the next argument are fatal. When Roger and Billy refuse to leave the space, Carlyle becomes frustrated because he cannot have what he wants. What is not stated is that he feels excluded and
frustrated that he cannot gain access to what they have—a make-shift home and people who belong in that space. Certainly, the alcohol they have consumed does not help keep tempers under control. Moreover, Roger and Billy do not want to leave a space they have a right to be in so that Richie and Carlyle can have sex. When Richie pushes the men to leave again, he views his request as a favor and tells the others that “Carlyle is my guest” (49). Roger replies that “He your friend. This your home. So that means he can stay. It don’t mean I gotta leave” (49), which can be rephrased to say that Richie has the right to use the space as he sees fit, but Carlyle is not part of their family.

The tragic consequences of this argument are readily apparent when Carlyle begins to intimidate Richie into having sex with him and tries to exert his will over the room. Billy is indignant when Roger tells him to “turn your back and look at the wall” because they both do not want to concede the space (49). But the final straw for Billy does not seem to be lying in a room while his bunk mate has sex. Instead, Billy tells Roger “I ain’t gonna have this going on here” in response to Carlyle’s full volume yelling at Richie to “GET ON YOUR KNEES, YOU PUNK, I MEAN NOW...AM I UNDERSTOOD? (50). Although Billy’s words to the rest of the room seem to indicate that he does not want their sex act to happen in his room because “it ain’t gonna be done in my house,” I do think that his response also has something to do with Carlyle’s treatment of Richie. After all, Billy did bring Richie that piece of pie in the beginning of the play, and they had positive moments of homosocial bonding throughout the play, despite the teasing. However, the bonding that they have done cannot withstand the pressure of homophobia and racism—and Billy’s own need to control what does and does not go on in his room. Carlyle turns off the lights to “disappear” in the dark and do what he wants to do (51). Billy will not let Carlyle control their environment to that degree, saying “Nobody goddamn asked me if the lights
go out” (51). When the lights go up, the stage directions indicate that “the switchblade seems to leap from his pocket to his hand” (51). They fight; both are injured, but Billy dies. As other army members drag Carlyle from the room, he tells them, “This is my house, sir. This my goddamn house” (59), and, finally, “To get away from me. I am stayin’ here. This my place, not your place” (60). Carlyle forced himself into their space by inhabiting it and dominating the others in the room—in a very war-like fashion for a man who does not want to be in the army. But, as a man who has likely had much taken away from him, he has to fight for what he wants. Again, there are competing societal forces at work in this play. Still, Carlyle could not integrate himself into their space in the pattern they had established. The other three men worked as a family, meaning they had to resolve their differences because everyone had a right to the space.

Richie and Roger are left with the consequences of the argument, their actions, and the mess that has been made in their room. The play ends with a domestic task and a peacekeeper advocating for the positive effects of male homosocial bonds. During stressful times, Roger seems to want order, so his first full sentence to Richie after the Lieutenant leaves the room, and they are alone is “This area a mess, man” (61). They then fight, each trying to blame the other until Sergeant Cokes wanders back into the room. Still drunk, he tells Richie—who has been crying—and Roger that he “lost” Rooney while they were playing “hide-and-go-seek” (62). Oblivious to the latest events, Cokes and Rooney have been playing a childish game, after they entertained the men with tales of their war exploits earlier in the play. Reminiscent of Carlyle’s drug-induced vulnerability, Cokes tells stories about their game and his exploits with Rooney crashing cars, but it is clear that they have a real friendship. Cokes finally rouses himself from his memories to notice Richie’s tears. Roger says that he has been “cryin’ ‘cause he’s queer” (64). Cokes takes this information in stride and chastises Roger for “yellin’ mean” to Richie (64).
Cokes’s words, stories, and the revelation that he will soon die from leukemia soften Richie and Roger. The human connection Cokes has with Rooney and his expression of love through the story demonstrate those same feelings of home and family that have just been destroyed in the barracks room. Cokes asks if he can sleep there, and Roger turns off the lights for him. Cokes becomes a temporary surrogate for the family member they lost.

With Streamers, Rabe provides a gender-fluid portrayal of home in a military and masculine controlled space. Instead of rejecting what would be perceived as feminine because of the associations with home—to return to Jeffords—the men re-cast the domestic activities to bond, admit anxieties, and create a sense of belonging. Rabe shows that men need an idea of home, as Haytock argues, but also that some types of American masculinity are flexible enough to re-cast domestic tasks and affects. Masculinities that want to control a space or have a clear hierarchy, as displayed by Billy and Carlyle, are ultimately not as flexible as they need to be, and their rigidity—and need for control—is bound to their masculine identity. Streamers demonstrates that the concept of “brotherhood” is not simple or assumed in a military unit. In terms of a brotherhood, Streamers picks up threads from Pavlo. Pavlo cannot cohere with the men in his unit because he holds onto his tough-guy, one-man-war-machine aspirational identity. The men in his unit do not want him there, and they assault him with a blanket party. In Streamers, the odd man out, Carlyle, is treated as a human being with emotional needs, and the men (to varying degrees) try to make a place for him within their community. For at least a few scenes, most notably when they drunkenly return to the barracks and talk before falling asleep, they create a bond that could be called a “brotherhood.” However, the consequences of the play demonstrate that brotherhood has its limitations, too. It is not the simple concept that mass culture and myths about war sometimes assume. Streamers also warns against battles for control.
of space among men. Billy and Carlyle fight only when each feels his right to control the room is threatened. Violence happens when they want to establish dominance and a hierarchy in terms of their bonds, as people who share the room and brothers-in-arms. Cokes and Rooney seem to have a true, equal friendship. The people that Roger and Billy were at the beginning of the play could have been on the same path that Cokes and Rooney have traveled, but they allow other stressors to alter their path. Strikingly, Streamers treats men’s relationships differently than other war plays or war literature in that the fight is not between fathers and sons, as it is in States of Shock.

**Sam Shepard’s States of Shock**

Sam Shepard, like Rabe, wrote his 1991 war play *States of Shock* to shed light on the problem or war, but their visions diverge regarding the possibilities of a gender-inclusive concept of home and relationships shared between men. As Susanne Willadt notes in her excellent article on the play, the events of the Gulf War provoked Shepard to write a comment about “the present state of the American nation” (148). This is worth noting for two reasons: Willadt acknowledges that using a historical event to spark his creative process goes against Shepard’s documented “artistic credo,” and *States* was Shepard’s first explicit war play (148). Willadt suggests that at the time the U.S., and Shepard, felt that the Gulf War was being promoted as a “kind of successful replay of the Vietnam War” (149). To that effect, Willadt concludes that *States of Shock* is a play that could have come from the anti-war movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s (150). Like Rabe, Shepard was in disbelief that the anti-war “voice” had “all but disappeared” with the Gulf War (qtd. in Willadt 149). Like Sticks & Bones, *States of Shock*, then, is an indictment of all wars. To a greater degree than Rabe, Shepard’s own artistic interests play into a dominant topic of war plays: the relationships between men. Willadt finds that *States of Shock*
falls “victim” to Shepard’s “artistic obsession: his fascination with machismo and with the ‘mystery’ he finds solely in the relationships between men” (148). Still, Willadt admits that Shepard’s play treats both the relationships between men and war, and she suggests that to separate those concepts would be misreading the play (148). Making more connections with Rabe, she quotes Shepard’s explanation as to why violence is so intriguing to him: Shepard connects American violence to “Anglo male American”(s) feelings of inferiority, which is humiliating and leads men to “continually having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent” (qtd. in Willadt 156). This statement resonates throughout Shepard’s body of work. In this play, the action revolves around the relationship between Colonel and Stubbs. They act out an idea of manhood in competition with each other, as the relationship between fathers and sons must always be primary for Shepard.

Colonel wheels Stubbs, an injured veteran, into Danny’s, a family diner, to have dessert and coffee before Stubbs needs to be back at the care facility where he lives. This outing is an opportunity for Colonel to pressure Stubbs into relating the events of Colonel’s son’s death on the anniversary of that death and Stubbs’s life-altering injury. During an unnamed battle in an unnamed war, the bullet that severely injured Stubbs went through him and into the man behind him, Colonel’s son. Colonel wants to understand the battlefield that took his son’s life in exacting detail. Stubbs regains his ability to speak early in the play, but his memories of the battlefield are not adequate for Colonel, who becomes increasingly angry with Stubbs. Eventually, it is revealed that Stubbs could be Colonel’s son, but Colonel is frustrated and angry that Stubbs cannot remember his part of the story. Therefore, they begin to act out the memories, and their actions morph into a conflict between a father and son. Stubbs accuses Colonel of “invent[ing]” his death after he was injured (20) because Colonel says, “No son of mine has a
‘thing’ like that. It’s not possible” (29). This primordial relationship between fathers and sons is familiar in Shepard’s body of work. While various war-like sounds and lighting disrupt the restaurant setting, the son wrestles control away from his father, leading to attempted patricide. Over the course of the play, Stubbs becomes stronger: he speaks to others after being presented as mute, stands up from his wheelchair and dances with the waitress Glory Bee, and tells his war story as a way of dominating Colonel. Colonel goes from being a character exerting the most control to losing the control he possessed, as the “son” wins the mythic war with his father for dominance. Colonel is now the one being interrupted by Stubbs when he talks. When Stubbs grabs Glory Bee, Colonel releases her and sits in Stubbs’ wheelchair. The play ends with Stubbs, in a gas mask, and Colonel, in the wheelchair, freezing in a tableau as the sword Stubbs is swinging stops inches from Colonel’s neck. While wearing gas masks, the other two patrons and Glory Bee sing “Goodnight Irene” as the lights fade to black.

Although Shepard’s connection between men’s relationships and violence is useful when discussing war plays, it also shows that Rabe’s depiction of men’s relationships while at war is significant due to his complex and nuanced view of home as a domestic site and as the sum of the relationships between family members. Willadt’s main premise is that States of Shock is only superficially about the historical event of war; instead, the play is primarily about the war between fathers and sons (150). She makes a good case for this and even argues that the “enemy” that brought Colonel and Stubbs together, and whom they toast, is actually the father figure. Ultimately, in order to become men, sons must “surrender to the mysterious and inescapable power of blood relations in order to find their own identity,” and in this way, war is all about family because “[f]or Shepard, everything is connected with the family, particularly male family members” (Willadt 162). Shepard views home and war as locations in which men participate in
mythical battle for supremacy. By his reasoning, the Gulf War—and given the play’s lack of specificity, all American wars—are about the Anglo man’s feelings of inferiority. Men go to war to become a man—a phrase that Stubbs shouts to himself, the White Man, and Colonel—and they either come back dead, as a hero, or in Stubbs’ case, an injured man who is no longer a man. What is more, the Gulf War that provoked Shepard’s response was, as Willadt suggests, felt as an attempt to revise America’s war track record, which made Shepard angry saying, “The notion of this being a heroic event is just outrageous .... This is supposed to be what America is about?” (qtd. in Willadt 149). The nation, then, had an inferiority complex that could be reconciled through warfare and violence to correct the “wrongs” of our fathers. Shepard makes a clear link between violent, familial relationships—along with men’s inferiority complex leading to violence—as the root cause of war.

Written fifteen years after Streamers was first produced, Shepard’s play shows a direction that male playwrights have traveled concerning war, home, and men’s relationships to those concepts. Yes, many war plays—and other war literature and film—treat the subject of men’s relationships with other men, but Shepard’s obsession with those relationships represents something a bit more common in war literature than Rabe’s gender-fluid vision of home and how soldiers encounter it. Shepard’s depiction of war and relationships between fathers and sons brings to the surface the idea that boys go to war to become men and take another step towards fulfilling, according to this world-view, their life’s purpose to kill (usually metaphorically) their fathers, assuming control of the home front. In contrast, Rabe’s plays frame men’s relationships (and the more extreme distillations of that as seen in Shepard’s play) in terms of family dynamics and see, at least for a few moments in Pavlo and Streamers, that men’s relationships as something non-violent, egalitarian, and supportive.
Chapter Conclusion

Rabe’s works offer more possibilities for home to be a generative force—even in a male dominated space—but, as the trilogy also demonstrates, the possibilities are ultimately unfulfilled. The possibilities for home to be a generative or reparative force in Pavlo are brief and concern only peripheral characters. As discussed, Wall wants to continue his friendship with Brisbey after they go home, but after he is rejected, Wall turns up at the brothel where Pavlo wants to have sex with the woman he loves. Pavlo’s narrative demonstrates the rejection of anything deemed feminine and his general lack of awareness concerning his own feelings. Pavlo desperately wants to be part of the brotherhood and to have the respect of his brothers-in-arms and commanding officers, but attaining their respect means that he would have to relinquish his goal to be the street-tough guy. He acts badly towards them—stealing and lying—and they want nothing to do with him. Their dislike of him and his relationships with them mostly serve to highlight Pavlo’s character defects. Then, Pavlo encounters home literally but finds a brother and mother who do not provide the emotional support he needs and an ex-girlfriend who has moved on with her life. As a last gasp at finding an encounter with home that will meet the emotional needs Pavlo cannot articulate, he demands that his mother tell him who his father is, and the answer Pavlo receives is that his father is a fictional, unattainable stereotype of a masculinity dependent on rejecting anything perceived to be feminine. Finally, an exhausted Pavlo tries to meet the needs of his body in the brothel as a substitute for meeting his emotional needs and catches a grenade thrown by Wall.

Sticks & Stones and Streamers treat the men’s relationships with each other as a major feature of the plot, but that concept is framed by other issues. David’s encounter with his family and his relationship with his father seems closer to States of Shock on the surface, as David
wrestles control of the house away from his father. David, however, is concerned with taking control of the house, both of his parents, and his brother to make space for his fallen comrades. In bringing the dead bodies into the home, he wants them (and the willfully ignorant nation they represent) to see the true cost of the war. Yet, I also believe that David—with the oddly emotional lines he delivers in an otherwise cynical play—wants to bring the war home, transforming his physical home into the warzone where he met and lived with Zung. She did not want to return to the U.S. with David. Still, David’s version of home would meet his emotional needs, while the family tries and fails to reintegrate David into their idea of home. Finally, in *Streamers*, men’s relationships and the fight for control over the environment is a central focus, but it would be reductive to view the play only in that way. Alongside the tension between the competing versions of American masculinity, there are places where the men have supported each other through domestic means and tried to make a community in their temporary home. Further, Cokes and Rooney—though drunk and traumatized by war themselves—become a vision into the future of what Roger and Billy’s relationship could have been. Cokes and Rooney have found comfort in their relationship; they drink to forget Cokes’ medical state and relive their glory days making mischief. Although the possibilities for a generative encounter with home are not fulfilled, they still exist in Rabe’s plays, whereas in *States of Shock*, war and home revolve around violent relationships between men.

Ultimately, Rabe—the foundational playwright for contemporary U.S. war plays—demonstrates how soldiers encounter home before and after war. Home is not the panacea for the trauma the soldier experiences. Home and the people who inhabit that space are just as problematic as war, and home is not a comforting place. People kill each other at home as well as at war. In each play, a man is killed. Pavlo catches the grenade thrown by a fellow U.S. soldier
because he does not register the depth of feeling his comrade has for a woman. David is killed by his not-so-loving family because he cannot be reintegrated into their stereotypical, toxic vision of the American family. Billy is killed by a man who wanted to be part of his community and slept under his “roof.” People kill each other readily, especially to preserve what they have, and that violence springs from relationships between people, as well as in a combat zone. Rabe does not offer an idealized version of home (as the home in *Sticks & Bones* is a TV fantasy)—where all the troubles men encounter at war do not exist.

If male playwrights after Rabe tend to treat war and home as places to explore men’s relationships or treat the domestic site of home as solely a feminized space, it is important to look beyond how men write about war, while acknowledging that Rabe’s works are important. How do women dramatize men’s relationship to home? Do women write about masculinities that reject anything deemed feminine? How do encounters with home change when women bring their own experiences and ideas to the subject of war? The next chapter explores another war play trilogy by Quiara Alegría Hudes, which echoes Rabe’s while extending the work that he began.
Chapter 2: Homecomings in War Plays by Women

Elaine: *(forcefully, thoughtfully)*: But when you came home, you weren’t Jim. Where did he go?

Jim: MIA. Never came back.

Elaine: No.

---Lydia Stryk’s *American Tet*

Elaine and Jim are characters in Lydia Stryk’s 2005 play *American Tet*. In the first scene, from which I have quoted, they are reclining on lawn chairs in their backyard, not looking at each other, and discussing some recent, severe injuries that a friend’s daughter has sustained in combat. Their discussion has a neutral, banal tone, signaling that for them, as a military family, this is somewhat normal conversation. Jim is a Vietnam War veteran and has had a military career. Elaine serves as an educator for the Army, helping spouses of enlisted soldiers adjust to their new lives. They have a son, Danny, who is coming home on leave from Iraq in a few weeks. Although Elaine and Jim anticipate Danny’s return, the play more deeply deals with the fallout from Jim’s own reintegration into American society after Vietnam, twenty-five years after his return. I have selected this exchange to open my chapter because of what it illustrates. First, Elaine is still trying to figure out why her husband came home from the war so changed. Second, Jim, too, acknowledges that he has changed so severely that he considers his former self to be missing in action—which often amounts to calling a soldier dead. To this day, Jim’s homecoming continues to affect not only his life but the lives of his family. *American Tet* will be discussed in more depth in this chapter, but Stryk’s treatment of a soldier’s homecoming is also characteristic of homecoming plays authored by women, which is the subject of this chapter. I
here explore how women playwrights dramatize men’s relationships to home, examining the effects of war on the soldier’s family and his reintegration.

Homecoming plays, like war plays, are as old as theatre itself. In one of the oldest surviving plays, Aeschylus describes Agamemnon’s return home from the Trojan war. More recently, as we have seen, David Rabe’s Vietnam trilogy features a homecoming play, *Sticks & Bones*. In his book *Levitating the Pentagon*, J.W. Fenn includes homecoming plays as one of his three categories of Vietnam War plays, along with those focusing on initiation and on experience. Fenn argues that upon making a “transition from a brutal survival situation to a relatively complacent civilian life in a few days,” veterans see a stark difference in the “perception of what the war was about” between themselves, the military, and civilians (199). Fenn continues, saying “the returnees encountered a form of reverse culture shock upon their return, as exposure to the home culture created stresses and anxieties as severe as those generated by the overseas experience” (199). The stress caused by reintegration constitutes “the dramatic conflict of virtually all homecoming plays” (Fenn 199). For Fenn, *Sticks & Bones* is the most important Vietnam War homecoming play in terms of understanding that culture shock. Not only does David experience extreme duress—expressed as his desire to make his family understand the consequences of war—but his family willfully ignores the war and the ways it would potentially change their lives if they did acknowledge it. *Sticks & Bones* treats the immediate homecoming of David, not the long-term problems of reintegration. Many women-authored homecoming plays, on the other hand, have addressed this latter issue. Often, the family becomes an ally in the soldier’s reintegration, not the enemy as Rabe imagines. This long view of integration may also be a product of many decades of war and soldiers reintegrating into American society. In more contemporary plays and war narratives, post-traumatic stress (PTS)
and a soldier in imminent danger of becoming violent have become common themes. In a recent special issue of *American Theatre* titled *The Theatre of War*, Bart Pitchford observes that in the last fifteen years, American war plays particularly have focused on the reintegration of veterans. Although Pitchford, a veteran turned academic, is in favor of these efforts, he critiques the focus on PTS and what he calls “moral injury,” a term that I will use throughout this chapter (24).  

Although PTS is important to portray and de-stigmatize, Pitchford argues that well-meaning efforts to focus on this may perpetuate the idea that veterans are dangerous. Moreover, he suggests, these efforts often signal a superficial understanding of veterans and their lives. He explains that there are many other aspects of war and veterans’ lives that are worthy of dramatic attention. After exploring the homecomings depicted by two playwrights—one of whom is Quiara Alegría Hudes, who will be discussed in this chapter—Pitchford argues for a more nuanced view of the military and veterans. Women playwrights are taking up Pitchford’s charge and have been expanding the idea of a homecoming play for some time. These efforts necessarily entail a revision or re-seeing of dominant, masculine war narratives.

In their discussions of non-traditional war literature, feminist scholars have addressed this issue. Jennifer Haytock offers a succinct summary of this narrative in her article about novels that respond to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: “The American war story is often the tale of the individual white male heterosexual soldier, a story of his personal experience of disillusionment and loss. In these narratives, war functions as a mirror for American masculine selfhood and nationhood” ("Reframing" 336). While my analysis of Rabe’s Vietnam War trilogy in the

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8 Journalist David Wood defines moral injuries as “wounds caused by blows to [soldiers’ and veterans’] moral foundation, damaging their sense of right and wrong and often leaving them with traumatic guilt.” Wood’s definition comes from his Huffington Post article, which is part of a larger series he wrote on the military. From an academic perspective, Kenneth MacLeish explores moral injury as a theory and how it is used by proponents of the theory. I have decided not to use the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because I do not know if any of the characters I discuss have been diagnosed with it, but they are, no doubt, suffering from stress as a result of their traumatic experiences.
previous chapter explains that Rabe’s plays do deviate from the dominant narrative of war, they also fit Haytock’s characterization in that they are about the male soldier’s “personal experience of disillusionment.” Like many contemporary war stories and plays, Rabe comments on the dominant war narrative, and all of the plays by women in this dissertation also participate in that dialogue. Alexis Greene adds to Haytock’s description in her discussion of six war plays by women: “The canonized narrative of war extols heroism and the personal glory that war brings, accepts war’s brutality, and sees the enemy’s death and defeat as the apotheosis of victory,” but women playwrights “rewrite that narrative” by presenting war as “brutal…[,] pointless, and certainly without glory” (85). In her remarks on discussing Emily Mann’s Still Life (discussed below), Marta Fernández Morales comments that Mann participates in a larger feminist effort to reclaim and unearth the voices of women in places where their voices have been erased or suppressed. In particular, Cheryl, the soldier’s wife, “is given a chance to speak her truth about a conflict that has been interpreted mostly from a male perspective” (Morales 32). The way Morales characterizes Mann’s recuperative efforts can be applied to all of the plays discussed in this chapter: Women playwrights provide a medium through which to speak about a critical part of American culture that is often limited to the male perspective, particularly the perspective of the white male heterosexual soldier. Sharon Friedman echoes Morales in her article about the “surge” of women-authored war plays in the 21st century. Examining the breadth and depth of this group of plays, Friedman concludes that women playwrights write against “[m]isogyny, violence, and the gendered discourse of war” by staging plays about these issues to “give attention to the cultural, material, and economic conditions that foment the injustices experienced by women and men in a range of circumstances” (609). My analysis builds on the work of these
scholars by arguing that the plays covered in this chapter write against the gendered discourse of 
homecoming narratives to give a voice to women and veterans’ families.

As I stated earlier, the contribution that the women playwrights discussed in this chapter bring to the war story and homecoming play is that they tend to look beyond the soldier to 
explore how the war has affected his family and its role in his reintegration. I say “he” because 
the playwrights I analyze dramatize the male soldier’s homecoming. My analysis begins with a 
crucial play written shortly after the Vietnam War era. Emily Mann’s 1980 play *Still Life* 
portrays a soldier who came home from the Vietnam War with PTS and has not adjusted to life 
after war. His family has played a pivotal role in his transition. While his parents have never 
talked with him about his experiences after his return, the soldier credits his wife, whom he has 
abused and effectively made a casualty of war, as an important reason why he can live in 
American society with a degree of functionality. However, *Still Life* also demonstrates that the 
home is not exempt from violence and that regular people—not just soldiers—are capable of 
violence. Twenty-five years and multiple conflicts in the Middle East later, Lydia Stryk and 
Quiara Alegría Hudes both produce their war plays within a few months of each other, and they 
present very different depictions of homecoming and the effects it has on the soldier’s family. In 
her 2004 play *American Tet*, Stryk presents a critique of military culture from the point of view 
of characters who live within it and fail to come to terms with war. Jim, too, has not adjusted 
well to life after the Vietnam War and uses his garden as a coping mechanism. However, in the 
years since the Vietnam War, Jim and Elaine raise a family, and both continue to participate in 
the military. The events of the play mostly concern their son’s return home on leave from the 
military and Elaine’s attempts to reconcile Jim’s war trauma for herself. She looks outside of the

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9 Chapter four explores the relationship female soldiers have with their homes and how women playwrights depict them.
military and finds an unlikely person to assist her: a Vietnamese waitress at a local restaurant. Elaine tries to befriend her, using domestic means, but the friendship fails, and Elaine and Jim end the play how they began—ignoring what happened in the past because it cannot be reconciled. Hudes’s The Elliot Trilogy portrays the journey of one soldier as he leaves for war, kills his first man, and comes back home with a moral injury, which exacerbates existing problems within his family. The Elliot Trilogy is comprised of three plays: Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue (2005), Water by the Spoonful (2011), and The Happiest Song Plays Last (2013). Over the course of a few years, the soldier’s mother, aunt, and cousin play a crucial role in his reintegration and adjustment to life after the military. Hudes ultimately presents an optimistic view of a homecoming because the soldier’s family and community help him to find purpose, which allows him to mitigate—but not relieve himself of—his moral injury. Although the plays under discussion do not question the purpose of war to the same degree as Rabe’s Sticks & Bones, these narratives portray war as brutal, without glory, and reveal the wider effects of a soldier’s homecoming. The families dramatized by these plays become the soldier’s comrades, allies, enemies, and victims in his reintegration to American society.

As part of my analysis, I examine the domestic actions and practices performed in these plays. Ann Romines provides a useful term that I will appropriate: domestic ritual. Romines introduced this term in her exploration of some early 20th-century American novels by women. Positioning her work to build on feminist scholars’ explorations of women’s novels and domestic writing, Romines focuses on ritualized behavior as a way of emphasizing and valuing the actions that women take in their home. She defines domestic ritual as follows:

[R]ituals performed in a house, a constructed shelter, which derive meaning from the protection and confinement a house can provide. They possess most of the qualities…
common to all rituals: a regular recurrence, symbolic value, emotional meaning, and (usually) a ‘dramatic’ group-making quality…. All such rituals help to preserve the shelter. The tendency of human-made shelters is to accede to nature and thus to decay and change. Ritual opposes that tendency. (12)

Romines’s concept works well for the novels she examines. It allows her to find nuance and complexity in writing about the domestic, private sphere in the works of Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, and others, while also showing how private writings are political. However, what I find most valuable about the term is that domestic rituals work to uphold and further a common culture, bolster a community, and promote values that are generative rather than destructive, unlike war. If we replace the decay and change that Romines describes, domestic rituals and repetitive domestic practices can uphold positive or generative societal values that combat the toxic effects of war on an individual or the soldier’s moral injury. Of course, as these plays demonstrate, domestic rituals and practices are not a panacea for the trauma of war. But while domestic rituals are limited as a tool and home as a place to express, understand, or resolve war trauma, some characters represented in these plays successfully employ domestic ritual and use domestic practices to mitigate their war trauma and its toxic effects. Others fail in their attempts, but the uses of domestic rituals and practices are still revealing.

**Before Mann**

I have chosen to begin my analysis of women-authored homecoming plays with Mann’s *Still Life* because it was written shortly after the Vietnam War, and its plot is tightly focused on the soldier’s post-war life. However, Mann was not the first woman to write a play that involved the Vietnam War. Megan Terry’s anti-war musical *Viet Rock* (1966) and Barbara Garson’s *MacBird!* (1967), a political satire aimed at the Johnson administration, are earlier examples of
As Fenn points out, Terry’s play is one of the first to deal with the Vietnam War written by a man or woman, and it is significant for its experimental form that reflected the concerns and anxieties of American society in the 1960’s (Fenn 24, 39). Fenn does not discuss *MacBird!* even though it is a war play, perhaps because Garson uses Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to critique the Johnson administration, and it is not a military play. However, *MacBird!*’s reception is emblematic of the erasure of women’s voices. Ryan Howe compares the reception of *MacBird!* with Rabe’s *Streamers* and finds that the negative reactions to *MacBird!* stem from the fact that it was written by a woman who was not a veteran. What is more, Howe finds that Garson’s participation in anti-war efforts—which would provide some authority for her to speak on the subject of war—are often left out of her biography when her play is discussed (78). Howe reads this as more than sexism and a “widespread dismissal of the playwright’s critical standing” (78).

**Emily Mann’s *Still Life***

As I discussed in my introduction to this dissertation, the idea that women do not have enough authority to write about war if they are not veterans themselves remains an issue today. Greene spends the first part of her article considering why women have not participated in the genre of war plays until relatively recently and explains that she believes the historical shift of the Women’s Movement made space for women on stage, particularly with the support of the not-for-profit theatre community (84). Mann, who is not a veteran either, is “lent” authority to discuss war because *Still Life* is a documentary play that she pieced together from interviews she did with a veteran, his wife, and his mistress that she conducted in the summer of 1978 (214). Two years later, the play premiered at the Goodman Studio Theatre in Chicago. Audiences

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10 *Viet Rock* was the inspiration for the popular, enduring musical *Hair* (1967) by Gerome Ragni and James Rado, and it was also produced by Joe Papp at the Public (Fenn 43).
receive a close and intimate examination of Mark’s experiences at war and in post-war life. At the same time and through overlapping and disjointed monologues, Mark’s wife Cheryl and his mistress Nadine provide their own stories discussing their relationships with Mark, along with stories about the violence they have experienced as women in American society. The plot is nonlinear and builds towards a confession from Mark that he murdered a Vietnamese family during the war in a non-combat situation. Behind the characters, Mark’s photographs cycle through on a projector. Fenn argues that the play’s form works due to the “interplay of stimulus/response and linguistic one-upmanship” as the characters only acknowledge each other’s existence a few times, and their monologues are separate but woven together (223). In her published note to the play, Mann explains that the play is informed by and constructed around trauma: “Each character struggles with his traumatic memory of events and the play as a whole is my traumatic memory of their accounts. The characters speak directly to the audience so that the audience can hear what I heard, experience what I have experienced” (215). Mann admits that she does not have answers for the questions the play asks but insists that they “are worth asking” nonetheless (215). Ultimately, Mann wants the play to be an opportunity for the audience to reflect on the Vietnam War and its consequences.

The significance of Still Life to my project is that Mark has brought the war back home with him, and his adjustment to life after the war has not been successful. In the approximately ten years since Mark returned home, he married Cheryl, had one child with her, became an artist, and started his own photography shop. Although he served prison time for drug trafficking, he now speaks as a man who regrets his past actions, which include the way he has treated his wife, and he understands that he cannot be free of his guilt. Mann emphasizes this in the very beginning of the play. Mark shows the audience a photograph of his wife “before.” The stage
notes read that she is “quintessentially innocent,” while the next photo of her “now” shows a
woman who is pregnant and “rigid” (218). Mark comments, “She’s been through a lot” (218).
While the broad strokes of his life may look like a successful integration, the details matter, and
the play repeatedly demonstrates that things are not as they seem. Over the course of the play,
the audience learns that Mark beats his wife, is having an affair, and bears both survivor’s guilt
for his comrades and guilt for his own actions in Vietnam. What is more, his marriage is
dissolving, and his business does not make enough money to support his family. Mark
acknowledges his own ill-adjustment to life after war: “See, I wanted to get back into society and
I wanted to live so much life, but I couldn’t. I was constantly experimenting” (251). 11 The
experimenting is likely a reference to Mark’s art, but it also speaks to his larger efforts to find
himself after the war. He has tried to reconcile the man he believed himself to be with the man
who did horrific things at war and survived it when many of his brothers-in-arms did not.

Mark is actively consumed by the war, as demonstrated by the art pieces he has created,
his photographs, and the way he speaks about his time at war. Granted, this is a memory play—
the characters are speaking to an unknown person, for whom the audience substitutes—so
allowances can be made for Mark’s attention to the war, as the forum demands it. However, the
women provide context, detail, and support for the idea that he is consumed by war. One of the
first signs of Mark’s efforts to preserve the war can be seen in his use of glass jars that contain
art he creates. Cheryl suggests that Mark uses his art as an outlet, but she thinks that he “gets into
trouble when he’s into that art world” (221). In small jars, Mark uses photographs and other
materials to create disturbing artwork. Cheryl describes one in which Mark has a cut out of a
picture of her naked and tied it “to a stake with string. And there was all this broken glass….  

11 Although the version of Still Life in Coming to Terms uses line breaks, the 1982 Dramatists Play Service edition
does not. I will not be using line breaks either.
Broken glass is a symbol of fire” (221). The jars disturb Cheryl, and she is concerned that their young son will see them. Cheryl interprets the one she describes as evidence that Mark wants to kill her. Nadine, on the other hand, is excited by them because they represent Mark’s artistic world and demonstrate his capacity for violence, which is one of the things she likes about him. Nadine appreciates the fact that Mark is honest about his capacity for violence and that he does not hide behind a civilized façade in which people supposedly are not violent. For her, all humans are capable of violence; Mark is simply straightforward about his capacity. Nadine is the one who calls his jars “brilliant, humorous” and explains, “He’s preserving the war. I’m intrigued that people think he’s violent. I know all his stories. He calls himself a time-bomb” (222). What is more, she accepts the person Mark is and his artistic efforts to “face all the relationships he’d been in where he’d violated someone” (219). Nadine is also not disturbed by the violent, gruesome photographs Mark has from the war, whereas they concern and confuse Cheryl.

Mark uses the projector to show the audience his photographs, further emphasizing the relationship Mark has with his war experiences. Mark’s gesture recalls the “home movies” that Rabe’s soldier David in Sticks & Bones describes to his family. The screen David uses is blank, but his words describe terrible scenes in vivid detail. In performances of Still Life, the photographs, a combination of domestic and wartime images that he has taken, become a focal point throughout the play as Mark flips through them in a slideshow. Among the wartime photos are some of the pictures of the men with whom he fought. However, at the beginning of Act II, when he discusses his time at war, he begins searching for specific photographs taken during his time in Vietnam. Before warning the audience, he finds shots that Mann describes as “gruesome pictures of this particular war,” and he describes them, using a banal tone, as “some pictures of
more or less dead bodies and things” (243). With the last, particularly horrible image, Mann says that “Mark looks at the audience, or hears them” (243) and acknowledges that the photographs are too much to see at that moment before turning the projector off. In one of those instances of “linguistic one-upmanship,” Cheryl tells the audience “You just don’t show some people those things” (243). Her words reframe Mark’s actions and signal Mark’s mental proximity to his war experience, even years later. This slideshow takes place after Cheryl has already told the audience that when Mark talks about the war he gets “crazy talking about it and you can’t get him to stop no matter what he’s doing to the people around him” (227). Her words might describe the audience at this very moment of the play.

Cheryl points out that when Mark starts talking “People start getting uncomfortable and you can see it in his eyes, the excitement” (228). Mark is particularly excited about his war experiences when he talks about his firearm, which is also connected to sex for him. Cheryl even comments that Mark has told her that fighting in the war was like “the best sex he had ever had” (232). Mark himself links power to sex: “It’s getting off on having all that power every day” (230). Having his weapon also meant he had control. In trying to get the audience to understand that he feels like the military did not force him to do what he did—he took orders, but he also feels like he could have stopped doing so—he explains that he and his comrades-in-arms “were given all this power to work outside the law. We all dug it” (237). That is part of Mark’s difficulty with reintegration: he enjoyed the power he was given and insists that the hardest part of coming home was giving it up and the power that went with it. Mark’s enjoyment of that power is part of his moral injury, as he feels immense guilt for killing the Vietnamese family. At the end of the play, Mark talks about seeing the boy he killed whenever he looks at his own son:

12 Morales provides an analysis of Still Life in terms of gender and sexuality, which is an undeniable part of Mark’s excitement.
“I have a child… [,] a child who passed through the age that the little child was. My son […] my son” (270). Mark’s moral injury has not dissipated with time, and new events and experiences will continue to make the war a current presence in his life.

Although Mark’s son has played a role in his reintegration, the play portrays Mark’s family as both hindering and helping his transition. While Mark was at war, he wrote home to his father and told him “everything” (257). Writing home was a way for Mark to experience emotion, even catharsis, and to admit how scared he was. All three characters acknowledge that Mark sent a bone from a man he killed back home to his family. Nadine says, “It was his neat attempt to demand for them to listen, about the war” (223). Still, Mark may have felt that they did not comprehend the situation. No other details about his attempts to get his family to listen to him are given. However, it is likely that this lack of understanding contributed to Mark’s exploits with the law once he came home. He comments throughout the play that he could not talk to his parents about his experiences after he got home. He tells the audience about walking into his parents’ living room just after he landed on American soil. Mark’s homecoming is reminiscent of David’s return in Sticks & Bones. In an event Mark retells a few times, he says he got home, and “[m]y dad looked at me, my mom looked at me. I sat down. Said: Could I have some coffee? That’s when my mother started raggin’ on me about drinking coffee” (258). Mark’s family seemed to want to continue with life as usual and sought to ignore what happened “over there” in Vietnam. Mark left home shortly after this incident and met Cheryl not too long after this. They were both into drugs, and Mark pursued her because she was “really American,” indicating his own desire to flee from anything that reminded him of the war (224). In Mark’s own words, Cheryl became “the chief surgeon. When the shrapnel came out of my head, she would be the one to take it out” (226).
Cheryl, then, has been integral to whatever degree of success Mark has had tackling his guilt and moral injury. He frequently explains how important Cheryl is to him because she has helped him through terrible times, including suicidal episodes. Nevertheless, the effects of helping Mark has transformed Cheryl. Mark calls Cheryl his “comrade,” and one of the takeaways of the play is that people at home are casualties of the Vietnam War even though they have never been “over there.” When the soldier comes home, he brings the war with him and creates new victims at home. Mark makes this connection for the audience early in the play: “See, I see the war now through my wife. She’s a casualty too. She doesn’t get benefits for combat duties. The war busted me up, I busted up my wife” (233). For all of Mark’s reverence for his wife, she explains their relationship in very different terms. She is a battered woman who does not know how to leave and still wants her children to have a father. She seems scared of Mark and what he is capable of because she knows all his stories, whereas Mark has kept things from Nadine. Mark seems to desire reconciliation with Cheryl—they are currently separated—because he calls her one of the “walking wounded,” and as a Marine, “You don’t leave a comrade on the field” (261). The mentality of leaving no man behind is the penultimate act of care, perhaps love, on the battlefield. This caring action becomes potentially destructive at home when applied to a battered wife who has become a comrade, sharing the battlefield that Mark preserves at home. Caring looks different at home than at war, and until Mark sees that military procedure does not have a place in his home, assimilation is not possible, and he will continue to hurt his family. Cheryl will not leave Mark yet, but Mark knows that he has hurt her. When discussing Cheryl at the end of the play, Mark comments that he does not “want to jeopardize what she’s giving me” or “jeopardize her,” but from the audience’s perspective, she has been through too much to stay with him and recover (261). Likewise, Cheryl’s capacity to help Mark
has diminished with time as well, which explains the affair he has with Nadine, who claims to “accept everything he’s done” (221).

As indicated in Cheryl’s downward transformation, Mark has altered his home and has a difficult time caring for it. Mark’s “home” encompasses his life at home and his relationships with family, but Cheryl retells two stories in which it is clear that Mark also has a difficult time caring for his physical home. Throughout the play, Mark projects an image of himself as someone who is trying to do better, to adjust after he has made mistakes. Nadine describes him as someone facing those whom he has violated. His participation in the play, which is some sort of exchange with the characters and the unnamed audience member, is part of this process.

While the narratives compete with each other at times and it would be unwise to trust any one of them completely, these stories represent the character’s perceptions of reality and how they feel. Fenn argues that the play is also about “portraiture, which stems from the human need to externalize, to render in concrete form, psychological stresses,” and building on that, the characters project outward their perceptions of their reality, which can lead to distortions (223). Nevertheless, Mark’s domestic efforts—as described by Cheryl with some corroborating information from Mark and Nadine—are an indication that whatever strides he is making, his journey is not yet complete. At some point in the recent past, Cheryl had reconciled with Mark enough to move back into his residence, but Cheryl explains to the audience, that it is not her home. If it was, she would be caring for the structure by making repairs. She says, “your own home means upkeep,” but “Mark will never be ready to have his own home” (246). An example of this is Mark’s dog, which Cheryl resents. Mark makes sure the dog is fed with regularity, but Cheryl feels that the dog “eats better” than she and her son do (249). Mark always makes sure the dog does not run out of food even when Cheryl runs out of milk for her son. Mark does not
care for his physical home in the way he should. Neither does Cheryl, but that is only further evidence of turmoil being hidden or not acknowledged. With the story about the dog and Cheryl’s comments about Mark’s inability to care for a home, it seems as though Mark is still “experimenting,” to borrow from the above quote, with his and his family’s life after returning home instead of focusing on adjusting to society. Mark cannot build a successful life for himself and his family at home. The one he has built is unfinished or is an inadequate imitation, which connects Mark to the play’s title: he can only build a still life.

Cheryl tells another anecdote that more closely aligns with Romines’s idea: the spaghetti story. Three years ago, Mark decided to start a tradition on the day before Thanksgiving. He invites many people to his house and makes a pasta feast for everyone, even though he and Cheryl cannot afford to host such an event. Cheryl objects to the party—as she is the one running around hosting and figuring out how to feed the people Mark invites. Although he has been throwing the party for three years, Mark tells her “It’s tradition. I have to do this every year” (264). After the cooking, Mark gets drunk with his friends and leaves the house for Cheryl to clean, including the “Spaghetti on the wall. Spaghetti pots dropped in the kitchen. Spaghetti all over the sink” (264). She said this tradition “ruins” her every year (265). To Mark, the spaghetti feast has emotional value and a group-making quality. It is a normal, domestic, non-military event that makes him happy. The drinking with his friends afterwards is also part of this potentially generative domestic ritual. However, Mark once more demonstrates his unwillingness (or ignorance) to acknowledge what the spaghetti party does to his home and his family. Therefore, the domestic ritual is not employed successfully. Although the goal of a domestic ritual would be to preserve the home and the values of the people who live there, Mark’s domestic ritual is ineffective, as he does not host the feast to nurture his family because he does
not consider its effects on his wife. Instead, the spaghetti feast demonstrates that his priorities are skewed and only hides his maladjustment to life after the Vietnam War for one raucous night.

Mann’s *Still Life* directly explores the link between violence at war and violence in both American culture and the physical home. Fenn considers the play one of the most important from this period due to its treatment of psychological stress. With its inclusion in *Coming to Terms: American Plays & the Vietnam War*, the only anthology of Vietnam War plays, and its continued popularity, *Still Life* has become part of the canon of 20th-century American war plays. It is important that Mann brings the Vietnam War home, and she is participating in a trend that Greene notes. She finds that connecting the war to the home is one of the reasons why more women began writing war stories for the stage beginning in the 1970’s. Women were treating the problems of women, which included abuse they suffered in their homes. Speaking about Mann and Naomi Wallace, Greene argues that “in joining the military battlefield to a battlefield they perceive at home, [the playwrights] aim to destroy a myth in which the United States used to take comfort—that war was always remote, ‘over there,’ far from its shores” (88). Whether the abuse came from a veteran or non-military spouse, there was still a battlefield that needed attention. Perhaps the raw brutality of war that has infiltrated the home is a reason for *Still Life*’s staying power. In perhaps the best consideration of *Still Life*’s legacy, Mann has stated that she wishes *Still Life* could be “simply a historical drama” and not be “a fragment of a painful reality on stage” (Morales 44). However, many aspects of this play remain current. Mann demonstrates how a returning soldier’s family can both help and hurt him, while exploring the impact and lasting consequences of a veteran’s moral injury, and women playwrights have continued to explore this subject.
Between the Plays: Twenty-Five Years Later

The next homecoming play I analyze was produced twenty-five years after Still Life. In the years between these plays, the number of war plays written by women increased, and many of them address the issues of homecomings. Ellen McLaughlin’s A Narrow Bed (1987) portrays the lives of two military wives as they deal with the enduring consequences of the Vietnam War. One of the women lost her husband when he went missing in action. The other woman deals with a medical scare for her veteran husband whose body has been destroyed by alcohol. Like Mann, McLaughlin provides space for the stories of women who have lost their husbands to the war.

Shirley Lauro continues the focus on women’s stories in her 1991 play A Piece of My Heart. In a style reminiscent of Ntozake Shange’s 1975 choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, Lauro depicts women, mostly combat nurses, who were on the ground during the Vietnam War. They tell their stories from some distance in the future, and Greene observes that Lauro positions the women to be heroes, not just support for the troops. The play reminds us that women were on the frontlines of the Vietnam War and that they, too, suffer from the consequences of its violence. Premiering in 1994, Naomi Wallace’s In the Heart of America picks up the connection Mann makes between violence on the battlefield and domestic violence. As Greene argues, Wallace further brings the war back home by implying that the wars going on “over there” have their roots in America. With Wallace’s play, “there is the sense that war begins at home and is just a bigger, technologically more sophisticated brand of homegrown terrorism racial violence” (Greene 87). Specifically, Wallace connects homophobia and Islamophobia in the United States to the Gulf Wars and the Vietnam War. The play is loosely a homecoming play, but in this instance, the soldier does not come home, leaving his sister to search for the truth about his death. With the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,
Friedman asserts that there has been a “surge” of plays written about these conflicts, and plays that explore women’s experiences with war have “predominantly been composed by women” (594). As Friedman’s and my own research indicate, the number of war plays that have been composed by women rose exponentially after Mann wrote Still Life. The popularity of these plays—and the awards being given to their playwrights—indicate that women’s stories and experiences of war respond to a cultural absence. Lydia Stryk’s American Tet carries forward this tradition of feminist war plays by focusing on the voices of women in a setting traditionally dominated by men and by demonstrating the urgently needed perspectives these women bring.

**Lydia Stryk’s American Tet**

*American Tet* premiered in 2005 at the annual Contemporary American Theater Festival held in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Chicago Tribune theatre critic Michael Kilian noted that most of the new plays staged there were about international conflicts, including Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell*. Although Lydia Stryk’s father is a World War II veteran, she explains that the Iraq War “has been the seminal experience of my political awakening” due to protests against the Iraq War in 2003 (qtd. in Malpede xxi). Stryk’s play, which Kilian described as “subtle as napalm,” is anti-war, and it focuses on the idea that war is damaging to those who fight it. In her interview with Kilian, she insists that the play is not anti-military; instead, “We live in a world in which we raise our boys to be soldiers and the families sit at home waiting for them and they follow orders. That’s what happens generation after generation. It may be necessary, but it has terrible costs, so I think we need to be very careful about when we go to war.” One of the unique aspects of the play is that Stryk expresses her critiques of the war through characters inside the military. At the anti-war protests she attended, she was struck by the number of former and

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13 Friedman’s article also provides a list of contemporary war plays by women, which would be useful to anyone researching this topic.
current military people speaking out against the Iraq War. Stryk talked to veterans who had fought in Vietnam, Korea, and the Middle East; “[l]istening to them,” she says, “I began to understand what it meant to be raised with a set of values…that enabled them to take part in what I had grown up believing was a preposterous and immoral way of life…. [;] military folk were thinking this through on their own terms and voicing deep concerns and amazing resistance from within” (qtd. in Malpede xxi). After that, Stryk felt that she could write about this war only if she did so from their perspective. Although Elaine’s voice—and her doubts—are evident in the play, so, too, are the doubts of others who adhere to the values and beliefs of the U.S. military. Within a community where dissent is traditionally suppressed or exiled, Stryk presents a family who question whether the disastrous effects of the war are worth it but quell their doubts. At the end of the play, they continue living the life they had before they started to question the way things are.

*American Tet* portrays the casualties of war from the perspective of a military family—in this case, one of those families who raised a soldier and are now waiting for him to return home. They hope that the cost that war exacts on their son is not too high. When Danny comes home on leave (and does not want to return to Iraq), he has only been psychologically harmed by what he has been ordered to do. However, as a family that has multiple serving members, they know other families who have lost a child to the Iraq War. Within the first scene—the one in which Jim and Elaine sit in their backyard talking about their children—they also talk about their friend’s child Angela, who saved her comrades by taking the brunt of an explosion. She has been disfigured, but Jim is adamant that she will pull through. Elaine wonders what the quality of her life will be because “she’s got no face, for god’s sake” (50). The subject changes quickly, but the human cost of the Iraq War, which is just having its first anniversary when the play takes place,
is manifest throughout the play. For instance, in scenes in which the family members are in their backyard, Elaine reports that “Larry’s boy blew up” (57) and “Darlene is flying home. With Kevin’s coffin” (61).

To give back to her community and promote the values she believes in, Elaine teaches a class to military spouses that introduces them to their new life. In the four scenes in which she is teaching, she intentionally skates by discussions about dealing with death or disfigurement of a spouse, even though she herself has dealt with a husband who did not return as himself. She fails to adequately address the potential of terrible things happening to their loved ones beyond making sure that wills have been written. Elaine’s real goal—and the goal of the military culture she is promoting—is to reframe the negative experiences of military life for families into positive ones, such that feelings of loneliness are reframed as feeling like one is part of a big military community. She also positions them to think of themselves as heroes who are experiencing a “sacrifice,” providing a mantra for them: “If it weren’t for the mission, we wouldn’t be free. If it weren’t for your sacrifice, we wouldn’t be American. Trust God with your spouse’s safety. There is no reason to worry” (64). Nevertheless, Elaine has begun to worry, and the main plot line concerns Elaine’s distress at her growing disillusionment with the war and its cost. She has lost her husband to it, even though he has damaged lungs due to Agent Orange, and her father is having trouble at his assisted living home with memory loss because, as Jim says, “Ernie’s on the Russian Front” and taking his coat off would mean his death (93). Now, the woman, Angela, who might have married her son was nearly killed at war. Moreover, Elaine becomes increasingly anxious that if Danny returns to the military, he might be killed. It is unclear if Danny’s family knows that he is a prison guard and not on the front lines, but Danny’s anxiety about the war feeds the demythologizing that Elaine is already experiencing about the U.S.’s
intentions in Iraq. Early in the play, Elaine meets and tries to befriend Nhu, a Vietnamese waitress. Nhu explains to Elaine who Buddha is—and what his tenet that “life is suffering” means to her—and some of her experiences as a young woman living in Vietnam during the war. By the end of the play, Elaine breaks down in class, as her doubts have begun to take control. Reconciliation, the play suggests, is unlikely, and the awakening Elaine might have experienced is too much for her.

Jim, on the other hand, needs to believe in the military’s actions and uses his garden as a coping mechanism and domestic ritual. Jim has not participated in Elaine’s awakening and does not engage in discussions about peace with his anti-war daughter. While he does think about the same things that Elaine is beginning to consider, his garden is a place he can control and in which he can avoid thinking, making gardening “such good therapy” for him (68). During these garden monologues, his discussion flips between reflections on himself and how he thinks of the garden. In this space, he can speak to the concerns he does not disclose to his family, saying that he is “[a] lifelong professional killer” who for thirty years “got paid for organizing and implementing effective destruction of a given enemy” (67). After his time at war and during the thirty years he spent destroying enemies of the U.S., he has come to believe that “Life is in fact without value. It’s just a force. Everything lives to live. That’s all” (67). The garden reinforces this belief because no matter what is done to it, it still continues to grow: “The thing about nature is. That nothing dies. Or death—being dead—just doesn’t apply. Nothing dies. You can kill it. Starve it. Drown it. Torture it. But it comes back to life. Or forget life. It just comes back” (67). For Jim, the garden is an extension of warfare, as gardeners nurture some plants and eradicate others. Moreover, it is a place where he contemplates life—the lives he has taken and whether or not he is living. Jim is still reckoning with his own adjustment to civilian life. His psyche does
not consume the play, nor does the play dramatize a reverse culture shock or journey of disillusionment in the ways that Rabe’s soldiers experience. Jim seems to believe what he told Elaine earlier in the play—that the man he was when he went to Vietnam is “MIA. Never came back” (49). His psyche is not the same as a man who has not gone to war, killed, and survived to live his life. However, gardening—a domestic practice—has helped Jim cope with his actions at war and in his career. Before Danny returns home, Jim tells the audience that he looks forward to showing the garden to his son and teaching him about it because “[a]ll the knowledge of the world’s right here” (73). To Jim, life within this microcosm of the word is controlled, and it exists for and at someone’s pleasure. When life dies, it is recycled and goes into the compost to contribute to new life. It is a cycle in which nothing truly dies. This metaphor, which aligns with the Buddhism that Stryk refers to elsewhere in the play, is a way for Jim to partially rationalize his actions and participate in society, while denying his responsibility for his actions. Life, which consists of living and dying, continues in nature, which means that he was and is participating in a natural cycle.

When Danny returns home on leave, he seems on the precipice of acknowledging that he has done something terrible. At first, home is a refuge for him. Before arriving at home, the audience has seen Danny stand in front of two military tribunals. The audience does not hear what the tribunals say, only Danny’s responses. From his words, it seems as though he has been helping to torture enemy combatants for information. He describes torture techniques, and his words demonstrate the extent to which he has dehumanized the prisoners. As horrific as his actions are, Danny is adamant that he was following orders and doing his job. Danny then arrives home at the end of Act I. His sister Amy is the first person we see talking to him, and she senses that something is wrong. Danny tells Amy that being “over there” was like being in hell and that
he did not feel “one good, proud day” while at war. What is more, if he goes back, “I will stand in front of a gun and help them pull the trigger” (75). With Amy and in this vulnerable moment, he seems to come just short of acknowledging a moral injury, but he is still warring with himself about whether he was simply doing his job or not. Being home saves him from hell and his own suicidal feelings. Amy tells him that he does not have to go back, and she says, “No one has to go back” (75). By this time, the audience has heard Amy tell her parents about the other casualties of this war, which include other soldiers who do not want to go back or spouses who are trying to keep their soldiers home. At his homecoming party, Danny acts like a normal American guy, grilling burgers for the family. In this way, he gets to sweep his anxieties under the rug.

His father, of course, has also tried to do the same, but the party reveals the degree to which Jim still struggles with the choices he made at war. Since the first scene, Elaine has been planning to welcome Danny home with a backyard barbeque. She also uses the party to extend her friendship with Nhu. Before the party, Elaine inadvertently pushed Nhu into unearthing terrible memories. Elaine believes that extending a hand in hospitality by inviting Nhu to the party will bolster their budding friendship and repair the damage she did. What is more, the party is an attempt at a domestic ritual to help comfort and mitigate the trauma experienced by her family and friend. Nhu, on the other hand, looks at the party as a way she can acknowledge suffering, a core Buddhist principle. Nhu offers to make food for the party, hoping to show this American family what the Tet holiday means to her and the people of Vietnam. Elaine does not realize that Nhu is also trying to say goodbye. Seeing Nhu at his home is a bit of a shock for Jim. Although Jim welcomes Nhu to their home, he still makes an excuse to sit in his garden for a few minutes. In his garden, he tries to keep his composure after seeing Nhu and speaking with her in
Vietnamese. While he is sitting, a young Vietnamese girl appears behind the fuchsia bush. Nhu explains to the others that during the Tet holiday, families make elaborate foods and welcome their ancestors to the celebration for a visit. The young girl says her name is Da’o, which is the name of Nhu’s sister who was killed in a chemical attack during the Vietnam War. Jim thinks that the girl arrived with Nhu, and he tries to take her back to Nhu. However, she disappears as Jim rejoins the family. Nhu makes eye contact with Jim in what could be an acknowledgement of the girl’s presence, but it also suggests that Nhu can never forgive the institution and people that Jim represents for the trauma they have inflicted on her and her country.

Something within Jim shifts after he sees Da’o, and at the end of the play, he tells Danny that the garden is now his to tend, providing Danny with a potential coping mechanism to use in the future, and finally opens up to his wife about what the garden means to him. The audience does not hear the implications of these actions, but Jim shapes Danny’s previous military experiences. While they are alone in the garden, Jim tells Danny that he was tortured in the Vietnam War and that he went against training and talked, saving his life. What Jim tells his son is exactly what changed him, and this is likely one of the few times Jim has ever disclosed this detail about his war experience. Hearing his father’s story in the garden and his efforts to cope with his choices at war, Danny internally decides to go back to war. Jim calls the men who tortured him “cowards” without realizing that his son has become one of those cowards in the Iraq War (93). Home is no longer heaven compared to war’s hell. Danny goes back to war, and his words to Amy earlier, that he would “stand in front of a gun and help [those shooting at him] pull the trigger,” come back to haunt the audience.

The fact that Jim recognizes that Danny needs the garden more than he does is an indication of a potential change or different approach to coping with his guilt. However, Elaine is
now the one impeding his progress when Jim appears to begin facing his moral injury. Elaine is distressed in the final scene by the buildup of recent stresses. Before Danny returned to the military, she had changed her mind and supported his wish to be discharged, but he still went back to the Iraq. Nhu left the U.S. to go back to Vietnam without saying goodbye. Angela committed suicide with Danny’s help—he provided the gun, although it is unknown if anyone else knows that. Amy’s anti-war ideas have begun to sway Elaine. And, finally, all of these events and feelings overwhelm her as she teaches her class of military spouses, and she has a hard time promoting beliefs that she doubts. In the final scene with Jim that takes place after Danny leaves, Elaine pleads with Jim to stay with her when she thinks he is leaving to sit in his garden, but the garden is no longer his personal refuge. He asks her “[s]o what shall we talk about, Elaine?” (93). She is in her own world when Jim tells her that the garden is Danny’s now, and that he is “letting nature wage its own war…. Stems, leaves, branches, vines twisting their way up toward the sun” (94). Not only is he letting the garden run wild for Danny to tame when he returns, Jim is talking about his own mind. The way he has been coping or trying to control his trauma from the war is going to change. He is on the precipice of potential change facing his war experiences and has finally let Elaine into this part of his psyche. Elaine does not address his words, as she has been overwhelmed. She cannot complete her own transformation, and she ends up impeding Jim’s. The play ends with Elaine explaining they should just sit in their backyard, under a tree like Buddha did: “life is suffering…. [;] let’s sit. And maybe. Eventually. The pain […] will go away. We’ll figure it out. We’ll know what to do” (94-95). They have pushed down their doubts about the military, the war, and facing the stresses that have affected this family. The stage fades to black as they recline in their chairs, but the stage directions state, “the sound of fire and burning is heard and grows progressively louder” (95). The sounds of fire contrast
with Elaine’s words, which she likely speaks to comfort herself. The suffering will continue. They will not know what to do. And whatever revelations or awakenings the characters were starting to move towards are left unfulfilled and unrealized. Unlike Buddha, the counter-image the play has introduced, Jim and Elaine do not sit in nature to think on suffering and ways to prevent it; they choose to ignore it, which goes against Buddha’s teachings.

It is difficult to decide if the family members will be allies, victims, or enemies who will hinder Jim’s and Danny’s past and future reintegration efforts. What the play does show is that even being home with your caring family is not enough to alleviate a moral injury. Guilt ignored, buried, or redirected into garden warfare will not reconcile trauma. With the emphasis on Buddhism, Stryk advocates actions that do not cause suffering for others. The suffering that exists, she suggests, needs to be acknowledged and tackled directly. The direct engagement with suffering will enable Elliot in Hudes’s trilogy of plays to experience a more optimistic version of the soldier’s homecoming.

**Quiara Alegría Hudes’s The Elliot Trilogy**

As the title of a recent feature in *The New Yorker* claims, “Quiara Alegría Hudes Rewrites the American Landscape.” I believe that Hudes is an important figure in the landscape of contemporary American theatre, and as a young playwright, she will continue to help shape it. Daniel Pollak-Pelzner, the author of *The New Yorker* article, notes that Hudes’s theatre “often portrays wounded people on the margins…and creates spaces…where they can start to heal each other.” Importantly for this discussion of Hudes’s work, her theatre often features women who participate in that healing. Hudes’s mother, who is a Lukumi priestess,14 told her stories about

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14 As the Harvard University’s Pluralism Project website explains, Lukumi stems from Santería, the worship of Catholic saints. However, many people who participate in the Afro-Caribbean tradition of Santería use the term “Lukumi” to de-emphasize Catholicism. The word “Lukumi” derives from a Yoruba greeting.
her home country of Puerto Rico and about being able to talk to their ancestors. However, Hudes has a “skeptical part” of herself, and her mother’s stories did not influence her as much until she read Shange’s _for colored girls_ as an undergraduate at Yale University. She explains, “It was the first time I encountered, outside my mom’s sphere, someone whose world vision centered around women’s healing abilities” (qtd. in Pollack-Pelzner). Although _The Elliot Trilogy_ is about the journey of a soldier named Elliot, his reintegration into society would not have been possible without the women in his life: his adopted mother, his biological mother, and his cousin.

_The Elliot Trilogy_, which Hudes started writing as a student of Paula Vogel in the Brown University MFA program, launched her theatrical career. Since then, she has won multiple awards, including a Pulitzer Prize in 2012 for the second play in the trilogy, _Water by the Spoonful_. Born in Philadelphia to a Puerto Rican mother and Jewish father, Hudes often felt that her sense of self was being pulled from multiple directions from an early age. It did not help that she was the first person in her family to go to college: she attended Yale University to study music composition and began writing musicals based on Yoruba mythology she heard about from her mother. However, the pulls she felt and the disparate communities she belongs to have allowed her to write about people and places as an insider and to provide unique insights about them. In an interview with Pollack-Pelzner, Hudes’s friend and collaborator Lin-Manuel Miranda explained that she “went into playwriting because she sensed that her family stories—those in Puerto Rico, those in Philadelphia—would fade if she did not give them language” (qtd. in Pollack-Pelzner). Hudes tells stories to preserve them and to make sure they are heard by a wide audience. Elsewhere, Hudes discusses how her plays have informed her other work as a teacher and her commitment to giving voices to the voiceless. She describes the lives of her cousins living in the barrio in Philadelphia as a driving force behind her writing. Class was
always an issue in her family because she was “the one who got out, the one who stands tall, the anointed, the learned” (“Cousins” 96). Meanwhile, her relatives in the barrio were poor, in trouble with the law, victims of the AIDS and crack epidemics, and made “invisible” by society (“Cousins” 95). Therefore, one of Hudes’s goals as a playwright is to tell “a community’s story, as told from within that community” because such stories should “be included in the recorded course of human events” (“Cousins” 95). Hudes also addresses the idea that not every story is uplifting, especially given the experiences of marginalized and invisible people in American society. Speaking about *The Elliot Trilogy*, Hudes explains that part of her motivation for writing about war came because “[i]t dawned on me: There’s no acceptable way of talking about ugliness in our culture…. we are conditioned to pretend that ugliness isn’t there, to pave over it with silence and petty conversation” (qtd. in Decaul 23).

The trilogy traces Elliot’s story as he leaves for the Iraq war and then comes home to work in a sandwich shop while his trauma from the war complicates his reintegration into civilian and his already complicated family life. Inspiration for *The Elliot Trilogy* came from her family, including an uncle and a cousin who both served in the military. Although there are intentional similarities between the characters and her family members, Hudes is adamant that the play is not a documentary (Soloski et. al. 37). If the plays were a documentary, they would detract from Hudes’s goal to make these stories more universal in that there are many Elliots out there. As a playwright, she hopes more people feel like her cousin did when he saw the first play of the trilogy, *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue*. Hudes says he wept throughout the performance because he “felt like he had a voice” and “felt really special to be seen and acknowledged, and he felt like his story was worth something” (Soloski et. al. 37).
In his article on contemporary war plays, Pitchford begins his discussion of Hudes by commenting on the way that she rewrites stories about soldiers dealing with a moral injury and PTS. He argues that Hudes demonstrates that “people with moral injuries will never be able to undo the events that caused the initial trauma” (Pitchford 29). Second, “Hudes suggests that this moral injury can produce something positive for generations to come” because Elliot will be able to “guide” people in his family and community about the cost of war (Pitchford 29). Speaking of the trauma her uncle, cousin, and the people they represent experienced, Hudes says, “A ‘moral wound’ cannot heal if we cover our ears and close our eyes. Even dealt with head-on, the moral wounds of war are profound and may never heal. God help us all, in silence wounds fester” (qtd. in Decaul 23). The Elliot Trilogy is one soldier’s journey to deal with his moral injury; in dramatizing this journey, it suggests that veterans can find a path towards living with their moral injury and that the veteran’s family is an important part of that journey.

**Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue**

Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue [Elliot] premiered in January 2006 at The Culture Project in New York, which is “dedicated to addressing critical human rights issues” (“Culture Project”). The plot of this experimental, poetic play is simple on the surface: Elliot leaves for war, shoots his first man, is wounded, and finally returns home to recover from his injury. Elliot’s experiences are echoed by those of his father (Pop) who served in Vietnam and grandfather (Grandpop) who served in the Korean War. At times during the play, Elliot and his father are performing the same action, many years apart, but their reactions are diverse. The play’s structure is meant to mimic a fugue, a type of composition on one theme that uses multiple voices or melodies (that sometimes clash).  

In the play, Grandpop describes a fugue as “an

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15 Anne Garcia-Romero has written one of the few scholarly articles on Hudes’s work. She argues that the use of the fugue by this Latinx playwright “create[s] a new cultural form” that intersects hegemonic and subaltern ideas (100).
argument” of voices that “tangle together” and “create dissonance” (35). The echoes and side-by-side portrayal of three generations of soldiers is also meant to suggest the other definition of a fugue, a foggy mental state that often comes from dissociation. The play ends as it begins, with Elliot’s leaving for war, and the lights go down on the three generations of soldiers standing together on stage each holding his duffel bag on their way to their respective tours of duty.

In a play about three generations of soldiers, Hudes also provides the war experiences of Ginny, Elliot’s adopted mother and Pop’s wife. Although the men’s experiences are the play’s main focus, she plays an important role in my analysis because Ginny successfully employs domestic ritual. Ginny’s garden is one of the two settings in the play. The stage is separated into two spaces: the garden part, which is “teeming with life,” and the “empty space” that is “stark, sad” and changes into different locations (4). In the garden part of the stage, Grandpop, Pop and Ginny recite their monologues or read letters they sent home. Although other characters use the garden, it belongs to Ginny. She started the garden after returning from Vietnam where she served as a nurse at an evacuation hospital for the Army Nurse Corps. Her monologue weaves together experiences during the war and the happier story of the garden. As part of her domestic ritual, Ginny took an abandoned lot and made it into a little piece of Puerto Rico. She cares for the garden, which has become a gathering place for her family. Although her monologue expresses the conflicting parts of Ginny’s life, the conflicts are in balance—one does not overpower the other. The domestic ritual of gardening has made it possible for Ginny to make her war trauma bearable. However, when her son goes to war, the balance shifts: “You have to plant wild. When your son goes to war, you plant every goddam seed you can find. It doesn’t matter what the seed is. So long as it grows” (22). Ginny plants without regard to the rules of the gardening because the act alone is the most important part of the ritual. For Ginny, “A seed is a
contract with the future. It’s saying, I know something better will happen tomorrow” (22).

Although her planting is chaotic, it allows Ginny to express her anxiety, perform a symbolic action, to do something instead of simply waiting to see if her son comes home. Moreover, Ginny does not try to tame her garden in the same way Jim does, which likely contributes to the success of her domestic ritual. While gardening as domestic ritual seems to be more effective for the gardener, there is hope because Ginny’s actions provide a precedent for successful domestic rituals in the play. The gardener understands her trauma, but the understanding and resolution it provides her do not extend to everyone else. Pop, for example, likely does not benefit from the generative effects of the garden based on the limited information the trilogy provides about him.

The garden does, however, help Elliot cope when he returns home. When Elliot finally enters the garden space during his monologue, it is symbolic because his presence fulfills the contracts that Ginny made with the seeds, even though his leg has been injured. Ginny wraps vines around Elliot as he discusses the healing he receives from his mother and the emotions he is able to express in that space: “I felt her fingers on my leg. That felt so good. Hands that love you touching your worst place. I started to cry like a baby…. She knows I been through a lot. She understands” (57). Because Elliot’s story continues in the next two plays in the trilogy, we know that Elliot’s trauma is not resolved, nor should a small amount of time in his mother’s garden be expected to cure him. However, he is able to heal enough mentally and physically to complete his service and go on a second tour of duty.

The second domestic element that helps to prepare Elliot to go back to Iraq is being able to read his father’s letters. It is clear throughout the play that Elliot looks up to his father and entered the Marines because his father had also been one, but their relationship is distant. Elliot’s father will not talk about the war, but Ginny gives Elliot the letters he wrote to Grandpop about
his time at war. Although the love the family has for one another is clearer than in the case of Rabe’s Nelson family from *Sticks & Bones*, the legacy of war has affected the family. The generational war trauma has changed these men and the ability of home to function as a place for expressing or understanding trauma. Elliot gains some understanding of his father, which helps him to see the similarities in their experiences. However, Pop’s trauma is unresolved and continues to affect his family and life at home. Like characters of other homecoming plays, Pop is an emotionally absent father who does not guide future generations regarding the cost of war. The letters home are the last time Pop speaks in the trilogy of plays, but the feelings and experiences expressed in his letters provide something that Elliot needs. In the end, Ginny is the only member of the family equipped to help Elliot. She has provided a tool to help him cope in the short term, but Elliot must create and employ his own domestic practices in the future.

*Water by the Spoonful*

*Water by the Spoonful* [*Water*], which premiered in Hartford, Connecticut, at Hartford Stage, explores the tenuousness of support systems for a veteran and what happens when part of that system changes. This play depicts the part of Elliot’s journey in which he is trying to close his eyes to his moral injury and ignore that ugliness. Elliot faces the all-too-common problem of soldiers addicted to their prescription opioids and the mental anguish that normal, civilian problems can cause to the already fragile psyche of a recent veteran. Elliot’s adoptive mother, Ginny, dies of cancer early in the play. Yaz, Elliot’s cousin, helps Elliot plan for Ginny’s funeral. During the planning, Elliot faces his biological mother and Ginny’s sister, Odessa. She is a drug addict who recognizes that Elliot also has an addiction. His dealings with Odessa take him to difficult places in his own mind. He becomes destructive and determined to make Odessa relapse because he knows that he can push her to do so. By causing harm to Odessa, he is acting out his
feeling that the “good” mom, Ginny, died and the “bad” one is still alive. However, Elliot is fighting two wars at home—the battle for veterans’ reintegration and the drug epidemic. Hudes positions the “war on drugs” as a domestic battle that is ongoing in the U.S. In keeping with the overall intention behind her war trilogy, she wants the devastating effects of the war on drugs to be noticed along with the effects of a veteran’s moral injury and his journey towards managing his trauma and guilt. As Hudes suggests, the domestic rituals and practices that worked for Elliot when Ginny was alive no longer succeed. Moreover, the structure that was his home is not home if Ginny does not inhabit it and he cannot care for or be cared for by his mother. Likewise, Odessa succumbs to ruin and relapses when she has to absorb two major blows to the peace she has been able to achieve: losing access to her online family and facing, again, the trauma she inflicted on her biological children. In the end, Elliot wages war on his own family member and becomes an agent of destruction.

At the beginning of Water, Elliot is a drastically different character than he was at the end of the first play in the trilogy. In the first play, Elliot seemed to be anticipating his return to war, and he provides a countermelody to Pop’s anger and antagonistic attitude about his tour of duty. In Water, Elliot is anxious: anxious about his mother’s health as she goes through chemotherapy; anxious to get to work at his “shit job” as a “porter of sandwiches” at Subway to earn money to support the family (21); and anxious for the arrival of someone who can help him understand his Ghost. Elliot is haunted by the Iraqi man he killed in Elliot, and the Ghost manifests itself in Elliot’s reality. After receiving help from a professor Yaz knows who speaks Arabic, Elliot finds out that the Ghost is asking for his passport back, which Elliot took from his body after he was killed per military procedure.16 Knowing what the Ghost is saying, however, does not make him

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16 Hudes indicates in Elliot that removing the man’s identification and any “intel” he had with him is “military code” (31). I cannot verify this military procedure, but the idea that it was the “military code” is important in Elliot.
go away. If anything, knowing what the Ghost is saying adds additional stress to Elliot. The final mental weight that Elliot experiences, Ginny’s death, pushes him over a line, and for the rest of the play, he is anxious and in a state of great emotional turmoil. Although he understandably is grieving for his adopted mother, the boundary that Elliot crosses is that he now looks to hurt others, and he finds an appropriate target: his biological mother. Elliot admits to Yaz in the last scene that he “engineered” Odessa’s relapse and that he is having nightmares about the person he has become (92).

For all of Elliot’s distress, the play is also about homes and the bonds that tie people together. Elliot’s emotional state is complicated and magnified by his war experience, his injuries resulting from war, and the loss of his keystone for coping, Ginny and the home she created. Before Ginny dies, Elliot, although anxious, seems to be doing well, focusing his attention on caring for his mother. For example, while waiting for the professor, Elliot asks Yaz if they can drive to Whole Foods to purchase healthy food for Ginny. He needs to believe that his mother’s chemotherapy treatment is working and that changing her diet will help her get well. While the higher quality, more expensive food unfortunately cannot help her, focusing on her diet helps him to cope. Furthermore, although his work at Subway is not a remedy for his trauma, it does distract him. Working at Subway is a domestic practice that literally keeps his Ghost at bay, and making food for people is its own domestic practice, further tying Elliot to civilian life. Right before Ginny’s hospitalization, Elliot is confidently and adeptly taking orders, making sandwiches, and bantering with customers. Although his Ghost inhabits the same space, saying “Can I please have my passport back?” in Arabic, Elliot can do his job, and the stage directions state that he “tries to ignore the Ghost” (18). However, all of the benefits he receives from focusing on his job crumble when he gets the text message about Ginny’s hospitalization. After
Ginny’s collapse, Elliot destroys a part of his support by walking into the Subway bathroom and smashing its mirror. Elliot’s mental state degrades to the point at which he physically interacts with his Ghost. Whether in a dream state or reality, Elliot boxes with his Ghost, a barometer for his state of mind: before Ginny died, he could ignore his Ghost and guilt, but after she dies, he fights with the Ghost and loses.

On the front lines of her own war to stay sober and help others deal with their addictions, Odessa freely employs domestic ritual and practices, successfully helping both her online family and herself stay sober. Odessa founded and runs a website for recovering crack cocaine addicts, and the individuals who have been using the website for the longest have become her virtual family. The website itself is a metaphorical home that Odessa works to maintain and preserve. Every day, Odessa logs online, greets her family, and provides a morning haiku. Odessa uses the haiku to remind them of the difficulties and rewards that are inherent with sobriety, while giving their minds something to focus on instead of crack. Moreover, her family expects her to complete her ritual and even pokes fun at her for her haikus. These inside jokes are evidence of their affection for each other. Odessa also works to preserve the metaphorical home on her website by censoring individuals, including her family members, when they use foul language or when individuals begin to tear down the open, supportive environment that Odessa has worked to create.

When Ginny dies and Elliot loses the centerpiece of his domestic attentions, he works to deprive Odessa of her access to her virtual home and domestic ritual. In a scene in which their worlds collide, Odessa is meeting with John, a middle-class, white family man, in person to convince him that he has an addiction. During the scene, Odessa receives a message that Elliot is looking for her, and she tells him where she is. When John comments on the resulting change in
her behavior, Odessa explains, “My family knows every button to push” (46). These prove to be fateful words as Elliot arrives ready to push Odessa’s buttons. After barging into Odessa’s meeting with John, Elliot and Yaz demand money from Odessa for her share of Ginny’s funeral. Odessa understands how to handle her addiction, but she has not found a way to cope with the trauma she has inflicted on her family. Odessa is ostracized from her biological family and does not interact with them often. Her aloof attitude toward them is her only defense, and it is inadequate. Elliot interprets her words and actions as an indifference to Ginny’s death. He uses her attitude as further motivation to tear down Odessa and the little bit of good she has built in her life—staying sober and helping others get sober. Odessa is broke, but Elliot will not relent, asking her for a smaller sum of money for Ginny’s funeral. Yaz and John are beyond uncomfortable, and after John offers to give Elliot money, the latter begins his final assault on Odessa. In this scene, we learn that Odessa has already made a sacrifice for Elliot by allowing Ginny to raise him. Elliot—almost gleefully—tells John that Odessa was high on crack when Elliot and his baby sister had the stomach flu as children. They were dehydrated, and the doctor instructed Odessa to give them both a spoonful of water every five minutes. Odessa left at some point to get high. A neighbor found them six hours later, and his sister had died from dehydration.

The death of her daughter was Odessa’s biggest regret and the event on which her sobriety is built. It is the reason that she carefully attends to her online home and works to support other addicts so that they can avoid making her mistakes. By retelling this story, Elliot persuades Odessa to relinquish access to her online family and the ritual that keeps her sober. When confronted with her earlier catastrophic error, Odessa gives the only thing she has of value, her computer. Elliot, however, does not understand the magnitude of Odessa’s sacrifice.
Elliot sees Odessa’s sacrifice as “symbolic” because “[t]his isn’t about money…. This is the bare minimum, the least effort possible to earn the label of ‘person’” (56). Although Elliot may perceive his actions to be his final act of caring for Ginny, the motivation behind his attack on Odessa—to make her suffer—interferes with the effectiveness of the ritual. Elliot uses Odessa’s sacrifice as compensation for an act that cannot ever be repaid. Additionally, Elliot does not see Odessa as much of a human being. In his anger that the “bad” mom lives, Elliot has dehumanized Odessa. He has allowed his childhood trauma, compounded by his grief and the moral injury he carries from the war, to consume him. Elliot commits a strategic attack on an enemy—one whom he has been dehumanized by like the enemies he fought at war. Thus, the compensation he seeks from Odessa can only have destructive consequences. During Ginny’s funeral, the scene is split between Elliot and Yaz giving a moving eulogy and Odessa spooning water from a cup onto the floor before relapsing off-stage. Elliot commits a violent act that has no chance of satisfying his anger, and Odessa is deprived of her own domestic ritual.

*Water* continues the theme in Hudes’s work of women being catalysts for change. In *Elliot*, Ginny helped Elliot to ease his war trauma by leading him to domestic practices that could help him. We see the consequences of Elliot focusing too many of his domestic practices on one person in his support system. Yaz helps him throughout the play, but Elliot’s attention and coping mechanisms fell apart when Ginny dies. For her part, Odessa also pushes Elliot toward change. After the funeral, Elliot and Yaz go to Odessa’s apartment, and they find her unconscious. Although he later says that he “engineered” Odessa’s relapse, Elliot is upset when he sees her and hurts his war-wounded leg lifting her onto the couch. Under all of the immense anger Elliot has toward Odessa, there is something like love in his reaction. Elliot reaches his breaking point, telling Yaz, “I can’t take this anymore” (74). Offstage, Elliot breaks something in
Odessa’s home, but the thing that Elliot breaks is himself. In the play’s final scene, he is forced to explicitly acknowledge that he orchestrated Odessa’s relapse and that he cares for her in some capacity. In doing so, he sees the monster he has become—a monster who destroys his family and home rather than helping to build or preserve it. After scattering Ginny’s ashes in Puerto Rico, Elliot tells Yaz that Ginny’s ghost came to him in his dream, replacing his usual nightmares of the Ghost. Ginny’s ghost screams at him, and as Elliot describes it, “She won’t stop looking at me, but she’s terrified, horrified by what she sees” (91). At the end of the play, Elliot is motherless and homeless, yet he is forced to acknowledge the mental boundaries he has crossed. The personal growth Elliot made in Water comes at a cost that Odessa bears. Upon finding her barely hanging onto life after she overdosed, Elliot begins to see how endless his anger has become. This is a critical moment for Elliot, and it leads to his next steps in mitigating his moral injury in The Happiest Song Plays Last and his confrontation with his Ghost.

Symbolically, Yaz takes on Odessa’s and Ginny’s mantles at the end of the play by offering her technical skills to the members of Odessa’s online family and buying Ginny’s house and garden. Although this should be read as Hudes emphasizing “the matriarchal legacy of many Latinx/ Puerto Rican families,” as Patricia Ybarra suggests (52), she also becomes Elliot’s anchor to the domestic space without becoming his focus. Uncoincidentally, Yaz is the most important person to Elliot by the end of Water. As Elliot has become effectively parentless (Pop moves to the Bronx, and Odessa is critically injured by her relapse), Yaz’s peer relationship “substitutes” for the ones his parents had with him” (Ybarra 52). Patricia Ybarra argues that Yaz’s relationship with Elliot becomes “the most fruitful for further growth and healing” (52). Yaz has been substituting her relationship for those of his parents throughout the play, but this is solidified after Ginny’s ashes are released and Yaz reveals that she has bought Ginny’s house.
Yaz offers Elliot a home. Of course, Elliot’s domestic practices have been broken because they relied on Ginny, and Yaz cannot fill that role for him. Nevertheless, Elliot has a safe harbor—in the form of a “plastic-covered sofa” that Yaz makes available to him (92). Elliot needs to find his own way forward. Thus, instead of returning to Philadelphia with Yaz, and Elliot goes to Los Angeles, taking the professor up on his suggestion to use his war experience in Hollywood, and at the beginning of The Happiest Song Plays Last, Elliot is in Jordan consulting on a movie about Marines in the Iraq War.

The Happiest Song Plays Last

In The Happiest Song Plays Last [Happiest], Elliot sets out on his own journey to face his guilt and trauma and to mitigate the destructive effects of his moral injury, which, as Pitchford reminds us, “[o]nce a soldier commits an act that undermines her/his moral grounding[,] this cannot be reset” (29). Hudes portrays one way in which a veteran can successfully integrate into civilian society and quiet the ghosts of war. Elliot faces his actions by traveling back to the Middle East, confronting people he inadvertently and directly harmed, and finding his way back home where Yaz is ready to help him find a purpose within his community. What is more, the play ends with optimism for Elliot, his community, and for the veterans he represents. In this final play of the trilogy, Hudes engages with another domestic “battle” in American society. Yaz fights against the apathy many of the people who live in her Philadelphia neighborhood have for those living in poverty in their community.

Happiest premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and the plot is more ambitious than that in the other two plays. Set seven years after Elliot arrived home in Water, he is now a consultant for a docudrama film in Jordan and ends up being the lead actor. While on set, he makes friends with Ali, the Iraqi culture consultant and translator for the crew, and Shar, an
American-born Egyptian woman who is the lead actress. The filming goes on a break because the political situation feels dangerous for the American film crew in the lead-up to the Arab Spring in Egypt. Ali offers to take Elliot and Shar on a tour of the “real Jordan” and his home. Shortly thereafter, the protests begin in Egypt, and Elliot feels compelled to go and participate. Meanwhile back at home, Yaz is battling problems in her own community: homelessness, gentrification, and the disintegration in the neighborhood. After a close friend dies in an emergency waiting room, Yaz unsuccessfully organizes a community protest against the hospital. A year after the play begins, Elliot returns home, prepared to be at home after traveling all over the world with Shar, who is now his wife. As Elliot and Yaz help each other find purpose, Yaz provides an important object, the *cuatro* (a Puerto Rican instrument similar to a guitar) of the man who died in the emergency room, that provides Elliot with a mantle, a role in his community, of his own. Ultimately, Hudes portrays the healing power of facing a moral injury. Elliot finds his own domestic rituals and purpose at home, allowing him to mitigate the guilt he feels and use his war experiences to benefit others.

At the beginning of *Happiest*, Elliot no longer jumps at his own shadow, and he wields his military experience as an asset in his life rather than a destructive force like he did in *Water*. Elliot is in a position to change his relationship with his war experiences because he is physically present in the Middle East. The person Elliot was at the beginning of *Water* might not have survived the realization at the end that he cannot be absolved of his guilt, but the new mentality he exhibits of facing his moral injury will allow him to absorb that blow. When Elliot is sitting in Ali’s house, Elliot explains to Shar that filming the movie in Jordan has given him the opportunity to “close a chapter” (29). Elliot and Ali have formed a unique bond during the time they spent on set, and it becomes something more on the tour of the real Jordan. Ali is a foil for
Elliot and an essential character for Elliot’s efforts to close a chapter in his life. Ali reveals his knowledge of Elliot’s time as a Marine because Ali, as a member of the Iraqi Armed Forces, served with U.S. soldiers like Elliot. Ali offers understanding when Elliot is ashamed by what he said about Iraqis on set to get the actors in character. Ali does not hold that against Elliot and tells him that “I am like you. We are the same. Xerox copy. Optimist. Always laugh laugh good time. Nice person. But inside heart, person who is different” (Happiest 34). By identifying with Elliot and expressing that he knows that Elliot carries a darker side within, Ali gives him something that even his own father in Elliot could not—understanding and compassion for the part of himself that has performed actions that he deeply regrets. With this revelation, Elliot feels comfortable enough to tell Ali about the passport of the first man he killed in Iraq, and Ali offers to return it to the family for him. Although Ali has physically relieved Elliot of his burden, Ali makes clear that “No forgive. I cannot forgive. But you know real who I am. I know real who you are. Witness for each other” (36). In order to close this chapter, Elliot must return the passport, but he also needs to know that returning the passport is not an act of absolution. Instead, returning the passport is doing what is right after these seven years. Ali is Elliot’s witness for his actions and, more importantly, his action towards reparation. Even though Ali still calls Elliot his brother and understands that Elliot was following orders, Ali cannot relieve Elliot of the burden he created. Ali, appearing on stage to read the letter, explains that “Man makes ghost, man keeps ghost. You cannot give your ghost for someone else’s shoulders” (83). Ali can acknowledge Elliot’s actions without granting forgiveness, and by acting as his witness, Elliot’s actions are seen by someone who can judge their appropriateness and see that the gesture comes from a well-intended place. Ali offers what closure he can to Elliot. After Elliot buries the passport in his mother’s garden, Ali’s gesture and words are enough. Ali’s actions are the most
important catalyst for Elliot’s change. Also, Ali is successfully employing a well-known domestic ritual: extending a hand in friendship to a man who was not always an ally over a meal in his home.

By taking Ali’s gesture of friendship that includes understanding but not forgiveness and giving back the passport, Elliot is ready to take the final step on his journey by entering another country in turmoil, not as an invader but as an accomplice in their fight for freedom. Shortly after the visit to Ali’s home, Elliot is compelled to go to Egypt, to “the aorta” of the Egyptian revolution (63). At the hotel where the crew is staying, Elliot watches *Al Jazeera*—in late January 2011—and is overwhelmed by the Egyptian people being interviewed. One man’s words particularly resonate with Elliot: “Now I taste freedom. If military takes freedom, then I know what I lose. Very happy, very scared” (64). Perhaps, as an American and a Marine, Elliot wants to help others attain freedom. Moreover, though the circumstances around the invasion of Iraq were different, Elliot might feel that he, as a Marine, participated in taking someone’s freedom. After hearing the man’s words translated by Ali, Elliot is adamant about going to Egypt because he wants to help the people who build pyramids and “took down a dictator with Sharpie pens and Twitter” (64). Elliot later relates the events in Egypt to Yaz, and his words indicate that it was a transformative experience. Rather than arriving in a military transport, Elliot traveled by a commercial airplane and a cab. Because of the number of people on the streets, Elliot does not make it to Tahir Square. Instead, he participates in a human pyramid. Two young people climb on everyone’s backs to a billboard of Mubarak and rip it down. Elliot became part of the group saying, “I could feel the sneaker on my back. Everyone was just calm, just breathing together…. Everyone wanted to cheer, but you can’t or else we’ll all fall down…. So people were just breathing without cheering, Yazmin, electric” (74). To become part of this collective group of
people acting on their newly gained freedom, Elliot strips away part of his identity as an American Marine in order to do what the Egyptian people want to do and at their direction. Elliot does not jump out of the cab and take control of the situation, as he might have done as a Marine. Instead, he empties himself of that identity, making himself a vehicle for the Egyptian people’s will. Elliot will receive no glory or praise; he will not be remembered by anyone in that pyramid. Elliot’s only reward will be the completion of his task and the transformative healing that it gives him.

When Elliot returns home a year later, he is finally ready to receive the *cuatro* that Yaz bequeaths to him. Moreover, Elliot is ready to continue the legacy that the Puerto Rican *cuatro* contains and let it be an outlet for him. Although Elliot’s journey is central to this dissertation, Yaz has experienced the great task of taking up Ginny’s mantle as a community leader and caretaker. Yaz’s journey is also part of the healing that Hudes advocates for in her trilogy. Yaz’s neighborhood is increasingly fractured, and its residences increasingly alienated from one another. Augstín, a community member who worked with Ginny, helps Yaz to learn what it means to take care of her neighborhood. After Augstín dies in a hospital emergency waiting room, Yaz tries to get her neighbors to pressure the hospital to take better care of their patients. When only eleven people come to her rally, Yaz loses faith in her community. She shuts her door to them until shortly before Elliot comes home. This is important to relate because Augstín and his *cuatro* play a role in Elliot’s journey. Augstín was a counselor at an area high school and supported the community by giving neighborhood kids music lessons. During an earlier conversation, Yaz tells Augstín that she learns through their conversations and his playing that the *cuatro* is “an outlet for men. You can make a string quiver like laughter but you can also make it moan like crying. It’s the one acceptable way a Puerto Rican man can cry” (43). As
Augstín demonstrates throughout the play, the *cuatro* is a tool to access emotion in the musician and the audience. After Augstín dies, his ghost implores Yaz to fix the *cuatro* that was broken at Yaz’s neighborhood block party; its strings should never lie still because its music matters to the community: “Philly will float out to sea if those strings lie still” (75). Augstín’s quiet, unappreciated role of helping children in his community was just as necessary to its residents as Yaz’s open house, open kitchen policy that fed many people. In a compact final scene, Elliot returns home and finds a letter from Ali. Ali explains that he is returning the passport due to the circumstances surrounding the man’s death—he was a civilian—and the loss to the man’s family is too great for them to relieve Elliot of his burden and accept the passport. Yaz tells Elliot to bury the passport in his mother’s garden. As Pitchford observes, “Hudes suggests that Elliot’s moral injury is now part of not only his story but [Elliot’s] entire family’s story” (29). If it is part of the family’s story and openly acknowledged as such, then, Pitchford suggests, Elliot can act as a guide to future generations about the cost and consequences of war. After Elliot comes back into the kitchen, Yaz gives him Augstín’s *cuatro*.

By accepting the *cuatro*, he not only accepts a means by which to release strong emotions and share his pain with another, Elliot takes up a legacy and a purpose within his neighborhood to care for it in the way that Augstín did. For all that the ending of *Happiest* feels rushed, Elliot’s story reaches an end. By playing the *cuatro* for himself and teaching children in the community to play an instrument as their own outlet, Elliot works to preserve and help his community. The use of music links Elliot to another man in his family. Grandpop used his flute during the war to ease the minds of his comrades and at home as an anchor to reality. Elliot learns what Grandpop knew: music is an outlet and can be a way to cope with trauma. Elliot has a domestic object that is imbued with purpose and meaning. He has taken up a legacy that he can make his own, and he
no longer uses others’ domestic rituals or another person as the focus of his domestic attentions. Accordingly, Hudes’s message about the importance of community and family that runs through the trilogy is solidified at the end of *Happiest*. Community, these plays suggest, is our reason for being. War destroys communities at home and abroad. The legacies of care and communities that Ginny and Augustín represent need to continue, as they are an important way to combat the destructiveness of war.

**Chapter Conclusion**

The women playwrights discussed in this chapter revise the homecoming play to include many voices that are absent from the literary tradition that privileges an “individual white male heterosexual soldier, a story of his personal experience of disillusionment and loss,” to quote from Haytock once more. Although all three plays explore an individual white male heterosexual soldier, their narratives of disillusionment demonstrate the reverse culture shock that Fenn describes. Mark, Jim, and Elliot look for ways to re-engage with American society after coming home. Mark is in the process of doing so, and, perhaps, the interview or performance that he is participating in can be a way to face those who he has hurt. At the same time, while Nadine reveals that facing those whom he has hurt has become a focus of Mark’s art, his art may not save his family or home. His art might be hindering his adjustment to life at home because it preserves the war. Likewise, Jim’s domestic ritual perpetuates the war while acting as a coping mechanism. He has had a successful life and provided for his family, but Jim is still a distant spouse and father. However, both men fail to utilize the most important aspect of a domestic ritual: to build communities and families, bolstering the generative, caring practices that exist in homes. Although Mark does invite his family and friends to his party, the party contributes to the breakdown of his family and he does not care for the structure of his home. Jim shares his
domestic ritual with his son, and the garden provides a lovely place for his family to gather, as they can often be found in the backyard. Still, his domestic ritual is not successfully employed because it is an extension of warfare for him; it is a way for him to avoid facing his actions and deal with his complicated feelings for them. He says that the garden is a place where he goes to stop thinking. Elliot, on the other hand, has his family and strong bonds with many of his family members. Mark did not have strong family support, and Jim was newly married when he went to Vietnam. Elliot’s support structure was already in place, and the domestic rituals were practiced before he took the initiative to face his moral injury head-on. What is more, Elliot willingly took a risk in coming to terms with what he did and accepts that while he must carry his burden, it is bearable. Ultimately, these plays demonstrate the necessity of family bonds and a sense of belonging for veterans when they come home. These qualities are also important across the field of women-authored war plays. We can see this as well in the plays discussed in the next chapter about the perspectives of marginalized and disenfranchised people who often bear the heaviest cost of war.
The dialogue quoted above comes from Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*. In the canon of war literature, *Mother Courage* is a foundational play, and Brecht used it to demonstrate how his theories of theatre work in practice. Although *Mother Courage* is about war, it is also a play steeped in war. Written during a period when Brecht and his family left Germany before World War II broke out, Brecht wanted the anti-war play to be a “warning voice.”^17^ Brecht left Germany in 1938 for Denmark and then took a lecture invitation in Sweden in April 1939 to gain more distance from the brewing conflict. During that time, John Willett and Ralph Manheim identify seven weeks during September and November of 1939 in which Brecht made no entries in his diary, likely because he was writing *Mother Courage* in reaction to the unfolding invasion of Poland. The only wartime production of *Mother Courage* premiered in Zurich in April 1941, a few weeks before Brecht and his family moved to Los Angeles. To the audience of the initial production, Brecht wrote, “Writers cannot write as rapidly as governments can make war, because writing demands hard thought” (qtd. in Willett and Manheim ix). The play that would become his best known was effectively shelved while the war raged on and Brecht worked on other projects, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Still, he picked the script up again, made some changes, and worked with Paul Dessau on the songs while in California. After the war, he returned to East Germany and created the Berliner Ensemble theatre...
group in late 1948. Brecht and his collaborators wanted its first play to be *Mother Courage*. The talented Helena Weigel, Brecht’s wife, played Courage, further cementing the play’s reputation and significance. It premiered in January 1949, and the rest is history. Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble would go on to change theatre in the 20th century using Brecht’s epic theatre techniques and new conception of theatrical spectatorship. However, this chapter is not about epic theatre or spectatorship, as those subjects have been covered quite well by other scholars.

I would like to frame *Mother Courage* as a war play that has provided a foundation for the 21st century war play genre, particularly those plays written by women. It is one of Brecht’s best known plays, and remarkably, given the dominance of men’s war narratives, its protagonist is a woman. As Iris Smith observes, “it cannot be denied that the most prominent and interesting roles in [Brecht’s] later plays are female” (91). Despite Brecht’s collaborations with Weigel and the other women members of the Berliner Ensemble (Bryant-Bertail 65), Brecht was not exactly a feminist. In an early feminist critique of Brecht’s female characters across his works, Sara Lennox found Brecht to be sexist and argues that he largely treats women as “demonstrative objects” (91). Still, even in this early piece of scholarship, she finds his theatrical strategies do contain “in rudimentary form, elements which point beyond his limitations with respect to women’s concerns” (Lennox 84). Sara Bryant-Bertail explains that Lennox was part of a generation of women scholars who were “disillusioned with Brecht and many other male heroes on the left who were systematically blind to the injustices that women historically suffered” (65).

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18 According to Philip Glahn, Brecht retained his Austrian citizenship—and was granted an Austrian passport in 1950—when he returned to East Germany, which led to “a major scandal that rocked the cultural scene…and resulted in a concerted anti-Brecht campaign in Vienna” (190). His actions were interpreted by some as “evidence of opportunism, even hypocrisy,” while others see them as “his apparent defense of the East German state’s violent repression of the infamous workers’ uprising of 1953” (190). To say the least, Brecht had a complicated relationship with Marxism and the Social Unity Party (the ruling party of German Democratic Republic), and Brecht maintained that he was needed in East Germany, as Glahn suggests, to “stake[e] out his own role in the new socialist reality” (192).
Across the feminist readings of Brecht (and in other areas of feminist theory), this is a common charge: socialist critiques left women out. However, a basic principle of Brecht’s is that social institutions and history can be critiqued and changed. His techniques are meant to position audience members in a mindset in which they can watch the performance and critically think about the material being presented; for feminists this includes consideration of historical inequalities and the material conditions of women. In her groundbreaking essay, Elin Diamond explains that “Brechtian historicization challenges the presumed ideological neutrality of any historical record” (87), and feminists have used Brecht’s strategies to challenge history and to address contemporary women’s issues. After examining two of Brecht’s important female characters, Smith explains that “[i]t remains for feminists to capitalize on their potential for gender studies” (491). Feminists and feminist scholars and playwrights have accomplished this in the years since Lennox’s scathing critique of Brecht. For instance, in another important essay, Janelle Reinelt discusses how British women playwrights in the 1980’s used and appropriated Brechtian strategies to “offer a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior…and their interactions with other socio-political factors such as class” (154). Women have filled the gap, then, and made such critiques their own.

Although the playwrights discussed in this chapter do not utilize Brecht’s strategies as much as others have, they find value in them and the content of his plays, especially *Mother Courage*. Paula Vogel, one of the playwrights discussed in this chapter, has developed her own interpretation of Brechtian techniques throughout her career, and I believe Vogel’s feminist appropriations of Brecht’s techniques are emblematic of the continued use and expansion of Brecht’s ideas. As David Savran notes, Vogel has a “love/hate relationship” with Brecht, as she understands the usefulness of his techniques while also criticizing them (188). However, both
Brecht and Vogel consider theatre as a means for audiences and theatre-makers to “co-produce meaning,” to borrow from Iris Smith’s discussion of feminist uses of Brecht (492). Lynn Nottage, also discussed later in this chapter, uses Brecht’s ideas more explicitly in her 2009 Pulitzer Prize-winning play Ruined, which was inspired by Mother Courage. Nottage, too, found aspects of Brecht’s theatre useful but found his form limiting. The playwrights discussed in this chapter may not, then, be using Brecht’s theatrical form as he did, but they do use his approach to war plays.

As Mother Courage demonstrates, Brecht’s approach to war privileges the experiences of those on the bottom rung of war who lack control over its events and its impact on their lives. The women playwrights explored in this chapter are continuing the conversation that Mother Courage began. Trying to eke out a living during the Thirty Years War, Courage and her children travel with various armies to buy and sell her goods. Courage, or Anna Fierling, earned her nickname because she “was scared of going broke,” so she risked her own life and livelihood to drive her cart through battle lines to sell barely-moldy bread (5). The cart, being pulled by Courage’s two sons Eilif and Swiss Cheese, is their home and the vehicle by which they all survive. At the beginning of the play, Courage is poorer in funds than she would like to be, but she does not realize how rich she is at this moment before she starts to lose all three of her children. By the end of the play, her children will be dead, including her daughter Kattrin who accompanies Courage for the longest amount of time and suffers trauma during their travels. In some ways, the plot of Mother Courage is simple in that she loses her sons to the soldiering life, gathers some companions, and continues to travel with various armies after her daughter’s death. All the while, she is anxious about whether she should be buying for the harder times to come or selling to get the best possible price. Courage’s haggling is directly linked with Swiss Cheese’s
death, but Courage chooses to continue her way of life, even after being offered the opportunity to run an inn with a suitor, the Cook. She decides not to settle down with the Cook because he does not want her to bring along her daughter. Twelve years after the play begins, Kattrin dies trying to warn a sleeping town of the soldiers marching towards them. After providing the coins she can spare for her daughter’s body, Courage ends the play alone on stage with her cart but without the people who made it a home. She hitches herself to the cart and pulls it towards the sound of drums and the troops marching in the distance. Courage’s voice is heard offstage singing “Wherever life has not died out/ It staggers to its feet again” (88). Brecht gives no indication of how Courage staggers to her feet to continue her business, only that she hitches herself to the cart. However, her actions are disjointed. She pulls the cart off stage, and then offstage she sings a song about the living continuing to move forward and the “common man” not benefiting from war. The audience’s empathy for Courage remains, but it has been altered and used as a tool for instruction. The audience realizes what Courage may not—that the war will kill her as well, but she has still chosen to continue her business. Gleitman notes about Courage’s goodbye to Kattrin that “[t]o the final and most desperate moment, the contradictions remain unsolved” because “Brecht resists the spectator’s tendency to smooth discordances into naturalism” (156-7). Brecht does not allow meaning or resolutions to come easy to the audience. Courage is a mother who has lost everyone she has been close with, but she has also lost them through her own choices and circumstances. Even for a character as savvy as Courage, she falls into the trap of war by thinking that she could navigate it on the peripheries and does not remember her own words: “As a rule you can say victory and defeat both come expensive to us ordinary folk” (31).
There are two threads in *Mother Courage* that have shaped my argument, and both are demonstrated during the response Courage gives to the Chaplain after they are captured by the Catholics. During scene three, the Cook and Chaplin are at Courage’s cart for a drink when the tide of the war shifts. A soldier runs by shouting, “The Catholics! Broken through” (28). The Cook goes to find his general, while Courage helps the Chaplain hide his religious clothing to avoid being killed on sight. As the sounds of war get louder, the stage goes dark. When the lights go up, it is three days later. Courage, Kattrin, Swiss Cheese, and the Chaplain are eating a meal, while they discuss their current situation. They survived their interrogations, but they wonder what the change of regime means for them. The Chaplain laments, “We are all of us in God’s hands now,” to which Courage responds, “Oh I don’t think it’s as mad as that yet” (30). She proceeds to assert her authority and knowledge over a man in a former position of authority. During her interrogation, Courage insincerely professes the Catholic faith to the best of her abilities, saying that “I told ‘em I don’t hold with the Antichrist” and “I asked where I could get church candles not too dear” (30–31). Although her knowledge of Catholicism might not be complete or stem from faith, she uses her knowledge to survive. The Chaplain suggests that they continue to act Catholic in order to survive and change what they drink to obscure their “Swedish appetites” because, “After all, we’ve been defeated” (31). His words indicate that the Chaplain believes in a side—the Swedish army—and his words recognize a typical perception about war; people pick a side, and one side wins. Courage corrects the Chaplain’s, and potentially the audience’s, misunderstanding:

Who's been defeated? Look, victory and defeat ain't bound to be same [sic] for the big shots up top as for them below, not by no means. Can be times the bottom lot find a defeat really pays them. Honour's lost, nowt else. I remember once up in Livonia our
general took such a beating from enemy [sic] I got a horse off our baggage train in the confusion, pulled me cart seven months, he did, before we won and they checked up. As a rule you can say victory and defeat both come expensive to us ordinary folk. Best thing for us is when politics get bogged down solid. *To Swiss Cheese: Eat Up.* (31)

The “side” that Courage takes is that of the ordinary folk, which now includes the Chaplain and her soldier son Swiss Cheese. With the Catholics in control, everyone eating around the cart has become ordinary folk. Ordinary folk do not have the luxury to be in a position of power to feel positive benefits from war. Ordinary folk will always experience some kind of expense when there is war. Even though Courage, the Chaplain, and the absent Cook discuss politics and governance, they never and will never have any control or power in that arena. While Brecht’s summaries at the beginning of each scene describe troop movements and provide the years the scene covers, they are a bit of a red herring. The efforts of the “Swedish Commander-in-Chief Count Oxenstierna” to raise “troops in Dalecarlia for the Polish campaign” means little for Courage, except for the fact that the Recruiter notices her because she has two sons (3). War stories are usually framed around the men who wage and direct war, men with control of the events of war whose decisions make change. Eilif, who is swayed by the recruiter to join the army, fools himself into believing that he has become one of the men on top, but he is executed for crimes that had he committed them during the war would have been commended. The top comprises a small, select group of men, and not even someone who finds joy in war-time activities, such as Eilif, can become part of that group. Brecht resists the spectator’s expectation that war is told through the eyes of the men in charge and challenges the idea that war benefits all who are on the “winning” side.
The second thread concerns the fact that the title character is a woman, and the play follows her through twelve years of war and loss. In the above quote, Courage ends her speech by looking around the circle and noticing that her son needs to eat his meal. Along with being a knowledgeable, experienced businesswoman considering what the future holds, she is a mother. She knows that whatever else the shift of military control means, a good meal will likely be hard to find, and she wants her son to take in whatever nutrition he can before the situation worsens. Scholars have largely neglected the domestic in *Mother Courage* and the fact that the cart is her home as well as her business. Bryant-Bertail's chapter on *Mother Courage* considers the cart a framework for the play, as Courage sits on top of the cart—and “on top of the world”—at the beginning of the play but ends up pulling the cart alone in the end (73). The cart is an important object and tool, of course, but she does not read the play or the cart through a domestic lens.\(^\text{19}\) Gleitman’s argument provides the closest examination of the domestic in *Mother Courage*. She argues that Brecht seeks to demonstrate how ideological institutions, what she calls *ideologemes*, support and contribute to war (148–49). Brecht looks to “subvert the signs of Mother and Family” (Gleitman 155). During the negotiations for Swiss Cheese’s life, Gleitman argues, Brecht “shocks” the audience by “juxtaposing moments of vile greed with moments of genuine maternal feeling,” complicating the empathy that has been cultivated for Courage (156). Still, *Mother Courage* was not meant to be a play about the different ways that women experience war compared to men or about domestic spaces. Brecht had other critiques in mind and wanted to provide a warning bell to audiences about the impending war. It is enough that he rejects the top-down approach to war narratives because that was a necessary first step in making room for stories about women’s war experiences and perspectives on it.

\(^{19}\) She also notes that, in the above scene, Courage puts the Chaplain in his place, and during the years they travel together, he sleeps under the cart (73).
The women playwrights under discussion in this chapter have taken up the challenge Brecht composed within *Mother Courage*. The feminist women playwrights discussed here have capitalized on Brecht’s work and the threads present in *Mother Courage* to make arguments about war and war literature. The first thread concerns the dramatization of someone on the bottom rung of war and the reframing of war to narrativize the cost it imposes on the life of ordinary folk. Likewise, the victories and defeats for those at the bottom are different from those at the top. The second thread stems from the first in that women’s experiences during war are different from men’s because women, especially in the settings of these plays, are already estranged and disenfranchised from society-at-large and are particularly so during war, as the “privileged spectators of war” are not supposed to participate in war or have a place within it. To rephrase Courage: as a rule, victory and defeat both have costs for women. Paula Vogel’s *A Civil War Christmas* (2008), Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3* (2015), Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2008), and Danai Gurira’s *Eclipsed* (2009) take up *Mother Courage*’s threads in different ways. Vogel and Parks use the Civil War as the setting for their plays and focus on the first thread, dramatizing the events of war for those on the bottom and its cost. Although *FCHW* features a homecoming, the setting is in close proximity to war (its immediate beginnings, time served, and immediate ending for the main character), and Parks turns the bottoms up view on its head. Nottage’s play, which was explicitly inspired by *Mother Courage*, sits between the two threads. Nottage’s goal was to bring attention to women’s experiences because they are different from men’s, and the women she depicts are severely disenfranchised in their society. In doing so, she displaces the idea that war narratives are primarily about men. Finally, Gurira tackles the issue of privileging men’s experience in traditional war narratives by excluding them and focusing on the different, contradictory
experiences women have during war. I argue, in other words, that these threads from *Mother Courage* have been picked up by contemporary female playwrights in their plays with active war and/or its immediate beginnings and endings.

The chapter will continue my discussion of the home’s depictions and use in war plays. Across these four plays, home still brings to mind feelings of care, community, and a sense of belonging. Yet, it is not a perfect place, either. Home is not a panacea for the trauma of war, but home can create a sense of security, which is missing for some of the women characters in these plays. Home can also be a place where people begin to heal from violence. However, war has intruded upon many of the homes featured in these plays. With the plays set in the Civil War, the place that was once a home has become a war zone. Therefore, Vogel uses domestic actions (such as offering hospitality and making food) to signal the potential of the domestic sphere to create peace during a war and, at the very least, to return people’s humanity to them after war strips it away. Parks depicts a man’s journey to power, which allows him to reimagine his home to suit his desires, and in the process, the people who care for him are harmed and betrayed. In the two plays set in the midst of African conflict zones, women create homes for themselves, but the homes are often damaged by war. Nottage offers a story about a woman who has carved out a space to call her own, and she actively works to keep the conflict outside the doors of her bar. Although not a completely safe space, the bar does offer a necessary degree of security for the women who live there. Finally, in *Eclipsed*, the women who live in the hut have made a home for themselves that preserves their humanity and helps to mitigate the effects of war, including the control men have on the women. By the end of the play, the events of war dissolve the home, and the cost of war is heavy for the play’s women because they also lose the bonds that have sustained them. The themes that emerge indicate that people surviving in a war zone need to
have a sense of community and belonging, and that, ultimately, the structure of the home is less important than the people who make it a home. Human bonds and domestic actions that manifest care for other people are crucial to survival in a war zone.

**Paula Vogel’s *A Civil War Christmas***

As a playwright, Vogel has a recognizable aesthetic and a consistent series of concerns across her work. Joanna Mansbridge summarizes Vogel’s theatre in the first sentence of her book: "To see a Paula Vogel play is to participate in a three-way dialogue with the dramatic canon, social history, and contemporary American culture" (*Paula Vogel* 1). Vogel has been an influential force in late 20th- and 21st-century drama with her plays, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive*, and her work as a teacher at Brown University. For twenty-three years, she has taught and mentored some of the major voices in contemporary drama, including Sarah Ruhl and Lynn Nottage (Mansbridge, *Paula Vogel* 3). Her plays are widely produced, even though she had her first play on Broadway in 2018. Vogel’s friend and respected theatre scholar David Savran ends his book of essays exploring the haunted stages in American drama with a discussion of Vogel. The focus of his argument is on Vogel’s conversation with the dramatic canon and Brecht. Although critical of Brecht, Vogel finds value in his theatre and theory of estrangement (Savran 188). After reading even one of Vogel’s plays, it is clear that Brechtian strategies permeate her work.

Indeed, Savran’s discussion of Vogel implies that the student has surpassed the teacher. Vogel and Brecht share some goals in their theatres—they wish to educate audiences and understand possibilities of defamiliarization to make societal critiques—but Vogel has taken on many of Brecht’s strategies and reworked them into a theatre of her own. Savran distinguished between their strategies by comparing Brecht’s protagonist in *Good Person of Szechwan* with
Vogel’s Li’il Bit from *How I Learned to Drive*: “Where Brecht requires two opposing characters (Shen Te/ Shui Ta, Anna I/ Anna II) to dramatize the schizophrenia that capitalism produces, Paula usually requires only one self-contradictory subject who encloses within her or him both this debilitating division and a remedy for that division,” like Li’il Bit (203). What is more, Savran notes that Brecht’s plays end in a “state of impasse and paralysis,” whereas Vogel’s plays often end with a “gesture toward a future that is utterly different, a fantastic, utopian future” (203). According to Savran, this fantastic future is made possible because the Other within the warring character only appears to be an Other, acting “like a speck of sand in an oyster, both as an irritant and as the basis for a sublime transformation” (203–04). To me, the way Vogel ends her plays at times— with the sense that great change is possible and about to happen— makes them noteworthy by revealing a space in which audiences can consider change. Vogel believes that the audience is part of the conversation taking place on stage, and with the audience, a new truth or history is created: as she asserts, “all subjects…are impeachable. That’s the great thing about drama…. There is no ‘there’ there. There’s no authenticity. There’s no truth, it’s who’s in the room” (qtd. in Savran 187–88).

I have discussed Savran’s ideas at length because I would like to consider Savran’s argument that within Vogel’s protagonists, there exist two warring concepts with the possibility for a “sublime transformation” within a single character. The possibilities for transformation and for learning are thus contained within the self-contradictory subject. Earlier in his chapter, Savran notes that Vogel’s works seem to contain a “doubleness, a sense of playing both sides at the same time” (188). Although Savran focuses on the way Vogel writes about gender and uses her own gender as a playwright, I think the idea that a character contains warring sides of an argument or theory is particularly relevant to *A Civil War Christmas: An American Musical*
Celebration (CWC). As Mansbridge points out in her monograph, Vogel treats every play like a theory (Paula Vogel 9). Mansbridge suggests that even if the “overall scope, purpose, and tone” in a CWC is different from her other works, it still aligns with her drama in that it treats “the centrality of family and community, the persistent haunting of memory and history, and the importance of theatre as a public space” (Paula Vogel 180).

While I agree with Mansbridge, a discussion of war adds another dimension to CWC. Vogel believes all subjects can be examined critically and be re-viewed. Like Parks, whose play is also set during the Civil War, Vogel uses the stage as a means to comment on contemporary society and its connections to the Civil War, the last war to be fought on U.S. soil. Vogel presents her subject matter as current, present, and urgent. Even though the outcome of the war is known, CWC still feels like something good and hopeful—something that is rooted in strong communities and families—that can occur to change the present state of the contemporary U.S., which audiences bring with them to the show. As Mansbridge and others note, Vogel’s theatre comments on the present moment, but it does so, often, by examining the past from different perspectives. Mansbridge observes that “Vogel’s plays invite audiences into a lively, and, at times, uncomfortable dialogue with contemporary culture, with social history, and with a dramatic canon that seems perpetually in conversation with its own past” (“Memory’s Dramas” 212).

With CWC, Vogel wanted to provide another holiday-themed play option for repertoire or community theaters that has American themes, events, and political figures, as theatrical versions of Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol tend to dominate in December. Through her use of historical detail, she invites audiences and those who produce the play to work together to

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20 Obviously, the Civil War is a contentious subject and a war that is still relevant to people living in the U.S. today. I do not mean to make any implications about the afterlife of the Civil War.
create new understandings of history. Vogel states, in no uncertain terms, that the play can be performed by communities for themselves, potentially creating a pageant play: “[T]his play is for community: So in some towns, perhaps it would be ideal to co-produce the play with local universities, undergraduates, acting students, church choirs, schoolchildren, and if there are any, Civil War reenactors,” adding “And if the audience sings along on some of the carols, better still” (4). 

CWC contains a complex, multi-narrative plot set on Christmas Eve 1864, months before the end of the war and Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. It has multiple, competing plots, some of which converge, while others do not. In Brechtian fashion, the chorus welcomes the audience to the show and frequently provides diegetic commentary and summary throughout the play. Depending on the acting group or availability of participants in a community, actors play multiple roles, with as few as eight and as many as fourteen cast to play the fifty-four distinct characters and groups of characters in the chorus, raiders, and various groups of soldiers. Scene and character changes are done openly on stage, and the character doubling suggested by a production in which Vogel was closely involved elicits interesting combinations: the same actor can play John Wilkes Booth, Robert E. Lee, and William Tecumseh Sherman, and another actor can play Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ulysses S. Grant, and Ward Hill Lamon. The set itself is sparse and exposes the walls of the theatre space, and the only props are objects (mostly domestic ones) with which characters interact, such as coffee mugs and a Christmas tree.\(^2\) In this vast play, the major historical characters are countered by lesser historical figures, such as Elizabeth Keckley, or fictional characters informed by Vogel’s research. With the exceptions of the Lincolns, major historical figures are present only for one or two scenes. The plots of major

\(^2\) In the production photos I have found, I cannot determine if Vogel’s scene titles and the settings are communicated on title cards—like Brecht’s would be for the audience—but if they were, it would provide a way for the audience to further interpret the scene’s content and argument.
importance concern a freedwoman who wants to give Christmas joy to others, a woman and her
daughter on the final leg of their journey to the United States, and a haunted blacksmith who
chooses not to kill a runaway, wannabe Confederate soldier boy. With these characters and their
plots, Vogel dramatizes different aspects of war as experienced by those without control of its
events, including the heavy costs they bear, but by the end, the major character’s actions, which
are domestic in nature, inspire hope and a sense of uncertain optimism about the outcome of the
war.

The uplifting narrative about family and the importance of community is conveyed
through the flight of Hannah and her daughter Jessa on the final, harrowing leg of their journey
to the North and freedom. The Christmas miracle of CWC concerns Hannah’s reunion with Jessa
after they are separated. Hannah and Jessa make their first appearance as they are approaching
the Potomac River. Hannah heads north with Jessa in tow. Like any child on a long journey,
Jessa wonders how much longer they have to go, and then she professes, “I want to go home”
(20). Hannah tells her, “It’s not Home since they sold your father” (21). Although a mother and a
daughter constitute a family, the person who anchored their home, Jessa’s father, was sold,
which led Hannah to find another home for her daughter—a place where, as Hannah says, “I
don’t have to watch our back when you get older. Or worry about the Master selling you” (21).
Jessa’s safety is enough of a reason to justify the journey, yet Vogel also demonstrates Hannah’s
belief that the place they are going to will do more than keep them safe. Hannah tells Jessa that
in the United States, the President is responsible to his people: “it’s his job to feed people who
don’t have any food, and to find a roof for people who don’t have any houses” (21). With
Hannah and Jessa’s narrative, Vogel’s play demonstrates how costly war is for those at the
bottom. After encountering roadblocks to crossing into the North, Hannah hides Jessa in a wagon
heading over the border and instructs her to go to the President’s home, “the largest white plantation house in town,” and not to talk to strangers for fear they are slavecatchers (31). Hannah risks her daughter’s life because of her belief that the North will provide a safe home for them. However, Jessa ends up lost and wandering the streets of Washington, D.C. looking for the President’s home on a particularly cold Christmas Eve night. There, she is approached three times: by John Wilkes Booth and his conspirators as they attempt to assassinate Lincoln as he travels out of town, by Lincoln traveling alone on his way out of town, and by Elizabeth Keckley, the former slave who is a seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln. Alone, black, and lacking proper clothing for the weather, Jessa is an extremely vulnerable girl. Booth is exactly the kind of man that Hannah warns Jessa about when they part ways. Although not a slave-catcher himself, he likely would have harmed her. Instead, he scares her badly, and she runs away, abandoning her blanket in the process. Lincoln spots her shortly thereafter. Because her mother warned her about slave-catchers and she has just run from Booth, Jessa runs away again. Although Lincoln has good intentions and would have helped her, his help would not have been as effective or generous as Keckley’s.

Elizabeth Keckley gets to be the hero in a play that re-visits history and pays special attention to those at the bottom. Mansbridge offers that the play has “enormous warmth and a reach wide enough to include the diversity of American cultural history, along with its unfinished business” (Paula Vogel 184). Vogel’s use of Keckley as a character seems to reinforce the larger unfinished business of systemic racism and writes African Americans back into American history. Keckley was a remarkable person and an example of the bootstrap mentality popular in American cultural history. Born a slave, she used her skills as a seamstress to buy her own and her son’s freedom (Young 118). Shortly after moving to Washington D.C.,
Mrs. Lincoln hired Keckley to become her personal seamstress, and she became Mrs. Lincoln’s confidant, writing a book about her experiences titled *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Young 118). In response to the crisis of freed slaves running to the United States from the Confederate States, Keckley used her many connections and relationships with people in power to create the Contraband Relief Organization in 1862 (‘Elizabeth Keckley’). Keckley’s organization clothed, fed, and sheltered the “contraband” of war, which is what refugees were called (‘Elizabeth Keckley’). Although Keckley is a minor character in history, she is one of the two main characters of *CWC* and a “hero” because she saves others and helps to create the joy necessary for the ending of a Christmas play on American themes. As a character, Keckley is complicated, and Vogel narrativizes Keckley’s interior mind, which is much more than she does for characters like Grant and Lee. By the time Keckley becomes involved in Jessa’s story, the audience has seen Keckley work to create Christmas joy for others by buying a Christmas tree to be delivered to an orphanage and the personal grief that motivates her to create such joy.

After losing her son to an early battle in the Civil War, Keckley is a mourning mother, and her trauma drives her to continue to search for Jessa past the curfew placed on African Americans. After Hannah arrives at the White House, the African American community who lived inside the Lincoln White House—overlooked, Vogel suggests, by historians—mobilizes to help find Jessa because people in power will not help them. The chorus informs us that “Any free person of color living in Washington, D.C. knew the adage by heart. The president can’t help us: 22

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22 Young dedicates an entire chapter of her book to Keckley’s 1868 autobiography. Keckley’s book created a scandal when it was published for its intimate portrayal of Mrs. Lincoln, but Young argues that Keckley, intelligent women that she was, “rips apart national discourse [on race, gender, and nationalism] and sews up her own political authority” in her narrative (119). Young also acknowledges the lack of critical attention to Keckley’s life and work, noting that her autobiography has only been examined as a slave narrative and for information about the Lincolns (118).
He’s too busy fighting the war! .... God Helps Those/ Who Help Themselves! (71). Keckley searches for Jessa together until the clock bells toll for curfew. At home, Keckley falls asleep by the warm fire and dreams of her son George’s last moments. His last word—“Mama?!”—pushes her out the door just in time to find the dying Jessa asleep in an empty box that “carried silks from France” (79). Calling for help, Keckley “bundled that little girl in a robe of silver and gold, fit for a prince” (79). Wrapped in a precious material, Jessa is transformed into a child who is important—not one of the many children who die during war and slavery. The reunion is a happy one, and at the end of the play, Hannah and Jessa are being cared for at Cox House, a charity for poor women and children. For now, they are safe, fed, and warm. Although Keckley, the historical figure, is elevated alongside the other major figures of the Civil War era, Hannah and Jessa’s story is part of both Brechtian threads laid out in Mother Courage in that Vogel has dramatized the perilous journey of two slave women and described some of the obstacles that women face at war. What is more, Vogel shows how the community of people of color in Washington, D.C. help themselves and each other. Still, war is costly for those on the bottom. Jessa’s rescue is a temporary victory—and provides a satisfying end to a Christmas play on American themes—but the continued good health of Hannah and Jessa remains unclear. Important as it is, Hannah and Jessa’s journey to freedom is one element of Vogel’s argument about the importance of those on the bottom rung of society. The story of Sergeant Decatur Bronson further underscores Vogel’s examination of the costs of war for those on the bottom, but Bronson contains within himself the necessary doubleness for a “sublime transformation” that can resolve division. With Bronson and his plot, Vogel wants to demonstrate that peace and camaraderie are possible between the two sides of the conflict.
In CWC, the characters without control of the events of war provide stories that feel hopeful—by suggesting that if more communities rallied together to care for each other and if those waging war made the choice not to kill their enemies, the Civil War could have ended differently. With—perhaps—a wink and nod to 21st-century audiences, Vogel seems to argue that every person can contribute to a better society, not just those on top. To make her comparison, Vogel gives some attention to the Great Men of the Civil War—Grant, Lee, and Lincoln—but they become supporting characters. Vogel sets them up as the three wise men from Christian theology. Vogel is explicit about this connection, titling scene four “Three wise men bowed their heads and prayed” (15). Instead of showing these Great Men at a desk or in a dignified position of power, she recasts the image of these men at war using the domestic. It is Christmas Eve, and the exhausted Generals Lee and Grant are served coffee by their aides-de-camp. With their respective confidants, Lee and Grant echo each other and express their desire to end the war using bloody fantasies. In these quiet and domestic moments, the generals are allowed to exhibit their frustrations with the war and uncertainties about how to end it. To emphasize the similarities between these two generals, they each sing a verse and the refrain from “I Heard the Bells” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who wrote the poem that became the carol on Christmas Day in the same year the play takes place (Meyer). Lincoln, the last of the three wise men, stares into the fire at the White House. Lincoln has awakened from a disturbing dream and in the most intimate depiction of the three, sings “there is no peace on earth... for hate is strong/ and mocks the song/ of peace on earth, goodwill to men” (15). Lincoln might be the wisest of them all. Like Grant and Lee, he wants peace, but he recognizes that the violence comes from a hate that is too strong. The irony of Vogel’s depiction of these Great Men is that they have the power to end the war if they practice goodwill towards all men. With the prayer in
which all three men sing the last verse and final refrain together—“THE WRONG SHALL FAIL/ THE RIGHT PREVAIL/ WITH PEACE ON EARTH, GOODWILL TO MEN!” (16)—Vogel indicates the men’s desire for the end of war, but in fact, they desire to be right and for their ideology to prevail. However, a wise man would be able to see that their actions (war) and their words (goodwill towards men) do not match.

As an alternative to the men who have power and do not act to resolve the war without more violence, Vogel provides another grouping of three wise men, who, like most of the characters in *Mother Courage*, have no control of the events of war: Sergeant Decatur Bronson, a former company leader of a black company and now a blacksmith; Private Chester Saunders, the Quaker who volunteered to be in the Union army; and Raz Franklin, a thirteen-year-old Virginian boy who runs away to be in the Confederate army but runs into a Union camp. These two men and a boy are wise because of their actions. Although they do not have the power to stop or change the war, their actions are made meaningful because they have been changed and demonstrate the goodwill towards men that eludes the Great Men. By the end of the play, Raz shakes the hand of his enemy and takes his charity. Chester remains steadfast in his beliefs and does not waiver. And Bronson navigates the warring philosophies within himself—the importance of fulfilling his need for revenge or his desire to stop killing and regain his humanity. The speck of sand within Bronson is best explained at the end of the play. Even though Bronson says these words as a member of the Chorus, I believe they belong to him as well. While singing their hope for a utopian future in the middle of a war, Bronson wishes that “Our own two hands we shall beat swords into plowshares” (86); he wishes, in other words, that tools of destruction can be turned into tools that help to feed and care for people. To begin the journey toward peace
as a nation or his personal journey towards taking care of people instead of killing them, Bronson offers his hand and hospitality to Raz.

Before Bronson offers hospitality to Raz, the audience sees his motivation for becoming a soldier and the moment in which that way of life overwhelmed him. Working as a blacksmith in a Union camp, Bronson is haunted by his wife, who was abducted from her own front porch. During a flashback that begins with an offstage voice yelling “TAKE NO PRISONERS,” the audience sees that Bronson was in charge of his own company of black soldiers until two weeks ago (18). While introducing a new soldier to the company, Bronson explains that black Union soldiers are not taken prisoner by the Confederates, even when they surrender. To revenge their comrades, every soldier under Bronson’s command “has made a vow he yells before battle” (18). Bronson tells the new recruit, “It’s a white man’s privilege to starve to death in a prison camp,” so they deny the white men their privilege (18). Something about this explanation—and the pantomime execution Bronson and his soldiers perform during the explanation—causes Bronson to reflect on his own actions. Bronson joined the war because his wife was abducted, and that was the only way he could do something to reunite with her. Echoing the bloody fantasies of Lee and Grant, Bronson says to himself, “Every Confederate I kill is a bridge to reach her […] but down here, the river is too wide[…] not even a regiment of bodies can reach across” (19). “Down here” could mean the front lines and the places where his company fights. In the depths of war, the front lines could also be the places where hope for a resolution would be most faint around the dead, dying, and unending violence. “Down here” also refers to his own mind and the person he has become. His awareness expands, and he says, “The river up there is barely a creek, two or three bodies wide. I’ll feel closer to Rose up there near our farm” (19). He does not know where Rose currently is, so, instead, his feeling closer to Rose and their home should be interpreted as
Bronson’s being closer to a place that held his other self. On the farm, he cared for the land and made a life for his family, and he wants to be closer to that place and his own humanity. Within Bronson, there is a man who successfully waged war and sought revenge for his fellow soldiers and all the civilians that Rose represented. Bronson seems to be reacting to the “speck of sand” within himself, understanding that his indiscriminate killing is wrong and that he cannot live solely for revenge. At the supply depot, he returns to his profession as a blacksmith, which suggests that he can make a cooking pot as easily as a bayonet. Leaving the front lines is the first step on his journey of transformation, and the irritant for a soldier becomes a pearl of hope.

Raz and Chester, the other two wise men in this grouping, are critical to Bronson’s transformation and the suggestion that a different history of the Civil War is possible. Until Raz stumbles upon Bronson’s forge, he is a comedic character. As Raz leaves his father’s camp with his “horse” (played by another actor), he thinks of war as a romantic adventure. While looking for the Confederate army, Raz runs into a group of Confederate deserters. He still wants to join their band because he thinks it will give him the adventure he has been seeking. However, Raz’s adventure turns serious when he walks into Bronson’s forge. The depth of Raz’s miseducation about war is not seen until Bronson has a gun pointed at him, ready to carry out the promise he made to his fellow African American soldiers to “take no [Confederate] prisoners.” Bronson begins to treat Raz, a boy, as a Confederate soldier, but the warring sides of himself stall him. Bronson explains that he will return Raz’s body to his parents if he will write his address, but Raz does not know how to write. Bronson is perplexed because every slave owner—and all Confederates are all slaveowners for Bronson—can write. Raz sputters, “I don’t own any slaves! I never went to school. I work in a stable. I sleep in a stable. And not I’m about to be shot by a slave” (80). After Raz spouts the beliefs and hatred that have been taught to a poor child, he asks
Bronson for a moment to prepare himself for death. Just as Bronson raises the gun to Raz’s head, Chester drops to his knees, praying for “the divine spark in every man” to change Bronson’s course of action (80).

Before the moment when Bronson contemplates killing Raz to keep his promise, Chester and Bronson have been discussing Chester’s beliefs as a Quaker and his actions as a conscientious objector throughout the play. Chester, a member of the quartermaster’s staff, is a Quaker who signed up for the war. Like Raz, Chester enlisted because he wanted to support his country. What is more, enlisting was Chester’s way of acting on the beliefs of his faith and upbringing. While Chester is recounting his enlistment to Bronson, Chester’s mother, Widow Saunders, joins Chester in the singing of an anti-slavery poem called the “Liberty Ball.” Whereas Raz responded to a call for adventure, Chester did what he could to help the war, which mostly consists of keeping the books and bringing dinner to soldiers. Initially, Bronson is confused by Chester’s beliefs and choices. Bronson implies that Chester would feel differently about killing if someone had killed his wife or mother, going so far as to ask Chester what he would do to a man who had killed his family. Chester replies, “I guess I would do what Mother would want me to do. I’d pray for him. For the divine spark in every man” (52). After Chester finishes relating his war stories, Bronson commends Chester for his bravery: “You’re a brave man, Saunders. Take guts to be fired on and not return the fire” (54). Even if he does not understand how Chester can turn the other cheek and pray for his enemy instead of getting revenge, Bronson respects Chester, and Bronson needed to hear about Chester’s faith in the divine spark in all men. Bronson also needed to hear that there is another way to react to violent situations. What is more, Bronson needed to be cared for by another person and feel connected to another person after all that he has experienced at war.
Chester’s domestic influence on Bronson contributes to the outcome of Bronson’s encounter with Raz wherein Bronson extends hospitality to Raz instead of killing him. When it comes time for Bronson to carry out his mission to take no prisoners, Bronson cares enough about Chester that he sends him away. Bronson sends Chester away, as the chants of “Take no prisoners; take no prisoners” echoes through his head (76). Bronson lies to Chester saying he will release Raz, yet Bronson’s lie can also be interpreted as a sign of his sense of guilt. He does not feel as confident in his bloody resolve as he would have been in the past. Staring at Raz down the barrel of his rifle, he begins to see him as a child with a romanticized view of war, and he sees himself and his actions. As Chester falls to his knees to pray, Bronson’s sublime transformation occurs. As he looks down at Raz to kill him, Bronson realizes that he is about to kill a child. With this realization, he is transformed. He offers Raz his hand and hospitality instead, making Raz a guest and not a prisoner, and by doing so, Bronson does not have to break his vow.

Raz then shakes the hand of his enemy and accepts his hospitality with the help of one of the most uniting forces in the history of the world: food. Raz’s display of fellowship is overshadowed by Bronson’s because Bronson has the power and control in this situation—and he is one of the main characters. Still, I do not want Raz’s action to be lost; he takes the hand of someone he has viewed as his enemy and accepts his hospitality. Raz’s action defies his upbringing and the mythology of war that he has operated on until this point. Chester, already shown to be a wise and brave man, can help Bronson to see his actions in a new light and change because the latter contained within himself the necessary tools for his sublime transformation by reconciling the division within himself. What is more, Chester helped to reveal that space within Bronson’s mind by caring for him, in a domestic sense. It should not be forgotten that Chester was only present for Raz’s arrival because he was bringing a meal to an officer under his care.
With Bronson’s transformation, Vogel imagines that history might be different if more enemies met and changed their minds about killing each other; perhaps the Civil War would have stopped sooner or the systemic racism that continued long after the war ended would cease to exist. This is Vogel’s “gesture toward a future that is utterly different, a fantastic, utopian future”—to quote Savran once more—and a simple extension of hospitality opened the door to hope for that utopian world.

Vogel’s desire for a changed, utopian word is underscored further in the last scene, and the ending stresses the importance of community and peace. The large cast of characters gathers onstage, and they feel a hush come over them on Christmas eve. Keckley serves as a narrator for the Chorus: “Yet in the midst of all the revelry that night, there was a sudden hush that could be heard” across the land (86). Perhaps the divine spark in all men synced for a moment, and the Chorus sings a prayer of sorts for a future in which:

KECKLEY. That there would be armies to search for every child…

RAZ. Regiments with hammers to rebuild roofs…

ROSE. And with our hands,

BRONSON. Our own two hands we shall beat swords into plowshares.” (86)

In this last song, Vogel reexamines instruments of destruction, imagining that they would instead build a better home and homeland. She asks the audience to imagine something radical: if every child and life were valued, armies would search for them and care for them; regiments would exist to build houses, not tear them down; and everyone’s hands would work to farm and create rather than destroy each other. By rejecting the top-down approach to war, she finds the hope—and dreams—that exists in those at the bottom rung of war. As they do not have control over their own circumstances or the violence of war, then they can at least do something small—look
under a box for a child or feed a Rebel “soldier”—that could matter. As the ending leaves the audience with an upswell of emotion, Vogel seems to show that hope is possible and radical. If she makes the audience feel as though the events of the Civil War could have gone differently—that Booth might have missed Lincoln or the alternative wise men’s small truce could have applied to the whole conflict—then we can hope to build a better country, even though the incredible divisiveness that is part of the history for the U.S., and it tore apart our home. Still, the play also demonstrates that this hope was possible due to domestic actions, such as extending hospitality, and caring for each person as though they are a member of one’s community—because as a member of the country, they are.

**Suzan-Lori Parks’s Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3**

Parks’s contribution to this group of women-authored war plays comes seven years after *CWC* and strikes a different chord than Vogel’s intentionally hopeful, uplifting play. She focuses on telling stories about those who were on the very bottom of pre-Civil War society: African American slaves. Parks is a critically important playwright who has helped shape the landscape of 21\textsuperscript{st}-century American drama. She is a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship recipient, and in 2002 she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Topdog/Underdog*, making her the first black woman to receive the prize (Parks, “Bio”). *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3 (FCHW)* comprise three short plays, making it technically a trilogy of works, but it is treated as one long play in production. Arguably, *FCHW* is another addition to Parks’s “Lincoln Plays,” along with *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Underdog* (2002).\textsuperscript{23} Understanding *FCHW* as one of the Lincoln Plays positions it within the trajectory of Parks’s theatre and in dialogue with her thoughts about historical and contemporary race in American. As a recent play, *FCHW* has not

\textsuperscript{23} Verna Foster’s article compares the content and theatrical strategies of the first two Lincoln Plays. Laura Dawkins analyzes them as well, but she examines them in terms of memory and trauma.
received much scholarly attention, but it is a play that aligns with Parks’s commitments as a playwright and is a major contribution to her body of work. It is also important to note that Parks named the play for her father and her memories of waiting for him to come back from the Vietnam War and other deployments during his military career (Lawson).

Parks’s career demonstrates her enduring investment in U.S. history and her goal to revise traditionally accepted views of American history that do not account for African Americans. For her, history and theatre are closely related concepts, and, therefore, a critical aspect of her theatre is that she sees her plays as a way to create history. In her essay “Possession,” Parks defines a play as “a blueprint for an event,” and as “history is a recorded or remembered event,” theatre is a forum in which Parks can “make’ history” (America Play 4). Making history is of particular importance to her because the history of African Americans has been “unrecorded, disremembered, washed out”; as a playwright, she can “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down….I’m re-membering and staging historical events which, though they are happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history” (America Play 4–5). While the history on stage that she has created belongs in the historical record, Parks feels that it is no less real for being a play: “Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events—and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human….Through each line of text I’m rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but not yet been divined” (America Play 5). Parks views her history-making for African Americans as part of her responsibility as a playwright. Just as creating space for African Americans in history was a goal for The America Play, the same can be said for FCHW.

24 In her analysis of The America Play, Katy Ryan explains how Parks’s history making creates “the possibility… that history can be made without whiteness” (91). Harry Elam and Alice Rayner’s discuss Parks’s ideas about making history in The America Play.
twenty-two years later. The structural racism featured in *FCHW* demonstrates a transhistorical connection between contemporary issues and African Americans' historical experiences. In fact, when the Goodman Theatre in Chicago produced *FCHW* in 2018, director Nigel Smith foregrounded this connection by imaging the plantation that the slaves live on as a prison by clothing them in orange prison jumpsuits (Kai). In the era of Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements, it would be a mistake to think that Parks and those who produce her works do not seek to make a contemporary comment, but *FCHW* is not a thinly veiled attempt to make news into theatre. Instead, Parks continues to dig into and stage historical problems in order to create an alternative “blueprint” for black experience and Civil War history.

Although Parks asks audiences to re-see the grand American narrative of the Civil War, she borrows most heavily from Homer’s *Odyssey* and looks to re-shape the epic. The bird’s eye summary of *FCHW* is that a man leaves for war, has an adventure, and returns home. Hero is the protagonist, who renames himself Ulysses after he has gone to war and returned home. Hero’s faithful dog is called Odd-see and Odyssey dog. And the other major figures in Hero’s life are Penny, his wife, and Homer, the man who has known Hero for the longest. Before the play begins, Hero betrayed Homer to the Boss-Master, which resulted in Hero being compelled to cut off Homer’s foot. Although it is intriguing to consider the implications of a character cutting off the foot of his creator, the references to the *Odyssey* serve as both a tool for analysis and a potential misdirection. During an interview with Marcos Nájera for the Center Theatre Group’s performance at the Mark Taper Forum in spring 2019, Parks said that the *Odyssey* “is in our drinking water” (Parks, *Creating Roads*). At the same time, she suggests that the play is not about the *Odyssey*, despite the fact that people still “latch onto it” (Parks, *Creating Roads*). Given Parks's free use of the names, it is worth noting the connections. Parks uses the *Odyssey* to
position black experience in conversation with the western canon and thereby elevate it. Parks creates a history on stage that dialogues with the epic (and the epic as history, which the *Odyssey* can arguably be categorized as) and likens Hero’s journey and the experiences of the slaves to the same level of significance as their epic prototypes. By making history, Parks positions African Americans within the epic tradition and the western canon that has historically focused on white experience, including white experience in the Civil War. By including African American experience, Parks demonstrates how the events and consequences of war always cost those on the bottom.

Because he is the main character across all three parts of *FCHW*, my analysis focuses on Hero. Parks dramatizes his journey from nearly the bottom rung of the Civil War society to a measure of control over his life and his use of war as a mechanism to do so. At the end of his journey, Hero/Ulysses reimagines his home to fulfill his desires, and in the process, he rejects Penny’s love and the home he had with her. Before the Boss-Master asked Hero to leave with him to fight the war, Hero had a place in his home, and he was the Boss-Master’s favorite. *Part 1: A Measure of a Man* dramatizes Hero’s decision to leave and go to war with the Boss-Master in 1882. It also describes his past transgression. *Part 2: A Battle in the Wilderness* presents a dialogue between the Boss-Master, now a Colonel in the Confederate army, and Smith, the Colonel’s captive Union soldier. As the Union and Confederacy clash on a battlefield in the summer of 1862, the Boss-Master is drinking and playing songs on his guitar. After Hero returns with news that their regiment is close, Colonel stumbles off to rejoin them and leaves Hero with the responsibility of escorting Smith. Hero decides to free Smith, whom he recognizes as a black soldier. Freeing a man becomes a transformative experience for Hero, and in *Part 3: The Union of My Confederate Parts*, Hero—now Ulysses—returns home from war and decides to take-up
the dead Colonel’s mantle. Ulysses has freed himself and elevates himself at the expense of his former fellow slaves and becomes an oppressor himself. Penny, who has waited for Ulysses to return, chooses to run away because she has been replaced with a new wife. Although the play ends with Hero/Ulysses’ homecoming, the play is concerned with manipulating the bottoms-up war narrative by dramatizing a man’s journey upwards through the ranks and demonstrating how those on the bottom, including Hero/Ulysses, bear the heavy cost of war.

Part 1 dramatizes Hero’s decision to go to war with the Boss-Master and, in the process, describes the home he leaves. Before Hero enters, the Chorus of Less than Desirable Slaves debates amongst themselves and makes bets regarding Hero’s choice. The Leader suggests that Hero’s life at war will look much the same as it does now (doing domestic tasks, while cleaning up after the Boss-Master and his horse), but the battlefield is more dangerous than a field of corn. The Second agrees that Hero’s life will be similar, but he believes Hero will do well to trade in this hard life for “getting a chance at getting his name, Hero, / Maybe up in one of them great Histories?” (8). Conversely, their debate could also be a way of passing time and debating what will happen to someone whom the Boss-Master values. The Chorus describes Hero in terms of the slave master’s value system, describing him as “[b]ig, brave, smart, honest and strong. / The favorite” and whole in body (9). Their description of Hero is Parks’s first clue that Hero’s character might not be what his name indicates he will be. Still, when the Old Man—Hero’s adopted father—comes on stage, it is clear that he loves his son. It is easy to believe that Hero is a heroic or good man if he deserves the fierce love that the Old Man has for him. The Old Man protects Hero from the debate of the Chorus and, like a good father, explains that he wants Hero to make the choice on his own. However, the Old Man quickly reverses course and explains that

25 Part 1 is in verse. Part 2 is in prose, and Part 3 uses a combination of both.
he wants Hero to leave for war for the chance to gain his freedom. Their discussion is reminiscent of the discussion fathers and sons have had throughout time. The Old Man sees the war as a way to improve his son’s life, and Hero believes that he can do more: “And I’ll give myself a chance at something great/ And I’ll come back here./ And I’ll help everybody when I get home” (23). Hero’s words have significant implications for the rest of the play, but for the moment, his intentions seem honest and good. The Old Man tells Hero that he will have to figure out a way to serve the Boss-Master well enough to gain his freedom. Penny further solidifies the idea that Hero is a good man and deserving of her deep love. When Penny arrives on stage, they embrace and kiss. When Penny realizes that Hero has been persuaded to leave, she defends his heart. She describes how in their bed earlier that morning, he decided to stay and made up his mind before it was “meddle[d]” with by others. His place is with her. They are so close that Penny describes how they woke up together “[i]n the same breath like [they] often do” (28). Though he is a slave, Hero has people who make his life meaningful and a place where he belongs.

Hero’s decision to leave is not one he makes on his own; rather, it is made for him because his betrayal of another slave is revealed, and the other slaves turn away from him. As a hero, Hero’s tragic flaw is that he believes the Boss-Master’s word can be trusted. The first character to set Hero’s tragic flaw into relief is Penny. After failing to persuade Hero to stay with his own words and arguing with the others, Penny picks up on something said in the conversation; Hero was offered his freedom. In, perhaps, a sign of love, she recognizes that Hero would be lured by that promise. She warns him that the Boss-Master does not have Hero’s best interests in mind: “But how could you even think of saying yes to him/ When you know good and well/ That his Freedom-promise is only. Ever. Linked. / To something. Bad” (31). Penny is
the first character to articulate the fact that the real and present danger to Hero’s life and well-being is not on a faraway battlefield: The Boss-Master is a dangerous man to all the slaves because he owns their lives and can do what he pleases with them. Penny initially convinces Hero to stay, but Homer, another slave, enters the stage and changes everything. Homer is a deep thinker and has had time to consider his position as the Boss-Master’s property. He has been maimed by the Boss-Master, who used Hero’s hand to do so, and since then, Homer has thought about running away and taking ownership of himself. When Hero refuses to run away with Homer again, Homer reveals the real story of how he lost his foot: Hero betrayed Homer to the Boss-Master for two promises of freedom that went unfulfilled. Hero committed himself to the Boss-Master’s ideology when he agreed to catch Homer and further solidified it when he cut off Homer’s foot. During their argument, Homer tells Hero that “You’re a dog what gets fed scraps from the table…A dog what follows his Master no questions asked. / You’re like that Hero” (47). Hero, it turns out, is a follower and the villain’s lackey. After the others are convinced of the truth of Homer’s tale, they turn away from Hero. The Old Man is devastated to learn that Hero betrayed his trust and love, saying “To have a son leave home is no small thing/ But losing a son before he leaves/ That’s more than an old man can bear” (52-53). He does not recover from this moment, and these are his final words in the play. The Chorus’s response indicates that while they did value and respect Hero, “we can’t call you Hero” (51). Their regard is something else that Hero has lost. Homer’s story has completely altered the way the other slaves see Hero and understand him. Hero, then, feels he has no choice but to go to war. Only Penny indicates that she still loves Hero and will wait for him to return. Hero has lost almost everything, but the loss likely overshadows the fact that he retains Penny’s love because she already knew what had happened. Penny serves as an anchor for Hero. He has a person he wants to belong to and who
loves him. Ultimately, however, her love will not be enough for Hero. He embarks on a journey, which begins as a chance for his freedom and evolves into an opportunity to return and change his home to make a place for his new identity.

In order to change his home, Hero must change himself, and Parks stages two of Hero’s transformative war experiences: he learns that he can take on a new identity, and he frees a man. Part 2 takes place in a campsite just beyond an active battlefield. The Boss-Master, now the Colonel, is lost and cannot find the Confederate Army. Hero returns to their campsite, and his behavior has changed since Part 1. While it could be different because Part 1 did not show how Hero behaves around the Colonel, the Colonel also seems surprised by Hero’s behavior as well. Hero acts as though he is a soldier in the Colonel’s regiment. While he was gathering firewood, he was also scouting to find the fighting armies, which the Colonel is not pleased to hear about. Moreover, Hero does not answer direct questions from the prisoner in front of the Colonel. When the Colonel leaves to do his own scouting, Hero still acts coldly to Smith—as though he is a soldier guarding a prisoner. However, Smith keeps pushing Hero into having a conversation with him and succeeds. After Hero reveals that he knows that Smith is a Private and not a Captain, their conversation becomes easier. The disguise has been lifted for Smith, and he is open about being a black man passing as a white Captain to avoid being shot on sight by the Colonel. Clearly, Hero admires Smith, and he asks him what it is like to hold a gun and be part of the army. Smith tells Hero to try on the Union Captain’s coat—to see what it feels like to be part of the Union. The coat is Smith’s disguise, but it contains power, too. Hero excitedly, but anxiously puts the coat on and says, “Feels good. Don’t know if it’s the Captain part of the Union part. Probably some of both” (97). Although the good feeling over pretending to be a Captain can be interpreted as Hero testing out the idea of being free or of a higher station, it also indicates that
he sees how he can embody a position of power using a disguise—and the power inherent within it. Along with the coat, Smith tells two stories, which both reveal the power of disguise and playing a role to gain something. Shortly before the end of the act, Smith tries to get Hero to run away with him. However, at this point, Hero is committed to the Colonel’s system of values and to gaining his freedom through the Colonel. Instead, Hero frees Smith. Hero’s choice is also rooted in the guilt Hero feels about what he did to Homer. Hero unties the rope from around Smith’s neck, and says, “I don’t know if I’m qualified to give freedom to another man seeing as how I’m not free myself but I give it to you just the same. God willing I’ll make up for a horrible wrong I did” (101). At the same time, while Hero believes his action is an atonement for a wrong, freeing Smith becomes a source of power and authority. Hero affirms himself as someone who has the ability and power to free someone else. Smith gives Hero his Private’s coat and swears him in as a Union soldier. Hero puts the Union coat on underneath his Confederate one and leaves. Wearing two coats and using them to disguise true intentions is also something that Hero learned from Smith, but certainly not in the way Smith intended. Hero’s decision is further explained in his last conversation with Homer at the end of FCHW. Hero, now Ulysses, has decided to walk in the Colonel’s footsteps and become more like him.

In Part 3, Ulysses finally returns home. As is the case in many homecoming tales, war has changed Ulysses, but instead of trying to adjust to his home after he has changed, Ulysses projects his change onto his home, revising it to fulfill his desire for power. In another change to the homecoming story, Ulysses has enjoyed his time at war. Odyssey Dog arrives first and heralds Ulysses’ return. Penny draws the story out of Odyssey Dog even though as he says, “It’s a long story” (129). War has changed Odyssey Dog, and though he relates details pertaining to Ulysses’ feats and the Colonel’s death, he does not have much to say about war other than “The
War continues. The details, pretty much unspeakable. Who will win? Who can know?” (129). One of the Runaway slaves (the new Chorus) adds, “Win or lose/ Means the same to us/ As long as we’re down here” (128). This comment, which recalls Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, shapes the end of the play. The outcome of the war does not matter because however it turns out, it will be costly to the Runaways, Homer, and Penny. As for Ulysses, he has adopted the oppressor’s values and reshaped his identity. In contrast to Odyssey Dog, Ulysses seems to relish his time at war. Like many of these moments in the play, Parks opens Ulysses’ words to multiple interpretations. His words are truthful, but the alternate interpretation fits with the character’s thoughts. Ulysses provides his assessment of the war: “It’s the War that’s really Something. I’m telling you” (142). He reminisces about the stories he will be able to tell in the future: “I’ll be an old man on this porch surrounded by his children telling war stories” (143). His words indicate that he has clearly imagined that moment in the future, and he hoards some of his stories for that time. Yet, Ulysses does want everyone to know that he freed a man. While this is not problematic in and of itself, combined with Ulysses’ attitude about his time at war, he clearly seems to treasure the event and the opportunities it provided him. After all, he has changed his name, “distinguished” himself at war, and, in the process, twisted and turned himself into someone else. In his mind, he is experiencing the glory and greatness the Chorus discussed in their debate during *Part 1*.

Although Ulysses reimagines his home to suit his desire, it is important to note that his home has changed slightly. Penny served as Hero’s anchor, but that is a heavy responsibility that she shouldered alone. It has been a year since she has seen Hero, and during that time, the Old Man has passed away. Penny is the only one left who waits for Hero since Homer does not look forward to Hero’s return. However, during Hero’s absence, Homer has cared for Penny and
consold her as she anxiously awaited Hero’s return. He has developed feelings for her, and when the Runaways who are passing through convince Homer to leave with them, Homer pushes Penny to do the same. Penny is persuaded to leave because the waiting has weakened her bond with Hero. Weighted down by her own complicated feelings for both Homer and Hero, she chants “Help me bear it” to the Runaways, and they say they will (126). Penny, too, is looking for a place and people with whom to belong. Ulysses’ return ends up hurting Penny even more that the weight of waiting and the guilt she bears for waiting imperfectly—she is pregnant with Homer’s child. When Penny is finally reunited with the man she thinks is her Hero, they embrace, and the stage directions say “it’s layered” (138). It is layered because Penny bears guilt for leaning on Homer while the weight of waiting was too much. Ulysses, having not yet completed his transformation, likely feels uneasy because he is no longer the man Penny loves—or who loves Penny. Penny, at least, is willing to suspend her feelings for Homer and be Hero’s anchor. It is soon clear that her Hero has undergone more than a change to his name.

Ulysses begins to reimagine his home by giving gifts that tie Homer and Penny to the land, rather than freeing them by reading the Emancipation Proclamation he has copied down on to a piece of paper in his pocket. Ulysses announces to everyone that he has brought back presents, and the stage direction explains, “He’s like a king graciously holding forth” (144). A true gift that Ulysses could give everyone would be to let them know about the Emancipation Proclamation. Reciting his deeds becomes more important than telling them they are free. Ulysses does not do something that even the Boss-Master’s wife, the Missus, has already done. Penny was perplexed by the Missus’ words, when she told her about the proclamation. The gifts Ulysses gives are at once executions of the power Ulysses wishes to exert and a demonstration of how radically his worldview has changed. For Homer, Ulysses provides an inappropriate
reparation for the wrong he has committed with the gift of a white alabaster foot. Not only has Homer adapted to not having his foot, but the new foot would weigh him down and tether him to the Boss-Master’s property. Ulysses gifts Penny a silver-tipped garden spade to use on a garden of her own. Silver is a soft metal and will look beautiful before it is quickly destroyed through regular use. Even so, the spade is an opportunity to exert power because he wants Penny to use it to tend to a pleasure garden, not a kitchen garden that would provide food. Until this point in the play, Penny has gone along with Ulysses’ changes until he reveals the gift he has brought home for himself: a new wife. Penny lashes out at Ulysses and expresses what she went through while she waited for him: “All that time. And every time we heard of someone dead I prayed it wasn’t you” (150). All the anguish and hard work she put into surviving to be a person her Hero would come home to is rejected. Ulysses did not want to go back to the home he had with Penny.

The home Ulysses envisioned for himself was the Boss-Master’s, for he has decided that his transformation has allowed him to become the Boss-Master’s heir. Ulysses has come home because the Colonel has died. After Ulysses has held court and passed around the gifts, Homer has the chance to ask Ulysses if the Boss-Master ever freed him. Homer, once more, hones in on one of Hero/Ulysses’ vulnerabilities. The Boss-Master did not free Ulysses, “Not even with his dying breath” (155). However, Ulysses believed he would up to his death, and the multiple promises of freedom grew inside him, changing him. Eventually, Ulysses found himself acting like the Boss-Master and laughing with him. Ulysses also positioned himself to be the Boss-Master’s heir. He tells Homer, “I didn’t take after him in looks but I did take after him. / I did. I did. Following in his every footprint” (155). In their time at war, Ulysses’ identity changed, but a small part of his mind kept thinking about how he had wronged Homer. Ulysses claims that his guilt was the reason he did not follow the Boss-Master into death, implying that coming back
home would mean he could right the wrong somehow. Instead of righting the wrong by working to liberate his fellows or making appropriate reparations to Homer, though, Ulysses takes another route: “I went and I cut out my soul” (156). The only way for Ulysses to reconcile the two parts of himself, the slave and the man trying to be the Boss-Master’s heir, was to become Ulysses, the non-slave man who has power over the lives of others in that he decides not to free the Boss-Master’s slaves and ties them further to the land. In doing so, Ulysses reimagines his home and his place in it. He is no longer a slave working in the fields; he will direct those who are enslaved, becoming the new Boss-Master and living in the Boss-Master’s home. In order to complete this transformation, Ulysses tries to kill Homer, looking to unify his identity and justify the decisions that led him to this moment. The others rush back on stage and intervene, saving Homer, but it is clear they no longer have a place in Ulysses’ new home. The Runaways, Homer, and Penny leave. Just as they go, Ulysses realizes that he forgot to read the Emancipation Proclamation to them after he neglected to read it to them earlier. With Homer and Penny gone, Ulysses’ transformation is complete. The play ends as Ulysses and Odyssey Dog walk off stage to bury the Boss-Master. The stage directions tell us that “Ulysses looks toward Boss-Master’s house, / ready to undertake his new life” (159).

Although Ulysses transitions into a position of power and control, his parting words with Homer indicate that the transition cost him. In many ways, Ulysses’ journey is similar to that of Brecht’s Eilif, but Ulysses is physically alive at the end of the play. Eilif likely had times when he felt powerful and as though he was truly the general’s heir before he was killed, so Hero/Ulysses’ story ends before a downfall and his debt being called in as it was for Eilif. At the end of FCHW, Ulysses loses his soul but creates a home where he has power and belongs in the Boss-Master’s house. In doing so, he has twisted his goal of helping his once-fellow slaves upon
his return. Parks also seeks to show that even though its outcome signaled legal freedom for African Americans, the Civil War was still expensive for African Americans—those on the lowest rung of society before, during, and for quite some time after the Civil War. The problem remains that Hero/Ulysses trusted and believed in the Boss-Master's promises of freedom, and he was unable to imagine a home that did not operate on those oppressive structures. That trust and the disingenuous words of men like the Boss-Master remain a transhistorical problem, and she explains this using a character who tries to climb up from the bottom and achieves a measure of success while harming others beyond imagining.

*CWC* and *FCHW* offer two very different accounts of the Civil War through the eyes of some of the most vulnerable. On the one hand, Vogel emphasizes community bonds and the goodness of people, while also tempering the good cheer to make statements about slavery and dissuade the audience from some historical assumptions. While Keckley and Bronson do good deeds, they are both in pain due to the collateral damage of war. Home means something different for both of them. Keckley helps other people’s children because she has lost her own forever. She provides a rare and luxurious treat to the children at the orphanage, making their non-home warmer, and she returns a girl to her mother, giving Hannah the opportunity to make a home with her daughter. Bronson gains a measure of his humanity back when he spares Raz, even if he does not return to the home that Rose no longer inhabits. Vogel’s exploration of the last war to be fought on American soil focuses on ordinary people who, while they do not have control over their circumstances or have a way to stop the war, do good (domestic) works that create space for hope. On the other hand, *FCHW* indicates, like *Mother Courage*, that war exploits those on the bottom, whether in systems like slavery or the military, which enlists people who are looking for social mobility. It is dangerous to believe the words of those in power
when they also have a stake in systems of exploitation. Perhaps, too, Parks is arguing that home is not a place but people who care for each other. The Old Man and Penny waited for Hero to return. But, Hero died, and the man who replaced him could not love Penny because he had changed. Although Ulysses tries to physically harm Homer, he hurts Penny in a deep way and rejects the well of love she has for him. In *Ruined*, Lynn Nottage works to pick up both strands left by Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and provides a sustained exploration of the effects of war on women who are disenfranchised and powerless in society.

**Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined***

Although Nottage is an accomplished playwright, she remains most well known for *Ruined* and re-seeing *Mother Courage* as a vehicle for social justice. *Ruined* has won numerous awards, including the 2009 Pulitzer Prize, the first of her two Pulitzers. In her introduction to the first book of critical essays about Nottage’s works, Jocelyn L. Buckner underscores that Nottage’s theatre has always been concerned with social justice and providing a voice for marginalized people, particularly women: “Untold stories. Unheard voices. Unseen peoples. Every one of Lynn Nottage’s theatrical endeavors tells a tale of unsung struggle for survival and personal happiness amongst individuals living along and beyond the margins of society” (Buckner, “Introduction” 9). Indeed, in an interview with Buckner, Nottage describes her focus on everyday people, particularly women of color, and her desire, like Parks’s, to make space for African American women in theatre and history (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 184). Nottage comments that the women in her plays—whose portrayals are influenced by the women in her own family and her ancestors—are “ordinary, extraordinary women,” and that they

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26 Buckner’s article “On Creativity” is an interview with Nottage, Whoriskey, and Seret Scott, another director who has worked with Nottage. The interview is compiled from condensed in-person interviews and emails, so I have treated it as Buckner’s creative work and cited it as such.
deserve artistic attention and theatrical representation because they “triumphed in the midst of adversity” (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 184). What is more, Nottage demonstrates the complexity and nuances of their lives on stage. In the interview with Buckner, she reveals that her mantra is “sustaining the complexity of what it means to be a woman,” and that, as a storyteller, she is “interested in all of the facets of womanhood” (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 185). Given the driving forces behind Nottage’s theatre and beliefs, it is no wonder that *Mother Courage* was so compelling for her. Not only did Brecht reject a top-down narrative of war, but he also used a woman to do it.

The story about how Nottage and Kate Whoriskey, Nottage’s collaborator and the director of the initial production of *Ruined*, got the idea for a *Mother Courage* set in the Congo is critical to understanding Nottage’s aims. In 2004, Whoriskey and Nottage were working on their second project together and started talking about Brecht (ix). Whoriskey says she has “always been drawn to Brecht’s heightened style and epic writing and was compelled by the notion of staging a woman’s complex relationship to war” (ix). Nottage, who had formerly worked at Amnesty International, saw the concept of re-staging Brecht as a way to draw attention to the bloody conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was not receiving media attention even though the casualties from the conflict were staggering. The conflict’s most recent death toll estimate is 5.4 million people, which number is compounded by infectious diseases and malnutrition (McGreal). Nottage found that there was “an absence of information” about “the impact on women and girls,” which includes rape, other acts of sexual violence, and high maternal mortality rates (qtd. in Iqbal). In an interview with *The Root*, Nottage remembered from her time at Amnesty International “how difficult it was just to talk about women’s rights in the context of human rights” (qtd. in Olopade). In the summer of 2005, Nottage was able to secure
access to refugee camps in neighboring Uganda, as Eastern Congo was too dangerous (x). Whoriskey joined Nottage, and they interviewed women in the refugee camps. As she listened to their stories, Brecht became a “false frame” for Nottage, and Ruined became more of an adaptation (Whoriskey x). Whoriskey explains that Nottage was “interested in portraying the lives of Central Africans as accurately as she could” (xi). Speaking about her activism and theatre—particularly how it related to her second Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Sweat—Nottage says, “I’m a storyteller and this is what I do, so this is the tool that I have. If I was a social activist I’d go and organize in the factories, but unfortunately, I don’t have that skill. I think what I can do is bring these stories to an audience, and perhaps put them in space where they feel empowered to effect change” (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 188). Ruined, at least, has had an effect beyond theatre. According to Whoriskey, the play’s focus on Congolese women received attention from the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon (xiii). Although Nottage, along with actor Quincy Tyler Bernstein, spoke at a public reception on Capitol Hill (Healy), Nottage is not sure about the play’s lasting impact. In an interview, she wondered if the play could be a “tipping point” or if it would have more temporary effects (qtd. in Olopade).

**Ruined**, a play about women in a brothel surviving on the margins, is a significant play in the American war play genre because Nottage rejects a top-down view of war and prioritizes women’s experiences. Part of the complexity of this play comes from the fact that Nottage wrote for American audiences. In an interview before the London premiere at the Almeida, she noted that “American audiences very rarely deal with material outside their borders…. To me, it was surprising [that audiences] were as willing and eager as they were to engage with the material. I expected more resistance” (qtd. in Iqbal). She wanted American audiences to feel and experience empathy for the women that her characters represent because she believes in “engaging people
emotionally, because I think they react more out of emotion” and not when they are “preached to” (qtd. in McGee). The way that Nottage discusses emotion is a departure from Brecht. However, as Gleitman reminds us, Brecht did not reject emotion: “What Brecht objects to is ‘the passive empathy’ that he associates with Aristotelian theater, the sort of mindless emotion that encoils the spectator in reverie and prevents him or her from coming ‘to grip with things’” (148–149). What is more, the type of emotion Brecht aimed for is useful because, Gleitman argues, “Emotion itself demands reflection” (149). Reflection and critical attention remain a common goal for Brecht and Nottage and the other playwrights in this chapter.

Nottage’s theatrical approach differs from Brecht’s as she cultivates empathy using a more traditional play form. Whoriskey, explains in an interview that “she, very cleverly, crafted, a well-made play with a love story at the end. It was intentional” (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 191). Instead of distancing the audience, Nottage deliberately brings them along in order to tell women’s stories (Buckner, “On Creativity” 191). Some scholars have supported Nottage’s strategy and re-seeing of Brecht’s strategies and the way she cultivates empathy. Barbara Ozieblo argues Nottage’s play draws audiences into the story: they are “seduced, but not pleased by, what they witness on stage” (68). As such, Nottage utilizes the audience’s empathetic response to the characters’ pain, positioning them to become witnesses for the women’s stories (75). However, Ozieblo finds that audiences are also drawn in to care deeply for these women and “the little cares and jealousies of their everyday lives, their hopes for the future, and their relationships” (77). Experiencing the highs and devastating lows of these women’s lives is part of Nottage’s intention, and the structure of the well-made play allows women’s stories to be told and felt (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 184). According to Jennifer-Scott Mobley, Ruined is part of the 19th-century melodrama theatre tradition and the
feminist “dramaturgy of reform” in its use of sensation for the social justice project (129). As Ozieblo and Mobley both suggest, Nottage uses the end goals of Brecht’s techniques (encouraging critical thinking that is politically engaged, which could lead to action) in her form. However, Nottage’s theatrical strategies in *Ruined* have been criticized. Marike Janzen argues that Nottage’s play and the “closeness” it employs does not “challenge us to examine the structural determination of identities and actions,” as *Mother Courage* does (174). Carolina Sánchez-Palencia and Eva Gil Cuder offer a similar critique, but they do acknowledge the importance of gathering stories from real women. What the critical discourse surrounding the plays tells us is that *Ruined* is not a replacement for *Mother Courage*, and Nottage approaches empathy differently than Brecht does. *Ruined* was created to “maintain the complexity” of African women, which includes—for Nottage and Whoriskey—finding humor, joy, and love in the story (Buckner, “On Creativity” 191). Whoriskey explains that exploring trauma (and staging the stories of vulnerable women) alongside the range of human emotion serves to preserve the quiet ways the refugee women told their stories and allows those moments to “hold dramatic tension” (qtd. in Buckner, “On Creativity” 191).

As the genesis story for *Ruined* explains, Brecht and Nottage have different goals. Brecht wanted to alert people to the threat of the impending World War II. Nottage wanted to draw attention to the plight of women in an ongoing, violent conflict in an African country. Arguably, Brecht did not intend for *Mother Courage* to be about women’s experience in war even though Courage’s motherhood is a critical tool for his critique. However, Courage’s experiences are not necessarily indicative of what a woman would have experienced at war, even the Thirty Years War. In scene three, Brecht does acknowledge the fact that women are raped during wartime. After the tide of war has shifted, Courage smears ash over Kattrin’s face, saying “There you are,
a bit of muck and you’ll be safe.…Take a soldier, specially a Catholic one, add a clean face, and there’s your instant whore” (29). While I am quoting from a translation, the word “whore” does not capture the horror of rape that is used as a weapon of war, and unlike the protection Courage provides to her daughter, a dirty face is unlikely to spare women in the conflict that Nottage depicts. Although Brecht acknowledges rape, Courage’s attitude and the lack of further exploration indicates that he is minimizing the trauma of rape and potentially how widespread the problem is. With Ruined, it seems as though Nottage took one look at Mother Courage and saw the elephant in the room: rape and the uniquely, horrifying way that women experience war. Therefore, Ruined blends the two threads from Mother Courage into one play by dramatizing how those on the bottom rung of war bear the heaviest cost and explicitly challenges the traditional, masculine war narrative that presents women as spectators of war. As Nottage shows, women are present during wars, and their bodies are used as a battleground. To maintain the complexity of her representation of African women, she creates characters who are surviving their trauma and a woman who works to distinguish herself apart from her patriarchal and militaristic surroundings, all while she profits from the conflict.

Nottage’s main character, Mama Nadi, owns a bar and brothel in a contested strip of land in the Congo, and she has made the bar her own space, with her own rules, and navigates the shifting politics outside it. Mama’s bar is described in the stage notes as a place with makeshift and worn furniture, but “a lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful” (5). Mama tries to be politically neutral and welcomes everyone into her bar. The basic plot demonstrates that the chaotic and swiftly shifting conflict outside her doors infiltrates her space, despite Mama’s efforts. The government militia raids her bar for serving the rebel leader and his men. However, the play ends unlike most war plays, not with total destruction or staging all of the
violent events of the raid. Instead, it shows how Mama and her girls continue to survive the war, despite their losses. At the beginning of the last scene, Mama stands outside her bar trying to lure customers inside and complains to the girls that the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces are bad for her business. I believe that examining how Mama defines her space in a patriarchal, militaristic environment is important because it demonstrates Nottage’s rejection of a top-down masculine narrative of war. During the first scene, Nottage establishes Mama’s character as a businesswoman, but also as someone who grudgingly cares for others. This is evident when Christian, the traveling salesman who brings her necessary items of her business, like cigarettes and condoms, haggles with her about some goods, which turn out to be two women. Mama did not pay for two and tells Christian that she will not take the second girl. The girl she wants is Sophie, but she is ruined (raped by a bayonet that physically traumatizes her vagina and surrounding tissue). Christian says he will sell both of the girls for the price of one. Mama says, “I’m running a business not a mission” (14). Christian pleads with Mama, explaining that the ruined woman is his niece. Sophie answers Mama’s questions, explaining that she can sing, and as she talks, she sheds a few silent tears. It is only with the tears that Mama relents. She uses her skirt to wipe away Sophie’s tears. The first rules Mama Nadi tells Sophie are “I expect my girls to be well behaved and clean. That’s all. I provide a bed, food and clothing. If things are good, everyone gets a little. If things are bad, then Mama eats first” (17). Mama also gives her some alcohol to help with the pain but warns her not to become reliant on it. By keeping Sophie, Mama likely sees a pretty face to interact with customers, even if she is unlikely to work on the other side of the business, and she does a favor for someone who helps her stay in business. This moment exemplifies a lot of Mama’s actions and decisions. She does care for the girls who work for her, but Mama’s survival and the survival of her business come first. According to Nottage,
“Mama lives in a man’s world… and yet she's able to transcend her circumstances and keep the community of women safe. She's exploiting them, but in a twisted way she is able to nurture them and keep them alive” (qtd. in Gener 21). Moreover, Mama sees her relationship with the girls as doing somewhat more. In a moment of anger with Christian, Mama tells him that “My girls…ask them, they’d rather be here, than back out there in the villages where they are taken without regard. They’re safer with me than in their own homes because this country is picked clean…. Because I give them something other than a beggar’s cup” (86). Mama protects them and, when times are good, everyone gets a little. She provides opportunities for a better life than they would otherwise be able to have.

The nurturing that takes place at Mama Nadi’s comes mainly in the form of female bonding and, when the male patrons do not need to have their needs met, the women have quiet spaces in which to build female bonds that are nurturing. The bar becomes a home and a refuge when the men are not there, but it is important to note that the bar is what Mama says it is. She works to create this safe space for the women she brings into her home. The bonding between women is important to the narrative and for creating the space for those stories, but María Dolores Narbona-Carrión argues that the female bonding is also “a powerful instrument in the fight against gender violence” and not often portrayed in American theatre (61). Because war narratives with men often portray male bonding, Nottage flips the script on what is expected. Narbona-Carrión suggests that bonding is an important way that Nottage maintains the complexity in portraying her female characters by making it “possible for women who suffer violence to have an active role…which has transformed the passivity that is traditionally associated with victimization” (63). Building on Narbona-Carrión’s argument, Sánchez-Palencia and Cuder find that the bonding creates that “optimistic belief that women can escape, or at least...
minimize, male oppression” (152). For example, Nottage dramatizes the bonding between Sophie and Salima. Salima, the woman Christian offers to Mama to compensate her for taking the ruined Sophie as a two-for-one deal, seeks to minimize her oppression by telling her story. On a morning a few weeks after arriving, the stage opens to a domestic, everyday sort of scene, revealing Sophie and Salima looking through a pop magazine and painting Salima’s nails. In this safe space—in which she is with a person who cares for her (since the beginning of the play their care for the other is clear)—Salima expresses her sorrow and begins to talk about what happened to her when she was kidnapped and her baby was killed. Saying her slain baby’s name seems to be a floodgate that Sophie will not let her open at this time. Sophie tells her “Stop it! We said we wouldn’t talk about it” (32). Not talking about their stories functions as a safety measure for both of them, and Sophie reveals a bit of her own story to get Salima to stop. Josephine, one of Mama’s girls, comes in after finishing with a client and prods them both out of her own hurt. But as the months go on, Josephine changes her attitude towards Sophie, of whom she is jealous because Mama does not ask her to whore. Later in the play, after Sophie is aggressively pursued by Osembenga, she tries to escape his advances and the hands he puts on her body, and Mama diffuses the situation. However, the interaction reminds Sophie of her rape, and she aggressively washes her hands. It is not Mama who comforts her; it is Josephine who hugs her tightly, saying “Stop it…Shh. Shh” (84).

Mama’s nurturing seems harshest when she tells Salima that she cannot go back home, but Mama makes it clear that Salima has a home in her bar. In another domestic scene, Salima is hiding from her husband. He has recently arrived in town as a member of the government-backed militia. He joined the militia to travel around the country and look for Salima because he regrets forcing her to leave their village and home. Mama gives Salima a hard truth in order to keep her
from going to see him and potentially be physically harmed, even while Sophie thinks he loves her and has changed. Mama tells Salima, “no matter what you say, he won’t be satisfied. I know. And, chérie, don’t look away from me.…We know, don’t we? The woman he loved is dead…He left you for dead. See. This is your home now. Mama takes care of you” (66). Although Nottage has presented moments in which Mama is compassionate with the women—such as drying Sophie’s tears and offering her a drink to help with her pain—this is the first moment in which the audiences sees that Mama has decided that these women are her own; she has welcomed them into her home, and she will take care of them. At this point, Mama likely knows that Salima is pregnant with the child of one of the men who abducted her and raped her for five months in the bush, while she was tied to a stake in the ground. If nothing else, Mama does remind Salima about the sexual shame of working in a brothel. When the husband she loved and longed to return to “beat [her] ankles raw” and chased her out of their village, he did so because she had “dishonored,” and she has continued to do so by working for Mama (70). Because that woman was dead—and Mama’s words seem to convince her—Salima finally is able to tell her horrific story to Sophie. While she was working in her garden with her baby resting in a nearby shaded patch, four men attacked her. The baby was crying, so a soldier smashed her head with his boot, and they then abducted Salima. Salima’s story is rich in detail about her wonderful, fruitful garden and her hopes for the future that were destroyed that day. Her monologue is quiet, compelling, and crests with anger only when she asked where anyone from her village was to help her. She asks Sophie what she must have done: “How did I get into the middle of their fight?” (69). Sophie kisses her cheek and tells her, “You didn’t do anything wrong” (70). With Mama’s words, the act of telling her story, and Sophie’s care, Salima is no longer sad that she must hide from her husband. The woman who survived still lives and is in her new home at
Mama’s bar, and she lets go of wanting to be the woman whose husband would love her unconditionally. Still, Salima’s story is a tragic one, and in the climactic moment of the play, she commits suicide. Nevertheless, Nottage takes great care to develop the bonds between the women and demonstrate how important they are to their own survival. It is quite extraordinary that the women are able to trust someone with their story after what they have experienced.²⁷

Still, Mama’s prosperity and ability to keep her bar and girls safe is compromised as the war continues to change and develop. Every night, men come into Mama’s bar. Some are content to abide by Mama’s rules, while others seek to assert some control over her space. Even though Mama welcomes their money and she has crafted a business to serve men’s desires, men still bring trouble through the doors. Carmen Méndez García explores Ruined from a spatial perspective and explains that Mama defines her own space “beyond the dominance of men, but still in a context open to them and therefore constantly in danger, as the war fields surrounding it can go through the porous walls in any moment” (García 133). Each night men come into the bar. They bring money, and Sophie sings them a song about how “You come here to forget, / You say drive away all regret / And dance like it’s the ending / the ending of the war” (20). They are filled with want: want of beer, cigarettes, a meal, a dance, and a woman to make them feel better (sexually and sometimes emotionally). Mama provides what she can and gets paid first, after telling them to leave their bullets at the bar or they do not get served. If a patron gets too rough with one of the girls, Mama is watching and distracts them to diffuse the situation. As the play progresses, that comes to mean she defends the political neutrality of the space so that she can continue to keep her doors open to all—and take anyone’s money as long as they can pay.

²⁷ Esther J. Terry provides an excellent reading of the women and their family/ regional ties, arguing that the bar becomes a place for these women to create diasporic kinships. Her reading of Mama Nadi is particularly good. Terry presents Mama Nadi as a woman who rejects “landed and heteropatriarchal orders of belonging,” and in doing so, “she forged her own sovereignty of belonging in her home, re-staking her existence” (172),
However, Mama cannot keep out all trouble, especially in a place where the war zone shifts. When the government-backed militia comes to town to drive out the rebels, trouble starts to brew for Mama, and she must navigate the shifting tides of the conflict. As Nottage explains, war from a woman’s perspective means that she challenges ideas about what war looks like: war “is actually quite different on the ground. It flares up and goes away. People return to their lives, and all of a sudden, it flares up again” (qtd. in Gener 21). This insight explains the plot of the play rather well. Conflict flares up, but then people go back to their lives—not without harm, but life goes on.

When the conflict zone heats up, Mama refuses to leave her bar and abandon the women who live there—her family. She chooses to ride out the violent flare-up because, unlike Courage, she cannot hitch up her business and move on. Mama is warned by Christian and Mr. Harari, a mineral merchant and frequent customer, that the war is heating up and she should leave; Unlike Courage, Mama Nadi cannot move her bar, and she is not going to leave. Early in the play, Nottage provides information regarding Mama’s perspective. Mama tells a story about the family lands that they were forced to leave because white men came with a paper saying they owned the land. Mama tells the diamond merchant, “Everyone talk talk diamonds, but I […] I want a powerful slip of paper” that will allow her to change the land however she pleases (27). She continues: “I don’t want someone to turn up at my door, and take my life from me. Not ever again. But tell, how does a woman like me get a piece of land, without having to pick up a fucking gun?” (27). Mama has a place that is hers. Whether or not she has that powerful piece of paper, she has a bar with her name on the door, and she used her skills as a businesswoman to get it. That does not mean that Mama is immune to men telling her what to do with her business or how she runs it, but she rebuffs these noises with a distraction or her tongue. At one point,
Christian is angry at one of Mama’s decisions, and she tells him, “I don’t give a damn what you think” as a man telling her how to run her business (86). Moreover, Mama will not leave the place she owns and the zone in which she has established her control. Before the climactic, violent end of the play, Mr. Harari offers her a ride out of town. She refuses to leave, saying “Since I was young, people have found reasons to push me out of my home, men have laid claim to my possessions, but I am not running. This is my place, Mama Nadi’s” (91).

However, all of Mama Nadi’s skills cannot spare her when violence breaks out at the play’s climax. By picking her own side always, Mama has sought to keep trouble out and appease whoever seems to be in power at the moment. The government-backed commander Osembenga gives Mama some advice when he first arrives by telling her about the character and goals of the rebel leader, Kisembe. Although Kisembe’s power is weakened, Mama knows he may hold the upper hand in the future and that she must play both sides. She does so somewhat successfully until Salima’s husband sees Kisembe leaving Mama’s bar while he stakes it out looking for Salima. Osembenga, already suspicious of Mama Nadi as a result of an earlier interaction, bursts into Mama Nadi’s bar. The assault comes on the heels of Mama’s failed attempt to get Sophie out of the war zone with Harari, as he is hitching a ride out of the escalating conflict zone with a group of aid workers. Without warning, the assault begins. The stage directions explain that “The Stage is flooded with intense light. The sound of chaos, shouting, gunfire, grows with intensity” (92). The tableau revealed shows Mama Nadi and Sophie lying on the ground while Osembenga and his soldiers stand over them. Osembenga interrogates Mama Nadi. She denies knowing Kisembe and tries to shift the blame to his soldier. Mama also tries to convince Osembenga she is telling the truth, saying “We are friends. Why would I lie to you?” and “Why would I play these games?” (93). Osembenga is angry, and in his
anger, Josephine is hauled on stage with the rest of them. Mama pleads with Osembenga to stop hurting them as a soldier rips Josephine’s clothes from her body. While Mama Nadi could easily use one of the girls—such as Salima, whose husband is one of the soldiers in the raid—to let her escape harm, she protects them all. What happens instead is that Salima makes a choice out of sheer desperation, fueled by what Ketu H. Katrak argues is “internalized exile” from her family, community, and own body due to her pregnancy, and she stabs herself in her stomach (43). She stands in the doorway covered in blood, and she screams “Haven’t you done enough to us!” (94). And in a moment that Mobley describes as a “show-stopper” in the 2009 Manhattan Theatre Club production (139), Salima “smiles triumphantly” while looking at the men and saying “You will not fight your battles on my body anymore” (94). Katrak reads her suicide as an act of defiance against the men who seek to control her body, but as she is a trauma victim, her action also stems from the desperation not to be violated again. With Salima, Nottage shows that women have been part of war; through rape, displacement, poverty, and the process of ruining them—what Whoriskey describes as “a way of stripping women of their wombs” and making them societal outcasts (xi)—women’s bodies have become a battleground. They are present at war, and they are not spectators. Mama Nadi’s bar, the place she made and has fought to protect, has also become a battleground.

Nottage does not want to focus on the part of the war involving men and their acts of violence. Instead, she demonstrates how ordinary, extraordinary women come out on the other side of a horrific war event. Opening on a final domestic scene, Sophie and Josephine are tending to the bar, their home, while Mama stands in the doorway trying to get some customers for them. The United Nations Peacekeepers are in town, and they have scared off her normal patrons but not become patrons themselves. Sophie and Josephine seem closer, and when Christian comes
back—it has been a month since the last scene—they briefly discuss what happened. Mama could not save Salima, and she mourns her loss, telling Christian that she was a “good girl” (97). Outside of this bar and the refuge Mama has created, there is no one to mourn and value the woman that Salima was when she died. Christian explains that he has come back to the bar to see if Mama will let him love her and “help [her] run things. Make a legitimate business” and “Fix the door,” likely some remaining damage from the raid (99). Christian’s words indicate that he would like to help Mama maintain her home and settle down with her in a romantic, domestic, and financial sense. He accepts her for the complicated, strong-headed businesswoman that she is—and that she will not leave her place. If he wants to be in a relationship with her, he needs to help her maintain her place and the values it represents. After rebuking him and trying to push him away, she finally reveals that she is ruined as well. Christian can only say that “I don’t know what those men did to you, but I’m sorry for it” (101). The play ends with them dancing, while Josephine and Sophie cheer them on. As was already mentioned, this ending is controversial. I side with García. She read this as a moment of optimism for the land that has been ravaged and the women who have been harmed. In her words, “The final dance…would thus celebrate the possibility of [creating a] paradoxical space where women, in extreme circumstances, are still able to create an identity based on dignity, courage and a new found sense of community” (138). The ending does justice to the women Nottage interviewed who survived incredible circumstances, and Nottage provides a complex representation of their lives.

**Danai Gurira’s Eclipsed**

Gurira, the least well-known playwright in this chapter, is an actor with a role on *The Walking Dead* television show and in the blockbuster hit film *Black Panther* (Cox). Born in Iowa to Zimbabwean parents, Gurira’s driving passion is to tell the stories of African women that
match the complexity of the place and people she knew, after her family moved to Zimbabwe when she was a young child. In a profile published in *Variety*, Gurira describes how, as a student who had returned to the United States for college, she could not find roles to use for auditions because “I couldn’t find anything that told the story of contemporary Africa, or told the story of what I grew up around” (qtd. in Cox). Her plays work to present those stories, and her passion to do so is “rooted in rage, because I feel that they are so under- and misrepresented. I’m trying to link these two places, and have Africa be seen by the West in a more multidimensional and complex and celebratory way” (qtd. in Cox). As Gurira explains in her author’s note, she was inspired to write *Eclipsed* after reading a news article about a Liberian rebel female soldier named Black Diamond (58). The article led her to learn more about the Liberian Civil Wars and the “Peace Women” who were largely responsible for ending the civil wars (58). Her goal in writing the play was to explore the different positions women have during war (soldier, peace woman, and victims or wives of men who fought in the civil wars), a task she found challenging (58). After Gurira traveled to Liberia and met women who were involved in the conflict, she noted that “The complexities of all these women, of their personalities, of their choices was something I had to fully embrace, no matter how uncomfortable at times, in order to give their humanity full breath” (59). In her article exploring women’s involvement in the Liberian Civil Wars, Leymah Gbowee—Liberian peace activist and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize—explains that the Liberian Mass Action for Peace was about stopping the conflict and violence against women at war (50). Their “activism is built on the belief that the systematic engendered forms of violence against women, such as rape, forced prostitution, mutilation, etc. are expressions of a deeper systemic disregard for women characteristic of West African societies in
particular but common in most other societies” (Gbowee 50). Like Ruined, Eclipsed is an activist play because it seeks to draw attention to the systemic mistreatment of women in West Africa.

In Eclipsed, three women, the commanding officer’s (CO) “wives,” live in their hut and attend to the CO’s sexual and household needs. The women do not use their names with each other and instead refer to each other by their rank as wives. One of the women, The Girl, is new and not yet a wife. The play follows her journey from her first day in the hut to her attempt to break out of the situation she is in by following in a former wife’s footsteps by becoming a soldier. While The Girl is in the hut, Helena and Bessie—Number One and Number Two, respectively—are given some spoils of war by the CO. Included in the pile of clothing and wigs (of particular importance to Bessie) is a biography of Bill Clinton. The Girl reads portions of the book to Bessie and Helena, and this odd plot device allows the women to hear about a powerful man who is subject to criticism and faces the consequences of his actions in his impeachment trial. For Helena at least, the process of listening to this story is transformative. The Girl is traumatized by her introduction to the soldiering life and tries to return to the hut. By this time, a Woman of Peace—a member of the Woman of Liberia Mass Action for Peace—named Rita persuades Helena (who has been with the CO for the longest) to leave as the war ends in 2003.

Theatre critics and the few scholarly articles about the play indicate that Gurira’s depictions are successful. Citing the 2016 off-Broadway productions of Eclipsed and Familiar, Lisa B. Thompson uses Gurira as an example of a playwright who presents a diverse and complex depiction of African women (161). Although Eclipsed premiered in 2009, it opened at the Public Theater in late 2015 after Familiar was brought off-Broadway at Playwright’s Horizons earlier that year. The 2015 production of Eclipsed was particularly well-received by critics because it starred Lupita Nyong’o as The Girl. Nyong’o had recently been awarded an
The Academy Award and Screen Actors Guild Award for her role in the 2014 film *Twelve Years a Slave*. *The New York Times* theatre critic Charles Isherwood described Nyong’o’s performance as “captivating.” I believe a confluence of factors—Nyong’o’s presence, Gurira’s increasing popularity because of her role on *The Walking Dead*, and, as Isherwood cites in his review, the 2014 kidnapping of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram—likely contributed to the play’s popularity, whereas the 2009 productions did not catch. I wonder, as well, if *Eclipsed* did not become a hit because Nottage’s *Ruined* had just been produced and received the Pulitzer. As I describe in the introduction, gender parity in theatre remains a problem, and a diversity of voices and experiences are also wrapped up in that disparity. Two plays about African women in conflict zones premiering in the same year might have seemed to producers too much. Still, *Eclipsed* does not portray for American audiences the “typical” depiction of African women as victims of sexual abuse.

Gurira chooses to stage the stories of these women in their home. The audience sees the women living their daily lives, washing laundry, styling each other’s hair, and making food. Gurira mentions in her author’s note that actors should learn to make fufu, a staple West African starch, because it is mentioned too often for them to avoid learning to make it without compromising some of the “hyperreality” the play demands (60). In Katherine Jean Nigh’s opinion, what makes the play work so well is witnessing the day-to-day activities of the women on stage. Nigh finds that “we can see ourselves” in their actions and conversations (434). What is more, “the efficacy of the play lies in the fact that this connection brings the audience members closer to those war experiences” even though these women live in a very different world than American audiences (434). Part of the connection that Gurira makes between the audience and the women being represented on stage by actors comes from the intimacy the women have with
each other, including the lack of privacy dictating that they clean themselves openly after they return from seeing the CO. The intimacy is part of the hyperrealism that Gurira suggests that productions use, which in turn sharpens the focus on the effects that war has on women. Even though the civil war is taking place beyond the hut, the Liberian war is brought into the domestic space in a variety of ways. For example, Maima, a former wife of the CO, became a soldier and refused her position in the hut. Maima begins to groom The Girl, who was brought to the hut after being abducted by the CO’s men and becomes one of his wives after being raped earlier in the play. Rita, the Peace Woman, comes to the hut to check on the women’s welfare, which is a sign of the success the women’s movements were having in ending the war.

Gurira privileges women’s experiences and focuses on the effects of war on women to the extent that men are not seen or heard. Instead, the women let the audience know that a man has come to their hut by going to a side of the stage and interacting with the off-stage man using hand signals, such as pointing to themselves to indicate they understand they have been selected by the CO. The women do not talk to men, and at times, the men seem to be a disruption to the women’s lives. For Helena, it may be that she is annoyed by the CO’s dislike of the meal she prepared. Bessie, wife Number Three, hates being pregnant and does not want to be a mother. When the women in the hut are called away for sex, they return to the hut and quickly clean themselves with a rag. The Girl becomes withdrawn afterward, but Bessie, who has been with the CO for many years (and who Gurira classifies as a survivor), does not miss a beat in the conversation they were having when she left. In the first scene in which The Girl is trying to calculate how long Helena and Bessie have been with the CO, Bessie is called away. Her first line when she returns is “It mean she old! If she knew how many years she had, she would have told you a long time ago” (9). Although her statement is sad in that Helena does not know her
exact age, Bessie bursts back into the scene, revealing a part of her adaptive, survivalist personality. She participates in the conversation as if she had not left it. Gurira explains that Bessie is a character who has “found a way to live and to find joy and fulfillment” in the life she has in the hut (63). Later in the play, Bessie returns from an interaction with the CO to convince Helena that she needs hair extensions, which are the spoils of war, because she is getting fat from being pregnant. When they are in the hut, the women are concerned with their own lives and doing household chores. Gurira is adamant that Helena’s hut (as it belongs to her as wife Number One) is tidy and cared for despite being a “dilapidated shelter” (7). The women have made it a home. Their relationships and domestic actions are emblematic of some of the ways that men are displaced from Gurira’s portrayal of war. Still, the threat of harm from men does happen. Gurira explains that “the presence of the CO is an ever-looming discomfort” in the play (62). Helena and Bessie have had years to acclimate to their environment so as to survive. With The Girl, however, Gurira shows how that “ever-looming discomfort” can have terrible consequences. In the first scene, Helena and Bessie are hiding The Girl under an up-turned bathtub, letting her out when they think it is safe. She was brought to their hut after being abducted, but the CO does not seem to know about her yet. However, a few scenes later, The Girl leaves to use the bathroom at night and is caught by the CO. He rapes her and tells her that she is now his wife. Helena and Bessie are both worried about her well-being—The Girl is fifteen and under their protection—but they could not have kept her from that fate. Although Bessie cares for The Girl’s well-being, it is Helena who feels that she has failed The Girl.

The story of Bill Clinton’s impeachment, on the other hand, has a profoundly positive impact on the women in the hut because his story is one in which a powerful man is held accountable for his actions. Helena and Bessie cannot read, so The Girl reads it to them. The Girl
ends up giving them a sort of summary of Clinton’s impeachment trial, as the writing level is a bit beyond her skills. Her reading results in an interactive story. The Girl struggles with some content, and the other two women help her to fill it in and provide context from their own world. The women unite to understand this story, even though they do not see why it is a problem that Clinton, as a powerful man, has a Number One wife and Number Two. After all, they are wives Number One, Number Three, and Number Four. Still, what they are struck by is that Clinton has to answer to Congress, and they can criticize his actions. Helena asks The Girl (who has a bit more schooling than the others), “so dey can say what happen to the big man o’ de country?” (24). They can, in fact, do more than say what the leader of the country will do; the democratically elected Congress can take the position from him, if the House and Senate agree. In Clinton’s case, the women understand that he is on trial for something to do with sex and the fact that he lied about what he did. Helena comments that “Imagine we have dat ‘ere—dere be no one to rule de country!” (25). Later, when Rita comes to the hut to check on the women living there, Helena tries to defend the way they live by saying they even have a book they are reading. Helena describes the story and asks Rita not to spoil it for her. Helena’s tone seems to shift after she talks about the book that she cannot read, saying “you know, when I look at you, you know all dese book tings—I do wan’t to learn—I neva go to school—I do want dat. It just…I just don’ know if I can learn now—I getting old to be sometin’ different” (31). In a relative sense, Helena might be old; after all, she has been with the CO for many years and has had at least one child he made her abandon in the bush. However, her words in this scene indicate that she does not know who else to be. Rita teaches Helena how to write her name in the dirt and has planted the seeds of another life in Helena’s mind, but this was made possible due to her hearing about a leader

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28 Gurira indicates the women’s dialect with her spelling., and she wanted to be sure that productions use Liberian English.
who can be criticized and learning that men can be held accountable for their actions. After this scene, Helena starts to listen to the news on the radio and becomes engaged in the world beyond the hut just before Charles Taylor, the Liberian President who was later convicted of war crimes, resigns. Helena connects herself to a world beyond the hut, and at the end of the play, she leaves the hut altogether.

The resignation of Taylor causes a chain of events that impact the women in the hut, and Rita’s presence in the camp as a Peace Woman means that she is in the right place at the right time to rescue those who want to leave. However, in the process, their home is fractured. In the final scene, the women reunite in the hut. Bessie sweeps the floor with the baby she chooses to love instead of hate on her back. The Girl returns after a fight with Maima to a place where she felt kindness, bringing a gift of food to Helena. Rita arrives, looking for Helena. Helena enters shortly thereafter in shock. She tells the other women that after talking to her like a person for the first time since she first began living with him, the CO has dismissed her because Taylor has ended the war with his resignation. She lists things she has had to do for him over the years she has been with him, which includes leaving her child to die alone because they had to run and making sure she would not have more children, and “den he go’ just trow me away like dat” (51). She goes on to explain that she does not know a life beyond the one he has made her live: “de war it ova! DO I have ma? Do I have pa? I no know, ‘You can go,’ I don’t know whot GO mean!” (52). Without the hut, she is without a family and home. Rita, however, provides an alternative place of belonging. Rita, still in the hut, explains the reason why she is there: “I am a member of Liberian Women for PEACE. I gon’ hep you, gal, I gon’ hep you” (52). Rita came looking for Helena because the camp is breaking up and the CO is letting all of the women go—not just his wives. Helena then chooses to leave with Rita.
The ending of the play demonstrates Gurira’s efforts to portray complicated women, even if their choices are difficult to understand. Gurira admits in her author’s note that “The complexities of all these women, of their personalities, of their choices was something I had to fully embrace, no matter how uncomfortable at times, in order to give their humanities full breath” (59). Although there are other moments when it is difficult to understand the choices these women make, the ending is what I believe explains this comment. Bessie decides to stay with the CO. He is the father of her child, and she cannot imagine a place beyond where she is: “Whot I go’ do out dere? I can’t learn to do tings, dat not for me” (53). Maima will not leave either because she would have to put down her gun. Rita and Helena assume The Girl will leave with them. Rita believes The Girl is the daughter she lost to the war (although she is not), and Helena knows the path that The Girl is headed on because Maima took the same way. Maima, who has entered by this time to chastise The Girl for taking off after a fight they had, does not want to let go of The Girl, but Helena disrupts Maima’s intentions by trying to return some of Maima’s humanity to her. Maima ultimately rejects Helena and The Girl. At the end of the play, Rita and Helena have rushed out of the hut to leave, calling for The Girl. However, the stage lights go down with Bessie on the floor singing to her daughter (named Clintine) with The Girl standing in the middle of the stage “seemingly transfixed to the floor” (55). She holds her gun in one hand and Clinton’s biography in the other, and the audience does not know what she will choose. It is hard to imagine how The Girl feels. She has had no control over her life, even when she made choices. Would leaving with Rita and Helena provide her with what she needs? Or has she gone too far down Maima’s path? As for Bessie, it is hard to imagine why she would stay with the CO, but it is what she knows. Helena’s choice to leave seems like the obvious way. Why would these women choose to remain enslaved? It is important to understand the risks
associated with all of the choices these women make—and the very fact that they are making choices. Helena takes a big risk, but the reward is unknown, if there is one. Returning to Gbowee’s point from above, Helena will still encounter “systematic expressions of a deeper systemic disregard for women characteristic of West African societies” (50). Although it is difficult to understand Bessie’s choice to stay, The Girl’s indecision, and Maima’s choice to continue to soldier, depicting these women’s complicated choices, options, risks, and the uncertainty of their futures is part of Gurira’s goal with the play. Eclipsed rejects the idea that women are simply victims of war. Women experience much more than sexual violence at war, and they are women and humans beyond their trauma.

Chapter Conclusion

Recalling what feminist scholars have said about Brecht’s strategies, these women playwrights have filled gaps left by Mother Courage and traditional war narratives and built new foundations for war plays written near the turn of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century. War plays do not need to treat the struggles or triumphs of those who have control over war. War plays can focus on the victories and defeats of those who do not have control and—in the case of Vogel’s, Nottage’s, and Gurira’s works—try to do some good for other ordinary folk. War can be a way of exploring other societal problems. Vogel and Parks both draw attention to the consequences of slavery that are still with us and remind us all that war does not just happen in a distant land. Vogel believes in the transformative power of community on a national scale and shows how divisions can be bridged, in her work with food and hospitality. Nottage and Gurira bring far-away conflicts to U.S. stages to draw much needed attention to the present and ongoing trauma being inflicted on millions of non-combatants. What is more, Gurira demonstrates that men can be background characters in a war narrative, just as women have
traditionally been. All four plays show how ordinary, extraordinary people survive in horrific circumstances and how important bonds are to survival during war. Nottage and Gurira, in particular, explore the importance of forged bonds that help to create strong communities, like the ones Vogel explores. What might be most important, the woman-authored war play is much more likely to depict experiences of vulnerable people to demonstrate the extent of war’s destruction—and how to rebuild.
Chapter 4: Women Soldiers & the Woman-Authored War Play

Thus far in my dissertation, I have presented four female soldiers or fighters: Angela from Lydia Stryk’s *American Tet* (2004), Ginny from Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Elliot: A Soldier’s Fugue* (2005), and The Girl and Maima from Danai Gurira’s *Eclipsed* (2009). Each one of them highlights different issues for women warriors. Angela, who was severely injured after taking the brunt of an explosion and saving her comrades, commits suicide during the play. The authors of a sourcebook written for mental health and medical professionals, *Women at War*, point out that “female veterans are 79% more likely to die by suicide than civilians” (Ghahramanlou-Holloway et al. 244). The authors believe that female veterans’ rates are high because of their familiarity with and access to guns. This coincides with Angela’s story because she knew Danny could find a loaded gun for her. Ginny represents a historical concern revolving around inequality. By the Vietnam War, combat nurses like Ginny were given a military rank. Women have been involved with every war in the United States—often enlisting under male aliases until the 20th-century. However, the Army Nurse Corps, created in 1901, was the first official way that women could serve in a war zone (Iskra 3). It took another forty-six years for the women of the Army Nurse Corps to receive the same rank and pay as the other Army branches (Iskra 4). The authors of *Women at War* also found that women enlisted in the 21st-century armed forces play “a proportionally larger role in healthcare than men” (Figley et al. 134). Since ground combat roles were opened for women in 2016, more women have joined the armed forces, but a higher percentage of them serve in administrative roles (Addario 141).

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29 I use the same capitalization that Gurira does for The Girl.
30 The sourcebook is an edited collection of essays by many researchers, mental health experts, and doctors. I have cited essays individually in my references but discussed them collectively in my prose to avoid confusion.
The Girl and Maima face different challenges than U.S. soldiers, as they are Liberian women fighting at the very end of the Second Liberian Civil War, but their stories still resonate with issues that surround women warriors in the U.S. for the mostly U.S. audiences who have seen *Eclipsed*. One of Gurira’s motivating factors in writing the play was to bring attention to women who were surviving in a war zone. This includes women who find a way to fight even though, Leymah Gbowee explains, women are “marginalized and excluded from the major spheres of decision making” and face a “systematic disregard for women” (50).\(^{31}\) By the time the Second Liberian Civil War ends in 2003, the war had been going on for both Maima and The Girl’s entire lives—Maima is described as being in her late teens and The Girl is fifteen. What is more, The Girl becomes a fighter just weeks before the twenty-year war is over. She is persuaded to cast off the status conveyed upon her as the CO’s fourth wife after Maima, a former wife of the CO, convinces her that she will have more freedom if she leaves him. Yet The Girl is imprisoned in another way after she becomes a fighter under Maima’s tutelage. After The Girl receives lessons on how to use her weapon to kill and a lecture in which Maima reframes the enemy as a non-human other, Maima forces her to round up other girls in the camp to make them sexually available to their male comrades. One of the ways Maima has saved herself from being raped and made into another “wife” has been to offer other girls and women to the men in the camp. When The Girl, horrified, tries to fight back against this practice, Maima tells her that “You feed dem, you not get eaten. Dat simple. Go and get de gals or I go’ have to tell dem you want to replace de gals today” (39). The Girl earns her fighting name, Moda’s Blessing, by the end of the play, but the process has also destroyed her. Becoming a fighter was an opportunity to

\(^{31}\) Black Diamond, the woman who inspired Gurira to write *Eclipsed*, would likely disagree with my phrasing here. Fighting found her after her parents were killed, and the camp she was staying at was attacked (Taylor). In an interview with *The Guardian*, she explains that “[b]ecoming a fighter was the best thing I could do under the circumstances” (qtd. in Taylor).
gain freedom from being a wife and from sexual assault, but being a fighter has changed her and morally injured her. Tragically, she thinks that she chose everything else that went with being a fighter, such as making more women into victims and being responsible for creating more orphan girls like herself.

Maima, an experienced fighter, who is modeled after the real Liberian woman commander, Black Diamond, conversely finds power in the fact that she is a woman in a man’s world. In contrast to other fighters explored in this chapter and in the dissertation, Maima’s confidence as a fighter stems from her position as a woman, not just a woman doing what is a man’s job in their culture. She incorporates military beliefs and more masculine characteristics into her new military identity, but it looks very different from the “militarized femininity” that women soldiers often adopt in the U.S. (Eager 2). Maima’s form-fitting clothing and the freedom to choose her sexual partners becomes a source of strength for her. She views the victimizing of other women—sexually or by training them to fight like The Girl—as part of her survival and a part of what it means to be a fighter; she is one who “HUNT[S],” as she explains to the Girl (39).32 Gurira argues in her playwright’s note that aspects of this play were difficult to write, but she had to “fully embrace” them “in order to give [the women] their humanity in its full breath” (59). She goes on to explain, “This play is my humble attempt to give voice to women who navigate vicious terrains not of their making” (59). As Chris Coulter, Mariam Persson, and Mats Utas recognize in their report on African women fighters, these women chose to be fighters in national conflicts, and the status and identities of women fighters are complicated because they

32 Mats Utas’s article “West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfrinding, Soldiering” explores, among other topics concerning female fighters in Africa, “the binary opposition between peaceful women and violent men [that] runs fee in Western emotionhistories” (405).
“may simultaneously be both victims and perpetrators” of violence (40). Maima, in particular, fits this description.

For American audiences, Maima also represents certain assumptions about women in the U.S. military. In her recent book on the representation of U.S. servicewomen, Emerald Archer finds that women are still more “often associated with passivity and a nurturing disposition,” which has wide-ranging implications for women in the military (4). In the edited collection *One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers* feminists, intellectuals, and academics, explore the idea that women can be perpetrators of violence just like men. Most of these essays discuss the 2003 Abu Ghraib torture and abuse prison scandal. Tara McKelvey says in her introduction that “[i]t is hard to say what is the most shocking about the Abu Ghraib photos,” but the incident “forced Americans to examine allegations of abuse of power and torture by women” (13). The Abu Ghraib scandal is often analyzed and discussed in scholarly research about women soldiers and the 21st-century military. The scandal exposes many assumptions about gender and women in the military, including the idea that women are not aggressors, but it also directly challenges the arguments about women and military cohesion. Many people and institutions—such as the U.S. Marine Corps—have argued against the full integration of women in the military on the grounds that they supposedly lack the necessary physical capacity and could potentially cause disruptions when placed in male military units. Megan Mackenzie addresses these claims—what she calls “myths”—concerning the “band of brothers” idea of the military. While exploring the arguments that all-male units achieve a certain cohesion and bonding, she argues that it also happens when women are part of the unit, and, in fact, it was essential to “the sort of group think and complicity that leads to Abu Ghraib prison abuse and perpetration—and coverup—of sexual

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33 The scandal has been explored in many critical texts, including Judith Butler’s *Frames of War*, Jeanne Colleran’s *Theatre and War*, Wendy Kozol’s *Distant Wars Visible*, Dora Apel’s *War Culture and Other Contest Images*.
violence within the ranks” (66). The three women who participated in the torture of Iraqi prisoners were necessary to the suffering and humiliation experienced by the Iraqi men. In her contribution to One of the Guys, Lucinda Marshall explains that these women were used to torture Iraqi men, “which amounts to the deliberate use of misogyny as a weapon of war” because “sexualized torture of men by women is scandalous both to Iraqis and Westerners alike” (55). The authors concede that the issues surrounding women soldiers and veterans are complicated, but, as Barbra Ehrenreich reminds us in the forward to One of the Guys, “Women can do the unthinkable” (3). Ehrenreich acknowledges that her own shock at the photos spurred her to analyze her own assumptions about women and the field of feminism that sometimes assumes that women are morally superior. McKelvey adds that the Abu Ghraib photos also “shed light on widespread assumptions about the maternal, loving traits in women, as well as the deeply held fears and anxieties concerning their capacity for doing evil” (7–8). What the Abu Ghraib scandal and the resulting shock in the media suggests, according to Ilene Feinman, is that “as a culture, we do not yet understand how to think about women in the military—much less women in combat” (63). Simply put, the female soldier is a lightning rod for many issues and social problems. Literature about female soldiers often depict their struggles to have a place in the “band of brothers” and their equality, which includes their capacity to be perpetrators of violence and do their jobs as soldiers.

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34 Marshall goes on to explain that the Abu Ghraib scandal revealed another level of misogyny because there is “ample evidence” of the sexual abuse of Iraqi women at the prison that did not get nearly the degree of attention that the photos with the U.S. women soldiers did. Marshall asserts, “Quite simply, sexual abuse against men is considered torture; sexual abuse against women by men is business as usual” (55). I would add, as have others in the volume, that it would depend on who the woman was. Many scholars, intellectuals, and feminists would say that sexual assault is torture, but that it, too, intersects with class and race.

35 For clarification, the book repeatedly attributes the scandal to the culture of the military. The torture was not done by “a few bad apples,” as the former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld wanted Americans to believe; the authors argue that it is an institutional problem.
In this final chapter on female soldiers, the plays under discussion continue to address themes and ideas in women-authored plays that I have explored to this point in the dissertation, particularly concerning the perspectives of women, veterans’ families, and those who bear the heavy cost of war. However, they add new elements and perspectives. While women also struggle to gain a sense of belonging and to adjust to military life, the plays present a gender-inclusive idea of home—as it is not strictly a feminized space—and domestic tasks can be recast as military ones. Women also struggle when they return home because war has changed them, but family continues to be important to their reintegration. As Rabe and the female playwrights discussed in my second chapter demonstrate, home does not always provide a refuge from traumatic war experiences. While home is not always comforting, everyone needs an idea of home as a place where they belong. A major addition to the above themes concerns sexual assault and rape. In two of the plays being discussed, women are under threat from male comrades. Rape is a weapon used in war, but that weapon becomes friendly fire when male soldiers rape women who serve with them. Plays with female soldiers also show that women can be aggressors and can do their job just as well as their male counterparts, even if the violence damages their moral foundation. In fact, many plays with a female soldier focus on gender equality in that way: women are soldiers who are just as capable as the men in their units. However, many of the women soldiers have to change parts of their identity to fit into their units or to incorporate a military identity into their idea of what a woman is. Ellen McLaughlin’s Ajax in Iraq (2008), for example, compares the epic betrayal that Sophocles’s Ajax experienced from his commander to the one that A.J. experiences from hers when he rapes her. This play also aims to present women soldiers as being men’s equals in war, though they are subject to the sexual harassment and rape that women experience. Helen Benedict’s The Lonely Soldier Monologues:
**Women at War in Iraq** (2009) [*Lonely*] continues to explore sexual assault in the military and argues that the exclusion that women soldiers experience contributes to and complicates the harassment they deal with. Of these plays, *Lonely* presents the most diverse picture of the struggles that women soldiers encounter. Finally, Lindsey Ferrentino’s *Ugly Lies the Bone* (2015) [*Ugly*] explores a female soldier’s homecoming. *Ugly* is a bit of a departure from the other plays because it centers on issues other than sexual assault. Jess, the recovering veteran, must navigate the changes in her life back home and in her identity. After discussing the concerns of female soldiers in these four plays, I will conclude this dissertation with some final thoughts on the women-authored war play.

**Other Plays with Female Soldiers**

Plays about female soldiers are still a small part of the body of contemporary theatre. However, more U.S. women have been in combat with the 2013 lifting of the combat exclusion policy that kept women from the front lines. Because of the increasing presence of women in the military, plays featuring them are likely to increase in number. Beyond those under discussion in this chapter, there are a few recent plays that feature female soldiers. Canadian playwright Judith Thompson’s 2007 *Palace at the End* makes direct references to the Abu Ghraib scandal. The first of three monologues, which comprise the play, is spoken by a pregnant soldier. Although she is called the Soldier, she is meant to be Private First Class Lynndie England, one of the military police officers shown abusing prisoners in the Abu Ghraib photos. Jeanne Colleran calls the Soldier’s monologue a “complex Althusserian portrait of social interpolation,” as the latter looks herself up online and resists the way that she has been presented by others (185). Thompson does not offer excuses for the Soldier’s behavior, but Friedman argues that Thompson emphasizes “the construction of England’s gendered identity by a mediated culture” (605). Julie Marie
Myatt’s *Welcome Home, Jenny Sutter*, which premiered in 2008, depicts one ex-Marine who is not ready to return home to her family. Jenny takes a solo road trip and ends up in Slab City, California in the Sonoran Desert. There she finds a community of other lost souls in what reviewer Bob Verini calls “Jenny’s halfway house.” At the end of the play, Jenny decides to head home. Paula Vogel has also examined the Iraq War with her produced but unpublished play *Don Juan Comes Home from Iraq*. In his review of the 2014 production, Charles Isherwood explains that Vogel portrays a “sexually predatory Marine captain slowly losing his grip on reality.” The female soldier in this play is Don’s former lover, Cressida, who decides to sign up for the Army reserves. Writing about the play, Toby Silverman Zinman argues that “[s]tanding in contrast to the Marine Corps’ motto, *Semper Fi* (‘always faithful’) is Vogel’s litany repeated over and over again: ‘Betrayed, abandoned, lied to.’ This describes the general condition” of many involved in the Iraq War, from the women Don has used and abandoned to Iraqi citizens who have received the same treatment from the U.S. military (“American Theatre” 230).

Of these plays with women soldiers, male playwright George Brant’s 2014 play *Grounded* has been produced and studied most widely. In this one-woman show, a female fighter pilot describes how she was “grounded” after becoming pregnant. She continues as an active duty pilot by flying drones from a cubicle in the middle of the Nevada desert. As a member of the “Chair Force,” she encounters mental health problems because she is unable to cope with the closeness of her two worlds when she returns home to her family each night after waging war all day. Ultimately, the pilot hesitates to kill a target because she observes a young girl playing next to the target after she locates him. The girl playing at his feet reminds her of her daughter. Rather than bringing the war home, the pilot brings home to the war. She hesitates, but a back-up drone pilot kills the target and the girl. As Bart Pitchford argues, *Grounded* presents a realistic
depiction of a struggle that soldiers experience—“[p]art of the psychological survival mechanism of military personnel in combat resides in successfully segmenting their lives” (59). Stacy Peebles argues that many stories for soldiers who fight in Iraq have an “in-between” quality (2). She suggests that because many soldiers grew up in an era that encouraged individualization, they resist the traditional “us versus them” mentality. War, however, “thwarts these impulses to challenge binary modes of thinking” (Peebles 3). Peebles finds that soldiers are left frustrated and, at times, feeling betrayed. Although this is not quite the case with the pilot, she still sees the humanity in a person she has been trained to dehumanize, making it—in that moment—impossible for her to do her job.

**Ellen McLaughlin’s *Ajax in Iraq***

Ellen McLaughlin’s play also features a female soldier who undergoes an experience—rape by her commanding officer—that makes it impossible for her to do her job and precipitates a depression. *Ajax in Iraq* is a mashup between a modernized (and condensed) version of Sophocles’s *Ajax* and experiences of contemporary U.S. soldiers who served in Iraq. McLaughlin wrote the play for and with a group of graduate acting students in 2007 and 2008. Writing about that experience, McLaughlin explains that she wanted to tell a story about the Iraq War and told the students to bring material related to the topic to their workshops. The students brought in a variety of materials, which included interviews they conducted with veterans they knew. After seeing what the student presented, McLaughlin says that “Ajax’s terrible story resonated best with the brutal mess we were investigating” (“Finding Ajax” 835). The play, which is experimental in form, travels between the stories of Ajax, A.J., and other short scenes with characters who are not seen again, including the woman who gave shape to modern Iraq.
Gertrude Bell. The set is minimal and flexible enough to incorporate the different time periods, and painted on the floor of the stage is an intricate map of the Middle East from around 1890—before the establishment of the modern country in 1920.

As McLaughlin explains in her article about the play’s genesis, modernizing Sophocles’s Ajax or restaging it with a female Ajax would not be sufficient to address the issues about the war that were brought up in the workshops, so she decided to combine them. In this way, each story “enriched the other as we saw how they reflected and deepened each other” (“Finding Ajax” 836). An important way that Ajax enriches A.J.’s story is to elevate her betrayal and madness to epic and the enduring significance of his. Similarly, A.J. is a great warrior who has completed heroic acts. She survived an explosion and attempted to rescue people in a resulting house fire. The soldier retelling these events explains that she did “heroic stuff” and “no one’s ever done anything like that” (37). In this play, there is no debate about female soldier’s physical skills, especially when it comes to A.J. She was respected and seems revered after her heroic actions, just as Ajax was.

A.J. is one of many female soldiers depicted in Ajax in Iraq, and it initially might seem that these women have the same concerns as men. The play’s Chorus is made of four women and four men, and although members of the Chorus double to play particular characters, such as the women in A.J.’s unit, McLaughlin downplays gender as a distinguishing feature or interpretive element. In the second scene, the Chorus becomes a chorus of modern-day soldiers being

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36 In her article analyzing Bell’s travel writing, Emma Short explains that Bell was the first woman to be admitted to Oxford University where she graduated with a modern history degree. In 1892 she made her first trip to Persia with her uncle, a British diplomat. Although she was an archaeologist, a prolific writer, world traveler, she is best known for using her skills as a geographer to shape the borders of the modern Middle East in the 1921 Cairo Convention.

37 What is more, Ajax’s story of betrayal and madness still resonates with soldiers today, as Bryan Doerries explores in his book One of his chapters discusses the Department of Defense sponsored Theater of War tour that kicked off in 2009 in Junction City, Kansas with a production of Ajax. Some of the soldiers in attendance had returned from Iraq as recently as ten days prior (116).
interviewed, and the audience only sees and hears their interwoven responses to questions. McLaughlin names the characters they are representing “A,” “C,” “B,” etc. Likewise, the issues they are raising are genderless. These soldiers are angry and frustrated that they do not have a clear idea about what “the mission is anymore” or if leadership ever did in the first place (11). Soldiers feel frustrated and betrayed by those at the highest levels because, as one suggests of President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech, they communicated to the enemy that the U.S. claimed a victory and was prepared to handle any conflicts that challenged their victory. The ideas of victory and preparedness to handle more fighting differed from what soldiers saw on the ground. Although Bush’s speech praised the troops and admitted there was hard work ahead, the soldiers presented in Ajax in Iraq were dismayed that a leader would say those things “when the troops didn’t have armor, shit, we didn’t have full battle-rattle until, like, well, do we even have it now?” (Ajax 11). The soldiers are angry and do not know where to direct their anger—at military leadership, the government, the Iraqis, or “fat idiots wandering around the malls” (10–11). One soldier says that “we’re all being just hung out to dry” (11). What is more, the Chorus of soldiers communicate the problems they have reintegrating into society. At least two of the soldiers say they keep going back to the warzones even with all its problems and danger: “I can’t stay home. I don’t feel like I mean anything except here” (13). These are the issues that the Chorus brings to the stage throughout the play, and it sets the tone overall.

For all of those efforts to create a coherent grouping of problems that soldiers universally experience, however, there is a tension in the play because A.J. is raped. Women, the play suggests, are trying to be soldiers while men complicate that goal in a military culture with embedded misogyny. Two moments in particular reflect the fact that men, not women, are the
issue when it comes to gendered problems in the military.\textsuperscript{38} There are four other women in A.J.’s unit, and they play poker while A.J. sleeps—which is a sign of her depression. They talk about western movies, but the conversation drifts to A.J.’s change in behavior. Two men from their unit enter the barracks and the conversation is sexually charged immediately when Charles says, “Strip poker? I’m in” (20). The men notice that A.J. is sleeping, and Charles asks, “Seriously though, what’s wrong with that bitch?” (21). His comment is layered because he does care for A.J.’s well-being, but the term he uses to reference her is coded with military culture. As the military saying goes, there are three types of women: a bitch, a whore, and a dyke. The pejorative labels are distinguished from each other in terms of women’s perceived relationship to a man and whether or not she will have sex with him. Although it does seem as though the men’s concern for A.J. is genuine, they use a misogynistic language that distances women from their roles as soldiers and principally defines them in relation to men. The men leave the barracks after the women verbally battle to defend A.J., and, again, the men process the women’s collective anger in culturally misogynistic terms: “Come on, let’s get out of here. They’re all on the rag or something” (22).

The second instance occurs sometime around the poker scene. A.J. is having a nightmare and thrashes around in her bunk. In the foreground, Athena speaks. She mostly interacts with the Grecian characters, but she also provides monologues about war that are applicable to both narratives. While A.J. writhes on her bed still asleep, Athena speaks about the realization that one can become a killer and cross one’s own moral boundaries—which is the likely subject of A.J.’s nightmare—and the audience sees men crawling on their forearms between the sleeping

\textsuperscript{38} Coincidentally, the heart of Megan MacKenzie’s argument about combat exclusion for women is that it “has always been about men, not women” because “the overarching message of the band of brother myth is that the exceptional, elite, essential characteristics of the male group depend on the exclusion of women” (3).
women. When A.J. fully wakes, the men are exiting the stage, and Athena says, “The difference between you and the person who can do unspeakable things? Not so great” (31). This short scene is layered, and Athena’s words apply to many of the issues the play addresses. Athena’s monologue in conjunction with the actions behind her incorporate rape into the list of actions that would constitute a moral injury. Moreover, the scene speaks to the fact that women soldiers must also fear the men in their units who are close enough to attack them and can do so in their sleep, when they are most vulnerable. While women go about their routines and perform their role as soldiers first, the military culture of male permissiveness treats women soldiers as women first. As the women soldiers in Lonely—discussed below—would say, the women are more likely to be harmed by their comrades than by enemy combatants.

A.J.’s story suggests that no matter how good of a warrior a woman is, she is still a woman first in the military culture. After the poker scene and A.J.’s attempt to save people after an earlier explosion, her Sergeant corners her when she is alone. He patronizes her, at once stripping her of her identity as a soldier and reducing her actions to something that he is responsible for in some way: “I’m so proud of you, Rambette. You’re my little hero” (Ajax 37). He grabs her and treats her as an object of his affection and obsession. She tells him, “This isn’t what I deserve, Sergeant” (Ajax 37). He is irritated that she would want him “to pin a medal on [her] tit” instead of receiving the “special little something” that he has for her (Ajax 38). After ordering her to take her pants off, he rapes her. Afterwards, he tells her, “Well done, Rambette. Welcome home. Isn’t life wonderful” (Ajax 38). There is a lot to unpack here. The play indicates that they have had a continuing, less-than-consensual relationship, and “welcome home” could refer to a brutal way of rekindling of their relationship. The Sergeant is threatened by A.J.’s heroic actions and competence as a warrior. He must possess her and simultaneously diminish
the significance of her actions. The rape can be interpreted as a stripping her of her warrior identity, positioning her to be only a woman. Returning home, perhaps, means returning to traditional, heterosexual gender roles in which a man would be welcomed home from war with sex. Homes are supposed to be caring, nurturing places, but whatever imaginative home he has welcomed her to, it is a nightmare and still in a warzone. Even at war, some men can only process women’s presence by defining them in relation to men, as the earlier discussion of women as bitches, whores, and dykes. Following her rape, A.J. goes mad as Ajax does, killing a flock of animals, and prepares to commit suicide. During their suicide monologues, A.J. and Ajax sit next to each other cleaning the weapon that will kill them. They echo each other, communicating and feeling the betrayals they cannot resolve.

A.J.’s memorial works to partially settle the disparate views of women in the military that are ultimately portrayed in the play. The soldiers focus on their loss and how the group failed A.J. One of the women in A.J.’s unit feels betrayed because A.J. took the “easy way” out of the situation she was in and abandons them in the process (53). A.J.’s suicide is incomprehensible to her, and this action makes her question who A.J. was. One of the men in A.J.’s unit who were concerned about her in the poker scene, however, explains that it was they who betrayed A.J.: “There must have been a thousand times she tried to signal that pain. We didn’t see it because we didn’t want to…. We should have paid better attention. She was one of us and we didn’t care for her” (53). His words suggest that the problem of sexual assault in the military is shared by all soldiers. They all failed A.J., but men bear more responsibility. Men fail the women they serve with even if they are part of a group that does not cross the line into physical assault: those in this group may have been disturbed by some of the things the Sergeant said in the earlier scene, but
they did not act in ways that counter the misogynistic attitudes embedded in existing military culture.

**Helen Benedict’s Lonely Soldier Monologues: Women at War in Iraq**

In a series of interwoven monologues, Helen Benedict dramatizes the stories of seven women who served in Iraq. *Lonely* is a documentary play compiled from interviews that Benedict conducted. The women recount what led them to enlist, some of their war experiences, and the difficulties they faced when they returned home. For most of the play, they are all on stage, listening while they each tell their stories. Parts of their stories are acted out and require the use of another person, and Benedict indicates that the small roles may be played by an additional male or female actor. However, in productions with a female actor, she can become the Voiceless Soldier. Until the ending of the play, in this case, this performer might be mistaken for an extra. However, when all of the other women have finished telling their stories of frustration, loneliness, and sexual assault, the Voiceless Soldier steps forward, acting apart from the other women. She looks at the audience and struggles to speak but does not say anything. As Benedict explains, she “represent[s] all the women who cannot tell their stories, silenced by fear, threats, trauma, or simply because there is no one willing to listen” (6). The Voiceless Soldier’s attempts to speak are a surprising moment of theatricality.\(^{39}\) In a play comprised mostly of words, her silence speaks volumes and emphasizes how significant it is that her comrades have had the space, occasion, and support to speak about the terrible things they have experienced. This moment is also significant for Benedict’s own work and the narrative about women soldiers and their plight. The silenced stories being represented on stage are directly connected to sexual assault for Benedict. Her reporting and earlier book *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of*

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\(^{39}\) The Voiceless Soldier’s attempt to speak was created in a 2015 production in London, and Benedict has incorporated this moment into the published play.
Women Serving in Iraq (2009) are credited for bringing widespread attention to the “private war” women are fighting in the military.\textsuperscript{40} The play is an expansion of the book and presents stories from more Iraq veterans. Additionally, part of the private war being fought has to do with recognition for being a soldier. In 2006, Benedict met Specialist Mickiela Montoya, a veteran. She told Benedict that “nobody believes me…. I was in Iraq getting bombed and shot at, but people won’t even listen when I say I was at war because I’m female” (qtd. in Private War 2).\textsuperscript{41} Women veterans are voiceless, too, because their war stories are not as often recognized or are ignored in favor of the stories of men. As many of the women in Lonely attest, even when women do speak, they are silenced by disbelief and skepticism, resulting in a hidden war they must wage against the treatment they receive.\textsuperscript{42}

The dominant theme of the stories being told in Lonely concerns sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual assault. These narratives coincide with an enforced sense of isolation from the men in their units, which borders on outright ostracization. What Army Specialist Clara Henderson experienced seems especially alarming given that she entered the military at a young age because she thought she could help others by spreading the word of God. Reluctant to enlist in the first place, Henderson was not able to serve in a religious capacity, as her recruiter said she could. Seventeen years of age, she was taken out of the reserves and put into active duty as the only woman in her platoon. In Iraq, Henderson was subject to sexual harassment from many directions. She explains that one of her fellow soldiers befriended her and, then, attempted to

\textsuperscript{40} Benedict’s 2007 reporting won the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism and inspired a 2012 Academy Award-nominated documentary about women soldiers titled The Invisible War (2012), directed by Kirby Dick.

\textsuperscript{41} The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq is referred to in the in-text citations as Private War, while the play Lonely will not reference the title within in-text citations.

\textsuperscript{42} In research conducted by the Department of Veterans Affairs, one in four women are sexually assaulted, and almost half of women experience sexual harassment (MacKenzie 66). What is more, the Department of Defense estimates that 80% of rapes or attempted rapes are not reported (MacKenzie 66).
rape her. When she was assaulted and harassed by her sergeant, she reported him but was told that she was the “common factor” for the problems she was reporting (30). Doing what she could to control the situation, Henderson tried to use the restroom as little as possible by sucking on Skittles instead of drinking water. Restricting use of the bathroom is a common experience for women in active war zones. Henderson also describes the idea of a “battle buddy,” an Army practice in which soldiers are assigned a partner to assist in and out of combat. For women, the battle buddy is important because they guard each other when they shower or use the restroom. Henderson tells the audience that “because I was the only female there, I didn’t have a battle buddy. My battle buddy was my gun and my knife” that protected her from the men in her platoon (23). At war, she had to be constantly vigilant to avoid any situations in which she could be sexually assaulted, thus isolating herself as a survival strategy. Because of these experiences, Henderson explains, she attempted suicide when she got home. Air Force Sergeant Miriam Ruffolo, a photographer with the public affairs arm of the Air Force, was raped on her second tour of duty. She was routinely called “Air Force Barbie” and says that she always felt like there were “a million eyes” watching her at all times (2). Like Henderson, Ruffolo reported the gross sexual harassment she experienced to leadership, but the reports did not go anywhere except in her file. Ruffolo explains that to survive the ongoing harassment she put up a “wall” for her, and she made it “thicker and thicker” (32). She made it so thick that “to this day, I don’t know if I’ve ever regained that part of myself,” that is, the part of herself that was vivacious and “bubbly” when interacting with other people before her service (32). After Ruffolo was raped on her second tour, she—a third-generation airman—left the Air Force and a job she loved. Although discussions of female soldiers often explore how women integrate aspects of masculinity into
their identity, as Maima did, the changes to identity in *Lonely* stem from sexual assault and isolation.

The women in Benedict’s play describe other ways that they have had to reckon with traditional gender roles that are still applied to women soldiers. Army Specialist Maria Sanchez describes how she was positioned to be a spectator and someone to be protected by her male comrades. While under attack, “they tried to make me stay in the back of the tank. They’d say, ‘It’s because you’re like our little sister, we don’t want something to happen to you’” (32). Sanchez replied, “I’m a soldier, not a gender. I’m a soldier just like you” (32). Even under attack somewhere in Iraq with a uniform, training, and a weapon, Sanchez was still treated like a woman first. Her response is interesting because while she believes that a soldier should not have a gender and the roles that go with it, this belief is contradicted by the treatment many of these women received. Further, Sanchez experienced retaliation from her comrades because they felt she insulted them by refusing their care. Army Sergeant First Class Santiaga Flores, by contrast, was able to recast the maternal role that she enjoys at home and use it along with her long experience with the military. Flores explains that she was often asked for help by younger soldiers, “[a]fter all, I was old enough to be their mom” (35). Flores often cared for soldiers in her unit, regardless of the racially charged power games some commanding officers played with her. Although some of those younger soldiers likely went to her because she was a parental figure, she was a drill sergeant and had a great deal of institutional knowledge about the Army. She channeled those experiences enough to recognize the ways that leadership was failing to care for soldiers, particularly their mental health after combat. Flores describes one such incident. A private that Flores had clashed with drove a vehicle into a car with civilians in it, killing everyone in a gruesome fashion. The woman was still in shock when she got out of the truck, but
Flores sprang into action: “I guess she thought I was still mad at her because she just stood there and didn’t say anything. So I hugged her. She started crying” (26). Flores knows that this woman and others like her were not trained to handle combat stress because they were not in combat roles. What is more, even though Flores successfully used her experience and skills to help others—and appropriately employed a domestic practice when it became necessary—the care that Flores provided was inadequate and not reinforced by the leadership or institutionally by the Army. At nearly every turn, Lonely suggests that the military is systematically failing women, and the issues that get ignored or disregarded have major consequences for the lives of women veterans.

**Lindsey Ferrentino’s Ugly Lies the Bone**

To conclude this discussion of female soldiers, I would like to turn to a story that does not involve the failure of the military or a woman dealing with sexual assault. Jess, the female veteran in *Ugly Lies the Bone* (*Ugly*), learns to cope with the severe injuries that resulted from her third tour of duty in Afghanistan. Jess’s experiences are different than the other women who have been depicted here, but these experiences are also important to consider. I like to think that Jess could be one of the women that Helen Benedict interviewed for her project who only had positive things to say about their military experience overall, barring the trauma they incurred as a result of a combat situation. Benedict quotes one soldier who said, “In the civilian world, you’d never have a twenty-three-year-old in charge of people’s lives and millions of dollars worth of supplies like I was” (qtd. in *Private War* 3). What Lindsey Ferrentino reveals about Jess’s military life is that as she was finishing her college degree, the military offered her a big bonus to return for another tour. The bonus was appealing because Jess’s mother has Alzheimer’s, her condition was worsening, and she needed money for her mother’s care. Like Jess, many of the
soldiers in *Lonely* spoke about the signing bonus and financial security being offered by the Army as the main reason they enlisted.

The major difference between the women in *Lonely* and Jess is that Jess experienced a physical disability in addition to her mental one. Jess has received care from the military, and she has spent fourteen months in the hospital recovering from injuries incurred after she encountered an improvised explosive device. Like the women in *Lonely*, Jess tries to start her civilian life back up again, but unlike the other women, she does not hold the military responsible for her actions. Jess does not provide much detail about her military experiences. Still, she has complicated feelings about her arrival home and is uncomfortable with the attention she received at the homecoming party that was thrown for her. Considering the variety of war stories told in this dissertation, Jess’s story is not a typical one for any soldier, especially for women soldiers.

The last severely injured veteran discussed in this section killed herself as soon as she got the chance to do so. Stryk’s play was cynical and critical, whereas Ferrentino’s is looking to show how a soldier can move forward after experiencing a major trauma. What is more, Ferrentino allows audiences to experience the awkwardness and uncomfortable interactions that Jess experiences as she tries to have a normal, ordinary life. For example, when Jess runs into Stevie—her ex-boyfriend and (tentative) current friend—he rambles uncomfortably before telling her, “I don’t […] ah. I really don’t know what to say” (19). When Jess becomes defensive about what he is saying and how he is reacting to her scars, he tells her “I’m tryin’ t’be nice” (21). She responds saying, “TRY HARDER” (21). In his review, Isherwood praises *Ugly* for just this reason. He argues that plays like this one present “unflinching portraits … of the transitions of wounded veterans back to society [that] are hard to come by outside journalism.”
The play dramatizes Jess’s small victories on her journey to accepting herself and her changed circumstances, such as driving to the gas station to turn in her scratch-off lotto ticket, and her setbacks, which includes a panic attack she has after seeing the rocket fuel burn as a space shuttle blasts off from the Kennedy Space Center. Moreover, the audience is given access to a rare setting, an injured soldier’s therapy sessions. Ferrentino was inspired to write the play by Snow World, a real therapeutic virtual reality video game used to help veterans who have sustained extensive burns (Green). The virtual reality game helps Jess manage her pain and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. The play begins with Jess in the virtual world and the Voice, her therapist, introducing the game to Jess and asking her to consider what she would like the landscape to look like. In the real game, Snow World takes place is an icy landscape, and Ferrentino modified the concept so that Jess needs to select a place that makes her feel comfortable, which is a major plot point. On stage, the virtual reality simulation is made with projections and lights. According to Jesse Green, the simulation sequences are so interesting because “[e]verything that happens in the social scenes is banal compared to the therapy.” While the virtual reality sets are indeed spectacular, I disagree with Green’s judgment on the other scenes. I think that in the larger context of war plays, Ugly presents an important narrative. Responding to calls—like Bart Pitchford’s—for more nuanced portrayals of moral injuries and post-traumatic stress on the contemporary U.S. stages, Ferrentino challenges the ways PTS and trauma are usually depicted. She does so by dramatizing the effects of a long separation and Jess’s grave physical injuries on her family, providing a window into a veteran’s therapy, and staging Jess’s interior efforts towards accepting a new normal. In doing so, Ferrentino opens the door for more dramas focusing on the stories and struggles of female veterans.
As part of her reintegration journey, Jess feels adrift in the society she is trying to rejoin in the midst of a major economic crisis in her town. She lives in Titusville, Florida near the Kennedy Space Center, and the play takes place in 2011 when NASA ended the shuttle program. The town is dealing with the economic repercussions of it, and other people Jess knows—mostly represented by Stevie—feel likewise adrift as their hometown changes irrevocably. Home is the place where Jess always wanted to return. When her therapist asks her to imagine what paradise looks like for her, she mentions her hometown: “The whole time I was over, I thought about coming back. And I did—because this is my home. It's the only place I've ever called that” (48). The changes her town is now undergoing are a metaphor for the changes that Jess has experienced. She knows every nook and cranny of her hometown and sees that it is changing. Through Jess’s virtual reality treatments, her therapist explains that she must keep moving forward: “Forward motion is how you’ll survive” (48). As the town changes, so must Jess, but accepting change of that magnitude is difficult. Jess comes to accept the changes to her mind, body, life, and town, and her family and friends also learn how to deal with them—especially when it comes to her injuries and scars—as well as the ones occurring in their own lives.

As Jess takes significant steps toward accepting her new life, the final scene with her mother is particularly important. Up to this point, Kacie, Jess’s sister, has cared for her and nudged her forward throughout her reintegration. Ferrentino describes Kacie as someone “trying hard for positivity” and as someone who does not share Jess’s sharp tongue and sarcastic humor (5). Kacie is just as hardheaded as Jess and keeps insisting that Jess visit their mother at the care facility where she lives. Their argument has a familiar tone and is presented within a whirlwind of short dialogue exchanges that communicate Jess’s distress. However, Jess finally tells Kacie why she has been so reluctant to see their mother. The answer is likely something Kacie already
knew, but Jess needed to hear herself say it: “Kacie…she is NOT going to recognize me” (47). The stage directions indicate that Jess says those words with “venom” and that Kacie leaves the room upset (47). Kacie has been pushing her sister so that Jess can see how resilient she is and assist with her reintegration. This interaction also reveals a key vulnerability that Jess has—she is afraid of not being recognized, especially by her mother. When she first saw Stevie, he did not recognize her, but when she talks with him about her appearance, he says that it is hard to look at her because “[y]our eyes’re—still—they’re like—still the same” (40). Jess is afraid that her mother will react like Stevie has done—with anxiety and distress. However, Jess’s physical appearance does not even register for her mother. When Kacie brings her home to visit, she is having a bad day, imagining that she just dropped her school-aged daughters off at school. When Jess introduces herself to her mother, she says “What’s wrong with you? You don’t think I don’t know my own daughter? ... If you wanna be Jess now, fine, but I like Jessica better” (63). After giving her daughter a hug, their mother goes to help Kacie set the table for lunch. The stage directions specify that her actions are “both mundane and perfect” (63). This mundane moment is what the play has been working towards and what makes it a unique and necessary contribution to the war play genre. Life will change. People will change. And it is these quiet moments of hope and normalcy that are important to a soldier’s reintegration. The play’s ending reinforces this mundane moment by turning the flashing projections of the virtual reality off and allowing Jess to stand confident and calmly alone on stage. She is on the roof—where she watched the NASA shuttle take off with Stevie days earlier—looking at the stars and listening for the sonic boom from the NASA shuttle indicating that it has safely returned home. This wordless scene suggests that Jess is hopeful for her future. In this moment, she is living in her
present reality appreciating how far she has come and understanding that she is up to the challenges ahead.

Chapter Conclusion

By revising what it means to be a woman and resisting the way that military culture has defined women soldiers, *Ugly* and the plays in this chapter underscore the contribution that women playwrights have made to the traditionally-male war play genre. Mangus from *Ajax in Iraq* briefly discusses how as a woman, she cannot be seen “having a little pity party” or “indulging” in comforts (16). Women have been stereotyped as being weak, and these stereotypes have been reinforced by arguments about their physical capabilities. In the face of this, Mangus and A.J. must project strength and propel anything that would make their gender an issue. The women of *Lonely* would agree with them. Maima from *Eclipsed*, on the other hand, uses her femininity as a source of personal strength and empowerment. To her, women can be hunters, while other women choose to be the hunted. Maima makes The Girl into a hunter by teaching her to kill and forcing her to betray other women by giving them to the men in their camp. When it comes to resisting the way that men define women in the military, *Ajax in Iraq* and *Lonely* highlight the derogatory and demeaning names women are called. Maima rejects many ways that women are defined as she can. She picks the men she wants to have sex with, refuses to cook and clean, and brings the spoils of war to The Girl and the women in the hut, which is something men have traditionally done. As for Jess, her recovery has shown that she is physically and mentally resilient. Although her injuries are severe, she has worked hard during her fourteen-month recovery to make it home. She needs all of her strength at home to continue her journey and works harder still to push past her physical and mental pain. As these plays demonstrate, sexual assault is only one of the many issues that surround the female soldier. With
more women participating in active combat, there are more women to tell those stories. I concluded my discussion of women-authored war plays with the female soldier because she puts the domestic on stage in ways that men do not. Men’s abilities to do their jobs as soldiers and be violent is not questioned as it is with women. Even though feminist movements have made major changes in the U.S. culture, these plays show that we still have a distance to go and must challenge our own assumptions about what it is to be a woman and a woman soldier.

**Dissertation Conclusion**

As this dissertation has demonstrated, women have stories to tell about war, and their stories have broadened the war play genre. Since the time of the Greeks, the genre has changed and responded to the new challenges of every war—as societies and the wars being waged change, so does the genre. As Rabe’s plays show with Vietnam, soldiers returned home disillusioned with the war and upset that people in the U.S. did not understand that disillusionment. In two of the plays discussed in this chapter, an emerging theme of the Iraq War is the frustration and betrayal soldiers felt when they were asked to participate in a seemingly aimless conflict without proper protection. The topic of war is adaptable, and regardless of its age, it is far from a weary or tired topic. The plays that have been discussed in this dissertation are a testament to the idea that war is still a fruitful object of study and there is still more to write about it.

Given the prevalence of war plays by women playwrights on the contemporary American stage, it may be worth considering whether this broad and diverse group of plays constitutes a genre in its own right. Genres are important and matter, as John Frow explains, because they are “central to human meaning-making” (10). Genres provide frames of reference for encountering new texts and for thinking about texts (and many other things) in relationship to other texts and
contexts. Defining genres, however, can be a difficult task, and the boundaries and benchmarks of a particular genre are arguable and complicated. When considering whether a body of texts can be considered a genre, Frow argues that a genre must have a set of formal features; “draw upon a set of highly conventional topics;” a “general structure of implication,” meaning that it relies upon the reader to have “relevant background knowledges;” “a rhetorical function;” and a “generic structure…which takes on the force of a regulative frame” (9-10). Importantly, the regulative frame “differentiates the genre of this text from other possible genres” (10). The question, then, is if these women-authored war plays are substantially different from contemporary American war drama and theatre more broadly? I do not think that they are. They do not have a separate rhetorical function or generic structure that serves as a regulative force from other contemporary American war plays. These women-authored war plays do, however, have a set of conventional topics, but that is not enough to consider it to be a separate genre. While the women-authored war play many not constitute its own genre, women playwrights have revived—and are continuing to revise—the broader war-play genre by making space for untold stories and re-seeing the genre with the perspectives of women and those who bear the heaviest costs of war.

Looking back on the contemporary U.S. women-authored war plays I have examined, I think the most important re-seeing that women playwrights have offered is the idea that war is about much more than an individual soldier because this figure belongs to a family, community, and nation. In addressing this issue, many of the dramatists I have discussed build on and revise David Rabe’s canonical trilogy. His trilogy dramatizes, with unprecedented complexity, the psychology of soldiers who fought the in Vietnam War, along with soldiers’ relationships with other men and other forms of community. Building on and critiquing the theatre of Rabe and
other male dramatists, women playwrights have challenged the traditional war narrative, and one of the important ways they have done so is by looking beyond the individual soldier and his bonds with other men. My second chapter is an excellent example of this. Mann’s Still Life demonstrates how far-reaching the effects of Mark’s service were on his family. In Stryk’s American Tet, Jim’s family still experiences new challenges directly resulting from his service and influences his son’s service. Twenty-five years later, Elaine still has questions about what happened to Jim and knows that the war has shaped their lives. Hudes’s Elliot Trilogy explores how war has impacted generations of a family and their community. In my third chapter, Vogel’s A Civil War Christmas broadens this topic by exploring the effects of war on a nation, using a large cast of historical figures and historical information. What is more, Vogel presents the truce that the New Wise Men make as a step along the path to peace for the nation. In chapter four, McLaughlin’s Ajax in Iraq connects the home-front problem of homeless veterans to the war and society’s failure to care for these veterans. War’s impact extends beyond the soldier and his family to many aspects (or arguably all aspects) of the public sphere, and women playwrights are likely to continue down this path as they continue to write about war.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, there is an obvious relationship between war and home in the war play genre, and the plays I have explored complicate a seemingly simple relationship. Early in my research, I was struck by the way that home and other domestic spaces can swiftly become war zones without the consent of the occupants, as they do in Nottage’s Ruined. Although Mama Nadi has battled to define her home and business by her own rules, the active conflict cares little for her rules and transforms her bar into a battleground. While Mama and the other women recover from their experience and continue to survive on the margins, the women, such as Salima, who have been ruined and raped over the course of the conflict
demonstrate how easily a woman’s own body can be violated and become a place in which war is waged. The sexual assaults dramatized and retold in this chapter demonstrate that U.S. women soldiers are not exempt from this war zone. In the plays set during the Civil War, the U.S. was simultaneously a war zone and a home. In *A Civil War Christmas*, the “war” or, rather, a refugee of the war walks right up to Elizabeth Keckley’s door. Generals Lee and Grant describe their fantasies of ending the war which would alter the landscape of their country’s soil with the bodies and blood of their enemies who were once their brothers and sisters. Bronson’s home was infiltrated before the war began when his wife was kidnapped from their front porch. *Father Comes Home from the Wars* presents a transhistorical examination of a home that is also a war zone, and racism is an integral aspect of Parks’s critique. Homer recognizes that the Boss-Master’s plantation has never been a home for him or his fellow slaves, which is why they need to run away from their enslavement. Parks also presents a complicated portrayal of a soldier’s homecoming through the character Hero/Ulysses, who alters his home and identity to create a privileged place for himself. In the process, Hero/Ulysses destroys the home he had with Penny and the love between them, which was one of the pillars of the home they created. Mann’s *Still Life* also reveals the link between domestic violence and war. Mark brought the home with him, altering his home and family, and he describes his wife Cheryl as a comrade and their home as a battlefield. Jim from *American Tet* and Ginny from *Elliot* use gardens as a coping mechanism. Jim uses the garden to preserve the war, whereas Ginny uses her energy to revitalize an abandoned lot into something that her family and community can enjoy. Throughout the plays discussed here, home is not a place where the weariness of war or the trauma inflicted by it are remedied or alleviated simply a veteran inhabiting that space. Indeed, homes come with their own challenges, conflicts, and dangers that were created before war ever figured into the
equation. Furthermore, some plays suggest that the root of wars comes from the home thereby forwarding the idea that home can never truly be a refugee.

However, these plays also demonstrate that homes occupied by people who care for each other do serve an essential role in mitigating the effects of war. *Eclipsed* provides a powerful illustration of this idea. The women in the hut care for each other, and Helena tries her best to protect them when she can. The bonds they create sustain them through the horrors they experience. The bond The Girl has with Helena is one of the forces that pulls her so tightly that she is frozen in place, while considering her decision to go or stay at the play’s end. In the *Elliot Trilogy*, Hudes demonstrates that family and community bonds are critical to the veteran’s successful reintegration. Even though Elliot cannot be relieved of his burden, it is buried in the backyard and becomes part of the family’s story to help future generations. In *American Tet*, Elaine helps military spouses integrate into their new community and to be prepared for the challenges ahead of them, even though her story demonstrates that there will be unsurmountable challenges ahead for them. In *Ugly*, Jess has worked hard to get home, but it is her family who helps her to face those final hurdles in her journey. Her hometown is changing, but her sister’s and mother’s love do not. Home can be a place in which a soldier receives care and can recover from war, but the healing it fosters is not an effortless process. Overall, the structure of a home is not nearly as important as the people who inhabit it and the bonds they have with each other.

Finally, as we have seen, war is a gendering activity that positions women to be privileged spectators of war and men to be the participants. Jean Gallagher explores this myth in her book about women artists in the period between the world wars, finding that the act of seeing is far from passive. When it comes to the woman-authored war play, the idea that women are privileged spectators is a deeply entrenched idea and harmful to women. No matter what their
role is—civilian observer, relative of a veteran, or soldier themselves—women have stories to
tell about war because they are never simply spectators, passive or otherwise. Vogel’s Keckley is
a good example of someone who could be a passive spectator in someone else’s play. Her son
died early in the war, but she works for the President and provides Christmas cheer to children
who have been impacted by war. Keckley, however, is not a passive spectator, and she
demonstrates that with a country at war there are no bystanders—everyone is involved in some
way. The female soldiers described here demonstrate that women can be active agents in war,
but the aggression that comes with that role is still something difficult to tackle. Viewing women
as spectators erases their suffering, especially considering the fact that war is sometimes waged
on women’s bodies. In particular, the idea that women are spectators of war erases the suffering
of severely disenfranchised women, like those in Ruined and Eclipsed. The same could be said
for Cheryl in Still Life, though she is more privileged than the other women.

By offering the experiences and perspectives of those who have been excluded from
traditional war plays, what many of these playwright advocate for is active witnessing. As
Ruined, American Tet, and Eclipsed illustrate, plays by women expand the narrative of war in
order to consider the full extent of its damage. They invite audiences to pay attention to the
effects of war and consider what their role might be to help alleviate the suffering of others.
War’s impact is wide-reaching, but—as a number of these plays suggest—something can be
done about it by looking for places in their communities and country to help those who have
been damaged. Revealing that war is part of the fabric of society is the first step to mitigating its
effects.
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Vita

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