

After war

The weight of life at Walter Reed

Reviewed by Anna Zogas

Zoë H. Wool, *After War: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 264 pp. (pb). \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6003-2.

After War is an elegant ethnographic account of the lives of severely wounded young American soldiers and their families residing at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. Zoë Wool examines soldiers' efforts to recover life through the ordinary (see Das 2007) in an analysis that foregrounds embodied experience. With great care, Wool shows how those efforts are laden with contradictions as 'soldiers' attempts to frame their past, present, and future selves as ordinary are foiled by . . . ubiquitous declarations of their exceptionality' (p. 114). The five empirical chapters of the book establish the ethnographic context and then trace life at Walter Reed from its most public dimensions to its most intimate. Chapter 1 depicts the atmosphere of postinjury life at Walter Reed. Chapter 2 combines archival and ethnographic data into a historical view of the institution and its symbolism. Chapter 3 focuses on very public encounters between soldiers and appreciative strangers. Chapter 4 explores soldiers' physical movement in space as a way of accessing the transformations they experience. Chapter 5 looks toward soldiers' futures through their intimate attachments to other people. Throughout, Wool evokes a contradictory and unstable ordinariness in which war, bodies severely injured in war, and heteronormative middle-class American life are both ordinary and extraordinary, linked 'in a precarious and suffocating relation' within the 'extra/ordinary' atmosphere of Walter Reed (p. 22).

After War complements ethnographies of biomedical knowledge production and medical care that focus on institutions as sites of bureaucratic and diagnostic labor, as well as studies of patients' and doctors' negotiations over care, including those written specifically about rehabilitation medicine at Walter Reed (for example, Messinger 2010). Wool focuses, uniquely, on dimensions of soldiers' lives that occur outside of their encounters with clinicians, and we see Walter Reed as a place where, for months or years, soldiers reside 'after being blown up and before being medically retired from the military' (p. 2). During Wool's fieldwork (2007–2008) these soldiers were outpatients, rehabilitating between or after surgeries and amputations. Readers become most familiar with the Fisher Houses, communal long-term residences on the grounds of military hospitals, housing both soldiers and their families. For soldiers living in the Fisher Houses, in Walter Reed's barracks, or in nearby hotel rooms, life is characterized by excesses of symbolic meaning and intense but fleeting moments of 'in-durable sociality' (pp. 52–60). Walter Reed's extra/ordinary atmosphere is characterized by juxtapositions of time, geography, and scale, all richly depicted in the first chapters. Ordinary life comes and goes in nighttime patio conversations and jokes between young spouses where glimpses of war are present but 'refuse to coalesce into a war story' (p. 37), in an off-post lunch with volunteers that requires careful consideration of a soldier's painful body, and in conversations between soldiers at the local pub where we see the 'sparse togetherness' (p. 47) of social relations that are at once intimate and impermanent.

Actual soldiers are faced with recurring collisions with the iconic figure of the soldier. Through an analysis of archived newspaper articles from Walter Reed's one-hundred-year history (chapter 2), Wool shows how nationalism, social obligation, and rehabilitative ideals create 'the impossibly cluttered space in which the soldiers . . . struggled to fashion ordinary lives' (p. 66). As one soldier and his wife wait around for hours before a photo-op with President George W. Bush – which they weren't told was happening – we see life punctuated with occasions when individual soldiers are pulled into the reproduction of this enduring symbolic field. Walter Reed is also filled with the material stuff, people, and events that constitute the post-9/11 economy of patriotism, including USO concerts, the donation rooms at the Fisher Houses, and many meals with appreciative volunteers (chapter 3).

After War is explicitly and deliberately not an ethnography of hospital biomedicine, and it is worth stating this because the productively conspicuous absence of doctors and diagnostics amplifies the resonance of Wool's commitment to exploring how extra/ordinary life is made through specific forms of sociality, precarity, movement, and intimacy. Wool's analysis of movement (chapter 4) takes us outside of Walter Reed's gates onto the streets of Washington, DC, where we see 'combat-connected transformations' in how soldiers walk in public and in their senses. Glimpses into soldiers' marriages and their relationships with their own parents, an overdose and its interpretation amongst Fisher House residents, and a

startling incident in which a soldier injured his wife are so intimate that it feels uncomfortable to witness such moments in strangers' lives (chapter 5). These are powerful reminders that life itself is at stake in soldiers' intimate relationships, and they implicate the reader in one of the most powerful dynamics of Wool's analysis: soldiers' lives at Walter Reed are simultaneously intimate and historical (p. 7). At the same time as they reconfigure their own intimate relationships, soldiers are national symbols: 'attachments and vulnerabilities to others are powerfully felt and the world and one's fleshy presence in it are marked by instabilities wrought by the incommensurability of being publicly bound to war while moving toward an anonymous American good life to come' (p. 189).

After War is indispensable to the anthropological literature on the United States military and the country's post-9/11 wars. Wool's perspective complements ethnographic studies of the ideological, cultural, and institutional dimensions of militarism and imperialism (for example, Lutz 2001) and studies that focus on soldiers' encounters with diagnostic categories and biomedical treatment (for example, Finley 2011). Beyond the book's insights into twenty-first-century warfare and post-9/11 America, its illumination of the 'vanishing point where the ordinary . . . and the extraordinary . . . flicker back and forth like some trick of the eye' (p. 5) makes *After War* a compelling model for any scholar thinking about the politics and poetics of ethnographic representation of people whose bodies and identities are overdetermined in one way or another.

About the author

Anna Zogas is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington. Her dissertation research is about mild traumatic brain injury and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system.

References

- Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Finley, Erin P. 2011. *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lutz, Catherine. 2001. *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century*. Boston: Beacon.
- Messinger, Seth D. 2010. 'Rehabilitating Time: Multiple Temporalities among Military Clinicians and Patients'. *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 29, no. 2: 150–69.