

‘You could see the marks all over’: Locating abject masculinities in Nico Walker’s *Cherry* and Roy Scranton’s *War Porn*

ABSTRACT

The veteran ‘hero’ is ubiquitous in the American cultural imaginary and goes largely unchallenged in dominant political and cultural discourse. This article examines the place occupied by the veteran in the cultural imaginary in relation to Nico Walker’s *Cherry* and Roy Scranton’s *War Porn*, which work to displace this narrative trope from a civilian readership’s engagement with war. Employing Claire Sisco-King’s notion of ‘abject hegemony’, I argue that these narratives succeed in this task of displacement by constructing ‘abject’ masculinities, affirming the emplacement of an ideology of hegemonic white masculinity. The logics of this ideology deny space to other voices, maintaining the primacy of the white male subject position in criticism of war. A critique of imperialism and civilian engagement with war must therefore take account of the place not only of the mythologised veteran hero, but also of the broader workings of hegemonic masculinity underpinning war and its representation.

KEYWORDS

War, veteran, hegemonic masculinity, heroism, abjection.

Introduction

Who, or what, enjoys privileged place in the cultural imaginary? In the UK, the COVID-19 outbreak has shone light on the rhetorical ligatures that bind a certain version of the NHS to the British imaginary: catchphrases like ‘thank you NHS’ and ‘clap for carers’ prove convenient ways to simultaneously focus on individual workers and maintain the service as a faceless and nebulous entity, leaving policy decisions – and all the important scrutiny that entails – largely out of the picture. In the USA, a similar privilege of place is reserved for the military. Roger Stahl interrogates this cultural axiom in his analysis of the rhetoric of ‘support the troops’. He argues that the movements of ‘deflection’ and ‘dissociation’ work in tandem to assert war as an unchangeable, inscrutable force against which individual soldiers must be protected, and to generate a soldier/civilian divide which maintains dissent to war as a personal and immoral attack on the soldier body (Stahl 2009, 535). This rhetoric is essential in securing and sustaining the special place of the soldier/veteran in the American cultural imaginary; it is replicated in the yellow ribbon, on bumper stickers, at sports matches, and in political speech.

Writer and veteran Roy Scranton considers the special place occupied by the soldier/veteran in the American imaginary in terms of the ‘myth of the trauma hero’. The trauma hero is a mythologised veteran hero who harbours an unspeakable truth of war and whose ‘redemptive arc of trauma to recovery’ functions as a scapegoat mechanism, absolving a civilian reader of guilt for American political violence committed abroad (Scranton 2018, 237). This mythology, he argues, is constructed through a certain set of conventions, which in turn shape political, cultural, and historical discourse. For Scranton, trauma hero narratives practice a dangerous

‘politics of forgetting that actively elides the question of what the US soldiers were fighting for and the bigger problem of whom they were killing, in favour of a narrower and more manageable question. “What was it like?”’ (2018, 234). While Hollywood and what Elliott Colla (2014) calls the ‘military-literary complex’ still cling to the myth of the trauma hero, narratives are beginning to emerge which challenge the primacy of this trope. Scranton’s own *War Porn* (2016) and Nico Walker’s *Cherry* (2018) both feature unsavoury, criminal veterans – a far cry from the troubled but sympathetic veteran of texts like Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2013) or in Clint Eastwood’s representation of Chris Kyle in *American Sniper* (2014). Puerile, misogynistic, nihilistic; a junkie bank robber and a war-criminal rapist, Walker and Scranton’s jarring and uncomfortable representations of veterans urge a reader to re-evaluate the cultural import we place on the homecoming veteran ‘hero’.

While *Cherry* and *War Porn* both characterise veterans in a way which problematises the hold of the veteran on the cultural imaginary, a closer reading of these texts reveals that the tools used to dismantle the narrative trauma hero are set in an ideology of hegemonic white masculinity. These texts therefore raise their own questions about the dimensions of critique of war and imperialism: Whose voice can claim authority? Who seeks to gain from this critique? Who loses out? To this end, this paper explores how the narrative ‘displacement’ of the mythologised trauma hero in *Cherry* and *War Porn* is contained within the contours of hegemonic white masculinity. This ideology mediates geo-political place in each text, from Iraq to America, places which are imbricated across white, male-embodied trauma and memory. I argue that this embodiment evinces Claire Sisco King’s conceptualisation the ‘abject’ male body and aligns with her notion of ‘abject hegemony’, a slippery ideological formation which enables the rejection of the masculinity mythologised in the ‘trauma hero’ trope, while sustaining the overarching hegemony of the white male subject position. In her analysis of David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), King understands Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject to include male bodies and subject positions, arguing that while much scholarship has focused on society’s punishment of the abject body, significant cultural privilege is placed on the abject male:

white masculinity is an abject formation, whose internal fissures, contradictions, and impossibilities allow it to accommodate a multitude of incarnations of what the ‘white’ and the ‘masculine’ can be. Culture does not afford hegemonic privilege to bodies and subjects that are easily contained but to ones that imagine and perform themselves as limitless, variable, adaptive. (King 2009, 370)

King identifies ‘abject hegemony’ as ‘the ongoing process with which ideological formations use their abjection toward hegemonic ends’ (2009, 370). This paper, then, suggests that Walker and Scranton’s texts construct abject masculinities in a way which simultaneously destabilises the trauma hero and affirms the limitless, inexorable workings of hegemonic white masculinity undergirding this critique. By invoking place both geo-politically and discursively, the abject white male in these narratives performs the double work of displacement and emplacement, displacing the trauma hero myth and affirming the abject hegemony of white masculinity.

‘Making sad faces’: *Cherry*’s abject addiction

Nico Walker's *Cherry* opens in a disorienting and chaotic present:

Emily's gone to take a shower. The room's half-dark and I'm getting dressed, looking for a shirt with no blood on it, not having any luck. The pants are fucked too – cigarette burns in the crotches. All heroin chic, like I were famous already. (Walker 2019, 3)

The continuous present tense of these first lines immerses the reader into the scene and precludes any sense of a beginning. A future voice bends back into the present moment with a metafictional nod to the writer's notoriety, blurring the lines between the writer and the narrative 'I'. This temporal compression takes a spatial dimension when it emerges that our narrator is about to inject a hit of heroin, as his sensations are concentrated through his body: 'It hurts a little extra when the needle's dull like this. It can make it hard to hit a vein' (Walker 2019, 5). Drew Leder describes pain as exerting 'a phenomenologically "centripetal" force, gathering space and time inward to the center. We are ceaselessly reminded of the here-and-now body' (Leder 1990, 76). Similarly, the narrator's experience of pain echoes through *Cherry* as a spatio-temporal contraction, which manifests in his preoccupation with his body. 'I'm on the floor and my balls are cold' he announces, coming to after overdosing, rousing the reader along with himself to his immediate, uncomfortable environment (Walker 2019, 5). Revealed to his consciousness on a cold kitchen floor, the narrator concentrates our attention on his embodiment; his balls are the 'thematic object' of his, and the reader's, experience (Leder 1990, 76). The white, male body is made visible in *Cherry* as physically marked and temporally rooted in a state of suspension by the effects of trauma and addiction. As Sally Robinson observes, 'there is something irresistible about the logic whereby white male angst gets represented in bodily terms' (2000, 6). *Cherry*'s prologue thus anticipates a collision of global and local crises coded in a crisis of white masculinity.

Exemplified in the prologue, temporal shifts and dislocations bridge two of *Cherry*'s core themes: trauma and addiction. Based on Walker's own experiences, the novel begins as a fairly classic war story of a college dropout who enlists in the US Army and is posted to Iraq as a combat medic. After completing a tour in Iraq, he returns to Cleveland, Ohio, burdened by the traumas he has witnessed at war. An occasional drug habit quickly transforms into an all-consuming heroin addiction, and the rest of the narrative sees the protagonist navigate life on heroin as he eventually turns to robbing banks to fund it. Walker's novel, then, is at once a war story and a story of the opioid epidemic that has been ravaging the United States, and particularly the Midwest where *Cherry* is set, since the mid-1990s. The particular conditions of the novel thus bridge Iraq and Cleveland, seemingly disparate places, as loci of crises of white masculinity: from a war whose justification relies on the revival of a masculinist white national identity, to a health epidemic interpreted largely in terms of blue-collar, industrial decline. In this section I argue that *Cherry* bridges Iraq and Cleveland through a slippage of form, reshaping the narrative from the war to the junk tradition, and this is in turn mediated by the marked white male body. In her analysis of the marked body as a trope of the crisis of post-60s white masculinity, Sally Robinson argues that since 'white masculinity has historically been understood as coterminous with the abstract individualism which an identity politics attempts to erode, white men have most often been understood as the victims of, but not participants in, identity politics' (2000, 4). On the contrary, she identifies white masculinity in

a ‘field of struggle for cultural priority’ and argues that within this field it practices its own identity politics. The core imagery through which this is achieved is the marked or wounded white male body (Robinson 2000, 6). Images of the marked body contribute to a slippery and adaptive configuration of white masculinity through which it appears as victimised while retaining hegemonic control of the dominant discourse. Engaging with Robinson’s critique in dialogue with King, I argue in this section that the marked body in *Cherry* feeds into an ideology of abject hegemony. While *Cherry*’s representation of veteran identity rejects the trope of the sanctified trauma hero, it still appeals to a wider crisis of white masculinity, broadening its co-ordinates from Iraq to Cleveland to insist on an expansive, adaptive, malleable hegemony.

Hailed by Christian Lorentzen of *Vulture* as ‘the first great novel of the Opioid Epidemic’, *Cherry* defies genre conventions to warp a familiar war narrative trajectory into one subsumed in twenty-first century crisis: from war to the global financial crash, unemployment and heroin addiction among the worst opioid epidemic the United States has ever seen (Lorentzen 2018). The story of an Iraq War medic turned heroin addict, *Cherry* bridges the Iraq War and the opioid epidemic as crises of masculinity at the site of the body. Walker alludes to the growing opioid crisis throughout the novel as his protagonist smuggles drugs like OxyContin and Percocet onto his base in Iraq, having ordered them from a seemingly unrestricted supply at home. When he returns to his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, the unnamed narrator-protagonist (known as Cherry) continues to use OxyContin and other drugs before eventually getting hooked on heroin. His body bears the marks of both these crises – echoing the legacy of the Vietnam War, Cherry is juxtaposed next to his girlfriend: ‘She was like a girl in a magazine. She had that whole flawless complexion thing going for her. She looked good in the sunlight whereas I looked bad’ (Walker 2019, 200). *Cherry* puts forward an embodied image of the white male identity crisis that followed the Vietnam War, as veterans lamented their supposed diminished position in society compared to the advancements made by the civil rights and feminist movements. Susan Jeffords (1989) articulates this identity crisis through what she calls the ‘remasculinisation’ of national identity following the Vietnam War, spearheaded by the media, culture and political industries. We see this drive echoed in Scranton’s notion of the ‘redemptive arc’ of trauma to recovery characterised in the trauma hero of contemporary war narratives. However, Sally Robinson warns against viewing a crisis of masculinity in terms of a teleological drive, arguing that the rhetorical conventions of the ‘crisis of masculinity’ ‘depend on a sense of prolonged tension; the announcements of crisis are inseparable from the crisis itself, as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity’ (2000, 11). Dwelling in a space of crisis are masochistic narratives that take pleasure in depictions of the white male body in pain to brandish as evidence of disempowerment (Robinson 2000, 11). Similar to Robinson’s argument, *Cherry* displays in corporeal terms a white masculinity dwelling in crisis, tracing a crisis of masculinist national identity (the invasion and occupation of Iraq) to a crisis of localised identities competing in a globalised world (the opioid epidemic). Cherry’s marked body, then, is situated at the nexus of war, trauma and addiction:

You could see the marks all over from where the sand fleas had been
at me the summer before, when I’d been out in the marshes and the shit

canals and that. I hadn't been eating much of late either, and I had the cocaine physique. And there were the cigarette burns too, as the tendency in those days was to burn myself with cigarettes whenever I got down in the dumps. All in all I was a stray dog with the mange.
(Walker 2019, 200)

In contrast to the wounds he witnesses as a medic in Iraq, Cherry's body physically bears the inconvenient but nonetheless inconsequential pockmarks of flea bites – the marks not of a sudden violent and completed action but of a place's gradual inscription of itself upon his skin. This accompanies a sense of stagnation conferred in the abject 'marshes and the shit canals', materialising Robinson's argument of a 'prolonged tension' or a crisis that dwells upon itself by drawing attention to the white male body as marked. This prolongation is fixed by the palimpsestic effect of cumulative intersecting crises on Cherry's body. From Iraq's flea bites, to cocaine's emaciating effect, to his combat trauma's cigarette burns, these marks converge the seemingly disparate places; Cherry's body stands out as what Edward Casey calls 'inter-place', 'in which the two epicenters of the here and the there are brought into concrete connection' (Casey 2000, 196). His body contains the memory of overlapping place, and fixes him between these 'epicenters' as a vector through which white masculinity asserts itself through a discourse of geopolitical crisis.

Marked by these intersecting crises, Cherry embodies the 'abject male body', which Claire Sisco King identifies as feeding into an 'abject hegemony' (2009, 366). Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the continual process through which we define the borders of our subjectivity by 'abjecting' that which is Other. The abject emphasises the permeability of the self, manifesting in entities that threaten the divide between subject and object, self and other: corpses, blood, shit, vomit (Kristeva 1982, 2). With drugs smuggled into the base in Iraq and the marks of war inscribed on the addicted body at home, the imbrication of the war and the domestic opioid crisis parallels this permeability of the self, rendering Cherry's body abject; an artefact of the collision of these crises. King draws attention to the Kristevan distinction between the state of being abject – 'to transgress boundaries and be "subversive" of the stability of representational systems' – and the process of abjection itself; the rejection of the abject to maintain the stability of our subjectivity and society (2009, 369). In her analysis of David Fincher's *Fight Club*, King rejects this dichotomy, arguing that subjects and societies never achieve the rejection of the abject: 'While subjectivity is typically imagined as whole, fully formed, and coherent, I understand subjects as de/composed by ambiguity, uncertainty, impossibility: the abject is not outside Other but the subject's "alter ego." The abject is the "foreigner" within' (King 2009, 370). Arguing that hegemony is marked and maintained by ruptures which allow for its constant growth and reassemblage, she contends that hegemonic white masculinity is an 'abject formation' (King 2009, 370). The abject state of Cherry's body is evident in its juxtaposition next to his girlfriend: their contrasting images embody the state's jettisoning of the abject to maintain its own borders (Walker 2019, 200). These abjected realities – the fallout of imperialism, wars, deregulation and neoliberal reform – are unsavoury but necessary to the state's maintenance of itself as 'healthy' and 'whole'. However, as King notes, 'neither subjects nor cultures ever fully rid themselves of the abject, or even want to, for that matter' (2009, 370). Similarly, Cherry's abject body exemplifies the public's fascination with the abject white male. In the same way that *Fight Club's* portrayal of fluid male bodies and subjectivities

reflects ‘hegemonic masculinity’s impulse to create multiple, even mutually exclusive, versions of itself’, so does Cherry embody the perennial hold of abject white masculinity, in its various forms, on the cultural imagination. The text – and indeed his body as text – constitutes a war narrative, so-called ‘poverty porn’, and a junk narrative; all strongholds of cultural intrigue in the (de)formations of white masculinity.

As a junk story, *Cherry* plays with narrative convention to displace the trauma hero trope from the centre of our reading experience. Like others in the junk tradition, *Cherry*’s narrative is steeped in negative space. ‘When I was gonna kill myself I went to the VA hospital’ he mentions, deferring his suicide attempt into the subordinate clause (Walker 2019, 201). This type of literary chiaroscuro reinforces a sense of subjective detachment from the society around him and is repeated in his negotiation of his embodiment within this shadowy space. As I have mentioned, Drew Leder’s notion of the ‘present-absent’ body is useful to understand how Cherry negotiates his abject embodiment. Leder notes that the body in its ‘normal’ state is ‘disappearing’: it recedes from the consciousness as it denies being the ‘thematic object’ of our experience (1990, 27). On the other hand the body in pain is ‘dys-appearing’; it affirms its presence to the consciousness by the semblance of being, paradoxically, ‘something foreign to the self’ (Leder 1990, 76). Crucial to its configuration as abject, Cherry’s addicted body is constantly articulated as something foreign. He repeats a fixation on facial imagery, recurrent in the meiotic refrain ‘making sad faces’ (Walker 2019, 250): withdrawal leaves him ‘making sad faces’; his dealer is ‘making sad faces’ when he loses his stash; even his untrained dog is left ‘making sad faces’ when forced to exist in a soiled diaper. Cherry manipulates his face as an object and experiences it as an alien presence, severing the intersubjective ties that connect him to others and the reader and rooting that foreign, abject Other firmly within the borders of his ‘centripetal’ self (Leder 1990, 76). As Robinson argues, white masculinity finds itself in a ‘double bind’, being invisible as the cultural standard-bearer and equally benefitting from a social ‘visibility’ that marginalised identities do not share – white masculinity is invisible *because* it is visible (2000, 1-2). In ‘dys-appearing’, then, Cherry embodies this visible invisibility of white masculinity, and his grasp of his face as Other emphasises his addicted, abject subjectivity as, in King’s words, the ‘foreigner within’. This interior subjective state is what roots him in Robinson’s notion of a tension or prolonged crisis. Bridging Iraq and Cleveland, war and junk, political and social, he maintains the expansive contours of white masculinity as an ideological formation, while paradoxically folding inward; his abject self afferent and interior.

Indeed, far from completing the redemptive arc of the trauma hero, *Cherry* ends abruptly and, like its temporally ambiguous beginning, precludes any sense of an ending to Cherry’s cyclical, interior existence. The novel’s concluding lines read:

I put the needle in my arm. The needle was dull so it pushed the vein away when it was going in. But the vein couldn’t run forever. I felt a little pop and my blood flashed in the rig. I sent it home. (Walker 2019, 313)

His conceptualisation of his body in these final lines reaffirms his abject embodiment. True to King’s notion of the abject as the ‘foreigner’ within, he witnesses a conflict of self and otherness, as both an integral part of the embodied self’s experience of addiction (‘I put the

needle in *my* arm') while also taking on agency of its own that must be overpowered (it 'couldn't run forever'). These last lines mirror the novel's prologue: 'It hurts a little extra when the needle's dull like this. It can make it hard to hit a vein' (Walker 2019, 5). Echoing again Leder's 'here-and-now body', these two scenes reproduce the cyclical, 'here-and-now' nature of addiction by bookending the text with scoring and shooting up. This potentially endless repetition dismantles the redemptive arc of the trauma hero and denies the reader our desired role in his teleological drive to recovery. However, by conforming to a cyclical structure, the text formally aligns itself with Robinson's notion of the 'prolonged tension' of white masculinity in crisis. While the text rejects conceptualising veteran identity within the parameters of the myth of the trauma hero, it nevertheless appeals to ideological structures which nurture and sustain the primacy of the white male subject position within a framework of abject hegemony, evoking a reader's simultaneous disgust and desire in the abject male. My argument now turns to Roy Scranton's *War Porn*, in which this model of disgust and desire takes a troubling turn as a framework through which to consider questions of masculinity, violence and agency in the representation, and consumption, of war.

'I just held the camera': Abject images in *War Porn*

Like Cherry, the homecoming veteran in Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2016) is far removed from the veteran hero typical of popular American literary, cultural and political discourse. The novel appears as Scranton's narrative response to his own critique of the trauma hero, as discussed in this paper's introduction. Whereas *Cherry* follows the singular perspective of a veteran protagonist who is self-centred and apathetic, evading characterisation within a binarism of hero or villain, *War Porn* takes a polyphonic narrative structure which includes the perspectives of Iraqi and American civilians in addition to those of US military personnel. Through the collective perspective of civilian guests to a barbecue in Utah, a reader is also exposed to a veteran recently returned to the US who is unequivocally a criminal and a villain. Aaron Stojanowski is introduced early in the narrative in the story titled 'Strange Hells (Columbus Day, 2004)', which is split between the beginning and end of the text. Against a crowd of liberal-left millennials, he is immediately marked as something dark and foreign: 'Somebody watching: a lean man at the gate with black hair cut close, face taut and flat, lips compressed in a line like a trick of the fading light' (Scranton 2016a, 16). Similar to *Cherry*, he occupies a negative, marginal space, alluding to his abject position among a civilian crowd invested in the sense of nationhood maintained by the veteran mythology. The barbecue guests fall back on tired clichés of war narrative which sustain the supposed soldier/civilian divide, querying his personal experiences of Iraq and thanking him 'for his service' (Scranton 2016a, 27). When a guest attempts to probe the political circumstances of the occupation of Iraq, she is berated for unduly attacking the veteran: evoking, like *Cherry*, the legacy of Vietnam, her girlfriend protests, 'You may as well have called him baby killer. We don't *do* that anymore' (Scranton 2016a, 34). The discourse that Scranton conjures around Aaron in this story suggests a stifled conversation that is bound up in taboo; one in which the only accepted line is of no-questions-asked veneration for the veteran. This mirrors his own argument in 'The Trauma Hero' that the discourse around the veteran indulges in a 'politics of forgetting' the damage for which the military is responsible, in favour of a narrow perspective of the veteran's personal experience and psychological turmoil (Scranton 2018, 234). It also narrativises the workings

of deflection and dissociation identified by Stahl in the rhetoric behind ‘supporting the troops’, suggesting that this discourse seeps into, and is perhaps the most potent, in even the most young, liberal, educated circles.

By the end of the novel, when ‘Strange Hells’ is resumed, the redemptive arc of the trauma hero is totally severed as Aaron is revealed to have been a guard in a prison strikingly similar to Abu Ghraib. After sharing disturbing and incriminating photos of torture and abuse with the host of the barbeque, the narrative ends with Aaron raping another of the hosts in her home. In an interview with Nick Flynn, Scranton said of *War Porn*’s ending:

I wanted to fuse the generic expectations readers might have, given the dramatic structure, for some moment of redemption or truth or resolution, with a sudden, destabilizing act of violence that, in retrospect, appears totally inevitable. I wanted readers to feel complicit in the violence, implicated by their narrative desire. (Scranton 2016b)

Scranton’s novel tempts the reader to hold out for a redemptive ending before pulling the rug out from under her feet and revealing a disturbing reality about war and those who return from it. As a narrative device, however, this ‘destabilizing act of violence’ is specifically gendered – leaving us to question the cost at which this narrative destabilisation occurs. As I will shortly discuss, the very gendered tools that Scranton employs appeal to, and ultimately re-assert, the logics of a violent formation of hegemonic masculinity.

Like *Cherry*, *War Porn* performs a displacement of the trauma hero from its privileged position in the cultural imaginary. He does this not only morally, characterising the veteran as a violent criminal, but also structurally, through a slippage of place from Baghdad to Utah. Whereas *Cherry*’s structure implies cyclicity, *War Porn* instead follows a ‘nesting dolls’ structure, which literally centres the perspective of Qasim, an Iraqi maths professor who witnesses with his family the United States’ invasion of Baghdad. Containing this narrative is the perspective of Wilson, an unlikely soldier who is gradually acclimatised to military culture, and bookending the text is ‘Strange Hells’. Baghdad thus seeps from the centre to the margins of the text through speech, memories, and images. Excerpts titled ‘Babylon’ also emanate like shockwaves across the narrative, representing the American collective consciousness as ‘babble’ produced by the media, culture, and political industries in support of the invasion: newspaper clippings, quotes from films, song lyrics. The centrality of the veteran is literally displaced into the edges of the text, and the Iraqi perspective occupies the heart of the narrative, accompanied by expansive and perceptive depictions of the domestic, quotidian spaces touched by the invasion. This central story, ‘The Fall’, signals a desire on Scranton’s part to draw attention to the human toll of the war by interweaving the voices of civilian witnesses whose individualised, idiosyncratic lives are each tainted by the intrusion of a hostile invading force.

While *War Porn* takes a big step in decentring the white veteran perspective, the text nevertheless struggles to enact this decentring outside the contours of hegemonic white masculinity and it ultimately, cynically, ends up appealing to the logics of this ideology. The memory of Qasim and of Baghdad deflagrate from the centre to the end of the text in the form of memories and images shared by the white soldier, be that Wilson or Aaron. Wilson conjures the memory of Qasim, who had taken employment as an interpreter for the United States shortly

after the invasion; Qasim's bloodied image then haunts the final half of 'Strange Hells' as it emerges he is a subject of Aaron's photographs, the victim of some of the worst abuse inflicted at the facility. While Qasim is starkly present at junctures throughout the second half of the novel, his memory is nonetheless mediated along a topography of hegemonic white masculinity, reified in the embodied and digital memories of the white, male soldier/veteran. The images produced by Aaron and shared on a computer screen in rural Utah bridge place in the same way as Cherry's body. Urging 'click forward...next...' Aaron's insistence on pressing ahead with the photo presentation conveys not the stagnant, 'prolonged tension' evinced in *Cherry* but instead a perversion of the teleological drive of the trauma hero narrative structure (Scranton 2016a, 317). He doggedly pushes forward not to a final redemptive moment but to increasingly horrifying images, which later culminates in the perverse re-enactment of this abuse in his rape of Dahlia. Drawing upon Edward Casey's work on place and remembering, Barbara Kowalczyk argues that the prison is 're-implaced' by Aaron's body in this scene: 'For Aaron, re-implacing involves both return – deep mental immersion – and recurrence. [The prison] is an embodied space, an Iraqi living room which dwells within the veteran and affects his enactments in the Utah bedroom' (Kowalczyk 2019, 12). For Kowalczyk, Aaron embodies what Casey calls 'idiolocality', carrying 'the peculiarities of place in its very flesh' (Casey in Kowalczyk 2019, 13). While this analysis interprets how the violent memory of the war is transferred from the 'front line' back to the 'home front', it does not account for how this process is mediated and sustained by an ideology of hegemonic white masculinity. As I shortly discuss, the 're-implacement' of the abuse through Aaron's body gestures to the dominance of white masculinity through the assertion of an abject hegemony which is inevitable, intransigent, and endorsed among the culture and society it contains.

In his short essay 'War Porn', Jean Baudrillard considers the abject nature of the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib. Compared to 9/11, which was an 'absolute event', he regards Abu Ghraib 'a non-event of an obscene banality, the degradation, atrocious but banal, not only of the victims, but of the amateur scriptwriters of this parody of violence' (Baudrillard 2006, 86). For Baudrillard, war as 'pornography', exemplified in these images, shows 'the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power' (2006, 86). Clearly inspired by Baudrillard's essay, Scranton's *War Porn* plays with the notion of these images as simulacra, feeding them into a wider media-driven simulation of war by abstracting them into further simulacra within the narrative. While Abu Ghraib is mentioned in the text and is a component of the narrative's world-making, Aaron's images come from the fictional 'Camp Crawford'. Paired with the 'Babylon' sections, Scranton's reproduction of these simulacra force a reader to consider their own position within the 'hyperreality' of these contemporary wars through an aggressive media cycle and consumer-driven publishing circles. *War Porn's* images of abuse echo Baudrillard's understanding of the images of Abu Ghraib as abjections of war. 'It's all a big show we put on' Aaron explains to his spectator, Matt, signalling these images as 'parody' of violence, jettisoned from the war to appear on the home front on a computer screen, compacted as digital images with the potential to be shared indefinitely (Scranton 2016a, 317). When Matt resists, Aaron retorts, 'nobody's making you look. All you gotta do is pull out' (Scranton 2016a, 311). But Matt doesn't pull out – he watches

the entire slideshow, implicating himself within the simulation. Sontagian questions of desensitisation aside, Matt's attention also speaks to the photos as abject and the nature of their position in an ideology of abject hegemony. As King notes, and as demonstrated equally in *Cherry*, cultural privilege is often afforded to the abject white male:

Understanding these men [as abject] helps to account for the public fascination they seem to elicit, whether or not they are found desirable or disturbing (or both); and, in many cases, this fascination, even when coupled with fear, translates into cultural privilege or, at the very least, historical prominence. (2009, 381)

Matt's inability to 'pull out' (converging militaristic and phallic connotations) of the photo slideshow draws attention to the abject status not only of the photos but of Aaron within this place. If, as Kowalczyk argues, Aaron 'reimplaces' the prison into the barbeque setting, and carries the 'peculiarities' of the prison 'in its very flesh', then Aaron's body acts as the abject vector for the transmission of the images and eventual reproduction of the abuse in the Utah bedroom. Aaron is the abject foreigner within this setting, an outside entity which, for all the disgust he elicits, is never fully rejected by the subjects or cultures he inhabits. Reaffirming Georges Bataille's work on the abject, King contends that 'that desire and disgust are inextricable [...] attraction toward and fear of the abject always coexist' (2009, 369). When Matt re-enters the party having seen the images, he regards the unassuming group of millennials and wonders, 'maybe they already know...' (Scranton 2016a, 329). Operating within the dimensions of this hyperreality and heightened by the effects of the weed they have smoked, Matt's paranoia speaks both to the images' abstraction from 'reality' and to the lurking presence and acceptance of the abject within society.

It is clear in this text that Scranton is aiming to replicate the structures of media and consumption at the heart of Baudrillard's work and which he applies to his analysis of Abu Ghraib. If these images are an abject 'parody', or in Aaron's words a 'show', then the question arises of who can claim agency when enmeshed in these structures. Scranton ensures that Matt, even when given the option, does not and cannot 'pull out' of the slideshow, alluding to the Baudrillardian idea that as individuals we have no option but to consume what is presented to us by a media cycle offering versions that become further and further abstractions of true reality. In this process, Aaron's agency is also compromised and he is absolved of his responsibility for these crimes; his refrain throughout 'Strange Hells' is 'I just held the camera', as if his complicity is an inevitable component of the process of 'parody' and 'abjection' of the war. To return to Scranton's own comments on Aaron, that his crimes should seem 'inevitable', his rape of Dahlia then becomes another part of this process – his 're-implacement' in the Utah bedroom, to use Kowalczyk's words, works in a way which is beyond Aaron's control. To this end, Aaron's victims are figured as 'inevitable' pawns in an 'inevitable' game, and Dahlia's rape appears as another simulacrum and the logical next step in this process of abject abstraction. If, in Scranton's words, a reader is to feel complicit in this 'destabilizing act of violence', it is not only because of their narrative desire for redemption, but is also due to the logics of a violent hegemonic masculinity which bears a perennial hold on the cultural imaginary. If abject hegemony is 'the ongoing process with which ideological formations use their abjection toward hegemonic ends' (King 2009, 370), the rape scene figures both as the

product of the cumulative abjection of the white male— the embodied artefact of the Camp Crawford’s war crimes – and as a statement of the domination of women under hegemonic masculinity. Further, by presenting Aaron as an abject inevitability, something we doubly fear and desire, the text enters dangerous ‘asking for it’ territory: Aaron and the aggressive, abject hegemony he embodies is figured as the logical response to the desires of the consumer-citizen. Scranton might have jolted a reader into questioning her faith in the redemptive trauma hero narrative, but *War Porn* also advises us that as participants in and consumers of the media cycle – the ‘babble’ of the war on terror – we are immobilised to envision any fruitful alternatives. The trauma hero successfully displaced from our reading experience, all we are left with is the exposed machinations of hegemonic white masculinity, for Scranton as immovable as it is inevitable.

Conclusion

As an ideological formation, hegemonic masculinity has an adaptive and expansive hold on the narrative structures of *Cherry* and *War Porn*. Tightly woven through these narratives, it mediates discursive and geopolitical configurations of place through encounters, discourses and memories, from the ‘front line’ in Iraq to the ‘home front’ in the USA. The construction of the white male body as abject reveals how abject hegemony expands, reassembles, and asserts itself, even in texts which seek to otherwise dismantle ideological conventions. In *Cherry*, this means a reader’s narrative desire to engage with a redemptive arc of a homecoming veteran hero is disrupted, but is ultimately deferred and satiated by other means: the trauma hero no longer the centre of our reading experience, we focus instead on the abject white male and the social, political, and geographical discourses subsumed in his abject, addicted body. Whereas *Cherry*’s subjective stagnation suggests a crisis of masculinity, *War Porn* locates a crisis in the interactive cycle between the media, Hollywood, the publishing industry, and the consumer-citizen. In his efforts to jolt the reader into acknowledging the Baudrillardian hyperreality in which we participate when we consume versions of the Iraq War – trauma hero narratives, digital images, *War Porn* itself – Scranton displaces the trauma hero from our imaginary by insisting on a configuration of abject masculinity which is at once inevitable, unchanging and even desired by the society he inhabits. If, as Roger Stahl (2009) suggests, the rhetoric of ‘support the troops’ asserts war as an intransigent, inscrutable monolith, then *War Porn* challenges this assumption not by doing away with it altogether, but by rendering hegemonic white masculinity in its place. The object of fear and disgust, intrigue and desire, this ideology is embodied in the abject veteran Aaron. The dominance of hegemonic masculinity reaches its apex at the end of the novel, where a civilian woman is raped, having expressed a suggestive sexual desire for the abject veteran throughout. Scranton’s intention is clearly to shock, to sever a reader’s narrative expectations and force us to re-evaluate the affective weight we attribute to war narratives. The point remains, however, that this is achieved problematically, by employing a narrative device that revels in sexual violence against women. Not only does this cynically assume that a readership will not be shocked *enough* by the revelation of Aaron’s war crimes at Camp Crawford, it also punctuates the narrative with an aggressive and specifically gendered act of violence which underscores the workings of hegemonic masculinity.

The tools used in both *Cherry* and *War Porn* to displace the mythologised veteran hero from our cultural imaginary make explicit use of the gendered discourses used to justify warmongering and imperialism. For *Cherry*, this comes in the form of an emphasis on white masculinity as in stasis, in crisis. While this deflects attention from the Iraq War itself, it nevertheless contains an implicit plea for remasculinisation such as that which followed the Vietnam War and which haunted the discourse behind the wars in Iraq. In *War Porn*, the process of displacing the trauma hero from the cultural imaginary comes at the expense of emplacing a discourse of hegemonic white masculinity through the image of the violated female body. Scranton thus struggles to articulate a critique of civilian engagement with the Iraq War outside the contours of a violent hegemonic masculinity. Both *Cherry* and *War Porn*, then, displace one ideological formation while ratifying another. To truly critique the representation and consumption of war among a civilian audience, it is not sufficient to dismantle the narrative desire for the trauma hero – we must also consider the pervasive cultural appetite for representations of abject masculinity; indeed, we must interrogate the ‘place’ not only of the trauma hero but of hegemonic white masculinity in the cultural imaginary. To this end, then, we must reach further afield than the veteran writer for critiques of imperialism – to forms and perspectives which challenge the primacy not of the trauma hero but of the white male subject position as the voice of critique of war.

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