

Conceptualizing the Embodied Front: An Analysis of *Born on the Fourth of July*

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In this paper I conduct an analysis of Ron Kovic's memoir, Born on the Fourth of July, in order to conceptualize 'the embodied front.' Utilizing theoretical work done on embodiment and masculinity, I argue that the embodied front produces a holistic approach to interrogating the impact of war on a society. The embodied front emphasizes how lived expressions of combat shape the lives and interactions of soldiers and society after soldiers return home from war. This perspective ultimately loosens the front from the grips of geographical location and places it within the very subjectivity of those experiencing combat. By focusing on men's experiences in combat, I isolate one component of the embodied front: masculine subjectivity. Such an analysis helps unravel the ways in which combat and masculine subjectivity are intimately interconnected.

The front, as a conceptual frame for understanding war, needs to be reconceived as a multidimensional site that includes not only the geographical landscape where fighting is taking place, but also the embodied experience that incorporates multiple battles and fields of tension. In this paper I employ an approach to the front that focuses on American combat soldiers in order to understand how lived expressions of combat shape the lives and interactions of soldiers after they return home from war. The front comes to life through the soldier's (now veteran's) interactions with the individuals in his/her community. This includes family, friends, coworkers, and individuals in a variety of social contexts. The embodied front is far from a static location exclusively contained to official military engagement.

Instead, the embodied front takes form through social interactions exposing discursive tensions surrounding American society and war. For example, several weeks

ago I was sitting in the lobby of a local movie theater, waiting for a friend to arrive. A middle-aged woman sat down next to me. I heard the woman say something to me, but it took a moment for her words to register in my mind. She had said to me, "I bet I know how he lost that," and nodded her head toward a man standing in line for popcorn. I looked in the direction she nodded and saw a white man in his mid-20s with a woman and two young children. I finally realized what she meant as I noticed his prosthetic leg. "Um-hmm," I said, quietly agreeing, but feeling uncomfortable about the unspoken reference to his missing leg. "That's too bad," she continued, trying to engage me in deeper conversation. "Um-hmm," I said again, wondering if the man noticed our stares. I turned away from him, but my own thoughts were flooded with questions about how the man and his family were managing his return home from Iraq. The woman and I sat there in silence; both of us assuming he lost his leg in Iraq, but neither of us able to say it out loud. His absent leg and the war were palpably present in that moment for me and for her.

Of course I went on to think about how we might be wrong. He could have lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. It could have been anything, but how is it we were so sure we knew that this man had lost his leg in Iraq? Was it his age? Did he convey some sort of aura of military service? Or was it the knowledge that this war was leaving a high percentage of men and women with lost limbs? All these questions raced through my mind as I waited on the bench.

My reading of this man's body could be attributed to my presence of mind that is steeped in my research on war and its impact on individuals and society. But it was not me who initially noticed the man; it was the woman sitting next me. Something else was happening in that moment. We shared a space of collective understanding. What knowledge did we share? It could have been our knowledge of the Iraq War and its presence in the community in which we live. We were interpreting this man's body, whether or not he was actually an Iraq War veteran, as something meaningful to us about the Iraq War. We were constructing this man as something symbolic of the repercussions of war.

It is not my intention to objectify this man or his experiences, but that moment was so dense, so riddled with social discourse about the Iraq War. Although this is a rather benign example, it is significant to understanding how individuals in society create meaning of bodies in the most mundane life experiences. The immediacy of the Iraq War emerged in that moment. Even if ours was a misreading of the man's body, the woman and I expressed and felt the accrued knowledge gained from the discourses surrounding the Iraq War. This is the embodied front at work.

At this point, I shift direction away from the Iraq War to look at the experiences of a Vietnam Veteran, but my intention is the same: to unravel the terrain of the embodied front. To do this, I utilize theoretical work done on embodiment in conjunction with an analysis of Ron Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*. This is a memoir of Kovic's route to Vietnam and his journey back home after he was left paralyzed from injuries sustained in combat. The memoir provides a salient example of the bodily expressions of the front as it comes to life through the interactions between combat soldiers and the individuals and institutions s/he encounters at home.

Embodiment and the Lived Front

If bodies are objects or things, they are like no other. They require different intellectual models than those that have been used thus far to represent and understand them.... Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable.” (Grosz xi)

The body is a site of activity and generative functions. Examining the front as an embodied site, that is, as a site that is brought to life through the actions of the bodies of soldiers, civilians, and other participants in war, moves us into realms far beyond the geographical specificity of war. It also brings up a number of tensions and challenges within the area of research on embodiment. The binary between the biological body and the socially and historically constructed body is an integral part of the work done on embodiment. A variety of theorists have worked on ways of understanding the relationship between the material and discursive body (see Bordo, Bourdieu, Butler, Csordas, Grosz, and Haraway). The tension between the physical and discursive body is one that produces an engaged dialogue rather than a resolution of the binary.

Thomas Csordas’ work is helpful in generating a methodological approach to analyzing the physical body living in real time with the complex social inscriptions and discourses shaping it. As Csordas explains, “I would like to juxtapose the parallel figures of the ‘body’ as a biological, material entity and ‘embodiment’ as an indeterminant methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world” (12). This *field* emerges out of the specificity of socio-historical context and the ways in which individuals are acting in those contexts. The embodied front is an example of the *methodological field* described by Csordas, which provides a mechanism through which to explore the dialectical relationship between textuality and embodiment (12).

The *perceptual experience* of soldiers involved in war and combat shape the perimeters of the front. This means the memories of their experiences are not left behind in the jungles, fields, and cities of Vietnam. Their experiences *in* war become part of the *mode of presence* that shapes their engagement in the social world in the United States. The social world is not cordoned off between war and non-war contexts, American and non-American soil. In fact, oftentimes the full impact of war does not manifest until the soldier is home and reintegrating into the social world he left behind (for example see Shay).

Embodiment takes on more than mere representation or lived experience. As Grosz describes above, the body is an object of study in the social world like no other. The body moves, acts, reacts, and can defy the normative patterns and categories used to define it. Therefore, a combat soldier’s process of reintegration is highly contingent on the social context in which s/he exists. Embodiment is one way to approach the fluidity between the body and society, enabling an engaged, conditional, and open understanding of the imbrication of the lived body and the discursive body. This is, in part, Csordas’ point regarding the importance of understanding the dialectical relationship between embodiment and textuality is of utmost concern.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler argues for a “return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but *as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (9, emphasis in

original). Butler's conception of materialization provides a directive for navigating the territory of embodiment. The materialization process takes places in time and over time, which means that the body is grounded in its social location and discursive norms. Yet the process through which the body takes on fixity and boundary within the perimeters of the front is not just left behind at the geographical location of a war. Acting through their bodies during combat, soldiers return home with the front present in their bodily and psychic memories. The constitution of the front is generated by the lived experiences of individuals acting within the roles and rules of engagement established by the military and then it is deconstructed and reconstructed through their interactions at home.

The body's surface is shaped by "a reiterative or ritual practice" through the practice of "performativity" (Butler 10). Butler conceptualizes performativity as the process through which the body acts out normative discourses in society (particularly gendered structures). In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic exemplifies the materialization process and the performative aspects of masculine subjectivity. As he recounts his experiences in Vietnam and his return home, he deconstructs normative notions of masculine subjectivity. At the same time, he works to reconstruct a different type of masculine subjectivity as he comes to terms with his life after Vietnam. This process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the masculine subject is one significant aspect of the embodied front.

Performativity provides a useful process-oriented framework through which to understand reiterative actions that stabilizes the subject. Although the actions function to create a bounded subject, it also holds the threat and possibility of destabilization that subject to produce change (Butler 10). This means that the threats and violence that were managed through various reiterative practices during combat take on new meaning and potentially shift the veterans subject position. Living through combat is extraordinarily contingent on the body's materialization process and the soldier does not simply forget those processes, nor do the experiences in combat cease to be meaningful upon homecoming. In some contexts, one or two years (and sometimes even less) of a soldier's presence in combat dramatically reconfigures the trajectory of their lives after that point.

The materialization of the self that results from the experience of war leads to visceral memories that are acted out in a variety of ways. As Jonathan Shay emphasizes in his book, *Odysseus in America*, combat soldiers who have returned home "may remain in combat mode, although not necessarily against the original enemy" (20). The combat veteran returns home acting out *the front* in social situations far removed from war. The enemy is no longer the North Vietnamese; the enemy manifests in social contexts that trigger memories of combat. Combat veterans embody the front through not only the acting out of their memories of war but also through their bodily reactions and responses to situations that are part of their present lives at home.

Kovic's memoir is just one example of this expression of the front. It is reinforced by other Vietnam Veteran memoirs (for example, see O'Brien and Puller) as well as in Shay's work with Vietnam Veterans. One example in particular that Shay discusses involves the experiences of a Vietnam Veteran named Bear.

His wife has taken to sleeping on the sofa. Bear always sleeps with a knife under his pillow, despite her pleas not to. He lives a long way from Boston in a rural community where few people lock their houses, no one

locks the car, and many leave their key in the ignition. Bear is fanatical about both—forcing his family to lower the blinds at sundown, and he ‘walks the perimeter’ every night before bed looking for snipers and ambushes. He rarely gets more than two hours of sleep a night because of nightmares. (*Odysseus* 25)

The materialization process of the front is expressed as Bear *walks the perimeter* of his property some thirty years after he has come home. Even though he is home and there is no threat of an enemy, Bear’s body reiterates this behavior. He is acting out rituals that were necessary for his survival during war. The impact of war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has left him expressing the front in situations are out of context with his family life. The reiteration of these actions has consequences on Bear and his relationship with his family. That Bear’s wife does not sleep with her husband is just one example of the real consequences of the front’s presence within the combat veteran.

What Happened in Vietnam Does Not Stay in Vietnam: Masculine Subjectivity and the Embodied Front

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels
I am your yankee doodle dandy
your john wayne come home
your fourth of july firecracker
exploding in the grave

- Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*

The title of Kovic’s book, *Born on the Fourth of July*, articulates the connection he makes between himself and America, in part, because his birthday is on July fourth, the nation’s day of independence. Kovic emphasizes throughout the book the damage done to his body. His paralysis and loss of the use of his penis parallel his structure of belief in American and its subsequent breakdown. “It is over with. Gone. And it is gone for America. I have given it for democracy. It is okay now. It is all right... I have given my dead swinging dick for America. I have given my numb young dick for democracy. It is gone and numb, lost somewhere out there by the river where the artillery is screaming in... I gave my dick for John Wayne and Howdy Doody” (112). The losses he experienced to his body always correlate to his ideological disillusionment. Kovic is highly attuned to the complex intersection of his physical body and the discursive structures defining him as a man in American society. The consequences of combat on Kovic and American society do not come to fruition until he begins to fully engage in social life at home. It is this notion of the front that provides insight into the way masculine subjectivity is deconstructed and reconstructed through the context of war.

Relying on Kaja Silverman’s use of the concept *dominant fiction* in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* we can understand the ways in which the discursive structures of masculine subjectivity intersect with the male body and American ideals and values. Specifically, the correlation of phallic identification with the masculine subject constitutes much of our ability to believe in the dominant fiction. Simply stated, the dominant fiction consists of a system of beliefs and desires that the whole of society (and the individuals within it) rely upon for social cohesion. It is a contained, yet fluid, boundary that provides guiding structures for self and society. The meaningfulness of the

American dream and American manhood are secured in *America*, as dominant fiction, defining less a story of factual events and circumstances than a series of stories that tell us about the beliefs and desires that drive social (inter)action. The stories told in the dominant fiction are not only of ideological systems of belief; they are stories informed by a will to neutralize our differences into a totalizing set of stories, which demand our collective belief (Silverman 54).

Kovic's relationship to his body is symbolic of the ideological value constructed through the physical body. The masculine subject and the ideals of America are part of the process of maintaining alignment between the masculine body (the penis) and the symbolic form of social power (the phallus). The phallus ultimately becomes indicative of masculine subjectivity, but it is not simply symbolic; it has a real and bodily correlation that cannot be wholly regarded as an abstract ideal. As Susan Bordo explains in her book, *The Male Body*,

The meanings that we have attached to the phallus, moreover, no matter how abstract and attenuated they have become...are grounded in the bodily image of the erect penis and ideas humans have attached to it. From this perspective, to proclaim that the phallus has nothing to do with the penis is to suffer from a sort of advanced "phallus" complex oneself, in which mind stands supreme over body, human over animal, symbol over flesh. Poised here as we are on the brink of the most abstract reaches of the phallus, let's return instead to the penis, and the role the phallus plays in the bodily life of real people. (94)

Embodiment must be attentive to both the physical reality of the body and the social context defining it. The signifier is not a blank slate because the phallus carries the connotations of its erect bodily counterpart. It is grounded in bodily difference. Although the phallus privileges men, it is a privilege *subjected* to constraints. This means that not *all* men can fill the position of ideal masculine subjectivity, even as men hold the expectation and assumption that they *will* fill it.

The equation of the penis with the phallus creates an internally vulnerable relationship, because is continually under threat of dislocation. Silverman explains that "It is imperative that belief in the penis/phallus equation be fortified...for it represents the most vulnerable component of the dominant fiction" (47). This vulnerable state emerges from a variety of societal obstacles that are continually threatening and undermining phallic identification (e.g. racial, class, and bodily differences). Kovic's paralysis threatens his ability to performatively reiterate and reinforce phallic identification. Yet the break goes much deeper than his body and threatens the very values and ideals that drew him to volunteer to go to Vietnam. As he writes,

I see it more and more as a terrible thing that I will have to live with for the rest of my life. Nobody wants to know that I can't fuck anymore....There is no real healing left anymore, everything that is going to heal has healed already and now I am left with the corpse, the living dead man...the cripple, the sexlessman, the sexlessman, the man with the numb dick, the man who can't make children...the bitter man with nightmares, the murder man, the man who cries in the shower (Kovic 38).

His bodily limitations (*the man who can't make children*) intermingle with the events that led to his disillusionment (*the murder man*). As such, Kovic has a hard time trying to

find a route into the materialization of masculine subjectivity that makes him feel reconnected to American society.

The experience of separation from American society continues to grow through the interactions he has with his family and community upon return home. As part of Massapequa's Fourth of July celebration, Kovic rides in the parade as a way to honor those from the town serving in the Vietnam War. In this account, Kovic turns to the third person to describe the disconnection he feels between himself and the community he knew as home.

The commander was opening the trunk, bringing the wheelchair to the side of the car. He [Kovic referring to himself] was lifted out by the heavy guy and he saw the people around him watching, and it bothered him because he didn't want them to see how badly he had been hurt and how helpless he was, having to be carried like a baby. He tried to block out what he was feeling by smiling and waving to the people around him, making jokes about the chair to ease the tension, but it was very difficult being there at all and the more he felt stared at and gawked at like some strange object in a museum, the more difficult it became..." (Kovic 105)

This feeling of objectification is compounded by the way he is rendered silent by the men and community honoring him. "[H]e wondered why he and Eddie hadn't even been given a chance to speak. They had just sat there all day long, like he had been sitting in his chair for weeks and months in the hospital and at home in his room alone, and he wondered now why he had allowed them to make him a hero and the grand marshal of the parade with Eddie, why he had let them take him all over town in that Cadillac when they hadn't even asked him to speak" (107). After this event, Kovic's interactions with his family and the community become more and more tenuous.

Kovic's performativity of masculine subjectivity exposes him and the community to the break in the dominant fiction.

All that stands between him and the abyss is the paternal imago, within which he can no longer recognize himself. For the society to which he returns moreover, he represents a sorry travesty of "our fighting men and boys," *a living proof of the incommensurability of the penis and the phallus*. Because of the resulting crisis of faith, "reality" itself is at least temporarily jeopardized. (Silverman 63, my emphasis)

Kovic falls into the *abyss*. His paralyzed body symbolizes the fissures between masculine subjectivity and phallic identification. The physical, emotional, and discursive breaks resulting from combat trauma converge. He sits in his chair, makes jokes about his wheelchair, and smiles in silence as he wears his military uniform and tries to be the hero he and the community so desperately want him to be. But the contradictions between his body and the event uncover the difficult transition between combat and American society. *Reality* is jeopardized for Kovic *and* his family and community. Removed from the reality of the brute experience of survival in combat and the support of other soldiers, the traumatic effects of war are revealed to the soldier and those within the domestic realm. It is in this moment that the front emerges as a site of tension to be reckoned with at home by both the combat soldier and the community into which he returns.

But it is not just the bodily damage that leads to Kovic's disconnection from the dominant fiction. This disconnection was also the result of what he believed was his failure to live up to the idyllic hero he so desperately wanted to be. "[T]he more they spoke, the more restless and uncomfortable he became, until he felt like he was going to jump out of his paralyzed body and scream. . . . He wanted to listen and believe everything they were saying, but he kept thinking of all the things that happened *that day*" (Kovic 107, my emphasis). *That day* alludes to an experience in combat that changed his actions on the front. In a moment of confusion during a gunfight, he accidentally killed one of his comrades, mistaking him for the enemy. All the reasons he decided to enlist in the Marines vanished in that moment. "All the hopes about being the best marine, winning all those medals. They all seemed crushed now, they were gone forever. Like the man he had just killed with one shot, all these things had disappeared and he knew, he was very certain, they would never come back again" (Kovic 186). Again, Kovic reverts to the third person to tell the story of this moment. His dreams of being a war hero were crushed during his real experiences in combat.

Winning and doing the right thing was central to who Kovic was/is as a man. That moment marked a change in Kovic as a soldier, but he would not fully comprehend what it had done to him as a man until he returned home. In fact, he believed that he was given a second chance by the major of his battalion, which gave him newfound hope to repair the damage he had done.

Here was his chance, he thought, to make everything good again. This young strong marine was getting a second crack at becoming a hero. . . . He wrote in his diary that night how proud he was to have been made leader of the scouts, to be serving America in this its most critical hour, just like President Kennedy had talked about. He might get killed, he wrote, but so had a lot of Americans who had fought for democracy. It was very important to be there putting his life on the line, to be going out on patrol and lying in the rain for Sparky the barber and God and the rest. He was proud. . . . This, he thought, is what serving your country is supposed to be about. (Kovic 198-9)

As Silverman explains, "Even under the most auspicious circumstances, moreover, the fiction of a phallic masculinity generally remains in tact only for the duration of the war. As long as the soldier remains on the battlefield, he is fortified to some degree by his comrades" (63).

This is why it is crucial to not conflate the battlefield with the embodied front. It is when the soldier returns home that society is forced to see the human costs of war; the combat soldier is no longer a "heroic abstraction" (Silverman 63). At the same time, it is when the soldier returns home that he must try to return to ideals and values that have been dramatically altered in combat. The soldier enacts (or at least tries to enact) the ethics and ideals instilled in him by society as well as by his military training. These ideals for Kovic included a particular view of American masculine heroics. His actions in Vietnam come back with him in his changed body and shape his reintegration into American society. The embodied front reflects the complicated process through which a soldier learns to be a soldier and relearns how to be a member of American society.

Conclusion: Homecoming and the Reconstruction of Masculine Subjectivity

Kovic's memoir is part of his process of homecoming and finding an alternative route into the reclamation of masculine subjectivity. Kovic does not recover the ideal of masculine subjectivity that he took with him to Vietnam. Instead, the materialization of masculinity transforms to accommodate his bodily transformation. His embodiment of the front exposes the problems he has experienced in America (the dominant fiction). He uses his body as a form of protest as he becomes more and more involved in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). He explains,

I went totally into speaking against the war [...]. I went into it the same way I'd gone into everything else I've wanted to do in my life—the way I'd gone into pole vaulting or baseball or the marines. But this was something that meant much more than being an athlete or a marine. I could see that this thing—this body I had trained so hard to be strong and quick, this body I now dragged around with me like an empty corpse—was to mean much more than I had ever realized. (149)

The materialization of masculine subjectivity for Kovic transformed as he became more empowered by his role with the VVAW. Still enacting an ethic of striving for success and mastery through his words and the recognition of his body as something meaningful to American society, masculine subjectivity materializes through alternative iterations.

No longer silenced by his longing for phallic identification through normative routes, Kovic finds voice through his commitment to end the Vietnam War and give anti-war speeches. Here he begins to reconcile the contradictions between his lived experiences, which includes Vietnam, and the discursive norms of American society. This is by no means an easy process. He expresses this struggle as he describes his experiences at Richard Nixon's presidential acceptance speech.

In a move of desperation I swung around facing all three of them, shouting as loud as I could so Walter Cronkite and the CBS camera crew that was just above me could hear me and maybe even focus their cameras in for the six o'clock news. "I'm a Vietnam veteran and I fought in the war! Did you fight in the war?" One of the guards turned away. "Yeah, that's what I thought," I said.... "I've got just as much right to be up front here as any of these delegates. I fought for that right and I was born on the Fourth of July. (178-9)

This reiteration of self is dramatically different from his actions (and reactions) at the Fourth of July parade when he initially returned to his hometown.

The embodied front is an ongoing process. For Kovic and other combat veterans and their families and communities, the embodied front is a mechanism through which to interrogate the persistence of war from contexts outside of political and military institutions. It enables a nation's citizens to ask questions about the human cost of war and war's impact on social institutions such as the family, education, and health care. The embodied front makes those of us who are not immediate participants in war look at it from its most micro-level—the individual—and understand it is not a remote and abstract part of our social world. It is right here with us, entering our lives at the most unexpected moments, whether it is at a movie theater, a classroom, or a family gathering.

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