

Unconquerable Heroes: Invictus, Redemption, and the Cultural Politics of Narrative

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The wounded veteran is a challenging subject for the state. Such figures bring us face to face with the fleshy and embodied impacts of state violence, and act as ‘constant reminders to the able-bodied of the negative body – of what the able-bodied are trying to avoid, forget and ignore’ (Hughes 2009, 406). These subjects must by necessity be narratively managed and reclaimed by the state, in ways which both recognise the violence of warfare and render critical responses inappropriate. Using the example of the Invictus Games, this paper argues that the wounded military body can in part be recast through emotional-political narratives of techno-heroic redemption. Through the display of ‘cyborg bodies’, elite sports men and women with prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs and national flags draped around their shoulders, the Games have become performance of a posthuman body, with a ‘more-than-human’ capacity to transgress boundaries of human capability. In this way, the Games show how the narrative managing of wounded military bodies can act in service of state redemption from the violence of warfare. This paper therefore contributes to existing literatures on the politics of veteran injury, sport and war, and indeed to wider debates regarding the regulation of violence and narratives of war by the liberal state. The paper concludes by arguing that the managing of the narrative actually serves to enact a different kind of violence upon wounded military subjects, one borne out of the ‘profound inequality of storytelling’ (Plummer 2016, 285). There is no place in Invictus for veterans who convey bitterness, despondence, defeat or anger; so what can we say of those who are written out of the story?

Keywords: Invictus Games; Militarism; Narrative; Heroes; Redemption.

Introduction

Wounded bodies are a part of war’s legacy. Scars, stumps, lesions, broken and shattered bones, sensory defects, missing limbs, and psychological scars; these are among the bodily manifestations of war’s violent legacy that societies who send people to war must contend with. In Western societies – increasingly isolated from the most proximal dangers of warfare – the wounded bodies of military veterans are a stark and visible reminder of war’s capacity to injure (Scarry 1985). These bodies are emotive sites and signifiers which

easily evoke the anxieties of nervous publics concerning the conduct of violence by the liberal state (Woodward *et al.* 2009). By confronting people with the disabling consequences of war, images of wounded veterans can undermine support for specific wars and governments, and also militaristic ideas and values more generally. How wounded veteran bodies are ‘managed’ and ‘scripted’ is therefore a matter of great importance to the liberal state.

The scripting of wounded veterans takes place through cultural narratives that states create and/or nurture in order to ‘domesticate’ these unruly wounded bodies (Achter 2010), and to manage their meaning and interpretation. These narratives – as well as their effects on public understandings of veterans, war, and the military – are traceable by attending to what we describe as the ‘cultural politics of narrative’ (Caddick 2019). Narratives are meaning-creating and meaning-shaping devices (Sparkes & Smith 2008). They are the shared cultural resources that help us to interpret events and social circumstances. They are also profoundly political. Narratives are embedded in wider historical and cultural structural contexts (e.g., the cultural diffusion and normalisation of militarism), and thus they are imbued with power (Plummer 2016). Narratives lose or gain legitimacy by virtue of the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) invested in those who convey them, and by leveraging dominant social, economic, class, and gender-based ideals. But the processes by which states use narratives to foster meanings are never straightforward, since dominant narratives usually exist in relation to ‘counter-narratives’ which seek to undermine and contest them (Gabriel 2016). Borrowing from Sara Ahmed’s (2014) work on the *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, our emphasis in sketching out a cultural politics of narrative is on what narrative *does* politically. Like Ahmed, our interest is in how people become emotionally invested in social norms. Building on the work of Ahmed (and others, e.g., Åhäll 2018), our suggestion is that narrative provides a crucial means by which social norms and structures are ‘felt as natural’ (Åhäll 2018: 43).

The cultural politics of narrative, therefore, is about influencing, controlling, regulating, and challenging narratives and the *work* they perform in social life (Plummer 2016), and it is played out across a range of social and cultural spheres including art (Gibbon 2010), the media (Woodward *et al.* 2009), and sport (Kelly 2012).

The politics of wounded veteran narratives hinges on the tensions between ideals of patriotism, heroism, sacrifice, and masculinity on the one hand, and perceptions of victimhood, disability, despair and betrayal on the other. Veterans are positioned within popular narratives which portray them as ‘damaged heroes’; valiant warriors prone to catastrophic illness or injury but betrayed and unsupported by the political masters who sent them off to war (McCartney 2011). Much to the displeasure of military and political elites, this has become the dominant framing of Western veterans in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan. Eliminating the narrative framing of ‘victimhood’ is a core political project from these elites’ perspective, and has given rise to a ‘politics of recognition’ in response (Strand 2018). Encompassing not only wounded veterans but veterans in general, the politics of recognition is an attempt by states to script veterans as resilient, desirable and enterprising citizens with much to offer society as ‘net contributors’ rather than detractors (Bulmer & Eichler 2017; Strand 2018).

The emergence of the Invictus Games in 2014 signals a key ‘moment’ in the cultural politics of wounded veteran narratives, enacted through the popular cultural arena of sport (Kelly 2012). The Games illustrate how the wounded military body, a subject difficult to reconcile with representations of the powerful yet benevolent state and its heroic military, can be recast through complex emotional-political narratives of technoheroic redemption. In contrast with the common emotional infrastructure of ableism (fear, pity, disgust), the Invictus narrative conditions us to respond to hyper-able disabled veterans with pride, sentimentality, and admiration (Hughes 2012). In 2013, Prince Harry (the patron of the

Invictus Games) visited the Warrior Games in the USA, a sporting competition specifically for active-duty service members and veterans, and became 'inspired' to bring a similar event to London. According to the Prince, the Games provide 'an important part of a broader legacy of support, through a combination of on-going care, training and employment opportunities, to the well-being of those men and women who have served their country' (Invictus Games 2016a), and the event is 'the only international sporting event for wounded, injured and sick Servicemen and women' (Invictus Games 2016b). The inaugural Invictus Games was held in London in September 2014, and welcomed over 400 competitors from 13 nations (Invictus Games 2016b). Across the four days of the competition, participants competed in nine sports across five venues (Invictus Games 2016c). Two years later, the second Invictus Games in 2016 was held in Orlando, Florida, the 2017 games were held in Toronto, and the latest event in 2018 was held in Sydney, Australia.

Building on the success of the 2014 games, the Invictus Games Foundation was established 'to pursue and develop the legacy' of the games (Invictus Games 2016d). It is clear in the framing of the Invictus Games that this sporting event is about 'recovery', although as Edkins (2003) argues, the project of 'recovery' is in itself a means through which the wounded subject is incorporated into wider power structures, and rendered invalid as a voice through which to express dissent. Thus, rather than being simply an example of banal militarism at work in sport (Kelly 2012), the Invictus Games crucially presents an example of how the wounded soldier body is remade through performance using narratives of overcoming and redemption. Invictus, we argue, can be read as an extension of the sport/war metaphor (Jansen & Sabo 1994), and a continuation of 'combat' as physical contest which prolongs and preserves heroic warrior identity. The Games very clearly depict the hero in terms of the 'techno-human'; it is about the public

performance of sporting achievements, achievements which render the wounded military body *more than human*.

In what follows, we first of all highlight the challenge of the wounded military body which *Invictus* seeks to address. We then explore the specific ways in which cultural politics is enacted through the figure of the ‘techno-human’, and through carefully emotionally choreographed stories from the ‘*Invictus* choir’. Our discussion then centres on the forms of post-combat being that are legitimated by *Invictus*, as well as the possible benefits of *Invictus* for veteran-athletes, the importance of the story *not* being told, and the emotional-political work performed by the *Invictus* narrative. Finally, we conclude by arguing that while *Invictus* works to blur out – to redeem – the violence of the state, the way that this is done is in itself symbolically violent. In making these arguments, this paper contributes to existing literatures on the politics of veteran injury, and indeed to wider debates regarding the regulation of violence and narratives of war by the liberal state.

The challenge of the wounded military body

Wounded military servicemen and women are ‘narratively difficult’ subjects. They trouble dominant narratives of heroism and sacrifice (Edkins 2011) which envelop the military, and necessitate the recasting of these narratives in new ways which contain the violence done by the state, but render it understandable and acceptable. Achter (2010) refers to this work as ‘domestication’, a process in which veterans are ‘framed as having already overcome any limitations imposed by their war injuries’ in order to symbolically manage the ‘harshness’ of war (p46). Following Achter, we argue that the recasting of these bodies relies upon a kind of emotional-political work being done, whereby narratives invite specific emotional responses and engagements from audiences, but at the same time annihilate the possibility for critique. By ‘emotional-political work’, we

are referring specifically to the manner in which narratives are scripted to evoke particular emotions (e.g., pride, love, sentimentality) in connection with particular subjects (e.g., wounded veterans), and the *political effects* of this emotional conditioning in fostering attachments and affinities towards the state and notions of patriotism and solidarity with the nation (see Ahmed 2014).

Closs Stephens (2016) for example uses an account of the London 2012 Olympics to show how nationalism can function in such events as ‘intensified national affects’ (Closs-Stephens 2016, 193), while Basham (2016), Cree (forthcoming) and Baker (forthcoming) similarly note how emotionally powerful narratives of feminine patriotic sacrifice circulate around military spouses in and through the Military Wives Choir. In all of these examples, the power to shut down critique lies in the emotions invoked by such narratives. To delve deeper, it is important to note that it is not only in fear or sadness that particular kinds of political alignments are created and mobilised. While it has long been accepted that fear as an emotion can govern the politics of our lives and our engagement with nationhood (Ahmed 2014; Anderson & Adey 2011; Pain 2009; Pain & Smith 2008), as Closs-Stephens argues (2016, 185) ‘ideas about nationality can be mobilized through fun and laughter as much as through the politics of fear’. In this paper we take this further, to shed some light on how military and state ideals can function in part through narratives of recovery, hope and redemption; even in the face of shocking trauma and injury. Crucially, these kinds of narratives take on an affective power in particular spaces, but spiral out further into everyday life (see Closs Stephens 2016).

What does it *do* politically, when we recognise disability, trauma and injury in servicemen and women? We are so often encouraged to recognise ourselves in ‘our boys’ of the military. They are ‘the blokes’, to use the gendered term coined by founder of Help

for Heroes Bryn Parry (The Guardian 2010)¹, subjects we feel obligated towards in their likeness to us; this is key to how current ‘hero-fication’ strategies, which notionally distance ‘our boys’ from the state and the military itself (see Kelly 2012; Basham 2016), function in contemporary Western societies. It seems therefore logical to argue that in recognising trauma and injury in servicemen and women, our obligation towards them becomes even more poignant and powerful. But there is much more going on here. When we are confronted with physical manifestations of the trauma of warfare, the notional distancing of ‘the lads’ from the ‘actual work being done’ (Kelly 2012, 733) becomes troubled, and we are forced to recognise the relationship between the violent sovereign state and the wounded military hero. Indeed, it is in such moments that the ‘fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness’ (Thomson 1997, 45, cited in Hughes 2009, 401) is shattered. We are brought face to face with the fleshy and embodied impacts of state violence, with such bodies acting as ‘constant reminders to the able-bodied of the negative body – of what the able-bodied are trying to avoid, forget and ignore’ (Hughes 2009, 406).

The wounded military body provides an obvious challenge to the link between militarism and masculinity; as Caso (2016, 4) notes, ‘Military training moulds the male subject, forging his muscular body and disciplining his emotions. War, however, represents a challenge to this embodiment, for it can unmake the product of military training’. As such, the wounded or disabled military body troubles the vision of physical strength and masculinity; such a figure instead locates a curious position, in which the aesthetic materiality of the disabled body by necessity must be inscribed with new

¹ This kind of rhetoric was used even more recently by Katie Hopkins in her ‘Stand With Our Lads’ campaign against the MoD’s investigation into serving soldiers who had their picture taken with Tommy Robinson (The Rebel Media 2018).

meaning and possibility. To put this another way, the wounded military body brings to light the violence of the sovereign state and the ‘real’ of warfare, and as Jenny Edkins notes, ‘The real is traumatic, and has to be hidden or forgotten, because it is a threat to the imaginary completeness of the subject’ (2003, 12). Being inscribed with the bodily impacts of sovereign violence, such a subject provides a challenge to his own imagined completeness and so these impacts need to be managed by the state, disguised, remade or forgotten.

The state’s challenge, therefore, lies in the need to acknowledge and claim the violence inscribed on wounded military bodies, but in a way which undermines neither its militarised aims nor the heroic representation of military bodies. Efforts by states to create hegemonic meanings of wounded veterans – ones that do not threaten to dismantle militarism – must discredit counter-narratives that portray veterans as vulnerable, damaged, or broken. In order to reclaim the wounded military body as a ‘safe’ subject and incorporate it into the national imagination and memory in a useful way, elements of the self that we recognise in such a subject must be forgotten while others must be celebrated. As Edkins argues, the creation of state memory relies upon the unmaking and remaking of subjects, the breaking apart of a sense of self in that which we must forget, but at the same time an identification with other elements of the self. In other words, wounded soldiers must still be recognised as ‘our boys’, but as also something *more* than us, something that is made *better* through violent warfare; this is the only way in which they can still be recognisable within heroic narratives. The emotional-political work performed must therefore harness something in the public imagination that recognises the masculine heroism of the military and the state as inextricably bound up in violence and injury. In her recent paper on the affective power of wounded military bodies, Dawney (2018, 15) argues that ‘the forms of visibility of wounded and dead military personnel can be understood as figures: iterative and tropic objects that do affective and political work’.

Dawney's analysis sheds an important light on the emotional-political work done by the wounded military subject, and in particular on how this figure's affective power helps to negotiate his own complex hero-victim subjectivity and annihilate critique. However, we want to take this argument further, and give further focus to the narratives that emerge in and through wounded veterans. More specifically, we want to move beyond Dawney's focus on figures as 'operational components of public imaginations' (2018, 6), and give further consideration to *what it means politically* to manage narratives around wounded soldiers in this way.

The interrelations between heroic masculinity and injury are played out narratively in various ways throughout history. For example, in Bourke's (1996) discussion of militarized masculinity in Britain during WW1, she argues that the ambivalent discourse around physically wounded military men showed that '[t]he disabled soldier was "not less but more of a man"' (p58). 'Bourke notes how maimed veterans represented a domesticated masculinity, but they were celebrated as national heroes nonetheless' (Caso 2016, 6). Furthermore, Caso notes that;

'Both Bourke's (1996) and Bösl's (2013) accounts of physically disabled veterans tell a compelling story about a particular politics of absence, for the absence of a limb in these cases comes to symbolize the power of the state rather than the embodied experience of the disabled individual or the inability of the state to secure the bodily integrity of its citizens. Bourke presents the missing limb as a sign of patriotism and sacrifice for the nation, a narrative that validates the authority of the state over and by its citizens' (Caso 2016, 6).

On the one hand, then, this kind of injured or limbless masculinity can be seen as a subjectivity through which wounded soldiers are remade; such veterans were scripted and narratively managed as representations of state power and individual sacrifice, not *in spite* of limblessness but *because of it*. This logically leads us to the conclusion that if a disabled

soldier is *not less but more of a man*, then this is in part a result of going through trauma and emerging on the other side. In this way, the subject becomes embedded in narratives of not only his own redemption and recovery from trauma, but the redemption of the state. That is to say, producing the wounded soldier as *not less but more of a man* serves to blur out the violence of the sovereign state, and render the military subject governable and manageable again. Importantly, though, the story must exclude veterans whose bodies have not been remade – or are too broken – for these would bring not redemption but despair. As we will show, the cultural politics of narrative at work in *Invictus* is not simply the drawing of a distinction between ‘our boys’ and state violence (Kelly 2012), but rather the management of narratives surrounding the impact of this violence on military bodies. This violence is not hidden, but rather remade as not only morally acceptable, but imperative in the making of the military hero.

The *Invictus* Games illustrate the complex negotiations that take place by harnessing these same narratives, but arguably in new ways, in order for the state to narratively reclaim and manage this subject. Particularly striking in the example of *Invictus*, is the way in which the emergence from trauma is spatially contained to the sporting arena, and performed in nuanced ways. Crucially, though, the narrative of redemption in which these subjects are embedded performs powerful emotional-political work that emboldens the prideful state whilst rendering angry responses to its violence inappropriate. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to a careful unpacking of examples in which we can see this emotional-political work being done.

Techno-human redemption

The word ‘*Invictus*’, the Games foundation claims, means “‘unconquered’”; it embodies the fighting spirit of the wounded, injured and sick service personnel and what these tenacious men and women can achieve, post injury. The Games harness the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation, and generate a wider understanding

and respect for those who serve their country' (Invictus Games 2016e). Invictus draws on a vision of the wounded military hero as one characterised by tenacity, a drive to achieve and to overcome. Harriet Gray (2015) notes that redemptive narratives are clearly evident in the discourse surrounding the Invictus Games;

'According to the Invictus Games website, the "wounded warriors" who compete "have been tested and challenged, but they have not been overcome. They have proven that they cannot be defeated. They have the willpower to persevere and conquer new heights." The injured bodies of these servicemen are thus reinterpreted, and understood not as something which makes servicemen weak, but conversely as something which makes them strong through providing the opportunity for demonstration of their ability to overcome.' (p13-14).

As Gray tells us, the Invictus Games provide the opportunity for the injured bodies of servicemen to be remade, and presented to the public as gladiatorial subjects who are conquerors of their weakness. Throughout the Games itself and mediations of the event, a redemptive narrative is constructed, in which the physical damage of war is redeemed and overcome via this emotive, gladiatorial subjectivity. Such subjects, rather than having their masculinity compromised, can become 'more-than-human', 'more-than masculine'. Caso (2016) for example argues, of the aesthetics of militarized masculinity in the work of US photographer Michael Stokes, that 'sexing the disabled veteran upholds the notion of militarized masculinity, makes militarism sexier, and buttresses the power of the state... Sexually powerful and technologically enhanced veterans are technomasculinized; that is, they embody a masculinity that is beyond the human' (p3). In the cultural narratives and imaginations of the nation, then, the absence of a limb can represent patriotism and sacrifice, as well as state power, rather than vulnerability and femininity, while the presence of prosthetic limbs points to a new kind of post-human

techno-masculinity. Representations of disabled military bodies, particularly those who rely on prosthetics, as masculine and heroic mirror the understanding of the 'cyborg' put forward by Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway's cyborg is, as Siebers (2001, 745) says, 'spunky, irreverent, and sexy; they accept with glee the ability to transgress old boundaries between machine and animal, male and female, and mind and body'. And, it is the ability and willingness to transgress that is so crucial here; these are not subjects who are forced to simply to 'adjust', but rather are made better, afforded the opportunity to become more heroic and masculine by transgressing these old boundaries.

The illustrative examples used in the following sections of this paper were chosen for how they speak to and reflect the wider politics of representation at work in the Invictus Games. In particular, critical discourse analysis (see Bryman 2012) was conducted using official Invictus material online, as well as 'thick description' taken while watching the 2016 'Invictus Choir' television series shown on the BBC. In addition, examples from independent outputs from both the 2014 and 2016 games were included, such as a photographic series based on the Invictus competitors by Erik Tanner published in *Time Magazine* which became the basis of our visual analysis. As such, the materials chosen represent not simply discrete examples of the narrative remaking of the wounded veteran in official material, but rather a wider site through which this subject can be approached. This reflects the fact that while the writing of wounded military bodies occurs in service of the state, the way these narratives are mobilised occurs in what Closs-Stephens (2016) refers to as a 'resonance machine', circulating through and congealing around particular objects and bodies that transcend the power of the state itself.

Our first example shows how redemptive narratives are scripted by tying veterans' gladiatorial subjectivities to the 'techno-human' body. In 2016, New York based artist

Erik Tanner photographed portrait images of Invictus athletes after different events, ‘subtly showing the intensity of the competition’ (Time Magazine, 2016). The images were displayed in an article by Time Magazine titled ‘See Inspiring Portraits of Vets from the Invictus Games’ (ibid), and depict athletes in action shots or posing, often with sports equipment, in powerful monochrome images². The image of Allan Armstrong is arguably one of the most powerful photographs in the set, showing a physically fit, attractive, and tattooed athlete wearing a swimming cap and goggles, crouched in a powerful stance which shows his lean muscular physique, but with his right leg missing. Similarly, the portrait of Ivan Sears shows him on an adapted cycle, leaning forward and facing the camera to confront the audience. He looks physically fit, and seems to be wearing US competitor clothing in addition to cycle gloves and a bandanna. The subjects of these photographs are commanding, confrontational but not aggressive; they are fearless, proud of their bodies and their capabilities. While they are confronting the audience, what we experience is not a confrontation with injury and sovereign violence, but rather with the heroic body and its capacity to overcome. In these bodies, the fantasy of a ‘good life’ is maintained. The bodies in Tanner’s work are, like Haraway’s cyborgs, ‘spunky, irreverent, and sexy; they accept with glee the ability to transgress old boundaries between machine and animal... mind and body’ (Siebers 2001, 745). They not only ‘overcome’, but are made better, more advanced, more capable. This is further reflected in the bodily aesthetics of amputation that are mobilised in the prosthetics of Invictus athletes and

² Unfortunately, the three images from Tanner’s collection that are discussed in this paper are copyright protected, and so we are unable to reproduce them. However, the full collection can be viewed using the following link: <http://time.com/4329155/inspiring-portraits-veteransinvictus-games/>.

shown in the examples from highlight reels below (see Figures 1 and 2). These prosthetics are not modelled on real human body parts, but consciously look ‘cyborg’. In this way, their injuries are not hidden. Rather, they are made *more* visible, but recast in a way that makes them manageable by and in favour of the state. These ‘cyborg bodies’ are elite sports men and women with prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs and national flags draped around their shoulders; they are no longer simply wounded veterans who bring us face to face with the horrors of war.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 (*Heroes Triumphant at the Invictus Games*, ABC News)]

Invictus participants are presented not simply as heroes, but as warriors; they have fought in wars, but more than that, they have fought to overcome the physical and mental impairments that these wars have inflicted upon them. These bodies reject fear, pity and disgust – the emotions typically evoked by disabled bodies within the nondisabled imaginary (Hughes 2012) – and call instead for reverence and inspiration. For example, in the snapshots above (see Figures 1 and 2), we can see ‘Heroes triumphing at the Invictus Games’; the images show men (and a woman) from team USA, draped in their nation’s flag or marching with resolve towards the starting line. These competitors are claimed from the outset by the state, drawing on a particular relation between the hero and the sovereign ‘self’ that relies on sporting competitive obligation. We are reminded of the ‘fighting talk’ shown in a video advert leading up to the games, between Prince Harry and the Obamas, in which Barack and Michelle Obama tweet a video to the Royal saying ‘Hey, Prince Harry... remember when you told us to “bring it” at the Invictus

Games? Be careful what you wish for' (The Guardian 2016). Prince Harry tweets back; 'Fighting talk there! You can dish it out, but can you take it? –H', later posting a video of the Queen watching the Obamas' video and scoffing 'oh really? Puh-lease' (The Guardian 2016). While these images provide only small screenshots from one of many 'highlights' reels from the Games available online, they nevertheless help us to shed some light on the politics of recognition at work. They point to specific conditions through which the wounded hero subject is brought into visibility; and, as Adrian Kear (2013) points out, 'the conditions of the appearance of the image provide the very ground for the recognition of the politics of the image' (p20).

And yet, it is not enough for this subject to be produced discursively, rather, as Wilson (2005, p164) argues, it is in part constructed through its relationship to other bodies. We must spectate upon the performance of this body in order for it to exist. Thus, the 'warrior body' is created through a performance of sporting achievements, in which they push their bodies to the limits and show their more-than-human capacity to 'overcome'. While the mediation of the event and conditions of visibility prepare us for the recognition of the gladiatorial subject, it is in the space of the arena that the relationship between the state and the wounded subject is really brought into visibility. In the arena, the Games became a vehicle through which wider state concerns regarding masculinity, competition, strength, and victory were articulated, inscribing the wounded military body with pride, promise, but also obligation to the nation. As Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008) note of sporting events, the drama 'inherent in competition... keeps those in attendance fixated on the action as it unfolds, providing them with a common focus (conveniently dressed in national colours) for their collective engagement' (p547). They further note that sporting events have the power to capture the imagination of the nation in ways that other events or forms of entertainment cannot (*ibid*). It can harness imagined

communities (Anderson 1991), uniting them in emotions such as ‘excitement, tension, hope and dejection’ which themselves have a politics to them. In the Invictus Games, the arena becomes a space in which the wounded body is put on display as a gladiatorial subject, asked to perform on behalf of the nation; in the arena, we have a stake in the success of the wounded military body, and all things are possible. The body that is materialised through the Invictus representation becomes an embodiment of the open futures that it imagines; it has the capacity to *be anything*, to *do anything*. That the Invictus warrior performs on behalf of the nation is telling of what the body of this technohuman gladiatorial subject *does* in and for the narrative management of violence. When Invictus participants perform on behalf of the nation, they become individualised warriors in a recast performance of state rivalry and nationalism. In this performance, the wounded warrior is remade as an ethically more certain martial figure in the uncertain times of morally ambiguous warfare, and the real violence of war is obscured. Invictus works to evoke what may be seen as a ‘simpler’ form of war, an image of boots on the ground, man-against-man reciprocal ‘combat’, but in the space of the arena as opposed to the space of the battlefield. Indeed, if, as Millar & Tidy (2017) note, combat can be conceptualised as a ‘normative imagination of martial violence’ (p142; see also Enloe 2013) in relation to which military masculinities can be constituted, what we see in Invictus is the transferal of these same imaginaries onto a new and ‘safe’ space where it is not lives at stake, but medals. Thus, the masculinities of armed conflict remain intact, even in the face of trauma and injury.

Of course, the success of the games participants (and subsequently of the nation) is claimed again and again in Invictus to not depend on medals and placings. Rather, as Prince Harry tells us in a rousing speech at the 2016 closing ceremony;

‘What could explain the remarkable sportsmanship of Mark Urquart in sacrificing gold on the track to push Stephen Simmons into first place? Invictus!

How else could I describe the way I felt seeing Tim Payne, a man I met three years ago to the day, in his hospital bed at Walter Reed, beaming as he wore his gold medal round his neck? Invictus!

What defines the spirit of Denmark’s Jonas Andersen, who loaded the coffin of his friend onto the flight which changed my life in 2008, and then fought through his own dark days to compete in London and Orlando? Invictus!

What is the force that drives Elizabeth Marks to return to these games after nearly dying two years ago, to compete now, at the highest level, in a sport that renders her blind and faint? Invictus!

What makes us cheer for Luke Synott, who took up wheelchair tennis, not just to represent his country again, but so he could play the sport with his children? Invictus!

Why did we stand in our seats, cheering our hearts out as Jordanian Wheelchair racer – Ulfat Al-Zwiri – fought, inch by inch, to the finish line? Invictus!

What else could we say about the woman who wrote to me after watching the opening ceremony on Sunday night, to say she’d realised the time had come for her husband to get help for his depression? Invictus.

Why did the 9/11 hero, Sarah Rudder, pick herself up when she fell, just meters from the finish line, and push on for a silver medal and into the embrace of her French rival? Invictus!

You are all Invictus. You are now ambassadors for the spirit of these games. Spread the word. Never stop fighting. And do all you can to lift up everyone around you’

(Prince Harry, Invictus Games Orlando 2016 closing ceremony).

Prince Harry says that in *Invictus*, Luke Synott is ‘representing his country *again*’, creating an equivalency between sport and combat in which war is seen as, like *Invictus*, a dignified duel between national representatives as opposed to the messy asymmetrical violences conducted on countless levels in contemporary warfare. And yet, we are reminded that the success of the wounded military body, and of the nation, comes not necessarily in the medals that they win, but in their *triumphs over adversity*. Prince Harry claimed that;

‘These Games have shone a spotlight on the “unconquerable” character of service men and women and their families and their “Invictus” spirit. These Games have been about seeing guys sprinting for the finish line and then turning round to clap the last man in. They have been about teammates choosing to cross the line together, not wanting to come second, but not wanting the other guys to either. These Games have shown the very best of the human spirit’ (Invictus Games 2016e).

By reframing what is at stake in the *Invictus Games* in these terms, the military spirit is made ‘unconquerable’ and thus, its body was never conquered in the first place. The ‘Invictus spirit’ being invoked here helps to resurrect an idealised military subjectivity, filled with notions of brotherhood and respect, and presented emotively as a deeply honourable way of being. What is crucial here is therefore that the gladiator subject evokes pride and triumph, a rejection of sympathy; the *Invictus Games* was after all founded on the basis that there is a need for wounded military bodies to be ‘recognised’ as valid, accomplished although physically injured subjects, without falling into the trap of becoming ‘the helpless child always in need of being looked after’ (Caso 2016, 5)³.

³ Indeed, on the *Invictus Games* website, it is claimed that the Games seeks to address the challenge of ‘How can [wounded members of the armed forces] be recognised for their achievements and not given sympathy?’ (Invictus Games 2016e).

But, when managed through narratives of patriotic heroism and emotive overcoming, there is a powerful force of sentimentality at play. These stories are supposed to make us cry with reverence at the power of the human spirit, and so become a way of bolstering sentimental attachments to nationalism and the military.

Managing narratives of vulnerability

A problem arises when we consider mentally rather than physically traumatised military bodies. Caso (2016, p4) points out that;

‘As a result of war, soldiers can suffer physical and emotional injuries; however, while the physically injured soldier has been accommodated within militarized masculinity and discursively constructed as the epitome of heroic sacrifice for the nation, emotional traumas are framed as a danger to the masculine gender identity writ large. This is because emotions remain associated with femininity, and as such fail to project the power of the idealized masculine state.’

Therefore, one of the challenges in remaking the wounded military subject lies in finding a means of incorporating both physical and emotional injuries into the transformation; it is not necessarily the case that vulnerability needs to be entirely written out of the narrative, in the way that Haraway’s cyborg might suggest. While historically the emotionally or mentally wounded serviceman posed a challenge to the framing of the military hero (see Caso 2016; Bourke 1996; Bösl 2013), the mental struggles of engaging in violent warfare have over recent years become a source of interest and empathy within the wider national public. For example, Woodward & Jenkins (2012) claim that British military memoirs are in part characterised by their framing in relation to public sympathy towards the true costs of war on the minds and bodies of soldiers. In *Invictus*, the subject created by the Games is one who is simultaneously a heroic warrior and vulnerable, following dominant media narratives in the UK (see Woodward *et al.*, 2009). Therefore the *Invictus* narratives of redemption mobilise mental trauma alongside physical trauma,

in a co-presence of techno-human and vulnerable subjectivities, in order to evoke both sympathy and admiration from the wider national public.

To unpack this, it is useful to consider another of the images in Tanner's collection⁴. The image of Peter Cook contrasts with the previous images discussed from the collection, and confronts the viewer much more with the material reality of the disabled body and, arguably, with the violence of war. The subject's body is normatively coded as 'overweight', missing his right arm but with no prosthetics to enhance his performance. He wears a swimming cap, shorts, and goggles, and stands in a puddle of water while staring straight ahead at the camera with a neutral facial expression. His gaze contrasts starkly with the images of Allan Armstrong and Ivan Sears; this is a portrait in which war's damage to the body is tangible. Indeed, the composition of the image shows Cook's full body, which forces us to confront the subject and the impact that the violence of war has had upon his body. Of course, this image represents the careful staging of the body by the artist, and yet what we can see here reflects a wider politics of recognition at work in the Invictus Games. The techno-human subjectivity of the wounded military body is not always cast as central. Rather, as the extract from Prince Harry's speech earlier in this paper alludes to, it is the Games participants' *triumphs over adversity* that are key. Peter Cook's very participation in the games *despite everything* is written in this narrative as a triumph, an example of the extraordinary capacity of the military body to overcome.

More than this though, the image of Peter Cook points us further towards an understanding of how Invictus manages and controls the narratives of injury. The copresence of the 'techno-human' subject and a recognition of the 'profoundly human' in

⁴ Again, these images can be viewed using the following link:

<http://time.com/4329155/inspiringportraits-veterans-invictus-games/>

Peter Cook reminds us of what Rosa Braidotti tells us in *The Posthuman* (2013), that we cannot draw a binary distinction between the human and then the posthuman. Rather, the human is always present in the posthuman, as the posthuman is a particular articulation of what it is to be human; ‘We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics’ (Haraway 1985, 66). Indeed,

‘...the body is “leaky” and its boundaries are elusive. Once, however, it is admitted that both social and biological bodies are not given but exist only in the constant process of historical transformation, then there are only hybrid bodies, vulnerable bodies, becoming bodies, cyborg bodies; bodies, in other words, that always resist definition both discursive and material (Shildrick 2002, 121)’ (Hughes 2009, 403).

If we consider that the categories of human and posthuman are not meaningfully separable, we can see that the Invictus subject is one in which different articulations of human-ness and heroic capability are made visible. In this way, Invictus carefully negotiates particular relations with the self and manages the narratives in a way which ensures the materiality of the wounded military body is brought into recognition, while the violence of the sovereign state is forgotten. We can at once recognise this subject’s heroic capacity to overcome while acknowledging and *accepting* the role of the state in this violence; this is central to how the narratives of injury connected to Invictus are managed and controlled.

A final example to show how these narratives are managed through the copresence of techno-human and vulnerable subjectivities is the 2016 addition of Gareth Malone’s ‘Invictus Choir’. This was the first year that mental trauma was incorporated into the representation of the Invictus body in a meaningful way. The Invictus choir became the subject of a two-part mini-series which followed Gareth Malone and his choir

made up of physically and psychologically wounded servicemen, women, and veterans as they worked towards their final performance at the 2016 Orlando Invictus Games.

Viewers follow the process from the ‘auditions’, the rehearsals, to the final performance, depicting firstly Malone’s hunt to find veterans and servicemen and women with the most compelling and captivating stories. These range from Allison, who suffers badly from PTSD and who struggles to leave the house, who hopes that ‘reconnecting with her love of singing will help her in her recovery’, to Paul, a man who offers no discernible singing talent but instead a heart wrenching story about losing the sight in both his eyes following a multiple IED explosion while on tour in Afghanistan. Paul, according to Gareth Malone, ‘is what it’s all about, someone like him is exactly what I’m looking for’ (Invictus Choir, Episode 1). ‘The goal’, Malone tells the choir members, ‘is to inspire the world with your voices, what you’ve been through, and what you’re doing now’. In this narrative, the focus is on the performance of their stories, ‘what they’ve been through’, and their trajectory towards recovery.

By incorporating men and women with not only physical but also mental trauma, the Invictus Choir goes some way to addressing the challenge posed by emotional trauma which is ‘framed as a danger to the masculine gender identity writ large’ (Caso 2016, 4). The Choir actively seeks to shed light on the emotional and physical trauma of war, but largely as a means of providing a compelling and entertaining story to viewers. Viewers are invited to spectate upon such bodies, revel in their pain, but importantly follow the story to its conclusion in the form of their final performance in Orlando. The traumatised military subject, through this type of performance, is rendered by the state a ‘safe’ rather than troubling or difficult subject, and as such the narratives of injury and trauma are managed.

Importantly, there is a distinction made between the members of the Invictus choir and the Games participants. While games competitors are depicted as warriors, this is not necessarily true for the choir members. The depicted vulnerability of choir members is profoundly gendered, as their emotion is feminised while the warrior subjectivity of the Games participants is always constructed in relation to masculinity. Indeed, the choir members become narratively important through their capacity to overcome (through the medium of song), but unlike the games participants we have no stake in their success, and they have no real obligation to us. The path that they embark on, while undeniably being a linear trajectory towards recovery, is profoundly personal – although, it is still subject to the gaze of the British television audience. In contrast, games competitors are on a journey towards achievement in which they have an obligation to us; they are competing on behalf of the nation, and *their success is our success*. Thus, a notional distinction is drawn, between games participants who are claimed by the state, and choir members who are simply spectated upon. It is their vulnerability that is necessary to the performance that they give; members are chosen according to how captivating their story is, and the two-part series emphasises throughout what is at stake in their performance. They will either be ready, or they won't. They will either succeed, or they will not. In this way, choir members are positioned as working towards recovery; recovery which may or may not materialise. The potential of this feminised and vulnerable voice to trouble the sovereign imagination and memory is therefore, as Edkins (2003) would argue, undermined. While members of the Invictus Choir are illustrated to be indefinitely occupying the trajectory towards recovery laid out by the state, games competitors occupy an entirely different trauma temporality. Common to both examples, of course, is that *what makes a good story* is held as the crucial concern. But, what of the stories we are not told?

Invictus benefits, and the story not told

The personal stories Invictus veterans tell are well aligned with the cultural narrative into which they are scripted⁵. This is partly because the Invictus narrative leaves them with little room to position themselves other than the heroic, redemptive characters they are hailed to be (Althusser 1971). But it is also, no doubt, because the recovery trajectories upon which Invictus sets them are sincerely bought into. Research has revealed the rehabilitative potential of sport for injured veterans and veterans experiencing the psychological and emotional scars of war (Caddick & Smith 2014). In the aftermath of traumatic injury, sport can provide veterans with a renewed sense of purpose and direction in life, a focus on ability and accomplishment, and a vehicle for social connection and camaraderie. Each of these benefits, it is important to note, can sustain life and hope in the face of devastating personal loss (e.g., of limbs, bodily capabilities, and careers)⁶. Indeed, the rehabilitative use of sport for injured veterans has a long history, beginning as a project of re-masculinising disabled ex-servicemen after World War II (Anderson 2011), and continuing with the birth of the Paralympic movement through efforts to rehabilitate spinally injured British veterans (Brittain & Green, 2011). There is, therefore, something worth celebrating about the role Invictus plays in promoting recovery for wounded veterans.

At the same time, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge the stories *not* being

⁵ These stories are told as part of the media coverage of the games itself (e.g., in the opening and closing ceremonies), but also through specific documentaries such as ‘Invictus: Battle to the Start Line’ first broadcast on BBC on 13th September 2017.

⁶ Sport also provides a vehicle for reconnecting with those aspects of military identity – purpose, direction, social connection – which are often most valued by members of the military, thus providing continuity with a soldierly identity (Caddick & Smith 2014).

told by *Invictus*, as well as the potential dangers of the *Invictus* narrative itself for veteranathletes. Within the cultural politics of wounded veteran narratives there is, to quote Ken Plummer, a ‘*profound inequality of storytelling*’ (2016, 285). In order to carry out the emotional-political work of inculcating pride and inspiration among its audiences, *Invictus* needs to promote a singular, coherent, and *positive* narrative. Particular kinds of ‘being’ post-combat are legitimated, but stories that do not fit the mould – ones that focus on anger, loss and betrayal in connection with injury – are excluded. There is no place in *Invictus* for veterans whose stories convey bitterness over the military’s treatment of them post-injury, or those who remain despondent and defeated rather than heroic and ‘unconquerable’ (Caddick *et al.* 2018). Nor is there space for veterans-turned-activists to register their disapproval at the dreadful costs of state violence, or to reinscribe patriotism as a quest for social justice rather than banging the drums of war (Schrader 2017). Fainter still are the stories of many innocent Afghan civilians whose lives, bodies and communities have been torn apart by war, but whose suffering is excised from dominant Western narratives of the recent conflict (Griswold & Murphy 2014).

The positive story of *Invictus* is not shared by all veterans, and the exclusion of alternative stories reveals the political effects of the *Invictus* narrative. Triumphant stories are harvested by the state for its own ends: to achieve redemption from failed expeditionary wars, and to demonstrate that veterans *are*, in fact, being supported and *are* flourishing despite the damage of war. Moreover, there may be hidden dangers for veteran-athletes in the use of their stories as exemplars of patriotic heroism. By hailing veterans as gladiatorial, techno-human warrior subjects, the *Invictus* narrative constructs an identity from which it may be difficult to escape (Althusser 1971). Thrust into the limelight, veterans are required to perform as inspirational warrior heroes, delaying or denying their ability to become ‘ordinary’ citizens. Rather than working to ‘demilitarise’ the self (Schrader 2017), to pursue careers or educational opportunities (Messinger 2010),

or to re-learn the rules of civilian life and interaction (Cooper *et al.* 2018), Invictus veterans may well become trapped by the public identity of warrior hero that may or may not serve them well in the longer term.

Conclusion

By identifying the emotional-political work of the Invictus story, this article develops the literature on sport as a vehicle for militarism (e.g., Kelly 2012, 2016), and offers critical new insights into the relationship between sport and war. Indeed, this paper helps to give valuable texture to our understandings of how both the narratives and violence of war are regulated by the liberal state. As part of states' efforts to remake the way this violence is inscribed on the bodies of wounded veterans, the Invictus Games functions as a vehicle for conveying narratives of redemption and overcoming. Notwithstanding the rehabilitative benefits for veterans, Invictus can be read as a site for the enactment of a cultural politics of narrative, whereby particular understandings of wounded veterans are promoted (i.e. triumphant heroes) and others are prohibited (i.e. anxiety-provoking victims). Inspirational recovery stories are told through the Games to invite us to invest emotionally in the hero's journey. Through the careful scripting of these stories, we are called to cry, empathise, marvel at their indomitable human spirit. But we are not meant to despair – these stories all have a happy ending. The violence of war is redeemed, and the heroes have triumphed over adversity. The benevolent state has thanked its warriors and made them shine again like stars. However, as we have shown, there is much that is obscured by this narrative framing, and much that is problematic regarding the emotional-political work undertaken by redemptive narratives. While Invictus works to blur out the violence of the state, the way this is done is itself inherently violent. The reclaiming of the wounded military hero in this way necessitates that those who *cannot* or *choose not* to 'overcome' are not only left out of the narrative, but are actively *written* out; these are deliberate acts of representation. What we are left wondering is, while there

may be recovery and redemption for *some* veterans, where does that leave the rest? And, if there are wounded veterans, as well as foreign ‘Others’, who must be forgotten in this narrative, can there ever be true redemption for the state?

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