OLD ARMY FIGHT:

THE INTERSECTION OF WAR MEMORIALS AND VETERANS AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

A Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May 2015

Major Subject: Performance Studies

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ABSTRACT

As Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom draw to a close, Americans are curious to learn more about soldier experiences during wartime. War memorials document public war memories and how the masses relate to war, while personal war narratives rely on performance vessels, such as plays, autobiographical novels, and movies to reach an audience. Texas A&M University's rich military history relies on war memories to serve as a cultural cornerstone to produce an "Aggie" identity. At Texas A&M, both the public and private sectors of war memories are available through performances ranging from memorials such as the Memorial Student Center to the 2014 staged performance of The Telling Project's *Telling Aggieland*.

In this MA thesis, based on ethnographic fieldwork with Texas A&M University's Memorial Student Center and veterans involved with *Telling Aggieland*, I explore the intersection between the public and private sectors of war memories. By examining the history of the MSC as well as student interactions with the building, I explore the public performance of the war memorial and how spectators negotiate these memories into their own (often civilian) lives. Additionally, fieldnotes from the performance process of *Telling Aggieland,* as well as interviews with participants, informs my understanding of how the performance of personal war narratives bridges gaps between veterans and civilians, while also serving as a therapeutic healing process. Combining my fieldwork of the MSC with my ethnographic interviews with veteran performers, I investigate how performance in the public and private sectors

communicate war memories and inform audiences, particularly at Texas A&M, about their military heritage.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandfathers and heroes, W.T. Hardi, a WWII Purple Heart veteran who served in the United States Navy aboard the USS Mustin DD413 & the USS Houston CL81 and Fritz Henry Paar, a WWII Army Medic in the European Theatre and recipient of the Good Conduct Medal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Kirsten Pullen, who has served as my advisor and foundation throughout the course of this research. Thanks also to my committee members, Dr. David Donkor and Dr. Marian Eide, for their time, suggestions, and support.

I want to extend my gratitude to the cast, crew, and production team of *Telling Aggieland*, especially the veterans and dependents who generously acted as my interlocutors. And, thank you to all members of the United States Armed Forces.

Finally, thank you to my friends, family, and graduate cohort for their support and encouragement. I particularly would like to thank Alex Simpson for acting as my sounding board throughout the completion of this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ABSTRACT		ii
DEDICATION		iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		v
TABLE OF CONTENTS		vi
CHAPTER		
I	INTRODUCTION	1
II	LIVING MEMORIES, LIVING MEMORIAL	9
	Reality: Aggies Go to War	11
	Representation: Aggies Remember	18
	Interpretation: Aggies Understand	25
III	CALL OF DUTY, DUTY TO TELL	33
	Reporting for Duty	34
	Entering the War Zone	39
	Debriefing Recovery	50
IV	CONCLUSION	62
REFERENCES		67

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Form a straight line! Does that line look straight to you?" Marine veteran Jonathon Orrie barks orders to fellow members of The Telling Project's *Telling Aggieland* cast as he embodies a drill sergeant introducing new recruits to boot camp. The audience laughs as the "recruits" stumble to make a straight line, running into each other and comically exaggerating their confusion after "arriving at boot camp." This scene is the last ensemble performance of Act One and serves as a brief moment of comic relief before the cast prepares to perform monologues of their personal war narratives. As the ensemble scene ends, the first solo performer, Margaret Young, walks to center stage and begins telling her story. For the next seven minutes, Margaret captivates the audience as she shares a plethora of war experiences over the course of her eighty years of life. Margaret's stories include tales of learning how to identify planes as a child during World War II, becoming a military spouse and living in "new and exotic places" during the Korean War, and, most moving of all, receiving a malicious prank call during the Vietnam War informing her that her husband was dead. The audience gives a standing ovation as her husband, Don, theatrically enters from stage left, citing Mark Twain and announcing: "The rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated!" The couple embraces one another, kiss, and then look out at the applauding audience with tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces. Margaret and Don have just publicly shared their personal war memories for the first time in eighty years.

An interest in war stories has emerged in American culture over the past two decades, as issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), homeless veterans, and disappointment and controversies with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have entered the national spotlight. "The critical attention [war has] received by both the press and the academy amounts to a minor industry;" however, this surge in popularity often lacks "critical comment on the moral and artistic inadequacy" of the media and Hollywood's performance of war (Zinman 5). This point can be further illustrated by the recent release of films such as *American Sniper, Lone Survivor, Unbroken,* and *Fury*, as well as each film's subsequent criticism and praise. Audiences demand "true" war stories, but also expect to experience the special effects that glorify explosions, gore, and enemy deaths, which Zinman refers to as "a wargasm" (Zinman 7). These expectations from viewers, added to Hollywood's capitalistic structure, nearly ensures that true war memories fall victim to exaggeration, omission, and inauthenticity. Audiences would rather pay to see a spectacle based on a true story rather than listen to the (sometimes mundane) details of a true story. Actors such as Brad Pitt, Mark Wahlberg, and Bradley Cooper have become the face of American soldiers, though ironically, none of them have ever spent any time deployed or on the front lines. This commodification of war stories by the media and the movie industry may raise awareness and support for certain veteran causes; however, they also do a great disservice to American military men and women, whose true war narratives are elided by the public idea of what war is like.

War memories play a particularly important role at Texas A&M University, for both former and current students. Texas A&M houses the Corps of Cadets, which

produces future military members as well as serves as a transition point for many returning student veterans. The university prides itself on the school's military history as well as its continuing ability to commission officers into the armed forces at the end of each semester.

> While membership in the Corps of Cadets became voluntary in 1965, it has nonetheless continued to play a key role in the university. The Corps is often referred to as the "Keepers of the Spirit" and "Guardians of Tradition." Texas A&M remains one of only six senior military colleges, and the Corps is the largest uniformed body outside the national service academies. (History of the University)

The school's military history and production of soldiers served as motivation for the Veteran Resource and Support Center (VRSC), the Association of Former Students (AFS), and the Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts (AVPA) to jointly bring *Telling Aggieland* to campus. Members from each of these groups noticed the need for veterans to share their war stories, especially at Texas A&M, so that cadets who plan on joining the military can gain a better understanding of what to expect in the future, among other reasons.[1] The VRSC, AVPA, and AFS also recognized how this type of performance would speak to the large number of student veterans at Texas A&M, veterans and their families within the Bryan/College Station community, and friends of cadets planning to enter the military after graduation.

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[1] Despite free tickets and specialized advertising, few cadets, other than Delta Company (the veteran unit) attended *Telling Aggieland* performances.

Texas A&M University's military history and continuing culture is evidenced through the Memorial Student Center, which was dedicated as a "living memorial" to all Aggies who have or will lose their lives in combat. The building serves as a counter to the idea of personal war memories, and provides a public combination of Aggie war memories. Visitors pay respect, whether intentionally or not, to fallen Aggies by removing theirs hats within the MSC and avoiding the grass around the building. In a way very different from *Telling Aggieland*, the MSC is a public performance of war memories, though the building focuses more on the idea of war and presence of Aggies in war, rather than the role each Aggie soldier plays in battle or on the home front. Unlike Margaret and the other performers of the *Telling Aggieland* cast, the MSC does not recall and share memories, but inspires experiences which eventually lead to memories. The Hall of Honor, Veteran's Study Lounge, and Flag Room are among the year-round spaces that invoke new memories; however, the building often houses traveling displays, especially around Veterans Day and Aggie Muster. The transfer and creation of memories within this space depends on the performance value of the memorial, including the aesthetic steps taken to affect visitors, community interactions prescribed by the building, and individual backgrounds that mold emotions and dictate experiences in the space.

During this research process, I have discovered that both memorials and the performance of war narratives are poignant ways to share war memories. Memorials, such as the MSC, allow visitors to reflect on the larger picture of war, including the large death toll of troops or the overlying issues of war, such as PTSD and homeless veterans.

This sector of remembrance affects cultural practices and encourages spectators to connect with nameless, faceless soldiers in an attempt to build community over space and time. Performed personal narratives, on the other hand, inform audience members about individual struggles faced by soldiers and their families during training, deployment, and upon return from war. These performances provide the audience with a staged embodiment of war experience. These embodiments invite spectators to emotionally and mentally empathize with a soldier's particular story, encouraging them to engage with the issues presented by the public sector.

The information about personal war narratives in my research relies on ethnographic data collected over the past two years. I borrow D. Soyini Madison's idea of "critical ethnography," which she defines as "an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain" and includes "an ethical obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity" (Madison 5). I applied this theory to my work with the Memorial Student Center by visiting the building and making field notes over the course of a two-month period. I also spent an extended amount of time at the memorial around and on Veterans Day. My ethnographic research for *Telling Aggieland* includes interviews with four veterans and/or military dependents at Texas A&M University or from the Bryan/College Station community. All of these interlocutors doubled as performers in *Telling Aggieland*, and include a Navy veteran, an active Army Captain, an Army brother, and a former Marine/current Marine dependent. Each interaction with my interlocutors consisted of a two to three hour interview after the closing of *Telling*

Aggieland, in which the performers were asked to talk through the performance process. Additionally, field notes taken throughout the process (I served as both production manager and stage manager for the show) inform my research about *Telling Aggieland.*

The theoretical structure for my thesis is broken down into two sections, one focusing on the public sector of war memories as seen in war memorials, and the other centered on personal war narratives in the private sector. My theoretical framework about the public sector relies on the work of John H. Falk and Michel de Certeau. Falk establishes the relationship built between a memorial and its visitor and introduces factors that affect the way memories are manipulated and formed in a space. De Certeau, on the other hand, explores the freedom a visitor has to either comply or resist these institutional attempts at forming a specific memory. Additionally, Diana Taylor's idea of "repertoire" or "embodied practices that generate, store, and transmit social memory" informs how memorials work on a public scale to dictate cultural practices (Taylor 356). The framework for my section on the private sector of war memories is based on the work of Kristen Langellier, Jill Taft-Kaufman, and Della Pollock. While Langellier and Taft-Kaufman focus on narrative performance and how "narrative…emerges from the lived realities of bodily conduct rather than the recognition, representation, or recounting of past experience," Pollock examines the performance of trauma and how this experience can eventually lead to catharsis (Langellier and Peterson 174). This combination of frameworks for both the public and private sectors are interwoven throughout my thesis to enable a better understanding of the performance of war memories.

In Chapter II of my thesis, “Living Memories, Living Memorials,” I establish three different theoretical lenses through which to examine Texas A&M’s Memorial Student Center: reality, representation, and interpretation. I examine the role military heritage has played in the inception and construction of the MSC, how the institution employs the building to construct Aggie culture and share Aggie war memories, and ways that visitors individually experience the space and build their own memories based on the nostalgia of that moment. This chapter provides an understanding of how war memorials work in the public sector to uplift and transmit war memories to visitors.

Chapter III, “Call of Duty, Duty to Tell,” explores the production process of *Telling Aggieland*, including personal narratives from four performers and their experiences through rehearsals, performances, and post-show meet and greets. I investigate the ways in which performance can be used to stage intimate narratives and provide a vessel for community growth and personal catharsis. By examining these experiences about sharing narratives, I situate *The Telling Project* within case studies of other war performances and suggest how staging trauma can lead to therapeutic effects.

Military performance at Texas A&M University ranges from the memories constructed in the Memorial Student Center, to the Corps’ performance of everyday life as a cadet, to the veteran communities that form to share experiences through projects such as *Telling Aggieland*, Aggie Adaptive Sports programs, and diversity lectures. War memories are an integral part of Texas A&M’s history, and students are encouraged to remember the university’s role in wars of the past, present, and future. At a time when less than 1% of the country’s population serves in the military, veterans search for ways

to share their true war stories in order to combat the incorrect spectacle of Hollywood war movies.[2] The performance of war memories, in both the public and private sectors, work to bring awareness to the experiences of soldiers and bridges an understanding gap between veterans, their families, and civilians.

[2] According to a study by the Pew Research Center, published in the New York Times (Tavernise 2011.)

CHAPTER II

LIVING MEMORIES, LIVING MEMORIAL

As I walk toward my bus on any given afternoon, I can witness a group of twenty people in camouflage running past me, carrying large guns and hollering in a syncopated rhythm. At most American university campuses, this performance might alarm the student body, but at Texas A&M University, students may pause to take a picture of the commotion before continuing on their way, if they acknowledge the event at all. At Texas A&M, military activity plays a central and institutionally sanctioned role in an Aggies' everyday life. The performance of war memorials, ranging from numerous small statues to the display of American flags over Kyle Field during home football games, reflects the military culture at Texas A&M. These campus memorials inform students of their military history, suggest a "correct" cultural identity, and illustrate fundamental social practices expected of students. Among the most beloved and informative of these monuments is the Memorial Student Center, also known as the MSC. Described as a "living memorial," students quickly learn standard rules about behavior inside and around the building. Signs displayed on the lawn remind pedestrians to stay off the grass and tell bikers to dismount, inscriptions on the MSC's doors inform visitors to remove their hats, and, in the rare case that an MSC visitor misses these notices, students (usually Cadets) are quick to verbally inform them of the behavioral expectations held in honor of the building.

War memories are often presented in the public sector through war memorials such as the Memorial Student Center. Because they are situated in public spaces and

available to the masses, "it is the memorial that most frequently becomes the flashpoint of struggles over history, politics and identity" (Niven 45). For this thesis, I have combined different theoretical frameworks and arrived at the idea that memorials can be understood through three different lenses: reality, representation, and interpretation. By researching a memorial through a factual frame, the history of the memorial becomes central, illustrating "the ethics of art in representing war, including the importance of practitioner intentionality and the tension between fictionalizing truth and authenticity through fiction" (Balfour 30). Through this frame, a memorial's primary function is to educate and acknowledge the factual past of the memorial's inspiration. Knowledge can be obtained through this lens by researching the history of a memorial and the events that led to its erection. Additionally, detailed analysis of the memorial itself, such as its architecture and décor can be studied using this lens.

The second lens, representation, focuses on the ways a memorial speaks to a viewer in ways that words cannot. Vivian Patraka argues that "if on one level language cannot represent any experience directly…some experiences, such as fascism or the Holocaust, are even less available for representation [and] especially resistant to logical, linear description" (Patraka 65). Some events and experiences do not submit themselves easily to textual description and need representation that transcends words. With representation, the designer or the institution responsible for the memorial enlists powerful imagery, rather than words, to draw certain emotions from visitors.

The final framework for understanding memorials, interpretation, allows visitors to combine their understanding of a memorial's history and their emotional reactions to

produce their own individual meaning for the memorial. Charles Griswold specifically evaluates interpretation and the Vietnam War Memorial, stating by exploring how the memorial's neutrality allows spectators to honor Vietnam veterans and overcome the stigma associated with being a soldier in Vietnam. Interpretation allows a viewer to understand and comply with the merits of a memorial; however, it also invites visitors to acknowledge their disagreement or uneasiness with a memorial, resulting in resistance against the memorial's intended purpose. By applying these three frameworks to the Memorial Student Center, the building's purpose becomes multi-leveled, and the public sector of war stories at Texas A&M University can be understood in many different ways.

Reality: Aggies Go to War

One of the most important functions of the Memorial Student Center is to share Texas A&M's military history. Texas A&M's military roots can be traced back to 1876, when the university opened its doors as the Agricultural & Mechanical College of Texas. The college received a public land donation as part of the Morrill Act, which stated that the college's "leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts" (History of the University). Initially, the college was limited to only white males, all of whom received mandatory military training under the Morrill Act. During General James Earl Rudder's presidency in the 1960s, both African Americans and women were admitted to the college and involvement in the Corps of

Cadets became voluntary. As of 2014, “Texas A&M remains one of only six senior military colleges” in the United States and “the Corps is the largest uniformed body outside the national service academies” (History of the University). Additionally, Texas A&M continues to “produce more officers than any other institution in the nation other than the academies” (History of the University). Despite the university’s student body growth, both in numbers and diversity, as an institution, Texas A&M continues to value its military origins and history. The university sanctions certain spaces to serve as constant reminders of this history to students, faculty, and visitors. The marking of the MSC as an educational space allows Texas A&M to transmit military history to the building’s visitors, through channels as simple as pictures on the wall or American flags hanging in the entrance foyer. At its core, the building is a “living memorial” for both deceased Aggie soldiers and the nostalgia of Texas A&M’s early military days.

As both a student center and a memorial, the MSC does not belong to any one person; instead, the building embraces the entire student body, theoretically inviting anyone to study, lounge, or hang out in the MSC during its hours of operation. Similarly, the dedication of the building encompasses a variety of deceased American warfighters, regardless of war or branch of service. In "War Memorials at the Intersection of Politics, Culture and Memory," Bill Niven explores the modernized shift of war memorials and how “after 1918, [war memorials] functioned often as crystallization points for collective mourning and remembrance” (Niven 39). Previously, memorials commemorated great leaders; but after World War I, they focused on the world’s “feelings of ordinary civilians” who either volunteered or were drafted “to fight the

wars" (40). The MSC especially aims to acknowledge the sacrifice made by young Aggies who were still students at the time of death. Former Texas A&M President William B. Bizzell "sought a way to memorialize these Aggies…[and] he envisioned a 'more dignified, elaborate, and permanent memorial that shall be made to perform some useful function on the campus at the same time that it perpetuates the names of the men who gave up their lives for freedom'" (Bacon 10). Texas A&M combined the need for a student center with its military history to produce a memorial that fulfilled Bizzell's vision. This combination of student center and war memorial subtly implements education of Aggie history into the everyday lives of Aggie students. The student body at Texas A&M is exposed to an institutionally sanctioned perspective of history, specifically in honoring Aggie warfighters and sometimes even glorifying the violence of war in the process.

In order to appeal to visitors, dedication to Aggie soldiers has always been at the core of the MSC and is illustrated through the physical decorations of the building. In 1951, on Aggie Muster Day (a day set aside by the university to remember all the current and former students who died that year), the Memorial Student Center was officially dedicated as a "vibrant living memorial of usefulness," especially honoring all Aggies who died in World Wars I and II (Bacon 20). A memorial plaque reciting the names of the initial dedicatees still hangs inside the north entrance. In 1976, shortly after U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ended, the building was rededicated to all Aggies who served their country in the military during the war. A multi-million dollar renovation

between 2009 and 2012 included the insurance that every entrance of the MSC provides a reinforcement of the building's purpose, stating:

> The Memorial Student Center is dedicated to all Aggies who have given their lives in the defense of their country in any war, past, present, or future. In token of respect for their sacrifice, all individuals are requested to remove their hats while in the building. (Memorial Student Center)

This type of dedication does not include specific names of Aggie war fighters, but it causes an awareness that doubly affects patrons. Every time a guest enters and exits the building, they are reminded that the MSC is a memorial and even educated on how to conduct themselves while in the building. Through these dedications, Texas A&M institutionally employs the MSC to serve as a vessel that illustrates Aggie military history.

The largest illustration of Aggie individual sacrifice is housed in the Hall of Honor, a foyer that includes memorials for the eight Aggies who have received the Congressional Medal of Honor, an award for valor against the enemy force and the highest award a member of the Armed Services of the United States can earn. Each recipient is represented by a large illustration, a replica of their medal (as the authentic medals in possession of the University are housed at the Sanders Corps Center), and a narrative of their war story. James R. Woodall, a historian, recently completed a project that collected these stories. He claims that their heroic tales are important "not only [to] Texas Aggies but…those interested in achieving an understanding and appreciation of the full dimensions of humanism, patriotism, and sacrifice (Woodall x).

Problematically, the foyer is located in the back of the MSC, and few students know about its existence, making it difficult to access these Aggies' stories and war experience. By inadequately providing, or even promoting, access to these stories, Texas A&M fails to offer students Woodall's intended full dimension of sacrifice. While students understand that the MSC is a memorial for deceased soldiers, they are not easily given the opportunity to learn the names or stories of many of these Aggie heroes. Even when a visitor finds the Hall of Honor, they only have access to eight stories and a list of names, urging spectators to question how else the MSC could honor individual soldiers instead of just the idea of war.

The latest Medal of Honor recipient, Clarence Sasser, was honored at a November 2014 dedication. This Medal of Honor dedication was especially significant for Texas A&M, as Sasser was "the first African-American medal winner to be included in the hall and the first who served in the Vietnam War" (Carroll). Despite the university's (much too tardy) progression in including an African American Vietnam veteran, the university still has a long way to go to truly honor all Aggie soldiers. Balfour notes that elements can exist that "question the completeness of the memorial as a site of official commemoration and break up the normative acts of instructing visitors about what to value and how" (Balfour 36). The fact that the Hall of Honor does not include every Aggie warfighter could be considered one of the elements that disable the intended education of the Hall of Honor. A greater impact would be possible with more individualized memorials, as students may more easily identify with certain stories, which may not belong to Medal of Honor recipients. Unfortunately, for now reality and

history in the MSC can only be obtained through the eight soldiers displayed in the foyer. The MSC's dedication as a war memorial reminds students of the past and informs their actions in the future.

While the MSC honors fallen Aggies and reminds students about the university's military past, it also informs current students about their cultural identity and military heritage. This assertion occurs mainly in two ways: the constant presence of the Aggie core values and the set of behaviors required within the MSC. First, the six Aggie core values (excellence, integrity, leadership, selfless service, loyalty, and respect) play an active part in the MSC's architecture. Each entrance to the building is dedicated to one of these core values, and the words literally sit above the doorways. Texas A&M's website claims that the university's mission through the core values is "to develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good" (Core Values). This statement itself emits military heritage, sounding similar to the United States Marine Corps mission statement: "We make Marines. We win our nation's battles. We develop quality citizens." These military values are imbedded within the structure of the MSC, informing students of their duties as Aggies to continue pieces of the military lifestyle on which the school was founded.

The Memorial Student Center also transmits knowledge of Aggie heritage in unspoken ways. Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas,* and her earlier article "Scenes of Cognition: Performance and Conquest" suggests ways that the university institution enforces the preservation of this military heritage through the MSC. Taylor's repertoire, defined as "embodied memory-

performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing-in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge" mirrors the actions performed by Aggie students and alumni on the grass surrounding the building (D. Taylor 22). As a sign of respect for the memorial, signs displayed on the lawn request that pedestrians stay off the grass directly surrounding the MSC. Aggies understand this rule because of their exposure to the culture, whereas many visitors miss the notices and are eventually confronted for walking on the grass, a rule many are not aware of. This non-reproducible knowledge is extremely useful at transmitting Aggie cultural identity and reinforcing the importance of military heritage. Taylor's essay continues, "[t]he vast majority of the population learn[s] and transmit[s] knowledge through the embodied practices that are the repertoire. Through formal and informal techniques of incorporation, rather than inscription, people memorize and rehearse fundamental social precepts" (358). In this way, the Aggie repertoire, as presented by the MSC, transmits knowledge and constructs cultural norms towards how Aggies should act not only in the shrine of the MSC, but in all aspects of life. Present day Aggies continue to repeat the same actions as Aggies from all generations, and the student body makes it their goal to hand down tradition to each new class, securing the sacred value of military honor and respect on campus. How current Aggies either comply or resist this repertoire, however, can be explored through my second framework lens: interpretation.

Representation: Aggies Remember

Texas A&M University's Memorial Student Center is always a site dedicated to military remembrance; however, special care is taken during the month of November to highlight Aggie service to the country. The days surrounding Veterans Day, November 11, offer flag raisings, keynote veteran speakers, and memorial dedications. In November 2014, the MSC housed a special traveling exhibit, "Remembering Our Fallen," a photo exhibit of pictures and memorabilia honoring all Texan soldiers who lost their lives during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The exhibit populated the entirety of the MSC's main foyer, hailing each visitor to stop and look at the display. Throughout the time that I spent looking at the pictures and reading their accompanying stories, I also witnessed many different reactions from students about the memorial. Several students paused, removed their iPods, and silently read about one or two soldiers before continuing their day. Others spent half an hour slowly moving down the line, taking in every face. One young woman in particular stood out to me, as she had arrived at the memorial before I got there and was still studying it when I left. Every few minutes, she would pull out a tissue, wipe her eyes, and continue down the line. This exhibit affected each visitor differently, regardless of the fact that many of them experienced the exact same piece of the display at the exact same time. Memorials such as "Remembering Our Fallen," or the Memorial Student Center in general, work to inspire specific emotions from its visitors. Through images rather than words, the architecture, design, decoration, and environment of a memorial exploits the history of the building and the culture that inhabits it, informs spectators about the purpose of the

space, and introduces new emotions to visitors. At the same time, spectators develop their own memory of a monument or memorial by accepting or rejecting these frames in addition to applying their own background knowledge and experiences.

Affect, or the "the conscious subjective aspect of feeling and emotion" plays a large role in the experience of a memorial visitor, as evidenced by the young woman above (Madison 75). Soyini Madison further defines affect as "the complex ways that feelings and emotions are produced and the ways they generate knowledge" (75). Through nonverbal language, a memorial inspires specific emotions within its spectators. Without words, images are able to transmit certain subconscious feelings to a viewer. I personally witnessed this affect at play in the MSC when I visited the "Remembering Our Fallen" exhibit and met a veteran named Bart. When the "Remembering Our Fallen" display came to Texas A&M in November 2014, the Veteran Resource and Support Center (VRSC) hosted a small ceremony in the Flag Room to unveil the exhibit and kick off the many events held by their office for Veterans Day. While I waited for the ceremony to begin, I spent time looking at the display and reading about some of the soldiers featured on the wall. As I was looking at a picture, a man who appeared to be in his sixties approached me and asked if I knew what the medals shown in this particular picture meant. I did not, so he introduced himself as Bart and spent the next five minutes explaining different military awards to me. Eventually, I asked Bart why he had traveled to the MSC for this specific ceremony and he told me that he was a local Vietnam War veteran. He had seen a newspaper article announcing the display and realized that, even though he had served at a different time and in a

different location than these soldiers, he was connected to every person featured on the wall. As he tried to explain that it was his duty to remember these soldiers, he began crying and touched the face of the soldier in the picture nearest to us. Without reading about the deceased veteran's story, Bart recognized the heavy feelings of loss he had for the young man and was overcome by emotions. These images employed affect to ignite feelings of loss and mourning for visitors. Bart, a Vietnam veteran had an experience similar to the girl with tissues. Both had arrived at the display with different backgrounds and opinions, but both were inspired to feel a moment of sorrow about the lost lives shown in the exhibit or about themselves.

Just as placing "Remembering Our Fallen" in the MSC used affect to inform spectators about the amount of life lost during conflict, other memorials attempt to educate visitors about the past. Charles Griswold's "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," is a case study of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC. Griswold notes that "the word 'monument' derives from the Latin monere, which means not just 'to remind' but also 'to admonish,' 'warn,' 'advise,' 'instruct' (Griswold 691). Throughout the article, Griswold explores the way that the monument "seeks to instruct posterity about the past and, in so doing, necessarily reaches a decision about what is worth recovering" (689). Texas A&M's Memorial Student Center often falls into this flaw of deciding what is and is not important for spectators to consume. The MSC encompasses the ideas of Texas A&M's core values, especially in the school's military history, but chooses to ignore other pieces of the university's past. Pictures of early Aggies displayed on the walls of

the MSC focus on their war service, rather than of the fact that women and non-white males were not allowed to attend the school in its early years. While Griswold examines the way memorials instruct visitors how to feel in the space, he acknowledges that "we must also understand the monument's symbolism, social context, and the effects its architecture works on those who participate in it" (690). This individualized representation and experience can be persuaded by architecture, but is also dependent on who the individuals are, what the space means to them, and how their emotions might be manipulated. Aggie students and family members obviously feel more connected to the MSC than outsiders; however, some Aggies are privileged (through race, class, sexual orientation, and political views) to feel more connected than others. Similarly, the MSC itself privileges some Aggie soldiers over others, especially honoring only those who have lost their lives in battle. Griswold makes a special point to mention that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is special because though "other war memorials…honor those who died, not all those who fought. The point is emphasized even by the monument's title: it is a memorial to the Vietnam veterans, not the Vietnam War" (708). The MSC, on the other hand, is specifically only for Aggies who lose their lives during combat, not those injured in war, or killed serving the country in other ways. This exclusion affects the way students, especially student veterans, experience the MSC and the memories they take away from the space.

Performance scholars can borrow some of the insights of the discipline of museum studies, which analyzes the ways museums, memorials, and monuments affect spectators, specifically by exploring the roles these places play in producing memories.

John H. Falk's *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, examines the art of memory-making within museum spaces. Though an institution authorizes what a museum space looks like and attempts to produce a particular reaction from its aesthetics, Falk claims that "all of us use filters to determine not only what to attend to, but also what we store in our memory" (Falk 136). The authority of the government, a corporation, or, in the MSC's case, a state-funded educational institution, can only go so far in planting certain emotions in spectators. True power lies within the eye of the beholder, and the way that they interact with a space, both mentally and physically. Just as I witnessed with visitors to the "Remembering Our Fallen" exhibit, "on any given day, two visitors will walk through the same exact space, at the same exact time, and come away having seen and thought about entirely different things" (137). For many of the students who only paused for a moment to look at a few pictures, the experience may not have been as meaningful in comparison with the girl who stayed over an hour. Falk explains that there are many levels to the experience of a space, stating, "networks of meaning and emotions play a big role in whether an event is experienced as meaningful and whether and how it is remembered" (148). Several factors affect the memories made in any given situation, including the length of time spent in the space, previous history with the content displayed, and the level of interest in the subject. Although memorials and "museums argue that they exist to serve their community, to support civic engagements, and build social capital…many continue to focus on fairly traditional and self-serving ways of achieving these outcomes" (240). The individual act of memory making empowers the spectator over the institution, allowing them to understand and

appreciate a space through these factors and on their own terms. Texas A&M primarily uses the MSC as a space for war remembrance, but students are able to dictate their relationship to the space.

Silke Arnold-de Simine's *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* also focuses on the importance that memory plays in the museum experience and the failure of communal representation in spaces. Simine, like Falk, focuses on the individual experience of a space, rather than on the community, because "'collective memory' is never simply orchestrated, nor is it the authentic voice of a group or community" (Simine 21). While the MSC claims to be a place for all Aggies, past, present, and future, it is impossible for the building to truly encompass the diversity of every Aggie, ultimately risking the alienation of certain parties or the misrepresentation of students. For example, the portrayal of Aggies today has changed from the representation of Aggies in 1970, when all students were cadets, white, and male. The MSC cannot represent all Aggies, because as Simine reminds us, students from previous decades have "memories [that] take on the qualities of the media in which they are preserved and passed on. Those qualities often only become visible in hindsight, when the technology is outdated and has been replaced" (31). One example of an outdated and exclusive quality of the MSC occurs in the Hall of Honor, where Bible verses fill the walls. The engraving of New Testament, Christian verses, and the absence of any other holy writing, ostracizes an Aggie who does not identify as a Christian.

Despite moments of erasure towards certain students, the MSC draws former, present, and future students together with one similarity: they are all Aggies. The use of

Aggie-themed décor around the MSC attempts to evoke feelings of nostalgia about Texas A&M. Maroon banners hang in the entrance corridor, the Flag Room faces a giant picture of Reveille, and the bookstore overflows with Aggie gear. Simine questions the true effectiveness of similarity on memory, because "on the face of those few examples it seems nostalgia can only be evoked through a deliberate misreading and evasion, a seduction and beguilement in which both sides (curators and visitors) collude in an idealized narrative" (54). This seduction leads spectators to believe that "their empathy, loyalty, and feeling of solidarity are supposed to disregard class, religion, ethnicity, and gender" in constructing an overall understanding of Aggie culture (151). Individuals seldom completely disregard all of these factors, further enforcing their power to construct their own reactions at a museum, memorial, or monument.

Memories made by individuals in museums or at monuments depend on many and varied physical and mental factors. For students at Texas A&M University, Veterans Week at the MSC is fraught with external signifers, attempting to manipulate certain experiences and emotions from spectators. Regardless of this institutional frame, students dictate their own experience and what the displays, pictures, and words represent in their lives. Texas A&M employs the MSC as a place to inform Aggies; however, Aggies also have the ability to decipher the MSC through their own experiences within it.

Interpretation: Aggies Understand

On my very first tour of Texas A&M University as a high school student, our guide led us towards the Memorial Student Center and pointed to signs on the grass. He asked the group to pause for a moment and continued to describe the tradition of staying off the grass around the MSC. As we walked towards the entrance of the building, he also paused to make sure everyone in the group knew to remove their hats. As prospective Aggies, our group needed to know the behavioral norms for interaction with the building: the first step to becoming an insider within the Aggie culture. Less than a year later, as an official Aggie student, I stood outside the MSC on a home football game day and watched fans for the other team cluelessly tread on the grass, easily marking them as outsiders.

Traditions at Texas A&M form a community based on common knowledge and cultural repertoire. While visitors who comply to the cultural repertoire mark themselves as insiders, bodies that are uninformed about these traditions can easily be noticed as outsiders; however, insiders may erase these marks and resist the cultural identity bestowed upon them by Texas A&M. Though Texas A&M employs numerous devices to pass along this cultural repertoire (including Fish Camp, traditions, and Aggie songs and yells), the Memorial Student Center proposes certain actions for Aggie insiders to perform. As a memorial, the MSC suggests that students should behave with solemn respect while in and around the building. On the contrary, as a student center, the MSC serves as a home base for students to meet, sleep, shop, study, and eat throughout their time at Texas A&M. Because it serves these two functions, the MSC leaves itself

especially open to interpretation by its visitors, regardless of insider or outsider markings. The struggle to serve and be understood as both a memorial and a home space on campus molds the way that the student body interacts and defines the MSC.

Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* introduces and defines habitus as "'systems and durable, transposable dispositions" based on "principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated'" (Bourdieu 72). As I watched the MSC entrance one day, I noticed that cadets robotically removed their hats at the same point outside the building. The action has become pure habit. This serves as a perfect example of habitus, as Bourdieu explains that "because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing…what they do has more meaning than they know" (79). At one point in time, students learned that the MSC stood as a living memorial, and that it was an act of respect to remove their hats when entering the building. Yet, over time, the act becomes habit and might lose meaning without a conscious effort from patrons. Avoiding the MSC's grass and removing hats inside the MSC is also "a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic... and charged with a host of social meanings and values" (87). Aggie students follow the MSC's rules to be respectful, but seldom do they realize that by doing so, they also comply to an institutionally sanctioned set of behaviors. This compliance reaffirms the support of Aggie students towards Aggie military heritage, which often includes the glorification of death driven by the faceless Aggie soldiers of war.

The MSC Flag Room, also called "the Heart of the MSC," is central in the struggle of ways that students connect to the MSC and negotiate their identities in the space. *The Battalion*, Texas A&M's student newspaper, describes the Flag Room as "a collection of flags ranging from the Texas and American flag to banners representing the different ROTC and Corps outfits" (Carter). Many Aggie veterans donate their individual company banners to the display after their return from deployment. This area encompasses the different experiences of Aggies who have served in different wars and different locations. This space also serves as a reading room for current students. Tables with outlets line the room's edges, couches and armchairs fill the center of the room, and a short two-minute walk leads students to numerous food dispensaries and the bookstore, where Aggie fans can purchase Texas A&M themed gear, ranging from shirts to key chains to children's books. Former students reminisce about the days before cell phones, when they could leave a note on themselves while napping on the couches, and complete strangers would wake them up in time for class. Students still use the Flag Room for in-between class naps, as well as study sessions and small group meetings. Every Friday in the fall, the Singing Cadets perform a short concert in the space, and on celebrated days, such as Aggie Muster, the Flag Room is transformed into a display room or ceremony hall. The space transforms for the student's needs, but eternally exhibits military flags and homey couches.

The pressure to comply with Aggie habitus and repertoire is asserted on incoming students by organizations within the university. Present-day Aggies continue to repeat the same actions as Aggies from all generations, and the student body makes it

their goal to hand down tradition to each new class, securing the sacred value of military honor and respect on campus. Granger Smith, a former student and current singer/songwriter, reflects this cycle in his song “We Bleed Maroon,” stating:

> And there late at night if I listen real close,
> The spirit still whispers through the crooked live oaks.
> And I hear my father and his dad before,
> and all those brave Aggies that never came back from war.

Students connect to past Aggie generations by enacting the same cultural performance decades later. During an optional, yet strongly recommended three-day retreat in August, first year students attend Fish Camp hosted by current Aggie students. At this retreat, students are taught cultural information, including yells for sporting events, the right way to introduce themselves in Aggieland, and most importantly, the history and proper actions to perform within and around the MSC. Though some students choose not to attend Fish Camp (or cannot afford it, as attendance costs $225)[3], the Aggie repertoire non-verbally informs them of prescribed behaviors, sometimes subconsciously. The “Aggie lifestyle” becomes the mark of an insider. In fact, many offices across campus display the quote, "From the outside looking in, you can't understand it. And from the inside looking out, you can't explain it." Aggie repertoire creates an insider culture, which is established by daily habits across campus, both in and out of the classroom.

With the growing diversity of Aggie students, however, comes the desire to challenge the institutionally suggested behaviors of “Aggieness.” Michel de Certeau

[3] According to http://fishcamp.tamu.edu/.

offers different insights into the ways students can choose to occupy a prescribed place such as the MSC. Examples of this occupation can be seen through areas like the Flag Room and the corridors that surround it. In *The Practices of Everyday Life*, de Certeau analyzes "spatial practice" and how authority "determin[es] conditions of social life" through manipulation of space (de Certeau 96). De Certeau also notes how people can choose to "ignore the devices" implemented by an institution (92). In 2009, shortly before the MSC closed for renovation, students organized a massive flash mob in the Flag Room to say good-bye to the building. This event was met with overwhelming reactions from students, both former and present. In retrospect, the Battalion described the event as "a break from the building's somber tradition, offending some students and former students while others enjoyed the event" (Bumgardner). Hundreds of students gathered in the Flag Room and passed around giant beach balls, while dancing to music. The crowd spilled into the hallway, and eventually, people were forced up the stairs so more could be included in the experience. The flash mob ended with the War Hymn and students threw their arms around the stranger next to them, enjoying the communitas of the MSC one last time. Though the students attempted to keep the flash mob focused with the school's fight song, they disregarded the building's sacredness during the event. This serves as an example of how students ignore the devices sanctioned by the university to create their own space within the MSC. The MSC attempts to form an Aggie identity across generations. During the flash mob, students recognized the way that "memories tie us to that place…it's personal [and] not interesting to anyone else" (de Certeau 108).

The Flag Room is not the only area that students reclaim for their own needs. The entrance hall is often overwhelmed with student organization tables and employment booths. Sorority members try to advertise their upcoming fun-as-philanthropy events and the gymnastics team offers to do tricks to help them raise funds. The bookstore, situated to the left of the main hall advertises Starbucks coffee, new Aggie sweatshirts, and samples of a new energy drink. In the matter of just ten feet, students experience the sign reminding them to take off their hats and act respectful, and then enter a world of commotion and commerce. These acts go against the instructions set forward by Texas A&M and allow students to create their own space for their own functions, whether it is raising money for their student organization or finding food and drink to sustain them in between classes. In "Mapping Realities," Michael Balfour cannot help but notice how, even though "memorials are officially sanctioned spaces of mourning and remembrance, the informal response…is paradoxically intimate and communal" (Balfour 36). In Balfour's case, Vietnam veterans and their families visit the wall and leave small gifts. What Balfour calls an "informal response" gives ownership to the veterans and families who visit, constructing a relationship both between themselves and the memorial, as well as themselves and other families affected by the Vietnam War. When students commune together in the MSC, whether over lunch, a study group, or playing Xbox on one of the televisions in the basement, they have made the building their own, but do so in a way that helps maintain the building as a place for Aggie remembrance through the creation of memories together.

The students in the flash mob, as well as students who have an informal response to the MSC, resist the sanctions institutionally designed by the university. Vivian Patraka's "Contemporary Drama, Fascism, and the Holocaust" questions the relation between reality and representation and explores whether memorials are "performers or performed upon" (Patraka 72). Should the students simply adhere to the MSC's rules out of respect, or should they honor the fallen Aggies with life? Patraka recognizes the struggle with war memorials, noting "the problem of finding a language for describing" war and the need to "prevent it from repressing and rendering invisible the tangible reality of physical privation, torture, and death" (67). In many ways, the student body must resist the implication that the Memorial Student Center can only serve as a monument. Students pump life into the building because they cannot imagine a student center based on blood, fear, loss, and death. Patraka warns against constructing war memorials that consume the viewer in trauma instead of remembrance. While students strive to honor their fallen Aggie brothers and sisters and to embody Texas A&M's six core values, they recognize that the MSC is a place to treat as a second home. The Flag Room provides Aggie students the perfect environment to understand a "culturally encoded experience" (70). The room contains military flags and symbols, but also consumes students with piano music, laughter, and the warm feeling of a place to connect with others and relax while taking breaks from their hectic class and study schedules.

Texas A&M is an institution founded on military values. Uniformed cadets roam the campus, students refer to past Aggie generations as "Old Army," and in lieu of a

fight song, students sing "The War Hymn" at sporting events. Traditional constructions of "Aggie-ness" and the compliance to respect military memorials in an institutionally sanctioned way are embodied in elements as simple as the student center and reading lounge. Aggie pride and military heritage abide side-by-side through the cultural performance instructed by Texas A&M University's repertoire. Aggies, past, present, and future, will continue to re-enact these practices as a piece of their identity and a way to memorialize those Aggies who have come before them. In particular, the Memorial Student Center will continue to serve both the university and students in very coded ways: First, it will instruct norms of Aggie identity and stand as a remembrance for fallen Aggies. Secondly, students will manipulate the institutionally sanctioned place to serve as a home. As the university continues to grow, the Memorial Student Center will exist as a link between past, present, and future Aggies, all of who understand Aggie culture and the confusing practices that mark students as insiders.

CHAPTER III

CALL OF DUTY, DUTY TO TELL

"People were burning flags across our country!" Kim Feldman's voice rang throughout the theater, as the nine performers behind her sat solemnly, reflecting on the intense pain in her voice[4]. It was opening night of The Telling Project's *Telling Aggieland*, a performance opportunity for local veterans and their families to share their stories with the public. Kim, a former military dependent and performer in *Telling Aggieland*, stood in silence for a moment before continuing her monologue about the hardships endured by her family during the Vietnam War. Through the course of her seven-minute monologue, Kim shared stories that encompassed over twenty years of military experience as a dependent. But the real climax of Kim's story occurred as she described returning to the United States during the peak of the Vietnam War and the unwelcome homecoming her family received because of her husband's military position. Kim detailed the protests happening across the country, including the burning of American flags on college campuses. And then her face broke into an unexpected smile: "But as we exited off the highway towards Texas A&M University on that Fourth of July, my eyes were relieved to see that the entrance to campus was ablaze with flags; they weren't burning, but proudly waving over the university."

Narrative performance has the power to transcend time and space, uniting a storyteller and their audience in a shared moment. Kim's story was especially moving, as it provided Aggie audience members with an opportunity to understand how their

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[4] The names of my interlocutors have been changed in accordance with the confidentiality agreement they signed as mandated by the Institutional Review Board.

university affected the life of someone else, over four decades ago. *The Telling Project* focuses on bringing veterans and civilians together to talk about war and veteran-based problems, and Kim's application of a piece of Texas A&M's history within her narrative resonated with the audience. Kim was relieved to see an institution proudly welcoming her military family, while the other performers and some audience members were proud to see a moment of relief in Kim's intense war story. This moment culminated Kim's story and Aggie heritage, extending a shared moment of recognition between a Vietnam veteran wife and many young Aggies in the audience.

Reporting for Duty

Texas A&M University's Veteran Resource and Support Center invited Jonathan Wei to bring *The Telling Project* to College Station. In conjunction with the Association of Former Students, the Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts, and the Department of Performance Studies, Texas A&M produced *Telling Aggieland* in late Spring 2014. After an initial interview process with 24 local veterans and dependents, Wei recruited a group of core performers and interlocutors. Eventually, the performance involved ten veterans and dependents, ranging from World War II to Operation Iraqi freedom, and including members from every military branch except the Air Force. Five veterans and five dependents, ranging from ages 21 to 84, rehearsed their own stories for six weeks before taking the to the stage for three consecutive performances. Behind the scenes, Colonel Gerald Smith led a panel of professionals and volunteers, including a psychologist and an Air Force student veteran, to support the cast through marketing,

rehearsals, and fundraising. *Telling Aggieland* drew together a team of more than thirty veterans, dependents, and civilians to create a forum where the performers could share their personal experiences and begin a conversation about veterans on campus.

The Telling Project's founder, Jonathan Wei, stumbled on the idea for the production during his job as an advisor for veterans. Wei recognized a disconnect between the University of Oregon's veterans and civilian, student, staff, and faculty, and sought to bring the communities together.

> *The Telling Project* works with communities and organizations to produce "*Telling*," – an innovative performance in which military veterans and their family members, after interviews and subsequent training and rehearsal, stage the 'telling' of their stories for their communities. *The Telling Project* creates opportunities for veterans to speak and their communities to listen… *The Telling Project* hearkens to the origins of theatre as a ritualized communal conversation, in which experiences, which might otherwise threaten societal cohesion, become instead vital and engaged elements in individual, communal and national identity. *The Telling Project* is performance, oral history and collective mythologizing to the end of broadening and deepening individual connection to community, nation and the world. (VeteranArtistProgram.org)

Since its inception, Wei has taken the project to fourteen cities in nine states, allowing over fifty veterans and family members to perform their personal stories for their communities. In a 2013 interview, he explained that our society has very few ways to

talk about war and that even during performances, "'stories' take a back seat to the experience of witnessing a group of individuals engaging honestly with themselves" (Martinez 8). Here, Wei states that *The Telling Project*'s goal is to allow veterans self-discovery on the stage. At the same time, *The Telling Project's* website reveals that the project's mission is also to "give veterans and military family members the opportunity to speak, and their communities the opportunity to listen" (TheTellingProject.org). As I witnessed the performers grow over the rehearsal process and through interviews with my interlocutors, I explored the idea that, though performers gravitated towards the performance to share their experience, different veterans had different goals for their participation in the show. Every performer wanted to share their story, but they each had their own motivation: some wanted to educate future soldiers and their families and others simply wanted the audience to understand the problems veterans face upon their return from deployment.

The Telling Project's process includes five important steps: interviews, scripting, performance training, production, and rehearsal. First, Wei conducts personal interviews with veterans. These interviews can last between one and seven hours, though the interviews for *Telling Aggieland* typically took two hours. Though Wei prompts the interviewee with questions when needed, he initially asks them to talk about their deployment in chronological order, beginning with their motivation to join and ending with a summation of how the military shaped their lives. Participants may discuss anything, but are not required to share discomforting or traumatic information. Wei records each interview and transcribes them verbatim. Step two, the scripting process,

begins with these transcriptions. Wei structures the script to contain monologues, dialogic conversations, and ensemble pieces, weaving them together to create a theatrical arc. The script follows the same timeline as the interviewing process, beginning with enlistment and concluding with the veteran's return to civilian life. While Wei composes the script, a guest director begins working to acclimate participants to the stage. Performance training, the third step in the process, provides veterans a crash course in theatre and stagecraft. During this step, veterans learn performance fundamentals, develop relationships with one another, and establish comfort in front of an audience. Simultaneously the fourth step, production, occurs among the crew and design team for the production. Volunteers assemble fund raising plans, design budgets, and launch marketing campaigns for the show. Designers compose set, lighting, and sound designs, while stage managers construct a rehearsal calendar. Finally, once the script is completed and the veterans feel comfortable performing, rehearsals begin. The director and the cast meet from two to eight hours each week to rehearse their stories. Wei states that

> *The Telling Project* is, fundamentally, not a product but a process—by which we mean to say that purpose is to provide not a play (though this is the medium), but a formalized space in which discussion of what has become a difficult subject—military service—can be addressed in as direct a fashion as possible. (TheTellingProject.org)[5]

[5] This Mission Statement appeared on the Telling Project's website in Fall 2014. Parts may have changed.

Wei produces a theatrical medium through which civilians and veterans can communicate about military experience. Wei explains that "a majority [of veterans]—do want to talk about their experience. And they want to talk about it with people who don't know" (TheTellingProject.org). *The Telling Project*'s website offers a number of personal testimonies from both performers and audience members. These statements confirm that the process allows the community a safe space to start discussions about military service. Though each performance contains different locations, different veterans, and different stories, the goal remains intact: allowing a place for veterans to speak and a time for audiences to listen.

My understanding of storytelling and affect, especially when used by veterans and dependents to extend knowledge to the audience during *Telling Aggieland*, is informed by Max Rayneard's essay about an earlier iteration of *The Telling Project*. Rayneard's article, "'Let Me Tell You a Story of How:' U.S. Military Veterans, Performing Memory, and the Telling Project," describes *The Telling Project*'s early struggle with authenticity, concluding that "authenticity affirms the relationship between veterans and the memories they perform" (Rayneard 2). For Rayneard, the storyteller must remain in control because authenticity coincides with ownership. Wei used the stage as a forum to share the stories, but did not initially expect that the stories would easily translate to a theatrical performance. Rayneard reflects on the show, explaining that performance was the practical medium to share these authentic stories, because "*Telling Eugene* was theatrical, even self-reflexively so" and that storytelling and theatre often go hand in hand (19). My ethnographic interviews with these storytellers explain

how the process shaped each performer's story, and explored the obstacles that they each faced.

Kim Feldman's performance during *Telling Aggieland* caused silence through the entire theater. Though Kim was a wonderful storyteller and had control of the audience's attention, the fact that her story was based on her own experiences during war enhanced her ability to silence audience members. As illustrated by this interaction with the audience, *Telling Aggieland* and the Telling Project have unlocked the secret to presenting war narratives as performance. The Telling Project's motto, "It's time to speak, it's time to listen," highlights the need to give narration privileges to veterans in certain spaces. By allowing an actual soldier to embody their story for an audience, *Telling Aggieland* presented a forum in which veterans could speak, and the audience was more than willing to listen.

Entering the War Zone

"I felt confident in my ability as an actress," says Olivia James, laughing as she reflects on her thoughts about the first rehearsal for *Telling Aggieland*, "but very unsure of Clyde's" (James 2014). Both Olivia and her husband, Clyde, represented the United States Marine Corps during *Telling Aggieland*, bringing the perspectives of both an active Marine and a former Marine turned military spouse to the stage. "I was really, really nervous about memorizing my script because, even at the very beginning, Clyde already had his script memorized," recalls Olivia, explaining her fears about the rehearsal process (2014). Like Olivia, many of the veterans and dependents who

composed the *Telling Aggieland* cast were nervous about many things, ranging from memorizing their lines to making sure their stories were acceptable to the military. Other members of the cast felt high levels of uncertainty during the scripting process. Though Wei transcribed the interviews verbatim, the performers did not have any initial say in what was included in the first script. “I was afraid how people might perceive what we’ve been through,” comments Martin Black, a Texas A&M student whose brother served in Iraq, “I just didn’t want people to judge my brother unfairly on what I said” (Black 2014). Martin’s brother returned home with both physical and emotional scars, motivating Martin to be a part of *Telling Aggieland* to spread awareness about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and how it affects our troops. “I was so mad when I got the script, because I wanted to get more of a point (about PTSD) out there,” continues Martin, “And that’s why I changed so much of the script” (2014). Eventually, the cast had the opportunity to shape their own narratives within the script. From interviews to scripting to rehearsals, the cast grasped ownership of their words, realizing that their stories and narratives belonged to no one but themselves.

Although cast members were experts about their own war narratives, none of them had previous performance experience and few had shared their war stories in front of a large audience before. Lana Timbs, a Navy veteran and *Telling Aggieland* performer documented her experiences in an article for the Texas A&M College of Liberal Arts:

> From the moment I received the script, I began reading, and a ton of emotions overwhelmed me. I cried. I laughed. Nervousness spread from my head to my toes as I realized that soon I would be telling my story… In

> the cast, there are mothers, brothers, husbands and wives. There are soldiers, marines and seamen. We have stories from Vietnam to present-day. All of these stories will give the community a better sense of what military members and their loved ones have seen and lived through. (Timbs 2014)

Lana, like many of the performers, was nervous with her ability to take her narrative and adjust it for an audience, but knew it was important for the cast to share their stories. Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson's essay "The Performance Turn in Narrative Studies" spotlights "the storyteller," building on Walter Benjamin's idea that "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience — his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (qtd in Langellier and Peterson 173). *The Telling Project's* goal is to use these staged stories to create shared experiences that inform civilian audience members about daily military life, both abroad and on the home front.

> Every cast member of "Telling Aggieland" has a captivating story, and the audience will definitely walk away with a better understanding of military life. The stories that each person tells highlight important events in the lives of military members, and most revolve around major times of conflict or war. (Timbs 2014)

The cast members worked to overcome their nervousness because they realized that, in order to allow civilians to understand the military, someone had to start telling war narratives. Langellier and Peterson identify the power structure within personal

narrative, explaining a difference between "who is qualified to speak...[and] who can and who has to listen" (Langellier and Peterson 178). In the case of *Telling Aggieland*, the performers used their position on stage to gain the power as the group qualified to speak, so that an audience could listen. By forming their stories into rehearsed narratives, the cast entertained while also educating spectators about military issues.

When turning these stories into narratives, it was crucial for the writing team, director, and cast to understand how words and actions work together to produce a performance. Langellier and Peterson describe narrative as a combination of "'making' (of experience for listeners) with a description of narrative as a 'doing' (taking, telling, and listening)" (Langellier and Peterson 173). By combining "making" and "doing," a narrative evolves from a simple story told from one person to another into a shared experience between a group of people. "Making" focuses on "elements, aspects, and structures that make up narrative" and means that a narrative must be presented as "an object, work, or text that is imagined, fashioned, and formed" with effort over time (174). In this way, the rehearsal process takes the repetition of words and makes it into something more for a performance, so that "it distinguishes or frames itself from what surrounds it, it marks itself off and thereby turns back to comment on its context" (174). *Telling Aggieland* performer Olivia James recalled the rehearsal process as a way for her to better understand her own story:

> There are words, and feelings, involved in my experience. None of which I completely understand, but all of which I experienced at a level I had not previously experienced on any stage. The time I spent in rehearsals

> was so many things… It was painful. It was difficult and it was natural. I've never before experienced something that had my thoughts and emotions waging wars so profound that at the end of the day, I fell in to bed exhausted and drained and alive. (James 2014)

This self-reflexivity involved in rehearsing narrative encouraged the performers to negotiate the impact these experiences have had on their lives, while preparing their narrative for the stage.

"Doing," on the other hand, involves the "explorations of the behaviors, habits, practices, and institutions which enact, execute, or do narrative" (Langellier and Peterson 174). The act of "doing" focuses on the body and the important role it plays in performance. Though a story can be shared through text, such as a book, letter, or e-mail, the embodiment of the words provides a new level of experience for both the audience and the storyteller. Navy submariner veteran Oscar Redding's narrative relied heavily on his body movements and ability to use the stage space to illustrate his experience. During one part of his story, Oscar recalled how his friends thought it would be funny for him to arrive at boot camp with lime green hair. During this part of his narrative, as well as others, Oscar depended on the use of the set and props to help him illustrate his narrative:

> The set and props were helpful because I was able to use a hat to show how green hair affected my appearance in boot camp and better illustrate my experience for the audience. [The use of the set] helped emphasize

> certain aspects of my story while relaxing me enough to speak more openly. (Redding 2014)

Oscar's description illustrates how "narrative…emerges from the lived realities of bodily conduct rather than the recognition, representation, or recounting of past experience" (Langellier and Peterson 174). Oscar's physical movements, with the help of set pieces, helped him better present his experiences in an authentic way. Just as the time and effort put into "making" allows the story to question its context, "doing" within a narrative "designates a site for doing work and play," and allows for the "challenging and confirming possible experiences and identities" (174). *Telling Aggieland* performers confirmed their identities within their narratives by presenting their bodies a certain way, often with the help of set pieces. This embodiment of their story helped the audience fully grasp their experiences. At the same time, it allowed the actors to move in a way that felt more natural than miming or ignoring their instincts to interact with objects around them.

This degree of "naturalness" enhanced the cast's ability to share their memories. By staging war memories as personal narratives, veterans and their families provide audience members with an embodiment of the reality of war. Jill Taft-Kaufman's "How to Tell a True War Story: The Dramaturgy and Staging of Narrative Theatre" explores a case study of a Vietnam veteran-based show similar to *Telling Aggieland*, noting the process's successes and obstacles. Storytelling becomes key in war narrative performance, because a shared "point of view thus establishes an interpretative relationship between narrator and audience" (Taft-Kaufman 22). This understanding also

reaches the performers themselves, as they are able to distance themselves from the idea of war and focus on their individual stories. Dr. Michael Greenwald, who served as the director for *Telling Aggieland*, recognized the importance in balancing heavy war stories with comedic life experiences during deployment. In an interview with KAGS, a local news station, Greenwald stated, “I don't want everyone to think this is all very heavy, well some of it is, some of it's absolutely bone chilling, but much of it is quite amusing” (Kim 2014). Every soldier has a different service experience and not all war stories are traumatic and scary. *Telling Aggieland* focused on the diversity of stories, just as it applied diversity among the cast and their ages, deployment locations, and military branches.

Much like with *Telling Aggieland*, Taft-Kaufman’s study calls on both performers and audience members to witness and confront the many issues presented by war. Taft-Kaufman asserts that war narrative theatre is crucial, because many non-veterans “made no distinction between the warrior and the war” at the time of her case study (17). Audiences become distanced from veteran experiences, and forget to differentiate between soldier and war. The personal lives and stories of troops often disappear. In the same interview with KAGS, performer Rebecca Lesemann explains how she understands the distance between veterans and civilians:

> "I think sometimes people they ask questions they don't necessarily really want the answers to, like have we been in combat, had to fire our weapon, have we seen bad stuff. Hopefully it'll help them connect with us and be

able to understand where we come from and see, maybe they're not as different as everybody else." (Kim 2014)

Telling Aggieland uses personal storytelling to provide audiences with the realization that soldiers are people, too. By asserting this similarity early in the show with the use of comedy, the audience is more willing to understand the veteran's stories and how a war does not reflect the people fighting in it. Rosie Cross explains it this way: "No one hates war more than soldiers" (Cross 2014). She continues to assert that soldiers dislike deployments and fighting just as much as domestic protesters disapprove of the war. The KAGS article concludes: "Here in Aggieland, veterans and their families are "telling" their stories in a unique play-- hoping to bridge the gap between the community and what they've experienced as men and women in uniform" (Kim 2014) The sharing of these experiences is important, because impersonal media "representations of the war enable Americans to remain distanced from the veterans' experiences" (Taft-Kaufman 17).

Jonathan Wei uses *The Telling Project* to help veterans claim performance as a forum to share their personal war struggles. In Philip Taylor's introduction to *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community,* Taylor includes the idea that social theatre "is a theatre that is taken out into nontheatrical settings... for the purpose of helping the audience, or the participants, grapple with an issue, event, or question of immediate public and personal concern" (P. Taylor xx). A particularly notable element about *Telling Aggieland's* cast is the fact that they were all nontraditional performers who had never experienced detailed stage training before

committing to the show. Colonel Smith, Jonathan Wei, and Dr. Greenwald built a cast of inexperienced actors to present social issues on the stage. This transition from usual audience member to actor intimidated some of the performers at first, particularly Martin Black:

> I've never been one to tell personal stories, as I often prefer my life to be just that, my life…So after I was contacted and asked to participate in *Telling Aggieland*, my initial response was, 'Not a chance in hell!' …In the initial interview, it was honestly incredibly difficult for me to get out words clearly and in ways I intended. So when I was asked about some of my experiences as a brother of a soldier, floodgates just opened. No matter how prepared I thought I was for the interview, and no matter how much I have thought about these experiences in years past, voicing them was a whole separate process that my brain was simply not ready for and not comfortable doing. I walked out of there fully expecting that to be my last time I interacted with those three people in that room for the rest of my life. (Black 2014)

Martin eventually decided to take part in *Telling Aggieland* as a nontraditional performer and the cast acknowledged Martin's narrative about his brother as an integral part of the performance. Martin's story culminated everyone else's tales together to present one large issue: the misunderstanding of returning veterans. Once the performers have used the stage to present their issues, *The Telling Project* relies on conversation to fully complete the organization's goal. An example of the project's success can be found

in April Baer's 2009 article from Oregon Public Broadcasting, "Military Vets To Share War Stories With Public." In this article, Baer introduces the project and invites the community to witness the show because veterans feel that "with that ownership (of their stories) comes a responsibility to share the experiences, and maybe - in some way - reduce the suffering of others" (Baer). The performance outcomes for *Telling Aggieland* can be based on the level of conversation surrounding the show, but also focuses on the individual growth of each veteran.

The veterans also grow together as a cast, forming a type of family throughout the rehearsal process. Lana Timbs' article explored how the *Telling Aggieland* cast developed relationships due to their experiences both in war and as nontraditional actors:

> Working with the other veterans and family members in this play has been an awesome experience. I feel such a sense of togetherness when at practices. That's the unique thing about the military. Beginning as early as boot camp, you learn to adapt to different situations, and how to make friends that usually end up being more like your family. You depend on each other. (Timbs 2014)

It was especially interesting to see how the veterans and the dependents automatically clicked together, regardless of their different experiences. In "The Vietnam Veteran as Ventriloquist," Keith Beattie discusses the "perception that reinforces the suggestion that only those who participated and witnessed the war can fully understand an experience that is otherwise untranslatable" (Beattie 80). The diversity and mixture of veterans and dependents in *Telling Aggieland*'s cast illustrates that not only veterans and soldiers can

understand war. Navy veterans and Marine dependents could relate to one another just as well as both Army dependent performers could understand one another. Despite her Navy background, Timbs felt connected to every other story:

> I have never felt that sense of togetherness at any other time in my life. Being a cast member of this play brings back so many great memories, and I can easily relate to almost every story that the cast members share. I am finally able to make it through the entire script without bursting into tears. (Timbs 2014).

Beattie argues that in order to understand the veterans and their conflict, Americans must erase the perception that civilians cannot understand war memories and be willing to try and understand veterans' experiences. The *Telling Aggieland* cast, especially the military dependent performers, illustrates how narrative brought them together to better relate with one another, a feat that could then be transferred to the stage to help an audience better understand the members of the United States military.

As I collected narratives about the *Telling Aggieland* process, I constructed an understanding of what military life is like for veterans, active military, dependents, sailors, soldiers, marines, pilots, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers, and how narrative allows these personal lives to be shared with the public. Personal narrative is a powerful tool in explaining the differences between military and civilian life. They explain, or "culture," an audience to understand the obstacles, hardships, and joys found within military life. In its three nights of performance, *Telling Aggieland*

reached nearly 800 people in the Bryan/College Station community of over 169,000[6]. Despite the low attendance of the community, bridges were built and healing occurred on both sides of the stage, in an attempt to start conversation about our veterans. The narratives were also helpful in forming a veteran community within the cast, where many of the performers finally recognized the need to talk through their stories in order to understand their experiences.

Debriefing Recovery

Shortly before the opening night of *Telling Aggieland*, Bryan/College Station's local paper, *The Eagle*, ran an article about the performance, including an interview with Colonel Gerald Smith, the head of the Texas A&M Veteran Resource and Support Center. Colonel Smith was a key player in bringing the experience to Texas A&M, after he witnessed a performance in Austin, Texas. Smith, who has worked with student veterans on campus in many different capacities over the past seven years, identified a need for these students to share their stories with the Bryan/College Station and Texas A&M communites. In the article, Smith is quoted: "Some of these students saw some horrific things, and endured some tremendous ordeals… they paid a pretty big price with some of the things they saw with their service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we don't want them to keep this stuff bottled up" (Perrone). Sharing war narratives, which was once seen as taboo in American society, has become a therapeutic and community-building tool adopted by career military members such as Smith. *The Eagle* reported that

[6] Population based on the City of College Station Demographic Report, 2012

“in some cases, participation in the project can serve as a healing opportunity for those who are involved… Texas A&M has roughly 700 student veterans, and about 400 veterans on staff, and the project will give them a unique opportunity to talk about their experiences” (Perrone). By performing their (sometimes traumatic) war narratives, the *Telling Aggieland* performers informed the civilian audience about their struggles during wartime and upon their return home. Performers were also surprised to realize that the show provided them a vessel through which they were able to have a moment of self-reflection to dissect their experiences. Smith’s interview with *The Eagle* ends with his assertion that “they need to get out to a certain level that they're comfortable with and tell their story" (Perrone). Though many of the *Telling Aggieland* performers found it difficult to face their trauma, they acknowledged that it was their duty to themselves, fellow soldiers, and civilians to share their stories.

Della Pollock’s *Telling Bodies Performing Birth* is an ethnographic documentation of the trauma suffered through the pain of childbirth. Though this trauma differs from the experiences faced by the American military, Pollock focuses on the performance of pain and how these embodied acts of memory inform both a traumatized party and an audience. Pollock documents how sharing these traumatic stories allows performers to “subject themselves, and me, and you, to often unnerving, transforming articulations of memory, discourse, and desire” (Pollock 7). Through this articulation of pain, the *Telling Aggieland* cast embodied their memories as a way to therapeutically self-reflect. Unfortunately, in that process many of the performers relived their trauma because “the ways in which we otherwise, ordinarily name or “do” pain suggests that

pain permeates language, refusing isolation to a discrete body part, confusing bodies, feeling, identities, and others, in a complex mess of representation that is inconsistent with diagnostic practice and is fundamentally inefficient" (118). Many of my interlocutors likewise identify the performance process as a way for them to work through traumatic events that they would otherwise repress. Simultaneously, this public performance of pain "in reciprocal engagement with a listener, a friend, an imagined community, [or] an institution crowding in on the very body of the story," allowed the performers' "stories to enter time through address, in flashing reference to the 'Other' whose otherness underwrite the act of telling" (Pollock 182). Many civilians in the audience could not fully comprehend the experiences faced by the performers and their families; however, by embodying war trauma in front of a crowd, the performers provided a tangible illustration of the pain faced by countless soldiers and veterans.

In "Performing Cultural Trauma in Theatre and Film," Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert and Sofie Verdoodt apply theories of trauma to popular theatre and film works, specifically focusing on the impact these stories have on an inexperienced audience. The trio identifies that "cultural trauma triggers a 'crisis of representation' in the sense that it disturbs the shared imaginations and representations upon which collective identities" of soldiers are built" (Le Roy, Stalpaert, Verdoodt 250). Our country's current representation of war experience fails to identify the real people who serve as soldiers, completely objectifying their joys and pains in place of faceless numbers and headlines. The authors acknowledge the reasoning behind our country's failure to sufficiently portray our warriors by asking, "how are we to perform an event that is defined by the

fact that it cannot be fully narrated, by 'the impact of its very incomprehensibility' that haunts the present?" (252). The struggle to perform trauma, from either lack of experience or fear of incorrect portrayal, further alienates the soldiers who feel like their stories have been overlooked or are too gruesome to talk about. By using performance training and a stage, projects such as *Telling Aggieland* "call forth a complex set of tensions between absence and presence, between showing and telling, between the performativity of the medium and the agency of the spectator, between representation and experience" (253). These tensions allow for the reliving of traumatic stories in a safe place, surrounded by veterans who have similar stories and can empathize, while simultaneously presenting the pain to an audience in order to help produce a better understanding of our military members. In this way, performance "narrative enables the traumatized subject to recount the experience that at first resisted all language… [so] narrative is thus a vital element in the difficult process of moving from the 'denial' and 'acting-out' to the 'working-through' of trauma" (26).

Telling Aggieland performer Rosie Cross shared a particularly traumatic story from her time as an Army captain as part of her narrative. She recounted her experience of a soldier's suicide and the consequential events that followed the death, including informing the family, breaking the news to her unit, and reading roll call at his funeral. Originally, this narrative had not been chosen to be part of the performance by Wei. However after Rosie received the first draft of the script, she contacted Wei and explained that she wanted this story to be included as a way to raise awareness for the pain suffered by our soldiers. In the initial interview process, Wei promised that

performers could add or omit anything they wanted from the script, and he obliged to Rosie's wishes. Rosie recounted this experience:,

> I originally thought [*Telling Aggieland*] wasn't going to do anything for me, but it was just to help benefit those around us to learn about the military and what we go through. Boy, was I wrong. It helped bridge that gap, yes, but it became very therapeutic for me as well. As I told my story, I realized I had never really dealt with the death of my soldier. I had pushed it aside so that I could continue along and get the mission done. Telling the story brought up so many raw emotions for me and helped me work through it all. It also allowed me to not only honor him, but finally let go of the guilt I'd been carrying and have some final peace about the whole situation. (Cross 2014).

Staging this trauma, Rosie was able to confront many of the issues that she had not been able to face before. The performance process allowed her to do this slowly, beginning with recounting the pain in her initial interview, then working through her emotions during the rehearsal process. Additionally, many members of the cast of *Telling Aggieland* were able to empathize with Rosie's story, opening channels of communication between soldiers. One of Rosie's most surprising cathartic moments happened one night after a performance:

> Every evening after *Telling Aggieland*, we held a reception to meet and greet with everyone who came to the show. Each night I was blown away by how many people wanted to come up and talk to us; not just about what

> they saw but about our experiences and share their experiences as well. There is one that really stands out to me. He was a retired officer who served in the Vietnam era. He thanked me for telling my story, specifically about my soldier's suicide, and then asked me if he could tell me his story. He told me of how he had a neighbor who had committed suicide and all of the guilt he had taken with him all of those years. He told me how suicide wasn't talked about then and so he just held it all in. He thanked me for telling my story because it brought back up so many of the same emotions for him and allowed him to grieve for the first time since that neighbor had died. (Cross 2014).

Rosie's stories, both about her own experiences on the stage and her interactions with a fellow soldier, prove that the performance of pain and trauma can have lasting therapeutic affects on both the performer and audience members. These recollections also support Wei's claim that *The Telling Project* serves as an outlet for sharing stories and bridging gaps, not only between civilians and soldiers, but between veterans from different branches and wars.

Another performer, Olivia James, wrote about a similar performance experience for *Military Spouse Magazine* in an article entitled "What I Learned Telling My Military Story." Olivia and her husband, Clyde, were both a part of the show because they wanted to "to encourage an open discussion between our civilians and our veterans here at Texas A&M, and her surrounding cities, about military service" (James). Much like Rosie, Olivia was disappointed with the first version of the script. Despite two hours

of interview that included stories from both Olivia's experiences as both a marine and a military dependent, Wei chose to focus on a comedic part of Olivia's story. She explains in her article, saying,

> I confess, when I first read the script, all I could think was that I'd been painted as the funny girl with nothing real to say, and it bothered me greatly. I felt like I had a lot to offer to the "conversation" we were initiating, and, as much as I adore a laughing audience, I wasn't going to get a chance to say some of the things I really wanted to say. I introduced my "character" as a comedienne, basically ensuring the audience looked forward to my next monologue-which addressed the heavy subject of the effects of military life on a marriage and divorce statistics, and allowed me to set the stage for an incredibly serious monologue about attempted suicide. (James 2014).

Olivia, much like Rosie, initially believed that she was telling her story solely for the benefit of audience members to better understand soldiers and veterans. She accepted her part as the comic relief, because she knew that it would help prepare the audience for more serious and traumatic issues that many of them might not be ready for. However, in the article that reflects Olivia's afterthoughts on the performance, she notes her realization that the performance helped her heal in places she did not realize she was hurt:

> All along I thought I was doing this great thing for the community around me, and we were, but I never thought about the great thing I was doing for me. I realized that, as a spouse, [I] needed healing too. Our service personnel often bring the war home, and I'd never taken the time out to

> make sure I was okay—always worrying about how it was affecting him, the kids, the younger wives, and his buddies. It's impossible to take care of all those people when you yourself need attention too" (James 2014).

The performance opened a door for Olivia to process her experiences as both a Marine and a military spouse in ways she never expected.

Performer Martin Black agreed to be a part of *Telling Aggieland* in the hopes of spreading awareness about PTSD, which has affected Martin's brother and his family. Martin sees the performance of war trauma in his brother's every day life, and specifically wanted to educate audiences about the disorder as a way to gain acceptance for his brother, as well as other soldiers suffering from PTSD.

> "Most of all, [my narrative] allowed me to communicate that what these soldiers go through isn't taboo. It is often uncontrollable without the proper help. Reaching out for help isn't a sign of weakness, but it is a sign of strength, that no matter how bad they have been beat up, they're still trucking through that forest and just want someone to hand them a stick to make their journey easier. And with my story I had hoped that showing that a little brother who is in admiration of his brother for admitting to his flaws would encourage those that feel lonely and lost out there to seek help. (Black 2014)

Though much of Martin's performance focused on his brother's PTSD and suicide attempts, he recognizes that telling his experience was comforting. When Martin was initially interviewed for *Telling Aggieland*, he had been uncertain about whether he

wanted to share his brother's story, because he was scared of the judgment that might accompany tales of a suicide attempt. Reflecting on his feelings directly after the initial interview with Wei, Martin realized that he needed to participate in the performance both for his brother and for himself:

> A few weeks [after the interview], my mind finally tamed itself enough to realize that what happened in that room, while traumatic for me, was therapeutic. It was nice to drop the defenses a little bit and allow others into the personal bubble where I have tried extensively to shield not only my vulnerabilities, but how others view those I love. (Black 2014)

Martin eventually saw the performance as an opportunity to face his own trauma while raising awareness for the trauma affecting his brother's life. Similarly, Oscar saw the performance as an opportunity to enhance his storytelling abilities and raise awareness of the things he experienced during his military service.

> More than helping me deal with any certain aspect of my experience it helped me feel more confident in telling people what I did in the military and explaining it in a way others could understand and relate to. (Redding 2014)

Telling Aggieland transcended experiences to allow Olivia, Rosie, Oscar, and Martin to cope with their trauma while also embodying pain for an audience who needed to see the face of a soldier (and their family members) to completely grasp the hardships that many soldiers experience.

Performance also becomes a common thread among those who wish to share war stories with fellow warriors, as evidenced by Crystal Brian's "Devising Community" and Rivka Syd Eisner's "Performing Prospective Memory." Eisner's case study focuses on cô Nhut, a female Vietnamese veteran, and how she uses performance to share her stories. Eisner introduces "prospective memory [as] a form of collective remembering that propels and compels the past into the present and future. Existing in and through performance, it is a culturally contextual, embodied, social endeavor of memory—and history-making" (Eisner 892). By experiencing cô Nhut's personal war narrative as performance, the audience is invited to both relate to her experiences and ponder the importance of her experiences in their culture and history. Similarly, Brian's article explores *The Antigone Project* and how "the art, poetry, photography, and improvised theatre pieces presented by the veterans, and the experiences they shared during the talkback after the performance, made the violence and ongoing trauma of war real for the students in a way that books, newspapers, and media coverage had not" (Brian 2). Staging war offers a new perspective to audiences and invites them to develop new ways of thinking about war. These case studies provide examples of the different ways artists and veterans have taken their stories and performed them on the stage to prompt conversations about war experiences.

Another performance, *Surrender,* is described by James Ball as "a simulated war deployment experience in three acts," produced by the International WOW Company and directed by Josh Fox (Ball 57). During this production, audiences are given military dress and in the span of three acts, they experience three different parts of deployment.

First, the audience undertakes a short boot camp. Though actors "can be identified [since] they are the ones yelling at you for tying your shoes wrong, having your nametag hung incorrectly, or taking your time…The fourth wall separating actor and audience is here the hierarchical distance between officers and grunts" (59). In Act Two, audience members are shipped out on a deployment. As the audience moves through a "war zone," they 'are compelled to speak, hear, and follow commands," just like soldiers do during battle (63). The movement happens quickly and audience members do not have time to think about what their civilian self would do. Finally, Act Three takes place and the audience prepares to "come home" to America. Set on a plane, the final act illustrates the PTSD, anxiety, and flashbacks that many soldiers experience once they have returned home. The audience and actors face the consequences of the aftermath of war together.

Just as Jonathan Wei uses *The Telling Project* to start a conversation between civilians and military, Josh Fox hopes that "politically oriented avant-garde theatre has sought to engage its audience—from provoking thought to activating new strategies for solving problems—in order to incite political activity" (Ball 61). After the show, audience members are invited to stay and talk to actors about their experiences throughout the performance. "The memories of embodied action to spur active reflection internally and in conversation" pushes audience members to understand the struggles faced by military members (69). Fox' *Surrender* aims to do the same thing as Wei's *The Telling Project*: both artists want to give a voice to veterans and a medium of understanding to civilians. Ball concludes: "Rather than falling into the delusion that

conversation creates a community to solve all of our problems, *Surrender* forces us to feel intimately the gestures that can produce community" (69). *Surrender* and *The Telling Project* use different paths and experiences to arrive at the same conclusion and prove that staged veteran narratives are essential for understanding and accepting of war memories.

Colonel Gerald Smith was inspired to bring *The Telling Project* to Texas A&M because he recognized that many student soldiers had issues only a performance could help resolve. Though many of the performers joined the cast with the belief that their stories would help the community instead of themselves, reflections from Olivia James and Rosie Cross demonstrate otherwise. The performance of trauma and pain is difficult, because the emotions often transcend language in a way that audiences cannot understand. By encouraging veterans to turn their traumatic stories into a stage narrative, *Telling Aggieland* embodied this pain and served as an important event to resolve emotions and alert audiences about the struggles faced by veterans.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

War memories are constantly at play on the campus of Texas A&M University, existing within its building structures, as well as in the embodied representations of student veterans and their families. These memories constantly remind of the role Texas A&M students and faculty have played within the country's military history and the importance of the university's own military history. Through the public sector, war memorials offer a view of the larger picture, focusing on the existence of war, the massive loss of life, and, in some cases, the glory of victory. In the private sector, war narratives offer personal stories and embody the toll that military service may take on individual warfighters and their families. The performance of war memories in both the public and private sector offer different ways for spectators to understand, negotiate, and place themselves within these war memories. Though the vessels of transmission act in different ways, both war memorials and war narratives serve to educate, inspire, and start conversation with spectators.

War memorials have a large degree of performance potential, from their aesthetic architecture to the transmission of information in the space. By identifying the history of the memorial, as well as the event or people it memorializes, spectators can better understand the structure's importance as a space for education. When witnessing a memorial through a lens of reality, visitors can learn about certain people, places, and events because of the memorial's existence. On another level, memorials reach out to visitors through representation, which transcends words to cause a specific emotion or

reaction. An institution may manipulate the space in a certain way to cause a visitor to apply prescribed meanings and feelings to the memorial. While in the space, spectators can also form their own memories, applying individual representation to a memorial. In these cases, the spectator acknowledges that the space has made them feel a certain way; they then negotiate what that feeling is with their own prior knowledge, emotions, and experiences. Finally, through individual interpretation, spectators can manipulate themselves in the space, either complying with the memorial's intended focus, or resisting and creating another focus. All of these layers of performance can be seen in war memorials, especially at Texas A&M's Memorial Student Center.

The Memorial Student Center encompasses war memories in many different ways. Visitors are reminded of fallen Aggies each time they enter the building and remove their hats. The Flag Room is filled with military memorabilia, and the Hall of Honor displays the names of notable Aggie warriors. Aggie students transmit military knowledge by complying with rules of the building, such as refraining from walking on the grass, but also resist some of the rules by changing traditional interactions within the space. The American flags interspersed with Aggie maroon banners in the front hall illustrates Texas A&M's dedication to keeping the university's military history available for all visitors to notice. War memories play an everyday role at Texas A&M, and the student center, at the heart of campus, proudly reminds students of the university's military heritage and history.

Although MSC honors national, and more specifically, the university's military members, the building fails to display individual war memories. Students and visitors

have adopted the MSC as a source of a communal, public war narrative, with an over-arching acknowledgment of war without committing to any individual soldier's war story[7]. Aggie students know that they should have pride in their school's patriotism, but rarely have the chance to hear true stories of Aggie patriots and how the war affected their lives, their families, and their opinions. As a memorial, the MSC excels in passing along Aggie heritage and national pride, but significantly fails to remember the individual Aggies who have served to provide Aggie heritage.

In an attempt to bridge this gap between faceless soldiers in the MSC and the student body, Texas A&M's AFS, AVPA, and VRSC turned to narrative, which cam allow veterans and their families an outlet to share their war memories. Narratives combine text and actions to provide nontraditional performers an opportunity to embody their stories, though audience response is always contingent. Unlike war memorials, this embodiment does not leave the memory up for interpretation and offers civilians an actual face and story with which to empathize. Narrative performance allows the storytellers to grasp a better understanding of their own memories, while educating audiences about the struggles of military life. In many cases, the rehearsal process leading up to the performance contains moments of catharsis and therapy. By creating a shared experience between performer and audience, narratives can extend an invitation to conversation in a way that war memorials cannot.

Jonathan Wei's *The Telling Project* aims to bridge this gap between the military and civilian populations. Locally, *Telling Aggieland* gave ten veterans and military

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[7] The exception being the seven Medal of Honor recipients, whose biographies are located in the Hall of Honor in the back of the building.

dependents the opportunity to share their stories with the Texas A&M community, specifically targeting the students who plan on entering the armed forces after graduation. The members of the cast grew as individuals in understanding their own experiences, as well as in a group who could relate to the experiences of others, regardless of difference in military branches and times served. Most notably, many of the performers conclude that the performance process, from initial interview to rehearsals to the final performance, played a role in healing of their own war experiences. Though the original goal was to educate the community about veteran experiences, the performers realized that the process served as a therapeutic exercise in helping them deal with issues they had either struggled with for years or simply put in the back of their minds.

Telling Aggieland performers discovered their own voices on and off the stage through the performance process. They became comfortable publicly sharing their stories, while privately engaging, understanding, and overcoming traumatic experiences. This is the most phenomenal outcome of my research, as I have gained a better understanding about the importance of presenting non-fictive war narratives. My work with this intervention helps the military articulate itself through individuals, providing them the agency to raise awareness about true military experiences. Colonel Smith and the Texas A&M VRSC plan to produce a second edition of *Telling Aggieland* in 2016, reintroducing the opportunity for Aggie veterans and military dependents to speak and the Aggie student body and surrounding communities to listen.

Texas A&M University will never be independent from its military history or culture. The MSC educates students about Texas A&M's role in war, while staged student narratives offer a better understanding of what it means to be an Aggie member of the military. When the university's military heritage and student veterans' personal war narratives intersect in the performance of *Telling Aggieland*, Texas A&M must acknowledge the existence of individual soldiers and their experiences, moving past the nameless, faceless glorification of war presented in the Memorial Student Center and accepting the university's charge to provide student veterans a time and place to tell their stories.

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