

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/04/ken-macleish.html>

Top of the heap: Ken MacLeish

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By Maria Cecilia Dedios and Ekaterina Anderson



In today's "Top of the heap," Ken MacLeish, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Medicine, Health and Society at Vanderbilt University, takes us into the world of war (and post-war) memoir, fiction and ethnography, also introducing us to some conceptual texts he's been thinking with.

Ken MacLeish

Danny Hoffman, [*The War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*](#) (Duke University Press, 2011)

"War machine" is one of the most overused metaphors for the large-scale organization of bodies, images and material things for the production of violence. It's also one of the most vivid and provocative concepts in Deleuze and Guattari's writing, where it describes not the hyperrational state apparatus of violence but the potentials and forces that escape state regulation and ordering. Danny Hoffman's ethnography of the aftermath of west African civil war makes a virtue of this ambiguity: it depicts decommissioned pro-government militia members' lives of

extreme precarity, showing the intimate, structural and social persistence of war far beyond cease-fires and national boundaries. These war veterans are accorded special status by the government but are feared and resented by their neighbors; their war is over but they live on guard against its revival or betrayal by the disarmament process meant to ensure peace; they migrate across national boundaries and vocations, moving through a series of networked conflicts the interrelated economies of mercenary warfare, civil conflict and resource extraction. Hoffman's description of them is a bit like a marriage of Carolyn Nordstrom's [A Different Kind of War Story](#) with Ana Tsing's [Friction](#). In both its theoretical dexterity and ethnographic vividness, it's an incredibly compelling argument for seeing all war in terms of messy boundaries and lingering effects.

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh, [Brief Encounters With The Enemy](#) (Dial, 2013)

Will Mackin, "[Kattekoppen](#)," *The New Yorker* (2013)

Will Mackin, "The Unwanted Food Shelf," [Tin House](#) (2013)

O.A. Lindsey, "[Evie M.](#)" *Iowa Review* (2013); *Best American Short Stories* (2014)

There is a lot of really good contemporary war memoir and fiction around at the moment, some by veterans and servicemembers and some not. This is an area where authenticity and verisimilitude (not to mention tragedy, redemption and melodrama) seem to be most prized, and there are excellent books in this vein. But I really like the way that these particular short stories "get it right" by being surreal, opaque and absurd in various measures, and in the process constitute an implicit challenge to the facile and critically deadening "you don't understand because you weren't there" common sense that so much literary and ethnographic writing also refutes. Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's collection describes an America and a contemporary war that are unnamed but eminently recognizable, one where citizenship feeds on earnest spectacle and the casual violence of privilege. In these stories war is a scene of national purpose and individual transformation, but only sort of: the characters are bored, venal, self-consumed but unreflective, and largely unimportant people, but no less brutal and brutalized for all this. And somehow the way Sayrafiezadeh treats them is consistently funny and kind.

Will Mackin is a former Navy officer who spent a lot of time in Iraq and Afghanistan providing technical support to various special forces operations. His stories revolve around relatively familiar tropes of war-zone loss, terror and camaraderie, but conveyed through hallucinatory and incongruous details (especially regarding food) and a macho, near-affectless narrative voice full of disorienting technical terminology. If Sayrafiezdah's stories highlight the ordinariness of war, Mackin's equally deadpan ones make it seem like life on another planet.

O.A. Lindsey is a writer and Desert Storm veteran, and a close friend; this story is so spare that describing it much at all might spoil it, but it's somewhere between these other two: war traced out in psychic numbness, mundane detail, self destruction, and the labor of normalcy. He talks about it [here](#).

Mel Chen, [Animacies: biopolitics, racial mattering and queer affect](#) (Duke University Press, 2012)

My work kind of unexpectedly took me to questions about the stuff people wear, the objects that are designed to hurt them, the ways their bodies themselves turn into pieces of equipment, and from there to bigger questions about what military bodies are, what they feel, and who they "belong" to. Bodily objectification here is, among other things, an institutional program, a form of violence, a rhetoric, a set of metaphors, and a source of tremendous positive identification all at once. Mel Chen's book is a fantastic antidote to the common notion that untangling such knots depends on privileging meaning over sensation, or materiality over ideology, or any other similar invented distinction in how it's possible to think what things are and what they do. Instead, Chen approaches objects, feelings and bodies through the specifically linguistic category of animacy hierarchies. It's a fantastically productive way for thinking about contaminating objects, transgressive bodies and bestializing categories, but also a provocation to let one's own theory be a little more usefully contaminating.

An-My Lê, [Small Wars](#) (Aperture, 2005)

This book is actually three collections of landscape photographs

with uncannily interrelated subjects: villages and countryside in Vietnam, Vietnam War reenactors in the contemporary northeastern US, and US Marines training for deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan at 29 Palms in southern California. Lê shoots with a large-format camera, so while some of the scenes have a documentary feel to them, they have a carefully staged and composed quality that is incredibly different from journalistic photography, especially combat photography. So the focus is on exile (Lê and her parents left Vietnam during the American evacuation), nostalgia (in an interview she talks at length about the reenactors' intense attachment to their craft), and training or rehearsal. Like with the stories I mentioned above, I like the turn this suggests away from the fetishization of authenticity and/or its suggestion that "being there" always entails some relationship with absence, artifice and intermediation.

Jarett Zigon and Jason Throop, eds. [Special issue of *Ethos* on Moral Experience](#) (*Ethos* 42:1, 2014)

I was really excited when the e-mail announcement about this issue arrived in my inbox the other day, and I confess I haven't read anything beyond the introduction yet. In my current work I think a lot about the psychomedicalization of war violence, and the mutually reinforcing naturalization that occurs when the moral and the technical intersect to explain experiences of intense violence and loss. All sorts of strange things happens when people seem not to be feeling the things we would expect them to feel. This is the kind of messiness that the issue seems to be concerned with: accounting for what the editors refer to as the affectively dense "moral experience of persons," especially those aspects that trouble or exceed social-science-ready categories and stable ethical dictates of goodness and right.

[Ken MacLeish](#) is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Medicine, Health and Society at Vanderbilt University. His book [Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community](#) was published by Princeton University Press in 2013. His current work examines contemporary military mental and behavioral health interventions, including efforts to instrumentalize resilience, police suicide, and define so-called "moral injury."

Image: Alicia Martín, "[Contemporaries](#)," 2007.

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