



KENTUCKY PHILOLOGICAL REVIEW

Volume 26

**BULLETIN OF THE
THIRTY-EIGHTH ANNUAL MEETING
KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY
FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY**

MARCH 4-5, 2011

The Battle for Balance: Ethnography and the Creation of Wartime Self in Shoshana Johnson's *I'm Still Standing*

by *Travis L. Martin*
University of Kentucky

Shoshana Johnson enlisted in the United States Army in September 1998 as a Food Service Specialist. A Panamanian native with a career-military father and sister serving as an officer, Johnson thought she knew what life in the military entailed: “[A] military career was one in which you could succeed based on your skills and abilities, a career where color, gender, and even nationality have little to do with your success or failure” (10). However, this illusion of control vanishes when Johnson’s convoy is ambushed in the opening days of the Iraq War. She becomes helpless: as a Prisoner of War, Johnson’s “skills and abilities” mean nothing. Wounded and with her life in the hands of Iraqi captors, Johnson cannot worry about a successful career. Surprisingly, after her rescue, Johnson’s loss of control only escalates: her fame as the first black female POW garners unwanted media attention, thrusting her into the political spotlight at a time when she desperately needs to heal and adjust to postwar life.

Johnson details the tragic ambush of a 507th Maintenance Company convoy in An-Nasiriyah during the opening days of the Iraq War. She recounts horrible deaths, wounds in both her legs, twenty-two days of captivity, and a tumultuous return home. Whereas Jessica Lynch becomes the center of media attention, Johnson vanishes into obscurity, secretly struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Six years later, Johnson assumes the new role of ethnographer, revisiting her experiences in a way not entirely dissimilar to how cultural anthropologists revisit their notes after a field assignment. At the same time, Johnson struggles to define a wartime self characterized by trauma, repression, and third-party fictionalizations of her experience. Johnson’s story addresses the competing narratives of her wartime experiences. In regaining control over those experiences, Johnson painstakingly maintains the balance between the personal and public versions of truth that coexist in her narrative.

I'm Still Standing is a balancing act between varying accounts of Johnson’s experience on a single scale of truth. One side of the scale reflects Johnson’s struggle to define her wartime self. Johnson defines this self by overcoming personal barriers, avoiding outside influences, and recovering repressed memories and feelings that may or may not have factual grounding. The other side of the scale represents Johnson’s role as ethnographer and her task of educating the public about what really happened. The search for public truth in *I'm Still Standing* is in many ways more difficult than Johnson’s search for wartime self. She must overcome the same trauma and repression present in her search for self with the added dilemma of creating a narrative that is true, accurate, and authoritative. If this narrative scale were constructed and tipped completely in favor of either ethnogra-

phy or the search for wartime self, “truth” would emerge in either personal or historical form. However, autobiography does not allow for a single, absolute truth. Instead, a fictive hybrid of the personal and historical emerges as the product of every war story. What is more, Johnson’s balancing act provides an acute example of this necessary fictionalization, illuminating circumstances specific to the current generation of authors emerging from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Johnson’s story is not the story of the political establishment. And it is most certainly not the truth Johnson knew before she committed to the narration of *I’m Still Standing*. Paul John Eakin claims that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and . . . the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). “Autobiographical truth” is what the public considers to be factual. The autobiographer must accept the fictionalization of self to accommodate history and/or the influence of third parties. Both ethnography and the search for wartime self revolve around a common, unattainable center; both become fictionalized; and the result is “evolving content” within a single narrative frame.

Autobiography charts single or multiple versions of an individual’s self. These selves combine to form identity, or a “totality of subjective experience” (Eakin xiv) that encompasses the sum of one’s identity in the present (152). A complete, healthy identity is an amalgamation of the sum of a person’s selves; but not everyone has a complete, healthy identity. Within the war memoir exists an extreme version of the self, a “wartime self” unlike its counterparts. War authors find, again and again, that their wartime selves fall “*outside the range of human experience*” (Brown 100). The natural response to this problem is attempting to repress or forget the experiences of war. *I’m Still Standing* is a tale of courage in that Johnson faces her traumatic past in an attempt to isolate, describe, and incorporate her wartime self into her greater identity.

Johnson’s narration is notably hindered by post-traumatic stress and repression. In a classic display of survivor’s guilt, isolation, and sadness, Johnson describes her difficulties in adjusting to postwar life: “These feelings of sadness have continued for years and I still struggle to understand why I am alive when so many good people aren’t. Some days I’m okay, other days it’s hard to simply walk out the door. I have felt as if I’m not really engaged in life” (266). PTSD affects every aspect of the sufferer’s life. Laura Brown lists “nightmares, and flashbacks; avoidance symptoms, the marks of psychic numbing; and the symptoms of heightened physiological arousal: hypervigilance . . . [and] a distracted mind” as indicative of the condition (100). Johnson not only displays these symptoms, she admits to dealing with them as she writes her story. She admits, “I would cry at times for minor reasons. Most times I had no idea what had triggered the response; I would just suddenly be crying. I would snap at people for no reason” (235). Writing conceptualizes these symptoms and, in some ways, overcomes them, providing Johnson with a measure of the control she lost during the ambush in 2003.

Each symptom of PTSD obfuscates the reality of Johnson’s past and her ability to perceive her wartime self. As a result, fictionalization becomes a necessary and practical approach to writing. In taking six years to write about her experience, the author certainly shows avoidance symptoms. Elsewhere she describes having nightmares and problems remembering: “PTSD had been and was going to continue to be an obstacle for me . . . I was seeing a therapist, I couldn’t remember things, I was having nightmares” (258). Without doubt, each memory Johnson calls upon in writing her story must be painful; and as her wartime experiences and medications trigger numbness, Johnson must face the effects of trauma and the loss of memories altogether. She must battle both repression and suppression.

The difference between repression and suppression is that suppression occurs in the moment whereas repression connotes an awareness and search for the thing that was suppressed. Repression is not uncommon among those who experience war. Jonathon Shay’s research with Vietnam veterans reveals that “[s]elective suppression of emotion is an essential adaptation to survive lethal settings such as battle, where numbing grief and suppressing fear and psychological pain are lifesaving” (39). In the initial ambush that led to her capture, Johnson describes this kind of suppression: “I would have curled into

a fetal position, grabbed my wounds, screamed for help, been paralyzed in pain and fear, but as much as it hurt, there was too much stuff going on to pay attention to any of it" (1). Through narrating these experiences, Johnson engages with her repressed emotions; feelings of "pain and fear" become very real parts of her present. The ambush, whether in the recesses of her mind or as words written on the page, cannot end until Johnson regains the control she lost in Iraq.

Johnson contemplates suicide after returning home in 2003: "I often thought I should correct what luck had dealt me and kill myself" (236). She also describes trouble interacting with those around her: "I couldn't get over the guilt I felt. Why were people treating me like I was some kind of hero? I wasn't brave. I had merely survived when others didn't" (230-231). Johnson experiences a series of emotional responses similar to the paradox of trauma described by Cathy Caruth: "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (Caruth 91-92). Johnson experiences emotions she suppressed during her ambush. She understands the facts: wounded and helpless, her life was in jeopardy. Oddly, and in opposition to the heroic figure that contemporary soldiers are associated with, Johnson paints herself in negative light: she admits to her fear. This admission is necessary because of Johnson's need to act as ethnographer and describe what she *should have felt*.

Caruth believes that trauma is incomprehensible because of its immediacy. Johnson cannot know what she felt during the ambush because she suppressed the emotions as soon as they occurred. Therefore, Johnson *chooses* to define herself using the emotional responses described at the time of her ambush. Oddly, the author reinforces the stereotypes associated with the public's view of her unit: "[T]hey wanted us to feel ashamed for having been POWs, for having been ambushed, and for having survived" (250). In addition to discovering wartime self, war memoirists must become ethnographers, travelling to exotic countries and "coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form" (Geertz 1). Johnson learns about Iraqis through her captors, but she also travels with the 507th Maintenance Company, a subject of intrigue and sometimes anger among the American people. She reports the facts as she remembers them but these "facts" do not match the versions of her story that already exist. As a result, Johnson's narration undermines the efforts of third-parties to create heroes and victims of Johnson and her comrades. Johnson is a hero because she takes on the establishment, taking control of her own life experience from those that would use it to support the war effort. Johnson's creation and discovery of a wartime self is a means to regaining the agency lost during the ambush as well as after her rescue.

After her rescue, third parties unveil the first black female POW, a woman heroically rescued from the hands of evil captors: Shoshana Johnson. In addition to being a symbol used to support the war effort, Johnson also represents "a symbol of abandonment and victimization" that Thomas Conroy claims causes Americans "to question the belief that they [are] part of [a] nation divinely determined to be 'superior'" (67). Conroy continues, "[T]he Bush team constantly sought to identify an event that that would provide an opportunity to craft a message that would resonate with its working class constituency. . . . The Jessica Lynch episode presented just such an opportunity" (75). Johnson's story is meant to be a footnote in the government's attempt to raise support for the war (Pratt 1520). Lynch is to be the frail, white, female poster child while Johnson is to be ignored (Conroy 79). However, Johnson escapes this false narrative by defining her wartime self, rewriting history, and engaging with the same audience duped by the Lynch façade.

Revisiting facts is easier than revisiting trauma. Defining self is extremely painful for Johnson because her past is confused. She is unable to pursue only personal or historical truth: PTSD creates problems remembering the latter while media saturation confuses the former. Johnson's most obvious approach to this conundrum is in the structuring of her book. *I'm Still Standing* begins with the standard attention-grabber in her first chapter: "I'm hit! I'm hit!" (1). Afterwards, the memoir fades in and out of the combat, captivity,

and return home sequences, interlacing aspects of Johnson's pre-war and post-war selves with the horrors experienced in Iraq. Even the narrator is constructed: Johnson engages with an assistant author, M.L. Doyle, who refers to Johnson's memoir as a "project" (x). The magnitude of Doyle's influence upon the story is not clear, underscoring the fact that Johnson is an author battling the effects of time and trauma, seeking to both discover and to create a past all in the same book.

Johnson must also defend the wartime selves of those who fought alongside her. Donald Anderson claims, "What is remembered or imagined *becomes* reality. And if we *don't* create our personal versions of the past, someone else will do it for us. This is frightening political fact" (32). The Bush administration's version of Johnson's narrative is the tale of a daring rescue, a "damsel in distress" rescued from the merciless enemy. As Johnson is moved from prison to prison by reluctant captors, the roles of "enemy" and "friend" are reversed: "I squeezed my eyes tightly shut behind my blindfold. Then a huge explosion went off right in front of the vehicle . . . we were a target. Even if we weren't, we could stumble into something that would kill us all" (Johnson 166). Johnson's fellow captives incite rebellion and taunt the captors, endangering the author's life: "I was constantly frightened for them every time they acted up, but I was proud of them, proud of their bravery" (170). In captivity, she is able to process trauma: "I found myself playing back the video of the ambush in my head over and over again. I berated myself for not putting up a fuss about driving into the city . . . I saw Lori's bloody face and the first sergeant's battered body" (176). In civilian life, Johnson must focus on her celebrity status and live up to the false narrative of Jessica Lynch. Healing becomes impossible; Johnson naturally represses trauma, exiting the discussion and allowing the government to create her narrative.

According to Eakin, "Most readers assume that all autobiographies are based on the verifiable facts of life history" (3). None of the facts in Johnson's memoir are "verifiable" because her memories are tainted by trauma and her identity is influenced by third-party narratives. Similarly, nothing that the government reports on Johnson's experience is believable for two reasons: 1) Johnson has the ultimate authority over her own life narrative, and 2) the authority of public truth vanishes upon a single omission, or, in the case of Johnson, multiple omissions and numerous falsifications meant to bolster support for the war. To assume that autobiography reports fact is a mistake. Eakin argues, "Historians and social scientists attempt to isolate the factual content of autobiography from its narrative matrix, while literary critics, seeking to promote the appreciation of autobiography as an imaginative art, have been willing to treat such texts as though they were indistinguishable from novels" (3). Both parties assume that such a thing as "truth" exists. All life writing has motivations. And history is notoriously written by the victor of each conflict.

Linda Anderson asserts, "To use one's experience as representative . . . is to attempt to assert its political meaning, to seek to offer a more general means of reflection on the experience and construction of . . . subjectivity" (124). At the end of her memoir, Johnson lists the names of her friends killed during the ambush in all capital letters, effectively screaming their names at the establishment that tried to erase them from memory: "And, of course, hardly a day goes by when I don't think about the ones in my unit who didn't make it. There's not much I can do but remember them. We should all remember them" (276). Repeatedly, Johnson asserts that the Army wants to forget the debacle that led to her capture: "Today, you won't find the 507th Maintenance Company on a list anywhere on Fort Bliss. The unit no longer exists. It was deactivated and then reactivated under another name. . . . The only memorial is a small bronze plaque on the side of the motor-pool building. A small plaque. It's as if they wish we would just disappear" (250). The very last line of her memoir lists a website for the 507th Maintenance Company that is no longer active. In fact, no official site for the company is active. *I'm Still Standing* memorializes Johnson's friends and attempts to undo this work of erasure.

These gestures are almost certainly made in good faith; memorializing the dead may be the closest thing to "truth" in any form of war writing. William Butler Yeats attempted to memorialize the Irish who fell in a revolt against the British in his poem "Easter, 1916." He lists names and concludes with insight into the nature of war:

I write it out in verse—
 MacDonagh and MacBride
 And Conolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Wherever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (2033)

Yeats's "terrible beauty" is the act of homage alongside the simultaneous act of painful remembrance. His conflicted understanding of beauty is similar to the conflict between truth and self within Johnson's narrative. Johnson's innocence and a version of herself died with her comrades during the 2003 ambush. In 2010, her war memoir is a testament, a memorial to those who died and lost selves while surviving the war.

Beneath the battle for authority that permeates Johnson's story is a sad and painful truth: There is no truth to be found in war. No one hits upon this point more succinctly than Tim O'Brien in his own memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*:

Now war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die. Fear hurts and humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery is. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry . . . some men thought the war was proper and others didn't and most didn't care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even a theme? (23)

O'Brien's frustration begs a question: What is there to gain from writing about war? Johnson, on the other hand, reveals one use in her memoir. She was unjustly robbed of her right to narrate her own experience and define her wartime self. However, Johnson regains this right by challenging established versions of truth, properness, and morality, exposing the competing versions of her narrative. The balancing acts between public and private interpretations of this self become sources of contention; but Johnson reveals how the ugly truth can be appropriated to help an individual regain the rights to his or her own past. With all of the government's efforts to silence the story of Shoshana Johnson, she emerges as the victor, creating a wartime self, understanding that self, and moving forward with a complete (although fictionalized) identity. In the end, and despite bullets, blindfolds, and press releases, Shoshana Johnson truly earns the right to say, "I'm still standing."

Works Cited

- Anderson, Donald. "When War Becomes Personal." *War, Literature & the Arts* 20 (2008): 31-34. Print.
- Anderson, Linda. "Autobiography and the Feminist Subject." *Feminist Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 119-135. Print.
- Brown, Laura. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective of Psychic Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. Print. 100-112.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.
- Conroy, Thomas. "The Packaging of Jessica Lynch." *Constructing America's War Culture*. Eds. Thomas Conroy and Jarice Hanson. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008. Print.
- Eakin, Paul John. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985. Print.
- . *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988. Print.
- Johnson, Shoshana, with M.L. Doyle. *I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen—My Journey Home*. New York: Touchstone, 2010. Print.
- O'Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. New York: Broadway, 1975. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Harm's Way: Language and the Contemporary Arts of War." *PMLA* 124.5 (2009): 1515-1531. EBSCO. Web. 22 Nov. 2010.

Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. "Easter, 1916." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: Norton, 2006. 2031-2033. Print.

Travis L. Martin earned the rank of Sergeant in the U.S. Army, serving two tours of duty in Iraq and receiving the Purple Heart, Army Commendation, Iraq Campaign, and Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medals. He holds an M.A. in English from Eastern Kentucky University where he founded *The Journal of Military Experience*. Travis is a McNair Scholar, a recipient of the Madonna Marsden Writing Award, successfully authored a national Phi Kappa Phi Literacy Grant, and was recognized by the Kentucky state legislature for his work with student veterans. Currently, he teaches and is a PhD student at the University of Kentucky. His research interests include trauma, autobiography, and war memoirs from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.