

## Research Article

Renée Pastel\*

# The Veteran Reintegrated in *You're the Worst* and *One Day at a Time*

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**Abstract:** As the “War on Terror” continues, the national myth of veteran-as-hero has given way to a narrative shorthand of veteran-as-villain. Films and television shows depicting the reintegration of veterans tend to focus on the struggle and alienation from the homefront that veterans feel upon their return. In contrast, comedy television portrayals such as *One Day at a Time* and *You're the Worst*, both of which slowly but successfully reintegrate their central veteran characters, do so narratively by shifting their characters' veteran status from their defining feature to one aspect of their past. Ultimately, I argue that the process of reintegration is one paralleled in the rehumanization that these comedy television portrayals permit, ultimately offering hope that reintegration, while not easy, is possible.

**Keywords:** veterans, television, reintegration, figuration

For many US citizens, the “War on Terror” (2001 – present) may seem distant. As the conflicts drag on, the continuing coverage is often eclipsed by national concerns closer to home. Nevertheless, it remains an inescapable specter in American popular media, betraying a cultural preoccupation with the war abroad. Television shows and films superficially unrelated to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan reveal a sharp awareness of those conflicts through brief allusions, and new, widely accepted tropes. One of the most common is that of the veteran suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), who often serves as an immediately understood villain or antagonist with no further backstory than “broken veteran.” This “damaged goods” shorthand appears again and again, and ultimately adds to the military/civilian divide that exists for real-life veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I argue that half hour comedy portrayals of successful veteran reintegration can play an important role in offering hope for the reintegration of their real-life counterparts, all the more so within the context of so many dramatic representations of failed reintegrations. Most interesting for my purposes here are two shows that use their narrative structure in order to consider the *successful* reintegration of veterans back into society – *One Day at a Time* (Netflix/PopTV 2017–2020) and *You're the Worst* (FX/FXX 2014–2019). In contrast to film and television dramas, which may seem more immediately suitable for addressing such a serious topic, these two comedies offer two of the most effective critiques of the struggles facing veterans upon their return. Crucially, neither show is thematized around the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, their characters exemplify an alternative to the essentialized “figure” of the veteran in film dramas, slowly redefining themselves as they overcome the challenges of a perceived military/civilian divide. These two

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Smith, “How Pop Culture Perpetuates,” and Philipps, “Veterans Pan, and Cheer.”

\* **Corresponding author: Renée Pastel**, Department of Communication, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, United States, e-mail: pastel@bc.edu

shows offer narrative ways of resisting the prevailing veteran type, and also forcefully articulate the conditions in which veterans must find ways to reintegrate into civilian society.

## 1 The veteran figure

Scholarly and popular observations about the ways in which media representation matters account for their significance in terms of concretizing, shifting, or otherwise impacting worldviews. These observations exemplify the ways in which slippage occurs between fact and fiction, leading audiences who “know better” to nevertheless fold fictionalized representations of reality into their understanding of the world and events.<sup>2</sup> This conflation of represented reality and reality is unsurprising given that one reason for watching visual media is to access aspects of the experience otherwise unavailable.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, true understanding via visual representation remains out of reach. When I speak of the *figure* of the veteran here, I am drawing on a concept of figuration that poses a figure as a unifying force, a recognizable (and potentially confusable) representation that permits slippages between fact and fiction, experience and representation.

The figure, distinct from a type or stereotype, is uniquely polysemous. It holds the capacity both to have distinct meanings for different viewers and to have a single term that is recognizable across those meanings. Although similar to type or stereotype in terms of drawing a set of associations to mind, the figure is less specific than these forms of generalizing, and its meaning, though perhaps assumed to be understood from one individual to another, varies with the individual. Employing the openness of the conceptual space Jean-François Lyotard creates in his discussion of the figure in *Discourse, Figure*, I extend his claim that “The figure is both without and within”<sup>4</sup> discourse by defining a figure as that which is formed enough to be recognizable to multiple audiences, but which carries the potential for multiple significations. Discourse and language here may serve to limit understanding then by eliding the openness of the many possible meanings of the figure. A figure carries meaning that can be described by language, but carries meaning that goes beyond that which words can describe. Language itself then flattens the multidimensional figure by giving term to, for, and of its being – which Lyotard frames in order to emphasize the often neglected, mutually implicated nature of discourse and figure.

“Veteran,” for example, is a moniker that at once holds many layers of interpretive potential for a reader or viewer. However, when shared by two readers or viewers, “veteran” flattens each individual’s understanding, discursively reducing it to the term alone as a signifier without the aforementioned interpretive layers. The accompanying meaning of “veteran” will be influenced by the individual’s experience of and thoughts about veterans – for someone who has served and identifies as a veteran, the seemingly neutral term may hold heroic or intensely painful dimensions; for someone with no personal connection to the military, the term may be colored by their political leanings and stance on past or recent military actions. Critically, Lyotard writes, “The position of art indicates a function of the figure, which is not signified – a function around and even in the figure. This position indicates that the symbol’s transcendence is the figure.”<sup>5</sup> I understand this to refer to the way in which art necessarily relies on an ambiguity of a portrayed figure to hold rich and varied layers of meaning open for different viewers, where the figure itself means all and none of the taken meanings. Thus, the ambiguity of a figure holds open a space for the viewer to imbue meaning beyond the unifying moniker.

2 See, for example: White, “The Value of Narrativity;” Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*; Weiss, “Scrubs;” and Macey et al., *How Television Shapes Our Worldview*.

3 See, for example: Zahavi, *Self and Other*; Gaut, “Empathy and Identification in Cinema;” and Choi and Frey, “Introduction.”

4 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 7.

5 Ibid., 7.

Inspired by this formulation of the figure as the “symbol’s transcendence,” I argue for an understanding of the narrative figure in media that allows a slippage between fact and fiction, wherein the designation or representation (of “veteran”) and understanding (of a veteran’s experience or meaning) permits many possible individual interpretations, drawing upon many registers and appearances of the figure. Nicole Brenez puts it: “It’s that precisely, the cinematic character rarely aims at the singular, does not come close to the incomparable, on the contrary: much more often it is a silhouette charged with giving form, provisionally, to a value, a function, an idea.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the figure gives a unifying name to a wide range of interpretations provided by the viewer – the veteran figure may stand in for a failed and corrupt war to some while simultaneously representing pride in nation for others.

In this way, the preponderance of images now circulating can fluidly shift and fit disparate worldviews, as they exist merely as outlines holding the meaning of an idea or value. This seemingly benign ambiguity becomes quite significant when considered within the context of the narrative constitution of personal identity. As put forward by philosopher Hilde Lindemann, narrative constitution may draw upon familiar character types and is “formed out of the interaction between one’s self-concept and others’ sense of us.”<sup>7</sup> Lindemann here is referring to how individuals create a sense of their own personal identity, noting the impact of repeated stories – whether fictional or from life – and the concept others hold. Retaining the multiplicity of interpretive possibility, including that of the veteran, disallows the common conflation of depictions of veterans (whether documentary or fiction) with those who have served and who are facing difficulties in reintegration that is routinely compounded by the “broken vet” stereotype. Said stereotype creates an ossified version of the veteran, for it does not retain changes in association across individuals in the way that figures do, nor does it allow for growth or change over time.

## 2 Failed reintegration dramas

The “broken veteran” character has appeared in movies, shows, and videos ranging from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* to TV shows from *Glee* to *The Wire* to *Sherlock*. Some depictions try to engage with the pervasive issues that are raised within such portrayals of veterans, offering some complexity even as they dispatch the “broken veteran” narrative, while others are happy to fall back on a widely recognized stereotype. While there are certainly some veterans for whom the ticking time bomb depictions are not so far off, it is never as unambiguous as these depictions make it out to be. Richard Allen Smith, a former Army sergeant writing for *Talking Points Memo*, notes, “There’s no conclusive evidence showing that veterans are any more likely to be violent than the general population. But in an era where less than one percent of Americans serve in the armed forces, our collective image of the ‘veteran’ doesn’t come from empirical data. Rather, for most Americans who don’t know a combat vet, this image comes from pop culture.”<sup>8</sup> Because the films and television shows directly representing the conflicts have not received critical or popular acclaim, the impact of the many representations of the veteran and of the “War on Terror” is easily overlooked. Nevertheless, such representations continue to be given the green light, and the possible views proliferate. Even more strikingly, the shift from a national mythology of the veteran-as-hero to that of veteran-as-villain in the narrative depictions not necessarily focused on the “War on Terror” marks a broader sense of unease around how Americans process the “War on Terror” culturally, as well as how to conceptualize an ending to the conflicts.

The many (failed) reintegration drama films – such as *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), *Brothers* (a 2009 remake of the 2004 Danish original *Brødre*), *The Messenger* (2009), and

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Brenez, *De la Figure en Général*, 182: “C’est que, justement, le personnage de cinéma vise rarement le singulier, ne relève pas de l’incomparable, au contraire: bien plus souvent il est une silhouette chargée de donner forme, provisoirement, à une valeur, une fonction, une idée.” My translation.

<sup>7</sup> Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, “How Pop Culture Perpetuates.”

*Return* (2011) – seem to suggest that ultimately, veterans are unable to reintegrate into civilian society, and all that they are “fit” for is to re-enlist and re-deploy to the endless war. Feature films directly addressing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans’ reintegration are united by their depiction of a homefront that is too difficult to navigate for veterans. TV, unlike film, permits stories to unfold over a greater length of time, potentially across many episodes and seasons. As such, the handful of television shows that have directly addressed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to date have used their multithread narratives to explore the struggles of veterans on the homefront who are unable to return to war (which is often the narrative “conclusion” in films). Through the sheer narrative length of shows such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005 – present), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), and the short-lived *Over There* (FX, 2005), television depictions of veterans with PTSD are able to more fully address some of the tedium and alienation experienced by veterans who are or who feel sidelined in the culture to which they once belonged.

Though such television shows permit a greater length of time over which the veteran figures they include can develop and experience the complications of having returned from war than their narrative film counterparts, they nevertheless still tend to flag those characters as a form of essentialized veteran in a variety of ways. In *Grey’s Anatomy*, for example, season 5 saw the introduction of Dr. Owen Hunt (Kevin McKidd), a trauma surgeon who first appears as an army doctor on leave in the season premiere but who joins Seattle Grace Hospital as the Head of Trauma Surgery later in the season. His struggle with PTSD is one of pushing people away, of minimizing the lingering effects of the war on his psyche, and of refusing any suggestions of his vulnerability or victimhood. Dr. Hunt’s storyline, though filled with medical professionals who “should” understand the deep-rooted tangles of PTSD, is one that has commonalities across many drama representations of reintegration, with the veteran character finding little connection with civilians, despite their well-meaning support. Most importantly, the character is marked and divided from others by his veteran status. It is a marker of his difference, and he remains defined by the confines of being a veteran. This is important as it reflects the experience of alienation many veterans describe upon their return. Nevertheless, it is also a narrative means of essentializing and defining the character by one aspect of his experience. Although Dr. Hunt eventually “normalizes” into his role at the hospital, his veteran status defines him narratively for several season arcs which reflects and reinforces the difficulties of reintegration.

In contrast, what is unique in *You’re the Worst* and *One Day at a Time*, is the emphasis in narrative rehumanization of their veteran characters, accomplished through formal storytelling that frames veteran characters instead as characters who once served in the military. Instead of being defined by their veteran identity, the characters these shows offer reaffirm themselves as being multifaceted people, whose veteran status is only one dimension of their story. As such, they contribute to the “rehumanization of those involved in war” that Kelly Wilz writes is necessary “as a remedy for the dehumanization of soldiers and enemies that is a function of war propaganda.”<sup>9</sup> Along these lines, these two comedy shows stand apart from other television iterations of the veteran (which still remain important for consideration of their role in working through the cultural ambivalence around the never-ending “War on Terror” and those that have fought in it). I single out these two comedies for the way in which both take advantage of the time afforded by the serial television form to very gradually allow their veteran figure characters to reintegrate and become more than veteran figures within the shows. Instead of keeping these veteran characters in the loop of soldier → veteran → soldier that narrative fiction films tend to rely upon – sending the veterans voluntarily or involuntarily back to war when reintegration proves too difficult, or isolating them into communities of veterans unable to reintegrate with civilians – these comedies offer hope that the veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can eventually reintegrate, even if the road to reintegration is difficult.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wilz, “Through a Soldier’s Eyes,” 423.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that, though my two case studies are comedy shows, my argument is *not* that comedy is necessarily better suited to rehumanizing the veteran figure. Certainly there are ways in which that argument could be made, especially with reference to scholars who have discussed the function of humor in breaking existing worldviews. The final section of this piece makes room for some discussion of this path of thinking.

### 3 Earning a new title: Transcending the essentialized veteran figure in *One Day at a Time*

*One Day at a Time* (Netflix/PopTV 2017–2020) is adapted from the 1975 Norman Lear classic sitcom of the same name. Although it retains the framework of a single mother raising two children in a building with a highly present landlord, the newer iteration centers contemporary issues, especially those related to representation and a multi-generational family. The main character, Penelope Francisca del Carmen Riera Inclán Ruiz Maribona de Alvarez (Justina Machado), is a Cuban-American single mother working to keep her family comfortable in the gentrifying Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. The early episodes of the first season often reference Penelope's veteran status, establishing it as a part of her life, and reflecting on the issues her family is currently facing through her experiences in the army. Critically, it is the latter move, consistently tying issues facing the Alvarez family in the present to Penelope's past experiences in the Army, that paves the way for softening the civilian/veteran divide and begins to develop the ambiguity of the veteran figure. Penelope directly addresses a variety of assumptions about veterans, as well as the isolating nature of her individual experience as a veteran. In this way, she challenges the essentializing nature of the veteran type.

*One Day at a Time* immediately establishes Penelope as defined by her veteran status while acknowledging how socially freighted the veteran figure is in American culture. For example, the first episode opens with Penelope, a nurse, taking a patient's vitals. The image of Penelope in fatigues with other soldiers that appeared in the opening credits montage is affixed to the back of her clipboard. Her patient, seeing the image, asks whether it is from Halloween. In this way, the show frames the common civilian misapprehension that women in fatigues would more likely be playing dress up than serving in the military. Once the patient "gets" that Penelope is in fact a veteran, Penelope rapidly preempts the usual questions she faces: "No, I never killed anyone. Yes, it was hot over there. You're welcome for my service. Anything else?" This one-sided, good-humored exchange reflects the superficial divide between veterans and civilians, based on the questions civilians awkwardly ask (which arguably reflect (mis)understanding of veterans).

A significant storyline through much of the first season has Penelope struggling with anxiety and depression, implied to have come out of her time as an army nurse in Afghanistan. While reintegration dramas across media forms – fiction and nonfiction film and television – often emphasize issues around Post Traumatic Stress, anxiety, and depression in veterans, they often focus on veteran resistance to treatment seemingly due to machismo or on civilian family members' fear of their "altered" veteran.<sup>11</sup> *One Day at a Time* dives into this directly, unpacking the bias against medication and therapy that Penelope inherited from her traditional (in some ways) Cuban mother, Lydia (Rita Moreno), who lives with her. Penelope puts it with dramatic flair in the first episode, "as a Cuban, I suffer in silence." Already, the exploration of cultural bias and worry around mental health treatment is a divergence from other representations, one that serves to destigmatize medication for depression and anxiety.

Such moves also work to bridge perceived differences within the Latinx demographic to which the show expects to appeal, a demographic that is "the fastest growing minority population in the military."<sup>12</sup> That *One Day at a Time* uses its media platform to address an issue that bridges veteran communities and civilian communities alike is no accident. From her interview with showrunner Gloria Calderón Kellett, Olga Segura writes, "For many Latino families coming to the United States ... mental health issues are often seen as struggles everyone goes through in life, or, if they are acknowledged, they are not prioritized .... Highlighting Penelope's post-traumatic stress disorder on the series, [Kellett] tells me, was an opportunity to focus on an issue that is still heavily stigmatized in Latino communities."<sup>13</sup> By consistently connecting

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the aforementioned *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), *Brothers* (2009), *The Messenger* (2009), and *Return* (2011), as well as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Homeland*, and *Over There*.

<sup>12</sup> Barroso, "The Changing Profile." (By 2017, the year in which *One Day at a Time* premiered, 16% of active-duty military members were Hispanic.)

<sup>13</sup> Segura, "Getting Latino Life – and Religion – Right."

Penelope's Army experiences to events happening in her present experience and to events occurring in the lives of her family members, the civilian/veteran divide is de-emphasized.

This de-emphasis does not erase the veteran status – instead it reframes being a veteran as a dimension of Penelope's everyday life, holding open the figure of the veteran without essentializing it. For example, in the sixth episode, what seems initially to be a lighter narrative about capitalizing on her veteran status unfolds to afford Penelope an opportunity to more fully express her struggles as a veteran. When her old car breaks down, Penelope ends up looking to buy a new, albeit used, car. She brings her landlord, Pat Schneider (Todd Grinnell), to act as her husband, as she anticipates sexism from the car salesperson. Her landlord notes her outfit – an ARMY T-shirt and US Army Veteran cap – and says, “Playing the veteran card is genius.” “Hey! I earned this guilt,” Penelope retorts. And the audience, having watched her struggles with depression for the first five episodes, can both recognize her good-humored gaming of the situation and the truth of her statement. The elision of the civilian/veteran divide is even more prominent in the sitcom twist. The salesperson, Jill (Haneefah Wood) is not a sexist man, but rather, a fellow veteran, who puts Penelope at ease in negotiating for the car without Schneider's assistance. In fact, she feels an immediate bond with Jill, who ultimately invites her to join a therapy group for female veterans.

When Penelope joins the veteran's group, *One Day at a Time* is careful not to suggest it is a panacea for reintegration. Penelope worries that her family will judge her – along the same lines that her mother shamed her for taking medication for anxiety and depression in the pilot episode. Penelope spends several episodes making up cover stories for attending the group therapy sessions, which are presented as a place where she can laugh about the stresses of everyday tasks like driving, post traumatic nightmares from battle experience, and therapeutic options. With the introduction of the female veterans support group, *One Day at a Time* acknowledges that there are things that only fellow veterans can understand, even as Penelope gains from the group tools she needs in order to work through her emotional baggage from war and function in her civilian life.

This support group makes the explicit critiques of veteran affairs in *One Day at a Time* all the more potent. Having exacerbated an old injury from her time at war while car shopping, Penelope spends the seventh episode of the first season on hold with Veterans Affairs (VA), trying to get through to Jolene in Pain Management to get an appointment with a chiropractor. She is on hold for most of the duration of the episode, which is set entirely in the apartment, and which taps into the very common experience of going stir crazy while on hold to get through to a bureaucratic representative. Though Jill, the car salesperson with whom Penelope bonded in the previous episode, tries to tempt Penelope out to join everyone else at the neighborhood's street fair going on outside, she respects that Penelope is determined to stay on hold. She comments that for herself, however, “I served, I get it, but I try to never deal with the VA. I stopped calling them about my punctured eardrum.” Though this is quickly used toward a punchline about her inability to hear, the unfunny reality behind Jill's decision to just live with diminished hearing rather than trying to deal with the VA makes a pointed remark about the institution in place to support veterans upon their return.<sup>14</sup>

The episode dives deeply into this critical point. At the end of the episode, Penelope gets through to Jolene, only to be met with disinterest. After being told that because Jolene is in a hurry to leave work early to catch a better bus home, she will have to call back later, Penelope snaps and speaks frankly, articulating a critique with a notable lack of jokes or laugh track:

Walk me through it, Jolene. Because I don't understand. What I do understand is ... I went to war. I got hurt. And when I came back, there was supposed to be an organization set up to help me and other veterans get the help we need. So I don't get why it's so hard to make a simple appointment. And I'm one of the lucky ones. My husband has bad knees, a bad back, and traumatic brain injury. He's not getting help. Partly because he's a stubborn ass, but mostly because of this insane process. And because he's not getting help, he almost did something stupid. I lost someone in my unit because she did do

<sup>14</sup> The critique the show makes may well have been based on headlines from 2016 and 2017 about wait times and delays in access to medical care from the VA. See, for example: Lawrence et al., “Despite \$10B ‘Fix,’ Veterans are Waiting.”



something stupid. So PLEASE enlighten me, Jolene, as to why helping soldiers is less important than you catching your goddamn bus.

Though Jolene puts Penelope on hold once again, she ultimately returns to the line, and offers Penelope an appointment for the following Monday. This small victory feels momentous for the episode-long wait (not to mention Penelope's month of trying to reach Jolene before this episode). The VA, as a central institution for veteran reintegration and care, is often critiqued in reintegration dramas, though the emphasis on the veteran side of the bureaucratic experience may be less relatable than the widespread American experience of being on hold. The narrative structure of Penelope being on hold for the duration of the thirty-minute episode makes a specific experience and critique of being a veteran in contemporary American society more broadly engaging. The sonic break in the rolling laugh track otherwise present throughout the episode underscores Penelope's monologue critiquing her treatment by the VA not just as a veteran but as a citizen who demands the state make good on its promises.

Importantly, as the series continues, its emphasis on Penelope's veteran status fades, a narrative reflection of her reintegration and redefinition of self within civilian society. She continues to attend her support group, but the focus there is more and more on the new hiccups in Penelope's life than it is about her experience of war. By the end of the show's third season (its final season on Netflix), Penelope has worked hard to earn herself a new title and role: Family Nurse Practitioner. Beyond her role as veteran, or mother, or romantic interest, Penelope is narratively recast and retitled in this moment, something she worked hard to earn and shape as her identity. Seasons 2 and 3 permit her to focus more and more on her present and less on her past, and in this way, illustrate her successful reintegration. The show takes on topical issues affecting American families – questions around sexuality and family acceptance, immigration, work-life balance, and family issues around aging and generational gaps. Penelope Alvarez, while a proud veteran, is much more than a distilled veteran figure through whom to work out the conflicted feelings around the larger “War on Terror” with which many Americans struggle. She has become instead a fully realized human being whose past is a part of, but not the definition of, her present.

## 4 Sidelined and taken advantage of: The unheard and unseen veteran in *You're the Worst*

While Penelope is a central figure both narratively and within a loving family, about whom the audience cares deeply, Edgar Quintero (Desmin Borges), on FX/FXX's anti-romcom *You're the Worst* (2014–2019), begins as a secondary main character, *without* much support from the other characters. As such, he narratively reflects the experience of real-life veterans neglected on multiple levels. Where *One Day at a Time* serves to challenge some assumptions that various viewers may bring to the veteran figure by having the veteran protagonist address them head on and by having her find a new defining characterization, *You're the Worst* narratively enacts the sidelining of veterans and the discomfort of civilians in facing reintegration issues for veterans. Addressing the figure of the veteran as a slighted figure with cynical humor, *You're the Worst* is a show about a group of somewhat awful friends living in Los Angeles, navigating relationships with one another and themselves.

Edgar is introduced in the pilot episode of the show as the roommate of one of the primary characters. He immediately informs another character that he has “PTSD and mild to medium battlefield induced psychosis.” The focus in *You're the Worst* is on the misapprehension of other characters, who constantly belittle and tease Edgar for his night terrors and other issues. In a discussion in the first episode between Edgar and his roommate, Jimmy Shive-Overly (Chris Geere), Edgar justifies his PTSD by saying that he developed it while defending his country. Jimmy responds, “Oh please. You weren't defending anything except for the business interests of evil men.” Edgar's sad retort, “Jimmy, our country is the business interests of evil men,” underlines the cynical alienation from a moral cause that many disenchanted veterans feel.

The show threads Edgar's background as a veteran throughout the first two seasons, showing the ways in which he is neglected and taken advantage of by others in part due to his PTSD. In episode 4 of the first season, "What Normal People Do," Edgar encounters a group of actors preparing for roles as veterans. Initially mistaking them for fellow veterans, Edgar is thrilled to have people actually interested in hearing his war stories since his friends have no interest in his "super depressing" stories and even the audience at a memorial dedication is more interested in the musical act than his reflections on service. Cut off by an assemblyman at the dedication and dismissed with a pat "Thank you for your service, soldier," Edgar is left searching for a way to relate to other people that is not simply as a veteran. He articulates this to another character: "I just don't want to be some symbol of patriotism." This is effectively contrasted with the concluding scene of the episode, in which the actors who had tried to mine Edgar's experience for their TV roles are revealed to be playing unhinged veterans shooting into a crowd. Placing this "veteran-as-villain" shorthand depiction of veteran characters at the end of the very episode that introduced how Edgar is sidelined by his friends, *You're the Worst* explicitly calls attention to the damage done by the "broken veteran" villain shorthand.

Throughout its run, *You're the Worst* appropriates and plays upon the reductionist stereotypes of veterans commonly seen across other media depictions, as when it depicts Edgar's interactions with an almost cartoonishly unhelpful VA. When Edgar contacts a VA representative about his recurring nightmares, the VA makes light of his nightmares in comparison to other veterans' more visible injuries. In this way, the show brings to light through an uncaring bureaucrat a common civilian confusion, one that is perhaps connected to broader social misunderstandings of mental health. Edgar's downward emotional spiral plays an ambivalent role in the show. His struggle with PTSD peaks in season 3, episode 5, "Twenty-Two," a formally interesting episode, as it portrays the same day as the previous episode, except this time focusing on Edgar. The audience sees the same harsh interactions with Jimmy and his girlfriend as in the previous episode, but where episode 4 leaves Edgar's storyline to follow Jimmy and his girlfriend's day, in episode 5, these interactions come within the context of Edgar's extreme depression, paranoia, and hypervigilance, and show the repercussions of those interactions on Edgar's psyche. Edgar goes to a higher-up in the VA in this episode, hoping to find some alternative to his anxiety medication, only to find little sympathy once it comes out that he is off his meds and therefore "hostile" to VA treatments. He tries to push back, saying that it is the VA's mission to help veterans and that it is "not enough to be fed the one-size-fits-all cocktail of shut-up pills," but the VA official remarks "Oh, if we had shut-up pills, we would have prescribed them to you by now," and sends Edgar on his way with a condescending reminder to make another appointment once he resumes his medication. Despondent, Edgar pulls off the highway and prepares himself to commit suicide. This tragic spiral, however, is interrupted when Edgar sees a paper boat in the drainage channel nearby, and is enchanted by the unexpectedness of its presence. This paper boat ends up being a prop for some student filmmakers who decide they like Edgar's "look" and cast him in their short silent film. Though this is yet another group using Edgar and his hangdog demeanor for their benefit, the film students crucially do not see him as a veteran, and thus cast him "out of type." As a result, they inadvertently help Edgar take a step toward reintegrating by typing him as something other than a veteran.

*You're the Worst* thematizes veteran reintegration as the interaction of how others view an individual and how an individual shapes his/her own understanding of self. After his interaction with the filmmakers, Edgar encounters a tow truck driver about to tow away his seemingly abandoned car. The driver turns out to be a fellow veteran, who offers Edgar marijuana and speaks frankly about the difficulty of reintegration. He cites the statistic of twenty-two veteran suicides a day, to which the episode title refers, and advises Edgar: "Here's what you gotta understand: they're not evil. None of them are. The military's job is to sand down our humanity just enough that we can take a life. That's it. Afterwards, some totally separate branch gets to deal with all these purposely broken motherfuckers. Not only is that impossible with the resources, that's just impossible. Period." He gestures to his dog, a companion animal for his PTSD, and recommends that Edgar look for what he can do to help himself, because looking to others, including the VA, is not the way to find a fix for his situation. The show similarly stresses the importance of appreciating unexpected possibilities in seemingly bad circumstances amid the difficulties of reshaping one's sense of self.



In these ways, *You're the Worst* frames reintegration as an iterative, long process, begun in this moment of understanding from the tow truck driver, which shifts Edgar and the audience away from the image of the veteran as essentially broken. It is not until the next episode, for example, that Edgar realizes that marijuana seems to take the edge off his anxiety issues. The sense of iterative process opens new avenues, ones foreclosed by traditional narratives about ignoring or even diagnosing and prescribing away the lingering horrors and alienations of the battlefield. The next several episodes then illustrate Edgar's struggle to obtain permission from the VA to take medical marijuana without risking his health benefits, as it is illegal federally, even if legal in California. Ultimately, Edgar's storyline is brought to the fore and sidelined no longer. His role as the lovable comic relief sadsack in the first couple seasons sharpens the cut of the show's commentary as he reaches main character status in the show, and his crassly uncaring "friends" are shown to be a microcosm of the broader uncaring public with which he must contend.

As opposed to reintegration dramas or even *One Day at a Time*, all of which are set among people with some understanding and interest in supporting the veteran at the center of the plot, *You're the Worst* effectively depicts the plunge back into civilian life without the supportive trappings of a military family or hospital setting. The show enriches the consideration of veteran reintegration plots by introducing a tragicomic view of a veteran surrounded not by supportive family, but by "friends" who lack any interest or understanding of his wartime experiences, "friends" not so different in attitude from the American public. The audience doesn't see much of Edgar immediately after his return; he was homeless for a time before moving in with Jimmy, and he spends time in season 3 trying to help other homeless veterans he encounters to write stronger signs to encourage generosity, advising them that "Between you and me, civvies feel super guilty around us veterans so they train themselves to ignore us. So, um, you know, maybe write something funny instead." This under-represented side of the veteran experience weaves Edgar's struggles into the general struggles against an uncaring world, which is likely a much more pervasive experience for veterans than most depictions would suggest. Edgar takes on much of the civilian cynicism about the war, mainly seeking recognition for his personhood beyond stock veteran character and outside the melodramatic narrative frame. By putting a pointed twist on the way that Edgar is sidelined as a secondary character in the first two seasons, *You're the Worst* sharpens the best elements of the melodramatic motifs it turns to once Edgar's storyline has the focus.

Ultimately, after Edgar's encounter with the empathetic tow truck driver, his storyline shifts from its focus on him as a veteran to his journey to assert himself and no longer permit himself to be taken advantage of. Edgar finds that medical marijuana helps to control his PTSD, and makes some viral videos as "Dr. Weed" – while this initially leads to his being taken advantage of by weed advocates, it also leads to Edgar getting a job writing sketch comedy. He is abused at work by a more established comedian (Paul F. Tompkins, playing a sadistic alternate version of himself), but eventually finds a sympathetic "friend" in co-writer, Max (Johnny Pemberton). At first, Edgar does not disclose his military background, but is encouraged by Max to share his memories of conflict when Max witnesses Jimmy shut Edgar down by shouting "Eject!" and plowing over Edgar beginning to share a memory from his time in Kuwait. Once Max offers to listen, Edgar eagerly shares all of his history, every memory he hasn't been able to share before, and it is clear to the viewer as the day slips away and the camera circles Max and Edgar, that Max is overwhelmed. Edgar is lightened, having shared "his truth," but Max leaves immediately after, graciously thanking Edgar for sharing all that he did and refusing to hear Edgar's concern that he spoke for too long. The show emphasizes the small steps that feel large in the slow process of reintegration – for Edgar, being able to face and give voice to his experiences as a veteran, experiences that play a part in his development, is crucial to his being able to accept himself in his many dimensions.

Having found a friend who initially only knew his civilian re-invention as a comedy sketch writer, Edgar finds a new identity for himself that he struggles to reconcile with his veteran past. Edgar is never a "veteran figure" to Max, but he is still marked by his experiences as a veteran and his own inability to express those experiences. When Max begins avoiding Edgar after Edgar shares his experiences, Max finally admits, "I told Doug I don't want to work with you anymore. You triggered me. Telling me about sad things and poor people – why would you put that on me? I'm having trouble sleeping. I have PTSD from your war stories." All Edgar can respond is, "I have PTSD from war." While Max is at last a friend to Edgar, someone

who offers a sympathetic ear, he is ultimately unable to handle the trauma of Edgar's experiences as a soldier. Yet in the moment of having been listened to and rejected by that friend, Edgar finally can articulate the self-reliance (advised in the earlier season by the veteran tow truck driver): "Maybe it's time I be my own main dude." The final season sees Edgar more consistently able to assert himself and more certain in voicing his own views and being heard. He is a veteran, but by the final season, as for Penelope in *One Day at a Time*, it does not define him – rather, acknowledging his veteran status is a condition of possibility for life as a civilian.

## 5 Rehumanizing and reintegrating the veteran

With only 0.5% of the American public serving in the military,<sup>15</sup> a relatively small portion of the American populace is personally affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the reintegration of their loved ones. Beyond the personally affected, a much larger portion of the public cares only abstractly or theoretically, if at all. For the latter, the oft-seen villain veteran who has "snapped" is a more convenient conflation of the public ambivalence about the wars with the soldiers fighting in them. Susan Carruthers writes, "With the veteran as optic, Iraq appears as traumatic flashback: a serrated shard of memory from a war neither comfortably past nor wholly present."<sup>16</sup> The veterans of the wars enlisted voluntarily, albeit many for the prospective veterans' benefits: monetary compensation, healthcare, tuition, etc., as well as for more idealistic or patriotic motivations. As such, they feel unable to speak candidly about their anger and frustration upon return. This, unfortunately, only exacerbates the fusion of fact and fiction for media audiences repeatedly exposed to the veteran-as-villain narrative shorthand.

Within the extremely different comedic styles of *One Day at a Time* and *You're the Worst*, the serialized form extends the duration of the veteran reintegration storyline, therein offering a uniquely rehumanizing means to break the essentializing depiction of veteran-as-hero or veteran-as-villain. What these shows offer by means of laughter (whether of recognition and warmth or cold cynicism and estrangement) is a formal address of the veteran experience, which permits civilians to avoid the figural trap of codifying the veteran as "other" and emphasizes experiences common across citizens' cultural differences. The shared Hispanic heritage of the two veterans discussed here, Cuban-American Penelope Alvarez and Mexican-American Edgar Quintero, grounds the comedies in which they appear in the realities faced by veterans returning to life in race-conscious America. Unlike the veterans too-often depicted in television dramas and as minor characters in sitcoms, these two characters are given the narrative breadth within which to reintegrate and permit their veteran status to be a part of their identity rather than their defining characteristic.

In their analysis of fiction, psychologists Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley write: "Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it."<sup>17</sup> In a similar vein, in an interview for *Libération*, philosopher Sandra Laugier notes, "[Television s]eries give access to a very large field of experiences, including interpersonal, friendly, familial, even sexual. They permit a sort of augmented experience that can only help to interact with others in real life. Furthermore, that can create a link because many people who do not speak to one another will have discussion around this subject."<sup>18</sup> The addition of comedy show portrayals of successful veteran reintegration such as those discussed here from *One Day at a Time* and *You're the Worst* stand out within a larger pool of representations.

<sup>15</sup> Eikenberry and Kennedy, "Americans and Their Military."

<sup>16</sup> Carruthers, "Bodies of Evidence," 31.

<sup>17</sup> Mar and Oatley, "The Function of Fiction," 173.

<sup>18</sup> Launay and Vécrin, "Sandra Laugier:" "les séries donnent accès à un champ d'expériences très large y compris interpersonnelles, amicales, familiales, même sexuelles. Elles permettent une sorte d'expérience augmentée qui ne peut qu'aider à interagir avec d'autres dans la vie réelle. Par ailleurs, cela peut créer du lien car beaucoup de gens qui ne se parlent pas vont échanger autour de ce sujet." My translation.

It is certainly notable that the two shows discussed here are both comedic. While I am not making an argument about the nature of comedy shows being best suited for keeping the openness necessary for a Lyotardian model of figuration *per se*, there is certainly room for further thought on the topic. Arguably, humor can permit a re-evaluation of social norms by breaking the unthinking acceptance of them. Scholar Michael G. Dalebout frames it nicely: “Any transformative possibilities of Humour begin with punctuated breaks in our automatic thinking.”<sup>19</sup> By narratively and humorously addressing the treatment of veterans within the shows, these two shows give time and space for audiences to reconsider culturally inherited assumptions about veterans they may not have been aware of holding. Philosopher Simon Critchley writes, “humour does not redeem us from the world, but returns us to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative. The consolations of humour come from acknowledging that this is the only world and, imperfect as it is and we are, it is only here that we can make a difference.”<sup>20</sup> Crucially, *One Day at a Time* and *You’re the Worst* contribute examples of reintegration that permit hope that reintegration is actually possible for those men and women who have served. Such hope is much needed as these unpopular conflicts come to an end,<sup>21</sup> for veterans must create a new sense of personal identity, and are impacted by the narratives told about them and the understandings others have of them, both those based in fact and fiction. The slow narrative reintegration of these veterans, a shift from essentialized veteran figure to more fully fleshed out characters for whom veteran is only a part of the identity, reflects the time and attention needed for their real-life counterparts to re-find their place within civilian life.

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<sup>19</sup> Dalebout, “‘Which One of You Is the Twelve-Year-Old Boy?’,” 245.

<sup>20</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, 17.

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