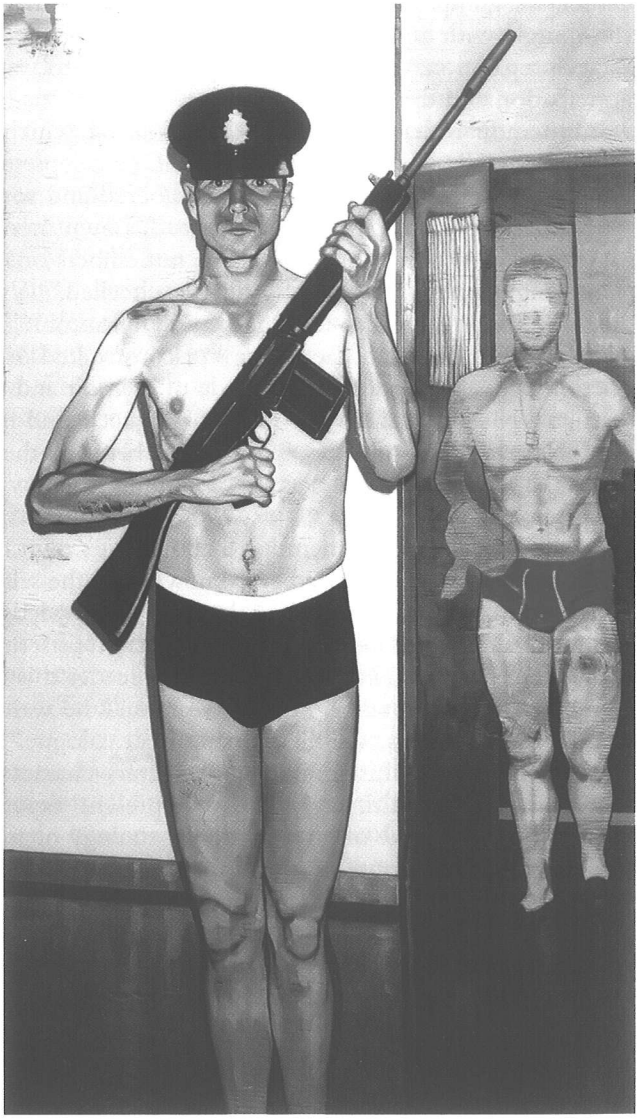
Tracing the Human: Memory and the Visual Frame in *The Hero Book*

by Sara Matthews



Ginch Wearers

From 1989 to 1992, Toronto based artist Scott Waters served in the Third Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Waters's visual memoir of that experience, *The Hero Book,*[1] is an aesthetic archive that comprises a collection of prose, painted images and photographs that chronicles the pleasures and traumas of his stint as an infantry soldier. Through a series of vignettes that limn the intimacies of his military induction, the reader follows Waters and his fellow servicemen on an odyssey between barrack and barroom. The transition from civilian to soldier is a definitive journey that Waters recalls with equal measures of nostalgia and ambivalence, but it is not a straight story of heroism. Rather, we glimpse a world of fractured violence in which guns and drink, camaraderie and abjection mingle with a pedagogy of a single shared purpose—combat training. And yet for all of their military preparation, Waters's battalion never went to war. Instead, they carve a life from the collective anticipation and dread of combat.

The word memoir is drawn from the Latin *memoria*, which can be understood as the capacity for remembrance as well as the reminiscence itself. As a representational strategy, memoir narrates *how* one remembers as relevant to *what* is remembered and so gives insight into how meaning is made from personal experience. In the preface to his own memoir, *Palimpsest,*[2] Gore Vidal echoes this view, suggesting that "a memoir is how one remembers one's own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked."[3] Vidal distinguishes the self-reflexive mode of memoir from the reality-testing method of autobiography that requires, he claims, the checking and double-checking of facts against a constructed or conceived historical record. While Vidal's distinction between the subjective mode of memoir and objective method of autobiography presents a particularly structuralist view of history, what I find interesting is the emphasis he places on process: autobiography, he intimates, is a dialogue between the self and the outside world whereas memoir captures the more intimate exercise of coming to know or construct the self in relationship to one's own past.

In addition to what can be remembered about one's own history, there is also the question of what one might not yet know or indeed ever know about the self and therefore eludes the procedural framework of fact checking. I am hinting at the kind of knowledge that is made from an engagement with one's emotional or affective landscape and that resists the ordered coherence of conscious thought. In the excerpt from *The Hero Book* that precedes this essay, Waters hints at the capricious qualities of emotional remembrance. "Twelve years on", he writes, "and there is no way to conjure up the ferocity of those feelings…all that remains is a catalogue." Despite his attempts to unearth the veracity of affect that haunts his military past, Waters characterizes his historical researches as a directory that points to but ultimately fails to represent experience. As if in answer to his own protest, however, *The Hero Book* offers a particular strategy or model for bridging the gap between experience and its representation. Creating a form of visual memoir by juxtaposing image and text, Waters produces a narrative of self-understanding that foregrounds the process as well as the content of recollection. His work tells a theory about how we make sense of the past. Following Judith Butler's argument that the visual frame allows for a "mode of knowing that is not yet recognition,"[4] I suggest that *The Hero Book* symbolizes the work of making the self through the tenebrous contours of memory.

To think about how to work with modes of knowing that are not yet recognition,[5] I draw on psychoanalytic models of knowledge and interpretation. One strategy fundamental to the analytic dialogue is the technique of free association, which can be described as an invitation to meander with one's thoughts and utterances without the constraints of intent, development or indeed, fact-checking. A unique narrative practice that breaks with the rules of temporality, free association is, posits Deborah Britzman, "a train of thought, a way of training thought to derail itself" and so to

"give up, however briefly, one's sense of reality in the world, one's sense of actuality and its limits, and one's sense that language can be controlled..."[6] This is difficult work because to swim with one's thoughts, images, impressions and feelings without constraint, is to withstand the desire to move too quickly from what we do not yet know to what we wish to solidify about the self.

With regard to *The Hero Book*, I want to suggest a way of thinking with free association. In the bound manuscript, the juxtaposition of the vignette with the painting *Defending the Beach Head*[7] is suggestive, raising speculation about the artist's intent and indeed the nature of his own associations. But instead of engaging the impulse for explanation and risk imposing a normative reading, there is another prompt we might consider. Architectural critic Jane Rendell, whose writings bring psychoanalysis to art criticism, offers the perspective that there is an associative encounter between the viewer or critic and the work of art itself. Developing her unique form of art criticism, what she calls "site-writing,"[8] Rendell seeks to "suspend what we might call judgment or discrimination in criticism"[9] in favour of an approach that views aesthetic objects as points of correspondence between the critic's outer and inner worlds. "Works take critics outside themselves," she writes, "offering new geographies, new possibilities, but they can also return critics to their own interior, their own biographies."[10] This is close to Meltzer and Harris-Williams suggestion that, "the aesthetic critic's prime responsibility...is to show how it is possible to think with the book, rather than showing what to think about it."[11] By describing something we also conjure it into being. To think *with* the aesthetic object rather than think *about* it requires that we stay with the ineffable qualities of the object in "such a way that we are discovering ourselves as the same time and responding to the invitation in art."[12] Instead of moving quickly towards representation the critic might remain with the incantation of the aesthetic object as itself "a form of knowing...bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge."[13] It is this form of criticism that I experiment with in my reading of *The Hero Book*.

Memoir as Archive

The paintings, photographs and textual vignettes collected in Waters's memoir do not so much document an already imagined military ontology as they do lay bare his personal experiences and private remembrances. But the personal becomes social commentary when we consider the lived realities within which the soldier is constructed. To engage *The Hero Book* as a civilian reader is to enter into a relationship with military experience in ways that may be otherwise inaccessible: one is free to make their own associations. Military cultures are somewhat obscure to those who have not participated in them, which raises the question of how, from disparate perspectives, one might respond. This query is relevant to the artist as well. Though Waters is no longer a soldier, his encounter with military culture remains an unsettled and unsettling element of his personal past that continues to influence his artistic practice.

An unsettled history is one that returns to haunt, bringing with it an agitation or disquiet that pricks at the corners of the present. The turbulence and affective conflict of the unsettled past, however, may be one force that drives the work of aesthetic translation. Rather than attempting to tame the intensity of feeling, Waters registers the impossibility of conjuring any semblance of their "ferocity" through visual or textual means. He likens the effort at representation to "an anthropological endeavour,"[14] as if he were a participant observer of his own experience, studying it from the outside and gathering together an archive of facts and impressions that might provide some contours of a coherent whole. In his search "through the rubble of so many degrading and empowering acts"[15] there is a sense of estrangement in that what remains is only a catalogue or *trace* of the original. This is the paradox of the unsettled past: what has been lost demands a response that can only be met in belated time and so fails to repair the original tear.

While we might think of the archive as an answer to the dilemmas of missed experience, as if experience might be anchored or bound by the archive in ways that remedy its incommensurability, it in fact symbolizes, following Rebecca Comay, the very trauma of missed understanding that it would resolve.[16] *The Hero Book* functions like a visual aide memoir, a collection of fragmentary events and experiences that only hint at narrative coherence. What is sought is not a record of past experience but instead, as Waters describes it, a frame that might translate the ferocity of affect into the present. Even as the catalogue fails to rekindle or register an impression of the original, it succeeds in tracing the haunting signature attached to each visual or textual vignette. Like a palimpsest, an ancient form of manuscript made from parchment that, once inscribed, could be subsequently erased and re-used, the memoir enacts the continual process of writing and erasure and re-writing that characterizes the ways in which memory works over time: new memories are forged but traces of past impressions remain. These same traces may elide our intentionality and, despite our best research efforts, return to haunt in provocative and sometimes elliptical ways. One might say that memoir archives the discarded content of memory against the activity of its recollection. Encountering memoir therefore brings the reader or witness into intimate and stirring proximity with the mysteries of remembrance itself. The effect of this hermeneutic strategy is that the reader is drawn into the tension of the interpretive encounter. With regard to *The Hero Book,* we are left with a kind of unsettled present that disrupts the normative frame within which we encounter and think about the soldier. This rubric is also evident in the formal aspects of the work.

The painted images in *The Hero Book* are rendered from photographs of Waters's time in the military. Painting brings the photographic scene to life and yet there is tension between the candid qualities of the photograph and the overtly staged qualities of the painting. Many of the scenes convey a certain frankness: in *Ginch Camp*[17] we glimpse soldiers in various states of undress or, in *Deer Hunter 2,*[18] participating in adolescent pranks under the implied influence of alcohol. As in *Pursuit to Mons,*[19] a gun or weapon of some sort is typically present. We also see depictions of physical aggression, like those in *Brothers in Arms.*[20] Executed with a hypersaturated colour palette, often on plywood, the paintings resonate in ways that surpass the inert quality of the photograph. "I have come to believe," Waters tells me,

> ...that paintings exist in the present...it's the equivalent of time-travel. It is the painting itself...you can see the brush strokes and that is a time-based process. Maybe it is painted years ago but you can see the accumulation of time within that painting. Even though I paint fairly realistically, I want to make sure that the brush is evident to some degree...There were times when I was working on the project in the studio...I remember one time specifically physically thinking that my friend was there...just for that split second (personal correspondence).[21]

If, as Waters suggests, painting is the equivalent of time travel, then does the viewer also travel? And, if so, from where and to where? To think about these questions we might consider *The Hero Book* as a memoir of failure in terms of both what it describes (the failure to go to war, the failures of social violence, the failure of the utopic myth) and its method (the failure of memory to seal experience and of aesthetic language to represent emotional reality). In this sense the memoir guides the reader through a landscape of breakdowns in which the broken are the normative epistemological frames through which we encounter the soldier as human. The narrative of *The Hero Book* is continually at odds with itself: on one hand there is nostalgia for the fraternity that made possible the shared "degrading and empowering acts" to which the reader is secondary witness; and on the other there is an expression of abjection and regret for the very same acts. What is produced is a visual frame that, in Butler's terms, "troubles our sense of reality... that does not conform to our

established understanding of things."[22] It is this unsettling encounter that allows us to stay with the uncertainty of our relation to the military subject and to travel differently along with the artist. In the remainder of this paper I offer an analysis of the ways in which state violence colludes with military fantasies in our apprehension of the soldier as human and I consider how aesthetic frames might alter such modes of recognition. To do so I bring *The Hero Book* into conversation with Butler's critique of the ways in which visual culture structures our recognition of the grievability of human life.[23]

Inventing the soldier

The invention of a soldier is achieved via the rituals of basic training, the kind of rituals from which *The Hero Book* borrows its name. In our conversations about the memoir, Waters tells me how, each morning, senior drill instructors would gather recruits together and recite stories of heroism by former forces members. The large bound text from which the officers read was known as the "Hero Book." More than a vision of what the recruit might become, such narratives delineate the path the soldier must tread if he hopes to attain heroic status. Such is the odyssey of basic training.

As a work of memoir, *The Hero Book* mourns the loss of the heroic myth while at the same time registering nostalgia for its utopic dream. In the mythic sense, an odyssey is an epic journey that transforms the one who survives it in some essential way. There can be no hero without the quest, for its endurance produces the extraordinary qualities that distinguish him as beyond the merely mortal. Even in death, the myth of the hero lives on. Part of power of the heroic myth stems from the fantasy that believes human frailty might be overcome. And yet it is precisely this frailty, argues Butler, which allows us to recognize ourselves as human.[24] Deny the reality of injurability, she argues, and we refuse our vulnerability to others with whom we share relations of dependence but also responsibility.[25] For Butler, living socially is a precarious endeavour because "one's life is always, in some sense, in the hands of the other."[26] The knowledge of this radical relationality, however, is what the soldier (whose job it is to take human life and to take it without compunction) cannot allow. The military fantasy is that precarity might be attenuated by some (the nation's warriors) and amplified in others (the enemy).[27] Indeed, this is not merely fantasy: the weapons wielded by our nation's soldiers can and do maim and kill.

The cost of the denial of precariousness, on an ontological level, however, is the fracturing of social conditions which allow us to live ethically in relation to ourselves and to others. One example of this cleavage is seen in the violence enacted through the positioning a sovereign subject who "denies its own constitutive injurability and relocates it in the other."[28] Another is the belief in state-sponsored violence as a protection against external threats, a position that, in Butler's terms, merely "exchanges one potential violence for another."[29] Thinking about precariousness as an ethical relation allows us to consider the social consequences of how some lives are constituted in excess of precarity *as well as* how it is occluded in others. I argue that the repudiation of precarity, as practiced by the soldier in the context of military service, is a social violence that must also be theorized as part of the left's political critique of war.

Butler's *Frames of War* invigorates her discussion of human precarity[30] by examining the ontological and epistemological frames within which certain lives become recognizable as grievable (lose-able or injurable) and therefore human. As a quality of human relationality, precariousness is not merely an existential dilemma: it also has political dimensions.[31] This is particularly true in the context of state violence. By minimizing precarity for some and maximizing it for others, she suggests, "war seeks to deny the ongoing and irrefutable ways in which we are all subject to one another, vulnerable to destruction by the other."[32] The denial of precariousness, which props up the

dynamics of social violence, must be understood within the particular discursive regimes and norms of recognition that delineate the terms of personhood and instruct what we apprehend *as a life*. These discursive regimes Butler calls "frames of recognition."[33]

The phrase "to be framed" carries with it a number of interpretive possibilities: a picture is framed but so too can a person be framed.[34] In the first sense, there is a notion of the frame as both containing and embellishing what is enclosed within it. In the second, there is a sense that one might be determined by the action of the frame. For Butler, the value of the frame as a conceptual apparatus is in its call for reflexivity or interrogation of how what is bound by the frame outdoes the limits imposed by it. She surveys several examples: the frame of the U.S. decision to go to war, the frame of sexual and feminist politics in the service of the war effort, and the frames employed by dominant media sources in times of war. Even as these differing epistemological frames construct certain lives as recognizable while effacing others[35] they can never fully delineate life because experience both surpasses and falls short of what the frame sets out to enclose. Interrogating the frame is for Butler a political act that seeks to explore how frames "can and do break with themselves,"[36] allowing for emergent iterations. Breakage works at the level of apprehension, which she describes as a "mode of knowing that is not yet recognition"[37] and which I interpret as the affect or impression that registers before thought becomes recognition. This is a crucial point for Butler: "responsiveness–and thus, ultimately, responsibility–is located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world."[38] Affect therefore sets the stage for the possibility of social critique because it is bound up in the ways in which we apprehend and recognize others.

Bringing this discussion of the frame to bear on my reading of *The Hero Book*, several questions are raised. How do various discursive frames and interpretive schema, some readily accessible and others remotely evident, condition our responses to the military subject? And further, why is this question important to a political critique of war? One way to experiment with the first part of this question is to notice the affective arousal provoked by an encounter with Waters's memoir and to reflect on the frames of recognition through which we anticipate the soldier. The second query may seem more difficult, not only because the soldier already occupies a space of dominance in the context of state sanctioned war but because this ascendancy is further heralded through processes of national and public mourning. In terms of grievability, the soldier may appear to be larger than life, but this is exactly the problem: to grieve the soldier as heroic is to operate within norms of recognition that proclaim him as outside the relations of human precarity, even as he is constructed as having taken the ultimate risk, that of placing his life on the line for national security. To think about the soldier as human requires that we give up the fantasy of the soldier as hero but *also* as villain. If we are human in as much as we are subject to relations of dependence and obligation with others in other words, we are all "precarious lives"[39]—then what kind of political critique might return the soldiers to their own humanity? If I am to think with Butler on this, one place to begin may be the revision of the conceivability (which also operates through frames of recognition) that training men and women for active combat is a reasonable thing to do. By reasonable I mean to register the difference between what is feasible and what is ethically sound.

The Hero Book traces heroism's failure to deliver its own myth and raises difficult questions about the status of the soldier as human. For instance, how does the memoir engage our apprehension of the soldier's personhood and lay bare the discursive regimes through which we are able to recognize the soldier *as a life*? The heroic fantasy begins to break with itself when we consider the extent to which state sponsored violence nurtures and exploits masculine (and some feminine) bodies in the service of what Georgis calls the domestic labour of the nation.[40] Georgis's analysis of the construction of masculinities through nationalist campaigns asks us to consider how male bodies are delivered in

servitude to the beloved motherland. Men do fight and die on behalf of the nation but something other than life is forfeited too, those aspects of masculinity that threaten to undo the careful cultivation of aggression as it serves the purpose of state-sanctioned murder.[41] The folly of the sacrifice is further revealed when the fantasy of invulnerability is stripped away, as is so often the case in the brutal reality of armed combat[42]. Chris Hedges, a veteran war correspondent who writes critically about the social meaning of war, advances this idea: "The myth of war," he writes, "rarely endures for those who experience combat. War is messy, confusing, sullied by raw brutality...in the final moments before the shooting starts...you do not think of home or family, for to do so is to overcome by a wave of nostalgia and emotion that can impair your ability to survive."[43] Indeed, the ability to survive, if assured at all, lies with the efficacy of one's combat unit. In battle, the soldier who was once the son of the nation now becomes the brother in arms. From the ruins of all that the soldier must leave behind, a new family is forged.

If military cultures are built around the shared capacity to split oneself off from vulnerability and side instead with the aggressive qualities of the human, what does this mean for social relationality? In conversation, Waters tells me that,

> One of the reasons that I joined [the infantry] was to leave home. The family that I helped to create was more important than the one I was born to. Everything else does drop away. That is how the military works... The things about the drinking together, the skivvies–that is an intimate tableau. Even drink would enable a kind of intimacy that may not be allowed in regular masculinity. So many of our experiences seemed to be [a] good idea at the time. You were together in this interminable waiting for something that never arrived–a promise that could never be fulfilled–the objects in the book come to stand for those connections. Certain forms of intimacy are allowable and certain aren't.[44]

The reconditioning of social ties in basic training produces new social formations with distinct codes of behaviour which serve military purposes. "What you have previously accepted as individuality is restructured," Waters writes, "so that the self now exists for the benefit of the group. That is not such a bad thing and sometimes feels like the ideal form of surrender."[45] Surrender is an interesting concept: it is both ontological (as in something one might do when taken prisoner) and epistemological (a psychical giving over of oneself). Surrender is therefore a relation of vulnerability that, in the military context, must be mediated in socially accepted ways even as it gambles with the conventions of heteronormative masculinity. A new fraternity—the substitute family created by the military—replaces old bonds, which now bear the weight of the soldier's repressed vulnerabilities. But at what cost, to the soldier and to the social networks he must abandon? Should the loss of the soldier's precarity be grieved and if so, how is this bereavement different from what is mourned when the hero meets their death? The ritual of mourning in which thousands of Canadians line the "Highway of Heroes" to bear witness to those soldiers killed in the line of duty as they are transported to their final resting place does not, I would argue, grieve the soldier's singularity but rather their similitude under the banner of national heroism. There is another kind of loss to be mourned: the soldier's relationship to their own frailty, the very thing that enables an ethical relation to the other. How might the memoir unsettle the norms of recognition that frame the soldier and return the human "in its frailty and precariousness"?[46]

Waters's simple line drawing, *3 of Us*, of three figures in silhouette is, for me, highly suggestive.[47] I am reminded of the child's tracing game in which one hand is placed on a sheet of paper while the other draws a path around it. The image that remains is uncanny, both of the body, yet not the body—a strange perspective of the self—only partially limned. In Waters's drawing, the blank space framed by the dark outline tugs at our attention, registering the impossibility that something in the

first place might have been known and in the second that it might be recovered. The text provides a counterpoint, a "where are they now" kind of narrative through which the complications of friendship are rendered anecdotally. The reader learns of marriages, divorce, old hobbies and new professions; the list of regained social ties reads like a tribute to survival. However, a question remains: who were they then? We may choose to believe that in the transition from civilian to soldier and back again, nothing was lost other than a cat named Tennis Shoe. Or, perhaps not: the phrase "also of importance yet not shown" is descriptive in the sense that it refers to the men whom the drawing excludes. But the statement also registers the importance of what can never be shown because it is ineffable or because it is not for us to see. The drawing captures a snapshot of experience now past and can therefore conjure only a semblance of its memory into being. Still, the soldier is outlined in stark relief, he remains present among us. The line provides a frame for that imagined presence but cannot enclose it. This may be close to Butler's insistence that the project of political critique, which is one of social transformation at the level of recognition, is not to decide in advance what a life can and should be, but rather to "find and support those modes of representation and appearance that allow the claim of life to be made and heard."[48]

NOTES

1 Scott Waters, *The Hero Book* (Toronto: Cumulus Press, 2006).
2 Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest* (New York: Random House, 1995).
3 Ibid., 5
4 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 6.
5 Ibid.
6 Deborah Britzman, "Five Excursions into Free Association, or Just Take the A Train," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 1, no.1 (2003): 25-37. [p. 28]
7 Waters.
8 Jane Rendell, "Site Writing: Enigma and Embellishment," *Critical Architecture,* eds. Jane Rendell, J. Hill, M. Dorian, and M. Fraser (New York: Routledge, 2007), 150-162. [p. 154].
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 54
11 Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris-Williams, "Aesthetic Appreciation through Symbolic Congruence," *Psychoanalysis and Art: Kleinian Perspectives,* ed. Sandra Gosso (London: Karnac, 2004), 244-252. [p. 249]
12 Ibid.
13 Butler, *Frames*, 5.
14 Waters.
15 Ibid.
16 Rebecca Comay, (ed.) *Lost in the Archives*, (Toronto: Alphabet City, 2002).
17 Waters.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Scott Waters, personal interview, February 25, 2010.
22 Butler, *Frames,* 9.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 14
26 Ibid.
27 A short discussion of the intersecting concepts of precarity and precariousness, as theorized by Butler, may be useful here. "The precarity of life," writes Butler (2009), "imposes an obligation upon us." (Butler, *Frames,* 2). When Butler refers to the "precarity of life" she is calling attention to the ways in which being a subject in the world—actually *living*—is an uncertain endeavor, subject to different orders of violence and threat. Since life is precarious it requires protecting and so we seek to establish various social and political conditions that will secure and/or sustain its flourishing. The difficulty that Butler wants us to think with is this: in order to secure and protect a life, it must first be recognized as *a life*. How certain lives become recognizable, in her view, is a problem of both ontology (how a lives are constructed in and through normative schema that are themselves organized within relations of power) and epistemology (the forms of knowing in which life appears *as such*). Lives are bound in relation to other lives, casting us all in precarious relation to each other. This brings us to the question of sociality: what does it mean to live ethically, and in relation to one another, without violence? The concept of precariousness captures this problematic since it refers to the relations of dependence and also obligation in which we find ourselves with others. The obligation is to apprehend and recognize each other as human, even in the face of normative schemes and social ontologies that, although not deterministic, are constructed within relations of power that make it possible to live. It is in this way that what Butler calls the "more or less existential conception of 'precariousness' is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'." (Butler, *Frames,* 3).
28 Ibid., 176
29 Ibid., 26
30 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the Power of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004).
31 Butler, *Frames,* 3
32 Ibid., 43, 54
33 Ibid., 5
34 Ibid., 8
35 Ibid., 9-10
36 Ibid., 12

37 Ibid., 6
38 Ibid., 34
39 Ibid.
40 Dina Georgis, Masculinities and the Aesthetics of Love: Reading Terrorism in *De Niro's Game* and *Paradise Now* (unpublished manuscript).
41 Ibid.
42 Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 38.
43 Ibid., 38
44 Waters, personal interview.
45 Waters, *The Hero Book*.
46 Butler, *Frames,* 77
47 Waters.
48 Butler, *Frames,* 181