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**Book Review: MacLeish, Kenneth T. 2013. "Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press**

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MacLeish, Kenneth T. 2013. *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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*Making War At Fort Hood* by Ken MacLeish is an ethnography that chronicles the lives on soldiers on the Fort Hood military base in Killeen, Texas. Fort Hood is a large military base with upwards of 220,000 soldiers located in a rural and isolated area about halfway between Austin and Waco in East-Central Texas. The ethnography focuses on both individuals who have not made it off base and those who have served in Iraq, some for multiple tours of duty. Although these men and women come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and choose to enlist for different reasons, they eventually all end up in the same boat due to their involvement within the army. Even those who just participated in combat training without actually being deployed seemed to be physically, mentally, and emotionally affected by their time spent with the armed forces. Their involvement with the army has left them with battered bodies, chronic pain, and other problems far beyond the physical body. Additionally, the soldiers profiled in *Making War at Fort Hood* all experienced the same tensions that come with army life, including fear of future deployments and strains on relationships with spouses and children. Many soldiers also expressed feelings of being “trapped” by the armed forces, or that the army dragged them into a cycle of pain and poverty that is hard to escape.

There are three primary arguments that MacLeish makes in *Making War at Fort Hood*. The first of these is that the army is an institution that does not care about its soldiers; it only cares about making war. The army destroys soldiers physically, emotionally, and socioeconomically, thrusting them into a cycle of exhaustion and

hardships, yet does little to alleviate these problems. The second argument MacLeish makes is that there is so much more to life in the army that meets the eye. Enlisting in the army affects not only the soldier, but also his entire family, and changes the lives of everyone involved. Soldiers often feel disconnected from their significant others, often because they do not want to burden them with the hardships they have faced. Deployment thus not only puts strains on marriages, but also affects relationships parents have with their children, and sometimes even leaves children without parents. This leads into his third and final argument, which is that once you join the army you are forever changed. Many people believe that the only problems soldiers face when they return home are post-traumatic stress disorder and other traumatic brain injuries. This is most certainly a huge issue for servicemen and women – one soldier recalls flying to the ground when she heard a car backfire – but problems returning soldiers face also involve physical injury, difficulty assimilating back into society, and more.

*Making War at Fort Hood* encompasses many different themes that medical anthropologists have recently been studying. Specifically, MacLeish's work is very similar to that of Seth Holmes' *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, in that Holmes and MacLeish both explore the ideas of violence and hierarchies. In his work, Holmes outlines a social structure on the Tanaka Farm in Washington State where the migrant workers are paid incredibly low wages to pick berries, the hardest form of physical labor on the farm (Holmes 2013). Migrant workers are also ridiculed by their supervisors while they work and called derogatory names. In *Making War at Fort Hood*, MacLeish describes a hierarchical structure of the army that has many parallels to the one described in *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*. The privates, or lowest-ranking soldiers, are also treated brutally by

their commanding officers. This treatment carries over into other aspects of their existence, especially when they return home and have to adjust to a civilian life. The soldiers take the military mindset everywhere they go and with everything they do, treating life like the army. The higher up the ladder you go in the army, through corporals and sergeants, the more respected officers are and the easier their job gets. There is not as much physical or emotional wear-and-tear involved, and often these men and women are not the ones fighting on the front lines. This is extremely similar to the higher-ranking persons on the Tanaka Farm in that most of them have desk jobs that require little to no physical activity and make considerably more money than the pickers.

Additionally, in *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, Holmes describes the different types of violence that the migrant Mexican workers experience while picking berries on the farm. These workers undergo structural violence, or violence associated with a person's race, gender, religion, or other defining factor, as well as symbolic violence, or violence associated with stereotyping based on that structural violence (Holmes 2013, 89). The workers are automatically prejudiced due to their race and migrant status, and are often seen as incompetent and lazy. These types of violence resemble the same types of forces that soldiers face in their daily lives. Similar to the workers on the Tanaka Farm, soldiers are also frequently seen as unintelligent, and injured soldiers are deemed lazy by their other comrades, supervisors, and doctors that treat them. For instance, Peters, a soldier with shoulder and back injuries, is subject to "skepticism and suspicion" from doctors about whether his injuries are legitimate, and he has been refused treatment for his ailments on multiple occasions and by multiple practitioners (MacLeish 2013, 110).

Along those same lines, MacLeish touches on another theme in medical anthropology when he discusses all of the ways that soldiers' bodies are treated as tools or machines. Soldiers' bodies are similar to athletes' bodies inasmuch as they are supposed to be strong and able to perform at their highest levels. Additionally, soldiers and athletes are treated similarly as far as injuries are concerned. In both lines of work, injuries make the person seem weak, incapable of doing their job, and lazy (MacLeish 2013; Overman 2010). Like an athlete who receives a concussion or other "invisible" injury and is pressured to get back into the game, a soldier who does not have a life-threatening injury is expected to take a minimal amount of time off before getting back in the line of duty. Finally, injured soldiers are often believed to be faking their injuries when indeed they truly are hurt. Stevens, a soldier whom MacLeish profiles deeply and who has chronic knee pain due to his participation in combat training, sums up the Army's view on injury when he states, "They told is in basic, 'Anything that's not life, limb, or eyesight, suck it up. If you tell us you're hurt, we're going to assume you're faking'" (MacLeish 2013, 112). This is yet another parallel between soldiers and athletes, in that it is believed that athletes often milk their injuries for attention (Overman 2009, 129).

MacLeish compiles a strong account of army life that is informative, incredibly detailed, and well written. One of the biggest strengths of *Making War at Fort Hood* is that it covers virtually all of the bases of army life. Nothing is left out in the effects that war has on all aspects on soldiers' lives, and the reader can clearly see how war affects both the soldier and those around them. Oftentimes people do not realize how hard it is having a family member in the military, and a large part of MacLeish's argument is that

war can have just as strong of an affect on a soldier's family as on the soldier himself. Additionally, another strength of MacLeish's work is that he isn't afraid to get gory to make a point. There are many graphic accounts of soldiers watching their friends get blown up right in front of their eyes and watching their bodies get turned into "spaghetti" (MacLeish 2013, 86). Another soldier recalls how he just wanted something to bring home to his comrade's family in a casket, yet his body was just completely torn to shreds so that it was not even possible (MacLeish 2013, 88). These brutal accounts of the horrors of war emphasize the trauma deployed soldiers face on an everyday basis, and give the audience a clear insight into what it is like to be a soldier for a living. Finally, one of the strongest points of MacLeish's argument is the clever analysis of how the equipment used to protect soldiers also often does harm to their bodies. Even soldiers who had never been deployed were injured in basic training due to the pure weight of all the typical army supplies each soldier has to lug around and wear each day, from the bulletproof vests to weapons and other gear.

There are very few weaknesses in MacLeish's work, although there are certainly a few things that hinder his arguments. One aspect that is missing is that there is very little mention of any soldier that has not had a negative experience in war. Soldiers he befriends are able to talk and laugh with him, yet they all get serious when they talk about the hardships the army has caused them. The other major weakness of his work is that it tends to feel repetitive, and MacLeish often makes the same points more than once. Maybe using fewer examples with more details instead of tons of examples with less detail could have more effectively gotten his arguments across. Additionally, one of the major aspects that his work is lacking is the first-hand experience needed to drive home

his main points even further. One of these perspectives is the ethnographic experience of actually going into combat. Traveling to Iraq and going on tour may have been logistically impossible, however author participation in combat drills or other forms of army training could have provided a much-needed first-person perspective on the physical, mental and emotional effects of war. What MacLeish needed to employ was the same type of “deep hanging out,” (Geertz 1998) or embodied anthropology, that Holmes used in *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, where he actually lived and worked on the Tanaka farm with the migrant workers instead of just studying them. In addition, another added detail he could have employed is actually living in Fort Hood instead of just working there. By living on the military base, MacLeish could have gained further insight into the daily life of someone who spends all of their time at Fort Hood and developed closer bonds with the people he studied.

There are multiple groups of readers who may find *Making War at Fort Hood* to be both an interesting and useful read. Young Americans who are thinking about enlisting in our nation’s armed forces should certainly give this ethnography a read, as it brings up many important points people often fail to recognize about army life. Reading this book would allow them to decide if the benefits of enlisting outweigh the end results, and if they still wish to fight for their country knowing that they won’t return as the same person afterward. Additionally, any American who has lived through the “War on Terror” in Iraq would learn much more about war from reading this book than watching the news. Americans usually only hear about wars when soldiers die, and do not realize that the ones who make it home are so badly damaged. Reading this book could also convince more Americans to support our nation’s troops, a movement that has died off



considerably since 9/11 and the start of the Iraq War. Finally, other anthropologists may find this book informative, especially those studying war, military life, and/or traumatic brain injuries. They could also learn from the way MacLeish formed relationships with the soldiers on base and the extensive ethnographic methods he used in his research.

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