

Reconciliation as [Lofty] Aim
A Genre Analysis of Iraq War-Era Women Veterans' Memoirs

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Abstract

Using the framework of rhetorical genre studies,¹ this paper presents findings from an analysis of fifteen memoirs written by Iraq War-era women veterans. This work seeks to elucidate how the genre of “the war memoir” both permits and constrains women veterans’ abilities to reconcile their identities post-military service. Studying the memoirs of Iraq War-era women veterans’ of various races and sexualities, who served in a variety of Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) and branches, reveals the heavy-handed influence of sex and gender on women’s identities and their sense of agency within and beyond the U.S. military.

Keywords: women veterans; rhetorical genre studies; memoir; war literature; gender studies; Iraq

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Reintegration

Repatriation

Rehabilitation

Reconciliation . . .

We use these words to describe processes of change—psychological, emotional, social, cultural, and material change. These terms attempt to categorize the cultural crossing of military personnel.

I do not need to tell you, an audience of experts on the U.S. military and the men and women who serve, that the military is a distinct culture—a culture in many ways, at odds with U.S. civilian culture.² Reconciling the differences between these two cultures, as U.S. military personnel (current and former) must face, can be a long and complex process. The processes of reintegration, repatriation, and sometimes rehabilitation must include, in one way or another, a means of reconciliation—of making sense of one's past while negotiating and navigating one's present. As Vietnam veteran and author Karl Marlantes has argued: unless the veteran undergoes a process of reconciliation, the individual faces difficulty establishing and maintaining a “new mission” in his/her life.³

For a number of men and women who have served in the U.S. armed forces, Marlantes included, the processes of repatriation or reconciliation are facilitated through a rhetorical or meaning-making practice of memoir writing.

Consideration of the genre of the “war memoir” might bring to mind:

- specific book titles and/or authors;
- typical conventions, like a section in the book's center comprised of images, printed on glossy paper that includes the obligatory picture of the author in army fatigues, holding a rifle;
- and I venture to guess that on first thought of “war memoir,” most of us think of works by male authors.

American women have been writing and fighting alongside men since the Revolutionary War.⁴ However, female U.S. service-personnel and veterans' literary merits have been under-read and under-appreciated in U.S. culture⁵; as Iraq-era Army Veteran and best-selling author Kayla Williams put it, "Public recognition of our honorable wartime service has not grown as swiftly as our numbers and opportunities."⁶

According to 2011 data "more than 1.5 million" American troops served in Iraq.⁷ Of the troops deployed to Iraq, women comprised a significant percent. More women served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2010) and Operation New Dawn (2010–2011) than in the first Gulf War (1990–1991), or in any other U.S. military conflict in which women's involvement was recorded.

While the U.S. public has been slow in recognizing women's contributions to U.S. military and literary history, a number of the women who served in Iraq have written and published memoirs about their deployments. Notwithstanding, many of these female veterans and war memoirists write with the expressed purpose of *reconciling* their military deployments and service.

Indeed, as I have found in my analysis of fifteen "war memoirs" written by U.S. servicewomen who deployed to Iraq between 2003–2010 and subsequently penned and published their war memoirs between 2005–2014: the majority of authors admit (within the pages of their books) to writing their "war memoir" for the expressed purpose of expediting the processes of reconciliation. However, these writers also conclude their works by admitting that their processes will continue well beyond the pages of their manuscript. Indeed, the war memoirist finds herself falling short of attaining the lofty aim of reconciliation.

All fifteen of the writers whose work informs my discussion—Blair, Coggins, Doyne, Goodell, Hikiji, Johnson, Karpinski, Kraft, Minks, Olson, Scott, Spencer, Williams, Works-Dennis, and Zaremba—face/(d) a variety of challenges: in the military; in civilian society; in reconciling their place betwixt and between both cultures; within the "war memoir—a

genre shaped and dominated by men; and in the publishing industry, compelling six of fifteen authors to self-publish—an enterprise that is in and of itself challenged. These writers and military personnel,

- six of whom are/were enlisted;
- seven of whom are/were officers;
- one of whom is a Chaplain;
- two of whom are/were medical professionals;
- five of whom still serve,

centered their memoirs on wrestling with and reconciling these challenges—many of which are further complicated because of their sex as women; and subscribing to feminine gender norms—while the Iraq War rages on in the background.

I venture it is not surprising to you that these women discuss their challenges, given recent statistics of female military service personnel and veterans' experiences, only some of which include:

- One in three military women of all generations, as compared to one in six civilian women, has been sexually assaulted or raped while enlisted.⁸
- More than 70 percent experience sexual harassment while serving.⁹
- Female troops doubt their own opportunities for career advancement within the military.¹⁰
- Marriages of female troops fail at almost three times the rate of male servicemembers.¹¹
- The rate of homelessness among former female military service-personnel exceeds their male counterparts, which doubled between 2006–2010.¹²

As a scholar of rhetoric—that is, how people make and share meaning—I approached the reading of these “war memoirs” in an effort to understand how genre conventions, inherent to the memoir broadly, and the war memoir more specifically, foster agency for these women. I wanted to know how writing and sharing their stories might challenge these disparaging statistics and illustrate a less victimized understanding of servicewomen and female veterans’ experiences.

And in theory, these works written by women who deployed to Iraq in their impressive roles, from all five branches of the military, *do* challenge stereotypes while establishing a historical record of women’s sacrifices and contributions to military history. But because these women chose the genre of the “war memoir” to share their stories, these women establish little movement and change in reconciling limited understandings of women’s involvements in the military during the Iraq war.

Genre theorists in rhetoric elucidate how the conventions of a given genre *assist* “the writer as agent.”¹³ For example, in teaching writing from a genre approach, we identify the conventions or moves a writer makes—and the audience expects—within a particular genre (the conference paper, for example) in order to enter those spaces. Adhering to the norms of a particular genre or rhetorical situation not only allows the writer to enter particular spaces but, more importantly, it increases the likelihood that the writer’s voice will be considered—and hopefully, that her experiences and sacrifices will be legitimized by the U.S. military and her male counterparts.

A significant majority of female veterans’, within their memoirs and elsewhere, maintain that there are relatively few spaces and conditions where their voices, perceptions, and contributions are considered, let alone recognized or appreciated. Janet Karpinski, commanding general of Abu Ghraib, faced a twenty-five-year struggle to be heard in the Army that climaxed in her assertion that she was “set up” for the events at Abu Ghraib. She explains that she “remained an outsider [in the army] fascinated by the power of shifting sands that could so swiftly become biting storms.”¹⁴

Within the institution of the U.S. military, women's bodies, voices, contributions, and sacrifices are by default devalued and marginalized because the ideals, values, and norms of the U.S. military were created by and for men. Amidst increasing opportunities for women in the military, and as women become the fastest-growing segment of active duty forces and American veterans, women's efforts rarely measure up. Jess Goodell explains that she wrote *Shade it Black* for the expressed purpose of reconciling "the trauma [she faced] from being female in an environment that was systematically hostile of females."¹⁵ Though Goodell faced considerable trauma serving in a Marine Corps Mortuary Affairs unit in Iraq, she explains:

It's as though the Corps, deep in its soul, believes that . . . females . . . fail because they are female. Females aren't held back by a single shortcoming that can be remedied. They are held back by what they are, and that cannot be overcome. They are the embodiment of flaws.¹⁶

Further, servicewomen and female veterans who want to share the story of their Iraq deployment also face challenges when they seek to enter another historically male-dominated space: the war memoir.

Analyses of the war memoir as a genre are cast without considering those penned by women. Conventions were established by men, some of which women authors have appropriated, some of which women authors ignore. As I have found in my analysis, writers are duly permitted and constrained by their individual war-time experiences, and by genre conventions inherent to the "war memoir."

What are these conventions that constrain and permit? To address that question I begin with its affordances, according to two experts on the memoir as a genre, not limited in its focus on the war or the military. In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr maintains: "Memoirists' methods . . . differ . . . as widely as their lives do."¹⁷ Even though genres consist of "regularized practices,"¹⁸ memoir as a genre is as dynamic as the demographic

of people who write them.

The late William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, provides helpful insight into the form and function of memoir as a genre, noting that memoirs are “window[s] into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition.”¹⁹ And, “The crucial ingredient in memoir is . . . people . . . the most important character the person who wrote it.”²⁰ According to the expertise of Karr and Zinsser, memoir as a genre shares three characteristics with the military veterans (male and female included) as a demographic:

1. Both are heterogeneous.
2. Both are stereotyped by limited understandings, token examples, and spokespersons.
3. Both are centered on relationships. As we know “selfless service” and the camaraderie that it facilitates is a value instilled in every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces.

*In the war memoir, specifically those that inform this presentation, the memoirist recounts prominent relationships:

- with other service-members.
- with friends, family members, and civilian society on the home-front.
- with the institution of the U.S. military and/or the specific branch in which she serves.
- with her location in Iraq, including her romanticism and repulsion for the desert, Iraqi customs, and its people.
- with herself as she combats barriers related to her gender and sex as a female and minority in a country and an institution unwelcome to women.

Though genre conventions foster agency and a certain degree of freedom for the writer, there are certain expectations inherent in the genre of the war memoir. According to George Packer (whose analysis does not include works by women) the Iraq war memoir as an emerging genre has its own set of conventions:

- It is “interested in the return home”;
- it distinctly contains a “lack of politics” as compared to works from previous military-eras;
- writers typically use “fragments” and “deal in particulars”;
- and as a corpus, writers of the Iraq war often “romanticize” the extreme environment of Iraq.²¹

Though Packer’s analysis was contrived only by acknowledging the work of male writers, these conventions can also be found in Iraq war memoirs written by women. For example, Works-Dennis’ book, *Home through Baghdad*, the shortest of the fifteen books I read (at just forty-eight pages), consists entirely of fragmented experiences from her Iraq deployment in 2004–2005, which she describes as “a series of images” and “snapshot[s].”²² She organizes her fragments in a chronological order and bookends them, writing from the home-front—reconciling life after her deployment.

Spencer’s *Baghdad Yoga* also uses fragments to discuss her 2006–2007 Iraq deployment; perhaps as a means of overcompensating for her use of fragments, Spencer uses a variety of organizing lenses in her book. The book is organized by the seven chakras; by the seven letters of Baghdad (which she’s fashioned into an acronym that accounts for her life philosophy developed *as a result of her military deployment*); by seven yoga poses; “the army’s seven core values”; and “the seven principles of Kwanzaa.”²³

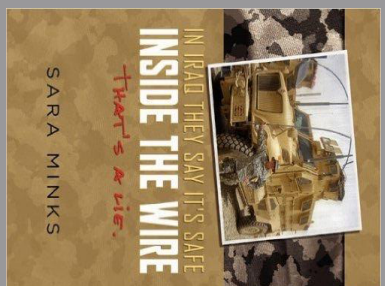
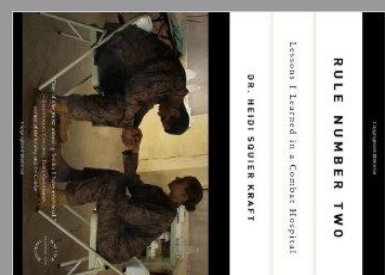
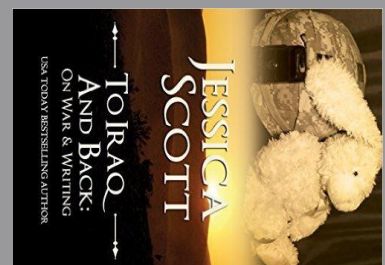
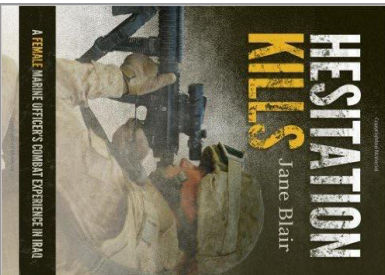
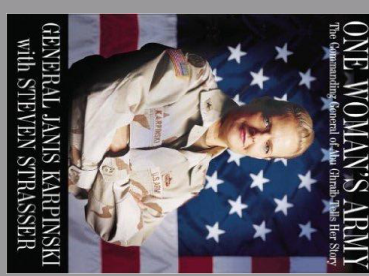
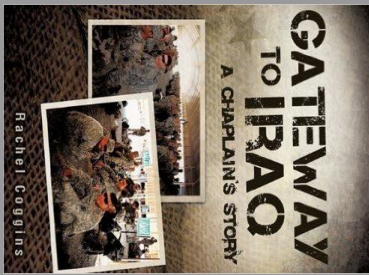
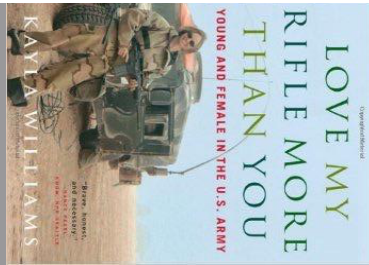
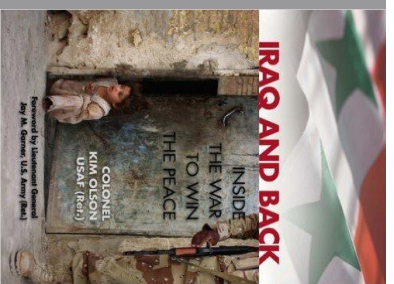
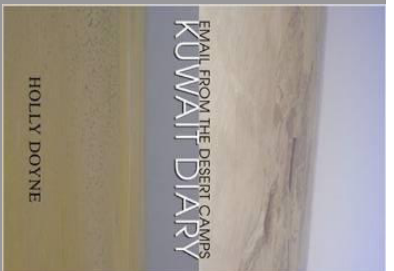
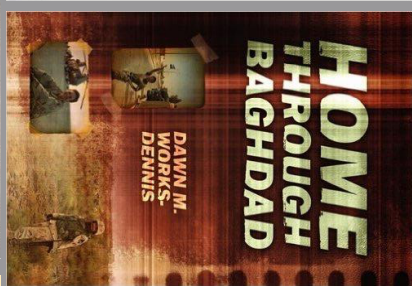
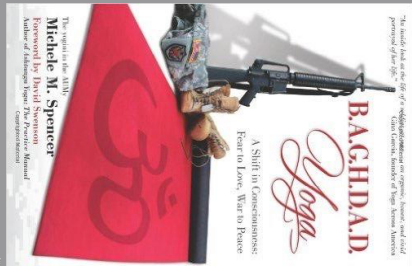
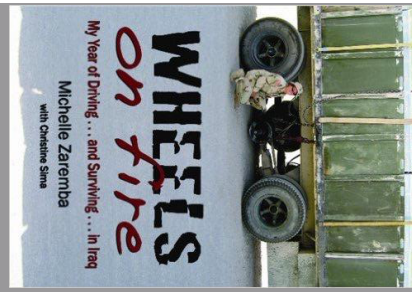
I mention Spencer’s work and her unique, though excessive, approach to organizing her war memoir as example of how the war memoir can be remediated to be more inclusive to women’s unique experiences and perceptions, through individual, self-published efforts. Some of these works, like Spencer’s, are more promising than

others; others are problematic for the reader because they ignore Zinsser's expert insight regarding the memoir: "A thin line separates ego from egotism. Ego is healthy; no writer can go far without it. Egotism, however, is a drag [and memoir writing] is not intended as a license to prattle just for therapy."²⁴

For example, Doyle's *Kuwait Diary*—all 525 pages—and Scott's *To Iraq and Back* are plagued by their egotism, and their choice to forgo editing. These self-published works are actually the email and blog-diaries the women kept during their year-long Iraq deployments. The authors acknowledge this in their prefaces and don't apologize for it. Though it makes for very a less-than-enjoyable experience for the reader, it does suggest that for some, daily life on a military deployment can be monotonous. Not unlike the practice of writing—it is work, after all.

Taken as a corpus, these women's Iraq War memoirs suggest a tremendous sense of agency for female veterans and servicewomen. Collectively, these works challenge limited stereotypes of the "war memoir" as a genre, and of "military experience" during the Iraq war. In sharing their experiences, specifically through the genre of the war memoir, women's contributions and sacrifices in the Iraq war are elucidated and recorded. As I've tried to argue: it is no coincidence that these women chose the war memoir to share their stories. They did so precisely because a genre frames one's experiences and perceptions in ways that legitimize and amplify their voices. However, the genre of the war memoir can also constrain, given that its conventions were established by men. Women's works unsettle these standards, as they should, and hopefully, in the coming years, we'll see more works by women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan that push against the genre's norms—foregoing the urge to share details chronologically or include posed photos.

Additionally, I hope that my presentation has ignited a curiosity about these women and their books. Indeed, real change—genuine reconciliation—for servicewomen and female veterans of the Iraq-era will only come from more people reading their books and recognizing their sacrifices on a playing-field that is (finally) equal to that of their male counterparts.



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Endnotes

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