Moving Words / Words That Move:
An Analysis of Discursive Practices Plaguing U.S. Servicewomen

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Abstract

Through a rhetorical analysis of three terms commonly used in military culture to describe servicewomen, this paper aims to inform instructors of the influence repeated exposure to visual/verbal practices (Fleckenstein; Sheridan-Rabideau) can have on female student veterans. The three terms focused on in this paper are: 1) “trou” used to refer to West Point female cadets’ body shape; 2) the phrase “Queen for a Year,” which is the “default status” all women are ascribed in the Armed Forces; and 3) the military cadence or “Jody call,” which couples the call and response of sexually-degrading messages with marching in formation. After establishing the exigency for increased attention to the effects of (military) cultured language practices have on female student veterans; a rhetorical analysis of the three terms commonly used in military culture to describe servicewomen follows; before closing with pedagogical implications for cultivating a pedagogy of inclusion for female student veterans, through a critical engagement with language.

Keywords: servicewomen, language, gender, female student veterans, pedagogy
Introduction

Scholars of rhetoric acknowledge and account for the ways language creates culture and identity. Kristie Fleckenstein’s work on rhetoric, vision, and social change reminds us: “Membership in a culture is predicated on one’s ability to see and speak in the privileged mode” (10). This is clear in the culture of the U.S. Armed Forces. As the character Gunnery Sergeant Hartman of Stanley Kubrick’s film Full Metal Jacket demonstrates, hate speech is part and parcel to new recruit training. Hate speech can be defined as any derogatory or unkind word(s) used to refer one’s race, color, class, gender, sex, or sexual orientation.

Although hate speech is “normal” in military culture, it also causes psychological and emotional harm. Women are a minority in all branches of the US Armed Forces and are susceptible to sexual harassment and sexual assault by their male counterparts. Many of the experiences women face during enlistment are perpetuated by hate speech. I aim to exemplify how language helps create and reinforce the norms of military culture, which subsequently favors male servicemembers at the expense of dehumanizing female servicemembers.

Methodology

Mary Sheridan-Rabideau uses the term “verbal imagery” to account for the word(s) we use to describe ourselves and others in conversational speech. Verbal imagery relies on stereotypes socially and visually contrive; one’s physical attributes are often used to describe said person through language. For example, Sheridan-Rabideau posits “verbal images of students as deficient or gifted or as active or passive clearly impact the learning and learners of the classroom” (106). Fleckenstein’s scholarship supports the work of Sheridan-Rabideau. Fleckenstein uses the term “visual imagery” similarly to Sheridan-Rabideau’s “verbal imagery,” to account for how, as Fleckenstein puts it, “static mental snapshots orient” us in a given culture (917). Both Fleckenstein and Sheridan-Rabideau urge women to enact agency by “transform[ing] language,” rather than unconsciously using commonplace, marginalizing language practices (Fleckenstein 928).

The U.S. Armed Forces uses various practices to orient and norm men and women into the hyper-masculinized culture. Two such practices which arguably rely upon, and conjure up visual images focused on women’s bodily attributes are: the establishment of nicknames, and marching and running cadences or “Jody calls,” which couple the call and response of sexually-degrading messages with marching in formation. I will demonstrate how repeated exposure to these practices fosters damaging thinking and behavior for men and women; however, I will also show how women are using these words and practices as a site of agency and public consciousness raising, showing society how words have the potential for fostering agency and oppression.

Moving Words

I interview veterans to understand how they use and are used by language and writing practices. I will share a gross overview of three particularly poignant interviews, out of the forty or more I have conducted with both men and women, in order to offer a more empirical snapshot of how hate speech is used in the USAF. It was difficult for these three participants explain the effects hate speech had on them during their service because according to them, hate speech is normalized in the military, particularly during boot camp. According to participants, hate speech has an integral purpose. However, it was implied explicitly and implicitly, that outside of boot camp, when language and gestures are used
"as a weapon" with "the intent to hurt" (I2) that at this juncture, hate speech becomes unacceptable and causes prolonged damage.

Two women explicitly noted the different degrees of hate speech in the military; otherwise derogatory language is sometimes received as a way for service-personnel to create identities for one another in the form of nicknames—Often, these identities remain with military service-personnel for a lifetime. The issue of identifying with one's military appointed identity is where I pause with concern: these women formed a deep bond with the identity they were given in the military—even if and when that identity was seen as "less than" their male counterparts. These women hold on to these "demoralized" (I3) identities; each woman reported that this acculturation has caused emotional and psychological damage. This brief overview of my findings, that come from a larger project elucidates that the continued, accepted use of hate speech in the military is an issue that must cease to be tolerated. None of us—civilian, veteran, military service-personnel, or otherwise—can afford to remain silent about the lasting power language has on a human psyche. The lessons servicewomen share about the power of words must be heard and upon listening, action must be taken—we have a responsibility to make change.

From the narratives of servicewomen shared through interviews, documentaries like the Invisible War and Soldier Girl, memoirs, and in the dozens of testimonies shared on the House floor by Congresswoman Jackie Speire, the pattern servicewomen experience becomes glaringly obvious: Servicewomen and their male counterparts are exposed to hate speech; both men and women use this language; their even minimal usage fosters a culture of consent to, and in which advanced forms of harassment and discrimination (such as rape (MST)) take place. It only seems logical to surmise that acts of sexual violence and assault servicewomen experience begin at the level of words.

**Nicknames**

In her memoir Shade It Black Marine Jess Goddell explains the role of nicknames in the Corps that resonates with Sheridan-Rabideau’s argument about verbal imagery; Goddell reveals: "women were assigned nicknames by the men who reminded them of how they were perceived, what they were seen as, names like Legs and Dolly, names that were unshakable and became what the women were called, at least behind their backs " (25). Another female veteran and writer on the topic of nicknames is Kayla Williams who affirms and complicates Goddell’s claims when discussing a nickname she claims is given to all new female recruits: “Queen for a Year.” Williams explains the term has been used since women nurses served in Vietnam and states that enlisted women can (and do) use their sexual identity “to great advantage” (19). Williams takes a provocative approach to one of the many “assigned” nicknames servicewomen have been forced to grow accustomed to. However, Williams’ shameless stance signals consent for servicemen to treat servicewomen as sexual objects. Williams’ appropriation of this term conspiring within the hyper-masculine culture, not only allows men to see servicewomen as sexual commodities, but drives servicewomen to perform their assigned role, thereby reinforcing a culture that salutes the marginalization and inequality of women.

The women’s voices in Cathy Brookshire’s documentary project Soldier Girl: South Carolina Women Veterans, provides a fuller-picture of the affect the nickname “queen for a year” has on military culture for men and women. Whereas one voice in Brookshire’s project confirms Williams’ stance on the term revealing the benefits she received from being “a man’s pet,” this stance is not the majority. Most of the women while aware of their role as “queens” in the Armed Forces, noted the physical, psychological, mental, and emotional damage their position fostered. As one strong woman shared, women had to be on the defense against their male counterparts; at times, women had to view men as the enemy in order to protect themselves.
Catharine A. MacKinnon might interpret Williams’ confessional as exemplifying her argument:

Women’s sexuality, is socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others...women never own or possess it, and men never treat it...with the solicitude with which they treat property. To be property would be an improvement. (45)

According to MacKinnon, women like Williams consent to rape because of their appropriation of the misogynistic language practices. As MacKinnon puts it: “Exercise of women’s so-called power presupposes more fundamental social powerlessness” (46). Said in this way, servicewomen do not have a choice but to comply with the sexual demands made by servicemen. For Williams and other servicewomen, to embody the cultural norms inherent in the term “Queen for a Year” is in actuality not an exercise of power but an act of powerlessness—the female soldier as commodity—a behavior that is at the whim of men’s desires. Some women adopt patriarchal-determined acceptable standards due to, as Laura Micciche notes “policies [which] emerge as much from our sense of what is [culturally] appropriate as they do from the emotioned basis that informs these very ideas” (173). When women behave as deemed socially acceptable in a given context, they subsequently reinforce, or consent, to sexual inequality and harassment. As bell hooks contends, “We cannot hope to transform rape culture without committing ourselves fully to resisting and eradicating patriarchy” (295); thus men and women’s repeated and unconscious use of marginalizing thoughts, gestures, and verbal communicative practices, keeps women in positions of powerlessness. Intolerance to discriminatory communicative practices used to refer to persons of minority status within a culture must be reinforced throughout society and in the Armed Forces.

**Cadences**

Rhetorician Debra Hawhee has elucidated “rhetoric as a bodily art: an art learned, practiced and performed by and with the body as well as the mind” (144). From her archival and etymological work Hawhee elucidates the Sophists’ Three Rs: “rhythm, repetition, and response” to support her claim that rhetoric is, and has always been, a bodily art (42). By demonstrating how bodily training fostered rhetorical proficiency in ancient Greece, Hawhee’s scholarship provides a close connection to the kind of training soldiers experience in their military careers. The U.S. Armed Forces transmits material to soldiers through rhythm, repetition, and response; soldiers are expected to learn materials through drills—bodily acts rhythmically repeated (e.g., such as taking apart and putting together a gun) thereby learning responsiveness, or as Hawhee puts it, to “get a feel for the work,” until such practices “become unconscious” or simply “bodily” (160, 149).

A military training practice that utilizes rhythm, repetition, and response is the marching or running cadence. While the practice of marching and chanting inherent in the practice is said to build camaraderie between soldiers, I would argue that because the military cadence (also known as “jody calls” or “jodies”) often employ, or rather rely on sexist terms, this rhetorical practice serves to further ostracize female soldiers (i.e., simultaneously bringing male soldiers closer together and perpetuating a societal consent to mark servicewomen as outsiders).

Consider the experience Jess Goddell recalls in her memoir *Shade it Black*:

> The eight-count cadences that motivated us and coordinated our marching and running in formation, were created by and for men. Cadences like ‘Momma and poppa were lying in bed, poppa rolled over and this is what he said, ‘Give me some! PT!’ They are straight out of an amped-up masculine world, yet the women stomp and march to them too, alongside the men...cadences also served to maintain a way of life ...of seeing things that encouraged even top notch Marines to be perceived as female Marines. (64)
A few paragraphs later, Goddell shares her experience leading a running cadence; Goddell switched genders in the previously mentioned cadence, making the man submissive to the woman. Goddell recalls her sergeant’s verbal, public lashing; she questioned her sergeant: *why it was acceptable for men to place women in submissive positions and not the other way around?* Her sergeant replied: “These cadences have been around for a long time. Who in the hell are you to change them?” (66) Reflecting on the experience Goddell poignantly states, “It was as though there were two levels of asymmetric warfare being waged simultaneously” (67). Jen Hogg’s work “The Sexual Politics of War” builds off Goddell’s cadence experience while offering commentary about the culture of the USAF. As seen in Figure 1 below, Hogg’s public performance combined her recited poetry to music and a choreographed cadence performed by men and women.

![Fig 1. Public performance, Warrior Writers Project, Jen Hogg’s “The Sexual Politics of War.”](image)

Hogg’s work builds off Goddell’s comment about experiencing two levels of warfare in the following stanzas,

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War

Is it a place young men, targets in uniform, fight in a far off land

Or is it my walk home at night, womanhood my uniform and target.
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In addition are the lyrics to a cadence Air Force Technical Sergeant Jennifer Smith found on her government computer while stationed at Shaw Air Force Base. The cadence, appearing on page 73 of a 124-page word document entitled the “77th Songbook” is entitled “The S & M Man.” On the 24th time (see Figure 2 below) Congresswoman Jackie Speier took to the House floor to speak about “the epidemic of rape in the military” she read some of the cadence lyrics.

![Fig. 2 Congressman Jackie Speire speaking on the House Floor. 19 Dec. 2012.](image)
Below are the lyrics and part of Speier’s rich commentary:

Who can take a machete, whack off all her limbs, throw her in the ocean, and watch her try to swim? The S & M Man.

The S & M Man is offensive, it’s hostile, but to her [Jennifer Smith] male colleagues and superiors, the song is just tradition. A tradition that is alive and well, celebrated in song and patches, offensive pictures, and behavior, and the tacit approval of commanding officers. A military tradition of demeaning women is not only sickening but contrary to the fundamental principles of an institution founded in respect—founded in respect and honor and in discipline, and it undermines our military's readiness and cohesion. Simply put, it gravely damages the military. (Speire)

Words that Move

The issues servicewomen face during service are further complicated when they return home (see Holmstedt). Although “women are just as likely as men to experience the struggles and benefits of service upon discharge” (Patten and Parker 2) women are less likely than their male counterparts to seek veteran services upon homecoming (Bhagwati 2011; Hickey 2011; Mulhall 2009). I argue that their hesitancy to seek services is due to the of the residue these rhetorical practices leave on these women’s psyches; language practices form memories retained by the mind and stored within the body, which when triggered cause mental, emotional, and physical paralysis often not understood by the individual our her culture(s).8

However, female veterans have found agency creating awareness about hate speech and sexual assault in the military, informing civilians and service personnel of the powerful implications of these practices. Heeding Audre Lorde’s advice9 female veterans are utilizing the Internet and social media, as well as the healing and communicative affordances of artistic composing for outreach and activist agendas. As female veteran and activist BriGette McCoy explained to the U.S. Senate (see Figure 3): “social media has been the single most thing that brought people together...for peer support and suicide prevention” (35-6).

McCoy’s testimony hinted at the thousands of veterans utilizing social media for activist and outreach purposes. As a researcher of online communities for veterans I can assure you that there are hundreds of open and closed groups for veterans on Facebook, LinkedIn, and other independent sites. As New Media scholar Jay David Bolter notes “the World Wide Web allows the tiniest of groups” to be heard, seen, and to make change (206-7).
Additionally, in March 2012 artist, activist, and Iraq veteran Erica Slone curated the all-female veteran art exhibit *Overlooked / Looked Over* for the National Veterans Art Museum (NVAM) in Chicago. Slone and eight other female veterans’ shared their artwork “to shine light on the unique experiences of women during service, in war, and as veterans” (National 2). At the opening reception for the exhibit Slone explained, "My piece [entitled “Uncovering My Crime Scene” (see Figure 4)] is about investigating, understanding, and trying to reconcile my decision not to come forward" about her MST which occurred just two months into her enlistment in the Air Force (*Overlooked*).

![Image](Image.png)

**Fig 4. Uncovering My Crime Scene. Artist Erica Slone. NVAM Chicago, IL**

Last May I had the opportunity to see Slone’s piece and the entire exhibit at NVAM. Slone’s piece in particular speaks volumes in its absence of words. However, I would be remised if I did not also give a nod to Regina Vasquez’s project *Fatigues Clothesline* which displays the damaging language of hate speech on the inside of military uniforms.

**Implications**

Slone, McCoy and the women and male veterans like her who have turned to art, the Internet, and social media for outreach and activist purposes, challenge otherwise unexamined cultural norms for all women, that as Helen Benedict couched it, “rape is an act of torture in which sex is used as the weapon...women are not objects of prey but human beings that must be treated with the same respect and consideration a civilized society would like to accord its male citizens” (127). Thus, each of us has a responsibility in this matter of hate speech and sexual violence against women. I offer three suggestions for changing our cultural consent to rape in both military and civilian cultures, which I have been taught by listening to veterans:

1. **Speak up:** Our silence about rape and hate speech is also our acceptance of these forms of violence. We cannot remain silent if we want such violence to cease.

2. **Share:** Transitioning veterans cannot be expected to know about the various resources available to them for support and other services. Share information about resources with veterans; suggest a wide variety of platforms for services and outreach—not just face-to-face—but also online—not just traditional medicine—but various kinds of approaches for health and human services.

3. **Listen:** The best favor we can do to any one, especially our female veterans is to listen to them. Many servicewomen admit to feeling silenced during the military careers. We cannot permit their continued silence; we must invite them to speak, while we listen attentively and without judgment. Listening is a powerful act of personal and social change.
Notes

1. A quote by Gunnery Sergeant Hartman that indicates the use of hate speech: “There is no racial bigotry here! I do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers; here you are all equally worthless!” (Full).

2. Women make up 15% of the military, serving in all military branches (“Background”).

3. The Pentagon estimated the number of MST occurring annually in all branches of the U.S. Armed forces as 19,000. Since just 3,158 cases were reported in 2010, some 15,842 sexual assaults went unreported.

4. In her book The Lonely Soldier Helen Benedict explains “the everyday speech of ordinary soldiers is riddled with sexist and homophobic insults…This misogynist language is so deeply engrained in military culture as to be reflexive. Yet it serves as a constant reminder to women that…when it comes to the group, they are alone” (50-51).

5. Military Sexual Trauma (MST) is the preferred terminology for rape and sexual assault by Veterans Affairs (VA).

6. Helen Benedict in "The Language of Rape" poignantly writes "the language of rape is insidious and it is used unconsciously, quickly, carelessly; yet I maintain that we need not listen passively in the face of its bias. Language can be and has been reformed in the media and symbiotically, in everyday life" (126).

7. Hogg’s poem “The Sexual Politics of War” was adapted into a public performance for the Warrior Writers Project, entitled the same, choreographed by Lily Hughes, with music composed by Ritsu Katsumata.

8. This notion is theorized by scholars of Affect (see Sarah Ahmed, Jenny Edbauer, and Laura Micciche).

9. Audre Lorde’s infamous quote from her essay and speech entitle the same: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 94).

10. BriGette McCoy spoke during the “Hearing to Receive Testimony on Sexual Assaults in the Military” on March 13, 2013 at the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Armed Services in Washington, DC.

Author Bio

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Mariana Grohowski is a second-year PhD student. Her research examines the cultural ideologies and literate activities of female veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. She has taught courses in first-year writing and service learning, and has worked as a writing consultant in a university writing center. She earned her M.S. in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Technological University. She is the Executive Vice-President of Military Experience and the Arts, an organization that fosters healing for veterans through writing and other forms of self-expression.
Works Cited


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Hate speech any derogatory or unkind word(s) used to refer one’s race, color, class, gender, sex, or sexual orientation.

There is no racial bigotry here. Here you are all equally worthless.
Female Representation in the Military

Women make up 15% of the military, serving in all military branches ("Background").

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**Branches of Military**

*Of women, men, % by branch*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
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<td>Navy</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Share of Officers**

*Of women, men, % who are commissioned officers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Women’s Growing Presence, 1973-2010**

*Number of female enlisted, commissioned officers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enlisted</th>
<th>Officers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>12,750</td>
<td>42,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1989</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>195,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35,341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Middle data label for enlisted is the highest number of women, 1989. Trend for officers includes only commissioned officers, not warrant or non-commissioned officers.


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Statistics

• Women make up 1.8 million (8 percent) of the 22 million U.S. veterans [nationwide].
  – The male veteran population is expected to decrease by 4 million by 2020,
  – Women veterans are projected to grow by 2.7 percent, making them 10.7 percent of the veteran population by 2020 (Biank 330).
Statistics

• A servicewoman is 180x more likely to be raped than to have died while deployed during the last 11 years of combat in Iraq & Afghanistan.

• The Pentagon estimates the number of MST occurring annually in all branches of the U.S. Armed forces @ 19,000.
  – 3,158 cases were reported in 2010
  – 15,842 sexual assaults went unreported.
Verbal Imagery

Mary Sheridan-Rabideau

“verbal images of students as deficient or gifted or as active or passive clearly impact the learning and learners of the classroom” (106).

Visual Imagery

Kristie Fleckenstein

“static mental snapshots[which] orient” us within culture (917).
Moving Words/Words that Move:
An Analysis of the Discursive Practices Plaguing U.S. Service Women

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Shade It Black
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Love My Rifle More Than You
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“Women’s sexuality, is socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others... women never own or possess it, and men never treat it... with the solicitude with which they treat property. To be property would be an improvement” (Catherine MacKinnon)

“We cannot hope to transform rape culture without committing ourselves fully to resisting and eradicating patriarchy” (bell hooks).
'Momma and poppa were lying in bed, poppa rolled over and this is what he said, 'Give me some! PT!'

War
Is it a place young men, targets in uniform, fight in a far off land
Or is it my walk home at night, womanhood my uniform and target.
30 March 2012

Gambler Songbook

Viper Pilot – HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

COMPLIANCE WITH THIS PUBLICATION IS MANDATORY

WARNING: This is a word of warning...a warning to those readers whose tender sensibilities may, or more accurately will, be offended by the language of these words and ballads. However, this is no apology for them, for these are the songs that are sung by fighter pilots throughout the English-speaking world. They reflect the manners of men at war, the morals of pilots who drink to forget for an evening, the combat missions they must fly at dawn. The pilots of the Korean conflict adapted many of these lyrics after having been popular among the same pilots during WWII. Some are more recent, having been sung by the air pirates of Vietnam and the warriors over Iraq, Bosnia, Serbia and Afghanistan. These are not the songs of degenerates, although they may sound that way. They are, however, an integral part of military life in the field.

YOU MUST ACCEPT OR IGNORE THEM, AS WE ACCEPT OR IGNORE THE CONDITIONS THAT INSPIRED THEIR AUTHORS TO WRITE THEM, AND US TO SING THEM.
Hearing to receive testimony on sexual assaults in the military
Overlooked/Looked Over

Erica Slone

Born: Ohio
Served in Iraq (Global War on Terror)
U.S. Air Force
2002-2008

National Veterans Art Museum
Implications

1. **Speak up**: Our silence about rape and hate speech is also our acceptance of these forms of violence. We cannot remain silent if we want such violence to cease.

2. **Share**: Transitioning veterans cannot be expected to know about the various resources available to them for support and other services. Share information about resources with veterans; suggest a wide variety of platforms for services and outreach—not just face-to-face—but also online—not just traditional medicine—but various kinds of approaches for health and human services.

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Thank you
Hate speech: derogatory or unkind word(s) used to refer to one’s race, color, class, gender, sex, or sexual orientation.

- Methodology
  - Mary Sheridan-Rabideau: “verbal imagery” verbal descriptions of people based on one’s physical attributes.
  - Kristie Fleckenstein: “visual imagery: static mental snapshots [which] orient” us to a culture (917).

- Moving Words
  - Nicknames
    - Jess Goddell
    - Kayla Williams
    - Cathy Brookshire’s *Soldier Girl*
    - Catherine MacKinnon
  - Cadences
    - Debra Hawhee
    - Jess Goddell
    - Jen Hogg, Warrior Writers
    - Jackie Speire for Jessica Smith

- Words that Move
  - Social Media
    - BriGette McCoy
  - Art
    - Erica Slone

- Implications
  - Speak up
  - Share
  - Listen

References (for handout)


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Discussion questions // Notes

1. What kinds of practices can civilian teacher-scholars engage to encourage female veterans to see language as a source of agency?

2. What resources are available (online and offline) for peer support and outreach for female veterans?

3. What role must men play in making change for servicewomen in the military?

4. How can the media assist in servicewomen and female veterans’ efforts for justice?