

**Resisting & Re-inscribing Gender Norms:
See Me/ Hear Me**

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“When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her . . .”
—Adrienne Rich

Abstract:

Women veterans not infrequently report the forced iconic characterizations of “bitch,” “whore,” or “dike” forced upon them by their fellow service-members, superiors, and the larger culture both during and after their military service. As a result, they experience a kind of cognitive dissonance. This presentation challenges the connections made between identity, gender norms, and the wedding of nationalism and masculinity when they serve to reject servicewomen by challenging their identities as in/sufficiently feminine/female, or when they inscribe upon the female soldier a pseudo- masculinity, concurrently denying her masculine privilege. This presentation seeks to engage conversation around ways to normalize images of the female soldier, recognize the value of the stories of all veterans, and explore – without essentializing –the tension necessary between gender and identity.

Keywords: female veterans, gender stereotypes, identity, story-telling

Women veterans not infrequently report the forced iconic characterizations of “bitch,” “whore,” or “dike” forced upon them by their fellow service-members, superiors, and the larger culture both during and after their military service. As a result, they experience a kind of cognitive dissonance. I’d like to challenge the connections made between identity, gender norms, and the wedding of nationalism and masculinity when they serve to reject servicewomen by challenging their identities as in/sufficiently feminine/female, or when they inscribe upon the female soldier a pseudo- masculinity, concurrently denying her masculine privilege.

I’m not suggesting that my arguments or observations apply to all women veterans, nor that experiences of being female in the American Armed Forces are universal. In fact, what I want to spend time thinking about is how conflicting identities must be recognized and held in tension in order not to essentialize (and so consequently silence) women’s experiences.

I think we need to recognize that these are roles thrust upon women, but they also become roles assumed by women as a means of negotiating the internal dissonance created by the need to remain true to themselves and at the same time perform equally well, be equally tough, be good soldiers - function if not in masculine forms at least androgynously.

Feminism is currently (quite frequently) rejected by millennials as something no longer necessary. The group at Duke two years ago who out of excitement over the realization that feminism actually had something to offer them created the “Who Needs Feminism?” website and tumblr. Likewise, I regularly have female student veterans tell me they cannot identify with the ongoing need of their civilian counterparts to fight sexual discrimination in the work place, and that they themselves, are respected for the work they do, paid for the work they do, and are offered opportunities based purely on their rank and abilities. Concurrently, and by contrast, ongoing revelations concerning sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military would seem to point to a strong need for a feminism.

Still even this definition from 1914 seems needed:

“Feminism is that part of the progress of democratic freedom which applies to women.”

—Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, 1914

My own niece, an active duty marine, experienced severe workplace harassment at the hands of a military contractor and former service member very early in her career and we had long talks about what it might mean to file formal charges and fight it, or whether she should move on stronger and wiser, and a bit more careful - what she would lose as a human being, as a female, what battles were ones you took on for a cause beyond yourself despite their intimate nature, and what were distractions from the real battles you’d enlisted to fight in. Her decision: to own the label “bitch” and to file formal charges. She accepted responsibility for making a situation right and in doing so also accepted the negative consequences of her actions, including a particular role beyond being a Marine.

As faculty, and as professionals who care about the success of women veterans, and about their wholeness, what can we do with the insight that these roles exist and must always at once be held in tension, particularly by female active duty service members?

The first thing we can do is simply recognize that essentialist/categorical definitions for women exist in the military. Next, I think we need to be ready to hear ANY story - being ready to hear ANY story is necessary hear

ANY story at all. Another thing we can do, I think, is to normalize feminine versions of being active duty. In other words, while the iconic storm-trooper may be the image that Hollywood most readily offers as metaphor for a powerful and patriotic America, what counter-discourse might we invite into the classroom that makes room for female veteran's stories?

Is there a multi-modal project that instead of saying "This is what a feminism looks like" says "I'm an American Veteran." "This is what a Warrior looks like."

What do feminist scholars do then, what should they do, with and for armed women, women vital to war efforts, women wounded in war? How can a feminist ethic of care encompass women warriors without essentializing them or victimizing them?

An article that appeared in *Time* magazine in 2010 provides a look at the dichotomy and tension of experience gender can play in healthcare for female veterans. The article opens with Shiloh Morrison, 25, who had been both a truck gunner in Iraq and served in Kuwait four months in the mortuary preparing bodies for autopsy, and giving the signal for taps and the last salute to fallen soldiers being shipped home for burial. Not quite two months home and working out in a gym, she's asked if her husband is marine because of the t-shirt she was wearing.

Fitzpatrick goes on to detail that by the end of the Vietnam War, "nearly 1 million living American women have served their country in the military, making up 3.5% of veterans overall. But the VA didn't start providing medical and mental-health services to women until 1988"(n.p.). Their experiences were invisible.

But the most poignant illustration of the tensions to be held at once comes from Fitzpatrick's report on Tammy Duckworth, a double-amputee whose legs were blown off when the chopper she piloted was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. She remarked about the fact that the Army could outfit her with prostheses but could not provide her with common contraception, "I remember thinking, 'Really? This is like a caricature . . . Why do you have Viagra but you don't have the birth-control patch?'"

The conflation of gender identity and military experience is explored in important ways in Suter et al, 2006, "Female Veterans' Identity Construction, Maintenance, and Reproduction." They summarize their findings based on the community of practice model applied to a group of WAVES (ranging in service from WWII through the Gulf War), this way: "[These women veterans] reported growing from shy, naïve young women to mature, self-confident adults. Participants found the transition back to civilian life problematic, in part due to difficulties meeting traditional gender role expectations and in part due to isolation, as they no longer related to civilian women in their hometowns."

They had difficulties meeting traditional gender roles because they had moved beyond them - not necessarily rejected them. Suter's group found that they reinforced their identities as veterans through their association with one another, meeting regularly. This enabled them to resist the disciplining of women's bodies and resist reframing (and thus decontextualizing and reducing the importance of their own active duty service - something they had a tendency to do).

A recent op-ed in the *New York Times* makes it clear that the issue of gender expectations and feelings of isolation the WAVES group experienced are still the primary issues facing the women veterans of the more recent Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Consider two quotes from this wonderful piece by Cara Hoffman (March 31, 2014):

“The injury wasn’t new, and neither was the insult. Rebecca, a combat veteran of two tours of duty, had been waiting at the V.A. hospital for close to an hour when the office manager asked if she was there to pick up her husband.

No, she said, fighting back her exasperation. She was there because of a spinal injury she sustained while fighting in Afghanistan.

Hoffman goes on to say, “It’s not that their stories are poorly told [women’s stories of combat]. It’s that their stories are simply not told in literature, film and popular culture” (1).

The second quote I’d like to pull from the op-ed brings into focus the question I hope we can explore here—how we listen better:

“Male soldiers’ experiences make up the foundation of art and literature: From “The Odyssey” to “The Things They Carried,” the heroic or tragic protagonist’s face is familiar, timeless and, without exception, male. The story of men in combat is taught globally, examined broadly, celebrated and vilified in fiction, exploited by either side of the aisle in politics.

For women it’s a different story, one in which they are more often cast as victims, wives, nurses; anything but soldiers who see battle. In the rare war narratives where women do appear, the focus is generally on military sexual assault, a terrible epidemic of violence that needs to be revealed and ended, but not something that represents the full experience of women in the military” (2).

Higher education itself offers a unique community of practice, certainly within disciplines, but also as a community at large. And that community is fundamentally guilty of perpetuated masculine vision what it means to be a soldier. . . . In thinking about the services offered to veterans and the role college can play in both aiding transitions and in enabling self-selected identity choices, Baechtold and Salwa assert that “In essence, [soldiers] need to make meaning of what they have seen and experienced while at war. The process of meaning making is related to the idea of shifting from accepting knowledge from an authority to constructing knowledge for oneself, based on individual learning and experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2001)” (38).

In this sense, women veterans on our campuses are not unlike any other student whose self-actualization we hope to foster, and by the same token, because their stories are stories of war and hardship, and loss, but also of adventure, of heroism, of responsibility, they are unlike any of our other students. “Understanding the development of women veterans require[s] making a connection between what these women experienced during their military service and how those experiences may or may not relate to how they make meaning of their experiences as college students” (38).

The last thing I want to pull from this excellent article are two elements concerning gender and identity that Baechtold and Salwa note from the work of Herbert (1998) and Josselson (1987). First, “women who enter a male-dominated setting must learn to redefine and manage “femaleness”(Herbert, 1998, p. 21). Herbert asserted that women in the military feel pressures to act either more feminine, more masculine, or both” (39). In addition, “women in the military are forced into a more conscious and deliberate role as an armed force

member and are not allowed a natural expression of gender... removal of the forced military identity causes a crisis of identity for female veterans as they struggle to re-assume roles as civilians” (40).

From the work of Josselson, the authors note that women in the military have often formed a unique identity in which their occupation is an expression of who they are as an individual [It’s the negotiated space that is and is not a gender]. “When their military occupation is removed and a new vocation must be found in a college or university setting, many women veterans....construct a new identity [not easily] that is specifically related to gender in order to make meaning of the collegiate environment (40).

Karen Wink says of Tim O’Brien’s writings as they speak to students, that “he shows an unvarnished view of war’s participants—not statistics—but people carrying profound burdens of responsibility within themselves in defense of our country (*Kentucky English Bulletin* 45). It’s this profound burden of responsibility that weighs on (and shapes) **all** of our veterans, men and women alike. It’s also this weight of responsibility that disallows female vets from ascribing too readily to traditional gender roles, but also means they resist feminism as unnecessary or not an instrumental necessity.

I don’t offer solutions today so much as invite you to think with me about whether we pay enough attention to these issues and how we should let them complicate our own classroom planning, or curriculum, and our research -- and how in doing so, how we can better serve women of in, and moving out of the armed forces. How do we “listen” better? How do we see and understand more?

A few suggestions for the conversation and a few goals moving forward:

- Normalizing the female soldier.
- Allowing and not essentializing tensions of gender and identity and story.
- Exploiting androgyny.

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