

Women Rewriting Scripts of War:
Contemporary U.S. Novels, Memoir, and Media from 1991-2013

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines contemporary U.S. women writing about war, with primarily women subjects and protagonists, from 1991-2013, in fiction, memoir, and media. The writers situate women at the center of war texts and privilege their voices as authoritative speakers in war, whether as civilians and soldiers trying to survive or indigenous women preparing for the possibility of war. I argue that these authors are rewriting scripts of war to reflect gendered experiences and opening new ways of thinking about war. *Women Rewriting Scripts of War* argues that Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* juxtaposes an indigenous Story concept against a white industrialized national "Truth," and indigenous women characters will resort to war if needed to oppose it. Silko's and the other texts here challenge readers to unseat assumptions about the sovereignty of the U.S. and other countries, about the fixedness of gender, of capitalism, and of how humans relate to each other—and how we should. I argue in Essay 3 that the script of "the body" or "the soldier" in military service can be expanded by moving toward language and concepts from feminist and queer theory and spectrums of gender and sexuality. This can contribute to positive change for all military members. In each of the texts, there are some similarities in connections with others. Connections enable solidarity for change, possibilities for healing, and survival; indeed, without connections with others to work together, survival is not possible. Changes to established economic structures become necessary for women in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*; I argue that women engaging in alternative modes of economy subvert the dominant economic constraints, gender hierarchies, and social isolation during and after war in the Congo. In Essay 5, I explore two fictional texts about

the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Helen Benedict's novel *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz's short story collection *Flashes of War*. The connections in these women's texts about war are not idealized, and they function as the antithesis to the fragmentation and isolation of postmodern texts.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to
Gary E. Stamper and Carolyn H. Stamper,
wholeheartedly.

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Essay 1

Introduction

1. Introduction

Some works have begun analyzing literature emerging from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; Stacey Peebles' *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*, among them. Helen Benedict's *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women in Serving in Iraq* is a groundbreaking journalistic account of women's experiences in the Iraq War. And, there are historical treatments of U.S. literature by women about women in WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and the Cold War. But no works yet focus on literary and media analysis about U.S. women writers and U.S. women protagonists in war in the contemporary time period. In this dissertation I investigate contemporary U.S. women writing about war, with primarily women subjects and protagonists, from 1991-2013, in fiction, memoir, and media, and with very different theoretical approaches and settings. The texts examined include novels, journalism, memoir, and short stories, and the locations include the U.S., Mexico and Central America, the Belgian Congo, and Afghanistan and Iraq. Theoretical approaches include U.S. indigenous rhetorical and narrative theory, feminist standpoint and international relations theory, and political-economic and trauma-recovery theory. The studies are linked because of the shared issue of women writing about war, the predominant focus on women protagonists, the contemporary time frame, the feminist analytical frameworks, and the authorship of U.S. women. But, considering how different the frameworks, subjects, and specific locales are in the projects, it was most beneficial to organize them as a suite of essays. In Essay 2, for example, I delve into indigenous critical theory, such

as Linda Tuhiwai Smith's indigenous methodology that advocates indigenous-led research and Lakota Harden's notion of equity for all people. That line of inquiry did not lend itself to examining the experiences of white U.S. women in the military dealing with sexual assault, as in Essay 3, or to the specifics of the Belgian Congo. The suite-of-essays structure supports the ability to consider a scope of wide range as well as a focused inquiry on the specifics of each essay. My work aims to advance the conversation about women and war by demonstrating how women's voices change the ways war is conceptualized; that war is considered to be going in the United States in some indigenous American views; that women staunchly hold their positions as military service members despite harassment, assault, rape, and the climate of vindication against reporting those violences; that many civilian women can and do survive in war while subverting economic, gender, and political systems; that women want to know and connect with women in the countries of Iraq and Afghanistan; and that women envision ways to reconnect and reestablish aspects of fractured humanity during and after war.

I argue that women's experiences and writing should be examined and that their voices on war should be heeded. Feminist international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe advocates for "the feminist discovery that paying serious attention to any woman's life can make us smarter about war and about militarism" (xiii, *Nimo's*). In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead*, indigenous women are not only at the table, they are leading a transnational movement and will resort to war if needed to achieve their goals. In each essay, women are challenging the set structures in which they operate, whether it is gender shaming, norming, or violence in the military; political occupation and economic violence against indigenous people and people of color in the U.S.; becoming a

single head of household with children in the Congo; or trying to make connections with others to retain aspects of humanity during and after war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States.

In researching women writing about war, the leading questions I asked were these: Who are contemporary women authors writing about war, and what are their concerns? How do military women's views on war differ from or align with civilian women's? And with the women of the countries the U.S. military is occupying? How are these texts representing women's experiences, and how are they intersecting with race, class, physical embodiment, and political positions? How are women interacting with dominant structures of power relating to war, such as masculinity, the military hierarchy, political policies, and to each other? What larger critiques are these texts making about war?

When using terms like "women," it is important to avoid notions of essentialism or of assuming one kind of "woman." In each essay, I have worked to write specifically about the women in that text, locale, and their ethnic and national backgrounds, sexuality, class, and time in history. Most of the authors discussed here are white, but almost all have written about women of color in their works, and Leslie Marmon Silko is an indigenous Laguna Pueblo writer. This project builds upon Susan Jeffords' work on remasculinization after Vietnam, Cynthia Enloe's work on seeking out the specifics of where women are, Sandra Harding's standpoint theory, Elizabeth Grosz's reconceptions of bodies; indigenous theories of Paula Gunn Allen, Lakota Harden, Andrea Smith, Gerald Vizenor, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith; and on the foundational work of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. In particular, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's move to place

indigenous people at the center of research, rather than at the periphery, and Sandra Harding's standpoint theory asking scholars to analyze which viewpoints are being considered and to "see" from different views helped me to theorize how to begin thinking about women in war narratives.

Drawing on such disparate fields of theory has resulted in an interdisciplinary study, with the work being bolstered by sociology, international relations, and just war and asymmetrical war theory, among other research. This range of perspectives has shed much light on the study of contemporary war. These kinds of frameworks also seemed necessary to advance literary analysis with so many differences in contemporary war experiences from wars in the past. At the same time, the focus of Essay 5 on distances and connections and how to psychologically live with war experiences has certain echoes from all wars.

Previous scholars laying groundwork for discussing women and war include Lidia Yuknavitch and Susan Jeffords. In Lidia Yuknavitch's 2001 book *Allegories of Violence: Tracing the Writing of War in Late Twentieth Century Fiction*, she outlines changes in the historical representations of American war narrative and the impact of wars on the style and form of the novel: "Critics generally agree that World War I and World War II changed the form of the novel . . . The modernist novel marked a fundamental historical discontinuity from the forms of realism including a sense of alienation, loss, and despair resulting in the search for inner meaning unavailable in the outside world, and a loss of stable authority in language" (6-7). I argue that the texts examined in this dissertation depart from modernism in that they recognize loss but also search for meaning in the outside world now, most importantly in connection with others. Oscillating between

distancing oneself (from emotions, from others, from morals, and from oneself) and connecting to others is a significant issue portrayed in these recent writings, but a desire for and the possibility of connection is present in each text. The connections reached for are with friends, children, and spouses. That desire and oscillation has changed the landscape of war writing, and it has become more individual.

Yuknavitch also notes more recent changes and discusses alienation and lack of meaning in Vietnam narratives. Post-1960, in representations of the soldier and about whose voice is considered authoritative. She writes, “The story of the white soldier male and his experiences at the front used to be axiomatic for our understanding of war . . . Since 1960 novels of war have displayed many different faces; the authority of the white soldier male has given way to other voices, such as women and minorities” (123). The women in the works examined in this dissertation have asserted themselves as authoritative, and I argue that they are rewriting those scripts of war to reflect their gendered experiences and opening new ways of thinking about war.

Feminist discussion of gender in war was significantly reshaped by Susan Jeffords’ germinal 1989 work *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Jeffords writes that “the arena of warfare and the Vietnam War in particular are not just fields of battle but fields of gender” (xi), and, as she later adds, of race. Positing the Vietnam War as an imaginative site of contestation in American culture, Jeffords argues that a remasculinization of culture resulted in many areas: political, cultural, private, public, and artistic. In this dissertation, the text of this time period are dealing with varying degrees of masculinist positions and different historical scopes. In Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, her narrative takes the 500-year

view of indigenous resistance against European and U.S. colonization. Other texts examined contend with backlash against women having entered the ranks of the Armed Services. But each of the works foregrounds women's voices and experiences of war, and reshapes former war narratives into new avenues that include women's experiences and that include pervasive issues of the tension between distance and connection.

One singular work when considering "war" literature situates war and the battlefield on United States soil, in contemporary time. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* discussed in Essay 2 portrays several voices of indigenous Americans who view life in the U.S. as taking place within a war that has been ongoing for more than 500 years. Many of Silko's characters are engaged in this war, via economic resistance, buying and stockpiling arms, and in organizing people to begin a new phase of the war by gathering a critical mass of people—indigenous and non-indigenous—to peacefully walk across formerly Native land and to reclaim it. Not just about property, this text opposes the violence of capitalism that allows many to starve. This kind of text required a turn to indigenous literary history and to indigenous theory to begin to unlock some of it. James H. Cox's work *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions* was indispensable in explicating an indigenous conception of Story and Truth. I utilized this concept to argue that Silko's *Almanac* juxtaposes an indigenous Story concept to combat a white industrialized national "Truth" that states that there is a "right" to wealth, regardless of what or who was affected by the accumulation of that wealth and that some people, but not others, have the right to clean land, enough food, and safety, housing, and medical care. It is this ideological foundation

on which the narrative of *Almanac of the Dead* argues for war—to save the lives of those who are crushed or damaged by that system and to save the earth itself from demise.

The health of the earth and its ability to yield enough resources for survival is also a key factor during and after war in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, which I discuss in Essay 4. Analyzing this text set in the 1950s Congo as a Belgian colony and continuing for decades, I benefitted from theory in the political, international relations, and economic realm. Sandra I. Cheldelin and Maneshka Eliatamby's edited volume *Women Waging War and Peace: International Perspectives of Women's Roles in Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction* aided my understanding of different specific war settings in the world and how some women have operated in societies in which "normal" structures of food production, transportation, family units, and economies completely changed during and after war. I built upon this and other research to approach Kingsolver's narrative in new ways. Most analysis of this novel center upon the feminist retelling of colonial narratives, on the clear patriarchal critique of the father figure Nathan, and on spiritual and religious issues of the white U.S. Christian missionary family around whom the novel revolves. I brought a new lens to this narrative by analyzing it in terms of war and also of focusing on the economic relationships among civilian women during and after the war. I argue that the women in *The Poisonwood Bible* who engage in these alternative modes of economy subvert the dominant economic constraints, gender hierarchies, and social isolation during and after war in the Congo. They are forced by circumstances of war to devise new modes of food production, trade, and supporting their families due to the loss of infrastructure and of the men who had helped support their households. The women become sole providers or key ones, and

though they fight nutritional problems, they keep their children and themselves alive. At first, when the white U.S. women lose their stipend from their Baptist organization and must devise ways to find food, they stay isolated, thinking they are relying on themselves, in an individualistic “liberal” way. They remain in their neoliberal, middle-class influenced Western socialization, not thinking to look to or rely on their neighbors. They learn later, though, that their Congolese neighbors have been helping them by placing eggs in their chicken house, among other things. All along the way, the missionary family are helped by Congolese people. Several times, they would have died without help. I argue that in a larger sense, this need to rely on others, and in particular, on the Congolese, symbolizes a need for a humbling position for the United States and the West. The Congolese know more than the white U.S. characters about the Congo and how to live and thrive there, and those methods are often directly in opposition to Western forms of development. The knowledge of the Congolese is severely curtailed, however, by the occupation of colonial powers who exploit the resources and people; when the U.S. missionary family come to the Congo, instead of helping the villagers of Kilanga, the villagers have to help the missionary family. *The Poisonwood Bible* maps out results of war through white U.S. characters in the hunger and infrastructure loss. During and after the war there, exacerbated by further U.S. imperialism, Leah learns that the methods of the ancient people of the Congo (or “Kongo”) are how the ecosystem and people can best thrive, not that of the West.

In more traditional literature of war, the memoir is a rich source of first-person experience. In war, as elsewhere, analyzing gender dynamics between women and men are key to understanding power structures and how they can be reworked or overturned.

In Kayla William's memoir, *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, the subject of Essay 3, U.S. soldiers are trained into adversarial gender roles and distance from girlfriends by chanting the training cadence "Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou, love my rifle more than you." Likewise, in Essay 5, a character in Katey Schultz's short story "They Call Us Cherries" relates how distance is trained into new recruits by other soldiers, such as physically slamming them into the wall and telling them to stop telling stories about how they almost got killed. The war experience for new soldiers is equated with first-time sex, as the newbies are called "cherries." Real women and men have to navigate sexual politics, but wielding the charge of homosexuality as an insult and control mechanism is damaging to all parties as well as to the structure of the military. I argue that opening up concepts of gender and different abilities would make a more flexible and stronger military. Additionally, normalizing straightness, and ideas of what makes a "real" soldier, contribute to a mental health breakdown and to a vindictive reassignment ending in death in Helen Benedict's novel *Sand Queen*. I argue that this novel, discussed in Essay 5, elucidates the dis-ease of sexual politics and shows they must be confronted and reworked for a better working military and healthier service members.

Most fiction being written about the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq has been authored by men, and understandably so, as men still make up the majority of military service members. In discussing the need to focus on women and what they are doing, however, critic Cynthia Enloe wrote that the ". . . gendered history of research—what is deemed worth asking, what is never asked, who is considered worth interviewing, who is considered too marginal to interview—shapes how we see any war; it determines what

lessons we take away from any war” (9, *Nimo’s*). It is into this arena—how we see war and what lessons we take away from war—that literature can play such an important role. And women’s voices need to be a part of the whole picture. Enloe’s now-famous question and call for research—“Where are the women?”—has been taken up by feminist scholars in many fields. Cynthia Enloe writes that

there are always fresh questions to ask about what it takes to wage wars—about all the efforts to manipulate disparate ideas about femininity, about the attempts to mobilize particular groups of women, about the pressures on certain women to remain loyal and silent. There are more efforts to control women and to squeeze standards for femininity and manliness into narrow molds than most war wagers will admit. There are far more efforts than most analysts care to acknowledge” (1-2, *Nimo’s*).

2. Essay Overview

I argue that the texts in this dissertation show the importance of women’s voices in war, whether it is as public rhetors organizing indigenous people to peacefully take back land, to reporting sexual harassment and rape in the U.S. military, to making interpersonal connections to heal war trauma and to form community to survive. In Essay 2, “Toward an Indigenous Rhetoric of War: Leslie Marmon Silko’s Novel *Almanac of the Dead*,” I discuss an indigenous viewpoint in the novel that currently, war is being waged against the United States by indigenous people within the country. This war takes place in the novel by indigenous people—and particularly women leaders—subverting economic laws, organizing indigenous people across borders in Mexico and Central America, and organizing African Americans, homeless U.S. veterans, and others. I argue

that Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* is an important text in helping to rethink frameworks of war, including just war and asymmetric war, because it challenges tenets of each while also asserting competing narratives. Rethinking philosophies of war is beneficial to theorists of war as well as to wider audiences in revising how we define and understand warfare. This reevaluation of war theory is also necessary to formulate a distinctly indigenous rhetoric of war, which I argue that *Almanac of the Dead* does. Furthermore, the indigenous rhetoric of war in *Almanac* can also contribute to rethinking how governments and social structures are currently organized and how they can be humanely improved. Silko examines these difficult issues, challenges the completeness of history, and theorizes about cultural change and possibilities of war.

Essay 3 is titled, "Women's Military Bodies: Non-Fiction Representations of Gender, Sexual Assault, and Possibilities for Change," and there I examine the standard script of "the body" in military service, ask how women are negotiating sexuality in this environment, and analyze some women's responses to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape in the military. I examine several non-fiction representations of women in the U.S. military: Kayla Williams' memoir with Michael E. Staub *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, Helen Benedict's *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, and journalist Sara Corbett's investigative article "The Women's War" from *The New York Times*, as well as a few other journalistic accounts. The way women are represented in these works expands the script of what the military body is and does, challenges conceptions about women's bodies in the military, and exposes realities of sexual assault in military culture. In addition to analyzing how women are representing themselves in this context, I discuss feminist theories of bodies

and arguments about women serving in the military and argue that moving toward language and concepts from feminist and queer theory about bodies and spectrums of gender and sexuality can contribute to positive change for all military members. Along with gender, I explore how race intersects with issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual violence in the military. In conclusion, I examine additional structural solutions for positive change in the military.

Looking outside of the U.S., in Essay 4, I analyze Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* in relation to war. Set in the Belgian Congo beginning in the 1950s, "The Uncertainty of Survival: U.S. Civilian Women and the Political Economy of War in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*" explores personal stories of white U.S. missionary girls and women within historical events in the Belgian Congo/Zaire and explores village and city life in a culture responding to colonial cruelty. The women press onward despite oppression of many kinds. What is remarkably different about Kingsolver's novel about Africa and war is that the majority of the narrative centers on the lives of women and their experiences. One of the ways in which this novel stands out in contemporary U.S. literature is that it represents women's lives related to war in a different place than Viet Nam or the World Wars. It is also remarkable in U.S. literature written after the Cold War in its portrayal of civilian women and the gendered ways in which war works upon their lives. And, it is a novel that criticizes U.S. political policy and Western colonial business and cultural practices in the Congo. *The Poisonwood Bible* shows civilian women's strength, resilience, and ingenuity, especially when, in addition to keeping themselves alive, they also hold together social fabric and keep children and often others in the community alive as well. I argue that this positive portrayal both

makes an acknowledgment of the U.S. intervention in Congo that was so painful to so many, opens a space and starts a dialogue about it in U.S. literature, and provides a way to move conversations, policies, and relationships forward.

Returning to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Essay 5 takes a different tack from Essay 3 on nonfiction. This essay considers fiction written about these wars, with the voices of some men but predominantly women narrating. Essay 5, “Distance and Connection in U.S., Iraqi, and Afghan Voices in Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz’s *Flashes of War*” also analyzes short stories by Schultz, and in both texts, the portrayal of Iraqi and Afghan women’s voices. Benedict’s and Shultz’s texts also play an important role in U.S. literature because they are among just a few of the early fictional works emerging from these recent and ongoing conflicts. Additionally, they are even rarer in that these texts are written by women in a small field of works written by men and they center on or prominently feature women protagonists. In these texts, I argue, it is through expressions of distance or connection that questions of morality and the unspeakable nature of war are represented, in characters from all backgrounds. But, the abilities of characters to make connections with others are heavily constrained by those backgrounds. Although the main female character serving in the Army in Iraq transforms into someone who can commit terrible violence, she is able to leave Iraq and return to the U.S. While that presents its own problems, she is able to be in physical spaces with no warfare and to receive medical care and counseling. For the Iraqi and Afghan characters in these texts, they must navigate remaining in areas without food or medical supplies or under the eyes of extremist factions who would imprison or kill them, not to mention U.S. troops. The distances there are not so easily traversed.

One concern shared by each of these texts, despite their marked differences, is the impulse to connect with others during and after war. In this late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century timeframe, this need for connection is not sentimental in the way of nineteenth century works by women, though that is not to disparage those earlier writings. The inclination for connection is at times frankly political, as in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, to advance the overturn of nation states, capitalism, and the oppression of people and destruction of the environment. At other times, the push for connection is intensely personal, as when a young female soldier goes AWOL to live with her mother after having been sexually harassed on an ongoing basis by three superior officers while deployed and coerced into a sexual relationship with one of her superior officers. While previous U.S. literature of war reflected historical concerns such as the first loss of life on a massive scale in World War I to the disillusionment and despair of Vietnam, the recent U.S. war texts authored by women also confront violence whether as military members or civilians. Portraying the usefulness of women soldiers distancing themselves from family who do not understand their military experience or distancing themselves from being called a "widow" instead of a "single mom," these works also include connections with others as pathways of hope, however faint they might be at the moment. In this way, the U.S. women writing about war include depictions of the damages of war—mental breakdowns, killing animals and innocent people, possible or imminent starvation—but shift the larger war vision to also accommodate current or future connections in order to help each other survive.

Essay 2

Toward an Indigenous Rhetoric of War:

Leslie Marmon Silko's Novel *Almanac of the Dead*

1. Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko's 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead* opens with a declaration of war. Although the narrative presents a vision for a peaceful and improved future by the conclusion, much of the nearly 800-page work portrays white industrialized culture in the United States and the Americas as filled with cruelty, torture, and murder. In opposition to these practices, the narrative of *Almanac of the Dead* states from the beginning that indigenous peoples of the Americas are at war against the United States and that this war has been ongoing for 500 years. For several reasons, Silko's indigenous war is different than conventional Western discourses of war, such as just war and asymmetrical war. One of these differences is that because the nation-state of the U.S. has so many resources at its disposal, the continual warfare of indigenous Americans is necessarily of a different nature and scale than a traditional war among nation-states. This imbalance produces an asymmetric power structure in which indigenous Americans retaliate against the United States, but the U.S. maintains legal, economic, and military dominance. *Almanac of the Dead* is an important text in helping to rethink frameworks of just war and asymmetric war because it challenges tenets of each while also asserting competing narratives. Rethinking philosophies of war is beneficial to theorists of war as well as to wider audiences in revising how we define and understand warfare. This reevaluation of war theory is also necessary to formulate a distinctly indigenous rhetoric of war, which I argue that *Almanac of the Dead* does. Furthermore, the indigenous

rhetoric of war in *Almanac* can also contribute to rethinking how governments and social structures are currently organized and how they can be humanely improved. Silko examines these difficult issues, challenges the completeness of history, and theorizes about cultural change and possibilities of war.

2. *Almanac of the Dead's* War Context

The way the West most often thinks about war is couched in “just” war debates and terms, and more recently with the language of “asymmetrical” war, referring to guerilla war tactics and suicide bombings. This philosophical viewpoint and recent reformulations need to be acknowledged in a discussion of war. However, I will argue that these discourses are not sufficient or even applicable to the indigenous warfare Silko creates in *Almanac of the Dead*.

Silko has long written about the effects of war, in works such as her celebrated novel *Ceremony* and her short story “Tony’s Story” in *Storyteller*. *Almanac of the Dead* is a work that challenges mainstream narratives of the United States, proclaiming the existence of a long and ongoing war in its frontispiece, before the traditional text begins. Written around a map of the southern U.S. and Mexico, the text gives the numbers for the genocide of indigenous peoples of the Americas: “Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600” (Frontispiece). It also describes indigenous resistance as being “unabated. The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas” (Frontispiece). Then, for hundreds of pages, the novel provides an often-graphic litany of characters suffering from drug abuse, cruelty, child kidnapping, and torture. The long roster of characters and locations include a white U.S. drug addict and her stolen baby, a Mexican private arms dealer, and a well-meaning Native American man who just wants to work and read true

crime magazines. After many short and bloody scenarios, a larger portrait emerges of a wide-spread abusive culture of predators and prey, largely perpetuated by white men in the U.S., Mexico, and South America. Along the way, Silko creates indigenous characters who resist this culture in every way they can. Calabazas conceives of transnational smuggling as acts of war against the invader culture, and he “would never abandon what he called ‘the war that had never ended,’ the war for the land. He wanted to call every successful shipment or journey a victory in this ‘war’ . . . They had always been at war with the invaders. For five hundred years, the resistance had fought” (178). Other key indigenous characters include several indigenous women who stockpile weapons for war and Twin Brothers who emerge from the South and bring masses of peaceful indigenous people to walk across the Americas, retaking indigenous land. *Almanac* presents resistance and war as rational choices on the part of indigenous people and any others who wish to oppose the criminality of stolen land and of oppressions of poverty, exploitation, and hunger in the Americas. By outlining in detail the oppression and criminality in the Americas, the rhetoric of indigenous war is legitimized.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, indigenous war is a different kind of war based on several criteria. By changing the standpoint of who narrates the history of the United States and of nation-states in general, *Almanac* dismantles the peacetime/war dichotomy. The novel changes the concept of where contemporary war takes place in the U.S. It is no longer just over there/not here. There are parallels to changes in notions of war after the 1980s Central American civil wars and post-9/11 United States, with indigenous resistance and with conversations about terrorist cells operating inside the United States. However, those frameworks maintain us/them or U.S./foreign terrorist binaries. The

causes for terrorist cells or asymmetric war tactics are also rarely considered to be linked to the policies of the U.S.; instead, narratives have been emphasized that foreign terrorists hate freedom and capitalism, and hegemonic U.S. truths maintain that those narratives should be valued and defended. By contrast, *Almanac* turns the conversation around toward the domestic and the American and toward how dire problems are that could cause indigenous, white, African American, and other populations within the United States to consider being pushed to war against the government and the systems that uphold it. This standpoint shift of an indigenous rhetoric of war, the interface of Story and Truth, and an alternative vision of relationships among people and the earth opens new spaces and changes the conversations of just and asymmetric war, policies toward indigenous peoples of the U.S., gender relationships in leadership, industry and environment, and urgent changes needed in domestic policy for poor and hungry Americans.

3. Expanding Concepts of Just and Asymmetric War

In several places in *Almanac of the Dead*, asymmetric war in the novel is waged without mines, bombs, or attacks on civilians. Two examples are when Vietnam vet Clinton interviews people of color who state that they would be willing to march against the U.S. and the smuggling tactics of Zeta and Calabazas on the Southwestern U.S. border. In addition to those actions, the crux of Silko's narrative hinges on a distinctly indigenous story that foretells that Twin Brothers will lead indigenous people to governance and to reclaiming indigenous lands. Significantly, this story of Twin Brothers crosses several cultures in different nations, and the walking movement in the novel is intended to be wholly peaceful. These stories of indigenous reclamation of leadership and

lands across continents differ vastly from the hegemonic U.S. political story, or the Truth of a settled nation-state running smoothly. That a change in borders, leadership, and political system is even desirable requires changing the U.S. political standpoint to one of discontent and move it toward a rhetoric of war.

Silko's vision presents ethical strategies and frameworks that exclude revolution or simple regime change. Shifting the value from a society of acquisition at the expense of others to a more ethical and indigenous rhetoric that values humans, the land, and all species challenges the notion that just war can only righteously be waged by a nation-state power. While Silko's text states in the frontispiece that part of the goal for Native Americans is "nothing less than the return of all tribal lands," the narrative never presents this reclamation of land as being for "territorial aggrandizement," which is a greed-based tactic that contradicts just war ideals.¹ The land is not sought for profit or to exclude others through militarized, closed borders. Moreover, from the indigenous standpoint in the novel, the land was not originally taken or settled legally. *Almanac*'s narrative posits, "There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land" (133). In this light, *Almanac*'s rhetoric is parallel with the just war tenet of right intention but in a uniquely indigenous way. *Almanac*'s indigenous standpoint challenges the narrative that we are not at war within U.S. borders. The rhetoric challenges the story that we are living in a peacetime country and hemisphere. The walk to reclaim indigenous lands also aims to reverse industrialization and to preserve the earth. The case for saving the damaged earth is made repeatedly in *Almanac*, but one example is striking, especially through the

contrast of Angelita La Escapía's reaction as she surveys Mexico City: "In the filthy, smog-choked streets with deafening reverberations of traffic jammed solid around her, La Escapía had laughed out loud. This was the end of what the white man had to offer the Americas: poison smog in the winter and the choking clouds that swirled off sewage treatment leaching fields and filled the sky with fecal dust in early spring" (312-313). Including environmental rescue and restoration as a major element is a distinctly indigenous factor in *Almanac*'s rhetoric of war.

In the perception of the indigenous peoples and any others who value their vision of living peacefully with other humans, animals, and the earth, the overthrow of the Destroyer system will be made with both just cause and "proportionality of ends," or to achieve more good than harm in the terms of just war, as noted by Heinze and Steele.² By relating in graphic detail how depraved the Destroyer culture is in the contemporary Americas, *Almanac*'s narrative in the first five Parts argues that the good achieved by overthrowing it is indeed a universal, unselfish good. Attempts by indigenous and other peoples to achieve these ends through many other means have been made over time. The *jus ad bellum* principle of "last resort" means, as Heinze and Steel write, "War should only be pursued after nonmilitary alternatives to solving the dispute have been pursued within reasonable limits" (Heinze and Steele, 5-6). This "last resort" requirement for a just war takes on a new level of gravity in the context of indigenous history, with the genocide of 60 million people, broken treaties, trails of tears, current uranium mining poisoning, lack of water, and severe poverty. Compounding this are the specific lists made in *Almanac* by Clinton and Weasel Tail, logging specific wrongs committed against indigenous and black Americans as well as historical uprisings by Native Americans and

people of color. Therefore the move to war, though it is asymmetrical against armed nation-states, is justified in the novel and set in motion by unarmed marchers, or civilians/non-combatants. In the indigenous rhetoric of war in *Almanac*, the last resort requirement of just war is widened to include contemporary U.S. domestic space, and it brings the case of war to American soil and casts war and regime change as an urgent need that cannot be deferred.

4. Reprioritizing Non-Combatants and Changing the Acceptance of Casualties

As part of *Almanac*'s retooling of concepts of war and of providing a wider-spectrum viewpoint of current American Story, Silko gives us voices of some of the starving people in the United States. Clinton, an African-American Indian Vietnam vet, performs qualitative research in *Almanac* exposes the illusion that "peacetime" is comfortable and actually peaceful for all people. That Americans are starving amongst wealth and that the government and Destroyer culture allows it are some of the main reasons used to justify the asymmetric war in the novel by Angelita La Escapía and by Clinton. This situation exemplifies the Destroyer culture in the narrative, in its casual cruelty. Clinton is homeless and DJs a radio program listing historical injustices against African American and indigenous peoples. This veteran of war attends the closed-door war meeting with the indigenous women leaders at the holistic healers' conference. There, Clinton accepts the women's leadership, and he weighs the certainty of losses of those who would fight against the U.S. government versus the "normal" state of living in America for the poor. He leaves the conference thinking about the upcoming war, planning to

spread the word among the brothers and sisters in the cities [. . .] the people would suffer immense casualties; the government would firebomb the crowds of angry citizens as they marched from the ghettos down Madison Avenue, State Street, and Sunset Boulevard. Clinton had talked with brown people, mostly women, because so many men were sick or dead. Talk about casualties and all you got was laughter, jokes, and more laughter. Two hundred or three hundred dead from police bullets or firebombs? That was funny! Hundreds more of the people died every year from starvation and its complications, which were slow and painful. (747)

This is another way in which Silko's concept of war is a different type of war: bullets and firebombs are the lesser evil. Slow starvation as a part of "normal" life – as casualties in an acceptably operating system in the U.S. and the Americas – can be read as economic warfare on the part of the nation-state Destroyer government. Philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain argues, "Many horrors and injustices can traffic under the cover of 'peace'" (50, *Just War*). *Almanac*'s narrative argues that, "To the indigenous people of the Americas, no crime was worse than to allow some human beings to starve while others ate, especially not one's own sisters and brothers . . . If communists [Stalin and Mao] had starved some millions, the bankers and Christians of the capitalist industrial world has starved many many millions more" (316). Paula Gunn Allen has decried, as have Angela Christie and others³, the current poisoning of lands and of indigenous peoples, who suffer inordinately high percentages of cancers, miscarriages, and birth defects due to uranium mining and other industrial waste (Allen, *Song of the Turtle*, 4).

Almanac of the Dead can be read as making a persuasive case that Americans should resort to just war. Heinze and Steele explain that in just war theory, “A war may only be waged for one or more just causes, which must be sufficiently grave to warrant the resort to war . . . The most widely agreed upon just cause is that of self-defense against aggression, though more controversial just causes in the debate include protecting civilians from massacre by their own government (humanitarian intervention) and averting imminent aggression (preemptive self-defense)” (5). The history of indigenous genocide and the American taking of all indigenous lands as well as the long list of specific cases of corruption in the first five Parts of *Almanac* can be read as “sufficiently grave” evidence and a just cause for war in Silko’s novel. And, the war of self-defense that Zeta and Angelita La Escapía plan only in the case that they are fired upon can be read in both indigenous terms and in the Euro-Western terms that Heinze and Steele outline as justified in protecting civilians from massacre by their own government.

Yet, despite historical and current motivations for indigenous Americans to wage a more violent war and an impetus to protect themselves from starving and other economic aggression, the large-scale indigenous movement in *Almanac of the Dead* refuses to adopt asymmetric warfare tactics of bombing civilian areas and killing innocent civilians. David Rodin writes that “[a]symmetric war’ is a new term for an old set of military practices [. . . and it] refers to the use of non-conventional tactics to counter the overwhelming conventional military superiority of an adversary” (154). Power inequality is certainly the case with indigenous tribes against state and federal governments in *Almanac*. Rodin then discusses some of the more recent tactics of

asymmetric war, outlined by Kenneth F. McKenzie as including using chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, information, and terrorism, as well as

alternative operational concepts which may include guerilla tactics . . . the involvement of non-state actors as parties to combat, the intermingling of military forces and installations with civilian communities and infrastructure, using civilians as human shields, shifting the battle site to complex urban environments that degrade the effectiveness of high-technology weapons, and using primitive weapons and technology in surprising ways. (154)

While many of these tactics seem applicable to situations such as the U.S. war in Vietnam, to “insurgents” in the Middle East, or to the U.S. use of Blackwater as a non-state entity for war, few of these tactics describe the ongoing war in *Almanac of the Dead*. Significantly, Vietnam vet Clinton’s description of war, like others in the novel, portrays the mass walking of civilians as unarmed. By the Twin Brothers and mass of walkers remaining unarmed, the indigenous rhetoric of war in *Almanac* reprioritizes the non-combatants as both valuable and as front-line peaceful warriors. In this expansion of the rhetoric of asymmetric war, the Twin Brothers and the walkers do not plan to inflict “collateral damage” on other civilians as part of their strategy.

5. Equalizing Gender Roles in War

While the Twin Brothers plan to follow the prophecy to lead unarmed indigenous people to reclaim ancestral lands, they do not think beyond their leadership of the unarmed walk. It is the indigenous women leaders in *Almanac of the Dead* that plan for the probability that armed forces will fire upon the walking coalition. Zeta, Rose the

Eskimo, and Angelita La Escapía take this responsibility into their own hands and organize to plan for this stage of the war. Heteronormative binary gender roles are reversed and equalized in *Almanac*'s war planning: Both women and men are leaders at the highest levels and in all areas. Women are in the war room. This gender reformulation is important to the indigenous rhetoric because of the large-scale, powerful, and strategic role the indigenous women play in orchestrating the war. The scripts of masculinity associated with war and the soldier include opposition to weakness, often coded in military culture and masculinity as "the feminine." Instead of women being "the Other" in this masculinist framework, in *Almanac* they are part of a coalition leadership with defined roles. The women are not separated from the tribe, or in military parlance, the "brotherhood." They do not even occupy a space in which they have been "allowed" to enter a system in which they have been traditionally excluded. In Silko's narrative, the indigenous women leaders are respected, listened to, and followed.

Long before the men Wacah and El Feo accept their destiny as the Twin Brothers of ancient Story and begin to lead the indigenous movement northward, the women Angelita La Escapía and Zeta prepare separately but simultaneously for war. *Almanac*'s narrative does not imagine or expand the gender spectrum for queer characters, but within its heterosexual limits, the text does disperse the binary for straight women and men. From their locations in Mexico and the Southwestern U.S., the indigenous women strategize and orchestrate the buying and stockpiling of military weapons. The narrative in *Almanac* that describes Zeta's weapons-smuggling work is titled "At war with the U.S. government" (128). For Angelita La Escapía's part, "She and the other leaders of the People's Army had been able to amass one of the largest and most sophisticated arsenals

in the region. The Indians had managed to obtain the weaponry and supplies” (310). Angelita La Escapía fascinates women and men and with her fearlessness and intelligent rhetoric. El Feo expects and welcomes Angelita La Escapía to be more realistic: “El Feo didn’t worry about the world the way La Escapía did. The thought of retaking all tribal land made him happy; El Feo daydreamed about the days of the past—sensuous daydreams of Mother Earth who loved all her children, all living beings” (313). He supports Angelita La Escapía being more rooted in the material world and taking charge of the physical defense of the movement. As both Angelita La Escapía and El Feo occupy non-normative heterosexual gender roles, they contribute to *Almanac*’s rhetoric of war that equalizes traditional heterosexual female/male and protected/protector gender performances.

The gender equalizing in *Almanac of the Dead* is perhaps most vivid in Angelita La Escapía, who is called “The Meat Hook” in one chapter title in the novel. This ominous nickname denotes her willingness for violence – a significant characteristic that defies traditional female roles. When El Feo first encounters Angelita La Escapía, he thinks she is “a raving orator who might someday gather together hundreds and hundreds of fighters [...] She was dangerous” (467). Her concept of history is informed by indigenous history and an intensive reading of Marx from the school Bartolomeo taught in Mexico City. Angelita La Escapía speaks publicly to a gathering of indigenous people in southern Mexico about the changes that need to be made based on indigenous knowledge and experience of past crimes, oppression, slavery, and deaths of indigenous people at the hands of Europeans:

Tribal people had had all the experience they would ever need to judge whether Marx's stories told the truth. The Indians had seen generations of themselves ground into bloody pulp under the steel wheels of ore cars in crumbling tunnels of gold mines. The Indians had seen for themselves the cruelty of the Europeans toward children and women. That was how La Escapía had satisfied herself Marx was reliable; his accounts had been consistent with what the people already knew. (312)

In southern Mexico, when Angelita La Escapía speaks to indigenous people in villages, persuading them to join the People's Army, "the women listened because they had never heard a woman like her before" (468). When Bartolomeo, the Cuban who taught classes on Marxism in Mexico City, goes to the villages in southern Mexico, he thinks he will be in charge of the indigenous people there. But, "A squad of village women had told Commander Bartolomeo to shove his orders up his ass. Bartolomeo had then called in the disciplinary committee to punish the offenders. Punish these warrior women? Angelita laughed" (514). Indigenous women in *Almanac* are key in planning and orchestrating the war and in facing down white male leaders and weapons dealers.

These representations of gender are opposite of Eurowestern historical and literary dynamics of women remaining on the home front or serving as nurses, journalists, or as steel workers while men strategically plan the war and fight. In discussing the changes gender causes in just war theory, Laura Sjoberg writes, "Feminists have pointed out that the just war tradition is *structured around* gender-stereotypical notions of what it means to be a man (citizen warrior) and a woman (innocent and protected)" (152, original italics). This means that "[w]omen . . . then, are excluded by

definition from the class of decision makers in war” (153). But Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* places women not only in the roles of the decision makers, but as the only ones even thinking about the possibility of armed warfare. However, as Sjoberg points out, the tradition and definition of just war theory is also gendered in that it is founded on “the perspectives of men and the privileging characteristics associated with masculinity [. . . and therefore elements of just war theory] rely on gendered conceptual understandings” (154). The women taking their place in the novel as directors of war strategy brings the gendered conceptual understandings into more balance in war strategy. Their presence disrupts the monopoly of single-gendered perspectives and sole male privilege of agency in directing war policy. This gender equalization is one of the more striking and unusual elements of Silko’s indigenous rhetoric of war. And, it meshes with historical exceptions of women warriors in some indigenous cultures. Kimberly Moore Buchanan, Beatrice Medicine, and Patricia Albers write that for many tribes and indigenous women, there has been a wider range of gender acceptance and participation in war.⁴ Beatrice Medicine notes in her work with Patricia Albers that not only did the role of the warrior woman exist for the Plains Indians, but “it has been reported in such widely separated societies as the Kutenai,” the Navajo, Tlingit, and Ottawa (267). This historical and cultural background that Silko builds upon in *Almanac*’s gender dynamics opens new room for concepts of women as lead strategists, decision makers, and full participants in the war process.

While I argue that *Almanac of the Dead* opens a wider and different space for women’s representations in war, women participating in warfare have not been absent in literature, and particularly not from indigenous literature and Story. Paula Gunn Allen

writes that war has been a common subject in Native writing, and she notes that women have figured as warriors and soldiers in many short stories. This is because, Allen posits, of the “recent” record of war “in the past two to five centuries” (*Song of the Turtle*, 15). In this view, *Almanac* shares historical and literary Native American themes of war and the possibilities of women in roles of combat. Indigenous women leaders solely engineer the armed war strategies in this novel. This makes it an indigenous war.

6. A Different Kind of War Requires a Different Kind of Rhetoric

The indigenous war Silko creates in *Almanac of the Dead* is so different from traditional Western concepts of war that a different kind of rhetoric is necessary. *Almanac*'s rhetoric is based in several indigenous historical and cultural frameworks, notably stories that are cross-culturally and transnationally indigenous (such as the stories of Twin Brothers in the Americas and Africa) and an indigenous standpoint on the history of colonization and genocide. Because indigenous people have been the target of eradication, and systematic attempts at erasure have been justified by Manifest Destiny, homesteading, governmental policy, religious campaigns, forced boarding schools, and the stories that paint these actions as acceptable, an indigenous rhetoric must counter and then enlarge the standpoint from which the “same” history and nation-building is historically and currently viewed. This argument draws upon Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory that asks subjects to consider viewing the world from another subject position and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's indigenous methodology that advocates indigenous-led research and that non-indigenous academics place indigenous people and subjects at the center of research, rather than at the periphery. This project argues that part of *Almanac*'s importance in this standpoint shift is that the narrative makes the assertion that

the status quo in the Americas is lethal to indigenous people's bodies, culture, and land and that the status quo is also lethal to most bodies, cultures, and lands in the Americas. These re-locations of subjectivity require a re-location of rhetoric to an indigenous center.

While *Almanac*'s text condemns capitalistic industrialized culture and the resulting power structures that are operated mainly by white men and women across borders, the text more specifically describes a murderous faction existing throughout history called the "Destroyers": "Hundreds of years before the Europeans had appeared, sorcerers called Gunadeeyahs or Destroyers had taken over the South. The people who refused to join the Gunadeeyahs had fled . . . No wonder Cortés and Montezuma had hit it off together when they met; both had been members of the same secret clan" (759-760). Introducing the Destroyer concept detaches the blame for the murder and other violence from a specific correlation with whiteness alone. But with the long history of the Destroyer culture concept, Silko also asserts that indigenous resistance predates European presence, which again defies the possibility of using European or Western modes of war theory. Silko locates the war geographical roots in the Americas before Europeans so that both in time and in geographical space, the indigenous war in *Almanac* is different from Western concepts.

The target, then, of the indigenous rhetoric of war is the destruction of the earth, oppression, cruelty, and greed in the Americas, which Silko depicts in many graphic scenes. In this cataloguing of atrocities, Jane Olmsted writes that "Silko has contrived a dramatic means of exposing the currents of U.S. culture that encourage self-interest over care for others—or even self-respect—and that result in greed, paranoia, suicide, murder, pornography, racism, and genocide. If there is one thing linking all the competing efforts

within the novel, it is blood . . . [and it] is on everyone's hands" (465). Stopping the bloodshed and reclaiming indigenous lands to stop the destruction of the earth are what drive the movement of walking indigenous people and like-minded others in *Almanac*. The narrative describes the gathering of the Army of Justice and Redistribution (309), or the People's Army (310), and their aim to include others and to retake the Americas unarmed:

Hundreds of people kept coming . . . a slow but steady trickle of people, mostly Indian women and their children, trudging along muddy, steep paths and rutted, muddy roads. The people came from all directions . . . Wacah had proclaimed all human beings were welcome to live in harmony together . . . A people's army as big as theirs would not need weapons. Their sheer numbers were weapons enough . . . All they had to do was walk north with him . . . the police had soon realized that they were greatly outnumbered and they had withdrawn . . . the tribes of the Americas would retake the continents from pole to pole. They did not fear U.S. soldiers or bullets when they reached the border to the north because they did not believe the U.S. government would bomb its own border just to stop unarmed religious pilgrims. (Silko, *Almanac* 709-711)

The public movement, therefore, will be unarmed and religiously or spiritually oriented. But, while the indigenous movement in Silko's text might seem to consist of nonviolent activism, it is far from the case. Michael True notes that nonviolent activists' aim, "as Gandhi often said, is to provoke a response" (xxi). However, the indigenous leaders in *Almanac* are not interested in provoking a response. They are not interested in having any

truck with the existing political nation-states or in asking permission for more rights under that system. This rhetorical stance or standpoint does not fit into the discourses of war or of nonviolent resistance. The indigenous leaders' aim is to dismantle the nation-state systems in the Americas and to stop their functioning and their governance altogether.

Within the indigenous movement in *Almanac*, there is a willingness to kill others if necessary, and this trait is found mostly in the women. In Silko's narrative, the willingness to kill also does not fit traditional non-violent resistance movements such as Gandhi's. Michael True also posits that nonviolent activists historically have been unwilling to kill others, whether the cause was just or not (xxii). Additionally, when Silko writes women characters who are the willing killers, this rhetorical move sets them apart from Euro-Western gender traditions, as well. Silko writes that the character Angelita La Escapía

had plans of her own . . . Angelita was in charge of "advance planning" . . . The U.S. government might have no money for the starving, but there was always government money for weapons and death . . . El Feo had agreed with Angelita La Escapía . . . The unarmed people would most likely be shot down before they even reached the border, but still they must have faith that even the federal police and the soldiers would be caught up by the spirits and swept along by the thousands. How long would the soldiers and police keep pulling the triggers? They might fall by the hundreds but still the people would keep walking; not running or screaming or fighting, but always walking. (710-711).

Angelita in the South, Zeta in the U.S., and Rose and elder Yupik Eskimo woman in Alaska all murder white people behind the scenes in the preparations before the walking takeover. Strategizing for war has traditionally been a male-dominated arena in the West, and this reversal of gender roles in *Almanac of the Dead* is one of the ways in which the text's rhetoric of war is particular to an indigenous rhetoric. Some of the questions that the women's killings raise are whether the means to achieve the ends can be justified and whether the circumstances described in the novel, bleak as they may be, warrant starting a war with large numbers of deaths to follow. But in place of the questions and arguments of just war and asymmetrical war, Silko's novel presents a different rhetoric of war that is indigenous and based in another philosophical tradition altogether.

7. Foundations of *Almanac*'s Indigenous Rhetoric

The novel's indigenous rhetoric embodies a more ethical and equitable philosophy that prioritizes human life and health, the land, and also other species. Along these same lines, indigenous activist Lakota Harden writes, "If it doesn't work for one of us, it doesn't work for any of us" (qtd. in Andrea Smith). Harden's succinct claim could be used to illuminate how *Almanac of the Dead*'s indigenous rhetoric is based on equity for all people, and that Story is a different foundation than European/Western histories or political narratives of the Americas. This groundwork for an indigenous theory of war is necessary in contrasting how different this standpoint is from other theories of war. In fact, Silko's rhetoric of war is so complex and at times contradictory – killing is acceptable if indigenous women do it, yet life should be prioritized – that it also does not fit neatly into indigenous traditions, either.

Despite its contradictions, Silko's rhetoric in *Almanac* largely wields specifically indigenous claims: to the lands in the Americas, indigenous knowledge, different values on time, geographic delineations not based on a political map drawn by the colonizer's politics, and a system of governance better than the European nation-state model of societal organization. Native American smuggler Calabazas outlines some of these historical claims and knowledges:

We don't believe in boundaries. Borders. Nothing like that. We are here thousands of years before the first whites. We are here before maps or quit claims. We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn't real. Imaginary lines. Imaginary minutes and hours. Written law. We recognize none of that. (216)

The basis from which any discussion about the status quo of the United States, of the nation-state construct in general, or about changing these systems must begin differently and proceed differently in *Almanac*'s indigenous rhetoric of war, based on the shifted position that values indigenous concepts of time, geography, health of the land, cessation of exploitation of human bodies, and the disregard for other humans starving.

Attempting to apply Western concepts of just war and asymmetrical war theory to indigenous circumstances in the Americas cannot work for an indigenous rhetoric of war. Western philosophies were used to colonize the Americas and to uproot and destroy the languages and cultures of indigenous people. The basis of just war and asymmetric war theories resides in Judeo-Christian traditions and Greek philosophy⁵, and those ways of conceiving of the world were carried to the Americas by people who decimated

indigenous populations across the continents. Jean Bethke Elshtain asserts, “By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the just war tradition had become part of the way in which much of the world spoke of war and peace questions. . .” (53, *Just War*).⁶ Furthermore, when just war and asymmetric⁷ war frameworks are analyzed as narratives, these war theories can reveal connections with how story functions to shape public beliefs and to maintain a hegemonic culture of domination over indigenous people. Importantly, the social standing of who is telling a story is crucial to the cultural validity and acceptance of the story. By the act of changing the viewpoint or cultural identity of the storyteller, the way a just war or asymmetric conflict is understood can also be changed. James H. Cox discusses Western hegemonic rhetoric that indigenous rhetorics have had to challenge. Cox observes that there is a separation and hierarchical value-difference placed on the notions of “Truth” and “Story.” Truth in this sense is considered fixed and undeniable. And, Cox asserts, “many Eurowesterners view [Truth] as directly oppositional to Story” (251). Examples of “Truth” are also stories, Cox writes, but these stories take the forms of “histories, news reports, scientific studies, or government intelligence briefings” (251). Because these kinds of texts are imagined from a particular viewpoint and then crafted as narratives, Cox argues, many indigenous writers are able to show that Story and Truth are actually intertwined. But, Cox points out,

The *separation* of Truth from Story is a key component of Eurowestern colonialism. Many Eurowesterners believe that they have exclusive possession of the Truth, a Truth that motivates colonial aggression, while other cultures are composed of primitive children who tell stories (myths, legends, lies, heresies) without access to the Truth. (251, emphasis added)

Indigenous rhetoric recognizes that these concepts are mixed: Story is in Truth and Truth is in Story. This complex relationship dismantles the binary concept of either Truth or Story and challenges notions that Truth is removed from storytelling or that only one possibility of Truth exists.

Almanac of the Dead demonstrates that the kinds of “Truths” in white industrialized nation-states include Stories of a right to wealth regardless of what or whom was affected by the accumulation of that wealth and Stories that some people, but not others, have the right to clean land, enough food, and safety, housing, and medical care. The narrative of *Almanac* asserts, “History was the sacred text. The most *complete* history was the most powerful force” (316, emphasis added). It is through this same method of narration that Story and literature can have the power to reshape Truth-Story narratives on a large scale. Providing different—or more complete—versions of a seemingly shared reality is one of the most powerful possibilities that literature can offer. As Silko writes in *Ceremony*,

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

Silko's poetry asserts the importance of Story in an asymmetric war environment. Asserting indigenous knowledge and stories as legitimate and as competing with the "Truth" of the "official" history of the Americas is a particularly indigenous way to resist. It is a defense as well as an offense and an indigenous rhetorical strategy of war. And, in a wider sense, it reshapes the rhetoric of war.

This indigenous rhetorical strategy is still necessary. For many readers, the claim of ongoing war in itself might be a surprise. Traditional war rhetoric has a beginning (shots fired) and an end (surrender and treaty). However, if the current status of indigenous Americans were to be reviewed even briefly, with data on poverty, health problems, lack of access to running water, environmental and human poisoning, and other issues commonly found across tribes and geography in the United States⁸, the idea that war continues to be waged on indigenous people in terms of economics, political policy, and "development" would not seem far-fetched. The indigenous war portrayed in *Almanac* is different from contemporary asymmetric war, which often describes small groups of lesser-equipped factions grouping in hills or mountains and often striking with suicide bombs or roadside bombs. By contrast, while the indigenous rhetoric of war in *Almanac* has a secretive side, with Zeta and Calabazas smuggling across borders and trying to break laws, the indigenous rhetoric also has a very public side, with Angelita La Escapía, an indigenous woman speaking in a public square in Mexico, and the Twin Brothers leading a massive group of unarmed indigenous people walking from the Global South northward through Mexico and toward the United States.

The narrative of ongoing war in *Almanac* asserts that colonization is a current and conscious reality for indigenous people in the Americas and elsewhere. Silko's novel

opens up space for creative thinking, challenging narratives that the U.S. has arrived at a post-colonial state. Many contemporary indigenous writers concur. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that,

For indigenous peoples, one term that has signaled the striking shift in discourse is ‘post-colonial’. Naming the world as ‘post-colonial’ is, from indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business. In Bobby Sykes’s cryptic comment post-colonial can only mean one thing: the colonizers have left. There is rather compelling evidence that in fact this has not occurred. And, even when they have left formally, the institutions and legacy of colonialism have remained. (98, sic punctuation from New Zealand)

James H. Cox writes that indigenous people are simply not even considered in white or Eurowestern Truths or Stories:

Native authors such as King, Vizenor, and Alexie show that the many non-Native efforts to write about colonialism are all part of a broad *non-Native storytelling tradition*. Whether non-Natives call this writing literature, history, ethnography, anthropology, travel narrative, or journalism, the Truth of these stories is inevitable Native absence. This failure, inability, or unwillingness of Eurowestern storytellers to narrate a story other than Native absence is also a key component of colonialism. (252, emphasis added)

Paula Gunn Allen explains, “Like our sisters who resist in other ways, we Indian women who write have articulated and rendered the experience of being in a state of war for five

hundred years. While non-Indians are largely unconscious of this struggle, we cannot afford that luxury” (*Spiderwoman*, 2). The indigenous rhetoric of war in *Almanac of the Dead* is based in the Native American tellings of Stories that contradict accepted white Eurowestern capitalistic Truth.

Almanac of the Dead's indigenous rhetoric of war not only challenges the prevailing U.S. and capitalist national narratives, but it also advances a radically more humanistic, inclusive, and sustainable narrative to replace them. James H. Cox writes about the deep urgency in replacing hegemonic colonial stories, in his assessment of the work of Gerald Vizenor:

As Vizenor demonstrates . . . survival for Native Americans depends in part on liberating the imagination from those texts—literary, historical, scientific, biographical—upon which colonial authors base their storytelling traditions. Vizenor affirms the imagination as a sovereign space from which Native Americans can maintain a world beyond the domination of texts, a space where both Indians and non-Indians can reimagine, and therefore begin to remake, the colonial world. (10)

Paula Gunn Allen writes that, unlike conventional concepts of war, an indigenous definition of war builds connections and opens pathways, rather than destroys: “. . . in English, the term ‘war’ means soldiers blasting away at military targets for the purpose of attacking or defending territory, ideals, or resources. In the tribal way, war means a ritual path, a kind of tao or spiritual discipline that can test honor, selflessness, and devotion, and put the warrior in closer, more powerful harmony with the supernaturals and the

earth” (*Spiderwoman*, 29). These different standpoints and alternative values and modes of living are the roots of an indigenous rhetoric of war and of post-war rebuilding.

8. Dismantling the Victor/Vanquished Dichotomy

The real difficulty with *Almanac*, though, is its failure to fulfill the promise of bringing the war into the text. Giorgio Mariani asserts that one of the main disappointments with *Almanac* and its move to show industrial and political overthrow is that “we are not given a satisfactory explanation of *why* and *how* it will be brought down” (204). The lack of tactics or fruition of the war effort is also anti-climactic in a text proclaiming war from its first pages. However, I argue that it is precisely because these contradictions and the potential war are so untenable in light of the other positions in the novel that the war is not even shown on stage. Taking the elements in *Almanac* to their logical conclusions would most likely result in continuations of dominant white Truths: asymmetric wars with or without civilian bombings often fail against nation-state governments. The closest the narrative comes to portraying the end war is to describe Lecha’s vision of the future in which U.S. military helicopters are flying back northward over the border, carrying soldiers wounded in the war, ostensibly by Angelita La Escapía’s defenses. Channette Romero argues that the vague ending in the novel allows for possibilities (635), and Mariani notes that no conclusive stance lets the text keep the options of revolution as spiritual or militaristic available. However, Mariani also argues that the choice of using an apocalyptic narrative allows the imagining of large-scale change (198). Instead of taking us to war, Silko instead takes us to a vision of quiet peacefulness, where anything can still happen.

This last section of *Almanac* instead turns to contemplate what would be possible if building a critical mass of support for contemporary indigenous rights and rights for the poor and for the planet could be achieved. *Almanac of the Dead*, for the bulk of the novel, considers, as James H. Cox does, the mainstream white rhetoric that indigenous thought must work against, and though the narrative can be read as an extended, case-by-case argument for engaging in a just war, *Almanac* ultimately waits on war. *Almanac* becomes a treatise on justice, violence, and corruption but also on debates for peaceful change. The complex representation of war in *Almanac of the Dead*, with its compelling reasons for war and the contradictions that result, demonstrate that despite strong justifications, there can still be no “just” war. Engaging in war makes Destroyers out of those who would advocate “killing the killers in order to stop the killing.” It is under these debates and alternatives that the option of war breaks down, in the conventional definitions of war.

In *Almanac*, then, the indigenous rhetoric of war challenges and expands concepts of war when considering Paula Gunn Allen’s assessment that an indigenous definition of war builds connections and opens pathways, rather than destroys. *Almanac*’s indigenous rhetoric of war, therefore, seeks to build and reframe, using Story to swivel hegemonic narratives and understandings to another point of view. It is productive, rather than reductive. In this the relationships among the unarmed walking warriors open new venues of possibility. This indigenous conception of war promises gathering potential power. In fact, Jane Olmsted argues that “Silko seems to promise a radical healing for those who recognize the connection between land, history, and spirit—including Europeans, who are increasingly a part of the Americas” and that furthermore, “Silko emphasizes the

connections among people routinely constructed as hopelessly marginal, homeless, unrelated, and without ties and their (as yet unrealized) power to coordinate efforts to undermine the status quo” (488). It is in such an indigenous definition that “war” does not have to mean a violent, shooting, or even military kind of war. The ending of the novel is a mix of Story/Truth and Truth/Story, or an indigenous standpoint and rhetoric intertwining the two.

Notes

1. Heinze, Eric and Brent J. Steele. *Ethics, Authority, and War: Non-State Actors and the Just War Tradition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

2. Historical criteria for whether or not to go to war, or *jus ad bellum* are outlined by Eric A. Heinze and Brent J. Steele. These six principles are just cause, right authority, right intention, proportionality of ends, last resort, and reasonable prospect for success (5-6). There are debates about the meanings of each of these and pointed and recent criticisms of some, such as “right to authority.” This criterion, in particular, has been challenged, as Heinze and Steele note: “There is also controversy over whether political authorities have the right to wage war regardless of their moral status or whether their political institutions must meet certain minimal standards of justice” (5). In other words, a government, such as the ones characterized in Silko’s novel, that cannot be found to be just or willing to be just may not be considered as having the authority to starve or kill its own people.

3. Angela Christie has written about “the devastations carried by widespread environmental contamination on Native lands across North America,” and she discusses the works of Andrea Smith and Winona LaDuke on uranium mining and toxic waste dumping. Christie cites one statistic of LaDuke’s that provides a big-picture perspective: “According to the Worldwatch Institute, 317 reservations in the United States are threatened by environmental hazards, ranging from toxic wastes to clearcuts” (LaDuke, cited in Christie; from Winona La Duke’s *All Our Relations* (Cambridge: South End, 1999).

4. Writings about indigenous women and a wider range of gender acceptance in war includes Kimberly Moore Buchanan’s study “Apache Women Warriors”; Buchanan writes, “The Apaches relied on raiding as a primary means of existence, unjustly earning for themselves the historical stereotype of ‘bloodthirsty savages.’ This fallacy can be challenged when raiding is viewed as an economic necessity rather than a sadistic pastime [. . .] Hunting, raiding, and warring were the three central features of Apache life. In order for a band to survive, both males and females participated in these activities” (18).

5. According to Cian O’Driscoll, the debates on just war theory and its intents and justifications stretch from Greek and Roman philosophy to Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes to contemporary writers and critics. For more on just war theory and asymmetric war, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, David Rodin, Eric Heinze and Brent J. Steele, Laura Sjoberg, and Cian O’Driscoll.

6. Elshtain asserts, “By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the just war tradition had become part of the way in which much of the world spoke of war and peace questions, especially such matters as noncombatant immunity, proportionality, and the treatment of prisoners. International law states that intentional attacks on noncombatants

violate not only recognized rules of warfare but universal humanitarian standards” (53, *Just War*).

7. David Rodin discusses some of the more recent tactics of asymmetrical war that Kenneth F. McKenzie outlines as including using chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, information, terrorism, and also

alternative operational concepts which may include guerilla tactics (in which soldiers, often disguised as civilians, do not seek to defend fixed positions, but rather to harass a regular army by conducting surprise attacks), the involvement of non-state actors as parties to combat, the intermingling of military forces and installations with civilian communities and infrastructure, using civilians as human shields, shifting the battle site to complex urban environments that degrade the effectiveness of high-technology weapons, and using primitive weapons and technology in surprising ways. (154)

8. Just looking at the U.S. Health and Human Services website *The Office of Minority Health* and the “American Indian/Native Alaskan” Health Profile (last updated at this writing 9/17/2012), “American Indians and Alaska Natives have an infant death rate 60 percent higher than the rate for Caucasians. AI/ANs are twice as likely to have diabetes as Caucasians. An example is the Pima of Arizona, who have one of the highest diabetes rates in the world.” Michelle Sarche and Paul Spicer reported in June 2008 that “More than one-quarter of the American Indian and Alaska Native population is living in poverty, a rate that is more than double that of the general population and one that is even greater for certain tribal groups (e.g., approaching 40%). American Indian and Alaska Native children and families are even more likely to live in poverty. U.S. Census Bureau statistics reveal that 27% of American Indian and Alaska Native families with children live in poverty, whereas 32% of those with children younger than 5 years do—rates that are again more than double those of the general population and again are even higher in certain tribal communities (e.g., 66%). Discrepancies in education and employment are also found. Overall, there are fewer individuals within the American Indian and Alaska Native population who possess a high school diploma or GED (71% versus 80%) or a bachelor’s degree (11.5% versus 24.4%) . . . Data from several studies reveal that American Indian and Alaska Native women are more likely than women from other ethnic groups to report a history of domestic violence victimization” (Sarche and Spicer).

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Essay 3

Women's Military Bodies: Non-Fiction Representations of Gender, Sexual Assault, and Possibilities for Change

1. Introduction

Women in the U.S. military have been voicing their bodily experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan in memoirs, documentaries, and interviews. These women are infusing their bodies into a particular and gendered script – the script of the “soldier,” “sailor,” etc. – and displacing normative roles, stretching and breaking them. This paper examines the standard script of “the body” in military service, asks how women are negotiating sexuality in this environment, and analyzes some women’s responses to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape in the military. This project argues that women’s experiences in the military are highly differentiated from men’s and that it is important to know how and why. Representations of women in journalism and memoir shed light on women’s experiences and help move us forward in this analysis. Changing conceptions of gender and language used to represent gender can help ease tensions in the military, and larger solutions are also discussed to this end.

In this essay, I will examine several non-fiction representations of women in the U.S. military: Kayla Williams’ memoir with Michael E. Staub *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, Helen Benedict’s *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, and journalist Sara Corbett’s investigative article “The Women’s War” from *The New York Times*, as well as a few other journalistic accounts. The way women are represented in these works expands the script of what the military body—previously understood as only male, but now also female—is and does,

challenges conceptions about women's bodies in the military, and exposes realities of sexual assault in military culture. In addition to analyzing how women are representing themselves in this context, I discuss feminist theories of bodies and arguments about women serving in the military and argue that moving toward language and concepts from feminist and queer theory about bodies and spectrums of gender and sexuality can contribute to positive change for all military members. Along with gender, I explore how race intersects with issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual violence in the military. In conclusion, I examine additional structural solutions for positive change in the military.

One of the reasons that the stakes are so high in this complex environment is that violence against women in the military by other service members is ongoing. According to the Fiscal Year 2013 Department of Defense's annual Report to Congress from the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office released in May of 2014:

- Reports of alleged sexual assault increased in all four Military Services. In total, the DoD received 5,061 reports of alleged sexual assault involving one or more Service members as either the victim or alleged subject (suspect) – a 50 percent increase over the 3,374 reports of received in FY12.
 - Of the 5,061 reports, about 54 percent involved Service member on Service member crime.
 - The 5,061 reports involved 4,113 Service member victims making a report for an incident that occurred while they were in military service.
- (Department)

Some women's accounts are harrowing. One woman who served in Iraq said "My company consisted of fifteen hundred men . . . and under eighteen women . . . The mortar rounds that came in daily did less damage to me than the men with whom I shared my food" (Benedict 4). Another woman reported that at Camps Arifjan and Speicher in Iraq, the threat of women soldiers being raped by their own military colleagues was so high, they were told never to go anywhere at night without a "battle buddy." But with so few women serving at one location, the battle buddies were sometimes men. When even a male battle buddy threatened to rape her, this woman explained that after that she always carried a knife, and other women she spoke to always did, too for the same reason; she said, "I wasn't carrying the knife for the enemy, I was carrying it for the guys on my own side" (Benedict 167-168). When researcher Helen Benedict started asking women soldiers, "'If the men are threatening, harassing, and even attacking you like this, where does that leave you in the middle of a battle?' Almost all of them gave me the same answer: Alone" (Benedict 168). Isolation among male service members is a major factor in the experiences of the women Benedict interviewed, and it is one of the less talked about difficulties of negotiating gender for women in military service.

2. Women Infusing their Bodies into the Script

Women have been serving in the U.S. military in an environment that was previously mostly male. The most recent Department of Defense numbers show that "Women, who number 202,876, comprise 14.6 percent of the DoD Active Duty force," according to the official 2012 Demographics Report (Defense, "2012," iii). The women in these non-fiction narratives have gone through Basic Training, served in the military, and they have participated in bodily practices in particular locations and times. This kind

of on-the-ground knowledge is not always valued from women, but Donna Haraway makes a case for specific situated knowledge.¹ Haraway argues “for situated and embodied knowledges and . . . against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (583). Extending Haraway’s concept to representations of women in these non-fiction texts means not generalizing about how all women experience being deployed in the military. Focusing on specific women’s statements and experiences can allow for a jumping-off point from which to theorize about what their specific claims signify. When the military women in these texts make apparent the specifics of their knowledge claims, and by their courage in speaking and writing publicly, outside of the military, they are contributing to what Elizabeth Grosz describes as the “ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them.” The military women’s voices in these texts contribute to building a larger picture of different women’s experiences in the military, and they counter mainstream narratives of a unified community of military “brothers.” Instead, they stretch out that formerly contained “brotherhood” to be more inclusive, more diverse, and to change.

Mainstream narratives of gender and of the military attempt to contain conceptions of women to spaces outside of the military and outside of the “brotherhood.” This can be seen in binary thinking and traditional language and thought, such as soldier/civilian, “women and children first” (detrimental to women as well as making men more acceptably “expendable”), and war narratives of soldiers abroad and women as only present as caretakers or back at the home front. The realities that some military women have expressed are that despite having joined the military and met the standards, they are excluded from the “brotherhood” of their peers. This is not only isolating but can

also be life-threatening, and it can become a major cause of PTSD when ostracism also includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape.

One specific example of the masculinist soldier script is relayed in the epigraph of Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle* book:

Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou

Love my rifle more than you

You used to be my beauty queen

Now I love my M-16.

--ARMY MARCHING CADENCE (8)

This marching cadence speaks volumes about traditional cultural stereotypes of both male and female heteronormative social and sexual roles, portrays women as being owned by men (“my beauty queen”), and it places women outside of the military and relegates women to the sexualized role of beauty queen. Conventional power dynamics in gendered relationships and of rape culture are maintained in many of the reports of women in the military seen in the nonfiction texts examined here as well as in the numbers of cases of rape and sexual harassment reported. The need to stop rape, assault, and harassment in the military (as well as outside of it) gives urgent rise to the need to shift ways in which women’s and all bodies are viewed and incorporated or rejected within the realms of military groups and identities. Changes of bodily concepts would benefit all members of military service and wider culture by acknowledging, as Elizabeth Grosz terms it, “a multiplicity of bodies,” or that many kinds of bodies exist; not all men are the most strong, or all women the most weak, for example.

In theorizing how bodies figure within masculinist frameworks in the traditions of feminist philosophy, a useful standpoint for examining these texts about military women is the position Elizabeth Grosz terms “Sexual Difference.” I argue that this position, rather than the schools of feminist egalitarianism or social constructionism, can be more productive and directly address issues raised about women in military service. Often, as Grosz asserts, egalitarian feminist “Political struggles are . . . directed toward *neutralization* of the sexually specific body” (16-17, my emphasis). That meant that some women have adopted masculinist modes of becoming “more like men” in order to succeed. That is one understandable response that some women have taken in order to gain entrance to and to succeed within the military – and this is one tactic of negotiating gender in the military that we see expressed in Kayla Williams’ *Love My Rifle* memoir. One example is Williams’ response toward the different physical requirements for women and men in Basic Training; she first met the women’s physical requirements. Then, she not only met the men’s requirements as well, but she exceeded what she could of the men’s physical training requirements (44). She consciously worked on these physical elements, although, as she says, “Other girls didn’t give a shit” (44). Women’s bodies have often been used against them in arguments that have blocked them from some military service and that previously prevented them from serving.

While the Department of Defense opened more roles to women in February 2012, women were still banned from serving in “direct” combat positions.² One of the reasons for that ban, according to a female soldier in the documentary film *Lioness*, rests on using a standard physical model that says that the “average” female body cannot carry the weight of certain packs³. This does not take into account that some men’s body builds are

slimmer and that some women's builds are thicker. Such an androcentric concept of bodies imposes a standard or script that all men — but only men — are capable of serving in that capacity, regardless of the differences in male bodies and abilities. Certainly there are some men who also struggle with heavy packs and who do not make it through Basic Training. However, those men do not have those conditions extended to categorize the whole gender of heteronormative men. This is where the sexual difference stance can be beneficial. Sexual difference theory expects that differences in particular bodies and their abilities will be acknowledged.⁴ Fortunately for women who want to serve in combat, in January of 2013, the Department of Defense “announced the end of the direct ground combat exclusion rule for female service members” (Roulo). For Kayla Williams in *Love My Rifle*, instead of identifying with the women who would “argue that our body types were different,” she rejected the norms and expectations for women in Basic Training as well as those of the women who were training with her and did not care about the different standards for women and men. Those choices for Williams enact the sexual egalitarian philosophy, and that tactic is understandable, both for testing oneself and for drawing a line of competence that men in the military may be more likely to recognize. This project, however, continues to investigate what other tactics and possibilities can be envisioned and also be practical.

3. Changing the Language, Changing the Concepts

The strategy of sexual egalitarianism can work well in some cases. But while being female in the military can be seen as being tough, courageous, and necessary, it can also be seen as disruptive to the military definition of “soldier” – and on a wider scale – to gender identities. In turn, this danger to set categories of gender produces anxieties.

About sexual difference, or recognizing bodily differences between and among women and men, Grosz writes that “This irreducible difference under the best conditions evokes awe and surprise; under less favorable conditions it evinces horror, fear, struggle, resistance” (208). Negative reactions also result in negative language and viewpoints; many terms for change to the military and for women’s presence in the military can be described in the negative: disrupting, disassembling, and destroying the current order. Along those lines, some responses to challenges to gender and military identities is to attempt to control the offending “contamination” or “pollution” of different bodies, and unfortunately, this has been the case in many instances in the U.S. military with sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. However, it is precisely the need to admit and confront corporeal and sexual specificity that Grosz argues is the way toward breaking strictly binary thinking about gender hierarchy. Breaking gender concepts away from an either/or, us/them limitation could help better integrate people of all genders in the military. What would it look like instead to openly discuss for women and men the specifics of their bodily abilities, to assign work accordingly, and to refuse to perpetrate or accept violence within a military unit? Moving toward using positive language and concepts can be an important tool in supporting such change. For example, women could be termed as adding to, fusing with, or synthesizing with a unit. The scientific connotations of amalgamation and fusing, making stronger and producing energy, are positive. Additionally, Grosz’s notion and language of a “multiplicity” of bodies can be more realistic and productive as well. We will continue to see in other cases in this essay that language use is extremely important.

4. Women Speaking Out about Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, and Rape in the Military

Changes in language and concepts of bodies and gender are needed as part of a multi-pronged strategic plan to combat and stop violence against women in military service (and outside of it). The historical reality, Helen Benedict writes, is that “War always fosters an increase in the sexual violence of soldiers. Many men resent women for usurping the masculine role of warrior. And the military is still permeated with stereotypes of women as weak, passive sex objects who have no business fighting and cannot be relied upon in battle” (5). But, Grosz argues that the idea of the “standard” body can be “undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities” (19). Acceptance of multiplicity may seem more challenging to apply to the military, where sameness is indoctrinated and enforced, such as when every soldier must be able to carry packs of a certain weight. But the presence of women’s bodies in this system is indeed manifesting those multiplicities. Women have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, with “other kinds of bodies and subjectivities.” Unfortunately, the resentment some men feel toward women erupts in sexual violence and causes particular kinds of injuries.

Journalist Sara Corbett interviewed women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in her 2007 article “The Women’s War” for *The New York Times* initially to learn whether they had Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While Corbett originally intended to investigate women with PTSD, what she learned was that women were indeed returning home with PTSD but also having experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault. One woman explained that her “stress came not just from the war and not just from the supposed harassment, she told the investigators, but from some combination

of the two” (Corbett). Helen Benedict’s research on the military uncovered that “studies have found [that harassment] can cause the same rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in women as combat does in men” (5). One woman Benedict talked to returned from a year in Iraq “so destroyed by sexual harassment that she tried to kill herself” (5).

Not surprisingly, some women have reported that if they want to stay in the military, they do not report sexual harassment or sexual assault. Elizabeth Becker interviewed “15 senior officers” about sexual harassment. Thirteen of the fifteen women said that they had experienced sexual harassment, and all of those thirteen “said that to protect their careers they never reported a one-time case of sexual harassment” (Becker). As it turns out, deciding that non-reporting was the choice most likely to protect their careers was merited. Becker talked with

Lt. Col. Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, a forensic psychiatrist in the Army who works with women who bring charges of sexual assault . . . “What is most likely to happen is a negative effect on your career,” Colonel Ritchie said. The women who bring charges of sexual assault against a man that lead to a trial generally resign from the Army within a year, she said, whether the man was found guilty or innocent. (Becker)

More severe evidence to support the damage to women’s careers if they report sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape in the military was brought to light in an editorial in *The New York Times* called “The Great Shame.” Bob Herbert interviewed two women who had experienced sexual assault during their time in the military. Several factors emerged as consistent in these women’s stories: The women were pressured not to report the incidents, the men in these cases were not punished, and the women each

subsequently left the military. One woman told Herbert, ““My military career ended. My assailant’s didn’t.”” In fact, Herbert writes, “most of the men accused of attacking women receive little or no punishment. The military’s record of prosecuting rapists is not just lousy, it’s atrocious.”

The proportion of men accused of sexual harassment and violence who are not punished is high. Helen Benedict’s analysis puts these numbers in context: “In 2007, 8 percent of reported assaults went to court-martial—meager, but at least something. (By contrast, some 40 percent of men arrested for sex crimes in civilian life are prosecuted)” (90). Benedict also writes that when superiors told women only to go outside at night with another female at all military bases, one Staff Sergeant commented,

They tell us (after we hit the deck from an incoming mortar shell) that we shouldn’t walk alone at night on base. We, as in females. How am I supposed to track down another female to go eat when I want to? Shower when I want? Females aren’t exactly crawling around this joint. Screw you, you deploy me here and tell me it’s not safe for me to walk alone to get a bite to eat because I’ll probably get raped by one of our own? (94)

A woman in a different unit explained that the harassment “went up so high in the ranks there was nobody to tell” (107). In *Love My Rifle More than You*, Kayla Williams described the anguish she experienced in trying to decide whether to report the most serious incident of sexual harassment and forced groping she experienced. Williams wrote that she went to sleep the night of the incident thinking that she would need to report it. But the next morning, the man came by her tent, apologized, and then ducked out without seeing her reaction or waiting to hear anything from her. Then she wondered

if she should report it. A major factor in her considerations, in addition to wondering if the man “gets it” is that “I have to assume that if it comes right down to it, the guys would all back him. As somebody on their team, in their unit, in their MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]. If I am to force this issue—if I am to ask them to be loyal to Rivers or be loyal to me—what might happen? I have to imagine which way that would go. This sucks” (208-209). Williams goes on to assert that, “As much as the Army would like to tell us that it’s not true, girls who file EO (equal opportunity) complaints are treated badly . . . in reality, they are discouraged . . . Needless to say guys do not like girls who file EO complaints . . . Even *girls* don’t like girls who file EO complaints—they don’t want to rock the boat” (209). It is understandable that some women would not like women who file EO complaints. It draws attention to their differences from the men. When unit cohesion is understood in gendered terms, then making a complaint against another service member for gender violence highlights those bodily differences. Yet on both an individual and structural level, shunning women who make EO complaints is further isolating to women and impeding positive cultural change.

A move that one woman made to take herself out of a sexual harassing situation was to go AWOL and not rejoin her unit as they shipped back to Iraq. In her article “The Women’s War,” Sara Corbett describes female Army Specialist Suzanne Swift, who remained in the U.S. while her Army unit deployed without her. They had previously been on a 12-month tour and been home less than one year. Swift hid for a while in the house of a friend but eventually moved back home with her mother. About six months after not appearing for her deployment, the Army sent police officers to arrest her. But after the arrest, the normal AWOL procedure was not immediately followed with Swift.

Instead, she was given a desk job while her situation was discussed. Corbett puts this in perspective and explains why Swift's situation merited consideration:

Despite the fact that military procedure for dealing with AWOL soldiers is well established – most are promptly court-martialed and, if convicted, reduced in rank and jailed in a military prison – Suzanne Swift's situation raised a seemingly unusual set of issues. She told Army investigators that the reason she did not report for deployment was that she had been sexually harassed repeatedly by three of her supervisors throughout her military service. (Corbett)

In addition to the sexual harassment report, Swift said she was suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Corbett explains that “PTSD symptoms can include, among other things, depression, insomnia or ‘feeling constantly threatened’” (Corbett). This sense of constant threat rings true with Williams' account in *Love My Rifle* and with reports of a much higher sexual assault proportion in the military than in civilian life that will be detailed below.

Swift asserts that she had been coerced to have a sexual relationship for a duration of time with her superior officer who was “responsible for her health and safety. (Some victims' advocates use the term ‘command rape’ to describe such situations.)” (Corbett). Swift states that she reported this unwanted relationship with a superior officer to the proper place—her Equal Opportunity representative—but that nothing was done. When questioned, the Equal Opportunity representative “told investigators that he asked Swift if she had a complaint to make but that she declined at the time” (Corbett). This she-said/he-said discourse is pat for civilian sexual assault cases. However, what we can also

see here is that Swift's narrative is a story of a woman who had passed through the training of military hierarchy and served at least one tour of duty, but she was sexually pressured by the men in charge of her assignments and safety while deployed. Her narrative also relates that she reported this and felt that nothing had been done about it. In Swift's narrative, she is employing dis-identification with a prescribed victim narrative and following procedures for accountability. After her redeployment was announced, and with only a few days before she was supposed to report for duty, Swift had all her things packed and in the car before she realized that she could not go back. She insists that it was not just PTSD that prevented her from going back to Iraq with her unit but "some combination of the two": PTSD and sexual harassment (Corbett). According to Corbett, Swift related that she was used to sexual comments from her peers. However, it was different, Swift said, when hearing them from men above her rank. Originally, Corbett was working on a story about women returning from Iraq with PTSD. What emerged, though, was another narrative: "The story I heard over and over, the dominant narrative really, followed similar lines to Swift's: allegations of sexual trauma, often denied or dismissed by superiors; ensuing demotions or court-martials; and lingering questions about what actually occurred" (Corbett).

The public representations of Swift are extremely varied. Corbett describes her in terms of whiteness, as having "blond hair, milky skin and clear green eyes, which lend her the vague aspect of a Victorian doll – albeit a very tough one. She curses freely, smokes Newports and, when she's not in uniform, favors low-cut shirts that show off an elaborate flower tattoo on her chest. 'Suzanne is not some passive little lily,' explained her mother. 'She's a soldier'" (Corbett). The journalist's representation of Swift's

strength derives here partly from her cursing and smoking — from being “like the boys.” Other representations, per Corbett, range between polar opposites: “Among the antiwar crowd, thanks in part to the fiery speeches Swift’s mother was delivering at local rallies and antiwar gatherings, she was being painted as a martyr, a rebel and a victim all at once. Meanwhile, others deemed her a traitor, a fraud or simply a whiny female soldier who’d been too lazy or too selfish to return to war” (Corbett). Swift’s characterization of herself, through Corbett, seemed humble: “Swift herself seemed stunned by the attention. ‘Look at me, a poster child,’ she told me wryly, making it clear that she was not enjoying it. She did not make the kind of grandiose anti-military statements her mother did but rather seemed to be trying to shrug off what happened to her” (Corbett). Placing this within the context of PTSD, Corbett relates some of the symptoms that she thinks could contribute to some of Swift’s reactions—nightmares, hysterical crying, emotional numbing, and avoidance (Corbett).

Being in the military brings different relationships to the victim narrative – toughness is expected in the military; but as we have seen, women’s word is still disbelieved by men, and their safety and careers are endangered and ended. For the most part, men are still in positions of power to judge, and significantly, superiors may be the ones conducting the assaults. Recent moves have been made in the U.S. Congress to improve the chances of prosecution for service members who have experienced sexual assault and to prevent them from continuing to serve with and live in proximity to their accuser, and these will be discussed in the Conclusion section.

There is a key issue, according to Helen Benedict, in contributing to the severity of the levels of sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, the lack of reporting, and the

reprisals from male peers and superiors. That major factor is isolating women by themselves or in small numbers within large groups of men in the U.S. military. Benedict, a professor of journalism at Columbia, interviewed 45 Iraq War veterans, and the picture painted in her text has a few bright spots but is mostly chilling. Veterans made comments such as “I was the only female in my platoon of fifty to sixty men” (3). In Korea, one Sergeant said she “found two female soldiers who looked as though they’d been battered mentally. They had the dead eyes of abused women. I learned that one of them had been living by herself with about thirty men – Americans and Koreans--and had to have a guard placed in front of the shower each morning” (4); and an Air Force sergeant explained that “I ended up waging my own war against an enemy dressed in the same uniform as mine” (47).

Something that makes sexual assault or the threat of assault different for military women is that when deployed in the military, daily conditions of “the workplace” and “after work” are blended into one. Ramifications of reporting an incident against a peer or superior while deployed can include having to still live near, eat with, and possibly fight alongside or serve at a guard post with the perpetrator. In addition to conflating life in the workplace and living areas, in the military (as well as in civilian life), taunts about gender and sex and exclusionary behavior against women or “feminized” men are used to both shame and unify heteronormative identifying men. Similar strategies have been used to make men feel “less than” a man. Here again is the importance of language and concepts about bodies, capabilities, and gender. The “threat” of becoming homosexual or feminized has now been literally realized in the military in part because women are now serving with men and because Don’t Ask Don’t Tell has been repealed.

Strategies of “othering” people on the basis of gender will need to stop being a basis of identity for military members and for bonding or disciplining. Being a unified military unit and performing dangerous and physical work needs to be reconceived as “military” work for whomever is assigned to perform it. If being “feminized” were no longer considered to be a threat or an insult, the gender binary would be extended, and definitions of gender, ability, and sexed bodies could seep into other areas, becoming both more and less visible. Admitting that there is a “multiplicity” of bodies, as Grosz asserts, opens up the vista of physical abilities. Viewing narratives from a situated, specific body, rather than a general category of “man” or “woman” or “soldier” or “civilian” allows for more room in the human experience, could reduce sexual violence as a response to othering, and improve the work and living environment in the U.S. military.

5. Sexually Specific Narratives

In the meantime, women are injecting their voices into the script of the soldier in non-fictional narratives, bringing new knowledge and paradigms to the idea of the soldier. In examining these realistic accounts, I attempt to heed the cautionary view of Wendy S. Hesford, when she discusses the “crisis of representation prompted in part by the post-structuralist argument that there is no unmediated access to the ‘real’” (Hesford, “Rape Stories,” 17). Continuing in this vein, Hesford notes that Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale⁵ write about the

risks of confessional modes, the sensationalism of survivor’s stories, and their potential recuperation by those in positions of power . . .

Recuperation can be subverted, they argue, by presenting [rape] survivors

as subjects, dismantling the victim-expert split, abolishing the bifurcation between experience and analysis, and creating spaces for survivors to theorize their own experience and talk back. (Hesford, “Rape Stories,” 14)

The texts by and about military women discussed here have already created spaces for them to theorize their own experiences. These women are representing themselves and their narratives, whether by writing their own memoirs or agreeing to go public in interviews about their experiences. Speaking out can counter sensationalism and make it less possible for those in power to reabsorb or spin women’s narratives. And, speaking out contradicts the stereotype of “victim,” using language to confront violence and impunity.

However, an important caveat to consider when analyzing non-fiction narratives is to consider the performativity⁶ the speakers and writers. There is pressure on women in the military to perform gender in a particular way—to be tough, uncomplaining, etc.—and this is not surprising. As we will see later, negotiating gender in the military is a process that problematizes notions of what is “natural” for a “female” and a “soldier.” One woman pointed out the hypocrisy of female and male sexual standards to Helen Benedict: “‘People think, ‘You just can’t be a woman in the military.’ But you should be able to. A guy can be a guy—why are you asking me to be stripped of all my sexual being? Guys can be as sexual as they want out there, but if a woman is, she gets called a slut’” (70). In Melisa Brittain’s article on race and media coverage in Iraq, Brittain writes about gender performance, pressure, and the rape of female soldiers by peers within the same military:

There is pressure on women in any male-dominated profession to prove their toughness; but the omnipresent threat of sexual assault on female soldiers by their male colleagues in the US Armed Forces suggests that deployed female US soldiers suffer from sexual assaults perpetrated by their male colleagues at a much greater rate than their civilian counterparts. [. . .] Given the abusive conditions under which women in the military must operate, conditions that would have been heightened considerably at a place like Abu Ghraib prison, it is quite possible that [Lynndie] England negotiated this treacherous ground by blindly following orders, or by acting like ‘just one of the boys’. (90)

Benedict’s research supports Brittain’s; Benedict wrote in 2009 that “the rate of sexual assault is now at least twice as high in the military as it is among civilians” (8). Brittain’s assessment of the “treacherous ground” on which female soldiers must not just tread but also sleep, eat, shower, fight, etc., goes a long way in giving context to Kayla Williams’ sometimes contradictory positions in her memoir with Michael E. Staub: *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*. Brittain’s article also provides a greater and earlier (2006) context for the U.S. women who spoke to Sara Corbett in *The New York Times* article published in March of 2007.

According to the accounts of Kayla Williams in *Love My Rifle* and of the women who talked to journalist Sara Corbett, women seemed to be subsumed into or conflated with their bodies. Heteronormative sexuality also takes center stage and seems to dictate all relationships as well as the daily operations for these military women. Corbett reports on one woman who stated that once, when she “asked where she was to report for duty,

[a superior officer] responded, ‘On my bed, naked.’” When raped or sexually assaulted, women in the military are often beaten and are sometimes killed, Benedict reports (6). And, being raped or sexually assaulted “by someone on whom you depend—whether a parent, partner, or comrade-in-arms—is more traumatizing than assault by anyone else” (Benedict, 6). Therefore, while power dynamics are present in civilian employment, they assume a different weight altogether in the strict hierarchy of military life. A soldier in a war zone in Iraq could make formal complaints against her superior officer, but she can’t go home for the day, possibly take a vacation or mental health time, or walk off the job in the same way a civilian might.

Significantly, Benedict argues that continual harassment and misogynist language serves to notify women that despite competence and advancement, they are not part of “the group” (51). This membership is vitally important to staying alive in the military. As two women told Benedict, the reason they were willing to kill in battle was not due to their skills or psychological training (such as yelling “Kill” and ramming bayonets into stuffed dummies) but due to the closeness they felt with their friends in their military group (58). But, as Benedict points out, “although they may feel this bond with their fellow soldiers, not all those soldiers feel the same bond with them” (58). The sexual framing of women forecloses women as non-sexualized co-workers in the military. If they are sexualized and objectified, they might be more easily categorized, but they would not be the same as someone—i.e., a man—with whom men expect to fight, shoulder-to-shoulder. That kind of exclusionary thinking effectively “others” women from the soldier script and potentially endangers their lives.

Kayla Williams outlines the intensity of the sexualization of her experience in the Army and states that daily psychological effects continued for years after leaving the military. She writes that when she wakes up sometimes she can still “forget I am not a slut” (13). Williams goes on:

The only other choice is bitch. If you’re a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get . . . ‘What’s the difference between a bitch and a slut? A slut will fuck anyone, a bitch will fuck anyone but you.’ So if she’s nice or friendly, outgoing or chatty—she’s a slut. If she’s distant or reserved or professional—she’s a bitch. (13)

This dichotomy of “slut”/“bitch,” while being hypocritical and misogynist, also led to misunderstandings and ostracization during Williams’ deployment. She learned that the men in her platoon whom she had partied with and lived near on the base before going to Iraq shunned her and would not speak to her once in Iraq because they thought she had cheated on a boyfriend. Although that was not the case, the man in question had actually cheated on Williams, and moreover, done so with an underage 16-year old girl, but the soldiers did not shun him or stop speaking to him. Williams not only missed having the support of those friends who were in country with her, but when those former friends – a large group of men – ostracized Williams, it was an insult with added stress because she was then isolated. Others came to know about this gossip, as well, adding to the misunderstanding, anger, and stress (Williams, pp. 159- 178).

Like the dichotomy of “slut”/“bitch,” the same cultural processes that operate outside the military compound the sexualization of military women. Tellingly, this binary casts women in heteronormative positions that define women only as beings existing in

relation to men; they sleep with men, or they refuse to sleep with men. To counter such reductive processes, the tactic of “dis-identification,” or “disidentification” can be helpful. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz wrote about disidentification with normative gender as a positive performative strategy,⁷ and Wendy S. Hesford wrote about dis-identification later as a rhetorical strategy.⁸ Muñoz wrote about queer performers and about the power of representing lives “in their complexity” (1). He adds that “enactments of the hybrid self” are acts that refute “hegemonic supremacy” (1). Muñoz’s theory can be useful here if women’s embodied lives in the military are considered complex and hybrid in that they are both “woman” and “soldier.” This does not mean they should lose their own sexuality, but it does mean that they can reject, or disidentify with reductive identities of slut or bitch. The testimonial writing of Williams in *Love My Rifle*, of the women interviewed by Corbett, and of Corbett’s own portrayal of the women she interviewed can be seen as strategies of disidentification with both the expected narrative of military women and men and with traditional gender roles outside of the military. Heteronormative labels can also complicate some women’s concepts of themselves and of other women as they are forced to contend with intensely sexualized treatment in the military.

6. Negotiating Gender in the Military

The difficulty in negotiating gender in the military is clear in Williams’ book. She writes that before entering the military, she spent one year in college in which she took some “women’s studies courses that made me think more about issues like feminism and misogyny” (31). Also before entering the Army, she graduated from college and worked as a fundraiser (31-32). She writes that the information, skills, and life experience made

her different from many of the other women in basic training (44-46). Williams trained as an Arabic linguist (42) and therefore was sent to work with many different units during her time in Iraq. This ability to move among units gave her key insights into how attitudes toward women differed; more will be discussed about this later.

A brief note about Williams' background can help clarify her perspective on the military and shed light on her representations of gender. Williams herself is both still inside and outside of the military, and she is conscious of part of that. She writes that she was a part of a "hyper-critical" punk scene before the military (29) and that she can now be moved to tears by watching commercials that play about military homecomings (14-15). She praises and respects soldiers that she worked and lived with (284-286), and was torn about wanting to go back to Iraq to "Finish what we started" (287). On the other hand, Williams also piercingly criticizes the bureaucracy of the Army in its ill treatment of injured soldiers needing long-term care. She asserts that back in the U.S., her partner, who took shrapnel in the head and was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury, has to fight for treatment: "Does the Army expect a man with a traumatic brain injury to advocate on his own behalf for the care and treatment he deserves? There are days he can barely get out of bed in the morning, the pain is so intense" (286-287). Criticisms of injustice on the part of the military such as this make the negotiation of gender in the text even more complex. In some places, Williams describes some women using the same manner of sexualized discourse that she says military women try to "get past" (13). When she meets a woman she befriends in Basic Training, she describes her, among other things, as being "Crazy and wild. Small tits. Great ass. Later guys would joke that the two of us put together would make the perfect girl. My rack, Zoe's ass" (49). In these

moments, Williams is not immune to the widespread cultural objectification of women: imagining “the perfect girl” as certain body parts and conceiving of her friend in the manner of a heteronormative male sexualized gaze. The field of gender, sexuality, and identity is complicated by this kind of participation when women both engage with this kind of discourse about women and also state that they get tired of being the object of it or reduced to it. That complexity is understandable, however, considering the limits on language and thinking about bodies and gender. It makes clear, however, that an expansion of thought and language, is needed and would be highly useful, as this project argues.

In a similar vein in the text, Williams is also critical of a man falling short of stereotypical masculine behavior. She describes dating a “sweet and sensitive civilian who began to urge me to end my Army life”; when they saw the movie *Black Hawk Down*, he cried “in public. There were people I knew in the audience. It made him look like a big pussy” (51). While Williams wishes not to be reduced to a bitch or a slut, she insults and is ashamed of a man who does not adhere to a masculinist notion to be stoic and not express emotion. She wants to open up a gendered restriction imposed upon her yet uphold one against the man she dated. These ideas of inconsistent gender concepts and expectations are important. Following Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, the repetition of certain behaviors, such as shunning a man who cries or viewing women according to particular body parts continuously produces gender and gender policing. Making these ideas available to wider audiences can help to take some of the weight out of gender policing and to begin a cessation of it. And, Butler’s theory of performativity can help in theorizing different stances that female soldiers take in coping with a

challenging environment. Williams is conflicted – as perhaps many readers are – about her ideas of gender. Negotiating these ideas within a military environment that is masculinist exacerbates conflicts of gender and gender identity.

Difficulties Williams faced included sexual harassment and problems ensuing from the reporting of it. She relates harassment from male soldiers on many occasions as well as groping and worse (72, 173, 198, 206, 212). She also describes the incompetence and egregious shirking of duty on the part of two different female superior officers (106, 261). But, on one assignment to use her Arabic linguistic skills, Williams was placed with what she called “the *only* unit in which I never experienced any discomfort or harassment” (123, her emphasis); she called the commander of Delta Company, or “D Co”

a stand-up guy, honest, straightforward, and tough. A man who inspired loyalty. A leader who made you want to try harder and do better. He was clearly devoted to his soldiers and his mission. His solid leadership showed on all levels. I was treated like a professional. These D Co guys respected what I could do for them . . . No one made inappropriate comments or stepped out of line. Even months later, when I ran into those guys, they always said, “Hey! You were our linguist in Baghdad!” They never said, “Hey! You were that chick we had with us!”—as so many other Army guys did. (122-123)

That experience is the most positive and most hopeful in Williams’ narrative, demonstrating a representation of her as a skilled service member assisting the D Co unit. The respectful and professional standard set by the D Co commander had clearly been

communicated to the whole unit, since Williams states that there were not even “inappropriate comments.” Language can therefore be affected by performance and produce further performance. In this case, the behavior from this unit can be contrasted with some others, such as when Williams arrived driving a truck up a rocky incline so treacherous that her other team members elected to get out and walk; when Williams arrived at the top of the incline shaking, the soldiers at the top said “Boobs . . . Look, this one’s got *boobs*” (161). The comment “Look” – as in “Look, you guys,” calls for and directs a group male gaze onto someone defined as outside of the group. The comment “this one” also means “not us,” and it separates women from belonging to the military brotherhood. Language and behavior like this isolates women, and this anecdote, along with many others that Williams recounts, support the research on isolation by Helen Benedict. The end phrase sexualizes and objectifies Williams down to particular body parts.

But while Williams sometimes views female peers with a sexualized lens, as mentioned above, she also has great respect for the professionalism of others, such as her friend Lauren. Williams describes one situation in Iraq at a roadblock surrounded by Iraqi civilian men that she is supposed to contain. When her female superior officer flatly refuses to help Williams despite requests and orders, Williams thinks,

I go get Lauren.

Now Lauren is a tiny person. She’s perky and cute, and speaks with the gentle twang of someone from a small town in Texas, which is where she’s from.

But she’s tough when she needs to be. And she backs me up.

Did I also mention she's the one on our team with our most serious-looking weapon? It's an M-249 squad automatic weapon (SAW). This is a big gun capable of firing 750 rounds per minute. When this little woman with the stern look and the dark shades moves to my side and holds her SAW up for everyone to see, there's a real hush in the crowd.

This weapon says: *Respect me.*

Lauren sets it up facing them, and everyone makes a nice neat line behind the rear vehicle. I grin at her. (106-107)

This scenario with Lauren highlights that Williams does not portray herself or other military women as victims. In varying degrees, she enacts disidentification with the sexualized views of her male peers and with superiors that ignore competence and wholeness. She recognizes Lauren as a complex person who can occupy qualities of being petite as well as tough and someone who is highly trained to operate the weapon she wields. In a professional situation and when she is needed, Williams can count on Lauren, and it has nothing to do with either of their expressions of gender or sexuality.

7. Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender with Sexual Assault in the Military

Issues of race also complicate negotiations of identity and gender in the military. For example, almost none of the women in these nonfiction narratives have their race identified, so the hegemony of whiteness is assumed, or they are sometimes described as white. The absence of women from other backgrounds in these narratives is disappointing and signals that these are incomplete representations in more ways than one. These representations imply the false impression of the female service member as white, and it is mainly the stories of white women that are being published and circulated.

The absence of the voices and presences of women of color in these narratives is echoed in the 2012 Department of Defense Demographics Report on the statistics describing women serving in the military. The 2012 report provides breakdowns of percentages of race and ethnicity for all the armed forces, for officers, and for enlisted members, but not for race and gender. The most recent *Population Representation in the Military Services* report from 2011 is missing an Executive Summary describing the data. The 2010 *Population* report contains an Executive Summary, but it does not mention assessments of gender and race. In the 2005 report,⁹ women in the U.S. military, “across the enlisted force and officer corps in both the Active and Reserve Components, are more likely to be members of a racial minority group than are military men. In fact, 39 percent of the women in the Active Components enlisted force are members of racial minority groups” (“Executive”). According to the 2010 *Population Representation in the Military Services*,¹⁰ Enlisted Women (not including Commissioned Officers, Selected Reserve Force, or Coast Guard) were 52.7% were white, as compared to 71.2% of Enlisted Men. Women from various racial backgrounds, then, made up 47.3% of Enlisted Women as of the 2010 report. Several statistical reports on populations in the military list qualities of race and sex separately, so that numbers on women do not often mention race, but numbers on race are exclusively about men. That kind of reporting also erases the specificity of bodies. What the 2010 Enlisted numbers show, though, is that women of color form a significant percentage of women in the military, and their stories also deserve to be told and circulated.

Exceptions to the narratives of white women service members can be found in Helen Benedict’s study *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*.

In Benedict's qualitative research, she interviewed many women, but her text is organized around five main stories of women: two white women, one black woman, one Native American woman, and one Latina. Eli PaintedCrow "is fully Native American, Mexica-Apache . . . [and] Yaqui" (19). In 1981, when, as Benedict writes, "the army was even less aware of its biases than it is now," PaintedCrow's "drill sergeant called her Taco because she spoke Spanish" (79). She also remembered that in Iraq, they would be briefed by Officers who said, "It's Indian country out there, go get 'em!"; part of her response was thinking "If this is Indian country, perhaps I'm on the wrong side" (159). In Benedict's work, the issues of race are necessarily mingled with issues of sexual assault, as that is the focus of the text, as well as her arguments about isolation of women in the military being so key to the possibility of rape, sexual assault, and threats of violence. What does come to light are issues interwoven with race, ethnicity, and class, such as the background of alcoholism and poverty in the early life of Sergeant PaintedCrow. One issue that middle and upper class people may not consider is that because Sergeant PaintedCrow's father left to her a tractor-trailer, she wanted to learn to drive it. In order to learn to drive one, she signed up for more duty in the military (83-84, Benedict).

What emerges in the narratives of women of color is evidence of not being listened to, of being threatened, and of nothing being done or ineffective measures taken (such as a quick sexual harassment seminar) when violence was reported. However, these circumstances are also echoed in the narratives of white women. Some differences, however, were targeted firings of people of color (90), a black male of superior rank not being listened to and demoted (153), and a black female being told she would need to go

for a mental evaluation for challenging incompetent leadership (78, 186-189). In Sergeant PaintedCrow's career, after she and a group of women made reports about sexual harassment and racial discrimination, a white female was then posted as a new commander. According to PaintedCrow, the white female commander proceeded to relieve from duty a black female, a Mexican supply sergeant, and a black supply sergeant "for no reason. She didn't follow any of the proper procedures; she just said that she's the commander and that's her reason" (90).

In each of these instances, a commonality is that there is ineffective accountability, or more frequently, no accountability at all from the chain of command. Many times, the chain of command causes the problems. For women of color, their race, ethnicity, and linguistic abilities add additional factors of disbelief of or dismissal of their competence, of discrimination, and of isolation to the weight of violence or the threats of it that other women also experience. Their skin color and background compound the number and types of discrimination with which they must contend. Because of the addition of racial, ethnic, and linguistic discrimination, more work needs to be done to recognize the realities of these problems in the military and to rectify them.

8. Conclusions and Additional Workable Solutions for Changing Military Culture

Bob Herbert writes in a 2009 editorial in *The New York Times* that while the U.S. military *could* change the environment for women, it won't:

The military is one of the most highly controlled environments imaginable. When there are rules that the Pentagon absolutely wants followed, they are rigidly enforced by the chain of command. Violations are not tolerated. The military could bring about a radical reduction in the

number of rapes and other forms of sexual assault if it wanted to, and it could radically improve the overall treatment of women in the armed forces.

There is no real desire in the military to modify this aspect of its culture. It is an ultra-macho environment in which the overwhelming tendency has been to see all women — civilian and military, young and old, American and foreign — solely as sexual objects.

Real change, drastic change, will have to be imposed from outside the military. It will not come from within. (Herbert)

This point of view has gained traction, especially with the continuation of rapes, sexual assault, and sexual harassment in the military. Congressional intervention and language could help, as calling out the slowness of military response on rapes and sexual assault could be made more public and labeled. There have been some legal changes improving the reporting processes after a sexual assault has occurred. Recent policy changes in the U.S. Senate have included that of Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), who co-authored with then-Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) the “Defense STRONG Act,” which “was signed into law in 2012. It provides survivors of sexual assault the assistance of advocates with genuine confidentiality, guaranteed access to a lawyer and expedited consideration to be transferred far away from their assailant” (Collins). Additionally, Sen. Collins writes that “provisions I authored [extend] the STRONG Act to the Coast Guard; mandate a dishonorable discharge or dismissal for any service member convicted of sexual assault, and allow a commander to relocate an alleged perpetrator rather than the survivor.

Another provision eliminates a commander's ability to overturn a conviction by jury post-trial" (Collins).

Yet, the Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2013 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military showed that reports of sexual assault rose in one year from 2012 to 2013 by 50 percent. Something that has not been very publicized is the rate of men reporting sexual assault; according to Jim Miklaszewski and Courtney Kube, "Almost half of those who reported abusive sexual contact and sexual assault last year were men" (Miklaszewski and Kube). It is largely due to the gain in public circulation and outrage that calls have been made to remove the prosecution of sexual assault from military channels altogether. Two bills in Congress were hotly debated in the spring of 2014, and one of them pushed for that change in military policy. That bill, proposed by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), would have removed prosecuting sexual assault from military jurisdiction for these very reasons. In debates that unfortunately pitted Senate women advocates of military women against each other, Gillibrand's bill failed,¹¹ However, another bill proposed by Sen. Claire McCaskill's (D-Mo.) passed.¹² McCaskill's bill makes some important changes, such as removing the "good soldier" defense that allows the alleged perpetrator's lawyer to review the perpetrator's service record as a favorable character witness kind of defense. McCaskill's bill keeps commanders in the process but also adds significant improvements to the process for service members who bring claims of sexual assault.

However, there is something to be said for moving prosecution of military sexual assaults out of military jurisdiction altogether. Among the new provisions of McCaskill's successful bill, there are options given in some circumstances. One possibility for a future

bill that Sen. Gillibrand or Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) could propose might be to give the option to the defendant as to whether she or he would like the trial conducted within or extraneous to military jurisdiction. Unfortunately, the bill that passed maintains the language of “victim.” Sen. Gillibrand’s bill was called the Military Justice Improvement Act,¹³ language that focuses attention on an active demand for justice, rather than Sen. McCaskill’s Victims Protection Act. This is not to dispute that those who experienced sexual assault were victims of violence. The term places the defendants conceptually and perpetually outside of a place of power or of fighting to bring the perpetrators to accountability.

In addition to the positive legislative changes, we know from Kayla Williams’ memoir *Love My Rifle* that at least one commander and unit in the Army achieved a unit that was free of sexual harassment. Her experience shows that this can be achieved with decisive and positive leadership. This account from a woman who served in the Army in Iraq affirms what Bob Herbert wrote in his editorial for *The New York Times*; that if the Pentagon wanted these changes, they would and could be made. While the policy battles continue in Washington, other assessments and suggestions can be made. This study has discussed and suggested changing language and ideology of bodies, changing leadership (moving to leadership like Williams experienced), and moving prosecutions outside of the military. Another change that can be made through policy is Helen Benedict’s proposal to assign women to work in larger numbers within the same units. That does not mean by default that all women would like or support each other, but it could help counter the isolation and contribute to lowering the likelihood of sexual violence. Benedict concludes her volume with an entire chapter of bullet points for practical

changes that could be made to improve military life for women; some include Promote more women, End official antipathy toward women, and Expel all personnel who have been found guilty of domestic or sexual violence while serving. Each of these points, and her others, are fleshed out with particulars.¹⁴

In addition to those policy changes, a sexual egalitarianism strategy has worked for some military women, to be more like “one of the boys,” or to adopt the terms of the male soldier language, role, and body. But using the language of feminist and gender theory, such as Grosz’s notion of a “defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities” can work positively for women and men in the U.S. military. An acknowledgement of a multiplicity of bodies would allow changes in strategies and relationships. Politically supporting the move to change the handling of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape cases outside of the military could help women. Reconciliation of the infusing of women into the military body by recognizing sexual difference, specific bodily standards, and an acknowledgment of a multiplicity of bodies could be major steps.

When sexual difference is recognized as non-threatening and the military standard is expanded to include a variety of standards, it will be positive for all genders. Also included in the new variety of standards should be an acknowledgement of sexual harassment and rape; easily accessible and actionable methods of reporting, punishment, and treatment; efforts to ensure safety in the field after filing a formal report; assigning groups of women to serve together, and concrete efforts to build solidarity between military women and men not based on gender stereotypes of hierarchy.

Notes

1. Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), pp. 575-99. To the charge of relativism that discussions of individual stories sometimes raises, Haraway responds that the "alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology" (584). In this stance, Haraway acknowledges that knowledge is partial, not whole, and not relegated to the "master narratives" of -modernity. This is a postmodern critique of epistemology that still offers possibilities of solidarity. The knowledge of the women's military texts form threads in a web of connections, creating spaces for dialogue and change.

2. The editorial "Women in Combat" from *nytimes.com* on 3 June 2012 notes that in February 2012, "the Defense Department opened up more positions to women, especially for tank mechanics and field artillery radar operators. And yet, the department continues to bar women from direct combat, especially in the large Army and Marine units like infantry and special operations . . . A suit filed recently by Command Sgt. Maj. Jane Baldwin and Col. Ellen Haring of the Army Reserve could help hasten [this policy's] end. They argue that the policy, based solely on gender, violates equal protection and is unconstitutional. Their complaint makes a compelling case that this discrimination has unfairly restricted their opportunities for career advancement and higher earnings and pensions." Lolita C. Baldor reports in *Businessweek.com* that "The new rules don't open up the Navy SEALs or the Army Delta Force to women, but some defense officials have said the military may eventually consider that."

3. Testimony of a female soldier in the documentary film *Lioness*.

4. Thinkers in the sexual difference position that Grosz outlines include Judith Butler, Monique Wittig, and Gayatri Spivak, among others (17). Most importantly, Grosz writes that "the body is crucial to understanding woman's psychical and social existence, but the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object. [Theorists of sexual difference] are concerned with the lived body, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures" (17-18). This view is a departure from the positions of egalitarian feminists toward the body. Grosz argues that egalitarian feminists see the woman's body as either limiting equality or giving special knowledge and therefore presents an obstacle that must be overcome (15). The social constructionist concept of the body that Grosz describes does not work well with these texts of military women's experience, either. Grosz believes that the attitude toward the body from the social constructionist view maintains the body/mind binary.

5. Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale's work is "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" mentioned in Hesford 2001, p. 14.

6. As Judith Butler asserted in *Gender Trouble*, “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv).

7. See the late José Esteban Muñoz’s germinal 1999 work *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

8. See Hesford’s 2005 chapter “*Kairos* and the Geopolitical Rhetorics of Global Sex Work and Video Advocacy” in *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminism, and the Politics of Representation*, Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, eds.

9. The acronym NPS stands for non-prior service. “Women comprised about 16 percent of NPS active duty accessions and 21 percent of NPS accessions to the Selected Reserve compared to 50 percent of 18- to 24- year-old civilians. Among enlisted members on active duty, 14 percent were women. For enlisted members in the Selected Reserves, the female composition was 17 percent. Among the Reserve Components, the National Guard components were less female at 13 percent. This is generally due to the Army National Guard’s heavier combat arms mix, which precludes women from serving in many of those units. The representation of women among active duty officer accessions and within the officer corps was 20 and 16 percent, respectively. Similar percentages were seen among Selected Reserve officers (19 percent for each).

Military women, across the enlisted force and officer corps in both the Active and Reserve Components, are more likely to be members of a racial minority group than are military men. In fact, 39 percent of the women in the Active Components enlisted force are members of racial minority groups. Hispanic females enlist at about the same rates as Hispanic males. [Hispanics [men ...] continued to be underrepresented, with 14 percent among NPS accessions compared with nearly 18 percent for comparable civilians.]

Women are a minority of the Total Force. However, their representation has grown greatly since the inception of the All Volunteer Force. In FY 1994, when the direct ground combat rule replaced the risk rule, new jobs were opened to women. Since the introduction of that policy, nearly all career fields (92 percent) have been opened to women. Accordingly, the percentage of Active Component women increased to the highest percentage of 15 percent in FYs 2002 and 2003. For FY 2005, however, there was a drop to 14 percent” (“Executive,” FY 2005).

From “Executive Summary.” *Population Representation in the Military Services*. Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness. Fiscal Year 2005. Web. Jan. 16, 2009. <http://www.defenselink.mil/prhome/poprep2005/summary/summary.html>

10. See Appendix B, Enlisted Force, “Table B-17. Active Component Enlisted Members, FY10: by Service, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity with Civilian Comparison Group.”

11. O’Keefe, Ed. “Senate Easily Passes McCaskill’s Military Sexual Assault Bill.” *The Washington Post* online edition. March 10, 2014. Accessed July 25, 2014. Web.

12. O’Keefe, Ed. “Senate.”

13. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s own website with her bill name -- Military Justice Improvement Act -- and information: <http://www.gillibrand.senate.gov/mjia>

14. Helen Benedict’s *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, pp. 223-232.

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Essay 4

The Uncertainty of Survival: U.S. Civilian Women and the Political Economy of War in

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

1. Introduction

Barbara Kingsolver's 1998 novel *The Poisonwood Bible* has been discussed in terms of whether or not it can be considered postcolonial¹, in terms of its Christian and missionary messages², and its position in disability scholarship³. It is also an important work in the genealogy of U.S. literature about war, particularly in its portrayal of civilian women and of political economics of war. *The Poisonwood Bible* was not written by a citizen of a postcolonial culture, nor does it focus on the lives of the indigenous people in a postcolonial country. However, Kingsolver brings her considerable literary gifts to bear on aspects of life in the Congo in the 1960s, and the novel highlights the covert and illegal involvement of the Belgian government and the U.S. CIA in bringing down the Congolese independence movement and in assassinating the elected leader Patrice Lumumba. Héloïse Meire argues that *The Poisonwood Bible* is a feminist revisionist historical novel⁴, and that the novel "recounts the historical period preceding and following the Congo's Independence as few other fiction works have done before" (79). The narrative is concerned in indirect ways with representing what happens to the Congolese people, such as the terrible treatment, including punitive severing of limbs, of plantation workers, the killing of young rebel men, and of the jailing of Anatole, the opposition-party supporter and teacher, and those like him.

The Poisonwood Bible does not delve into the horrors of war; the women are not raped, captured, or sold. Leah does learn that one of her children's friends, a young girl,

has to drop out of school to become a prostitute to help her family earn enough money to eat and to survive. Leah struggles, with Elisabet's help, to understand that this is an economic necessity for many girls and families. For the men, while Anatole is imprisoned, he is not tortured. Although men are killed, such as Leah's friend Pascal, the narrative does not examine torture or other issues of that severe nature. Another criticism of the novel, per Héloïse Meire is that the narrative simplifies the political context and conflict; that it "tends to see the historical events of the Congo in black and white, with martyrs such as Lumumba on one side, and on the other side, the American and Belgian heads of state and Mobutu as the malevolent forces, ignoring the ethnic and regional conflicts among the Congolese" (80). But Meire also notes that Kingsolver stated that she "wants to reach the largest public possible" (80). That goal, plus the lack of widespread information in the U.S. about the CIA involvement in the Congo may explain that lack of detail. The fact that the narrative is mostly told from the point of view of U.S. teenagers and a child can also explain that somewhat. We learn about the Jeune Mou-Pro faction of rebels from the youngest Price daughter, Ruth May, who calls them the "African Communist Boy Scouts" (118). The Price daughters survive the war (Ruth May is killed by a snake, not war), Adah is physically healed once in medical school in the U.S., Leah survives, and Rachel profits. Nathan is killed as a result of his own ignorance and refusal to learn about or from the Congolese people.

More directly, *The Poisonwood Bible* situates personal stories of girls and women within historical events in the Belgian Congo/Zaire and explores village and city life in a culture responding to colonial cruelty, resiliently pressing onward despite oppression of many kinds. What is remarkably different about Kingsolver's novel about Africa and

war is that the majority of the narrative centers on the lives of women and their experiences. The protagonists are five white US females of the missionary Price family: the wife and mother and her four daughters. One of the ways in which this novel stands out in contemporary U.S. literature is that it represents women's lives related to war in a different place than Viet Nam or the World Wars. It is also remarkable in U.S. literature written after the Cold War in its portrayal of civilian women and the gendered ways in which war works upon their lives. And, it is a novel that criticizes U.S. political policy and Western colonial business and cultural practices in the Congo. Many critics have noted that the narrative highlights Western imperialism is by employing the metaphor of misguided missionary work on the part of the husband and father, Nathan Price.

Christopher Douglas writes, "*The Poisonwood Bible* is one of the relatively few literary novels to engage seriously with the postwar conservative Christian resurgence, and the novel's core ethos of respect animates its critique of both American imperialism and American postwar religion" (146). For these reasons, *The Poisonwood Bible* is an important work in U.S. literature, in narrative theory, in International Relations theory, in war and economic theory, and in feminist theory. This essay explores three avenues of analysis in *The Poisonwood Bible*: (1) the positions the female narrators take in response to war, (2) the way economic factors in war are gendered and experienced by the female characters, and (3) the tactics the women use in order to survive the war and postwar life.

When losing male and institutional economic support, the women in *The Poisonwood Bible* must improvise. War is directly responsible for these economic losses. The U.S. Baptist foundation stops sending money to the Price family. Nathan can no longer provide economically for his family, and Leah steps in to fill the gap. Later,

Anatole is arrested and imprisoned as a resistance member, so Leah has to provide for herself and her children then, too—and is helped by a Congolese woman, Anatole’s aunt Elisabet. The women must continue the daily work of staying alive, regardless of where their husbands, community members, or government has disappeared to and left them. Civilian women must negotiate the fallout of war, and sometimes this is in more awful ways than others; Leah learns that a young girl who is friends with one of her sons must drop out of school and become a prostitute to help her family earn enough money for everyone to eat. Other ways of managing scant resources are to eat nutritionally vacant food, such as the manioc root, and of stretching every coin. Psychological coping in the novel includes fantasizing about what they would do if they won the lottery and what meals they would eat. Engaging in alternative modes of economy subverts dominant economic and political constraints as well as gender hierarchies and social isolation. Civilian women become sole providers or crucial ones, and though they fight nutritional problems, they keep their children and themselves alive. They do this in large part through their innovation and through helping each other. Women form social structures independent of men and often also of government resources, instead forming women-centered and women-led living households and marketplaces. This renders the heterosexual, nuclear family model as unnecessary and breaks apart its normalization. The woman-run household and women’s informal economies become the new norms in this novel during and after war.

Héloïse Meire writes that “the involvement of Western powers Belgium and the United States in the murder of the Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba have been ignored for a long time in Western countries and have only recently been revealed to the

general public” (79-80). Jennifer Wenzel writes that *The Poisonwood Bible* is among texts about Africa “that return from a post-Cold War vantage point to the 1960 ‘Congo crisis’ and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba” and that these texts imagine or acknowledge that there was an alternative to the difficult postcolonial history that followed (4-5). Meire also notes that “the novel addresses a specific readership—namely, the Western reader, who is seen as directly or indirectly benefiting from Africa’s exploitation” (83). Part of the responsibilities, or “how to live with” white privilege and imperialism is to recognize where harm has been done and acknowledge it. Linda Wagner-Martin quotes Kingsolver on her frustration with the United States’ refusal to admit to or examine ““a legacy of exploitation and racial arrogance. . . As long as I’ve been a writer, I’ve wanted to address this, to try to find a way to own our terrible history honestly and construct some kind of redemption”” (Kingsolver, qtd. in Wager-Martin 102). By contrast, Héloïse Meire wrote in 2010 that Belgium had “recent exhibitions, plays, historical publications, and broadcasts [that] demonstrate the difference between the modern debates on Africa and colonization and those witnessed by older generations fifty years ago” (71). That position stands in stark dissimilarity with the unwillingness to admit or discuss such history connected with the United States.

Kingsolver’s narrative brings the white, missionary, U.S. family floundering into small village life in Kilanga before the country-wide efforts of democratic voting usher in major political change, booting out Belgian rule. While the novel’s early section focuses on familial, spiritual, and cross-cultural issues, these relationships have political overtones. Missionary Nathan Price, the husband and father of the U.S. family, exhibits the unfortunate combination of arrogance and ignorance. As others have noted, his

character can be seen to parallel how the U.S. acted in its foreign policy decisions toward the Congo: Acting like it knew best about what the people of the Congo needed or disregarding sovereign wishes for U.S. interests. Christopher Douglas writes, “Kingsolver makes the point that patriarchy is to blame for male-rule in the household and masculinist European colonial rule and American neocolonial rule in the Congo” (136). Nathan keeps expecting a reward from God, such as God’s approval, for his hard work (78), just as U.S. political policy saw a reward for blocking Communism in the Congo. The results for the Congolese are terrible and unjust, however, according to Kingsolver’s narrative. *The Poisonwood Bible* describes the great lengths to which many people in remote areas went in order to vote for leadership in their country, including placing pebbles representing votes into carefully balanced canoes and floating them in rivers to towns. Yet despite the painstaking care with which so many Congolese people voted and transported those votes to make them count, shortly after their democratically elected leader Patrice Lumumba gained power, he was deposed. That the deposition, and later his murder, was orchestrated and supported by Belgian and U.S. agents is especially bitter to several of the U.S. characters in the narrative. With these events portrayed in the novel, alongside Nathan’s ignorance, naiveté, and dangerousness of that combination, *The Poisonwood Bible* critiques the Western tradition of war-making. The reasoning for the intervention of the U.S. and European political and military forces cannot withstand the scrutiny of just war theory in the case of the Congo. Without missiles pointing in the direction of the U.S., arguments to engineer the downfall of the democratically elected leader of the Congo could not be made in the same way as arguments against the Cuban regime. *The Poisonwood Bible* condemns the U.S. and Western intervention as unjust

and unwilling to learn, listen, or respect the Congolese will or people. Kingsolver crafts an individual character to highlight that lack of understanding or willingness—and therefore an unjust cause for war—in the form of Nathan Price.

Kingsolver builds a portrait of one nuclear family with a blustery male head of household in Nathan Price who is not interested in the slightest in the thoughts of his wife or children; he ignores them while he sets about his own, important life, expecting them to follow, obey, and revere him. The narrative portrays Nathan in a sympathetic light in the view of his daughter Leah. Even though he neglects her and won't even look at her while they work side-by-side in the garden, she wants to throw her "arms around his weary neck and pat down his ruffled hair" (40). This view provides compassion for the otherwise unlikable authority in the family; this portrait of adoration by a young girl is parallel to that of the U.S. or Western public who either does not know or understand what is going on in the Congo or who believe the media stories about the situation, such as those in the *Saturday Evening Post*. This may make it somewhat easier for some readers to be open to the political critique of Nathan representing the political power and policies of the United States in the Congo.

Lending more sympathy and complexity to the situation, and bringing more fairness to the ignorance of Nathan, Leah comments that she "was hardly any less in the dark," living there (447). One of the most difficult aspects of the events in *The Poisonwood Bible* is how impossible it was to know what was happening politically for civilians outside the cities. The narrative does, however, excoriate pedantic masculinist positions such as Nathan Price's and those of U.S. college undergraduates who purport to instruct Anatole on democracy and human rights; this despite Anatole having been

imprisoned for rebelling against U.S.-led forces that removed democracy from his country (468). Nathan Price never believed the Congolese people were capable of democracy. Christopher Douglas asserts that part of “Kingsolver’s critique . . . unmask[s] Christian universalism as merely Western ethnocentrism” (135). Douglas notes criticisms of the novel’s “one-dimensional” handling of the character of Nathan Price (136), and while this can be frustrating, his disregard for others does mirror the policy and consequences of historical U.S. intervention in the Congo. Kingsolver places narrative emphasis instead on the women’s voices and their points of view, some of which deals with how they negotiate the relationship toward this unreasonable, uncaring, masculinist force.

The women in *The Poisonwood Bible* are for the most part diametrically opposed to the character of Nathan. They represent a different political model from the Nathan-as-U.S. symbolism in that they are interested in what Congolese people think. The white U.S. girls and women listen to their ideas, they accept their help, and in Leah’s case, she learns one of their languages. Kingsolver’s narrative is not simply black and white, male versus female, however. The exception in the women’s realm of listening is the self-centered, materialistic Rachel, and she is discussed later. Leah is the model for reshaping U.S. and Western policy toward the Congo could look like. If Leah were a political liaison or a leader, she could translate Congolese concerns and avert war.

2. Economic Disruptions of War Impact Women in Gendered Ways

Carol Cohn writes about the structures that make war possible: “Ensuring stability . . . requires repression, which is bought with ever-increasing militarization. Indeed, as feminist scholars have prominently argued, the current forms of economic

globalization and increasing militarization are necessarily inextricably linked (Enloe 2007; Peterson 2008; Zarkov 2008a)” (26). The economic consequences of war and political upheaval are life-shaping for Leah and the majority of the people in the Congo/Zaire. In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the narrative describes the wider costs of war, or the “Price” as the U.S. family is named, to civilian, indigenous people, and particularly to women. Angela Raven-Roberts writes that “. . . rigorous studies on the impact of armed conflict on life expectancy show that ‘. . . [Among] civil wars, we also find that ethnic wars and wars in ‘failed’ states are much more damaging to women than other civil wars’ (Plumper & Neumayer 2006, p. 723)” (quoted in Raven-Roberts 36).

After Leah recovers from the malaria, she and Anatole commit to each other. Leah is then smuggled by night into the Central African Republic to a convent. This kept her safe when her whiteness was a cause for rage among many in the Congo (418). After dropping Leah safely off at the convent, Anatole is captured by by Mobutu’s forces, beaten up, and imprisoned. However, it is his imprisonment and Leah’s concealment in the convent that save their lives “while war overtakes us” (419). At this point in their relationship, they do not have children, and both are fed and housed, albeit Anatole’s provisions are within prison. According to Carol Cohn, “we need to . . . [understand] the contexts . . . the interlocking systems, relationships, and processes which constitute the conditions under which women act. These include the gender systems in which women live: the specific kinds of wars being fought; and the wider set of actors and economic, political and social processes, from local to global, which shape both women’s lives and the societies within which they live before, during, and after war” (2). During the time that Leah hides in the convent, she thinks, “We hear one awful piece of news after

another, with no power to act. The free Congo that so nearly came to pass is now going down. What can I do but throw my rosary against the wall of my cell and swear violence?" (420). Leah also thinks about joining the fighting. She tells Sister Thérèse that she would fight with the rebel army, if they would allow her. But Sister Thérèse replies, "'But it's not your place to fight with the Simbas, even if you were a man. You're white. This is their war and whatever happens will happen'" (421). In one of the many positive threads of the novel, Anatole survives a three-year tenure in prison but was not tortured or killed (432). After Mobutu secures power, Anatole and Leah are reunited at an outpost that used to be a rubber plantation, and for a while they work in government-related jobs and receive small paychecks (433).

The mechanisms of daily food sustenance and purchasing are disrupted or eliminated by war and the postwar dictatorship. Using this framework of a "political economy approach to conflict," (40) Raven-Roberts explains that "livelihood systems" are one of the ways in which war most alters "community life"; war can affect an area unintentionally or can pointedly be directed toward ruining communities and taking their resources (42). Among these strategies, "marketing and transportation systems are often destroyed and damaged," and people are driven from their localities and often separated, often made to "develop alternative ways of earning a living" (42). Kingsolver depicts similar circumstances in the life of Leah and her children, as they move from the jungle to the city, where they have even more dire problems in acquiring subsistence food sources than they did in the village. Raven-Roberts outlines Lautze's notion that "the stresses of frequent relocation of army families [are among the factors that] produce distinct relationship, social, health, and financial liabilities" (49). Anatole is repeatedly

removed from the physical presence in their family by being politically imprisoned. In addition to the terrible emotional toll on the family, it also removes him from being able to help with the economic support of the family. Even during this time, however, Leah recognizes her level of resources still outweighs those of the Congolese, as her leather shoes set her apart, even while she must depend upon Elisabet's help to both survive and to continue learning social conventions in the Congo. Leah's commitment to Anatole, their sons, and to their ideals is admirable and difficult. At one point in the novel, she thinks, "I'm numb with the tedium of a hard life" (436) and "I think about food, mostly" (434). She and her children have experienced true hunger.

3. Girls' and Women's Narrative Responses to War

If Nathan's ignorance yet power can be read as U.S. foreign policy, then Orleanna Price, the mother and wife of the Price family, can be read as political isolationism or as a perspective of U.S. citizens unaware of what U.S. policy was doing in the Congo and elsewhere. Orleanna's early positions represent perspectives of those not standing up to the government (personally, to Nathan) and of people not wanting to "get involved." Narrating from a later part of her life in hindsight, Orleanna thinks, "I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war. Guilty or innocent, they have everything to lose" (89). On the one hand, these ideas Kingsolver attributes to Orleanna exhibit the silence-keeping that many women and men enact around war. Cynthia Enloe describes how this silence is a mechanism that enables war to happen and keeps war functioning; Enloe explains that war "depended on certain women to play certain roles in order to carry out their state's war-waging operations" (xiii, Nimo's). Some of these roles include being a "supportive"

wife and mother, when the support means not questioning the enlistment of a son, husband, or other men (and now daughters) or of the general political support in the wider world for war efforts, such as not questioning policies or arguments about going to war. On the other hand, Kingsolver also adds to Orleanna's analysis the painful corollary for women that they "have everything to lose," in the form of loss of life of those beloved men, as well as the loss to their own lives of the economic and structural support of a main breadwinner and the structural support of a partner or child. Enloe's rightly specific phrase "certain women" describes heteronormative roles for women and men and does not refer to all women.

While Orleanna began her personal life with Nathan as an isolationist, trying to ignore and live with Nathan's imperious neglect, she later left him in order to survive and to keep her remaining children alive. She interrogates her positions and lives with almost unbearable guilt about the death of one of her daughters. After staying for years in the Congo, she returns to the U.S. and joins the Civil Rights movement, changing her own life and working to help gain rights for people of color in the U.S. The change and development in Orleanna's life to an activist banishes her silence and demonstrates what can be done domestically and internationally when women stop keeping that silence that enables and supports war—rights can be fought for and won, in solidarity with others. In the case of Leah, who stays in the Congo, the crushing poverty and fight for food and survival highlight what kinds of intellect and energy are lost when economic oppression quashes potential voices who are willing to learn and to listen. Both Leah and Orleanna's sense of justice has been ignited by experiencing life alongside the Congolese, and living with the villagers has therefore opened up their formerly narrow perspectives. People

with such opened perspectives, *The Poisonwood Bible* argues, would be much less likely to go to war or usurp the rights and sovereignty of another people.

Héloïse Meire notes that the perspectives of the narrators in *The Poisonwood Bible* can be read as representing different Western positions. Kingsolver wrote about her intention to do that on her website, according to Meire, who quotes Kingsolver:

“The four sisters and Orleanna represent five separate philosophical positions, not just in their family but also in my political examination of the world . . . Orleanna is the paralyzed one here, and Rachel is ‘What, me worry?’ Leah, Adah, and Ruth May take other positions in between, having to do with social activism, empirical analysis, and spirituality, respectively.” (Kingsolver, qtd. in Meire 82)

I also argue that these narrative positions have additional shadings when examined in relation to war. The women of the Price family can be read to represent Western war profiteers (Rachel), a failed rebellion and negotiated partnership without political power (Leah and her husband Anatole), children whose lives are lost (Ruth May), U.S./Western NGOs or medical workers (Adah), and U.S. isolationists and later aid volunteers (Orleanna). The larger family, or model village community, in *The Poisonwood Bible* is Congolese-led, with the Congolese helping the U.S. characters the most, instead of the reverse. The missionaries come to convert the indigenous people are instead empowered to survive in times of dire hunger by the Congolese villagers. The U.S. characters cannot even bring themselves to acknowledge the help of the Congolese people at first. When eggs just appear overnight for them, they do not question how they arrive. They simply consume them at first, emphasizing the immaturity of the characters—standing in for the

political United States—and their inability to recognize their place in the village or the fact that they are being helped. In fact, *The Poisonwood Bible* inverts the otherwise dominant international political power into one of the players, and a weak one, at that. In the Congo, the U.S. characters do not know best. In fact, they do not know how to survive at all, much less thrive, unless they listen to the Congolese and learn some of what they know. Kingsolver’s narrative displaces the U.S. as the most knowledgeable and most powerful actor, culture, and epistemological authority.

Another way that Barbara Kingsolver has supplanted formerly dominant knowledge in *The Poisonwood Bible*, asserts Anne Marie Austenfeld, is that the U.S. women’s voices “offer a feminist alternative . . . to historical writing . . . to male-written and narrated European fiction about Africa . . . and to the . . . use of a third person narrator” (294). In the first-person accounts of the female voices, Austenfeld points out that “Kingsolver . . . delivers what history books rarely do: examples of how a variety of individual human beings act and are acted upon every day in the context of rapid and difficult social, political, and economic changes” (294). Each of the female characters responds differently to these social, political, and economic changes in relation to war in the novel. Each of the daughters undermines some aspect of traditional feminine expectations and roles, even Rachel, who at first conforms the most to conservative ideals of American femininity. The lens of gender negotiation of the girls and their mother can also be turned toward political positions on war. The linguistically innovative daughter Adah thinks in poetic terms. I differ with critic Wagner-Martin’s assessment of the character of Adah. Wagner-Martin describes Adah as “*plagued* with a number of *palindrome fixations*” (emphasis added, 108). She lists Leah as “the intellectual leader of

the sisters” (108), writes that Adah has “cumbersome and defensive phrasing” and that “the rhyming of the *grasping mind* in search of language gradually diminishes and later sentences in Adah’s monologues resemble Leah’s . . . Adah speaks *normally*” (emphasis added 109). The expectation or desire for Adah to speak and think “like Leah” or “normally” prevents viewing Adah as the intellectual among the sisters and a poet. Her language and speech choices are not fixations but experiments with poetry and language that grasp quotidian speech and surpass it, creating puzzles and games with words and ideas. Wagner-Martin also interprets Adah’s emotional state late in the novel (p. 365) after the death of Ruth May as “the first sign of real feeling that Kingsolver attributes to this daughter” (110). That interpretation misses the joy, wonder, and poetry of Adah’s lines that Wagner-Martin lists as being difficult to decipher: “Sunrise tantalize, evil eyes hypnotize: that is the morning, Congo pink” (Poisonwood 31, qtd. in Wagner-Martin 109). I argue that Adah feels tremendously throughout the novel and expresses her thoughts and feelings by choice and by artistry in her words. Adah’s play with language is a serious rethinking of reality and of normative social structures of family and ableism. She recognizes the injustice of the U.S. intervention in the Congo in different and more sophisticated ways than the other U.S. characters, and Anatole is the only other characters who understands the larger historical picture as well as, or better than, Adah. Her depiction of the long-range consequences of the efforts of the West to disperse Congolese self-governance comes in furious tones and confronts any easy dismissal of how damaging the Western interference was.

Each of the Price family members has a strong sense of self, and Kingsolver creates distinctive language and narrative voices for them. As they each find their places

– or fail to, in the case of Nathan – life-changing political events develop along with the growing of the girls into young women. As independence and then civil war comes to the Congo, hunger and the death of one of the girls drive Orleanna and her remaining daughters to leave Nathan behind and set out on foot to survive. According to Angela Raven-Roberts, we are “learning more about the gender-specific ways in which women experience wars” (Raven-Roberts 36-37). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, the loss of the youngest daughter Ruth May is experienced on a very personal level by Orleanna, Adah, and Leah. Ruth May’s loss also parallels the disintegration of economic connections due to war, and the date on which she dies is the same as that of the democratically elected leader Patrice Lumumba. As the years progress, Leah remembers the anniversary of the death of Lumumba, mourned by many in the Congo and around the world, as the death of her sister. That Kingsolver linked these dates challenges readers to take destructive political policies of their nation-states on a more personal level and to at least acknowledge and take action to repair relationships and to prevent new interventions. Writing personal stories about the Price women as civilians in war, the disorientation they experience in a country not their own is highlighted in relation to Western soldiers and the conditions that war has imposed on them. In one relationship, the women are not endangered by Belgian soldiers who march through their village (116); but readers learn through the U.S. characters that the colonial Belgian system maimed and killed Congolese people and kept the people of Congo uneducated, excluded from their education system (revealed in conversation between Nathan and the doctor when Leah gets her broken arm set).

The response of the unfeeling, unreasonable Nathan is to remain in place despite the fact that his wife and children are starving and that one of them has died. Raven-Roberts explains that “The damage done to livelihood systems has intensely gendered impacts because livelihood is an arena where gendered relations and ideologies are very pronounced at the community as well as the household and personal levels” (Raven-Roberts 42). She also notes that normally “clear sexual divisions of labor” are overturned during war (42-43). In *The Poisonwood Bible*, her father’s inaction and the absence of food and funding due to drought and war cements Leah’s already-growing command of herself and her insistence on taking action to keep her family alive. When the small stipend that the Price family had been receiving from their Southern Baptist missionary organization ceases, they are forced to live like the Kilanga villagers to whom Nathan has been preaching. That means that someone must hunt for and provide food, but Nathan does not acknowledge this or take any action to help feed his family. He cannot step out of the U.S. model of working for a paycheck, despite the stoppage of any incoming funds. Nathan also lets slip his traditionally “male” role of breadwinner. The war and drought situation in the Congo cannot shake him out of his accepted paradigm, and *The Poisonwood Bible* redesigns gender roles accordingly. William F. Purcell writes that Orleanna “is exasperated upon learning of the generosity and interdenominational cooperation of the other Protestant organizations working in the Congo mission fields . . . while her own Southern Baptist Mission League has cut off even the tiny stipend the Prices had been receiving” (Purcell, “The Gospel,” p. 93). In this crucible, Orleanna and Nathan’s daughter Leah decides that she will publicly take on the previously male-only role of a hunter in order to hunt food for her family (335-356).

While Leah's bold gender-overturning move is disparaged and opposed by the older men of the village and by her father Nathan, she receives support from several other men: Anatole, the Congolese village teacher whom she has come to love; the younger men of the village; and Nelson, the boy who works for the Price family and who taught her how to shoot her bow and arrows. Out of these circumstances, Leah hunts and brings food to her family and directly flouts her father's dominance for the first time. However angry Nathan may be, he does not stop Leah's hunting. Leah insists on hunting, endures the political process of the village men voting on whether she will be allowed to join the group hunt with the men, and wins the majority vote. It is not surprising that such a reversal in gender roles would bring condemnation from the older, more traditional men in the village. Kingsolver's narrative confronts questions of survival during war, however, and creates headstrong Leah as a representation of women who move in to occupy formerly male-held positions when they are gone or not performing the same gender-specific roles.

War and the real specter of starvation drives Orleanna and the young women of the Price family to severe lengths to survive. Christopher Douglas notes the relationship of the environment in this complex situation: "Creation did not start out pristine and good only to be transformed through human agency (as Genesis suggests) but has from the start been the site of violence, disease, starvation, and predation. Environmental violence and suffering is the condition for, not consequence of, human agency" (143). This environmental condition is made worse by war, and it gets worse in the novel for the civilian women and children left by the war and displaced several times. The cutting off of resources by the war forces these women to do things that were previously

unthinkable. Orleanna succeeds in helping each of her daughters, but in ways previously unthinkable. When the youngest daughter Ruth May dies shortly afterward, Orleanna leads her remaining daughters out on the road, out of the village, without any men, with war going on, white people being killed, and soldiers on the road. She agrees to send her eldest daughter Rachel out on a plane with the clearly sexual-intentioned bush pilot Axelroot. On the grueling walk out of the village to try and reach a larger town, Leah becomes deathly ill from malaria. Although they receive help on many accounts by Congolese women and men, after several months pass with Leah living but still unable to continue walking onward to a city, Orleanna leaves teenage Leah in the small town to continue to be nursed back to health by Anatole (p. 396). The mother pulls her last remaining daughter Adah fiercely by the hand to go with her onward. With Leah's early example to her family of appropriating erstwhile men's tasks, and the sad death of Ruth May from a snake bite, Orleanna also defies Nathan and takes action to leave him, superseding him as head of her family. By changing the power dynamics of gender and nuclear family assumptions, *The Poisonwood Bible* dramatizes what many women enact during wartime and reconfigures definitions of the heterosexual, male-led family model.

That these women survive, however, is remarkable. Angela Raven-Roberts writes, "Increasingly . . . we are learning more about war's gender-specific effects. We know for example, that women die at higher rates than men from the indirect effects of war on health and social services" (36). And, as Leah unfortunately notes in *The Poisonwood Bible*, "The war cost most of its lives among children under ten" (523). As the Price teens become young women, they respond to the region's war in gender-specific ways. Rachel, the oldest, becomes a war profiteer, first using her beauty to convince CIA

operative Axelroot to fly her out of the village where the Prices live and to take care of her. As the most traditionally feminine of the Price women, Rachel leverages her beauty and sexuality in subversive social ways and take on male-coded roles. After leaving Axelroot and then divorcing a second husband, she becomes a businesswoman, operating a restaurant and bar for white Western businessmen and politicians. Elaine R. Ognibene writes, “Rachel finds herself a place among the exploiters. Even at the end of the novel, three marriages-of-sort later and not yet out of ‘the Dark Continent,’ Rachel still does not believe that ‘other people’s worries’ have ‘to drag you down’ (516)” (Ognibene 31). Rachel rejects reaching out to other people, yet she has benefitted from her family’s efforts to keep her fed and alive and from her multiple husbands’ shelter, support, and wealth. Although she has lived and been helped by black Congolese people in the village of Kilanga while her family lived there, she bans black people from renting rooms or even going upstairs in her place of business – including her sister Leah’s husband, whom she knew during her years in Kilanga, and their children. So great is her distance from her own nephews, brother-in-law, and sister, she thinks, “Now, Leah, though. That one I will never understand. After all this time I can certainly work with the Africans as well as anybody can, mainly by not leading them into temptation. But to *marry* one? And have children? It doesn’t seem natural. I can’t see how those boys are any kin to me” (464). While Rachel manages to survive and even thrive out of wartime circumstances, she cannot accept the reformulated family structure that Leah has made with Anatole—with a black man of the Congo—and with their mixed-race children.

The narrative of Kingsolver’s novel, however, upholds Leah and Anatole’s marriage and partnership as one of emotional strength, integrity, and commitment to their

ideals, their children, to the Congo, and to each other. According to Rachel, Leah, who married Anatole, a teacher and revolutionary organizer, decided to pay for their sister's death "by becoming the Bride of Africa" (464). Rachel's stunted understanding of Leah or of deeper human connections prevents her from seeing that Leah and Anatole love each other and have ideals to which they deeply commit their lives. As materialistic and self-centered as Rachel is and remains, Kristin Jacobson points out that she does not return to the U.S. This is a fascinating point when considering how much more convenience Rachel might have access to in the U.S. But Jacobson observes that Rachel "never returns to the United States because she cannot meet traditional American domestic expectations" (121). By remaining in Africa, Rachel uses her whiteness to advantage, and her beauty, but does so for both economic gain as well as to secure her independence from men. Her response to war and to her father's abusive rule is to stake out a small kingdom for herself that she controls. There is something to be admired in her fierceness and self-protection. However, Jacobson contrasts Rachel's and Leah's homes: "Their homemaking practices connect domestic stability to imperialism and white privilege, teasing out economic and emotional security's costs and consequences" (114). And, "at the expense of the Congolese . . . Rachel's domestic practices and ideology represent the worst in American domestic and foreign policy: she couches her individual economic gain as a cultural improvement" (115). When claiming that her own wealth and power aids the Congolese people who work for her, Rachel's character slips into rationalization of an exploitative situation. Like the Belgian rubber plantations under colonialism that brought work to people of the Congo but also cut off their hands as work

punishment, a rigid employment situation that channels the majority of profits to some but leaves scant wages for the Congolese is condemned by the novel.

As a contrast, among the significant commitments Leah has to Anatole, she is devoted to the ideals of self-governance and to building an independent Congo for their children. Her decision to remain living in the Congo despite serious poverty and lack of nutrition for their children is a serious and daily struggle. Leah remains in the Congo for many years raising their children while Anatole is imprisoned for his political beliefs and alliances. While Jacobson writes that “Rachel’s homemaking highlights the historical amnesia required to carry out American domesticity’s inequitable economic and imperial agendas” (117), Leah spends much of her children’s lives as a single mother, bringing them up on nutritionally devoid manioc root and always searching for protein sources for them. *The Poisonwood Bible* represents Rachel’s point of view but does not support it, as she ends up independent but alone, trapped in her stunted materialist, racist thinking. Leah and Anatole’s family structure and beliefs emerge as a healthy, equitable antidote to Nathan’s totalitarian rule. They represent a family that has dialogue, and the metaphor of their family can be extended to contradict the U.S. and Western imperialism that is uninterested in what the Congo would have spoken back to them, if dialogue had taken place. Kingsolver has created a multi-level metaphor of gender, economics, and politics in her repositioning of these families.

4. Women’s Survival Tactics During and After War

When earlier in the village of Kilanga, the Price family’s stipend is cut off, and access to food becomes much worse in the village of Kilanga, at first, the white U.S. women stay isolated, thinking they are relying on themselves, in an individualistic

“liberal” way. They remain in their neoliberal, middle-class influenced Western socialization this way, not thinking to look to or rely on their neighbors. They learn later, though, that their Congolese neighbors have been helping them by placing eggs in their chicken house, among other things. All along the way, the Prices are helped by Congolese people. Several times, they would have died without help. That the white Christian U.S. characters need the people of Africa to keep them alive is a poignant reversal of U.S. political and economic hegemony. *The Poisonwood Bible* denounces the belief system that the U.S. had any right to invalidate the elections of the Congo or to finance and support Mobutu’s forces to capture and assassinate Patrice Lumumba. Kingsolver’s narrative lays out a slow coming-to-terms story of American characters, particularly those of Leah and Adah, who learn about U.S. and Western imperialism in Africa and are outraged by it. Their education symbolizes what the novel is also doing on one level—exposing U.S. and Western audiences to the little-known political history of this part of U.S. foreign policy. Their individual stories and the story of their family needing knowledge of the Congolese people to survive poses the question about what the U.S. and the West could learn from the Congo and from other African cultures and knowledges.

The Congolese people help the Price family in tangible ways. When Orleanna, Adah, Leah, and Rachel walk out of the village in the rain, they forget to even take water on what they think will be a two-day walk. One of the women sends her daughters after them with a bottle of water and some oranges (389). Orleanna and her daughters are offered shelter from torrential rain under leaves by Kilanga women they meet on the road, are welcomed to stay the night in the home of a relative of the Kilanga village

women, and are given precious food and blankets, as well as having a fire made for them inside the home (389, 392-393). When they continue walking and Leah becomes severely ill with malaria, her life is saved by men who carry her on a pallet to the next village (395). There, she lies in a hut and is nursed through a months-long sleep and illness, fortunately by the Kilanga school teacher Anatole, who has appeared there (396). Leah thinks,

What do people know here but forbearance? They take one look at the expensive, foreign-made uniforms of Mobutu's police and know to keep their thoughts to themselves. They know who stands behind Mobutu, and that in some place as far away as heaven, where the largest rules are made, white and black lives are different kinds of currencies. When thirty foreigners were killed in Stanleyville, each one was tied somehow to a solid exchange, a gold standard like the hard Belgian franc. But a Congolese life is like the useless Congolese bill, which you can pile by the fistful or the bucketful into a merchant's hand, and still not purchase a single banana. It's dawning on me that I live among men and women who've simply always understood that their whole existence is worth less than a banana to most white people. (436-437)

With the linking of war, economics, and the value of lives according to race, *The Poisonwood Bible* uses circumstances of war to expose injustice in existing racial and sexual hierarchies and in international politics. The twins Leah and Adah are the most perceptive about these larger meanings. Adah arrives at a similar conclusion to Leah's realization: "What I carried out of Congo on my crooked little back is a ferocious

uncertainty about the worth of a life” (443). Leah and Adah realize that the experience of hunger and brushes with death they have experienced are not uncommon to the people of the Congo. The figures to whom these realizations and experiences are new in the novel are the U.S. characters, who bring a personalized narrative of hunger, disease, and dire circumstances to a U.S. audience. I argue that in a larger sense, this need to rely on others, and in particular, on the Congolese, symbolizes a need for a humbling position for the United States and the West. The Congolese know more than the white U.S. characters about the Congo and how to live and thrive there, and those methods are often directly in opposition to Western forms of development.

Leah survives her serious bout of malaria and later marries Anatole. After some years, they meet up with a relative of Anatole’s, Elisabet. Leah and Anatole meet her by surprise at Bikoki Station, where Elisabet had gone to look for Anatole years before. She is Anatole’s aunt, yet because she is the youngest sister of his deceased mother (432), she is barely older than he is (446). Anatole and Leah invite her to live with them in Kinshasa, and even though Leah has learned much in intervening years, she continues to learn new survival techniques from Elisabet (446, 452). Leah notices, “I’m learning that Elisabet’s sudden conversational turns are always for a good reason—usually someone’s safety, probably mine. I watch her in the marketplace, too, well aware that no schoolroom has ever taught me as much” (452). On one hand, this kind of narrative about a white character learning from wise black characters can be frustrating, especially when the black characters are one-dimensional and serve mainly to teach the white character. Anatole and Elisabet function as limited characters who explain the world to the unknowing or recklessly vocal white character Leah. On the other hand, Kingsolver

portrays the black characters as entirely capable and as not needing missionary or political intervention by the U.S. or the West. There is even a section in which Elisabet explains to Leah how the system of bribes and negotiation works—a tactic of survival in an unstable economy wracked by neglectful colonialism and then war—that serves as the *modus operandi* for much of Congolese society. The conventions and understandings of the West are inapplicable in the Congo. Assessing people and opening with some kind of gambit, such as asking for a sum of money, is not an expectation of actually being given that money; instead, it is an opening to begin negotiating and of expressing what one person has access to and might be able to offer another (452-453). This explanation could possibly go some way toward giving more nuance to oft-reported “corruption” in the “system” in Congo and in Africa; Kingsolver’s narrative both highlights a different kind of corruption on the part of Belgium and the U.S. and gives context to that Congolese societal practice.

In fact, *The Poisonwood Bible* points out corruption in the system by the West, to give a fuller picture and dramatize hypocrisy. One example in the novel of this is the “Inga-Shaba” Province, in which the U.S. financed the construction of a power line (457-458). For some time, Leah teaches the children of the American workers who come to the Congo to construct the power line and form a walled city of their own. Leah notes both how difficult it is to build a long power line across the jungle but also that this province in particular “roars with waterfalls, more than enough to generate its own electricity” (458). From what we have seen as the dire state of economics in the novel, it is not surprising to readers when Leah recounts the metals and supplies of the power line

being stealthily carried away by the Congolese (458). What Kingsolver's narrative explains, however, was that

It was not merely a misguided project; it was sinister. The power line was never meant to succeed at all. [There was] no way to service a utility stretching across the heart of darkness . . . anything that might serve for roofing material trailed off into the jungle [with the Congolese people]. Anyone could have predicted that exact failure. But by loaning the Congo more than a billion dollars for the power line, the world Export-Import Bank assured a permanent debt that we'll repay in cobalt and diamonds from now till the end of time. (458)

Kingsolver's use of "the heart of darkness" is of course intentional and ironic; many have written about this novel as a counter-narrative to Conrad's novel. Here, its use juxtaposes the term against the corruption of economists and politicians who would have known what the long-term consequences would be of the project and enormous loans⁵.

Economics is therefore reconfigured by European and U.S. imperialist wars.

The Poisonwood Bible explains and exposes corruption and predation such as this in Western systems, and three of the Price women—Orleanna, Adah, and Leah—wrestle with what to do about it, as well as what to do about the racial systems of power interlaced with economics and war. Kristin J. Jacobson writes about a passage in which Orleanna wonders: ". . . I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity. Some of us know how we came by our fortune, and some of us don't, but we wear it all the same. There's only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?"

(p. 9)” (Kingsolver, qtd in Jacobson 110). One of the ways in which Orleanna “lives with it” is to take part in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, working in an office and marching in demonstrations. Adah becomes a doctor, periodically returning to visit Leah in Africa. It is through Leah that the narrative examines how, on a more individual level with one’s family, Leah can teach her children to live in such a world.

Leah’s work with her husband, sons, and herself is part of Kingsolver’s portrayal of an attempt to be mindful of reproducing racial privilege. Sometimes, Leah does reproduce racial privilege, though: Leah becomes a member of a co-op late in the novel, but she assumes the role of a teacher to the other women (of nutrition). She mentions that they give her the respect of the title “Mama” but ignore most of what she says. Kaufman and Williams write that “Women have agency when they form grassroots organizations to secure food, healthcare, housing, and so forth for their communities, their families, and themselves” (132). Leah does this in the latter part of the novel, when she is teaching nutrition classes and raising food with other women. Seemingly unintentionally, though, she cannot completely break out of the mind-set of hierarchy. But at the same time, she tries to keep learning and does not give up. Although she and Anatole spend some time in the U.S. with their boys, they refuse to live there due to the attitudes about skin color and the effects they would have on their children, the arrogant and ignorant political beliefs that some undergraduate college students spout to Anatole, and their strong feelings for the Congo. Leah even stays in the Congo, raising their children during Anatole’s long periods of imprisonment and tells her husband that their sons “will be African.” The self-awareness that Leah strives for, while imperfect, is a form of agency in interrupting white privilege.

5. After War, Accountability and then Possibility

Narrating Leah's concern with how to help her children stay in Africa and survive well after war and on how to interrupt her white privilege are positive, future steps. The focus on maintaining family relationships among the Price women is also a defiant stance against splintering effects of war. "One of the most lasting impacts" of war, according to Angela Raven-Roberts, can be loss of family and community support networks (44). In the *The Poisonwood Bible*, though, Leah maintains her relationship with her mother and Adah after they return to the U.S. Leah remains in the Congo with Anatole, Elisabet, and her sons, and she can occasionally receive postal shipments of much-needed protein source in cans of tuna from her mother and sister. Later in the novel, she is able to buy a used Land Rover to help her work at the co-op. These relationships are vital in the health and survival of Leah and her children, and they are also enabled by her whiteness and economic connections to the U.S. The Price women also survive by help from the Congolese in all forms: in food, transportation, information, nursing, shelter, familial bonds, and love.

The emphasis on the white, U.S. characters and their reactions situates *The Poisonwood Bible* as a work of U.S. literature for a U.S. and Western audience. Therefore it is understandable to read comments such as Meire's, that Kingsolver "offers an alternative to the mostly masculine Western fiction on the Congo," although it is still "a critique of the West rather than a voice for the Congolese" (80). Yet, the fact that Kingsolver's novel does not speak in a direct voice of a Congolese character can be viewed as a resistance to appropriate an African voice. It is through the women of *The Poisonwood Bible* that the narrative argues to a U.S. audience that the policy of

intervention was against what the people of the Congo wanted and that it has had lasting violent, corrupting, and political effects. Elaine R. Ognibene writes about the attitude in *The Poisonwood Bible* on the part of some voices, such as political figures from the U.S. and Europe, that they have “not the faintest moral responsibility” toward the Congo (34). Ognibene argues that “The power of Kingsolver's novel lies in her ability to question that response” (34). This point also helps explain Kingsolver’s choices in focusing on the voices and perspectives of white, U.S. characters in questioning white, U.S. policies and politicians.

On the other hand, Priscilla Leder writes that some critics “ultimately indict Kingsolver for idealism, arguing that she offers readers escape rather than the motivation to action that her political concerns demand. Carried to their logical extension, their standards for political writers would dismiss all imagined solutions as suspect, requiring that such writers depict only problems—painful realities . . .” (20). And, Leder adds, after quoting *The Poisonwood Bible*’s last lines (“Move on. Walk forward into the light”), “Without the light of possibility, we remain without direction, in the dark” (20). Meire also discusses the last words of the novel—“Move on. Walk forward into the light”—and says that the narrative “offer[s] here again a contemporary counterpoint to *Heart of Darkness* and Marlow’s horror. Although the Congo is still confronted with many conflicts, hope for peace and reconstruction are huge” (84).

Barbara Kingsolver’s positive scope gives hope for moving forward with accountability and also more specifically shapes the notion of civilian women in war as survivors as well as victims. *The Poisonwood Bible* shows civilian women’s strength, resilience, and ingenuity, especially when, in addition to keeping themselves alive, they

also hold together social fabric and keep children and often others in the community alive as well. Kingsolver gives Leah the introspection and long-historical view to brainstorm how to live with the facts of war, hunger and displacement. Through Leah, the text imagines the Congo moving toward a life cycle like “the ancient Kongo, traveling by foot, growing their food near at hand, using their own tools and cloth near the site of production” (525). A non-materialistic and non-Western model.

The idea of looking forward is coupled with a desire for accountability. *The Poisonwood Bible* stands for the value and knowledge about lives of Congolese people and the history of the Congo. The novel reshapes U.S. and Western ideas of the family by reversing gender roles, opening up spaces for new kinds of family structures, and detaches imperialism from its hidden place in U.S. and Congolese history. It is important, too, in the U.S. that there should be public acknowledgement of the role the U.S. played in intervening in and changing the course of the Congolese government and society and the people there. To understand another, one must listen and be open to hearing about ways that may seem radically unlike one’s own “reality.” But there must be interest and desire for that, which Leah faithfully represents in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

One of the ways in which we can respond to Orleanna’s question – how do we live with this knowledge – is to work within U.S. culture toward building a conversation in which it is not damaging to U.S. identity to discuss mistakes or wrongdoings of policy. If we are to support “truth and reconciliation” in other cultures, we need to be able to take a hard look at U.S. history and be willing to forge into discussions on contemporary issues, too.

Notes

1. Purcell, William F. "Is Barbara Kingsolver's 'The Poisonwood Bible' a 'Postcolonial' Novel?" *Illuminazioni: Rivista di Lingua, Letteratura e Comunicazione* (20): 24-61. April 2012.
2. See Elaine R. Ognibene's "The Missionary Position: Barbara Kingsolver's 'The Poisonwood Bible.'" *College Literature*, Volume 30, No. 3 (Summer, 2003). 19-36; Christopher Douglas' "The Poisonwood Bible's Multicultural Graft: American Literature during the Contemporary Christian Resurgence." *American Literary History*, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2014. 132-153; and William F. Purcell's "The Gospel According to Barbara Kingsolver: Brother Fowles and St. Francis of Assisi in The Poisonwood Bible." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Volume 12, Number 1, Winter 2009. 93-116.
3. White, Jeanna Fuston. "The One-Eyed Preacher, His Crooked Daughter, and Villagers Waving Their Stumps: Barbara Kingsolver's Use of Disability in The Poisonwood Bible." *South Central Review*, Volume 26, Number 3, 2009. 131-144.
4. Meire referring to the work and terms of Ansgar Nünning, pp. 79 and 80 in Meire.
5. The "structural adjustment policy" lending practices of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are well documented; one poignant example is Stephanie Black's 2001 documentary film *Life and Debt* about Jamaica. The film interviews Former Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, who was educated at the London School of Economics. Prime Minister Manley describes how he brought the IMF a 5-year plan in which he explains that Jamaica could by that time become economically self-sufficient. When the IMF tells him no, they only give 1-year loans, the Prime Minister protests that with a one-year loan, the country will be right back where they started when they asked for the loan. The IMF economists stick to their policy, allowing the Jamaican economic and social infrastructure to be destroyed and bringing the country into dependence on outside countries, exports, policies, and economies.

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Essay 5

Distance and Connection in U.S., Iraqi, and Afghan Voices in Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War*

1. Introduction

Distance and connection are pervasive issues in the war fiction of Helen Benedict's 2011 novel *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz's 2013 short story collection *Flashes of War*. The narratives are set both in-country and at home during the U.S. armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Neither author served in the military. But each has taken on the challenge of investigating meanings of violence on the body, mind, morality, and humanity that these wars have brought to the people in the military, the people of the countries in which they are posted, and to their families and friends. Both texts also present perspectives and voices from characters in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Cynthia Enloe writes that

we have something important to discover by thinking of Iraqi and American women together . . . because thinking about women on several 'sides' in the same war might make starkly visible how wars and their prolonged aftermaths depend both on particular ideas about and practices of femininity and masculinity, and on women in warring states not discovering their connections with one another. (emphasis in text, 2, *Nimo's*)

Enloe's assertion can be extended here to analyze the fact that the U.S. military characters in Benedict's *Sand Queen* cannot make a real connection with the Iraqi civilian Naema on the other side of their guard post. One of the soldiers, Kate, is

sympathetic to Naema's plight and that of Naema's father and brother. It is that nascent connection for Kate that makes it even worse later when Kate learns that she unintentionally kills Naema's gentle father. The tenuous connection Kate feels to Naema intensifies Kate's guilt and sorrow and she is haunted by the violence she enacted on Naema's father, causing his death. The failure to connect germinates violence, and the pain of the missed connection this novel presents highlights what might have been—and what could be, if we change circumstances and work to make connections happen.

Sand Queen is a novel written by Helen Benedict, who is a journalist, novelist, playwright, and professor at Columbia Journalism School. Benedict is “credited with breaking the story about the epidemic of sexual assault of military women serving in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars” (“Helen”). She has written a play on that subject matter, titled *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*. Both the novel and play grew out of her 2009 non-fiction work *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women in Serving in Iraq*. Benedict interviewed women who had served in the Iraq War and exposed the serious and constant threat of sexual assault by fellow service members that those women faced. Threats of sexual assault by service members also figure prominently in the novel *Sand Queen*, told in two voices: one from the perspective of a young white U.S. woman stationed in Iraq as a soldier in the Army, both in Iraq and in the U.S. Another perspective is from a young urban Iraqi woman who left the fighting in Baghdad with her little brother and parents to stay at her grandmother's house in a small village. Structuring the novel with voices of two women and from two different “sides” of the Iraq War allows Benedict to investigate the human experiences and morality of actions and policies there. Women experience exclusion, isolation, rape, and sexual assault and

harassment in different degrees than men in the military. Civilian women experience raids on their homes and suspicion or violence in the streets also in gender-specific ways. Investigating these questions in representations of women gives a much wider perspective on war and the lives of women and can contribute to changing tactics and methods of war.

Explorations of private thoughts and reactions to the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan are also central to Katey Schultz's short story collection *Flashes of War*. This collection comprises many stories that are extremely brief, ranging from some that are half a page, some that are one and one-half pages, up to more conventional short-story lengths. This kind of narrative structure has been termed "flash fiction" for the brevity of the stories, and a nod to the structure is reflected in the title of the collection. In this text, Schultz's first published book, she creates stories from many different viewpoints, including some female and many male characters U.S. military members in country and at home; a U.S. sibling and a wife; and several Iraqi and Afghan characters.

In this essay, I will explore representations of Iraqi, Afghan, and U.S. women and men and examine how the texts of Benedict and Schultz portray distance and connection. It is through expressions of distance or connection that questions of morality and the unspeakable nature of war are represented, and it is also through reading distance and connection that larger meanings of the texts can be understood. Distancing oneself from others, from feelings, and from analysis can be an advantageous method of interacting in military situations in which quick decisions must be made, violence is required to perform, and friends may be killed. Stepping out of distance can become problematic or impossible, and the inability to do so can affect military situations with the people of the

country in which a service member is stationed and also when returning home to the U.S. It can also be a problem when “others” can be women with which men are serving. Not to mention that if distancing becomes too ingrained or too deep, it can cause long-term or permanent damaging to the humanity of an individual. The notion of distancing is integral to full discussions of war experiences for both military members and affected civilians.

Efforts to clamp down on emotions or emotional reactions or to emerge out of a contained emotional state form some of the main subject matter in the works discussed here and run through much of war literature. How to transition out of that state is a struggle expressed in both of the fiction pieces, with several characters. Examining how particular texts take on these issues, how they are represented in the contemporary period, and how they are gendered can open up new spaces in relating to service members, affect policy toward civilian treatment, and help to rethink assumptions about war and veteran care.

The voices in Benedict’s and Schultz’s texts dramatize Cynthia Enloe’s proposition that analyzing the war in a gendered way rendered “reports on the Iraq War more realistic and thus more useful” (8, *Nimo’s*). Enloe’s now-famous question, taken up by researchers in several fields, was “Where are the women?” Enloe writes about “the feminist discovery that paying serious attention to any woman’s life can make us smarter about war and about militarism” (xiii, *Nimo’s*). Becoming smarter about war and militarism can forward thinking about a range of issues, such as militarism’s recent omnipresence, improving life in the military, occupation relations, or discussions of drawing down troops. Keeping gender in mind in all of those discussions would make

thinking about and making decisions about war more effective. With this discussion and reading of Benedict's and Schultz's texts, I hope to contribute to wider and better understandings of what U.S. women and men are going through during and after war and also some of what Iraqi and Afghani people are going through. We know from previous wars that civilian exposure to knowledge about and images of war contribute to enhancing and sometimes changing public opinion on war and on foreign and domestic policy, as well as on the opinions about weighing civilian casualties and on how to treat soldiers when they return. Benedict's and Shultz's texts also play an important role in U.S. literature because they are among just a few of the early fictional works emerging from these recent and ongoing conflicts. Additionally, they are even rarer in that these texts are written by women in a small field of works written by men and they center on or prominently feature women protagonists. Benedict and Schultz's fiction provides different and more complete views of war, especially in light of women's recent and fuller integration into the military and recent representations of the imagined lives of Afghan and Iraqi women under U.S. military occupation. Those voices help humanize the Afghan and Iraqi people and demonstrate how some civilians are not so different from people in the United States. Their experiences could also serve as meditations on how Afghan and Iraqi people become turned against U.S. forces. Some of the representations of life for these occupied people are steeped in trauma, of losing their family members in nighttime raids, seeing fragile loved ones violently stepped on and dragged away. Experiences like those give rise to anger, oppositional thinking and action, and trauma. U.S. military members also experience trauma, of course, and often use the notions of distancing to help manage trauma.

It was only in 1980 that trauma was admitted into the parlance of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo write that the APA “officially acknowledged the phenomenon of trauma, describing its effects as a new illness coined as ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD)” (1). They note on a broader scale, noting others’ research¹, that “Modernity is marked by the ‘sign of the wound,’ and ‘the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma’” (1). Studies of trauma, Nadal and Calvo outline, were set off in the 1990s, associated with the terrors and pain of World War II and are now enlarged, as they quote Luckhurst, to include ““a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory and selfhood’” (1). These concepts of examining trauma are useful in examining emotional and mental distance represented in Benedict and Schultz’s fiction about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nadal and Calvo comment that Dominick LaCapra’s assertion is important that we be ““responsive to the traumatic experience of others’—of generating what he calls ‘empathic unsettlement’ (2001, 41)—which, among other things, suggests a close link between trauma and ethics” (La Capra qtd. in Nadal and Calvo, 2). This is a similar call to Stacey Peebles’ argument that we need to listen to the stories of the war in Afghanistan and the Iraq War (Peebles, 174). Also writing about trauma, E. Ann Kaplan explains that for her, after 9/11 when she was living in New York City near the Twin Towers, “New York City, and the United States as a nation, both were destabilized as concepts” (3). Kaplan theorizes the broader effects of trauma and how it can affect ideas and subjectivities that would not immediately seem to be so strongly touched by trauma. War literature has long portrayed characters affected by “shell shock” and more recently with

“PTSD.” In this essay, I examine some of the direct and indirect effects of war trauma, how trauma is gendered, the different kinds of distance Benedict and Schultz’s texts illustrate, what actions they produce, how they change subjectivities, and what these texts say about the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

2. Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen*

Many concepts are destabilized in *Sand Queen* and *Flashes of War*, including the Army, brotherhood, masculinity and femininity, family, nationhood, organized society, and individual subjects. In Katey Schultz’s *Flashes of War*, the female characters have a close male friend, as in “Amputee” or are close to a brother, as in “Deuce Out.” In Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen*, however, the male characters in the Army are mostly violent and antagonistic to the female soldiers. The now well-publicized situation of male soldiers raping, sexually assaulting, and sexually harassing women soldiers is central to this novel. Benedict’s previous journalistic book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women in Serving in Iraq*, presented her interviews with 40 female service members returning from Iraq. *Sand Queen* continues Benedict’s emphasis on women’s experiences, but in this novel, she brings in the voice and perspective of an Iraqi woman and her family who are on the receiving end of the U.S. military occupation and war. This character, Naema, is more educated, articulate, and mature than the young white U.S. character Kate. Naema is young, too, but she has a middle-class, supportive family who want and expect her to go to college, whereas Kate does not. Their lives are so different from each other: Before the events of the narrative, Naema was going to Baghdad Medical College, living with her family, and being courted by a fiancé; Kate has a much younger little sister and spent long hours outside with her boyfriend in summer,

with little interaction with or interest from her parents. The war brings them briefly together and irretrievably damages both of them for the rest of their lives, in different ways.

Benedict labels most of the sections of text with the name of the speaker, although she leaves some sections without identification. The text opens with an epigraph from Shakespeare as the only text on that page (*For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds*, Sonnet 94), and the next page also contains limited text. On that next page, one line continues and deepens the ominous tone begun by Shakespeare on the previous page, but in contemporary language:

“Perhaps if she curls up very small, she won’t hurt anyone ever again” (3). While this section is not named, we learn from later in the text that this is the voice of Kate, the U.S. soldier. She becomes devastated by her violent treatment of an Iraqi prisoner who later dies. Benedict is breaking up the text in different narrative voices but also breaking it up in time. The unlabeled sections about a female character, often calling herself “the soldier” in the third person, is Kate from later in time than the other narrative periods. The detachment on the part of a voice describing itself in the third person, with medical details added, and a setting in a hospital combine to convey sense of dread and anticipation of what violent act may have happened to land the character where she is.

After the unlabeled section, the narrative of *Sand Queen* alternates between “[Kate]” and “[Naema]” sections, with their names labeled in square brackets, as if to contain them neatly. The very short sections that are not named continue, though, to punctuate the Kate/Naema binary. Because the narrator of the unnamed parts calls herself “soldier,” these sections are tempting to identify with Kate, and that indeed

becomes the case. The unnamed sections are Kate, but told from a later time period than her labeled sections of narrative. The sections are kept brief and also do not interrupt the alternating Kate/Naema threads often or for long, giving them a sense of foreboding of what it is that Kate will do as we read her narrative as it is unfolding in the named portions.

While Benedict's narrative structure is not linear, it is not so experimental as to be undecipherable to a wide mainstream audience. Writing about contemporary literary works dealing with trauma, such as those about 9/11, Roger Luckhurst asserts that although "Modernist difficulty is often the favoured aesthetic mode . . . [it] isn't necessarily helpful to transpose to contemporary events, where the urge to convey the hidden or suppressed consequences of violence in the most literal ways possible can have significant political impetus" (52). *Sand Queen* portrays consequences of violence in an unusual way in the literature of war, by voicing the experience of a female soldier and also that of a woman from the occupied country. By drawing attention not just to violences of the U.S. military on Iraqis but also to women within military ranks and Iraqi civilian women who are directly affected by the loss of their male family members, *Sand Queen* highlights important political issues not addressed adequately or at all in U.S. policy or in previous war literature. Crafting the novel in voices from two different sides of war also prevents one voice from claiming the sole knowledge and definition of this particular war in this particular place and time. It belies the privilege of one authoritative voice.

Key among the political issues not previously portrayed in war fiction, is that we find out quickly that the U.S. soldier narrator Kate is being regularly harassed by both a

man in her sleeping tent; harassed by her superior, who calls her “Tits” (27); and that her fellow soldiers leave her isolated at a post when it is against the rules to leave only one soldier there at a time, and where they cannot even see her (5-12). A short time later in the novel, Kate’s superior, together with a lower-ranking soldier, harass and attempt to rape her inside a tent at the outpost, though they do not succeed because another male soldier pulls her superior off “just in time” (80-82). The narrative of *Sand Queen* combats what might be construed as a possible argument of what is “natural” behavior when stationing women with men in war situations. Cynthia Enloe, feminist International Relations scholar, writes that the value on “Having a feminist curiosity entails questioning allegedly ‘natural’ dynamics between women and men, as well as delving into what women do and what they think,” (xii, *Nimo*’s). Hearing the voice and experience of a female soldier stationed in-country with almost no other women in her military unit and the relentless defenses she must uphold in her life there can help to question how harassment and rape might be a “natural” or accepted dynamic between women and men. *Sand Queen* presents strong, competent women and ethical upstanding men among the male characters who harass the women soldiers and rape one of them. Benedict’s novel also explores the relationships among the women characters.

There are only two other women in Kate’s unit, with whom she has different relationships: Yvette, who is tough but a good friend, and a woman they all call the disgusting name of “Third Eye” because of an insect wound on her forehead. When Kate returns to the large group sleeping tent after the attempted rape, word of the event has beaten her there, but no one, not even the two women, speak to her (86). The women of the novel are placed in such a difficult position as women integrated into the ground

troops, and in very small numbers². They feel pressured to be tough “enough,” and this extends to Third Eye blaming Kate for what happened to her. That positioning unfortunately allies Third Eye with a masculinist stance of blaming the woman for being assaulted. It is also unfortunate that Third Eye’s gender is commented upon by Kate as possibly being lesbian, placing the physically larger, possibly lesbian character with an insulting nickname as a turncoat of a friend, concerned more with her own job than her friend or in the injustice of the sexual assault.

Before the sexual assault on Kate, Third Eye was talking with Kate on a normal day walking to the showers together, with their rifles “so we can protect each other from getting raped by one of our own fine comrades,” as Kate says (55). In this context, Third Eye’s advice to Kate was to play along with the harassment, get meaner, or pick out a boyfriend (56-57). In fact, after Third Eye tells her to “make your signals clear” or “get a whole lot meaner,” Kate asks, “Like you?” Third Eye replies, “Yeah, baby. Like me” (56). Unfortunately, after Kate is assaulted, Third Eye not only refuses to support her, but she turns on Kate. The main insult Third Eye hurls at Kate is “Sand Queen,” a specifically gendered term. Kate explains,

Sand Queen is one of the worst things a female can get called in the Army. It means an ugly-ass chick who’s being treated like a queen by the hundreds of horny guys around her because there’s such a shortage of females. But she grows so swellheaded over their attention that she lets herself be passed around like a whore at a frat party, never realizing that back home those same guys wouldn’t look at her twice.

In other words, she's a pathetic slut too desperate and dumb to know she's nothing but a mattress. (105)

Third Eye's betrayal of Kate is more painful because she is one of only two other women stationed with Kate in her unit, leaving Kate with no other friends or allies except the two men who help her. Helen Benedict mentions in her non-fiction research of women in the military that posting so few women in overwhelming larger numbers of men contributes to the problems for women. Grouping women in more numbers together is one of her proposed solutions for making situations for women and men better while deployed (Benedict, pp. 223-232, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private*). Additionally, Third Eye adopts the well-worn but still powerful trope of blaming the victim. Not only does she abandon Kate as a friend, but she inflicts pain on Kate by not telling her in advance about the public shaming of her through graffiti on their base, much of which are lies. Instead, Third Eye tells Kate to follow her to show her that graffiti, and intends for it to shock and hurt Kate. The division or distancing that such intentional injury can accomplish is exacerbated by it coming from another woman, and someone whom Kate thought was a friend. This gulf between them is not so surprising given the pressure the women are under to perform "like" men but with the threat of rape, regular derision, and the exclusion from the group "brotherhood" identity that might provide a sense of belonging, identity, and protection. This hateful, hostile environment can logically produce trauma among the few women living in it. E. Ann Kaplan discusses the definition of trauma and "extend[s] the concept of trauma to include suffering terror . . . one recognizes degrees and kinds of trauma" (2). Kaplan's definition can reasonably be extended to Kate's unit in Iraq, and the trauma she experiences is specific to her gender.

Lacking any sizable number of other women among whom to turn for friendship, comradeship, or support, the pressures are intensified. Third Eye's conscious separating of herself from the "tainted" Kate also damages Third Eye unwittingly. Later, in terrible irony, the same two men who tried to rape Kate end up raping Third Eye (139). Despite this, Third Eye keeps going out on duty, as assigned, with those two men, one of whom is her superior officer. Third Eye cut herself off from a potential friend in Kate, although Kate still reached out to Third Eye. She views her situation differently than Kate's, and insults her when Kate tries to talk with her (139). Out of the brotherhood, and rejecting friendship from Kate, Third Eye works herself into a corner, isolating herself from all comers, and weathers the harassment, working with her rapists, and the other dangers of war, heat, and violence alone.

Two male soldiers, Jimmy, the man who stopped the assault, and DJ, want to back Kate up in reporting her sexual assault. The narration in *Sand Queen* rejects a male soldier helping Kate out twice. Jimmy saved her from being raped, but Kate cannot bring herself to accept his and DJ's offer of help a second time, and it is in part to protect them. Kate thinks a few things, but none of them involve going forward with reporting: She thinks that the careers of the two men will be ruined if they stick their necks out for her (100); that "no shitbag on earth," not the men who punched and tried to rape her, "not the whole frickin' Army—can stop me from being a soldier" (95); and that she's not going to talk about the assault or report it because "that's not what soldiers do" (130). That phrase has such a different context here that it is jarring to read. Language is also gendered in a military setting. Kate's thought of "not what soldiers do" should be applied to the actions of the men who isolated her, sexually harassed her, rejected her from the "brotherhood,"

punched her, and tried to rape her. Kate is upholding her side of the code of “brotherhood”—sticking with her fellow soldiers—even when they exclude her, harass her constantly, and attack her. The idea that reporting her fellow soldiers for sexual assault would disqualify her “from being a soldier” is one of the arguments of this text—that it should not.

There are some morally upright male characters in *Sand Queen*, and the two soldiers who stopped Kate’s assault and say they will back her up in reporting are notable. But what finally shifts Kate’s thinking and the narrative is a real alliance—a connection—with another woman. The petite Latina soldier Yvette realizes what really happened to Kate and demands that they go together to report the two men. Yvette says she knows a female officer to whom they can make their report. It is that first connection with a real female supporter that switches Kate’s thinking that she could and should file the report. She does not worry to the same extent about Yvette’s career that she did about Jimmy’s or DJ’s. While those men were genuine, ethical, and well-intentioned, their offer was not enough for Kate to take action. Instead, she feels ready and able to take action with the backup of her female friend.

Benedict’s narrative in *Sand Queen* is hopeful in the successful connections made between Kate, Yvette, and the female EOO Lieutenant to whom they make their report. In a realist vein, however, these connections are not strong enough to break the structure of masculinist culture in her unit or in the bureaucracy of the Army. In this environment in which Third Eye must continue working with her rapists unless she reports them, the result of what happens when Kate reports her sexual assault may be evidence enough to show that reporting did not work. Not only does Kate not receive any kind of

acknowledgement of what happened to her from reporting, her superiors instead believe the lies told by the officer who raped her. Furthermore, in retaliation, Kate and also Yvette, who helped her, have their lives placed in regular danger by being transferred to being on truck convoys that are routinely attacked and blown up by IEDs. The connections with Yvette and the female EOO Lieutenant were bright spots, but they were darkened by subsequent masculinist and institutional actions. The brightness is blackened when Yvette is killed by a mortar, an indirect result of being on the convoy detail she was assigned to as retaliation. It happened at the end-point of the convoy run, at the base where they were to spend the night before setting off again on the return truck convoy back to their own base. Yvette was in the MWR building (for Morale, Welfare, and Recreation), sitting at a row of computers, sending an email. But she would not have been there if she had not been placed there in retaliation by her superiors for supporting Kate's sexual assault report.

The pressures that all the soldiers face are compounded when the women can never let their guards down, whether walking to the showers, eating in the mess hall, or sleeping in the group tents. In reality, it is often the cause of PTSD, as Benedict's academic work reports. In *Sand Queen*, it produces a distancing effect from other male soldiers, from other women, from Kate's boyfriend at home and her family, and it also becomes a catalyst for her enacting violence on another human being. This distancing effect is a direct result of Kate's gendered condition and recent military policy of stationing so few women together in deployment and the isolation of her at her particular posts, successively. The distancing damages her unnecessarily and severely, producing a mental breakdown in her case and the death of an innocent Iraqi prisoner in another.

Kate's frustration and attacks on her selfhood and morality, as well as the punishing physical conditions, the isolation that she is placed in against the rules in two of her daily jobs, the loss of her one female friend Yvette, and the other violent acts she must commit in the line of duty combine to push her into committing violence against two Iraqi prisoners. It is that violence that she commits that create the final cracks that break her physical and mental states, and the violence is a result of the combined pressures of the harassing conditions of her work, the sexual assault, and losing her friend. It cannot be overstated that while men also endure and cope with the violence, illnesses, and distancing issues of being deployed, women experience additional problems. Some, as in the case of the women in *Sand Queen*, are raped and assaulted, and many others as described in Benedict's non-fiction research and in *Sand Queen*, live with multiple threats of violence throughout every day. This includes being ordered by military supervisors to not walk to the mess hall or to the toilets or showers without a buddy to help prevent being raped by fellow soldiers. This pressure also manifests in feelings and realities of being excluded from friendships or working bonds that would relieve some of the hardship for men. In the case of Kate in Benedict's fiction, she also experiences sexual harassment from the prisoners she guards, including one prisoner who repeatedly exposes himself and masturbates in close range in front of her guard tower. After the multiple incidents mentioned above, this sexual harassment prompts Kate's violent reaction.

The first main act of violence that Kate enacts is enabled by other, male soldiers. Kate has been assigned to guard duty on the perimeter of one of the prison tents, isolated again out of sight of other soldiers, and placed on a raised wooden platform behind razor

wire, but very close to the fence and the prisoners. Adding to her isolation, her walkie-talkie and radio do not work, and “not another soldier’s in sight” (96). One of the prisoners masturbates in front of her daily. That form of prisoner resistance is sexual and gender-specific, and it added to the other forms of resistance the prisoners enacted every day, such as shouting, spitting, and throwing turds at Kate. When another soldier hears her story, he arranges to have the prisoner singled out one night, and brought out by the MPs. They hold the prisoner and allow Kate to beat and kick him, and to stomp on his head while his face is down in the dirt. As the prisoner raises his hands and speaks, Kate realizes that he is not the individual she thought he was, and that she had been injuring another person. The wounds she inflicted later led to that man’s death, and it is the regret over this death that gives meaning to the second epigraph beginning the novel, “Perhaps is she curls up very small, she won’t hurt anyone ever again” (3). She is the one directly responsible for the death of this prisoner, yet she did not intend to kill him. This death on her hands becomes the final blow to her mental stability. She cannot distance herself further from the series of gender-specific sexual assault, isolation, vindictive posting to dangerous duty, and sexual harassments.

After that act, Kate returns to her duty. But a short time afterward, Yvette is killed, and her loss hits Kate heavily, both as a loss of her friendship and the visual of seeing Yvette’s body filled with shrapnel as she died. At Yvette’s funeral, Jimmy tells Kate that they are like “robots” (274), the implications of which include their requirements to do what they are ordered, to distance themselves mentally and morally from their duties, and more so in the women’s case, to not say anything if they are assaulted or raped. Those conditions cause Kate to reject the valor and honor that Yvette

is lauded with in her funeral, when a commander is giving the eulogy for Yvette and the other soldiers killed recently:

Telling us how the dead robots personified bravery and valor, and how dying for your country is the biggest honor a robot could ask for.

Fuck valor and honor. Yvette was killed in the middle of writing a frigging e-mail, for Christ's sake, because the Army was too damned cheap and disorganized to have installed a siren system in the MWR, let alone a mortar-proof bunker for us to shelter in. She was killed because that shithead Henley is buddies with Kormick, and Kormick wanted revenge on me for reporting his sick, perverted ass. Valor and honor? Shit. (275)

Male soldiers may well feel anger toward the cheapness and disorganization of the Army and question or reject the ideals of valor and honor also. But those understandable reactions are intensified for Kate and the other women, who are left out of the positive fellowship and support that the Army might offer them and instead abused, hated, and killed. The distancing from ideals of valor and honor are another layer of separation for Kate, who embraces the mode of "robot." The parameters of being a robot work only in part for Kate, because she has a festering desire for violence rising in her. Jimmy tells Kate that they shot a 13-year old Iraqi boy for trying to escape the prison. Kate tells him that she doesn't "give a fuck," and that she had shot a donkey on the convoy so as not to shoot the kid that was with him, who may have been carrying a bomb. She adds that she "*Really*" wanted to kill the boy . . . "And this is just the beginning" because she intends to kill the superior who sent Yvette and her to convoy

duty (283). Later that night, she thinks, “I feel hard and tough and cold inside. I feel like a soldier now. A real robot soldier. I know who I hate and I know who I want to kill. All the rest is bullshit” (283). The transformation of distance has been accomplished; Kate has morphed from a person who cared about Naema, the young Iraqi woman she talked to at her first guard post, and Naema’s family to being unable to have a relationship with her boyfriend back home or with Jimmy, who has professed his love for her. While declaring she is a robot, she is conversely consumed with hatred, rage, and a desire for revenge and action. The distancing has not provoked a cold robot but an erupting violence.

Not surprisingly, in Kate’s new state of being, she acts differently. She so seriously threatens to shoot the man who bunks next to her and verbally harasses her and gets too close to her every day that he believes her and moves away (286). In the searing sun on her guard platform, she becomes so thirsty that she takes her helmet off to cool off, revealing her hair. This riles up the prisoners below, who start yelling at her again, and the “jerk-off” prisoner begins masturbating in front of the fence below her again. In the context of everything else, that was the last straw for Kate’s mental health. She pulls out her weapon and shoots the masturbating prisoner, and then blacks out from dehydration and falls off the platform, injuring her back.

While Kate takes action, it is against those less in control than herself. Like what was done to her, she enacts violence on those who were less powerful—a helpless donkey, a prisoner held down by several Military Police, a prisoner inside a fence with razor wire. Those acts do nothing to change the situation of her assault, the death of Yvette, or changing the corruption in the reporting structure. To be fair, however, it is

difficult or impossible to see how one individual could make those changes, especially while on duty in country. The combination of violence and distancing produced more violence plus a mental breakdown and the loss of a woman who had originally been a good and competent soldier who felt duty not to turn on her fellow soldiers. The bright spots were the connections to two other women, and, upon returning home, the connection she revives with Jimmy when they are in the U.S. before he is redeployed. There is some hope for Kate's mental health. Third Eye, she learns, shoots and kills herself while home in the U.S., in her father's garage. The trauma of being raped and continuing to work with the men who did so and her self-isolation from her women friends contribute to her lack of will to continue.

There is also little to no hope for Naema, the Iraqi woman whose voice tells another part of the narrative in *Sand Queen*. Naema is charming, strong, and articulate. She is close to her loving family, her father is a poet, her brother Zaki, a skinny guitar-playing thirteen-year-old, and her mother a daughter of farmers who made it to the city of Baghdad. It is through her eyes and that of her gentle family that *Sand Queen* presents a different view of U.S. soldiers. The narrative began with the epigraphs and then the voice of the U.S. soldier Kate, giving readers a voice that would be somewhat familiar. The pivoting of the narrative of *Sand Queen* between the U.S. voice of Kate and the Iraqi voice of Naema mimics the push and pull of distancing and connections that these characters must perform when living in militarized conditions. When we first hear from Naema on page 14, Benedict draws readers in with the mysterious line "It happened last night, while we were squeezed around my grandmother's table eating supper" (14). This dark line presages violence to come and may lend more sympathy to the situation in

addition to picture of the close, playful family. When American soldiers come pounding on the door to take Naema's father and little brother, she describes them as "Hideous in their bulky uniforms, their faces obscured by goggles and helmets, their huge guns thrusting, voices roaring fury and insults. They pushed me aside as if I were nothing . . . 'Stop, please!' I begged in English. 'He is only a child!' But they did not hear me. I had no voice to them, no existence" (15-16). The women left behind, Naema, her mother, and her Granny, are hard into the wall. They are worried about both Naema's father, who was previously tortured by Saddam's soldiers, and his legs were broken repeatedly. He was frail and had heart problems. The U.S. soldiers tie the father and brother's hands behind them, put hoods on their heads, and "pulled Papa and Zaki to their feet by their bound wrists, as if they were sacks of grain, not human beings" (16). By juxtaposing this violent treatment of the men and the women of Naema's family with their good natures and innocence, the distance some might feel toward Iraqi citizens can be narrowed. A measure of closeness or identification with their family can be a way of connecting us to Iraqi civilians, to humanizing them, to move readers to question the tactics and policies of war.

The trauma that Naema experiences is in multiple, terrible layers. After her father and Zaki are taken, she hopes that her language skills in English may help her and her neighbors learn from the soldiers what has befallen their family members who have been taken by the U.S. forces. To Benedict's credit, the narrative does not romanticize the story or situation. It is chilling to realize from Naema's view and that of her neighbors that the U.S. Army has "disappeared" their men in a similar vein as people were snatched in Chile and Argentina under those dictatorships. While the Chilean and Argentine

disappearances were enacted by their own governments, the U.S. military took men and boys from homes, and families could not be certain where the men and boys were or if they lived or died. It is turning out to be true that Naema, as she thought on her family's drive out of Baghdad, that "It would have to be my strength that would carry us through, I knew that then. Zaki was too young, my father too fragile and my mother too stunned by loss. It was up to me now, and me alone, to make sure that my family survived" (34). Naema's determination make her even more admirable and sympathetic.

When Naema walks with her Granny's neighbors and meets other Iraqi people at the gate to the prison compound, Naema talks with Kate, the U.S. soldier who is stationed there alone. Naema is shocked that the soldier there is a woman. But she gives Kate a photo of Zaki and her father, and asks her to look for them. In turn, Naema offers to translate for Kate what the angry crowd says and wants; "You need me to help keep control, I think," Naema says (23). After the untenable ruse Kate is told to perform of giving the crowd a very partial list of names of the prisoners held, Naema realizes the truth—she is not going to be able to get information about her father and brother. She assesses Kate as a "child" and "young and ignorant. Nothing but a puppet" (50, 51). The concept of "puppet" is similar to that of "robot" as taken up as an identity marker by Kate. In both cases, a puppet and robot are controlled by others and objectified as inanimate and lacking will or agency. While Kate and other soldiers do follow orders on a regular basis, there is only so much that a human can do to distance herself from violence and pain. They seem like puppets and robots on the surface, but through the vision of this novel, we see that easy and reductive labels do not hold.

Despite Naema's conclusion about Kate, the characters do bear similarities in *Sand Queen*. Naema's steely resolution to be strong and help her family survive parallels Kate's determination to be a good soldier, withstanding harassment and assault on top of the other hardships. While their parental environments differ greatly, the two women have a younger sibling they feel protective about. Both characters have sweet-natured romances with young men who love them, and both Naema and Kate reject marriage proposals from their suitors. Each woman states they want some kind of their own life first. Naema tells Khalil, "I need to wait. I need first to follow my own dreams" (91). Kate tells Tyler, "Listen, I'll marry you later. We need to grow up first" (42). There are similarities but a missed connection. After Kate is moved from prison gate duty, Third Eye takes her place. Naema talks to Third Eye in English but is rebuffed by her, true to Third Eye's character. There is no possible connection for Naema with Third Eye or vice versa.

While Kate's fate is surely difficult, it cannot match Naema's. Most of *Sand Queen* is told from Kate's point of view, with Naema's voice being interspersed. But the young Iraqi woman's passages are poignant. When her Granny begins to die, she borrows a neighbor's car, and Naema drives while her mother holds her Granny. The trip to the nearby city of Umm Qasr is harrowing, as they are repeatedly almost run over by military convoys blasting through the roads. Naema and her mother have heard from the villagers that British doctors have arrived in the hospital of Umm Qasr to help. Unfortunately, this turns out to be just a rumor, and they arrive in a packed traffic jam near the hospital, with cars directed at each other, and no way out. Crowds of people holding fatally wounded children and terrible emergency situations surround the cars,

asking for help and trying to enter the hospital. The hospital in turn is much worse, having long ago run out of basic medicines and anesthetics. Naema, with her basic training from her early Baghdad Medical College regimen, starts to help out the nurses and works all day into the night. There is no help for her grandmother, and she numbly works until her mother comes to stop her and tell her that her grandmother has died. Naema begins to leave, and the nurse there is disappointed that Naema is leaving but numb, as well. These scenes are more familiar in terms of war literature, recalling stories of nurses working against a tide of incoming wounded and dead. This time, however, we view this not unfamiliar story from the perspective of a kind young Iraqi woman, one who speaks English, loves her Granny, and contributes her basic medical training without supplies and without being asked. Her actions and thoughts are again honorable and engender sympathy with her as a good human being.

Some of the most moving passages in *Sand Queen* involve Naema and her mother washing and caring for the body of their grandmother/mother. They enact the rituals of the cloth necessary for carefully wrapping her body, and Naema's mother Zaynab tells Naema to pay attention so that Naema can do this properly when it comes time for Naema to prepare her body (307). These tender scenes evoke a time when rituals like this were performed more widely in the United States, to a time when Americans were closer to the care of death. In the novel, it connotes an older time, perhaps, for U.S. readers, and emphasizes a closeness to the humanity of relatives, to the frankness of their bodies. The narrative seals a closeness with these women that ends the thread of their story. The reality that has been intimated earlier is stark, however. With the absence of resources in the nearby city of Umm Qasr, shown in the hospital scene, and the already

regular need to borrow food from Granny's neighbor's home gardens, it seems mostly likely that Naema and her mother will starve to death in Granny's village. It is heartbreaking and respectful that Benedict ends their narrative with quiet death.

3. Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War*

Attempts at achieving disconnection as coping mechanism are threaded throughout Katey Schultz's short story collection *Flashes of War*. Schultz portrays various positions on distance and connection with female and male characters, but *Flashes of War* imbues much more hope for the possibilities of connection. Several characters display desire to connect, whether muted or conscious. And, Schultz also engages in imagining voices of Afghan and Iraqi women, men, and children. Schultz writes one very different character from Naema in the story of an Afghan woman in Kabul, and this character finds herself dreaming of vengeance on the soldiers who caused the destruction of her city, the death of her father, and left a missile that has not detonated in her home garden (3). This startling revelation is slowly developed in the story "With the Burqa," including this speaker explaining that "Now, wearing the burqa is a choice" (3). She describes the capital as a "city with so much death . . . Women sat like forgotten boulders along the sidewalks in Kabul. We begged. We prayed" (3). Schultz's writing creates a slowness in the listing of what is gone: "Now, my father is gone, and the wall is gone, and even the tools for restoring the wall have been looted from our doorstep" (3). One might wonder after that what is left for this woman, her remaining family, and her neighbors. By presenting circumstances first, it is easier to begin imagining, along with this speaker, what it would be like in a dream to secretly give "a bullet for the sergeant who pestered my children in the middle of the night" and grenades "for the pilot who

dropped the missile on my house,” among others (4). This story, while using the term “soldiers” does not use the words “American” or “U.S.” or “Allied.” Instead, there is specificity used for the words of the Afghan woman and her situation. Writing her concerns as living in a city of death, with so much loss that includes her father, her home, and her children being disrupted at night by soldiers allows a sympathy and connection with the situation of this woman.

When International Relations scholar Cynthia Enloe had been on invited on talks around the country for her non-fiction book about Iraqi women’s lives, she wrote, “I was just trying to find a way to make the complex wartime lives of Iraqi women as real as those of American women. Narratives—telling stories—seemed to help. It made it harder for listeners to deny that Iraqi women had their own histories, their own feelings and dilemmas, their own organizing strategies. Stories made it somewhat more comprehensible that there was no such thing as monolithic ‘Muslim women’ or ‘Middle Eastern women’” (xii). In an analogous way, Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz’s story “With the Burqa” relate Iraqi and Afghan women’s lives, but these fictional works develop the imaginary women’s lives further. The venue of fiction invites readers to imagine how they might feel or think if they were in a situation in which children or any people they love were woken in the middle of the night by soldiers, their home bombed, and their father torn away from them. These fictional works have the power to create empathy and deeper understanding.

Schultz’s collection includes stories with voices of Afghan boys, Navy SEALs, and the young widow of a U.S. soldier. Several of her stories explore disconnection and moral trauma, such as the story “AWOL,” which involves a U.S. soldier and his

considerations of Iraqi lives. The speaker in this brief flash fiction story rejects the Army's military code because he adheres to his sense of what is right: "If I filled out the report, I'd have to admit that disobeying my superior to save lives was an unacceptable infraction" (138). He rejects the distance that would be required of him to let Iraqi people die. Even though he values their lives, he still has difficulty accessing them as individuals in his role in the military. And still, he tries. It is through his imagination of how the Iraqi civilians view him as a human that he uses as partial criteria for how he acts and what he chooses. Seeing himself in the dark eyes of Iraqi civilians, "I only saw my own reflection, a hundred tiny me's shining back. It made it hard to shake the sight of myself—all that ammo and camo, my tight-lipped expression nothing like the man I wanted to be" (138). The speaker's analytical mind, combined with what he "made it through" (138) to be in the Army, his own values, and the gaze of the Iraqi civilians, amount to a person who will not sign that report. The irony of this character and the circumstances of the story is that he is admirable. Those are the qualities that would make a great leader and good human being, but the bureaucracy and hierarchy of the military system cannot make room for him, "a spoiler," as he thinks of himself in the Army view. He distances himself from his country by leaving, going AWOL on leave. He refuses to distance himself from his ideals and values or from the man he wants to be. He even states that he will turn himself in for trial "eventually," along with the politicians: "The day those suit coats ante up for crimes against humanity, I'll ante up for AWOL" (138). Viewing himself as responsible, he is willing to be accountable for leaving the Army despite the unethical requirement that he admit to wrongdoing in saving Iraqi lives.

E. Ann Kaplan writes about trauma that it is important “how one defines it” (2). While writing about the events of 9/11, I would extend Kaplan’s theory to the trauma of morality to the soldier in the “AWOL” story. Kaplan notes that “how one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one’s individual psychic history . . . and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is ‘managed’ by institutional forces” (2). The particular culture of Army hierarchy and the political context of the Iraq War both affect how the soldier in this story processes events. His own psychic history is at least partly positive, as he considers how his life used to be. He thinks of the long term, in which he views his future in prison, and in this vision, he receives parts of his old self back—“the life I left in Ohio”—in steady pieces through the labor he will perform (138). This sentence is weighted with the notion that his old life and his old self, such as the man he wants to be, has been lost to him. He is confident it will come back. On the other hand, he imagines that the politicians’ time in military prison will be with “double the weight on their backs, the ghosts of the innocent Iraqis pressing them deeper into the ground” (138). The crux of how this Private First Class feels about the circumstances is that he was “betrayed” (137). Betrayed by the Army and by U.S. politicians, “the almighty creators of this betrayal” (138). With this phrasing, Schultz’s narrative widens the betrayal for this character from the individual conflict about whether or not to file the report to the war in general. Additionally, the Army hierarchy “management” of the events in which the soldier refused his superiors in order to save Iraqi lives does not improve the situation. Instead, the institutional management compounds the moral trauma this soldier is experiencing. Iraqi lives figure prominently

into this soldier's already well-established morality. He is not willing to distance himself from his own moral code further.

Distance from one's self can be a coping mechanism to deal with trauma. In *Flashes of War*, Schultz writes one of the longer pieces about a character named Nathan, "The Quiet Kind." Nathan has been home in the U.S. for three weeks and is managing PTSD. Some of his strategies for dealing with it are brilliant. At one time, he is at the dining room table and hears a car engine backfire, which triggers a memory of explosions in the war in Afghanistan. Then, "he lets his mind make a movie of everything his cells are telling him to do—Nathan, diving beneath the dinner table; Nathan, chin-tucked, hands reaching for the safety on his M4; Nathan, sheepishly returning to his chair, dodging his wife Tenley's gaze" (149). He explains this distance further by saying "There is the Nathan living and the Nathan watching Nathan" (149). This explication of separation of self could not be more clear; this character cannot be whole while watching himself, yet the separation is allowing him to function at home and also at work. Even what might seem like the simplest of interactions with others can be a struggle so severe that Nathan must construct a formula about how to utter speech. When a co-worker finally tells Nathan that he's glad Nathan made it back, Nathan first

forces his gaze away from the [news]paper and out the storefront windows. He should stand. If he can stand he can talk, and if he can talk he'll be okay. His body obeys, and he sets the paper down lightly, then turns to face Ranold. He will not tell him that making it back in one piece is not the issue, but how many pieces of you got left behind. He will not say that even though he's never been hit, he feels as hollowed as the

hemlock trunk on his shooting range. He will, instead, look Ranold in the eyes and speak very, very normally. (150-151).

Reading an experience like this and the deep wells of emotion beneath it are important for understanding what some veterans are going through. The level of difficulty of the situations in civilian life that Nathan is facing and the strength, intelligence, and creativity he negotiates them with are issues that should be more woven into the U.S. dialogue about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Schultz continues to craft this beautiful story with Nathan's marriage and the struggles he and his wife Tenley face in trying to become emotionally close again, as well as his struggles as a father to his young daughter. Tenley also makes serious efforts in her thinking to reconnect with her husband. Researchers Armstrong, Best, and Domenici write about coping strategies for returning U.S. troops and their families. In their work, they cite Dr. John Gottman, who "emphasizes that successful relationships are those in which the partners choose to turn toward each other rather than away . . . when each partner consistently chooses to respond to the other's invitations for connection, support, and affection by engaging—not by turning away, withdrawing, or withholding" (Gottman, qtd in Armstrong, Best, and Domenici, 177). As we have seen in both *Sand Queen* and in *Flashes of War*, this is so deeply difficult for many of the characters. For *Third Eye*, it was not possible. In Schultz's story "The Quiet Kind" about Nathan and Tenley, there are seeds of hope in their efforts. Schultz beautifully writes about Tenley's intimate thoughts; ones that she thinks when she and Nathan try to become physical again, and which we can imagine she might never tell anyone: "Tenley works on her mind, hard. . . . She will not think of the fifteen hundred million ways her husband might have killed another human being, fingers

on a trigger, fingers in her hair. She closes her eyes and pushes back at Nathan but doesn't let go" (162). The effort made by Tenley is necessary if she wants to turn toward Nathan but so searingly hard when she is thinking about what his hands might have done. Nathan suffers similar thoughts of physical reminders of other things but also fights to negate the past thoughts and is able to keep himself in the present with Tenley. This painful but touching scene shows these characters successfully making connections with each other.

Better understanding is also needed for the U.S. family members of returning service members and of those who do not return. Homecomings or the lack of them require identity changes that can be profound. As one example, E. Ann Kaplan writes that her experience of 9/11 while living near the Twin Towers "radically altered my relationship to New York, to the United States qua nation, and produced a new personal identity" (2). Experiences of traumatic events such as war or living as a single parent for a year at a time bring changes to individual identities and those of a family and of notions of country. In Schultz's story "Getting Perspective," young mother Lillis is dealing with her husband's death in Iraq, and she is refusing the terrible term and identity of "widow." Lillis is connected with the natural world of her home in North Carolina, and envisions her husband like "the rhodies blooming atop Roan Mountain in summer . . . It might not make sense, comparing him to a mountain, but now that he's gone I feel him around me even stronger, lodged into the horizon" (51-52). In this story, while there is cutting loss, there is also the connection Lillis feels to the land, to her two daughters, and to the mother of her husband, whom she calls Mrs. Young: "Ben's mom also says I'm going to have to relearn myself, but all I have to say to that is, there's no time. *Single mom . . .*

which is a heck of a lot better than being a spider that kills. Widow? I've had enough of death. The last thing I need is people calling me something I'm not" (52). Lillis' matter-of-fact voice is refreshing and straightforward, but on that score—of not being a widow—she is off the mark. She may refute the word and its associations, but her position as a woman whose husband has been killed affects her as an individual as well as her life as a mother.

What helps Lillis move through her denial is partly her recounting and remembering her husband's life, the importance of emphasizing what was good about him to their daughters, and crucially, the closeness of her relationship with his mother. Mrs. Young has experienced much loss in her life, "Not even sixty and lost both sons" (56). The woman is wise and compassionate, and she helps her daughter-in-law emotionally by talking and physically by watching the children when Lillis is able to pick up an extra shift at her waitressing job and while she takes night classes at college. This connection enables Lillis the time, love, and thought to begin adjusting to the loss of her husband; Armstrong, Best, and Domenici write that ". . . relationships, especially with family members, can be *the* healing antidote to the experiences of war" (172). In the case of Lillis, as with Nathan and Tenley, in *Flashes of War*, there is possible love and connection with family members.

4. Conclusion

It is not possible in every case to make connections with others or with one's self, however. Unfortunately, in *Sand Queen*, Yvette, the Latina woman, is killed, and the lesbian character Third Eye shoots and kills herself after returning to the U.S. Kate is mentally, emotionally, and morally damaged by the knowledge of the violence and death

she caused. But, Kate will have enough food and water and hospital care with proper supplies. Jimmy will have to go back to Iraq in redeployment, but Kate will not, having been dishonorably discharged. She will stay and receive medical care in the U.S.

That is not the case for Naema, though, or the Iraqi and Afghan characters in Schultz's work, such as the teacher who goes back to wearing a Burqa in fear, the boy who died for wanting a notebook, or for the Afghan woman who dreams of blowing up American soldiers. For those characters, what lies in store is starvation, grief, and potentially new avenues of violence. U.S. characters are severely damaged in Schultz's stories, too, in their deaths, wounding, and probable torture (such as in "MIA"). In Benedict's *Sand Queen*, U.S. characters experience sexual assault and rape, suicide, and mental and emotional fracturing. Neither Benedict nor Schultz's texts romanticize the trauma of death and war. The authors do not spare characters' lives when they realistically would not be, and they portray mental and physical anguish and fear.

While experiences of war destabilizes concepts and identities, for survivors, they must be rebuilt, recovered, or built anew. Connection may seem unlikely or impossible in parts of Benedict's and Schultz's texts, but their texts also argue that connection can provide a way out of isolation and distance from one's ideals, family, wider culture, and one's self. Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War* show moves toward that direction for the U.S. characters who live to return home. Closeness with family does not happen for Kate in *Sand Queen*, but there is potential for closeness with Jimmy. Family is healing to Lillis with her mother-in-law and for Nathan and his wife Tenley in *Flashes of War*. Adherence to personal morality is healing to the soldier in Schultz's story "AWOL." And, connection and identification with Iraqi and Afghan

characters is one of the strongest potentialities of these two texts. Benedict and Schultz both give us insights into the inner thoughts of Iraqi and Afghan characters, a compassionate and important contribution furthering the possibilities of connection to stretch from healing ideals, family, and self to healing rifts of understanding within the U.S. and between cultures.

Notes

1. Selzer quoted in Luckhurst, 2008, 20.
2. Helen Benedict's *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*, pp. 223-232.

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Essay 6

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have investigated U.S. women writing about war in the contemporary period of 1991-2013, in the genres of fiction, memoir, and media, and with primarily women subjects and characters. I have examined the ways in which these authors have represented women and war from viewpoints of indigenous women, military women, and civilian women in Iraq, Afghanistan, Mexico, Central American, the United States, and the Belgian Congo. For each of these specific texts, I have asked how these texts have affected the ways we conceive of and think about war and about women's interactions in war. I have endeavored to forward feminist conversations about women's abilities and rights in the military, indigenous women's outrage about illegal colonial oppression and violence, civilian women's strategies to survive crumbling infrastructure during and after war, U.S. women's portrayal of women of Iraq and Afghanistan under U.S. war, and about how women and men become damaged by war and work to reconnect.

The women's writing in this project asserts that women in this contemporary period write more specifically gendered narratives and also represent women in different roles than previously depicted in war: as arms dealers and strategic leaders, as participants in the military in battle who assert their right to be unmolested, as civilians learning to live on such meager rations as to endanger children's lives, and as women who can perpetrate violence unjustly, themselves.

The texts discussed in this dissertation confront injustice in war, whether it is reporting sexual assault in the military, explicating how cultures and knowledges other

than those of the West or the U.S. have something to teach, or making Iraqi or Afghan women's thoughts relatable, even when having violent thoughts toward U.S. military members because of the death, disappearance, or murder of their family members. Each of these texts dislocates narratives of war into unfamiliar territory. They challenge readers of U.S. literature to unseat assumptions about the sovereignty of the U.S. and other countries, about the fixedness of gender, of capitalism, and of how humans relate to each other—and how we should. These women writers situate women at the center of war texts and privilege their voices as authoritative speakers in experiences of war, whether as civilians and soldiers trying to survive or indigenous women preparing for the possibility of war.

These texts demonstrate Cynthia Enloe's assertion that "the feminist discovery that paying serious attention to any woman's life can make us smarter about war and about militarism" (xiii, *Nimo's*). In each essay, although they are different from each other in location and culture, there are some similarities in the various approaches to war and coming home. These actions take the form of connection with others, and usually with other women. Connections enable solidarity for change, possibilities for healing, and survival; indeed, without connections with others to work together, survival is not possible.

Literature manifests the visions of community and possibilities of better futures, but it also renders difficult subjects with empathy. Reading about the imagined lives of women in Afghanistan and Iraq is painful when it is dramatized that their family members, innocent, are dragged from their homes in the middle of the night, and are never heard from again, such as in Benedict's *Sand Queen* or deaths of children who just

went out to buy a notebook in Schultz's *Flashes of War*. Any of us could imagine the rage, fear, and determination to find family members and the shock and violation of the killing of a child. Placing the essay about Iraqi and Afghan women next to those that portray indigenous women in the Americas and women and children in a continual state of hunger in the Congo also makes an uncomfortable but important parallel. It highlights that these conditions are unfortunately historical and also contemporary. And women are struggling—sometimes successfully, and sometimes not—to survive. They need each other if they are to navigate societies that have non-functioning infrastructure, to build mass support to defy nation-state governments, to have allies when reporting sexual assault within a military structure, and to attempt to heal after committing violence as a military member.

The connections in these women's texts about war are the antithesis to the fragmentation and isolation of postmodern texts. That is not to say that the connections are essentially "feminine," warm and fuzzy, or idealized. In some cases, they are silent, grim, and painful. But there are connections, nonetheless. This is a distinction that makes these works have some degree of hope, however slight. That hope is not central or heavy-handed. In one of Katey Schultz's stories in *Flashes of War*, in fact, a military character says, "Hope is just a gravestone in this cemetery of a war" (118). But, I argue that the text as a whole belies that. Just a few stories later, another of Schultz's characters thinks, "hope seemed just as feasible" as a series of "unsettled" uncertainties (136). And Schultz's longer stories portray characters who show desire to move forward out of pain and stagnation, and they succeed in doing so through deep connections to others (Lillis in "Getting Perspective" with her husband's mother, and Nathan in "The

Quiet Kind” with his wife Tenley). Significantly, the deep connections can be found in each of the works discussed in this project: Helen Benedict’s novel *Sand Queen* (Kate with Jimmy, after her injuries and breakdown; Naema with her mother), Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (Leah with Anatole, Adah with her mother Orleanna), the twin sisters Zeta and Lecha in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, and several military women in the journalistic accounts with their mother, boyfriend, or children. The human connections made in these U.S. women’s writings set them apart from much of the other writing about late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century wars. In *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier’s Experience in Iraq*, Stacey Peebles asserts that

what is most evident in these narratives is the soldier’s desire to be truly “in between,” to break down and transcend the cultural and social categories that have traditionally defined identity. Ultimately, however, that desire is thwarted. War, and contemporary American war in particular, enforces categorization even as it forces encounters across the boundaries of media, gender, nation, and the body. (2)

However, the texts in this dissertation written by women about war reach beginning stages of that transcendence that Stacey Peebles states that so many texts about the recent wars see but are not able to reach. Peebles adds that “war thwarts the impulses to challenge binary modes of thinking . . . [the soldiers’] attempts to construct a viable alternative fail . . . [and the] resources [such as social media and online media] fail them as well” (3, 4). To counter that failure of resources, old technology can step in—direct

human connection and Story. Leslie Marmon Silko's poem in *Ceremony* is fruitful to read here:

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

It may be that new connections are made, and new stories told, such as with soldiers who have been deployed and had similar experiences. But stories and connections can provide partial steps to fight off "illness and death," whether it is deeper mental disturbance and suicide, such as in Benedict's *Sand Queen* and Katey Schultz's *Flashes of War*, the possibility of starvation without collective effort in Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, the gender violence and damage in the lives of military women, or colonial oppression and threat of cultural death in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*.

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