

Race And Gender in Electronic Media

Content, Context, Culture

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Chapter 5

The Challenge of Warrior Women

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“We kill for peace. We kill for each other.”
Army Captain Anastasia Breslow

Lioness

Introducing herself and the women who are the subjects of *Women Serving in War*, the documentary she narrates, Minnesota National Guard Medevac pilot Jennifer Merrill tells viewers, “I’m just a chick who flies . . . but these ladies, they’re the ones who laid the pathway for me . . . [They] went through a lot of grief and aggravation to allow us to follow in their footsteps” (Lamke & Halleen, 2014). In the United States, women such as these have had an official military presence since the establishment of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) in World War II (Meyer, 1996). With the end of conscription in 1973, the number of female service members has risen steadily; as of 2010, 14% of enlisted service members and 16% of commissioned officers were women (Patten & Parker, 2011, p. 4). Tanya Biank noted that as 11% of the fighting forces experiencing regular deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, “today’s generation of service-women [has] more war service than either their fathers or grandfathers” (2014, p. 5). Yet, in policy, law, and custom women are still Other to the norm of military masculinity (Enloe, 2000; Sjoberg, 2014).

Since September 11, 2001, U.S. media have addressed this otherness by producing a spate of non-fiction works about women in military service in Afghanistan and Iraq; an abbreviated list includes *The Lonely Soldier* (Benedict, 2009), *The Denver Post* series/digital newsbook “Betrayal in

the Ranks” (Herdy & Mofeitt, 2004), and PBS’s *Women in War* episode of the “Makers” series. Similar martial images and themes circulate through these texts to form what Stuart Hall has labeled a “regime of representation” (2001, p. 328)—in this case about women’s experiences in military service. Crucial to understanding any such regime is examining how its constitutive representations produce what Foucault calls “truths” and link these to “specific effects of power” (1977, p. 14): that is, “‘truth’ is linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it.” In this context, truths are relative, produced by discursive systems such as media, and may or may not be accurate or verifiable. However, it is not their accuracy or verifiability that makes them significant; instead, it is their use by powerful institutions such as the military and media that make truths seem to be true, regardless of their basis in actual fact.

This chapter thus explores, first, truths about women’s military experience produced by the regime of representation that I term Warrior Women, and, second, these truths’ circular relation to systems of power, particularly patriarchal power. To do so, I conduct a feminist analysis of six recently released, representative documentaries: *Lioness* (McLagan & Sommers, 2008), *Sisters in Arms* (Freeman, 2010), *Service: When Women Come Marching Home* (Rock & Stotter, 2012), *The Invisible War* (Dick & Ziering, 2012),¹ and two public television programs that aired in 2014, PBS’s *Women in War* (Grady & Ewing, 2014—an episode in the *Makers* series) and Twin Cities Public Television’s (TPT) program, *Women Serving in War* (Lamke & Halleen, 2014). Each of these documentaries has a companion web site and Facebook page, and several include more interactive digital platforms. I analyze all of this associated content to generate a full picture of this regime.

Theorizing Warrior Women

A representational regime is composed of media constructions linked intertextually, accumulating “meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images”; a regime, in other words, is “the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment” (Hall, 2001, p. 328). My analysis of the Warrior Women regime accounts for both words and images because in these documentaries’ numerous talking head segments, words work together with imagery to construct women as warriors. Former CIA agent Valerie Plame provided an example of such intertextuality, citing a popular TV program in her arch observation about the CIA’s early years: “it was a little bit like *Mad Men* with security clearances. The girls got the

coffee” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Hall (1997) noted that the representations a regime comprises are not simple reflections or re-presentations of the object(s) in a domain; rather, they discursively constitute the meanings of these objects, in part by persistently articulating—or connecting—specific meanings to an object or object domain and thus normalizing that meaning. These documentaries, for example, repeatedly articulate women to the military both to reveal the many roles women have held since World War II and to produce a regime of truth that normalizes women’s presence in this historically masculine institution. In this way they amplify other post-World War II TV and cinematic treatments of military women as documented by Tasker (2011).

The Warrior Women regime is part of a proliferation of military-themed popular culture produced since September 11, 2001 (Stahl, 2010), and serves various purposes, two of which are germane to this chapter: It provides a site where gender, race, and military policy intersect—a site where viewers may negotiate what it means to be a service woman; and, second, it offers opportunities for military policy activism. In their images and words, these documentaries use discursive techniques of equalization and differentiation to humanize service women, and, in Butler’s (2010) terms, make them both recognizable and grievable. Warrior Women thus positions service women as equals to service men—the martial subjects we have historically been conditioned to recognize and grieve as such. This regime’s system of power produces truths by illuminating women’s wartime labor, injuries, and deaths, and by indicting some aspects of the military’s treatment of women while overlooking others. A system such as this is compelling and invites further examination because, as Butler has argued, representations of war act as trajectories of affect; thus they orient audiences to understand, sympathize with, and even empathize with their subjects. TV news coverage, for example, “positions citizens as visual consumers of a violent conflict that happens elsewhere, at least in the United States where geographical distance from our so-called enemies allows us to wage war without close domestic scrutiny of our actions” (Butler, 2010, p. xv). Although Butler develops these concepts mainly to understand how media representations construct victims of war as more or less grievable, her argument is applicable to the documentaries I review here because of their collective project to constitute women as victims of unjust and even dangerous military policies and practices.

For Butler, recognizability is not simply a realization that another human is within our field of perception, but full comprehension or apprehension of that human life’s precariousness. Precariousness in this context “implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other . . . Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous” (2010, p. 14). Precariousness, Butler asserted, is “coextensive

with birth itself . . . which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands” (p. 14). Working in tandem with recognizability, grievability is a presupposition for recognizing that the loss of a person’s life would matter, and presents itself even at celebrations of birth. But she added that,

there can be no celebration without an implicit understanding that the life is grievable, that it would be grieved if it were lost, and that this future anterior is installed as the condition of its life . . . Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life . . . The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life.

(p. 15)

This is the chief challenge the Warrior Women regime poses to media studies scholars working with feminist and critical race theories: it constitutes women as recognizable, grievable martial subjects by highlighting their interdependence, competence, and suffering while perpetuating and normalizing militarism.² In this chapter, I argue that through the discursive strategies of equalization (casting service women as equals to service men), and differentiation (illuminating gender differences to the exclusion of race), Warrior Women constructs the military as a post-racial sisterhood whose geo-political objectives and impacts on civilian populations go unexamined.

Equalization: Women on Par with Men

As armed and uniformed Marine Staff Sergeant Juanita Towns walks down a dirt road in Afghanistan, her voiceover explains that she enjoys being out on patrol, just “like my brothers” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Although it is unclear whether Towns means her siblings or military colleagues, her statement characterizes the goal of equalization: to show that the qualities of a good soldier can be found among women as well as men. All of these films include scenes of service women and men working together in apparent harmony, intercut with women explaining why they enlisted and then stayed in the military.³ Wanting to serve their country and desiring military benefits top the list. CIA security analyst Gina Bennett summed up their sentiments when she asserted that, “women have been involved in war since the beginning of this nation, and we’re still trying to get society to accept that women have the same calling to securing their nation as men. It is no different” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Between their stated reasons for enlisting and images documenting their suffering—such as Sue Downes’ agonizing

recovery after her legs are blown off in an IED attack (Rock & Stotter, 2012)—these women become sympathetic, recognizable as warriors on par with the male soldiers long the proper martial subjects of our culture.

Like many men, service women enlisted to help with the war effort or from an ingrained sense of duty. Helen Miller, one of first female soldiers in the U.S. Army, enlisted with her friend at the beginning of World War II because, “we wanted to help get the war over with so that we could go on with our lives” (Lamke & Halleen, 2014). Lashonna Perry joined the Army in 2002 because she wanted to “help out” after the September 11th attacks (Rock & Stotter, 2012). Other women enlisted for familial reasons. Airman 1st Class Jessica Hinves’s family taught her that, “it’s every citizen’s duty to join the military; if you can, you should” (Dick & Ziering, 2012). Alexis Courneen joined the Coast Guard to honor her veteran grandfathers and aunt: “of course that’s what I wanted to do. Because there’s nothing you can give back greater. There’s no better sense of pride than [the military]” (Rock & Stotter, 2012). Embedded even in the derisive comments about female Army nurses made by one ABC news correspondent is recognition of their similarity to service men: “There’s nothing like a dame, and the dames have finally come to the South Vietnamese war. This week about 38 pretty, young American Army nurses landed at Qui Nhon to help set up a huge, mobile field hospital. These girls are in good spirits, like most of the Americans in Vietnam” (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

Just as a desire to serve one’s country is an equal opportunity motivator, so too are the material benefits that inspire women to enlist—especially after 1967 when President Johnson lifted the cap imposed by the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act of 1948, which had limited the number of women to 2% of total enlistment. Johnson’s move permitted women to be promoted to higher pay grades and ranks (WREI, 2013, p. 9), making the military a more attractive career option for women. By the end of conscription six years later, women were joining in much higher numbers (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Despite this trend, however, all branches of the military realized they needed to change recruitment tactics so that women would continue to enlist. “Young women,” Christiane Amanpour observed, “were definitely part of the marketing plan” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Recruiting ads in the 1970s used Second Wave feminist appeals including wage equity, work opportunities, and financial independence. One ad’s voiceover, for example, claimed the Air Force as “a *now* place to be,” with “exciting, glamorous” scientific and research jobs “open to a girl.” An ad for the Navy featured African American women, jazzy background music, and a hip-sounding male voiceover explaining that women “make the same pay as a man doing the same job and get the same advantages as a man. It’s opportunity, advancement, good pay, equality. The new Navy” (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

In Warrior Women documentaries, women voice their attraction to the military for reasons strikingly similar to those found in early ads: to be challenged by their work, afford college tuition or travel, and to acquire training for jobs such as helicopter pilot. These women confirmed that the marketing plan was indeed successful because all of them—even those suffering from PTSD—reported that they found military service to be beneficial. For example, Peggy Swanson of the World War II Army Air Corps said of her service experience that, “I think it made me a better person. It was a good experience. I don’t regret any bit of it” (Lamke & Halleen, 2014). Former war correspondent Molly Moore pointed to women making the military a more populist organization: as women joined the military in increasing numbers, the military became a “microcosm of our society . . . You . . . look at the women who are breaking the glass ceiling and becoming CEOs, that’s always going to be a very small percentage of women. But . . . women who are joining the military they’re your neighbors, your family members, your friends next door” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). A key point made in all of these documentaries is that women take pride in their military service, a sentiment that helps to normalize women warriors by illustrating that in this way, too, women are indistinguishable from men.

Women’s experiences around the front line during contemporary warfare illustrate both their similarity to and difference from service men. Along with other accounts (e.g., Benedict, 2009), these documentaries show that troops need not seek out combat because rapidly changing and multiple front lines bring the fight to them, often unexpectedly; this feature of modern warfare has made enforcing gender segregation of troops impossible. Women have been in and around combat since at least the 1989 invasion of Panama when the first woman officially led men into battle. For example, Air National Guard Major M. J. Hegar flew more than 100 search and rescue missions in Afghanistan, one in which her helicopter was shot down. Recounting how she shot back at “the enemy” while being rescued, Hegar boasted, “I have that warrior spirit. And it came out” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey acknowledged that in Iraq and Afghanistan “there was no front line, there was no rear . . . This notion that you could somehow segment the environment” to separate women from men “just fell apart . . . it was an anachronism of history at that point” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Although the combat exclusion’s official demise came in 2013,⁴ it was in place when these documentaries were produced, and confusion about its enforcement permeates the accounts of the service women featured in them.

Lioness (McLagan & Sommers, 2008) and *Sisters in Arms* (Freeman, 2010) focus much more on combat than do the other documentaries, and detail multiple problems women encounter when involved in fighting.

Canada opened its combat forces to women in 1989, so the soldiers appearing in *Sisters in Arms* were trained to fight; although they too experienced PTSD, their reminiscences lack the sense of betrayal U.S. women voiced after finding themselves in firefights, untrained in how best to fight back. The women featured in *Lioness* were part of the Army's Team Lioness, created in 2003 to foster a sense of cohesion among the female support soldiers accompanying male combat units on missions in Iraq. The film showcased activities that only they could perform, such as patting down Iraqi women to ensure they weren't smuggling weapons (McLagan & Sommer, 2008). *Lioness's* scenes from Iraq show that being attached to combat units meant women were in the line of fire just as men were, yet they received neither training nor credit for enduring these conditions. The father of one Lioness even reported proudly (with tongue in cheek, one hopes) that his daughter was the best shot in her platoon not because she had been trained by the Army, but because she spent so much time "shooting all of them squirrels in Arkansas" (McLagan & Sommer, 2008). Non-Lioness female support teams also expressed dismay that they could not be rewarded for their combat-related contributions and sacrifices (some had limbs blown off, for example), and were even criticized for having a negative effect on *esprit de corps*. The latter accusation was countered by Joint Chiefs General Dempsey, however, who asserted that "not only were women competent, but they made us a better military" (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

All of these accounts serve to make women recognizable as warriors in terms Butler (2004) explained: "To ask for recognition . . . is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (p. 44). By making visible service women's competencies, suffering, and sacrifices, the Warrior Women regime enables their transformation to recognizability as it diminishes their status as Other to this martial realm.

Differentiation: Women Changing Warfare

Warrior Women documentaries position military women as equal to their male counterparts; but as they establish parity, they also identify how gender difference plays out, both praising women for actions that only they can undertake and revealing gender-specific dangers of military service. Deploying difference to military advantage, women warriors work to, as Christiane Amanpour contended, "fundamentally redefine what war is and who our warriors are" (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

These documentaries typically make claims about women's positive impacts using essentialist terms, exemplified in CIA Analyst Gina Bennett's assertion that women are "patient, tenacious, and strategic in

our perspective. Very long term in our focus” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Featured in *Sisters in Arms*, Corporal Katie Hodges suggested that, “a woman maybe brings more patience to the job than a man. We have a different outlook on everything. I think it’s fair to say that women are somewhat more emotional than men. I know I am. I think that’s just the basic chemistry within us” (Freeman, 2010). Such comments about putative gender-specific traits construct them as beneficial overall, particularly in segments depicting activities only service *women* can do.

When the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq two years later, the Pentagon recognized the need for female troops to work with Muslim women, many of whom were not permitted to speak to or otherwise engage with men. Team Lioness was therefore created and dispatched to Iraq, while other female engagement teams were sent to Afghanistan. Lioness Ranie Ruthig remembered that most of their missions took place at night, when families were likely to be at home. Her voiceover narrates scenes of male soldiers securing an area after breaking down the doors of family homes, followed by Lionesses engaging women and children she described as “panic stricken” in order to gather intelligence. Rebecca Nava recounted giving “[Iraqi] kids candy, school supplies” in order to win their trust. Ruthig expressed regret about these tactics: “I felt like the Gestapo. All I could think of is what I’d do if they did this to me” (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Anastasia Breslow read from her war diary a comment that if roles were reversed and she had been in the families whose homes were being invaded, she might plot against them too. Her entry ended with a weak reassurance: “We just have to have faith in the intel that these people are doing wrong” (McLagan & Sommers, 2014). In Afghanistan, female engagement teams worked to get from women intelligence about the location of Taliban forces and search for weapons women might be carrying under their robes. To accomplish these tasks, the female soldiers featured in *Women in War* tied on headscarves before donning helmets to patrol with the men; this gender signifier enabled what Marine Staff Sergeant Juanita Towns explained was “a lot of searching . . . We were looking for weapons, pistols, any kind of contraband they’re not supposed to have” (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Scenes such as these from Iraq and Afghanistan show women warriors behaving as humanely toward women and children as their missions allowed, a suggestion that they make for a kinder, gentler combat force.

Women warriors also display compassion while recounting their military experiences. Army nurses Mary Beth Crowley and Donna Korf both expressed distress about having been in the midst of injury and death—especially of children—during the Vietnam War. Crowley remembered that, “I think what got me through it, was I used to cry in the shower. Almost every day.” Korf, too, acknowledged crying about the many injured young people she encountered until, “one day you stop crying.”

“You had to be strong,” her interviewer affirmed; Korf replied: “Yes, and so did they . . . They took a lot of pain” (Lamke & Halleen, 2014). In 2002, Major General Heidi Brown led the only Army air defense force in Iraq. When one of her convoys was attacked, troops were taken prisoner while others were killed. Asked about the experience of losing soldiers under her command, a visibly distressed Brown replied that she felt “like a parent losing a child” (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

In addition to the mix of emotions they voice about about being involved in wartime brutality, women warriors openly express dismay and frustration at encountering gendered barriers to carrying out their duties. This is especially evident when they discuss combat, sexual harassment, and assault. In 2004, the Lionesses were involved in the deadly and destructive battle for Ramadi, a city in Iraq’s largest province of Anbar. “If you control Anbar, you control Iraq,” a male commander asserted (McLagan & Sommers, 2008). Despite being in firefights and sustaining injuries in Ramadi, the Lionesses received no credit for having been there—they were officially prohibited from fighting. In one poignant scene, the Lionesses gather for an informal reunion. After they greet each other and gush over Nava’s infant, they settle into their seats to view *Shoot Out at Ramadi*, a History Channel documentary. When they discover their absence from the program’s recounting of events, one observed that the film seemed to go out of its way to render them invisible. “That was *our* mission,” another declared with disappointment (McLagan & Sommers, 2008).

The Lionesses’ experiences and those of other women warriors in this regime illustrate how gender difference can exacerbate dangerous conditions when fighting breaks out. Voicing sentiments common to many of the women, Army nurse and Vietnam veteran Diane Carlson Evans observed that, “the combat zone [was] 360 degrees around you,” and the only difference between the women and men “was we could be shot at, but we couldn’t shoot back.” Besides being perilous for women, this maintained a system in which women were “second class citizens,” averred retired Brigadier General Pat Foote (Grady & Ewing, 2014).

Warrior Women documentaries all contain troubling accounts of male soldiers and military brass being hostile to women, but *Service* and *The Invisible War* focus most on stories about two other gendered hazards:⁵ sexual assault and harassment. Sexual assault and harassment have long been problems in the military; although prior to 2012 several works documented the pervasiveness of military sexual assault, their authors were not able to draw Congressional attention to it. *The Invisible War* was different; its director and producer brought its exposé to the civilian public and the military in town-hall meetings to illuminate the twin problems of sexual assault and its subsequent (mis)treatment: women who reported their attacks were considered troublemakers, faced retaliation, and had

little chance of seeing their perpetrator(s) punished, let alone prosecuted. Appearing in *Women in War*, Molly Moore affirmed *The Invisible War*'s narrative when she recounted her reporting on the numerous sexual assaults that occurred during the Navy's 1991 Tailhook convention. She noted wryly that women who had been attacked there faced many obstacles to getting their cases treated fairly because, "if there's one thing the military hates it's a trouble maker. And especially a female trouble maker" (Grady & Ewing, 2014). Warrior Women documentaries illustrate that simply being a woman is risky in a military that discourages sexual assault reporting yet maintains what one veteran called a "target rich environment" for sexual predators (Dick & Ziering, 2012). Former Marine 1st Lieutenant Ariana Klay's story in *The Invisible War* exemplifies this problem. Klay was stationed at Marine Barracks Washington (MBW), a prestigious assignment for which only the best Marines are recommended. When she arrived several of the male Marines declared to her that women at MBW were nothing more than "walking mattresses," there for the sole purpose of being "fucked." Soon thereafter, one of Klay's fellow officers raped her. Despite being told that she would be killed if she reported it, Klay did report the rape, only to see it covered up by other MBW officers. Then, like so many other service women who survive sexual assault, Klay attempted suicide—an experience she and her husband recall with palpable anguish (Dick & Ziering, 2012).

Both *The Invisible War* and *Service* reveal how common sexual abuse is for service women and how poorly the military both prevents and prosecutes it. These problems continue for many women once they are discharged and need the services of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Although the VA's generally poor treatment of veterans experiencing PTSD and suicidal depression has recently come to light in news reports, *Lioness*, *Service*, and *The Invisible War* demonstrate how much worse its treatment of female veterans is, particularly those experiencing what the VA terms "military sexual trauma." From a dearth of professionals trained to treat sexual trauma to facilities that lack privacy for women using its services, the VA has proved dangerously ill equipped to treat women warriors, according to these documentaries.

Although the Warrior Women regime highlights numerous perils women face during and after military service, its exclusive focus on gender precludes an intersectional analysis that would consider how racial difference affects service women. Such inattention to race marks Warrior Women as postracial because despite featuring many women of color, none of them is asked whether she has experienced racism during her service, a time when race discrimination is common. According to Dempsey and Shapiro (2009), Hispanic and African American troops report "discrimination within their units and in the Army at large at much higher rates than common narratives of Army life would suggest" (p. 546).

Additionally, the only two veterans in these films who mention being homeless after returning from service are African American (Rock & Stotter, 2012). Their stories indicate that African American veterans face more difficulties returning home than do their white counterparts, but Warrior Women filmmakers fail to address this issue. Filmmakers sensitized to how race and gender intersect to produce differential relationships to institutional power and poverty might have pursued this as part of their project to improve the military for women; but absent such a discussion, Warrior Women “obfuscate[s] institutional racism” of the sort reported by Dempsey and Shapiro, and subtly “blames continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves and their families” (Squires, 2014, p. 6). A lack of engagement with racial oppression weakens Warrior Women’s attempts to cast service women as recognizable subjects as it renders invisible a system of oppression that systematically degrades the lives of women of color.

Spreadable Activism

Warrior Women’s boundaries extend to the digital platforms associated with each documentary, and, for those that have been broadcast, to the comments sections of broadcasters’ sites. These digital sites offer motivated viewers opportunities to engage in self-care and policy activism, thus making them spreadable. Spreadability here refers to means by which media texts may be changed and recirculated in their new form, exchanged as social currency, or used to spur activism. In a description apt for this chapter, Jenkins, Ford, and Green explained that, “the spreadability paradigm assumes that anything worth hearing will circulate through any and all available channels, potentially moving audiences from peripheral awareness to active engagement” (2013, p. 7). Active engagement is what the Warrior Women regime seeks; to achieve it, each documentary’s web site includes links to content that models or enables activism: news stories about filmmakers meeting with legislators to advocate for military policy changes or interviews with the filmmakers, for example. Each website also includes a link to the film’s Facebook page, where visitors can participate in conversations about the issues it raises; in some cases, websites include links to a related Twitter feed, YouTube channel, blog, or, as with *Service*, podcast.

The Invisible War has proved particularly spreadable, extending to town-hall meetings accompanying film screenings (some on or near military bases), PBS broadcasts, print media, the Web, Twitter, Facebook, and iTunes. Content on these sites is meant to impel public activism to remedy the military justice system’s failure to prosecute perpetrators of sexual assault (Dick, 2013). For example, just prior to *The Invisible War*’s PBS broadcast in May, 2013, the Independent Lens blog posted an interview

with Dick, who touts the film. Viewers have been “outraged and moved and compelled to want to take action and help,” he claimed. Further,

most of the people in the film have seen it—and they have been very, very pleased—they all have said the experience of participating in the film has significantly changed their lives for the better—it’s been surprising [*sic*] therapeutic and empowering—they no longer feel invisible and discarded and ashamed. They feel validated and it’s renewed their faith and trust in others.

(Independent Lens, 2013)

In another interview, Dick and producer Amy Ziering directed viewers to the NotInvisible.org website, which urges visitors to “demand change” by signing a petition; to “host a screening . . . to spark conversation, awareness and change”; to donate to the Artemis Rising Invisible War Recovery Program; and to “join the conversation” protesting military sexual abuse on *The Invisible War* Twitter feed (Kim, 2012). Among the many resource organizations NotInvisible.org links to is RAINN (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network), which has partnered with the Department of Defense’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) to host a hotline for military sexual assault survivors and design a mobile self care app: “DOD Safe Helpline.” This app

gives members of the military community access to resources and tools to help manage the short- and long-term effects of sexual assault. The app helps you create a plan that is right for you, from exercises that aid in reducing stress to tools to help you transition to civilian life. You can even store your customized plans and exercises so you can refer back to them at any time.

(iTunes, n.d.)

Like that of *The Invisible War*, *Service*’s home page includes a short video trailer above a provocative diary entry: “Dear Diary, I left Afghanistan a year ago yesterday and I don’t feel like having sex with my husband in Kansas tonight cuz he woke me up from a flashback where I saw Tim’s arm lying in the sand.” A description of the film follows, explaining that *Service* is “part of a much larger project. Through robust social media, SERVICE continues supporting women through open and closed Facebook groups where women can exchange information, find friendship and share solutions that have changed their lives” (“About the Documentary,” n.d.). From this page visitors can connect with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) organization, which assists injured veterans in their recoveries.

Warrior Women documentaries do not flinch from presenting difficult and painful consequences of women’s military service, doing so to make

women recognizable and grievable to military personnel and civilians alike. These affective renderings of service women's experiences that permeate *Warrior Women* offer viewers a space in which to engage with women warriors at a personal level—to grieve with them—then align themselves with projects meant to alleviate their suffering. The expressions of grief depicted throughout the *Warrior Women* regime exemplify what Butler (2004) contended: that grief

furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order . . . by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against.
(pp. 22–23)

These documentaries offer a sense of political community by first constructing a trajectory of affect along which viewers may align themselves, and then detailing concrete policy changes meant to help women warriors: eliminating combat exclusions, making the VA more responsive to women veterans, and moving sexual assault prosecutions outside of the military chain of command, and more. The Military Justice Improvement Act addresses the flawed assault prosecution system, and has been sponsored most visibly by New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (and blocked for a second time in the Senate in June, 2015); Gillibrand wrote the legislation after viewing *The Invisible War*, finding herself “gripped with anger and disgust and determination that I was going to do something about it” (Zremski, 2014). Given Gillibrand's and others' statements about the effectiveness of these documentaries, the claim that they have played a significant role in ameliorating some of the problems faced by warrior women is plausible.

Challenging Warrior Women

Perhaps paradoxically, these documentaries' project of making post 9/11 women warriors grievable and recognizable poses challenges to media studies researchers interested in social justice. *Warrior Women* films construct military gender integration as a civil rights issue and celebrate women's participation in this struggle as a “sign of American modernity and democracy” (Tasker, 2011, p. 206). But Tasker cautioned that, “we should not romanticize or simply celebrate [military women]. It is clear that to a large extent a place appears for military women as and when their labor is required”; what's more, in “our current historical context of open-ended war and ongoing military interventions, that labor has been integral to American assertions of military authority” (p. 15). The subjects of *Warrior Women*

work in the conflicted manner Tasker described: although they become recognizable and grievable combatting military patriarchy, their uncritical acceptance of the military's martial objectives serve to legitimate the violence on which military authority depends. And although Gray focused on racial difference, his point may be germane for Warrior Women as well:

The connection between the promise of seeing more diversity in media and post-9/11 attacks on the United States links the regulatory role of race and difference with the discourse of homeland security and global terrorism. Domestically the discourse of racial diversity serves as an alibi for racializing and securing the "homeland" through increased surveillance, incarceration, and militarization in the name of national security.

(Gray, 2013, p. 774)

In a similar way, Warrior Women works to diversify military-themed media by incorporating service women's experiences into them. However, the regime can also work as an "alibi" for normalizing and even intensifying militarism when its presence can be justified by kinder, gentler women warriors. Since 9/11, U.S. militarism such as that Warrior Women depicts has become commonplace—a situation I believe feminists should call out and interrupt whenever possible, if for no other reason than to challenge the violence and destruction accompanying it.

Feminists (and everyone else) should also be concerned about militarism, both because military service can have problematic consequences for women and because war devastates the populations subjected to it. According to Zarembo (2015), the rate of suicide among female veterans is about six times that of civilian women—a figure one epidemiologist called "staggering" and "obscenely high."⁶ And then there is the death and injury toll incurred by war. Among Afghans and Pakistanis, the death toll from the U.S. war in Afghanistan is about 149,000; another 162,000 people have been injured (Crawford, 2015). When Iraqi, U.S. military and private contractor deaths are factored in, the number of direct war deaths rises to 350,000. The economic cost of these wars is also remarkable: the US alone has already spent or obligated \$4.4 trillion (Costs of War, 2014).

But these figures do not appear anywhere in Warrior Women, which renders war as if its human and material costs are borne almost entirely by the U.S. military. Although military service women endure an unimaginable amount of suffering in the performance of military duties, so too do the individuals living in lands the US has invaded. Militarism works against the goals of social justice that are part and parcel of feminist work by legitimating the notion that "we kill for peace," as Lioness Anastasia Breslow put it. If feminists are to challenge militarism, we might start by refusing to accept the dangerous truths the Warrior Women regime

perpetuates, and instead cast peacekeepers and pacifists as heroic. In this way we can create our own mission—this one for the purpose of accomplishing representational regime change.

Notes

- 1 Four of these documentaries were broadcast after being released in theaters and on DVD: *Lioness* appeared on PBS's Independent Lens in 2008; *Sisters in Arms* aired on BBC Radio 4 in 2013; *Service: When Women Came Marching Home* was broadcast on numerous local TV stations in 39 states; and *The Invisible War* appeared on PBS's Independent Lens in 2013.

- 2 Cynthia Enloe's definition of militarization guides my work:

Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal. Militarization, that is, involves cultural as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations.

(2000, p. 3)

- 3 Warrior Women documentaries suggest that because U.S. service women enlisted voluntarily this is a sign they are committed to military life. Although service men who enlisted after the end of conscription did so voluntarily, that is not necessarily true prior to 1973 when many men were drafted—at times against their will.
- 4 In 2013 the Pentagon eliminated its combat exclusion policy for women, giving the branches of the military and the Special Operations Command three years in which to allow women to have access to about 250,000 jobs (Haring, 2014).
- 5 *The Invisible War* shows that service men are also victims of sexual assault; they, like women, experience negative effects of their attacks long after they occurred. Because they are the majority of military service members, more service men than women have been sexually assaulted, and they are less likely to report their attacks than are women (Dick & Ziering, 2012). But no matter the gender of the victims, sexual violence has its roots in patriarchal power. About male rape, Scarce wrote that rape is a “political weapon that is wielded by those who have more power over those who have less power” (2001, p. 234). In a rigidly hierarchical institution such as the military that has a history of enlisting sexual predators, rape has become an occupational hazard (Dick & Ziering, 2012). This has institution-wide consequences: as Joint Chief General Dempsey pointed out, sexual harassment erodes trust between soldiers, and trust is necessary for maintaining the military's effectiveness (Grady & Ewing, 2014).
- 6 Male veterans are also prone to suicide, especially those age 30 and younger; their rate of suicide is about three times higher than that of civilian men in the same age group (NBC, 2014).

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