

ARTICLE

Tactical tactility: Warfare, Gender, and Cultural intelligence

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Abstract

The participation of women in the landscape of warfare is increasingly visible; nowhere is this more evident than in the US military's global endeavors. The US military's reliance on cultural intelligence in its conceptualization of engagement strategies has resulted in the articulation of specific gendered roles in warfare. Women are thought to be particularly well suited to non-violent tactile engagements with civilians in war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan because of gender segregation in public and private spaces. Women in the military have consequently been able to argue for recognition of their combat service by framing this work in the war zone as work only women can do. Women reporters have been able to develop profiles as media producers, commentators, and experts on foreign policy, women, and the military by producing intimate stories about the lives of civilians only they can access. The work soldiers and reporters do is located in the warzone, but in the realms of the domestic and social, in the periods between bursts of violent engagement. These women are deployed as mediators between civilian populations in Afghanistan and Iraq and occupying forces for different but related purposes. Soldiers do the auxiliary work of combat in these encounters, reporters produce knowledge that undergirds the military project. Their work in combat zones emphasizes the interpersonal and relational as forms of tactile engagement. In these roles, they are also often mediating

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between the “temporary” infrastructure of the war zone and occupation, and the “permanent” infrastructure of nation state, local government, and community. The work women do as soldiers and reporters operates effectively with the narrative of militarism as a means for liberating women, reinforcing the perception of the military as an institution that is increasingly progressive in its attitudes towards membership, and in its military strategies. When US military strategy focuses on cultural practice in Arab and Muslim societies, commanders operationalize women soldiers in the tactics of militarism, the liberation of Muslim women becomes central in news and governmental discourses alike, and the notion of “feminism” is drawn into the project of US militarism in Afghanistan and Iraq in complex ways that elucidate how gender, equality, and difference, can be deployed in service of warfare.

Introduction

United States militarism in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early twenty-first century has become entangled with feminist discourses in ways that are fraught, providing a means by which to examine how vague and varied notions of “feminism” come to circulate and gain visibility in public discourses on militarism. This is most evident in the public discourse on the liberation of Muslim women that has circulated since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, and in the discourse on gender equality in the military that has emerged over the last decade. The Pentagon’s decision to open all combat positions to women, allows the US military to present itself nationally and globally as an institution that is evolving, however incrementally, to embrace progressive values. This positioning results in a complex proliferation of positive and detrimental effects on different populations of marginalized and oppressed people in domestic and global contexts. Though women soldiers have long been present in the war zone, formal acknowledgement of women’s combat service becomes possible when Muslim women are central to the rhetoric of warfare, and cultural practices of gender segregation in Muslim societies are foregrounded in the development of military strategies in the war zone.

The interplay of the domestic and the global that forms the work

women do in the war zone as soldiers and as observers raises obvious questions about moments when militarism appears feminist. Postcolonial feminist theory has long contended with the domestic/global fault line, critiquing the globalization of secular-liberal feminism, the project of modernity, and normative liberal conceptualizations of agency, subjectivity, liberation, equality, and difference, by engaging with the broader contexts of colonialism and imperialism (Grewal and Kaplan, 2002; Mahmood, 2005; Mohanty, 1988). In the era of the War on Terror, radical, left, and anti-war academic and activist feminists have raised serious objections to ascribing feminist aims and principles to military projects, particularly when the rescue of Muslim women is invoked to garner public support for militarism (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Toor, 2012). Building on this literature, this analysis examines the progressive narrative that frames US women's participation in and support of militarism in relationship to the narrative in which militarism rescues and liberates women in other places. In these narratives, a particular War on Terror era manifestation of liberal feminism is deployed, one that argues not for gender neutrality or simply for equality in militarism, but for seeing the value of women in the war zone through the specificity of their difference, so that gender difference is accounted for as a benefit to militarism.

US women soldiers have a niche in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan through cultural outreach operations designed to engage civilians, specifically women, cloistered in domestic spaces. These combat operations focus on deciphering civilian needs and discerning the ways in which the military can fulfill those needs. They also emphasize creating ongoing relationships with civilians through which soldiers can de-escalate tensions. While carefully delineated from armed/violent combat operations in their practices and goals, these forms of outreach are not classified as logistical, and are instead thought about and discussed as explicit forms of tactical engagement in the war zone. To advocate for recognition of women's combat service on the front lines, and their use in tactical operations, female soldiers and veterans utilize women's experiences as part of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) deployed in

Afghanistan and the Lioness Program implemented in Iraq. These programs are a strategic element of the “stabilization” phase of militarism in Iraq and Afghanistan, otherwise known as Phase IV of military operations (Conrad, 2005). Unlike the initial burst of violent combat operations that characterize the invasion phase and that were soon declared done (by George W. Bush who proclaimed “Mission Accomplished” on 1 May 2003 on the US aircraft carrier the *USS Abraham Lincoln*), the stabilization (occupation) phase continues indeterminately. In the stabilization phase FETS and the Lioness Program play a significant role, making the work of women soldiers legible to military commanders, political actors, and the public. As a result, organizations such as the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) have successfully lobbied for formal recognition of women’s combat service.

The cumulative effect of this is that the particular forms of cultural work (outreach and intelligence gathering) that women soldiers are doing has been incorporated into the realm of tactical military strategy that uses nonviolent means to shape the trajectory of violent warfare. This trajectory is framed in reference to another implicit temporality, that of the evolving values and progressive aims of liberal societies in which warfare can work with progressive projects such as gender equality. The incorporation of progressive values does not limit or reduce the scope of violent military tactics; killing, imprisonment, and torture persist. Instead, it broadens the scope of military tactics so that now all modes of engagement are available, including forms of social and interpersonal tactility.

These forms of engagement are important as warfare extends over years, encompassing both the mission to thwart ongoing insurgent activity and the mission to develop infrastructure. Counterinsurgency, Laleh Khalili (2010) argues, is already gendered:

Counterinsurgency itself is presented as the opposite of a more mechanized, technologically advanced, higher-fire-power form of warfare. Given that the latter is often coded as hyper-masculine, the former is considered feminine...the very object of population-centric counterinsurgency would be perceived as feminine, since the focus

of counterinsurgency is the transformation of civilian allegiances and remaking of their social world. (p. 3)

Counterinsurgency encompasses development projects and the work of talking with civilians to ascertain the needs of different localities.¹ In the phases of simultaneous counterinsurgency and development, the interactions these women have are a tactical form of diplomatic tactile engagement organized around developing a mutual interdependence between the “permanent” local, civic infrastructure, and the “temporary” infrastructure of the war zone. Women’s work in the war zone calls into question the understanding of foreign military occupation as a state of impermanence positioned against the permanence of locally grown civic infrastructure. The development projects women soldiers are brokering with civilian leaders in specific localities embed the presence of the US military and allies into everyday civilian life, long after the physical withdrawal of troops. Conversely, the ongoing presence of militarism in the building of infrastructure is an ever-present reminder of the fragility of the local civilian and political infrastructure and its susceptibility to destabilization and future cycles of militarism and warfare.

The feminization of counterinsurgency and gender’s mobilization in military strategy work symbiotically with the use of gender to make sense of these military endeavors through the plight of Muslim women. Politicians and pundits in support of ongoing occupation often argue it is necessary for maintaining stability and security for women, particularly in the case of Afghanistan. The instrumentalization of women in this discourse creates a demand for the stories of Afghan women and Muslim women more broadly. In turn, that demand creates a niche for women journalists and filmmakers in knowledge production during the War on Terror; journalists and filmmakers mediate these women’s experiences for audiences and, in the process, elevate their reputations as wartime correspondents and commentators on policies regarding women’s liberation and war. Former ABC News journalist and reporter Gayle Tzemach Lemmon has published multiple books on the experiences of both Afghan women and US women soldiers as a result of the time she

spent in Afghanistan after the US invasion. She is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and writes regularly about militarism and women. Kim Barker, who covered Afghanistan as the South Asia Bureau Chief for the *Chicago Tribune*, went on to lecture about US foreign policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan at the Council on Foreign Relations. Her book, *The Taliban Shuffle*, has been adapted to a comedy feature film starring comedian Tina Fey titled *Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot*, which was released in 2016 by Paramount Pictures. The work these journalists do, albeit as observers rather than as direct participants, is an integral part of the war zone; the media they produce informs the discourse on militarism as a means of engendering liberation that permeates academic and popular culture. The expertise they cultivate and the cultural productions they appear in are often used in the public discourse to romanticize the presence of women in the war zone, without a sufficient interrogation of how they came to be in the war zone and the position they occupy as intermediaries and storytellers.

In past popular progressive and feminist narratives that shifted perceptions of women, work, and war, such as the Rosie the Riveter campaign during World War II or the enrollment of women in the West Point Academy in 1980, women were poised to take positions men usually occupy and do the job “just as well,” whereas now women participants and women observers come to the war zone to do work only women can do. In this way, women trained in the methods and processes of civilian engagement function as a technology or tool of militarism, using a particular set of skills deployed in combat. The use of women soldiers as a war zone technology of civilian engagement originates, in part, from the types of caring work women have traditionally done on the front lines (Enloe, 2000). However, those forms of caring work, such as nursing, were directed towards the care of the soldiers they were working alongside. In this contemporary context, caring work is reformulated into an external orientation, a mode of extraction that functions to gather intelligence from civilian populations who occupy a precarious position in between “us” and “them.” Women become “cultural experts” by doing this

work. The feminized warfare of cultural expertise also side-steps concerns about women's inability to meet the same physical standards male service members are held to, emphasizing the specificity of what women do outside of conventional forms of violent combat. Whereas the introduction of the difference of women's bodies into soldiering was once almost universally considered a dire threat to the project of militarism, here bodily difference is absorbed into the logics, strategies, and tools of combat, clarifying the function of gender as a technology of warfare.

Affirmation, tactility, and cultural competence

Technologies of early-twenty-first-century militarism are organized around the binary of remote engagement, drones and improvised explosive devices, for example, and immediate engagement between bodies in the war zone, as happens in ground combat. Categories emerge of "technologies of annihilation and technologies aimed at population management and life affirmation," (Nisa, 2015), and in turn annihilation and affirmation are articulated across the continuum of proximity. Technologies of annihilation, such as bombs, are ostensibly deployed in response to intelligence gathered about the enemy's positions and strategies. Technologies of population management and life affirmation are often deployed as a means of gathering intelligence, specifically "cultural" intelligence. It is in the practice of gathering "cultural intelligence" that women in the war zone have come to function as a technology of life affirmation, using diplomatic, affirmative, and tactile engagements. Tactile engagement references the use of touch and can be utilized in masculinized forms to kill, maim, and arrest. The affirmation work women do to build relationships with civilians requires other tactilities: conversation, visiting homes, and partaking of hospitality. The use of tactility in the service of life affirmation bridges the war zone infrastructure and the local civic infrastructure, fostering interdependencies based on mutual goals that are defined through the extraction of information about the needs of civilians and the needs of the military. The

use of women to do the affirmative work of extracting information in the context of Muslim societies is conceptualized in terms of cultural knowledge.

Cultural intelligence gathering is not a new strategy in warfare, but long-term warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq have intensified the thinking on “culture as a weapon system,” as Major General David R. Hogg put it in 2010 while head of Adviser Services in Afghanistan (Davis, 2010). Moreover, the particular ways in which culture is understood in conflicts in “the Muslim world” (informed by long-standing Orientalist tropes of savage, brutal men and harem women) explicitly centers gender and women in the tactical discussion. Gender, women, and femininity are collapsed in this tactical outlook into a category with its own particular technological potential. The type of intelligence these women gather may have pertinent information about military violence strategies; civilian women in rural Afghanistan, for example, have passed on information about insurgents and bomb makers in their areas. More often, however, the cultural intelligence women gather is utilized to ascertain the broader social-political landscape of alliances and enmities across different parts of the war zone in Iraq and Afghanistan, information that shapes future conceptualizations of both strategic violence and diplomacy (Bumiller, 2010b). The conversation about cultural knowledge’s tactical potential is sophisticated, prepared to address critiques of militarism; it argues for an evolved approach to the extraction and use of such knowledge.

Allison Abbe and Stephen M. Halpin are civilian psychologists working at the US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. They advocate for an emphasis on “cross-cultural competence” rather than cultural knowledge/understanding/awareness, particularly in the context of irregular warfare (persistent violent conflict between state and non-state actors). Abbe and Halpin argue that cultural knowledge focuses on the “lack of social maturity” perceived to exist in places like Iraq, and the ways in which these places differ from the US. Cross-cultural competence encompasses language skills and cultural knowledge, but extends beyond them; cross-cultural competence “skills encompass

the ability to regulate one's own reactions in a cross-cultural setting, interpersonal skills, and the flexibility to assume the perspective of someone from a different culture" (Abbe & Halpin, 2009, p. 10). Cross-cultural competence is characterized by reflection and restraint, juxtaposed against the aggression of ground combat. It also mirrors the apparent informed, coordinated restraint of drone warfare, another binary that has its own gendered characterizations.

Public discourse on US counterinsurgency strategies is primarily engaged with the costs and benefits of drone warfare over ground combat. The use of unmanned machines carrying out targeted assassinations of predetermined state enemies, which should ostensibly reduce casualties overall, appeals to a war-weary society and bolsters the mythologies of technological advancement and military intelligence.² Undoubtedly, drone warfare has its own tactile impact, but its remoteness, the deployment of bombs from far above and with the human hand managing them removed to a control room in a remote location, frames that form of tactility differently. Proximate outreach through cultural work mitigates other anxieties about the destruction that accompanies US militarism and further undergirds the narrative of a military that is gaining in intelligence and evolving.³ In their own ways, both remote and proximate tactile technologies promise a warfare that features targeted and precise encounters. This promise is part of a larger progressive fantasy substantiating the assertion that while twenty-first-century US and allied warfare is, of course, carried out in service of state interests, it is also a humanitarian endeavor (Atanoski, 2013; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002; Nisa, 2015). Women's work in the war zone is illustrative of the role gender plays in forming a practical and productive symbiosis between these apparently contradictory aims.

In the twentieth century, advancements in warfare technologies such as the atomic bomb were articulated in terms of the largest radius of annihilation they could accomplish.⁴ Twenty-first-century remote and proximate technologies are marketed in terms of their ability to achieve the smallest radius of impact—targeting individuals for execution or

diplomacy—and a clinical precision in their implementation. This apparent trajectory towards limited and precise warfare is always complicated by the messy and imprecise engagements of the war zone: drone strikes on hospitals and wedding celebrations that kill many innocent people at once, revelations of widespread practices of torture at Abu Ghraib and other sites, routine suicide bombings and assassinations, and moments in which soldiers have attacked civilians for sport.⁵ As warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan continues over a decade, these technological crises persist, routinely disrupting the prevailing logic: that these military endeavors are well thought-out, and are borne of good intelligence about the enemy's strategic maneuvers and expertise on the character of the enemy.

Soldiers of compassion

Reporter Gayle Tzemach Lemmon (2015) notes that the “cultural turn” came at a moment when commanders like Eric Olson were grappling with the fundamental ineffectuality of violence. Olsen and others theorized that warfare strategies erred too much toward the “hard side,” and not enough toward the “softer side: the knowledge based war” (p. 11). As the primary focus of military strategists in Iraq and Afghanistan shifted to defeating insurgencies, civilian women came to be seen as a source of “deep knowledge.” Additionally, civilian women could be “armed” to exert the right influence on husbands, brothers, and sons, who may be tempted to join insurgencies against allied troops. Given the socio-religious and cultural precepts prohibiting interactions between male soldiers and civilian women, the technology needed to extract deep knowledge from civilian women was determined to be other women, specifically women soldiers trained to engage in social and relational contact with civilians in war zones. In contrast to remote warfare technologies that target populations from above, women soldiers access populations on the ground, in close proximity. Interactions between the satellites above and the populations they surveil below are prohibited by distance, and missiles function as an emphatic and one-sided statement that leaves no room for

reply. Programs of nonviolent proximate tactile engagement are organized around interactions in which exchange is possible. It is in the possibilities of an exchange, facilitated by and through women, that these forms of tactile technological engagements influence the infrastructure of the war zone and militarism itself.

In the realm of media production, the rhetoric about the oppression of Muslim women and their portended liberation through allied military intervention led news organizations to embrace their own cultural inquiries.⁶ Although it may never have been formal policy on the part of news organizations to send women into the war zone to report on women civilians, the emphasis on the dire circumstances of Muslim women living under oppressive Muslim political regimes, and the desire to “hear” these women’s stories and “see” their faces, in conjunction with the increased demand for news about the war itself, increased opportunities for women to report from the war zone in greater numbers than in past conflicts. The heightened visibility of women reporters in the war zone did not go unnoticed by media outlets, and at different points the reporters themselves have become a part of the story (Ali, 2014b). The presence of North American and Western European women in the war zone is emblematic of a greater integration of women into economies from which they were once excluded. The presence of women reporters and soldiers “over there,” in high-risk situations that were once almost exclusively the domain of men, is a moment in which we can see the entrenchment and enactment of feminist principles of equality.

In combat zones, the notion of tactility and contact between populations is generally utilized in reference to the infliction and reception of aggression and violence: searches at checkpoints, patrols, night raids, firefights, and interrogations, for example. In the realm of war zone journalism, the journalist’s presence is conceptualized in terms of their proximity to the violence and the suffering inflicted by warfare. This type of tactility is associated with masculine ideals. In contrast to this type of masculine tactility, feminized and feminine notions of tactility emerge. Kim Rygiel (2016) maps the relationship between the masculine constructions

of the “citizen warrior” and the feminine construction of the citizen performing her duties in service of national protection on the “home front,” “in terms of sacrifice, care and emotional support”; she is a “soldier of compassion” (p. 150). The soldier of compassion does not use technology as we usually envision it, as “industrial machinery and military weapons...the tools of work and war” (Wajcman, 2010, p. 2). Instead, she is utilizing resources and gifts (such as medical supplies and toys), talk (soldiers are advised to begin with conversations about children and everyday domestic procedures), and rituals of hospitality (Bumiller, 2010a). Tactile engagements amongst women are less a reformulation of violent combat into feminine terms and more a case of summoning the “soldier of compassion” from the home front to the front lines.

Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times* refers to the deployment of women soldiers in these ways as “tea with a weapon missions” (2010a) because these women are tasked with listening, and thus their deployment provides an empathic audience for an unheard segment of the population. Reporters must also present themselves as empathic to extract stories of abuse, suffering, and, in some cases, triumphs of civilian women. Empathic presentation relies on the clear identification of gender difference; women soldiers are told not to hide their ponytails or other visible gender markers to differentiate themselves from male combat soldiers. The ostensible goal of this knowledge production is to create a body of intelligence that allows for the fantasy of precise and remote warfare and, by extension, warfare whose goals and methods are ethical, even humanitarian. This narrative of progressive warfare works symbiotically with the narrative of the military as a progressing institution, increasingly open to accommodating recent social shifts in regards to gender, sexuality, and identity.⁷ In this way, it becomes clear that the assimilation of women into the war zone is no longer considered a threat to the war zone, but has been transmuted into a discourse of benefit. Fears about women softening the brutality of warfare or making that brutality an unbearable burden on their male colleagues has given way to a practical instrumentalization of the very aspects of femininity that were

once considered problematic.

Though reporters do not act directly as agents of warfare, their participation in the production of knowledge about Muslim society, culture, and women contributes significantly to the cultural narrative employed by the military. Furthermore, they must sometimes rely on the military in order to do their work. In the war zone, reporters are often embedded with military installations in formal pre-arranged configurations, but these arrangements also emerge informally and spontaneously. In describing the difficulty of reaching activist Malalai Joya as Joya campaigned for office outside of Kabul, filmmaker Eva Mulvad tells an interviewer, “we almost gave up, until we found some Danish soldiers who had a cargo military plane going there. And we charmed ourselves into that plane and right away we got out there” (Brancaccio, Mulvad, & Joya, 2007). The forms of engagement that take place between military entities and journalists/filmmakers provide an additional dimension to our consideration of the engagements each has with civilians, as well as the ways in which the work of warfare and reporting are defined, and gendered, in relation to one another.

Women who are in the war zone making media are less likely to adopt the personae of bravado and/or stoic detachment that has been traditionally cultivated by the male war correspondent, who only occasionally succumbs to the affective dimension of warfare, often when it concerns the men who fight. This refusal is an advantage. In 2002, *Vanity Fair magazine* ran a story titled, “The Girls at the Front,” featuring reporter Marie Colvin, who sports an eye patch as a result of taking shrapnel to the eye while covering the war zone. Colvin is keen to make this differentiation: “Boys get fascinated by toys about age two, and that never changes... That’s not what I think is important about covering a war. I think the story is the people” (p. 127). Colvin’s statement suggests that as observers of warfare, women are less drawn to objects and more to human stories and experiences. A *Marie Claire* article celebrates the bravado female photojournalists display in the war zone, “where fear and violence are standard occupational hazards.” However, it is through the

“the female lens” that these women are able to see “beyond the chaos and carnage” to find “extraordinary moments of humanity and heroism” (“Through the Eyes of Female Photographers,” 2011)

As with soldiering, this commonsensical understanding of what women “see” in the war zone is no longer treated as an imposition on hard line reporting, but as a productive arena of coverage in which the stories of human beings are extracted to give dimension to warfare. These articles are rife with an assumption permeating public discourse: that women access humanity in war zones by virtue of a gendered mode of observation and spectatorship. In the stabilization phase of militarism, such stories turn the attention of audiences and pundits towards individual stories of liberation and achievement in the midst of abstract narratives about large-scale development projects and nation building, a combination of narratives that actively works to cultivate support for indefinite occupation. Observations on the state of Afghan and Iraqi women then go on to function as a measure for determining the successes and failures of the development project. Stories produced about women by women gauge whether militarism can produce liberation, the documenting of each woman’s tragedy and achievement signaling success or dire warning.

Outside of the war zone these stories create additional currency for their authors. Many women journalists convert their work in the war zone to real opportunities spanning the economy of knowledge production “back home,” where there is a market for foreign policy content framed as human interest. Amy Waldman reported for the *New York Times*’ Metro Desk for several years. Six weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Waldman was reporting from Iran, Russia, and Afghanistan. She would eventually become bureau chief in the region before returning to the United States to work at other news organizations and later take a fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. In the early days of the War on Terror, the US administration sought academic support for a cultural approach to militarism using texts like *The Arab Mind* (1973), by cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai, which purports to provide a comprehensive capture of ‘Arab’ sexuality, language, and politics, across time and across

region (Ali, 2014b). Patai went on to publish *The Jewish Mind* in 1977. In the academic setting of the Radcliffe Institute, Waldman's journalistic observations and reporting on warfare in Afghanistan are similarly taken up as an academically sanctioned source of knowledge, providing a basis for future understandings of militarism and gender liberation in "the Muslim world."

Much of the work of women journalists is about the people who inhabit the war zone with them: soldiers, aid workers, and the men, women, and children who live there. In the accounts of people's experiences is sometimes an implicit advocacy for the presence of US military in the region. Sometimes the advocacy is explicit, as in the case of the use of the image of a young Afghan woman, Bibi Aisha, taken by South African photographer Jodi Bieber. The portrait of Aisha's face, mutilated by her in-laws, was published July 2008 on the cover of *Time* magazine alongside the tag line "What Happens if we Leave Afghanistan," referring to the corresponding article by Aryn Baker, in which the then South Asia Bureau Chief expounds on the question of ongoing military occupation and its impact on the safety and security of Afghan women. The image won Bieber the World Press Photo Award in 2010.

Bieber's photograph entailed a degree of proximate engagement. This engagement is made explicit in her own account of photographing Aisha. Bieber took the photograph on a shoot in Afghanistan inside "Women for Afghan women," a women's shelter in Kabul. That Bieber's status as a woman, and a woman using gendered strategies of proximal engagement, gave her gendered affinity with the shelter and intimacy with her subject is underscored in Bieber's own account:

Before I start, I try to make a subject feel comfortable through small talk, and already I could see that Aisha was quite extraordinary. Then I began and it wasn't working so well, so I put the camera down and said: "Would it be possible to not think about what happened to you for a few minutes and just focus on your inner power and beauty?" So she did and I took the picture. (Phillips, 2011)

Proximate tactile engagements are not the only ways in which women participate in militarism. Eric Blanchard (2011) argues drone warfare has disrupted the fragile discursive relationship between masculinity and combat. Male drone pilots fear they are “cowards” because they do not put their own bodies in harm’s way. In the ranks of the military the remoteness of drone warfare poses a challenge to the figure of the male warrior who learns what masculinity is through engaged combat. For women soldiers, who have until now been formally excluded from combat, drone operation is a sought after opportunity to gain combat experience (Tickner & Sjoberg). Discourse on women operating drones emphasizes difference through displays femininity, Air Force Staff Sergeant “Anne” is described by a journalist as a drone pilot who adorns her headset with costume jewels and goes by the handle “Sparkle,” but the soldier herself retains some ambivalence about difference. The remoteness of drone warfare removes the question of women’s physical differences and how those differences may impact women’s performance in combat, but the tactility of drone warfare raises other anxieties around femininity, “when you hit a truck full of people, there are limbs and legs everywhere,” says Anne, “you have to watch that. You don’t get to turn away. You can’t be that soft girly traditional feminine and do the job. Those are the people who are going to have nightmares” (Maurer, 2015). Whether articulated in relationship to masculinity or femininity, anxieties about drone warfare are organized around proximity and tactility in relationship to violence; some worry they’re too far to properly touch violence, others are concerned distance alone won’t prevent violence from touching them too deeply.

Cultural Intelligence

Samuel Huntington’s assertion that the “Muslim world” and the secular “Western world” are destined for inevitable interminable conflict, what he termed the “clash of civilizations” (1993), has influenced the particular interventions of culture in military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. In her exposition of torture practiced on bodies of Afghans and Iraqis in this era

of militarism, Judith Butler (2008) notes that the particular strategies for the abuse and torture of Afghans and Iraqis was built on “bad anthropology.” This bad anthropology relies on texts such as Patai’s in which it is argued that the mind of an Arab is a particular object (Butler calls it a “ready object”), distinguishable from the Western mind (Butler, 2008). Patai’s text is part of the production of knowledge about “the Muslim world” that Edward Said identified as Orientalism (1979). This discourse, he argues, conjures an “imaginative geography” of the Muslim “world” and the Muslim “mind”. Based on this imaginary, culture becomes the sole mode of apprehension available to us to understand these conflicts, and gender and sexuality are central to these cultural formulations.

Butler illustrates how the emphasis on sexuality as a point of vulnerability amongst Muslim men drove the particular humiliations devised by their torturers. Jasbir Puar (2013) echoes this critique, and conceptualizes homonationalism as a means by which to interrogate liberal discourses on notions of sexuality, gender, and rights that bolster state power and that inform the currency of citizenship. Gender and sexuality have become central tenets around which the public discussion and thinking on Islam is organized. In the midst of this discourse is the eternally present question of whether societies and governments who identify primarily as Muslim adhere to values and beliefs that are fundamentally incompatible with Western liberal democracy. In the context of this discourse, the prominence of women in the strategies of militarism do the additional work of reinforcing the notion that Western liberal democracies are “farther along” on the progressive trajectory. This progressive trajectory works symbiotically with the assertion that US forms of warfare are humanitarian endeavors aimed at women’s liberation (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Hunt & Rygiel, 2006; Hesford, 2011; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002).

The presence of women permeates the infrastructure of early-twenty-first-century militarism. Women act as agents in the development of cultural knowledge/intelligence in a number of ways, including in

scientific and academic fields of inquiry. Women working as medical personnel have been responsible for treating prisoners of war and enemy combatants at prison sites in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantánamo Bay, in an inverted articulation of the soldier of compassion, providing care in the context of antagonistic intelligence gathering that includes the use of torture. Women working as psychologists have advised interrogations and torture, and women conduct interrogations. Each of these occupations situates the work of women differently, but, always, in relation to the role of the soldier of compassion employing technologies of care. Professional women who function as observers and lend their expertise to facilitate militarism, in ethically ambiguous situations, offer another perspective from which to assess the role of gender in the technologies of cultural intelligence.

The Human Terrain System (HTS), a program initiated in 2005 and finally discontinued in 2014, is another iteration of a cultural intelligence program that relies on the notion of tactile encounters organized around exchanges of information and resources. Devised by cultural anthropologists Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson, the HTS functioned as part of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command. The HTS recruited anthropologists, political scientists, and others to create teams of social scientists who traveled with soldiers, and in some cases were trained military personnel themselves. These teams moved about on the ground as attachments to combat platoons in the war zone, conducting the research that provided the basis from which soldiers were trained to engage with civilians. McFate, who vetted all participants in the program, once described her ideal candidate as someone who holds a PhD in Middle East Studies, is fluent in Arabic, and who is also a trained Navy Sea Air and Land Team (SEAL) member (Burleigh, 2007). The ideal agent of cultural intelligence has language capacity, a scholarly and historically grounded understanding of the place and its culture, and the physical strength and training of a soldier. These auxiliary agents of warfare indicate the trajectory of future conceptualizations of ideal soldiers, who can be engaged in both the diplomatic and the violent

engagements of the war zone.

In response to public condemnation from the American Anthropological Association, who stated the HTS exercised a “problematic application of anthropological expertise,” that violates the AAA’s code of ethics, HTS’s administrators sought to defend the program as a “cooler” approach to militarism. This approach can possibly circumvent the aggression of military violence, offering a pathway to an idealized targeted warfare in which civilians are less likely to be killed. McFate (2005) uses this logic to defend the practice of doing anthropological scholarship to explicitly aid the project of militarism in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Muslim world more generally. She argues, “without understanding of the population, the military is more likely to make grave errors resulting in the destruction of property and the loss of human life” (p. 27). McFate’s rationale invokes the archetype of the compassionate soldier. Through compassion, she can articulate an ethical position from which to function unfettered as a part of the project of gathering cultural knowledge. Women outside of the realm of active soldiering can be interpolated into the position of soldier of compassion in the war zone. What is more, the involvement of women is associated with an evolution in military strategy based in intelligence and reason. The project of gathering cultural intelligence in the war zone is porous, drawing varied forms of work associated with ascertaining the motivations and needs of human beings in the project of militarism.

The Human Terrain System manifested soon after the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as the anti-US insurgency continued unabated. The HTS sought to inscribe human beings into the geographical terrain that soldiers are familiarized with in training, in ways that go beyond envisioning civilians as obstacles around whom they must navigate when engaging in violent combat. The re-inscription of human beings into the terrain of the war zone as part of the “cultural turn” in military strategy quickly became an opportunity to formulate new strategies around “human terrain.” Cultural mappings of Afghanistan and Iraq made civilian women more visible to military strategists, and strategists began to conceptualize

the role these women could play in facilitating cooler relations between armed forces on both sides. The question of how to access civilian women was answered in the form of consolidating women soldiers who were functioning disparately in the war zone into all-female platoons, something commanders on the ground began doing early on in both the Iraq and Afghanistan military campaigns (Lemmon, 2015).

In 2003, prior to the official configuration of FETS (Female Engagement Teams) the Team Lioness Program was implemented. The Lioness Teams served to perform critical proximal labor in regions where the touching or searching of women by men is prohibited. In order to find soldiers to serve on Team Lioness, commanders hastily gathered women from positions as drivers, mechanics, medics, and civil affairs officers. these women soldiers accompanied male platoons “outside of the wire” to talk to Afghan women, in some cases implementing livelihood projects with the women (Lemmon, 2015). In the combat zone they were assigned the tasks of distributing information to local women and families and gathering intelligence, as well as searching women’s bodies for weapons and verifying that individuals who appeared to be women were, in fact, women. In 2009, Matt Pottinger, a journalist-turned lieutenant officer in the United States Marines Corps, surmised women would be necessary to conduct raids in Farah province in Afghanistan. Relying on the expertise of Sarah Chayes, an American journalist who had lived in Afghanistan for several years, Pottinger implemented a training program that would result in the first Female Engagement Team. Lemmon writes, “With his commander’s approval, Pottinger assembled a group of seven female Marines and one female interpreter, and over a period of several days led impromptu lessons on Afghan culture, proper search techniques and how to conduct tactical questioning” (2015, p. 10).

Another main player in the implementation of these programs is former Marine and then civilian advisor, Claire Russo. Upon hearing of Pottinger’s experiments with women platoons, Russo set out to implement a version of the program in the Army; Lemmon writes that Russo traveled to Afghanistan “as part of a civilian team created to help the Army better

understand the cultural terrain” (2015, p. 10).⁸ As architects of these programs and foreigners in Afghanistan, Pottinger and Russo employed ethnic intermediaries to do the work of translation, both in terms of language and in terms of culture. Afghan-American linguist Hali Jilani also participated in the development of the FET program. Social scientist and consultant Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam helped launch the HTS. At one point, Azarbaijani-Moghaddam advised Major General Nick Carter, head of the NATO forces in southern Afghanistan (Hodge, 2010). Both women are ethnically Afghan but were educated in Europe; in different forums, they articulate hybrid experiences of mobility, simultaneously identifying as within and outside of the experience of being Afghan.⁹ Like many others in the war zone who do the work of cultural intelligence gathering, both women continued to work with and for the US and UK military and as a result are given opportunities to act in an advisory capacity in foreign policy discussions. Azarbaijani-Moghaddam is a regular contributor to the Middle East institute and, in 2014, she wrote a working paper on FETS for NATO titled, “Seeking Out their Afghan Sisters,” a 2010 article for *The Nation*, Ann Jones describes Jilani as a “cultural advisor” to the US marines. Jilani and Azarbaijani-Moghaddam see their work as an opportunity to avoid “misunderstandings” that result in civilian casualties, and express unwavering support of US and allied militarism in the region.

Conclusion

The positive aspects of the work of women soldiers and journalists in the war zone are not difficult to ascertain. Women reporters do the work of recording and broadcasting Afghan women’s stories in spaces where these women are usually absent, to audiences who may have no other means by which to learn about them. Soldiers work with civilians to develop resources, increasing women’s access to healthcare by bridging the physical space between male healthcare workers and women who would otherwise be out of reach; they help to reduce illiteracy in rural areas (McBride & Wibben, 2012). Their presence is indicative of a

“cooler” militarism, focused on the circumvention of future episodes of violence and the preemptive defeat of violent threats via intelligence. The work women do in the war zone has afforded women in the military a pathway to making material gains, in terms of career and promotion, salary, and veteran’s benefits. This is important as long as military service continues to be one of the limited means by which people can access some form of economic stability and potential upward mobility. The work these women do is also one of the few contexts in which Muslim women are talked about and talked to outside of stories of trauma and victimhood; as partners in cultural intelligence gathering, Muslim women gain recognition as sources of influence in the household, and as crucial actors in politics and militarism. As a result, Afghan women have significantly increased visibility on the world stage.

The purpose of their engagements are to “chang[e] the ‘story in a given space’” (McBride & Wibben, 2012, p. 206), getting residents to invest in a long-term future rather than the immediate gains promised by insurgents. Changing the story is dependent upon the precise deployment of gender. “Don’t start by firing off questions, do break the ice by playing with the children, don’t let your interpreter hijack the conversation,” they are told (Bumiller, 2010b). The training women soldiers receive is aimed at achieving a balance between maximizing the perception of themselves as non-violent and helpful, while remaining firm and insistent on their goals, illustrating how gendered forms of interpersonal engagement are rendered into technologies. Women’s approach to tactility must be conversational, not confrontational. Technologies of affirmation emphasize mutually constructive engagement. Who best to articulate this than the soldier of compassion? The soldier of compassion approaches day-to-day sociality at a proximate level, engaging with women about the mundane and tactile work of running a domestic household with inquiries into community needs, suggesting ways in which the military can fulfill those needs—and in the course of this proximate outreach, the soldier of compassion extracts information about alliances and enmities in the local political and military hierarchies, information that may directly benefit

military intelligence. The labor of the soldier of compassion visible the ways in which counterinsurgency and development are mutually dependent, and therefore the ways in which Iraqi and Afghan civilians and allied military forces can develop a mutually beneficial partnership. The purpose of their work is, of course, to foster a sense of mutual reliance between residents of Iraq and Afghanistan and the military infrastructure of occupation, as Bumiller makes clear in her report for *The New York Times* on the benefits of putting women at the scene:

In the wake of several years of destruction, women enter the scene: As envisioned, the teams will work like American politicians who campaign door to door and learn what voters care about. A team is to arrive in a village, get permission from the male elder to speak with the women, settle into a compound, hand out school supplies and medicine, drink tea, make conversation and, ideally, get information about the village, local grievances and the Taliban.

(Bumiller, 2010b)

Tactile engagements in the war zone in Afghanistan and Iraq encourage women soldiers to see difference from men as a strength, women have their own work to do. In soldiering, and in corporate and academic environments, women are told to avoid overt performances of femininity in favor of more neutral enactments in which women “prove” that they are capable of working to task as equals to men. But in the twenty-first-century project of counterinsurgency in the “Muslim world,” a reconfiguration of such logics occurs, and women’s success in the war zone is dependent upon an explicit display of femininity. Both reporters and soldiers depend upon the clear recognition of their gender and the positions they occupy as not-men to gain access to civilian women and to not be viewed as a threat to men. Commanders and commentators still harbor anxieties about the potential psychological and physical vulnerabilities of women in combat, but these anxieties are far outweighed by the collective imagination of the productive ways in which women can transform militarism.

The enthusiasm about the increasing presence of women soldiering

and producing knowledge in the war zone reads in public discourse as a progressive feminist narrative, one that presents feminism as singular and always moving in the same direction. There is an apparent ease with which the project of feminism comes to exist in a comfortable symbiosis with the project of militarism, until a close look at the conditions on which this narrative of progress are dependent; namely, conditions of warfare, instability, and violence. As femininity comes to be seen in more tangible terms as an asset of militarism, in which feminized strategies work better for the project of interminable warfare, and simultaneously as a means to argue for more intelligent and less violent warfare, it seems inevitable that “feminism” will resurface and be deployed continually in public discourses that are supportive of, and resistant to, the project of militarism. It remains to be seen how, in these resurfacings of feminisms, gender and difference will be utilized in discourses aimed at advancing militarism and those aimed at dismantling it.

Notes

¹ Learning what these needs are from the population, rather than assuming what they are from an academic and detached assessment of “these people,” can and does shift the landscape of the war zone, directing resources to projects like irrigation, based the reports of the women deployed to engage with them (Bumiller, 2010b).

² A 2013 Pew Center poll showed a majority of Americans favor the use of drones, despite questions raised about their effectiveness and collateral civilian casualties. This is one of the few issues where agreement cuts across political boundaries of liberal and conservative (Pew Research Center, 2013).

³ Recent decisions by US military governing bodies to end the ban on transgender individuals serving in the military and to amend dress codes to accommodate Sikh soldiers substantiate the narrative of the military as

an increasingly progressive institution.

⁴ In her essay on the use of language by “defense intellectuals” to describe nuclear weapons, Carol Cohn posits the use of the term “clean bombs” as a metaphor for their perspectives. “Clean bombs” refer to fusion bombs whose blast radius is likely to have much greater destructive power than a fission bomb. “This language,” she writes, “has enormous destructive power, but without the emotional fallout that would result if it were clear one was talking about plans for mass murder, mangled bodies, and unspeakable human suffering” (Cohn, 1987, p. 691).

⁵ There are several moments in which attacks by soldiers on civilians gain serious traction in US news media: the 2006 gang rape and killing of fourteen-year-old Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi and her family by US soldiers in Mahmudiyah, Iraq; the Nisour Square massacre in which seventeen Iraqi civilians were killed by Blackwater Security Consulting employees; the Maywand district murders in Afghanistan in 2010 in which a group of US soldiers created a “kill team” and posed for pictures with the corpses of the civilians they murdered as they would animal hunting trophies; and the rampage of Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bale in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan in 2012 in which he killed sixteen civilians.

⁶ This narrative is deployed arbitrarily and only sometimes in relationship to the realities of women’s experiences. Afghanistan under Taliban rule was deeply oppressive of women; Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein was relatively liberal. Meanwhile, ultraconservative Muslim governments like that of Saudi Arabia openly perpetuate gender inequality as part of a bouquet of illiberal, unethical, and inhumane practices while remaining close political and military allies of the United States.

⁷ This is evidenced by the acceptance of transgender soldiers in military service, which is part of a larger trajectory that includes striking down Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, a rule banning soldiers who openly identify as

homosexual from serving in the military. These policy changes suggest the military is an adaptable institution, capable of being reshaped by external forces when the political climate can be brought in line with progressive social thought.

⁸ After her military service, Russo would go on to be a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, advising on foreign policy matters and engaging in the academic knowledge production that informs the formulation of foreign policy. Her path is a common one. Many women who participate in these forms of cultural intelligence find post-combat homes in scholarly spaces and other spaces dedicated to knowledge production, their time in the war zone forming the reputation that allows them to be referred to as experts on foreign policy, militarism, and the liberation of women.

⁹ Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam profile, The Middle East Institute, <http://www.mei.edu/profile/sippi-azarbaijani-moghaddam>; Hali Jilani profile, <http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/about/foundation-voices/hali-jilani>.

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Bio

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