

Empire at home

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I am concerned with how the social imaginary of a nation sustains a state of denial in face of massive threat.¹

American anti-militarist feminist Cynthia Enloe argues that a feminist analysis of militarism connects IR analysis of "hard power" to the margin – women in places where hard power intersects with their 'soft' inconsequential power.² In my short time I will consider two American women -- Lisa and Elizabeth -- who witness to the violence of the US military arsenal. Our California campus was founded on Fort Ord, a converted army base. Anywhere between 10-15% of students in my classes have served or have families in the military. I co-teach Feminism and Militarism. The marked absence of most undergraduates' political or global awareness has made the class something of a truth commission on US military and the War on Terror. One of those to speak to this was, ironically, a military spouse. Lisa writes...

Holli and I walked everywhere together. I'd walk to the PX with her just to give her company. She walked with me to Tennyson's preschool... When we needed to go somewhere and we couldn't get there by foot, we jammed three car seats into the back of a car and went together. Mostly Holli and I just listened to one another. She listened to me describe apraxia.... I listened to her talk about her mother who was slowly losing her memory...

The only thing Holli and I didn't talk about was what our husbands did for a living. I never mentioned that, although Dan never set foot on Kosovo's soil, he participated in the bombings of buildings and lives. Holli never mentioned that Kevin loaded the bombs that fell over Iraq. Juliet's husband, Alex, led the F-16 fighter planes into Iraq. But I didn't ask what happened to the bombs Kevin loaded when Alex flew over Baghdad. Carli's husband, Joey, heard Arabic while in flight. He probably told Alex where to put those bombs. Amy's husband, Martin, worked on the computers Dan, Alex and Joey depended on. He didn't ruin

¹ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. (Atlanta: Duke University Press, 2003). Taylor refers to the West's multiple modernities through its social imaginary – the way people understand their collective life. He takes three dominant themes of Western "imaginaries" -- the market economy, the public sphere, and the notion of self-governing people. In this case, I am using social imaginary to refer to the American public's understanding of its military adventurism. See also Roger Cohen on *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. (London: Polity, 2001).

² I do not mean Joseph Nye's notion "soft power" as a form of American diplomatic, or persuasive power, but Cynthia Enloe's feminist analysis that foregrounds trivial bodies as cases for analysis. In *Emma's War, Nimo's War, Making Sense of the Iraq War*. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2010) she reflects on the war and occupation from the perspectives of both of Iraqi and American women -a beauty parlor owner in Baghdad, the young wife of an Army sergeant. See also *Globalization and Militarism; Feminists Make the Link*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007); *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in The New Age of Empire*. (Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 2004); For a more recent analysis of hard power, see Kurt Campbell and Mike O'Hanlon, *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

any lives, except his own when he slept with a coworker in Greece. Amy left him. I babysat while Holli drove her to the airport.

Lisa is not alone in what Spivak calls non-innocent ignorance or “sanctioned ignorance.”³ Lisa’s her inability to witness to the real effects of her husband and his buddies’ bombing missions is not innocent.

Of course, military language and the media help her to sanitize the violence of these American bombing missions. Warplanes no longer drop bombs, “weapons systems” or “force packages” “visit a site”. They don’t blow up houses, bridges, factories and people, they “degrade,” “neutralize” “suppress,” eliminate,” “sanitize,” “impact,” “decapitate,” or “take out” targets.⁴ As Orwell notes in *1984*, doublespeak is designed to narrow the range of thinking among the citizenry to the point that they lack the terms to think for themselves.

This is absence of the messy, horrific implications of military violence in American social imaginary is what Slavoj Zizek would call American fantasia, the inability to grasp the REAL.⁵ Zizek reflects on the increased virtualization of our daily lives in advanced capitalist states. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, he argues against the standard logic that the “real” crashed into American society when the World Trade Center collapsed. Instead, he argues that American advanced capitalism’s utilitarian dispiritualized universe dematerializes “real life” and transforms it into fantasy. In this sense, America woke up to its fantasy. Thus, he argues, our reality before 9/11 assumed third world horrors as truly elsewhere and spectral, and now the spectral played itself out on TV for us to see—the nightmarish movie of disaster actually plays a disaster. And certainly, the increase in video and web-based virtual wars keep distraction on fantasy narratives.⁶

There is, as Bruckner so eloquently argues, a dangerous *Temptation of Innocence*, when entitled societies feel victimized.⁷ As Sturken argues, “The disavowal of the United States as an empire has allowed for the nation’s dominant self-image as perennially innocent.”⁸ She maintains that Americans are “tourists of history,” what Berlant has called “infantile citizenship.”⁹ As *Tourists of History*, Americans are detached from their own complicity in America’s imperial violence elsewhere. They (we) respond to domestic terrorism at the WTC and the Oklahoma Federal Building with an increased culture of paranoia and fear¹⁰ and turn to a frenzied need for consumer comfort, a “complex relationship of mourning and consumerism and the economic networks that emerge around historical events, including events of trauma.”¹¹ Sturken notes an increase in consumption security systems in houses and purchase of American flags (made in China). In this American

³ Gayatri Spivak notes this sanctioned ignorance is a result of the “epistemic violence” of imperialism which obfuscates the Western dominance which brought about what she calls “the worlding of the West as the world” in which Western interests are naturalized as global concerns. Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, strategies, dialogues*. (New York & London: Routledge, 1990). She goes on to say that American exceptionalism and Eurocentrism are ideologies that place their citizens as the centre of the world, who must citizens must ‘help the rest’ and that “people from other parts of the world are not fully global” Spivak, A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: politics and the imagination, interview by Jenny Sharpe, *Signs* Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28(2) 609-24.

⁴William Lutz The First Casualty, *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*, vol. XVII, n^o 4, Jul 1991

⁵ Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. (New York & London: Verso, 2002).

⁶ James der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*, (New York & London: Routledge; 2 edition, 2009).

⁷ Pascal Bruckner, *The Temptation of Innocence - Living in the Age of Entitlement*. (New York: Algora Publishing, 2000).

⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tourists of history: memory, kitsch, and consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 7

⁹ Laren Berlant, Theory of Infantile Citizenship, *Public Culture* 1993 5(3):395-410.

¹⁰ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000)

¹¹ Sturken, 4

fantasia, kitsch symbols of one terrorist event can be attached to another.¹² Thus, thousands of teddy bears sent to Oklahoma bombing memorial for children were given to US GIs on their way to Afghanistan. In fact, 350 pounds of the WTC rubble was collected by a military entity so that “every soldier going to Afghanistan could have a piece of the WTC in their pocket.”¹³

Carol Cohen, feminist IR theorist attended an elite nuclear deterrence seminar at Harvard in the 1980's, offers a short brilliant analysis of the disconnect between abstract discourse and male-dominated seminar where there were

strong currents of homoerotic excitement, heterosexual domination, the drive toward competency and mastery, the pleasures of membership in an elite and privileged group, of the ultimate importance and meaning of membership in the priesthood, and the thrilling power of becoming Death, shatterer of worlds.¹⁴

While the rationale for deterrence was abstract, the male elite's references to nuclear explosion were ejaculatory. They were invited to 'pat the bomb' The intersection of sexual imagery, religious euphemism and other codes obscure the realistic outcomes of these weapons of destruction. She argues ultimately that the language of deterrence so forecloses other discourse, it operates in its own logic – you must think its language even to argue against it. The language of “peaceniks”, she argues, was dismissed as too impotent, too flaccid, not as penetrating as the effete and impossibly arcane arguments for and against nuclear buildup. This is the most obscene form of epistemic violence.

And so, if this is Lisa's world, what of witness?

I will reflect in closing on the symbolism of Disarm Now Plowshares' civil disobedience against nuclear warheads.¹⁵ In their first action in the 1980's the Plowshares Eight, a brainchild of the Berrigan brothers (both priests) entered the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania and poured their blood.... At their trial, they were charged with burglary, criminal trespass, criminal conspiracy among others and given the opportunity for these charges to be waived if they would 'go away'. They refused. There have been about fifty Plowshares actions in the US since then.¹⁶

The Naval Base Kitsap in Bangor, Washington which stores where about one fourth of the US nuclear warheads, and is home to a fleet of eleven submarines that deploy Trident nuclear weapons. On November 2, 2009, five Catholic activists (one nun), illegally entered the grounds, poured their own blood over the site, and beat on facilities with household hammers before their arrest.¹⁷

The movement is radical, marginal, aging, whose participants are often priests and nuns, men and women who consider their acts political, theological and symbolic are meant to counteract the massive obfuscation and consumer comfort in the American public.

¹² See Hal Foster. “Yellow Ribbons.” London Review of Books. July 7, 2005.

¹³ Mateo Taussig-Rubbo, Sacred Property: Searching for Value in the 9/11 Rubble, Buffalo Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2008-24

¹⁴ Cohn, Carol. “Clean Bombs’ and Clean Language.” In *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory*, eds Jean Bethke Elstain and Sheila Tobias, (Savage, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 1990), 33-55.

¹⁵ Kristen J. Tobey, ‘Something Deeper Than Reason’: Violence and Nonviolence in the Plowshares Nuclear Disarmament Movement, The Religion & Culture Web Forum, The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Culture and Religion, University of Chicago Divinity School, December 2009, Accessed January 2010 <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/webforum/archive.shtml>

See also: Philip Berrigan with Fred A. Wilcox, *Fighting the Lamb's War: Skirmishes with the American Empire* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Religion and War Resistance in the Plowshares Movement*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ See Disarm Now Plowshares at http://www.jonahhouse.org/Disarm_Now_Plowshares/pressrelease.htm.

Elizabeth McAlister, Plowshare activist and wife of Philip Berrigan, argues

If only the horror with which people respond to the blood as symbol can be transferred to the reality of shedding blood!¹⁸

Restoring symbols and purifying them through suffering and public exposure is part of the renewal of a community of sanity—which ought to be the definition of the Church...We do our symbolic action to witness to the truth about our lives today.¹⁹

The number of Plowshares actions have declined in subsequent decades.²⁰ Perhaps the Plowshare's bloody witness is dimming as the Hwacheon Consultation and other convergences bring new urgency on nuclear disarmament to the public. But as a feminist concerned about a social imaginary that counters the real effects of war, and America's *Colonial Present*²¹, the evocative power of religious metaphor, symbol and ritual, perhaps we should not yet dismiss the symbolic power that the Plowshares activists offer up. As Elizabeth claims, "We need to get beyond the assumed rationality of it all. We need to appeal to something deeper than reason, something that has to do with powerful earth symbols and actions..."²² actions of all of us here.

¹⁸ Cited in Tobey, Philip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, *The Time's Discipline* (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1989), 110.

¹⁹ Cited in Tobey, McAlister, notes for testimony at Griffiss Air Force Base Plowshares trial, DePaul University Richardson Library Special Collections, Berrigan-McAlister Collection, Box 1.

²⁰ There have been seven Plowshares actions, as compared to 15 in the 1990's and 28 in the 1980's.

²¹ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present, Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (London: Blackwell, 2004).

²² McAlister, notes for testimony at Griffiss Air Force Base Plowshares trial, DePaul University Richardson Library Special Collections, Berrigan-McAlister Collection, Box 1