

The Limits of Empowerment

The Woman Soldier in Kayla Williams's Memoir *Love My Rifle More Than You* (2005)

Martin Holtz

1. Introduction

When thinking about guns and their potential for empowerment vs. their potential for destruction and suffering, one finds the most explicit and pronounced manifestation of this dialectic in war. War can provide profoundly diverse manifestations of agency, ranging from a notion of *disablement*, expressed in victimization, immobilization, traumatization, and death, to *enablement*, expressed in the perpetration of heroic, courageous, skillful, and powerful actions of assertion and dominance.¹ The US's recent wars in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and Iraq (2003–2011) have illustrated this range, starting out with a display of utmost military domination culminating in a quick and, as it turned out, farcically premature sense of George W. Bush's proclamation »mission accomplished«, only to grind on in a display of incompetence, military and moral failure, and ending in the catastrophic futility of abandoning the conflict after rekindling aggression. The conflicts showed that the destructive force of war lastingly sabotages a sense of empowerment, given the limitations of constructive interaction between the involved parties after the initial military victory. Hence this victory was a moment of pseudo-empowerment, as the very military superiority which made it happen also sowed the seeds for its quasi-defeat a grueling 20 years later, the destruction of the enemy resulting in the lasting destabilization that would consume victors and vanquished alike. This »grand narrative« of America's recent wars has a quasi-synecdochic relevance for the focus of this contribution, which aims to show how the gun as an icon of the military promises empowerment for a female soldier – only to end up signifying defeat.

1 For more on the negotiation of agency in war see Holtz (2019: 1–6, 33–46). See also Peebles, who describes the experience of military life in similarly dialectical terms of »freeing« and »limiting« (Peebles 2011: 20–21).

While the amount of cultural responses to the wars in literature, film, and other media, have been steadily growing since 2003, there has been little academic recognition of these texts. Lockhurst, for instance, claims that there are »no definite literary texts [that] have emerged from the overlapping contexts of the invasion, the Iraqi civil war, or the occupation« (Lockhurst 2012: 713), which he explains, writing in 2012, by the war's »odd stage of incompleteness« and its »intensely divisive« politics. Deer concurs that what hampered cultural response and contextualization was the wars' »lack of certainty« in the way the US tried to construct various conflicted narratives in its efforts to legitimize them while simultaneously other narratives emerged, which undid these very efforts: »Once the initial rationale for the invasion of Iraq (the country's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction) collapsed, it was replaced by the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, which foundered in the face of the 2004 Abu Ghraib torture scandal and the failure of the occupation to provide security for the Iraqi civilian population« (Deer 2017: 314). To this assessment of narrative confusion can be added the enablement-narrative of the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 vs. the disablement-narrative of the inglorious departure of US troops from Afghanistan and the reestablishment of Taliban rule in 2021.

What Lockhurst and Deer overlook, though, is that despite this collapse of grand narratives (Deer 2017: 315), there has been a proliferation of small narratives emerging from the wars. Recent years have seen an immense boom in non-fiction writing about the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The numerous accounts by veterans, journalists, and external analysts are characterized by a »narrative drive«, the acute description of combat by means of »scrupulous observation and phrasing« and the urge to convey the exhilaration of the fight while stressing the professionalism of the soldiers (Dyer 2010). The focus is on the active and involved subject whose actions make a difference. Indeed, the memoir has emerged as a master genre in delineating literary discourses of the war. Focusing on three representative soldier memoirs², Kieran argues that they »celebrate the soldier [and the institution of the military], justify his

2 These are Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away* (2005), Donovan Campbell's *Joker One* (2009), and Craig Mullaney's *The Unforgiving Minute* (2009). Additionally, starting in the 2000s, the ever-growing canon by male authors includes but is not limited to John Crawford's *The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell* (2005), Jason Hartley's *Just Another Soldier* (2005), Colby Buzzell's *My War* (2006), Matthew Burden's *The Blog of War* (2006), Paul Rieckhoff's *Chasing Ghosts* (2006), Marcus Luttrell's *Lone Survivor* (2007), David Bellavia's *House to House* (2007), Matt Gallagher's *Kaboom* (2010), Rusty Bradley's *Lions of Kandahar* (2011), Jessica Goodell's *Shade It Black* (2011), Chris Kyle's *American Sniper* (2012), Sean Parnell's *Outlaw Platoon* (2012), Mark Owen's *No Easy Day* (2012), Brian Castner's *The Long Walk* (2013), Brian Turner's *My Life as a Foreign Country* (2014), Michael Golembesky's *Level Hero Zero* (2014) and *Dagger 22* (2016), Kevin Lacz's *The Last Punisher* (2016), Nicholas Irving's *The Reaper* (2016), and Clinton Romesha's *Red Platoon* (2016). Though Kieran's arguments are valid for the majority of these texts, some develop a more complex and contradictory image of war and the military than he suggests.

[sic] violence, define the loss of American lives as the war's only significant tragedy, and refuse to critique the war or the policies that enable it» (Kieran 2012: 66–67). The agency of soldiers is characterized by choice, a noble refusal of privilege in order to serve the country. Combat is non-traumatic, killing the enemy is rationalized as moral necessity and generally informed by carefully weighed moral choice. The military is portrayed not just as a provider of physical and moral education and testing ground for individual capabilities but even as an elite circle surpassing the moral integrity of the nation at large (Kieran 2012: 68–80). War in this narrative is often stripped down to a »classical« scenario of close combat which counters images of the button-pushing drone operator or the cog in a machine. Instead, memoirs play up an old-fashioned warrior image where the appropriate measure of courage, consideration, physicality, selflessness, discipline, and opportunist initiative prevail in heroic fashion, often in the form of rescue missions for fellow comrades, by which virtue is added to the uncompromising destruction of the enemy. In this way, war is salvaged from its perceived futility by constructing it as a showcase for small-scale heroism that is supposed to signify America at its best, and as a scenario of empowerment. If this is the dominant narrative in the soldier memoirs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, it is certainly not the only one. In contrast, fictional narratives of the wars emanate in the 2010s and portray them in predominantly critical fashion as disabling the capacities of individual soldiers to act morally. Such texts include, for instance, Helen Benedict's *Sand Queen* (2011), Katy Schultz's flash fiction collection *Flashes of War* (2013), or Whitney Terrell's *The Good Lieutenant* (2017).

Published in 2005, Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More than You* belongs to the first wave of non-fictional war memoirs and preemptively deconstructs the enabling narrative of more contemporary examples. Williams exposes the mechanisms of exploitation and corruption lurking behind the lure of empowerment that the military and its loaded icon of the gun, featured so prominently in her title, promises. The book is one of the few memoirs by female soldiers, even if recent years have seen more examples of the kind³, and the aspect of gender is central to it, as the subtitle *Young and Female in the US Army* signals. The book initially suggests an emancipation narrative, as the military is portrayed as a challenge to prove oneself by joining a »masculine collective« and thereby transcending the limitations imposed upon women by society (Peebles 2011: 49). The military functions as a test of individual determination by overcoming adverse circumstances in an environment that by its very nature of constituting obstacles challenges one to become a »better«, »truer«

3 See Mareike Spychala's pioneering work on female soldier memoirs from the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars. Spychala shows how later memoirs show great diversity in their portrayals of war and the military, and while some of them exhibit a similar critique of entrenched sexist structures, they also follow the enabling narratives of their male soldier counterparts.

self in order to be admitted into an elite circle. This meritocratic ideal of self-improvement is one that the US military has embraced repeatedly, for example in its official recruiting slogan between 1980 and 2001 and revived in 2023, »be all you can be«, suggesting a discourse of enablement and empowerment via disciplining the self.

The feminist discourse of entering and proving oneself in a masculine domain also partakes in the loaded symbolism of guns and rifles. Zeiss Stange/Oyster for example argue that »The gun is only the symbol of male power to the extent we let it be. And as some feminists are finally beginning to realize, it can function as a particularly potent symbol of female resistance to male aggression« as its levelling access to violence »def[ies] conventional gender stereotypes« and »may also open up for her new avenues of self-awareness, new and more truly empowered ways of relating to other people and the world around her« (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23,28, 29). Similarly, Latzel et al. suggest that the female soldier by wielding a gun challenges »the dualism of male protection and female need for protection« (Latzel et al. 2011: 12, my translation) and gains »empowerment« by the »appropriation of a heretofore exclusively male authority of violence« (Latzel et al. 2011: 32, my translation).⁴ Evert (2011) adds that in the military, the rifle and its predecessors, sword and spear, have traditionally been conceived as signifiers of »male autonomy«, demarcating male privileges from female limitations (72, 77), not least because of their phallic connotations as penetrative weapons (79–80), so that the assumption of the weapon in the context of its loaded cultural history becomes a transgressive, emancipatory gesture.

But Williams' memoir shows that the gun and the discursive realms of military and war it represents are pseudo-empowering. It is not just that the military effectively resists female intrusion and acceptance, but also that seeking the agency associated with the gun and the military turns out to be dubious in the first place. As a woman, Williams is confronted with a male backlash against her intrusion, as the military turns out not to replace society's misogyny with meritocratic equality, but to exacerbate it as a highly guarded privilege of male exclusivity. Female soldiers are a disturbance, whose presence requires an internal distancing to uphold the idea of a realm in which a specifically male identity is acquired, performed, and guarded, which results in labelling, shunning, verbal, and ultimately physical abuse.⁵ By de-

4 The originals read: »Dualismus von männlichem Schutz und weiblicher Schutzbedürftigkeit«; and »Das gesteigerte weibliche Selbstbewusstsein, ja die Selbstermächtigung, die hier vernehmbar werden, entstanden aus der Aneignung bis dato exklusiv männlicher Gewaltkompetenzen«.

5 Latzel et al. further explain this dynamic: »Wie sehr die institutionelle Aufnahme von Soldatinnen in die regulären wie »irregulären« bewaffneten Formationen den »virilen Kern« von deren professionellem Selbstverständnis bedrohte, zeigte sich insbesondere in der am weitesten verbreiteten Ausschlussstrategie: der Verschiebung der Herausforderung auf das Feld des Sexuellen. Dabei reichten die Praktiken von der verbalen Diffamierung etwa als soge-

picting the military as denying the cultivation and fulfillment of individual potential, the book frames it as subverting the »American myth [...] of self-realization«, a central narrative in American life writing (Smith/Watson 2002: 122). Instead, the military is shown as an »un-American« institution since it allows and fosters incompetence, mismanagement, and corruption, either keeping the individual from being »all you can be« or, turning the slogan on its head, turning them into a morally reprehensible person: a rapist, a torturer, a killer. The gun becomes the tool which simultaneously seduces the individual into a false sense of agency and turns them into a tool themselves, as its supposed bestowment of a power over life and death becomes a crippling corruptor of moral principles in favor of an automated hostile response, which uses rather than enables individuals for its nefarious purposes. In the context of war, the gun as a tool of exclusionary violence is shown to make matters worse.

Love my Rifle more than You expresses its frustration with this corrupting influence by showing how Williams, Othered herself as a woman in a male environment, exhibits a complex relationship with the local population Othered by the military discourse. She veers between adopting a stance of hostility and recognizing herself in the plight of the Other in moments of identification and empathy. It is in the interaction that Williams develops a sense of self, both in terms of eschewing the obvious identification with her fellow female (and male) soldiers and recognizing the humanity she has in common with the supposed enemy, thereby embedding her sense of identity in values of seeking a dialogue, understanding, and sameness with Others. This relationality emerges as a decisive counter-value to the hostility signified by the gun.⁶ In this way, the gun becomes the icon of a misguided and coopted »feminism«, in Laura Browder's words a »shortcut feminism«, which only serves to uphold a destructive ideology instead of promoting structural change.⁷ In Browder's argumentation female gun ownership perpetuates precisely those tendencies of harmful and hostile exclusivity which large portions of feminist activism have sought to

nannte Offiziersmatratze über sexuelle Nötigung bis zur Vergewaltigung. Die weibliche Aneignung von Verletzungsmacht wurde hier mit der gewaltsamen männlichen Demonstration weiblicher Verletzungsoffenheit beantwortet« (Latzel et al. 2011: 34; cf. also Evert 2011: 93).

6 »Relationality« is a feature conventionally and controversially associated with the female autobiography in particular, the ability to encompass into a notion of self the presence of the Other because of a female tendency towards »fluid ego boundaries« (Smith/Watson 2002: 17). Drawing on Chodorow, Stanford Friedman writes that where male life writing tends towards establishing an identity of separation and exceptionality, female autobiographies show a »consciousness of self in which ›the individual does not oppose herself to all others, nor ›feel herself to exist outside of others,‹ but very much with others in an interdependent existence« (Stanford Friedman 1998: 77). More recent scholarship has challenged the gendered conception of relationality though.

7 Browder analyzes how the gun lobby/NRA targeted women as gun customers in the 1980s with feminist slogans and how feminists resisted this sort of pandering (Browder 2006: 230–231).

undermine. The gun is a pseudo-feminist key to a world of male privilege, an emancipation by emulation, which by embracing values of exclusionary identity politics only helps to sustain the injustices and inequalities that constitute patriarchy and its reliance on a binary Othering conception of the world in the first place. Williams's memoir illustrates these implications of the woman in arms and illustrates the »failure of the masculine collective« (Peebles 2011: 49) to serve as a sustainable model for the self, as I outline in the following.

2. The Lure of the Military

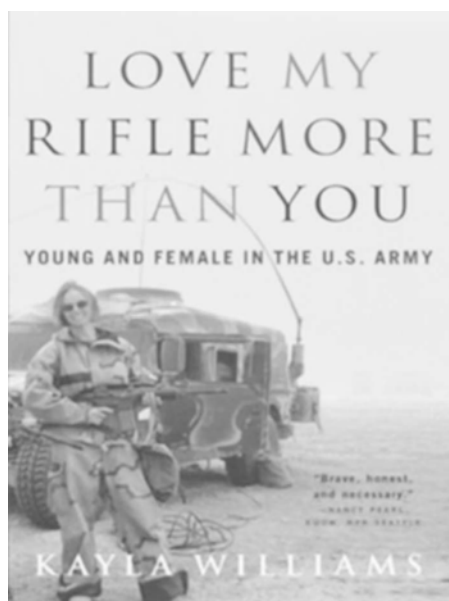


Fig. 1: Williams, Love My Rifle More than You, Cover image

Already the title of the book accentuates the centrality of the gun in relation to gender identity in the military. In connection with the front cover image, which shows Williams smiling in uniform posing with an assault rifle in front of a military vehicle (fig. 1), one could assume that the title suggests a cocky, defiant feminism, a sense of phallic swagger in which the assumption of the rifle has replaced the necessity of dependence on male protection along the lines of Zeiss Stange/Oyster's argu-

mentation for female self-assertion by gun ownership (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23–28).

When contextualized with the epigram that opens the book, however, this suggestion of empowerment is undermined. The title is taken from an »army marching cadence«, sung by thousands of men who have undergone basic training, and the full stanza goes:

Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou/
Love my rifle more than you/
You used to be my beauty queen/
Now I love my M-16. (Williams 2005: 9)

Hence the title is not about empowerment, on the contrary, it is about the replacement of the woman with the rifle, her relegation to an outsider status. The tool that appears to empower is in fact the icon signifying her absence. Evert confirms that the common practice of soldiers personifying their rifles by giving them female names »always contains the demarcation to the woman« (Evert 2011: 77): the maleness of the military space is constructed by projecting femininity onto the inanimate object that is under full compliance of the male soldier, arraying him with a (phallic) power to kill (Evert 2011: 82). As Zeiss Stange/Oyster confirm,

American military culture has always prized stereotypically masculine characteristics like aggressiveness, independence, risk taking, and sexual bravado. [...] The message is clear. To be a woman is to be inferior. And to be a female in the military is to be inferior. [...] To the extent that it requires such misogyny to forge the warrior spirit, accepting women or gays into the ranks obviously disrupts the process. (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 51–53)

Hence the epigram conveys the military as a place in which the woman is an intrusion into a specifically male rite of passage, in which weakness and failure is equated with being female, and therefore not just »unloved« but potentially hated.

The first chapter of the book immediately addresses the constricting discourses that impose themselves on a woman in the military as well as the ambivalences and illusions of their empowering lure. Williams writes how female identity is rigorously reduced to a sexual availability for men. You are either a »slut« or a »bitch«: »A slut will fuck anyone, a bitch will fuck anyone but you« (Williams 2015: 13). There is no way, no matter how you act, to escape an unflattering male categorization. The attempt to escape this kind of external labelling is a trope that Peebles makes out as central not only to Williams's book but also to many recent soldier memoirs: writing becomes an attempt to regain control over one's identity (Peebles 2011: 2). Peebles also points out how the binary categorization according to (hetero)sexual availability

is mirrored in the first chapter in relation to the military competence of the female soldier (ibid.: 77–79). Williams writes that part of her motivation to share her story is to counter the image of the female soldier in the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars as defined by Jessica Lynch, who was the subject of a widely publicized rescue mission, and Lynndie England, who became the face of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal (Williams 2015: 15), two figures who turned into representations of the twin poles of female stereotyping of the woman in arms: either incompetent victim and damsel in distress to be saved so as to celebrate male heroism, or a »violent, sexually out of control, and amoral [...] embodiment of degenerate American womanhood« (Browder 2006: 18). Browder affirms how the image of the armed woman as either too incompetent to wield a weapon or too unhinged to control its violent potential powerfully affirm reservations against female presence in the military and its cultural enshrinement as a masculine space (ibid.: 18–19). By drawing a connection between the binary labelling of sexual availability and military competence (you are either too limited or too indiscriminate, in any event incapable), Williams makes clear how the military environment is informed by a continued structural discrimination against women, which has deep cultural roots, is pervasively present within and outside the institution and is severely limiting the potential for female soldiers. As opposed to the dominant discourse in other soldier memoirs, which paint the military as an idealized, elite circle, the military is a place in which the aberrations of society at large are not diminished but become painfully amplified. As Williams writes in the last chapter, »This [female self-assertion] is a struggle that is magnified in the military because it is still such a male environment – a weird little microcosm of society on steroids« (Williams 2005: 278).

At the same time, Williams makes clear how the mechanisms of stereotyping and discrimination have an alluring quality of pseudo-empowerment. She writes about so-called »Queens for a Year«, female soldiers who use their heightened sexual allure in a predominantly male environment to their advantage: »I don't like to say it – it cuts you inside – but the attention, the admiration, the *need*: they make you powerful« (ibid.: 14), because, »[y]ou could use your femaleness to great advantage. You could do less work, get more assistance, and receive more special favors« (ibid.: 20). Williams is altogether critical of »succumb[ing] to temptation« (ibid.) because she recognizes that such behavior only entrenches existing stereotypes of female inferiority, and she repeatedly criticizes female comrades in the book for falling into that trap. She essentially argues that the *individual* empowerment through sexuality is illusory because it affirms a *structural* diminishment. But this dynamic of illusory empowerment inadvertently contributing to institutional abuse is shown by the book to characterize the military as such.

The yearning for empowerment arises from a feeling of inferiority, from feeling like you have to prove something. Williams connects this feeling with a formative childhood incident in which she touched a hot stove and burned her hand. »I think

this early encounter with fire left me deeply hesitant to take risks for fear of pain. As a consequence I've always believed that I have something to prove« (ibid.: 24). While she connects this sense of battling a feeling of risk-averseness, which is clearly identified as a weakness, to her personal psychological disposition, it is extrapolated as a signifier of a general quality which society assigns to women. In Williams's assessment, by chivalrously allowing them to sidestep the demands placed upon men and foster their compensation by pointing out their frailty and need for protection, women are kept in a state of inferiority. Her feminist impetus is to break out of this assigned inferiority by seeking out situations in which she can prove her mettle and her equality to men by facing challenges. As it turns out, this strategy leads her into further abuse, which intensifies rather than remedies a feeling of structural oppression. This is how she describes the dynamic in an abusive relationship with another man (of which there are a few because »historically I've dated a lot of guys who treated me like shit«, ibid.: 172): »Douglas turned it into this twisted deal where I was supposed to *like* that he was cruel to me – as a way to prove to him I could handle it« (ibid.: 40). So the desire to prove oneself becomes an excuse for exposure to more abuse. Yet it is exactly this desire to prove herself, specifically to Douglas, himself a wannabe Marine, that makes her join the army »to prove him wrong« (ibid.: 41). Thus, even if her decision to join the army is born out of feminist defiance of her abuser, she cannot escape making her decision in relation to a man's conception of her. And as it turns out, the army is a mere successor to the abusive partner, not an alternative.

What Williams hopes to find in the military is a levelled playing field, one in which opportunity and challenge is the same for everyone, in which structural inequalities of society at large disappear and one is judged purely on the basis of one's own merit. This is of course precisely an image the army likes to cultivate and it is a sentiment which is shared and occasionally also acknowledged as a welcome reality by some female soldiers (Browder/Pflaeging 2006: 142). Williams makes a point of not acquiescing to the lower physical fitness standards for women, but to accomplish exactly what males have to accomplish: »But guys couldn't bitch if we passed the male tests. That was my response. I was eventually able to surpass the male minimum standard for push-ups for my age group. I also worked hard to get my run to where I'd meet the male standards« (Williams 2005: 44). Initially, it seems as if this approach is indeed a way to empowerment and a »be all you can be« narrative: »But I discovered at Fort Jackson that I could do things I never knew I could do. Endurance, stamina, willpower. You name it. I found I was strong beyond all my prior understanding. I learned what I could do, because I had to do it« (ibid.: 46). Challenge brings improvement, and meeting male standards results in a feeling of equality. The gun contributes to this ideal: »At Fort Jackson, I fired a weapon again for the first time in more than ten years. I was surprised; it felt good. Empowering. I liked having a weapon in my hands again« (ibid.: 44). In this regard the function of the gun

as an indicator of an acquired autonomy can be linked to the Second Amendment of the US constitution and to narratives of the American Revolution, in which the »obligations and rights of full citizenship« were connected to the ability to serve under arms, making the gun the »distinction between the freeman and the slave« (Browder 2006: 16), and to the related »refusing to be a victim« narrative of pro-gun feminism (Zeiss Stange/Oyster 2000: 23, 29; Browder 2006: 19). Without challenging the effectiveness of these narratives of empowerment, the book nonetheless points out the detriments of defining a feminist impetus as the effort of following male standards and seeking male approval, a feminism which does not challenge male norms and structures but reinforces them.

3. The Failure of the Military

The pitfalls and naiveté of Williams's idealism become evident in her deployment to Iraq, where she serves as a translator, having been trained in the Arab language, and goes out on missions with various units of her Military Intelligence battalion. With the other women in her unit, she has a strained relationship, which she describes as »catty« (Williams 2005: 46). Especially her immediate superiors, the female group leaders Moss and Simmons are regarded by her as not living up to leadership standards. Apart from their incompetence, which occasionally puts their subordinates in danger, Williams cannot tolerate their display of female weakness: Both of them are shown in moments when they cry, Moss out of frustration for not being able to establish a working relationship with Williams (ibid.: 91), Simmons in a moment of stress which she blames on PMS (ibid.: 268). Despite the fact that Williams herself vents her frustrations by having a quiet cry at some point in the book, she can only react to her superior's display of emotional vulnerability with utter disrespect, because they confirm the stereotypical image of femininity. »Because you still hear lots of stuff like, *Women should never be president, because they're too emotional to handle it. What if she got PMS, she'd start a nuclear war*« (ibid.: 268). By applying male standards, Williams is thus unable to empathize with her fellow female soldiers. Instead of showing understanding, the adherence to a masculine value of toughness makes her see everything that does not live up to this standard as weakness. Female-associated qualities of emotionality and vulnerability are looked down upon as her judgment is dictated by a male rendering of femininity as Other, which destroys the possibility of female solidarity.⁸

8 There is a significant exception to this rejection of female solidarity in the person of Williams's close friend Zoe, with whom she even shares an apartment. Yet, as Peebles points out, also this relationship is characterized by a male attitude and rhetoric: »She goes on to

Instead, Williams seeks approval from the male group and in the male spirit of competitiveness. She proves herself by driving a truck up a dangerous hill, earning the respect of an outfit which prides itself on toughness and calls itself the FISTers⁹ (ibid.: 161). She enjoys the »trash talk« with them, the competitive insult, which bespeaks a bond of mutual respect (ibid.: 181). But as a woman, this respect has its limitations, as she cannot escape being objectified, reduced to her body and her sexuality on numerous occasions. An innocuous conversation with another soldier turns into a verbally abusive come on, which Williams shrugs off as an »obnoxious ritual, some kind of compulsion to say anything – like dogs feel the need to piss on a tree and call it their own« (ibid.: 72). But it does not stay limited to verbal abuse. When she is with the FISTers, she is assaulted by a fellow soldier, who believes her to be fair game, a slut, despite her fierce resistance. This moment confronts her with the inescapability of her femininity: »The *shame* of being in a position where you might have to [...] [y]ell for help. Like some damn damsel in distress« (ibid.: 208). No matter how she reacts in this situation, whether enduring a rape or yelling for help would mark her as female. So even if she desires to belong to a male group as an equal member, the group can never accept her as such.

This also becomes clear in the way the assault came to pass. Because of her sexual activity before her deployment, via rumors being blown out of proportion, she was regarded as a slut, and her attempts at making connections with guys were seen as sexual advances. After rejecting the soldier who assaulted her, she is shunned by the group and accordingly labelled a bitch.¹⁰ So whether she experiences assault or respectful distance, she cannot escape an outsider status as a woman: »the guys I considered my friends were treating me like a *girl*. I was tits, a piece of ass, a bitch or a slut or whatever, but never really a *person*« (ibid.: 214). This dynamic is systemic, built into the very fabric of the institution and perpetuated by the very processes that are set up to protect women from sexual assault.

describe Zoe in perfect patriarchal style, apparently unironically: »Beautiful and amazing Zoe. Crazy and wild. Small tits. Great ass.« (Peebles 2011: 49)« (Williams 2005: 87).

- 9 The term stands for Fire Support Specialists. As Forward Observers they are routinely involved in frontline missions.
- 10 Peebles adds that the counterpart of respecting private space is similarly alienating. Where physical contact between guys contribute to a homosocial brotherhood, Williams writes that apart from sexualized assault »physical contact was more or less something I did not have during my deployment. Guys were extra careful not to touch me. As a female I was not really a part of the »good game« (Williams 2005: 188). Hence »The men Williams describes presumably want to treat her with respect, but it is that very form of respect that dictates *not* touching her body, *not* treating her as an object-that also isolates her, excludes her from the all-male community of the good game« (Peebles 2011: 91).

Girls who file EO (equal opportunity) complaints are treated badly. [...] Even girls don't like girls who file EO complaints – they don't want to rock the boat. Girls don't want to be perceived as filing a frivolous complaint. There's still the assumption that girls lie about harassment to get what they want – to advance their careers or to punish somebody they dislike. (ibid.: 209)

In other words, if you make use of the equal opportunity mechanisms that are in place to counter incidents of abuse, you forfeit your equality. The systemic imbalance regarding the status of male and female soldiers in the military is symptomatic for the book's judgment of the military as such by calling into question the very values of meritocratic opportunity and beneficial self-development it likes to champion itself for.

The military is presented not a forum of meritocracy, but as a mismanaged institution. It exacerbates injustices and imbalances and contributes to worsening conditions of and relations between people. As Williams writes, »Like death, like taxes, military incompetence is something you can bet on« (ibid.: 98). The list of dysfunctions Williams identifies is long and ranges from avoidable discomforts regarding the living and working conditions at the bases in Iraq (ibid.: 64–67) to bureaucratic red tape dismantling effectiveness and pragmatism, such as the waste of food rations (ibid.: 85), which is only alleviated by illicit bartering between units, endless communication problems which keep the soldiers from preparing accordingly because they don't know where and when they will be deployed, »little coordination and poor planning« (ibid.: 94) or »no maps« (ibid.: 97) for individual missions that require interaction with the local population, which Williams only alleviates by joining other units against regulations. A major cause for her frustration is the bad experience with her superiors. On numerous occasions, the incompetence of Sgt.s Moss and Simmons endanger her and her comrades or seriously hamper her unit's efficiency (ibid.: 79–81, 84, 89, 91, 103, 261, 268) while simultaneously disregarding her efforts and competences (ibid.: 154). Williams identifies the problem as systemic, because the system applies the wrong standards for assigning rank and promotions, not based on combat experience but on college education or prior job training without regard for leadership skills or military competence (ibid.: 92–93). In other words, the system demolishes the very idea of matching rank with merit. It forces merited soldiers into lower positions while bestowing rank upon the unmerited. In its defiance of presumably American values, Williams likens the military to a communist institution, after she has read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, sharing with the controversial author a disgust for a view of communism that »encouraged people to do as little as possible« (ibid.: 270). In this view, the army is an un-American system sabotaging a sense of work ethic and self-improvement by rewarding those who do least and punishing those who exhibit commitment to efficiency.

This mismatch of invested effort and lack of purpose is a powerful theme in the book. It reverberates on many levels, as Williams not only encounters a personal powerlessness in making a difference due to military mismanagement and strategically wrong decisions, she ultimately feels that the war as such was a mistake. »The fact that the war was based on lies destroys some of the sense of purpose for me« (ibid.: 283). While she mentions small episodes of being able to help the population, of securing schools, of experiencing moments of bonding with team members and being recognized for her actions (not by an army medal but in the form of an improvised token from a unit she served with; ibid.: 228), there is no display of small scale heroism which characterizes more glorified depictions of the war in other soldier memoirs, no rescue missions or feats of survival or annihilation of evil forces. What dominates in *Love My Rifle More Than You* is a sense of failure and crucially of doing more harm than good, despite her best efforts.

4. The Gun as Corruptor

Her job as an interpreter illustrates the mismatch between the productive practice of seeking dialogue, which she is trained for, and the nefarious practices of creating division and aggression that the military and the war force the soldiers to engage in. Despite the fact that »the primary effort had been to build a bond with the locals, carefully nurturing relationships and building *trust*« (ibid.: 141), she repeatedly encounters situations in which she cannot build any trust because the military's hostile behavior undermines any sense of it. The iconic contrast here is between language and the gun, because it is the gun which manifests division. In one exceptional passage, the smallest woman in Williams's unit, the 4'11"« Lauren, wields »our most serious-looking weapon [...] an M-249 squad automatic« (ibid.: 107) to instantly hush a throng of people crowding around their patrol car and facilitate communication. »The weapon says: *Respect me*« (ibid.: 107) and this moment encapsulates a perfect balance of force for order and dialogue for understanding as well as empowerment without corruption. But this moment only illustrates the illusory empowerment of the gun, particularly in its feminist potential of arraying the seemingly most powerless with the capacity to assert herself and to establish the basis for an equal communicational footing. Because it stands alone. Most of the time, Williams frames the gun as the element of volatility, not empowering but taking away agency precisely because of its destructive potential of exacerbating miscommunication whereas the ability to converse is the way to achieve clarity and control.

Put yourself in the position of some eighteen-year-old infantry soldier with a loaded weapon in a country surrounded by people who don't speak his language. And these people come up to him and yell. They want to tell him something.

And he doesn't know what it is. They might be saying to him, *I love you, and I am so glad you are here to liberate my country*. Or they might be saying to him, *I'm about to fucking kill you*. So this kid is eighteen and he's got his loaded rifle – and he doesn't know what they're saying. (ibid.: 109)

The passage suggests that the gun is the problem, because most of the time it does not facilitate dialogue but sabotages any potential for fruitful interaction. It forces the individual into seeing the Other as a threat and in this way it controls action rather than facilitating agency whereas any »eighteen-year old kid« would be better equipped to handle the situation if they were trained in the language rather than in weapons-handling. Williams illustrates the simultaneous volatility and disempowering quality of guns in the following way:

If you see someone heading toward you, he could be approaching to offer you information. He could have an explosive device strapped to his waist and be about to kill you. He might want to ask for food. You have to make that call – instantaneously. You have to decide whether or not you will allow this man anywhere near you. You have to decide whether you shoot him where he stands. Or whether you attempt to communicate with him from a distance and tell him to stop. [...] You have to make that judgment call. Every single time. Every time you see any person anywhere close to you. [...] Basically we all reach a point where we have to assume that everyone is friendly (and respond accordingly), or assume that everyone is a potential enemy (and treat them as such). It simply becomes too overwhelming to play that line at every single moment. [...] So we make one choice: We come to assume the worst about everyone. And we stick with it. (ibid.: 238)

In other words, your gun is making the decision, because the individual is »overwhelmed by the situation« (ibid.: 238); the gun is a shortcut to aggression. It disables choice by enabling hostility.

Numerous episodes in the book confirm the disabling nature of guns or undermine the agenda of possessing them. Rules of engagement meant to reduce aggression in the country are repeatedly shown to increase tensions, such as when the soldiers are told to shoot at people when they refuse to put down a cell phone (ibid.: 236), or when a single rifle meant to protect a local Christian monastery is seized by an inspecting officer, with Williams present as a powerless interpreter (ibid.: 115–121). The episode illustrates how taking away the weapon from the perceived enemy actually worsens the situation. The officer makes a point of not talking to the head of the monastery directly even though he understands English, but uses Williams as a filter, avoiding bilateral communication in favor of a shortsighted execution of rules. So the urge to maintain control over weapons leads to a one-sided and detrimental domination, leaving the ones to be protected vulnerable to attack.

Other episodes deal a lot with so-called UXO, unexploded ordnance, the lingering detritus of weapons in the country, encapsulating the uncontrollable side effects that the presence of arms causes as disabling baggage. The effects of the UXO are illustrated when Williams's unit arrives at a scene with several injured soldiers and locals, one of them dying, the result of an explosion of previously marked UXO, but »We don't bother to mark the UXOs in Arabic because it's usually the locals who call the unexploded mines to our attention« (ibid.: 131). The explosion was triggered by a clueless local who brought the soldiers to the scene to remove the threat. The man is thus a victim of a combination of miscommunication and leftover arms, and to add insult to injury, the officer suspects the dying man of leading the soldiers to the UXO out of malicious intention, forcing Williams to interrogate him instead of helping him (ibid.: 137). The combination of weapons and hampered communication sows mutual mistrust, victimizes innocents, and creates a climate of aggressive, volatile suspicion: »No respect for the customs of the people, for the rhythms of their lives, for the shit they've had to suffer. There was way too little attempt to communicate with the people. Too many soldiers acting like it was *shoot-em-up* time« (ibid.: 142). Instead of investing in the dialogue, the army deals in the aggressive division produced by weaponry and fortified army compounds. »It made no sense at all unless the goal was to lose the hearts and minds of the people. To make them stop thinking of us as *liberators* and start thinking of us as *occupiers*« (ibid.: 200).

With the strategy of division comes dehumanization and aggressive violence. The dehumanization of the enemy starts with the application of labels, akin to the labelling of women. In Iraq, the term is »*Hajji*« (ibid.: 200). On this basis, the enemy is reduced to an inferior being whose eradication is seen as an empowering act. Williams has one telling conversation with a teenage soldier in which he cannot stop bragging about having killed an enemy. »Yeah,« the guy said, puffing himself up and stretching his arms. A little yawn. Casual-like. »I got a kill just last week. Man, I gotta tell you. It was the coolest. To see what happens when this dude got it. I can't even begin to explain.« He looked at us to see how we were doing« (ibid.: 143). The absurdity of the repeated swagger is emphasized by the non-reaction of his listeners. The very insistence on being proud of having killed someone clearly masks the uncertainty over the moral dimension of the deed. »But it's my job and all, y'know?« he said, a little shaky. »I got a job to do. That's why I'm here. To get a job done. Y'know?« (ibid.: 144). This insecure defensiveness essentially illustrates how the army's questionable lure of empowerment is really an unsettling release of a potential for monstrosity. While Williams is able to reflect these mechanisms of hate and even empathize with corrupted soldiers, she cannot extricate herself from them. Even though »we [translators] had so much more understanding than the average soldier[...] even we reached the point where we were very close to hating the Iraqi people« (ibid.: 254).

This creation of monstrosity expresses itself in various forms. Williams's observation of two soldiers torturing and killing a kitten for example (ibid.: 196) shows that the aggression the army fosters to cultivate an assertiveness against the enemy seeks release by targeting the innocent and powerless, manifesting in a sadistic joy. Clearly, there is no empowerment here, but a succumbing to destructive urges. Yet the suggestion of power is precisely what makes this cultivation of aggression so seductive. This becomes particularly apparent when Williams is involved in the abuse of a prisoner: »Yet yelling at this guy did also feel perversely good. Because it was not something I was allowed to do. No one does this in our society; we don't just decide we can scream at random people who have their hands tied and who have no power to resist. I don't like to admit it, but I enjoyed having power over this guy« (ibid.: 205). The »power« the army provides trades on repressed desires, which manifests in a release of pent-up destructive emotions, the worst of »all you can be«, and, as Williams astutely points out, this lure of power is dependent on the feeling of powerlessness the soldier can compensate by dominating others. »I wonder if my own creepy sense of pleasure at my power over this man had anything to do with being a woman in this situation – the rarity of that enormous power over the fate of another human being« (ibid.: 205).

The feminist impetus of empowerment, of escaping a condition of powerlessness as a woman in society, is used by the army to lure her into the position of the abuser when she becomes involved in systematic torture practices. It is precisely her femininity which makes her a »useful prop« (ibid.: 249) to humiliate a prisoner, as she is ordered to verbally degrade and mock him. More than anything, this episode elevates the personal abuse she experiences in the army to a structural level, because her degradation to a prop is elemental in the degradation of someone else, prompting her to ask the question »How morally culpable am I?« (ibid.: 252). This question highlights the perfidy of the system which is built upon degradation:

All of us, guys and girls, were in a situation in Iraq where we were powerless much of the time. Powerless to change what we did. Powerless to go home. Powerless to make any real decisions about how we were living our lives while deployed. And then we found ourselves in this situation where we had all this power over another person. And suddenly we could do whatever the fuck we wanted to them. (ibid.: 206)

So the army not just lures the powerless into its narrative of empowerment, it also exacerbates this feeling of powerlessness by its strict hierarchies so as to generate the desire for compensation and consequently release the potential for abuse. Hence the very expression of power in this scenario of enemy mistreatment is not just expressive of the abuser's powerlessness, it also perpetuates the structures that cause

this powerlessness in the first place. In fact, by making you complicit in inhuman actions, the system washes itself of responsibility.

The military's rejection of responsibility for turning its members into unstable killers, torturers, and rapists is nowhere more effectively illustrated than when at the funeral of a female soldier who killed herself, the battalion commander proclaims, »she caused this because she never reached out for help« (ibid.: 227). There is no recognition of systemic accountability or an assumption of care but the conferment of responsibility on the individual for their own failure. Fittingly, the episode that follows Williams's involvement in torture is the attempted rape by one of her fellow soldiers. In this way, the text connects the dynamic between her and the prisoner to that of her would-be rapist and herself. In this first case, she is the victimizer, in the second case the victim, but the cycle of powerlessness and compensation by victimization is the same. Accordingly, the text identifies her abuse as symptomatic of an abusive system, in which her would-be rapist and herself are similarly victimized and literally »perpetratorized«.

5. Solidarity with the Other

At the same time, being female in the army also fosters the awareness of these very processes of pseudo-empowerment and cyclic abuse by virtue of her Othering from the male collective. Williams is particularly attuned to the xenophobia that the military fosters. Even before she joins the army she has a relationship with an Arab man, Tariq, called Rick, which prompts her to learn about Arab culture and language. She is particularly enamored with the Arab sense of community. She writes, »It wasn't until I joined the military that I experienced anything like this again« (ibid.: 34). This fairly innocuous sentence points to a quality of the text that can be likened to what Smith/Watson call »relationality« (Smith/Watson 2002: 34): the awareness that »one's story is bound up with that of another« (86), »mobilized within life writing for the purposes of self-narrating and self-knowing« (ibid.: 86, 88). Williams recognizes the Other not as separate entity, against which she defines herself, but as a shifting signifier relating to her own identity in complex and changing ways, inviting her to reflect on herself and the environments she moves in. She sees a connection between the military and the Arab community, but not just in positive terms of group cohesion, she also critically reflects on her status as a woman in that community, noticing how Rick's friends treat her with respectful distance because they regard her as his property (Williams 2005: 110), akin to her treatment as »bitch« in the military. In this way, Williams sees different cultures as mutually illuminating each other, discovering similarity where the military only preaches difference.

This also means that she is able to see her own culture critically by assuming the view of the Other. One such instance is her encounter with Jimmy the Ice Man

who shows a considerable entrepreneurship in providing the soldiers with fresh ice against the heat. He invests in the infrastructure (hires cars for a day to provide the ice, creates demand, controls the supply) and can finally jack up prices to make a profit. He represents »Capitalism in its purest form« (ibid.: 193) and by witnessing its mechanics provides the example to critically reflect on the values and pitfalls of exporting American values abroad. When Williams talks to Jimmy about living in America, she tempers his desire to go there and make a lot of money with the reality of the cost of living and the hassle of paying bills. In response, he »whose impoverished people have suffered for centuries at the hands of one oppressor or another, has taken pity on my small salary« (ibid.: 195) and offers her a free soda. By reversing the roles of oppressed and kind provider, Jimmy invites Williams to regard her own culture and her own understanding as liberator of Iraq critically. Through the Other she can interrogate and relativize her own position and identity. In this way she also recognizes a kinship between her own diminished status and that of women in Iraqi society.

In another scene, she makes a rare encounter with a Yezidi woman who barely speaks Arabic, which makes conversation difficult but not impossible:

It was the first time I encountered a young local woman with whom I could spend some time talking. [...] Her name was Leila, and we became friendly, if not friends. [...] I noticed that all the girls in the family had tattoos on their faces, but none more than Leila. [...] I tried to ask what these dots on her face meant, but there was too much of a language barrier. [...] Besides my general interest in the locals, and my desire to get to know what the civilians were like, it was just great to see a girl. This was such a male environment otherwise. And even though our conversations were hobbled by our mutual inability to make ourselves easily understood, there was just a sense of relief. For me. And, I began to suspect, for Leila as well (ibid.: 189–190).

This moment demonstrates the potential for communication, even for female solidarity across cultures that is mostly happening on the level of an emotional empathy, the recognition of sameness. The unreadable tattoos (reminiscent of Ishmael's encounter with Queequeg in Melville's literary classic *Moby Dick*) constitute the superficial Otherness belying the common humanity underneath while presenting an unbreakable barrier of unknowability. Williams is drawn to the shared experience of having to deal with a »male environment«, yet in a sense the tattoos also signify how this male environment has imposed itself onto the female body and appropriated it, hampered its relationality by turning it into a signifier, just like Williams is turned into a label by her male environment. The two women thus recognize their sameness in the very fact that they are alienated from each other due to imposed patriarchal, linguistic, cultural barriers. The tragedy is that this moment of connection, of recog-

nizing herself in the Other, is disrupted by precisely those dynamics that contribute to her oppression, but it is this reflectiveness which makes Williams turn her back on the institution after her tour in Iraq is over.

6. Conclusion

When summarizing the effect that the army had on her as a person, it becomes clear that if Williams has become more assertive, it is in spite, not because of the military, which punishes assertion (*ibid.*: 278). What dominates are feelings of powerlessness and purposelessness in an institution of mismanagement, waste, and corruption, sabotaging efforts of creating peace and stability, victimizing people by turning them into violent aggressors and afterwards refusing responsibility, and fighting a war without justification. The gun, used by the army as an icon of empowerment, is unmasked as the facilitator of abuse, forcing the individual into immoral actions by denying the potential for a productive dialogue between cultures. Instead it undermines agency by creating a climate of volatile aggression.

At the end of the book, Williams wonders if she »should go buy a handgun because I didn't have a weapon in my house. What if something happened?« (*ibid.*: 281). The gun has become a dependency, not an enabler. And the military has become a specter, threatening her with reenlisting. »I'm not completely safe until 2008. I could be in graduate school. I could have a job I love. And the letter could come. Tomorrow. Next week. Next month. Next year. No, it's not over. Not for a long while yet« (*ibid.*: 288). Since the publication of the memoir, Williams has become an advocate for the protection of veterans from the detrimental effects of their military careers, and she served as the Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs in Joe Biden's cabinet until June 2022. Williams's narrative runs counter to sociological studies which postulate the beneficial effects of women serving in the military for gender equality (Latzel et al. 2011: 48). As such, it is an important reminder that every opportunity for progressive development towards greater equality comes with its inbuilt pitfalls of regressive backlashes, and that rather than championing access to supposed privileges, it may sometimes pay to interrogate and question the structural inequalities and deficiencies upon which these privileges rest.

Works Cited

Browder, Laura (2006): *Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Browder, Laura/photographs Pflaeging, Sascha (2006): *When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Chodorow, Nancy (1978): *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deer, Patrick (2017): »Beyond Recovery: Representing History and Memory in Iraq War Writing«, in: *Modern Fiction Studies* 63.2, pp. 312–335.
- Dyer, Geoff (2010): »The Human Heart of the Matter«, in: *The Guardian* from 12.06.2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/12/geoff-dyer-war-reporting>.
- Evert, Urte (2011): »Soldatenbraut und Mannesehre. Geschlechtsspezifische Symbolisierungen und Zuordnungen militärischer Waffen«, in: Klaus Latzel/Franka Maubach/Silke Satjukow (eds.), *Soldatinnen: Gewalt und Geschlecht im Krieg vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Paderborn: Schöningh, pp. 65–94.
- Holtz, Martin (2019): *Constructions of Agency in American Literature on the War of Independence: War as Action, 1775–1860*, London: Routledge.
- Kieran, David (2012): »It's a different time. It's a different era. It's a different place: The Legacy of Vietnam and Contemporary Memoirs of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan«, in: *War & Society* 31.1, pp. 64–83.
- Latzel, Klaus/Maubach, Franka/Satjukow, Silke (2011): »Soldatinnen in der Geschichte: Weibliche Verletzungsmacht als Herausforderung«, in: Klaus Latzel/Franka Maubach/Silke Satjukow (eds.), *Soldatinnen: Gewalt und Geschlecht im Krieg vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Paderborn: Schöningh, pp. 11–49.
- Lockhurst, Roger (2012): »In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq«, in: *Contemporary Literature* 53.4, pp. 713–737.
- Peebles, Stacy (2011): *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Smith, Sidonie/Watson, Julia (2002): *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2nd edition), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spychala, Mareike (2022): *Gender and Imperialism in the War on Terror: Autobiographies by Female Iraq War Veterans*. Dissertation, Uni Bamberg.
- Stanford Friedman, Susan (1998): »Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice«, in: Sidonie Smith/Julia Watson (eds.), *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 72–82.
- Williams, Kayla/Staub, Michael E. (2005): *Love My Rifle More than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Zeiss Stange, Mary/Oyster, Carol K. (2000): *Gun Women: Firearms and Feminism in Contemporary America*, New York: New York University Press.