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## De-Militarizing Masculinities in the Age of Empire

*Dieser Artikel untersucht kritisch die Beziehung zwischen Männern, vorherrschenden Männlichkeitskonzeptionen und den Prozessen und Praktiken, die ins Spiel kommen, wenn Männlichkeiten militarisiert und zum Kriegszweck eingesetzt werden. Nach einer einleitenden Übersicht über die feministische und nicht-feministische Literatur zu Militarisierung und Männlichkeitskonstruktionen konzentriert sich der Artikel auf die Aussichten für eine Demilitarisierung von Männern und Männlichkeitskonstruktionen im US-Empire seit dem 11. September 2001 und insbesondere im Kontext der Kriege in Afghanistan und im Irak unter der Führung der USA. Die Analyse unterscheidet zwischen dem Militär als System, Militarisierung als Prozess und Soldaten als Menschen. Da Kriege nicht ohne militarisierete Männlichkeit zu führen sind, helfen Kriegsgeschichten von Soldaten, die zu einer Demystifizierung des Krieges beitragen, auch die enge Verknüpfung zwischen Männlichkeit und Gewalt zu schwächen oder sogar aufzubrechen. Zu diesem Zweck steht die Analyse der Beschreibungen von Soldaten im Zentrum des Artikels. Eine wichtige Schlussfolgerung des Artikels ist, dass der Prozess der Demilitarisierung ausdrücklich alle Systeme der Herrschaft und Unterdrückung, einschließlich Sexismus, Rassismus und Homophobie, die explizit und implizit im Militarisierungsprozess zur Anwendung kommen, in Frage stellen und delegitimieren muss.*

*Keywords:* masculinity, militarization, gender, veterans, September 11  
Männlichkeit, Militarisierung, Gender, Veteranen, 11. September

### 1. Introduction

Inspired by Cynthia Enloe's assertion that "everything that has been militarized can be de-militarized" (Enloe 2000, 1), this article seeks to untangle the relationship between men, dominant conceptions of masculinity, and the processes and practices that are at play as masculinities become militarized and deployed to fight a war. To examine the prospects for de-militarizing masculinities, one must begin to pay close attention to how masculinities have been constructed. That is, what are the main processes and practices that are involved in encouraging boys and men in a particular society to view the military in general and the war in particular as a key stepping-stone in their identity formation? My primary focus in this article is on the militarizing and de-militarization of men who have served in the United States military since the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. Although I use the term "the age of empire," an examination of the emergence and operations of the U.S. empire is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, like Arundhati Roy, Zillah Eisenstein, and Cynthia Enloe, I invoke the term to examine critically some of the gendered implications of the U.S.-led wars on Afghanistan and Iraq (Eisenstein 2004; Enloe 2004; Roy 2003).

The project of de-militarizing masculinities in the age of empire involves a critical examination of several discourses and practices: 1. the hegemonic discourse of masculinity and the justifications for war that the empire invokes and on which it depends; 2. the discourses and practices which promote militarization as a central aspect of masculine identities; and 3. discourses of resistance which reject hegemonic discourses of masculinity and their militarization. Grounded in both feminist and non-feminist literature on masculinity, militarization, and war, the article's primary focus is on discourses of resistance used by men who are re-thinking their relationship to the military in general and to war in particular.

I became interested in men and masculinity in the course of my research on the gendered dimensions of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Due to the highly militarized character of this conflict, I focused on the relationship between masculinity and militarization and on the spillover of violence from the battlefield to the homefront (Sharoni 1994; 1995). My service in the Israeli Defense Forces was a key turning point in my personal-political journey. During that period I became aware of how I and those around me, especially men, were being de-humanized and militarized. Gradually, I also became aware of how sexism, racism, and homophobia help both to perpetuate and to reinforce the militarized culture that I was socialized to embrace. In many ways, my own "awakening" and subsequent personal and political transformation is an example of de-militarization. As such, it may help to shed light on both the prospects and the challenges facing men (and women) when they begin to examine critically the relationship between militarization and their sense of personal and collective identity.

In my earlier work on formations and transformations of militarized masculinities I sought to document the practices and processes that are at play in cementing particular conceptions of masculinity and then militarizing them. Determined to challenge and to move away from the stereotypical association of men with war and women with peace, I drew examples from my field work in Israel, Palestine, and the North of Ireland to highlight differences and similarities and patterns of continuity and change not only over time and across cultures and political context but also among men within these collectivities (Sharoni 1998; 2000; 2002; Sharoni/McKeown 2002).<sup>1</sup>

There are clear patterns underscoring the relationship between men and militarization that cut across cultures and contexts. Nevertheless, in this article, I continue to resist the temptation of abstract theorizing. Instead, I focus primarily on different examples and strategies of resistance to militarized masculinities. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the processes and practices involved in resistance to militarization, I have argued that we must listen to the stories of soldiers who have become aware of the toll militarization has taken on their lives and have grown critical of war more generally. These personal accounts, shared both in public and in private settings, are invaluable, because it is such uncensored stories that the mainstream corporate media has failed to share with the American public (Sharoni 2005). While the empirical evidence to support my thesis is drawn from material collected in North America in the context of resistance to the current U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, my analysis is informed by interviews I conducted with Vietnam veterans and veterans of the first Gulf War as well as war resisters in Israel.

Following a review of relevant feminist literature on men, masculinity, and militarization, the article examines how the sociopolitical context in the United States after 11 September 2001 contributed to the heightened militarization of masculinities. Against this backdrop, I read U.S. soldiers' narratives of resistance as examples of de-militarization of masculinities. Finally, because these narratives are as political as they are personal, I consider their broader implications. The

last section of the article identifies new directions for the study of men, masculinities, and militarization by focusing both on the prospects and on the challenges for a process of de-militarizing masculinities. Drawing a distinction between masculinities that were formed in the context of domination and masculinities that have emerged amidst a liberation struggle, I explore the conditions necessary for the emergence of a masculinity that does not depend on and that explicitly challenges not only militarization but *all* structures of domination, including sexism, racism, and homophobia. Inspired by Arundhati Roy's assertion "that the only thing worth globalizing is dissent," the concluding section of the article includes some general recommendations that transcend the particular context of post-September 11 U.S.A. (Roy 2006, 467).

## 2. Feminist Theorizing about Men, Masculinity & Militarization

*Soldiers are not born, they are made; and part of what goes into the making of a soldier is a celebration and reinforcement of some of the most aggressive, and most insecure, elements of masculinity: those that promote violence, misogyny, homophobia, and racism (Whitworth 2004, 3).*

Over the years, feminists have written extensively about men and the effects of their identities and behavior on women, society, and politics. Nevertheless, until recently, masculinity, in its multiple manifestations and especially as it is experienced by men in various political contexts, has been relegated to the margins of feminist inquiry. In recent years feminists who study gender in/and international politics have made a consistent effort to address issues of men and masculinity from a feminist perspective (Zalewski/Palpart 1998). Still, most analyses focus on the effects of men and particular constructions of masculinity on women's lives. This is especially evident in the feminist scholarship on gender and militarization. What has been largely missing is field work that engages critically the way in which men embrace and/or resist dominant constructions of masculinity and their deployment by militaries as well as by other power structures. Indeed, until recently, the experiences of men whose masculinities become mobilized and often highly militarized when a conflict escalates have been largely neglected. Sandra Whitworth's analysis of Canadian peacekeepers is a noteworthy exception (Whitworth 2004). Still, there has been little or no attention paid to men who either resist militarization from the outset or change their views and relationship to violence and war during the course of the conflict. While some attention has been paid to these issues in the non-feminist literature on war, such analyses tend to be one-dimensional, focusing on the act of resistance to war itself, rather than on the potential deeper identity transformation of the men who refuse and resist war (Hallock 1998; Kingston 2006; Laufer 2006).

Feminist scholars' relative lack of attention to men and especially to men's resistance to militarization may be related, at least in part, to the ever present need to document the experiences and struggles of women that have been neglected and marginalized for decades. As a result, when men are mentioned in the literature, it often seems that they are treated as a monolithic entity, even if this is not the intention of the author. This tension is particularly evident in the body of feminist literature on gender, war, and peace. Pioneered by feminists in the fields of Peace Studies and Peace Research, this seminal body of scholarship established that a critical examination of gender relations and roles has much to contribute to the study of war and peace (Brock-Utne 1989; Boulding 1976; Reardon 1985; Ruddick 1989). At the same time, it was

broadly interpreted to suggest a relationship between women and peace, and men and war (Forcey 1991; Sylvester 1989; 1991).

Having worked closely with many of the feminists that have contributed to that body of literature, I contend that by and large most do not share the above interpretation that has since been criticized by feminists as “essentialist.” At the same time, while their lack of attention to men and masculinity was not intentional but a result of the urgency they felt to document women’s experiences in and responses to war and peace, it prevented more complex research and theorizing. At present I would argue that most feminists who work on issues related to gender and militarization would concur, as I do, with Henri Myrntinen’s conclusion that “depicting women as being essentially peaceful and men as essentially violent reinforces the hegemonic, patriarchal models of masculinity and femininity, and simultaneously obscures many patterns of dominance and violence” (Myrntinen 1996, 43).

The term “militarized masculinity” has been used widely in feminist literature to refer to the processes and practices that turn ordinary men into warriors. Feminist literature on the topic underscores the fact that in most cultures to be manly means to be a warrior (Enloe 2000; Whitworth 2004). As a result, the link between masculinity and propensity to violence often seems unquestionable. One reason for this quagmire lies in the tendency of scholars and journalists alike to treat men’s aggression as the *cause* rather than as a *symptom* of violence and war. Such analyses rarely pay attention to social, political, and economic conditions that fit the definition of structural violence and often trigger physical violence. Along these lines, the conventional literature on war limits its definition of violence to physical violence, that is, the use of force and its implications, which can be clearly observed. Structural violence, on the other hand, is not always visible. It may include political violence, such as a lack of democracy and human rights, or social violence in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic violence, which can manifest itself in such conditions as poverty, homelessness, and unemployment.

As wars and violent conflicts do not just happen, but are rather the result of policies maintained by governments and state bureaucracies, a conceptualization of violence that includes structural violence is crucial to a feminist analysis of militarization. To understand how masculinities become militarized and how they can be de-militarized, we must examine the larger historical, sociopolitical, and economic context within which individual and collective identities are formed and transformed. Along these lines, I suggest that while wars and violent conflicts tend to heighten the construction of militarized masculinities, they may at the same time open up space for critical exploration of different notions of manhood and their relationship to violence and war.

While it is understandable that the study of men had to be pushed aside to create space for the study of women and their experiences, it is impossible to understand, let alone transform, the interplay between gender and militarization if the diverse experiences of men remain unexamined. Conventional theorizing on gender, war, and peace may backfire because, despite the powerful critiques of militarized masculinity, they include little or no analysis of the experiences of men. As a result, militarized masculinities are treated as the norm, thus reinforcing the social and political status. The growing body of anti-sexist/pro-feminist literature on men and masculinity challenges this simplistic equation, illuminating the diverse experiences of men and the multiple, often competing, conceptions of masculinity which shape them (Connel 1995; Digby 1998; Haywood/Mac an Ghail 2003; Kimmel 1987; 1995; Lingard/Douglas 1999; Messner 1997). In recent years, the groundbreaking theoretical work on men and masculinities by pro-feminist men has inspired several empirical studies based on extensive field research around the world (Cleaver 2002; Jones 2006; Ouzgane 2006; Pease/Pringle 2001; Seidler 2006).

Most feminist and pro-feminist scholars and activists insist that it is important to distinguish between the terms “men,” “male,” and “masculinity.” Further, many prefer to use the plural form “masculinities” over “masculinity” to underscore that being a man is neither a monolithic nor a static position. Most attempts to classify the literature tend to converge on broad categories ranging from men’s traditional social roles to new masculine expressions based on equal gender relations (Lingard/Douglas 1991). To capture differences among men, the plurality of masculinity and its fluidity, it is useful to think about masculinity as a discourse and examine it in relation to power structures. As Greig et al. point out, “misogyny, homophobia, racism and class/status-based discrimination are all implicated in a ‘politics of masculinity’ that is developed and deployed by men to claim power over women, and by some men to claim power over other men” (Greig et al. 2000, 2).

The treatment of masculinity as a discourse of power is particularly useful to the examination of the militarization and de-militarization of masculinities, especially in times of war. Once men become aware of their own social locations in relation to other groups, they have the potential to change both the meanings and the behaviors that define them as men, including their relationship to war and militarization.

### 3. Militarization and Masculinity in Context: Post 9/11, War, and Empire Building

*It is crucial to locate and name the privileging of post-September 11 masculinity power with all its destructiveness (Eisenstein 2004, 151).*

*Our strategy must be to isolate Empire’s working parts and disable them one by one (Roy 2004, 66).*

9/11 provided a perfect pretext for the re-masculinization of the U.S. and an excellent foil for U.S. empire-building. The 1990s were characterized by a hegemonic masculinity involving the dominant political and economic trends of globalization (Hooper 2001). This hegemonic masculinity was less militarized, celebrating men in civilian clothes: corporate executives, investment bankers, and international businessmen. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, strong men in uniform replaced corporate billionaires. The re-assertion of America’s military might and the rebirth of a new form of masculinity were reminiscent of the images of men that dominated popular culture in the U.S. after the Vietnam War (Jeffords 1989). In both cases the images of strong, invincible, and trustworthy men were designed to mask the sentiments of vulnerability and insecurity and to divert attention away from the failure of political leaders to re-enact a sound foreign policy.

However, the male hero that has dominated the TV screens after 9/11 and been turned into a cultural icon since was not similar to post-Vietnam Rambo. Rather, the firefighters, police officers, politicians, defense specialists, and soldiers who dominated the air-waves displayed a masculinity which was both “tough and tender” (Niva 1998)<sup>2</sup>. Stories of masculine bravery, action, sacrifice, brotherhood, and responsibility were carefully crafted and marketed. Seeking to mask empire’s vulnerability and its subjects’ insecurities, the re-masculinization of American manhood was re-enacted against the backdrop of the domestication, marginalization, and silencing of women (Faludi 2007). While tough and tender men at home were instructed to deal with their fears and insecurities by re-asserting their dominant roles as men, the U.S.-led attacks on

Afghanistan and Iraq introduced an unprecedented level of militarization into American culture and politics.

The discourse of militarized masculinity that has been dominant in the U.S. since 9/11 has been used by the Bush administration to justify its current foreign policy. This discourse, like other discourses of domination, depends on the clear dichotomy of *us* versus *them*. Indeed, this simplistic distinction, which has been used to fuel hatred, wars, and conquest in other contexts, has been the underlying rationale of the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq and the targeting of people of Middle Eastern descent in the U.S. after 9/11. Words like “security” and “liberation” have been manipulated by the Bush administration and the corporate mainstream U.S. media to justify U.S. aggression. Such aggression was presented as inevitable in the face of the collective American experience of terror and fear. Both the protection of the American people and the liberation of the people (especially women) from the Taliban in Afghanistan and from Saddam Hussein in Iraq on the other, have been used as pretexts to celebrate militarized masculinities grounded in a sense of entitlement and superiority.

The protector/protected dichotomy, which has been the focus of much feminist International Relations scholarship, shapes the identities and roles for men and women based on the conventional juxtaposition of masculine autonomy, action, and control with feminine dependency, passivity, and vulnerability (Hooper 2001). In the age of empire, these stereotypical constructions of femininities and masculinities acquire another layer of *us* versus *them* polarity: that between colonizers and colonized. The current U.S.-led project of colonization and empire-building has gained additional currency after 9/11 by hijacking simplistic understandings of Western feminism and re-creating the old colonialist narrative of Western/“enlightened” men waging a war against “other”/often dark-skinned men, with the goal of rescuing “other” women (Hunt 2002; Fowler 2007; Russo 2006).

The Eurocentric-racist gendered imagery of American and British men rescuing Afghani and Iraqi women from “their” men has been embraced by the corporate-owned media in the West, especially in the United States, and used to mobilize support for the U.S.-led wars. Arundhati Roy points out the irony that escaped many American and British citizens: “television tells us that Iraq has been ‘liberated’ and that Afghanistan is well on its way to becoming a paradise for women, thanks to Bush and Blair, the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s leading feminists” (Roy 2003). By representing war and empire-building as a humanitarian mission, the hijacking of some Western feminist ideas has served to mask the re-militarization of American masculinities and to silence dissent and opposition to the hyper-militarized U.S. foreign policy.

The re-militarizing of American masculinities has also inspired new, more aggressive military recruiting strategies which more than ever target working class communities and people of color, including non-U.S. citizens (Goff 2004; Ensign 2004). Military recruiters often do not tell the young men they were targeting that they might, in all likelihood, end up fighting wars in far away places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead they dangled images of confident looking men in uniform in front of boys and men whose existential, emotional, and economic insecurities were heightened by the post-9/11 climate of national insecurity (Laufer 2006).

Within this political context, Cynthia Enloe, amongst others, warns that “focusing our attention on the military-industrial complex, oil and empire isn’t enough. If we dismiss the politics of femininity and masculinity, we will never get to the bottom of what fuels militarization. We will never roll it back because we won’t know what propels it forward” (Enloe 2006). Feminist scholars like Enloe have done a remarkable job in unmasking the interplay of gender and militarization and its impact on society in general and on women and children in particular. What

has been largely missing from this expansive body of literature, however, are the voices of boys and men whose identities have been hijacked and harmed by militarization. To get to the bottom of what fuels militarization, we must pay close attention to how different men experience militarization, how they cope with its short- and long-term harmful effects, and, finally and most importantly in the context of my project, why and how some men question, refuse, and resist violence, war, and militarization.

### 3.1. Understanding Militarization and De-Militarization

Why and how do men become aware of the toll militarization takes on them and on others? What can we do to encourage such a process and to support soldiers as they go through this often painful transformation? What are some of the challenges that prevent most soldiers from realizing their potential to question the high price they have to pay for their nation's decision to make war a center-piece of its foreign policy? My reading of the literatures of war with particular attention to veterans' stories of resistance and my interviews and more casual conversations with soldiers who experienced war point to a multi-layered process involving the de-militarizing of the body, heart, and mind and the healing of the soul. For men, all these aspects of their identity have been militarized through violent socialization in a militarized culture. There is, however, an additional defensive shield that is acquired during military training and service. The military refers to this process as "soldiering" (Grossman 1996; Neiberg 2000).

People across cultures and contexts came to view the turning of boys into men as one of the key elements of soldiering. But as Sandra Whitworth points out "even before joining up or being conscripted, young men normally have been socialized into ideas associated with soldiering and of being a warrior through family norms, movies, male role models, books, military recruitment campaigns, television programs, and children's games" (Whitworth 2004, 160). As the military is a hierarchical organization whose chief role is to prepare warriors to be ready to kill and die, the legitimization of aggression and violence in the process of soldiering should come as no surprise. What is surprising to some, however, is the blatant manner in which aggression is celebrated and condoned during military training. To create an illusion of power and control among soldiers who are in essence losing their individual identities and experiencing immense vulnerability, the logic and practices at the heart of soldiering draw heavily upon and openly promote sexism, racism, and homophobia (Razack 2004; Whitworth 2004).

Feminists have long called attention to the fact that sexism, racism, and homophobia are interlinked systems of oppression that reinforce one another because they share a logic of domination, of *us* versus *them*, thus, legitimizing the power of one group over another and justifying the use of violence against "the other." It is no surprise then that the process of soldiering and the preparation of men to confront the "enemy" who is constructed as "the other" involve hate speech and derogatory jokes targeting women, gays and lesbians, and people of color. As the process of militarizing masculinities depends on the privileging of white heterosexual masculinity, it is possible that some individuals who have suffered from racism, sexism, or homophobia and join the military expecting to be treated as equals have a problem with the logic of domination when it is introduced during their military training. They are uneasy from the start about accepting their rights when they come at the expense of others. While those who have been at the receiving end of discrimination may question the logic of *us* versus *them*, they are well aware of the risks associated with such questioning.



To challenge the logic of militarized masculinity and to undo some of the damage of soldiering on a larger scale, the process of de-militarization has to therefore explicitly call into question and de-legitimize all systems of domination and oppression, including sexism, racism, and homophobia, that have been used both explicitly and implicitly during the process of militarization in general and in the course of military training in particular. In other words, the process of de-militarization is in essence a process of resisting de-humanization that is the center-piece of militarization. To use positive language, the process of de-militarization is in many ways a process of re-humanization.

All too often, the de-humanization of the “other” has been not only central to militarization but also a legitimate practice that is rewarded by one’s national collectivity. As a result, the processes and practices associated with de-militarization and re-humanization entail numerous risks for individual soldiers and their families. Given this context, many veterans hesitate to share their reservations about war with non-veterans because they were trained to put the needs of the collective (their military unit and their country) above their own needs and concerns. According to veteran and military psychologist Dave Grossman, “among men who are bonded together so intensely, there is a powerful process of peer pressure in which the individual cares so deeply about his comrades and what they think about him that he would rather die than let them down” (Grossman 1996, 150). Veterans often remark that the bonds they form with their comrades on the battlefield are stronger than their most intimate relationships. While this prevalent comment reveals much about hegemonic constructions of masculinity in our society, it also explains the pressures confronting soldiers who challenge implicitly or explicitly the rationale or the particular practices associated with militarized masculinity and the acceptance of war as inevitable, if not just. Questioning war or the military is often viewed as an act of betrayal if not treason.

Grossman and others examined carefully and critically the role of groups in legitimizing inhuman practices like war stressing that “groups can provide a diffusion of responsibility that will enable individuals in mobs and soldiers in military units to commit acts that they would never dream of doing as individuals, acts such as lynching someone because of the color of his skin or shooting someone because of the color of his uniform” (Grossman 1996, 152). As militarized masculinities are formed through the fostering of uniformity and group identity, the risks associated with challenging these dominant constructions involve the potential loss of close friends as well as fears of being accused of treason, not to mention the actual risk of imprisonment.

Given the context of militarized patriotism that has been a centerpiece of U.S. culture since 9/11, soldiers who resist militarization have to take some great personal risks as they begin to de-militarize their identities. Finding like-minded individuals and groups within a militarized context may help soldiers realize that it is not they as individuals who have a problem, but rather the system is responsible for causing it. Veterans for veterans support groups play a particularly important role in the de-militarization process of soldiers returning home as they operate from a shared experience and culture. Groups such as the Veterans for Peace, G.I. Hotline, Courage to Resist, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and Iraq Veterans Against the War have played a crucial role in supporting individual soldiers as well as orchestrating public relations campaigns designed to let American citizens know how war is experienced by soldiers. Veterans’ groups have worked in collaboration with military families opposed to the war and with local and national peace groups. Similarly, the founding members of Gold Star Families For Peace and Military Families Speak Out see their primary roles as two fold: First, they have sought to offer support to military families and to soldiers and second, they have worked to share their experiences of and views on the Iraq war with elected officials and the American public.<sup>3</sup>

The groups mentioned above have played an important role within the peace movement, which mobilized early and in large numbers to protest the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan and the plans to attack Iraq (Cortright 2004). To avoid the stereotypical characterization of the peace movement as dividing the national collectivity and undermining the morale of its troops, the slogan “Support the Troops – Bring Them Home” became one of the most popular and visible messages of the movement. But even the most powerful slogan has lost momentum in a militarized culture where the dominant media is controlled by individuals and groups who have much to gain from a perpetual war. While the slogan makes sense to those who are opposed to the war, the peace movement has had few opportunities to share this view with larger segments of the U.S.-American public.

Creating space and opportunities for such debates in a culture where many people pay more attention to reality TV than to the reality of war is not an easy task. To de-militarize masculinities and to de-legitimize the military system that they uphold and the militarized foreign policy they serve, we must distinguish between the military as a system, militarization as a process, and soldiers as human beings. A powerful and effective way of doing that is by reaching out to soldiers and listening to their stories. Because war cannot be fought without militarized masculinities, soldiers’ war stories, which help de-mystify war, also work in turn to weaken, if not undo, the tightly constructed knot between masculinities and violence.

### 3.2. *Listening to Soldiers’ Stories*

*No one knows better than those who “were there” that war is hell (Hallock 1998).*

*By putting my weapon down, I choose to reassert myself as a human being. I have not deserted the military or been disloyal to the men and women of the military. I have not been disloyal to a country. I have only been loyal to my principles (Mejia 2005).*

I first became aware of the toll militarization takes on soldiers during my military service in Israel in the late 1970s. I witnessed how sensitive boys turn into tough guys, but I was also privileged to serve in a role where several of these young men complained to me that they did not like how they were changing. They were stressed out; they felt lonely and scared. I remember in particular my friend Josh, who was a junior officer and loved to play Cat Stevens songs on his guitar. I told Josh that some of the soldiers in his platoon were uneasy about the effects of their military training on their hearts and souls. The following evening, Josh arranged for those soldiers to be on the same shift and he took his guitar with him to the observation post they were guarding. Josh’s sensitivity, compassion, and care landed him in a military prison for 14 days and I felt guilty and responsible. After handling several suicide threats of soldiers who could not cope anymore with their sense of rapid loss of self, I complained to those higher up in the chain of command. For Richie, my boyfriend at the time, writing poetry was an act of resistance – a conscious effort to keep some parts of his inner-self out of the military’s reach.

Almost a decade later, during the early months of the first Palestinian *Intifada*, I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Mark after he returned home from a month of reserve duty in a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. Mark also wrote poetry, but after his time in Gaza he, like many other soldiers who have served in the Occupied Territories, could not write love poems anymore. His poetry reflected the hell he witnessed in Gaza, his traumatic and traumatizing

experiences, and the demons he was wrestling with every night when he tried to fall asleep. I remember in particular one poem, in which he attempted to see himself through the eyes of the young Palestinian boys who threw stones as he patrolled the streets of their refugee camp.

It was easier for me to empathize with Josh and Richie because I was not aware at the time of the toll militarization takes on Palestinians, nor of the effects of militarized masculinity on women and children in both societies. It was more difficult for me to support Mark because he had blood on his hands and I felt guilty when I listened to him. I also did not want to accept the role most women in Israel take for granted: that of consoling and supporting men when they return from the battlefield. Today, twenty years later, my perspective on this issue is different. In an op-ed article I wrote on the second anniversary of the U.S. attack on Iraq, I insisted that

*(it) is not the time, nor our role, to judge or educate these soldiers. They do not need us to tell them that they participated in a futile war, nor to lecture them about the real reasons behind it. Most of them experienced the futility of this war on their bodies, pondered the lies behind it in their minds and had to fight with anguish, frustration and fear in their hearts, whether they admit it publicly or not. Listening to these stories as difficult as they may be, will enable us to better reach out to and to communicate with those who don't yet share our sense of urgency to end this war (Sharoni 2005).*

Due to the personal and social stigma and the political price associated with speaking out against militarization, there are countless anonymous soldiers who either desert or manage to negotiate special deals with their units. Jeremiah Adler, Camilo Mejia, and Kevin Benderman, among others, have chosen to make their personal stories public. Their powerful, yet dramatically different, stories offer many insights into militarization and de-militarization.

For many soldiers, taking the military uniform off and physically removing themselves from the battlefield is a necessary precondition to their voluntary involvement in a process of critical reflection. This explains why some soldiers, like Camilo Mejia and Kevin Benderman, who had returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, refused to go on a second tour of duty. Sometimes, the process of disillusionment occurs during basic training before soldiers experience war. The following excerpt from Jeremiah Adler's letter home highlights his growing awareness of and deep uneasiness with militarization and the toll it took on him as an individual.

*It's hard for me to be myself here. There's no room for dissent among the guys. ... The vocabulary is much different here. The bathroom is called the latrine, food is called chow, women are bitches, sex is ass. These people want to go to war and kill. It is that simple (Cited in Dobie 2005, 35).*

The re-claiming of one's humanity after witnessing the de-humanization that makes militarization and war possible is evident in Camilo Mejia's story. Camilo Mejia spent more than seven years in the military and eight months fighting in Iraq. On a furlough from the war, he applied for Conscientious Objector (CO) status and was declared a Prisoner of Conscience by Amnesty International. His application for CO status was denied and subsequently he was convicted of desertion by the U.S. military for refusing to return to the war in Iraq and was imprisoned. Mejia was released from prison on 15 February 2005. Two days after his release from a nine-month incarceration in a military prison, he published an insightful op-ed article entitled "Regaining

my humanity” (Mejia 2005). In the article, Mejia details the process that led him to his action, including a return home, which gave him the space and opportunity to reflect on the in-human acts he witnessed while on the battlefield:

*Going home gave me the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say. People would ask me about my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors – the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood or an innocent man was decapitated by our machine gun fire. The time I saw a soldier broken down inside because he killed a child, or an old man on his knees, crying with his arms raised to the sky, perhaps asking God why we had taken the lifeless body of his son.*

Mejia also elaborates on the process of questioning the reasons behind this particular war, which is crucial to the de-militarization of one’s mind:

*I realized that none of the reasons we were told about why we were in Iraq turned out to be true. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. We weren’t helping the Iraqi people and the Iraqi people didn’t want us there. We weren’t preventing terrorism or making Americans safer. I couldn’t find a single good reason for having been there, for having shot at people and been shot at.*

The number of soldiers currently deployed in Iraq who have questioned the reasons behind the U.S.-led war in Iraq has been steadily growing. Filmmaker Michael Moore captured some of these voices in his powerful documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* and in a subsequent book titled *Will They Ever Trust Us Again? Letters from the War Zone*, which includes emails and letters he received from soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the book’s foreword, Moore (2004, 2–3) writes:

*Since the beginning of the war the American media has worked overtime to portray our brave troops as some sort of monolithic machine of men who are of one mind to rid Iraq of the bad guys and bring the goodness of Uncle Sam to that country. It wasn’t until *Fahrenheit 9/11* that most people had any clue there were so many soldiers NOT in support of what Bush was doing.*

According to Moore, Camilo Mejia is a representative of a silenced majority of soldiers whose experiences call into question not only the legitimacy of this particular war but of war as an institution. In a clear and eloquent manner, Mejia (2005) re-defines loyalty and subverts the stigmas associated with refusal to participate in war:

*To those who have called me a coward I say that they are wrong, and that without knowing it, they are also right. They are wrong when they think that I left the war for fear of being killed. I admit that fear was there, but there was also the fear of killing innocent people, the fear of putting myself in a position where to survive means to kill, there was the fear of losing my soul in the process of saving my body, the fear of losing myself to my daughter, to the people who love me, to the man I used to be, the man I wanted to be. I was afraid of waking up one morning to realize my humanity had abandoned me. (2005)*

As he engages his critics openly, he sheds light on both the risks associated with war resistance and the process of de-militarizing masculinities. His explicit reference to the sense of accountability he feels for his daughter resonates with other veterans' stories.

Kevin Benderman (2005) whose application for CO status was denied last year and who is currently serving a 15 months sentence in the military prison at Fort Lewis, Washington, echoes Camilo Mejia's sentiments and logic:

*I look at my stepchildren and realize that war has no place with me in giving them what they need to survive the trials and tribulations of early adulthood. And if you look at all the time soldiers lose in the course of fighting wars, such as birthdays and anniversaries, their children going to the senior prom and college graduations, and other things that can never be replaced, then you have to come to the understanding that war steals more from people than just the sense of humanity – it also steals some of that humanity from their family.*

Benderman's detailed letters from prison, which have recently been published in book form, offer invaluable insights into the complex process of de-militarizing masculinities. His passionate prose questions the logic of *us* versus *them* that upholds systems of domination in general and the military in particular. Benderman's critique explicitly calls into question the de-humanization that is part of being a soldier, especially on the battlefield:

*When you contemplate the beauty of the world around us and the gifts we have been given, you have to ask yourself, "Is this what humanity is meant to do, wage war against one another?" Why can't we teach our children not to hate or to not be afraid of someone else just because they are different from us? Why must it be considered honorable to train young men and women to look through the sights of a high-powered rifle and to kill another human being from 300 meters away?*

The healing of one's soul is instrumental to a successful process of de-militarizing. For many, the process involves individual and group therapy to deal with the post-traumatic effects of participation in war. For others, speaking out against war and taking action is key. For many action involves not only reaching out to people within their community and nation but also relating and apologizing to those whom they were trained to view as the enemy. Camilo Mejia (2005) addresses the Iraqi people:

*I also apologize to the Iraqi people. To them I say I am sorry for the curfews, for the raids, for the killings. May they find it in their hearts to forgive me.*

Mejia's sentiments resonate with those of many Vietnam era veterans who, beginning in the 1980s, engaged in numerous efforts designed to reach out and apologize to the Vietnamese people. These efforts included traveling to Vietnam and seeking reconciliation and healing through involvement in a variety of community projects (LaFontaine 2000; Shay 1995; 2003). Theories of healing and reconciliation as well as personal accounts of veterans suggest that the processes of questioning war and seeking to connect and reconcile with those who they were taught to hate and kill are not only important stages in the personal healing of veterans from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Healing and reconciliation processes are crucial to un-

dermining both the logic and the practices of militarized masculinities and empire's agenda more generally.

Indeed, veterans who have found healing from the wounds of war offer inspiring personal accounts about dealing with guilt and pain, forgiveness, peace, and hope. In the foreword to a book titled *Hell, Healing and Resistance: Veterans Speak*, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (cited in Hallock 1998, 91) suggests that veterans' healing and involvement in reconciliation efforts have a transformative potential for a nation as a whole. He contends that:

*Veterans are the light at the tip of the candle, illuminating the way for the whole nation. If veterans can achieve awareness, transformation, understanding, and peace, they can share with the rest of society the realities of war. And they can teach us to make peace with ourselves and each other.*

The back cover of the book provides some insights into the role of the community in the process of healing. Accordingly, "a necessary part of healing ... is to let veterans speak, to give them space to honestly confront the past, and to provide a supportive community that carries its share of the pain and guilt" (Hallock 1998). This was the logic behind "Winter Soldier," a gathering of Iraq Veterans Against the War, which took place in March 2008 in Washington, D.C., and featured testimonies of soldiers who had served in Afghanistan and in Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

Winter Soldier 2008 was inspired by the first Winter Soldier, which took place in January 1971, at the time of the Vietnam War. The first gathering was organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War who sought to hold a large scale public hearing, featuring testimonies of veterans and representing every major combat unit that was involved in the war (Stacewicz 1997). The 125 Vietnam veterans who testified during the original Winter Soldier hearings made clear that incidents like the *My Lai* massacre were not isolated and rare occurrences, but were instead the frequent and predictable result of official American war policy.

Winter Soldier 2008 was designed with a similar intention. Hundreds of people gathered in Maryland, a short-distance from Washington D.C., to listen to the 55 veterans, who gave personal testimony of what they had seen and done in Afghanistan and in Iraq. In addition to the soldiers' testimonies, the four-day event, which was covered live on a few satellite TV networks as well as webcasts, featured expert analyses designed to both support and provide a context for the personal narratives of soldiers. The program included a session on gender and sexuality in the military and two sessions on racism and de-humanization. Although, with few exceptions, the historical gathering was ignored by mainstream, U.S. Media outlets like the New York Times, MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News, Winter Soldier 2008 was a significant landmark on the way to de-militarization in general and a de-linking of masculinities and violence in particular.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.3. De-militarizing Masculinities as an Anti-Oppression/Liberation Project

*I write against empire building in its exploitative, racialized, masculinist, militaristic forms. I can see more inclusively when I look to find these complex webs. I ask you to look for them, and to destroy them (Eisenstein 2004, 20).*

*Feminist writing did not tell us about the deep inner misery of men. It did not tell us the terrible terror that gnaws at the soul when one cannot love (hooks 2004, 4).*

It would be impossible to de-militarize masculinities in any given context without fully engaging in a struggle to undo the damage of patriarchy and sexism as well as other systems of oppression and domination. Such a struggle resembles in many ways an anti-colonial struggle, which as many post-colonial scholars have pointed out, involves not only liberating a piece of land and overthrowing those who colonized it (Ouzgane/Coleman 1998). In the context of this project, de-militarizing masculinities involves the de-colonization of bodies, minds, and souls and the re-integration of the different parts of a man that have been colonized. Men who participated in wars have to undergo this process to unmask both the processes of making and unmaking of their particular militarized masculinities in the age of empire.

Differences, shaped by age, class, religion, and other modalities of identity and mitigating circumstances exist not only between men in different regions and on different sides of a conflict but within each group as well. Paying attention to these differences is crucial to understanding possible changes in conceptions of masculinity shaped by the conflict or by various attempts to resolve it. But as this paper underscores, changes in the meanings and practices associated with masculinity are not simply a matter of personal decisions or choices nor do they take place in a vacuum. They are shaped by and in turn inform our political views and visions for the future of our community. Moreover, dominant constructions of militarized masculinity as well as the discourses of resistance which challenge them cannot be fully understood without a careful analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and cultural context within which they unfold.

In the current political conflict, soldiers deployed to fight in Iraq make an implicit or an explicit choice to support or to resist the rhetoric and action of the empire which recruited them. In my earlier work on formations and transformations of masculinity in Israel, Palestine, and the North of Ireland, I have noticed that men who believe in and are involved in work for social and political change are often more aware of the privileges associated with being men in their respective communities than men who are actively engaged in safeguarding the social or political status-quo. In an article I co-authored with Laurence McKeown, we proposed that the meanings and practices associated with various notions of masculinity are influenced by both the broader context and the social location and political standpoint taken by men in relation to a political conflict (Sharoni/McKeown 2002). Based on our examination of constructions and changes in conceptions of masculinity and the experiences of men in the North of Ireland and in Israel and Palestine, we suggested that there is a profound difference between masculinities that are shaped in the *context of domination* and those shaped in a *context of liberation*.

A context of domination involves practices, policies, and discourses informed by an ideology of superiority, control, and power over others. Men whose conceptions of masculinity are shaped in such a context have a vested interest in maintaining the political status-quo. A context of liberation, on the other hand, involves practices, policies, and discourses designed to bring about freedom, justice, and equality. Men whose conceptions of masculinity are shaped in such a context seek to radically transform existing institutions and change the political status quo. Due to their different positions vis-à-vis the status quo, masculinities shaped in a context of domination are likely to be more rigid and resistant to change, whereas masculinities shaped in a context of liberation have the potential to be more flexible, mobile, and susceptible to change.

This statement is often challenged by feminists and non-feminists alike because of the dominant media images, which tend to portray men in national liberation movements as more macho and militaristic than soldiers in ordinary armies or police forces. In contrast, one is likely to encounter more rigid masculine behavior and resistance to change among soldiers and state police who are trained to view the use of physical force against others, including killing, as

part of their job. They learn about weaponry and wars, to be regimented, and to observe hierarchies and their place within those hierarchies. They have uniforms, insignias, songs, rituals, parades, marches, and ceremonies, which are all designed to reinforce their sense of belonging to a collective and to legitimize the use of force against those who appear to threaten that collective. Although some national liberation movements have at time embraced similar practices, these practices have always been contested from within and subjected to critical debate. This contrast is especially evident in the North of Ireland.

Most IRA volunteers had a fundamentally different understanding of and relationship to power. They “volunteered” to join a national liberation army and were repeatedly challenged to determine whether or not they really wanted to make such a decision. Unlike ordinary soldiers and police force personnel, IRA volunteers did not have a uniform and have very few collective rituals, none of them in the public eye. In agreeing to take up arms against the state they went against their moral (and state) upbringing that it is unlawful for them to do so. In carrying out such operations they consciously risked getting killed or long periods of imprisonment. Far from viewing their membership in the IRA as a profession, they believe the circumstances warrant their involvement and that their community require them to do so. Some would describe it as demonstrating “civic pride” (McKeown 2001; Taylor 1997).

Contrary to British soldiers and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) who, like other professional soldiers and state police forces, have been trained to guard the status quo, IRA volunteers and freedom fighters more generally fought for social and political change. This is particularly true for volunteers who spent significant periods of time in prison, where they were exposed to popular education and other ideas and strategies of community transformation. This process has included an awareness of gender inequalities. More specifically, during the blanket protest and hunger strikes, and especially in their aftermath, Republican prisoners, informed for the most part by Paulo Freire’s notion of critical pedagogy, organized popular education sessions to educate themselves on various social and political issues, including gender issues and feminist theory. Amidst a relentless struggle for national liberation, Republican men were able to transcend their immediate conditions and challenge themselves to think critically about their power and privilege vis-à-vis women (Sharoni 2000).

The image of Irish Republican prisoners engaged in a critical dialogue about masculinity, sexuality, and gender relations in one of the most heavily guarded prisons in Europe calls into question the monolithic portrayals of IRA volunteers as hyper-masculine, violent and sexist, which have dominated both media accounts and conventional literature on the conflict (Sharoni/McKeown 2002).

As the above example underscores, the rigidity or mobility of masculinity depends to a great extent on the rejection or acceptance of the political status quo, on the one hand, and systems of oppression and domination, on the other. Gender can be used to both cement and challenge militarized masculinities and the political discourses, policies, and practices they shape. While the discourse of militarized masculinity that represents current U.S. foreign policy is clearly a discourse of domination, soldiers’ stories which challenge de-humanization are examples of a discourse of liberation. U.S. soldiers who refuse to serve in Iraq because they do not want to participate in the destruction and oppression of people, engage in acts of resistance against U.S. foreign policy. In disassociating themselves from their government’s policies, they re-claim their humanity and their individuality. These acts are often accompanied by expressions of compassion and solidarity with people in Iraq and Afghanistan and with members of the global peace and justice movement. By placing their values as individual human beings over the dictates of



the military, they challenge, even if initially only implicitly, the logic of militarized masculinities. In refusing to fight a war, they challenge the logic of domination without which war and militarization cannot exist. The critical examination of one's militarization and especially the de-humanization of "the other," although painful on a personal level, is often accompanied by a sense of freedom. Liberating oneself from the harmful effects of militarization marks the beginning of a process of re-humanization, which has a transformative potential, both on a personal and on a political level.

Nevertheless, most boys and men operate at the moment within a political and popular culture and circumstances that are far from conducive to a fundamental transformation of masculinities. The attacks of September 11 and the militarized xenophobia they unleashed in the U.S. and around the globe have resulted in a reassertion of dominant and militarized masculinity. For men who have not witnessed first-hand the toll war takes on both their lives and humanity and on other people's lives, the re-surfacing of the militarized masculine ideal provides an illusion of security. However, that manufactured illusion of security is called into question when soldiers who experienced war and have been traumatized by it share their stories.

When I first listened to such stories at the founding meeting of Iraq veterans Against the War in 2005, I was troubled by the traces of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class privilege that were woven into the stories. As a feminist aware of the intricate ways in which systems of oppression and domination are linked and re-inforce one another, I was convinced that efforts to transform militarized masculinities must coincide with struggles to eradicate social, economic, and political inequalities. The historic gathering of Winter Soldier 2008 offered ample examples of soldiers whose masculinities have been militarized and who are working to undo the damage of de-humanization both to "the other" and to "the self." The vast majority of these soldiers seemed well aware of how the structures of racism, sexism, homophobia and militarism mutually reinforce one another as they work to cement the logic and policies of empire. Supported by ample documentation of the inhumanity of war as experienced by ordinary soldiers, their stories highlighted in this article are clear examples of people speaking truth to power. The common humanity and the principles of justice, equality, and self-determination for all, which underline these stories offer glimpses of hope and have the potential to inspire creative resistance during this dark moment in history.

## NOTES

- 1 I deliberately use the term "North of Ireland" instead of "Northern Ireland" that is often used in mainstream media and scholarly accounts to refer to the six counties of Ireland which are still colonized by Britain. The fact that "Northern Ireland" is the official term used in the arena of international politics does not make it legitimate or any less political. Because my work is about resistance and liberation, I use the term that reflects the nationalist struggle in Ireland aimed at ending British colonial rule.
- 2 Steve Niva used the term "tough and tender" to discuss the construction of American masculinities during the first U.S.-led Gulf War in the early 1990s. The term seems relevant in the context of post-September 11 masculinities in the U.S.
- 3 To learn more about these organizations see the following websites: Courage to Resist: <http://www.couragetoresist.org/x/>, Military Families Speak out: <http://www.mfso.org/>, Gold Star Families for Peace: <http://www.gsf.org/>, all accessed April 16, 2008. The term originally appeared in an art installation by Gabi Gofbarg. Gofbarg's installation critically examined representations of the Israeli Sabra. For a photo of the installation and a discussion of the term, see Sharoni 1995, 421.

- 4 To listen to the testimonies go to <http://www.warcomeshome.org/content/montage-cuts-heart-war-and-winter-soldier>, accessed April 16, 2008.
- 5 For more on Winter Soldier 2008, check the website of Iraq veterans Against the War at [www.ivaw.org](http://www.ivaw.org), accessed April 16, 2008.

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