

## **Suspended Selves: Between Female and the Warrior Bond**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores abjection as a normative construct — a tool of punishment and persuasion that, in military contexts, leaves women 'hanging' outside proper subjectivity. Moving through an analysis of Kayla Williams' 2005 memoir of military service, *Love My Rifle More Than You*, and touching on Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*, the article explores the uses of shunning and 'penetrability' in consolidating group warrior bonds at the expense of 'the female.' Finally, it is suggested that the omnipresence of bonding as an interest behind gender creation in military spheres may open a new space for political acts.

There is a moment in Kayla Williams' 2005 memoir of female military service in Iraq, *Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army*, in which, having driven a Humvee up a hill so steep the vehicle nearly flips, she feels (whether in the moment or later, when reformulating the experience for memoir) that she has earned respectability among a nearby group of males:

I could tell right away that they were laughing with me,  
not at me. I had won their respect [...] (161).

[3] It is hard at first to understand the importance Williams attaches to this apparent 'respect' — with its recognition of selfhood; its promise of status — when, in the next part of the anecdote, the men seem to exclude her:

'Boobs,' a FISTer said, like it was some genuine insight.

'Look, this one's got *boobs*' (Williams 161).

[5] If 'laughing with' connotes respect, then certainly 'this one's got boobs' puts Williams in a strange category — among the men, but not one of them ('this one', like an object). Perhaps she formed the linchpin of a joke aimed at the other soldiers, much as the term 'women' is used in interdictions about how boys should behave: 'You are to tell your men to stop acting like women[,] ' former commander of the United Kingdom Special Forces in Iraq, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins, said in his own memoir of desert service. Even while apparently included in the warrior bond, Williams was aware of a certain precariousness:

'Listen, now,' Travis says. 'What's the difference between a hooker and an onion?'

'Ah, that's my joke,' I complain, passing the can to him. 'No one ever cried when they cut a hooker[...] '(168).

[7] An attempt at self-inclusion, Williams' 'cut hooker' answer contains the idea that to consent to penetrative sex in the way of prostitution implies consent to all penetrations, including wounds. Clearly Williams saw herself as occupying a different kind of subjectivity to the 'hooker,' one in which penetrative consent might be presumed to matter. But later when the men began telling rape jokes, her safe zone crumbled and her "blood [...] 'froze'" (212). Her bodily integrity had been shown to be no more than a conceit, subject to the whims and permissions of others. Shortly after recounting the cut 'hooker' joke, Williams describes being called 'hatchet wound', causing 'a nasty shiver'. (167-168). Suddenly she glimpsed the yawning gulch of contingency that lies at the heart of all social relations, and most direly at the heart of warrior relations.

[8] This contingency was made even more real to Williams when, through no obvious misdemeanour on her part, the male soldiers began to actively avoid her:

I was getting shunned. The cold shoulder from guys I used to hang with all the time. I had no [...] idea why. No one was talking. No one was telling me anything. (159).

[10] Helplessly she recalls begging others to tell her why she was being treated as an outcast:

Why the hell won't the guys in our platoon ever talk to me anymore? (175).

[12] Indeed, the real story of *Love My Rifle* is not that of a female recruit acting as part of a military whole, but the way that whole banded together to reject her. Yet even that is putting it mildly. This was not a culture in which a woman could render *herself* one of the 'impenetrable' ones; this was a culture that specifically defined females as penetrable in order to parade, denigrate and exorcise associations not desired within the bond. None of it, despite Williams' introspective agonising (258), was personal. At no time during the shunning were its reasons made known. Only when a soldier was about to leave Iraq at the end of his duty did he admit some of the rationale behind the shunning:

'They think you're a big whore,' Quinn says, looking away. 'They think you're a slut. And they don't want to have anything to do with you[...]' (175).

[14] The whore, the slut, the hatchet wound — in documenting her experiences of being 'young and female' in the military, Williams manages to reveal the way motifs of penetration, penetrability and openness are used in forming and policing the homosocial warrior bond. Self-definition in bonded warrior cultures has been described as requiring 'purification' via the

expulsion of motifs associated with the enemy (Salman 2006). Anything that admits penetration is rejected from the bond. Anything that counts as openness may be read as penetrability. Appalled at the false perception of herself as a 'slut,' Williams describes feeling that she may have been partly responsible for it by being too verbally open. (258).

[15] In the psychic life of warriorship, at lot is being attempted: the consolidation of brotherhood against enemies; the expulsion of destabilising forces; the creation of a new congruent identity at the expense of unwanted motifs. Like all psychic processes, to understand them it is necessary to think in terms of associations. But even at its most literal, the prohibition on penetrability seems logical. The bond needs to close the team against penetration from outside: openness in that sense counts as weakness. However, external penetrability alone fails to explain the logic behind the conflation between sexual and injurious penetrations — that is, why Williams was called a 'slut.' The logic for these associations lies as much in what is *not* said as what is.

[16] According to Eve Sedgwick, the homosocial bond is characterised by hidden forces of domination and mastery (1985, 1990). These forces must be channelled, deferred and externalised if the bond is to succeed. Penetration may come, after all, not only from outside, but also from within,

most notably in the form of cuckoldry, which Sedgwick defines as 'a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man' (49). These tenets support the notion that Williams was cast out because she represented not merely penetrability in a broad sense, but specifically the unspoken, phobic prospect of sexual rivalry within the bond.

[17] This apparently doubled motif of penetrability — representing external weakness and the spectre of cuckoldry — may account for what seems the *excessive* vehemence of shunning as Williams experienced it, as well as the general view expressed toward military females:

It was around this time that I first heard that a female in the Army deployed in Iraq was either a bitch or a slut (259).<sup>i</sup>

[19] Within military relations, hatred of the enemy soldier exists as a hatred between men of otherwise equal rank. Albeit fighting on opposing teams, there is an affinity here between enemy soldiers that can translate into respect (Swofford).<sup>ii</sup> But Williams' experience of abjection implies she has been cast below even the status of an enemy, leading her to feel more upset by home team behaviours than warzone exigencies:

Why is it I can watch a man die and not freak out? Then I have a powerful physical reaction to a small — and *completely* unjustified — hassle from a [male] superior? (165).

[21] Having glimpsed the seriousness of the bitch/slut handle, Williams understandably preferred the role of 'bitch' (Williams 261) even as, to the reader, it seems clear that she had very little choice in terms of self-definitonality at all (one senseless slip — really a mistake of perception — and she was branded the other thing). Indeed, even her *official* status was routinely ignored:

A male friend of mine whose team leader was a girl and also the same rank had already told me that when people came to his site, they would talk to him — not to his team leader. And that would bother him.

He would say: 'She's the team leader.'

People would say: 'Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay.' And then keep talking to him. And repeatedly address him as if he were in charge.

He would again say: 'No, no. *She's* in charge.'

Now the same thing happened to me (259).

[23] The cultural presumptions that accorded status with bonded impenetrability have a hegemony of their own, colouring Williams' view of other females. Talking about her female superiors, Williams finishes her account of their incompetence with a description of each bursting into tears (91 and 268), in Simmons' case explained (by the Sergeant herself) as

premenstrual syndrome, perhaps an even worse gaffe given the notion of PMS ushering in the very bleeding that evokes the idea of a wound and, thereby, penetration (268). Later, Williams calls the weeping Staff Sergeant Moss a 'bitch' (91).

[24] Yet she also seems uncomfortably aware of the pressures that caused her to police the other women in this way:

You *never* cry in front of a subordinate. Especially if you're a woman in a position of authority. The guys already think we [female soldiers] can't handle this. It just isn't done (ibid.).

[26] Perhaps William's policing of these women counts as no more than another vain attempt to shore up her fantasy of inclusion among the men, much as in the way she tried to use 'hooker' in the cut onion joke. Like the male soldiers, *all* of whom can become targets for processes of casting out (anyone, after all, can be penetrated), the threat against Williams is a dire one, and policing others on behalf of the institution is perhaps one way of ameliorating risk. In Williams' narrative the behaviours of the men toward her evidenced a disturbing tendency toward increased sexual aggression:

It's dark, but not so dark that I can't decipher at some point that Rivers's pants are open. That he's got one hand on his penis.  
And then, suddenly, he's also got one hand on my arm.



He's pulling me pretty firmly toward him, maneuvering my hand toward his crotch (207).

[28] Perhaps familiar to anyone aware of team male 'sexploits' in the news,<sup>iii</sup> Williams' subsequent complaint to a superior appears to have merely resulted in further bonding amongst the other male soldiers. Across ranks, the men consolidated to tell an alternate story to the one she told — a complete, unified refutation that tried to redefine her once again as being too penetrable (this time orally, perhaps to match her crime of speaking out) and moreover had the weight of numbers:

He just launched in.

"Rivers tells me that you came over here in the middle of the night one night. He says you said: 'Oh, please let me suck your dick. I want to suck your dick so bad'"(212).

[30] Furthermore, as Williams notes, an increase in enemy pressures and group anxiety coincided with a visible increase in the bonded soldiers' obsession with penetrability and sexual hostility:

We were not in this together any longer. Nasty down the mountain, the insurgency gathered strength day by day. Ugly up here, too (ibid.).

[32] In the aftermath of all this, Williams considered suicide:

It was around this time that I contemplated offing myself (215).

[34] Perhaps it should come as no surprise that someone struggling with peculiarly hostile differentials of subjectivity might contemplate suicide. Anthony Swofford's 2005 literary memoir (or memoir-novel) *Jarhead* (Swofford 2003) also recounts a suicidal moment contextualised by problems adjusting to the deindividuation of military life (Swofford 95-97). However Swofford's self-narrator was rescued when a fellow soldier reminded him, via the devaluation of the woman whose infidelity was interpreted as being causative ("[s]he ain't suicide-pretty") (Swofford 99), of his position as part of 'a blood bond' (Swofford 99). The same horizontal bond that outcast Williams worked in reverse to reincorporate Swofford.

[35] As it happens, *Jarhead* provides an illuminating 'male' perspective on the military exorcism of penetrability. In fact, Swofford's work could be read as both a critique of and an *exercise* in masculine warrior bonding. The chief mode in which females are discussed in *Jarhead* seems to be cuckoldry (Sedgwick 49), a motif that so fixates the soldierly bond as to almost seem fetishistic. Narratively speaking, all but the most transient 'love' in *Jarhead* (the love of 'whores'<sup>iv</sup>) produces an ultimate betrayal, and the occasion of Swofford's best love marrying another is used as a moment in which to

express and solidify male bonds (206). Female figures discussed in the narrative include the wanton girlfriend,<sup>v</sup> sexual tricksters humiliated in the processes of their tricks (Swofford 130),<sup>vi</sup> and the targets of disparagement inscribed on a 'Wall of Shame' in terms of their sexual exploits (or bitchhood) (Swofford 128). Thus, while Swofford's self-narrator experienced his own subjective discomfort and ennui,<sup>vii</sup> it did not derive from shunning but, it seems, from the general loss of his individual status among the horizontal bond.

[36] Unlike Swofford's 'jarhead', Williams was not offered membership of the bonded identity as recompense for submerging her own. It makes no difference that such 'membership' can only ever be illusory or that even male 'members' can be cast out; what matters is that the bond *automatically* shunned Williams ('bitch' or 'slut': there was no third term). Moreover, unlike Swofford, Williams was exposed to exclusion from the pact as well as the threat of actual penetration, in all its meanings. If one becomes bonded by excluding 'penetrability', and 'female' is broadly taken to embody 'penetrability' in order to cast it out, then 'gender' in the army described in *Love My Rifle* seems not merely dichotomously posed, but *structurally* lopsided. It makes no difference that the warrior subjectivity so forcefully created can only be a *group* subjectivity in which individuality is always in danger of being completely undermined at the same time as it (the

bond) can never achieve permanence. What matters is the transmissibility of the ritual, lodged diffusively, multiply and variously within an institution that is, after all, notoriously traditional.

[37] The question of military culture's attitude to women has proved a fraught one even as, in many countries, armies have come under increasing scrutiny for traditional prohibitions: the British Army entered a contingent in the Gay Pride festival for the first time ever in 2005;<sup>viii</sup> anti-sodomy laws were still in place in the US up until 2003 (Janofsky 2005); and, despite discussions about the issue of female soldier equality, the Australian army maintains its refusal to employ female troops in combat roles at the front line.<sup>ix</sup> Even 'inclusive' nations like Israel appear to employ gender divides in the way they utilise female soldiers,<sup>x</sup> while Cynthia Enloe and others believe US military culture facilitates rape.<sup>xi</sup> When *Love My Rifle* came out in 2005, the social context included ongoing discussions about the role of pregnant Private Lynndie England in prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib,<sup>xii</sup> a matter that brought to the cultural forefront uncertainties about the proper role of women occupying classically masculine positions of (apparent) domination and control.

[38] Military institutions are not the only venues to receive unprecedented 'gender' publicity in recent years. As Judith Butler's influential *Gender*

*Trouble* (1993) foreclosed against radical feminisms, finding them unable to escape heteronormativity,<sup>xiii</sup> forms of gender categorisation that arguably propelled radical feminism appeared to be raising their heads in a variety of male bonded fields. From the oil sands of Iraq to Australian rugby league football, team male attitudes toward women began to come under intense scrutiny. As early as 1994, Roger Horrocks described football as ‘a consolidation of masculine solidarity against women [,]’ (Horrocks 1999)<sup>xiv</sup> while Karen Willis of the Rape Crisis Centre blamed traditions of group bonding and secrecy for alleged team sport participation in group rape and cover-up (Jackman 2004). According to gender and women’s studies theorist Michael Flood, ‘sports players are over-represented among the men who commit acts of sexual assault and domestic violence’ (Flood). Whatever the causes, from 2003 onward, at least in Australia, allegations of gang rape against footballers began to dominate the media.<sup>xv</sup> In the aftermath of a particularly controversial gang rape allegation (Jackman), a football organisation confessed to an ‘attitude problem’ toward women<sup>xvi</sup> and hired a consultant to assist in promoting attitudinal shift.

[39] Even before the spate of team based controversies, there seemed to be strong connections between military definitions of relational gender identities and wider social life. Barry McCarthy’s 1990s work on warrior masculinity found ‘warrior values’ associated with military bonding to be

widely hegemonic within non-military culture. This was no small scale trickle-down of ideas, but:

[...] an inescapable emergent theme: the almost universal, intimate bond between warrior values and conventional notions of masculinity (McCarthy 1994).

[41] To McCarthy, universal 'warrior values' include physical courage, endurance, strength/skill and honour (105). However, mention is also made of the commonality of 'avoidance of femininity' (118), and while McCarthy casts 'rape' as a perversion of warrior values, he acknowledges that under duress it often becomes 'the rule rather than the exception' (105).

[42] With all the above in mind, the notion that widespread gender inequalities are persistent and somehow normatively *similar* inside a range of male-bonded systems seems quite plausible, even as, following Butler, reiterative systems are inherently unstable and are not supposed to be transhistorical or universal (Butler 89)<sup>xvii</sup>. In the military world portrayed by Williams, 'gender' is perhaps only a set of effects created out of the necessity to bond. That is, in order to reify its bond, the team constantly creates *and* casts out 'female' as penetrability's locus. For these reasons, the foreclosure of emancipatory gender activism brought about by Judith Butler's work on the inevitability of heteronormativity<sup>xviii</sup> and the failure of identity

politics<sup>xix</sup> seems largely irrelevant here. While it may be impossible to achieve emancipation from normative heterosexuality, embedded as it is in subjective differentiation, (Butler 3)<sup>xx</sup> it would seem that an interested and practical activism could — without straying into the materiality of bodies Butler found so problematic<sup>xxi</sup> — perhaps find ways of troubling penetrability and shaming. In doing so, it just might affect whatever passes for ‘gender’ in that sphere. Indeed, if Barry McCarthy is right and warrior ‘values’ are hegemonic, then a political reworking of rituals dealing with ‘penetrability’ in the military could possibly bring about some degree of cross-cultural change. The same segregationalism that appears to protect warrior rituals from unwanted cultural influences (perhaps leading to McCarthy’s *outward* notion of hegemony) *might* open the territory to an unprecedented vulnerability at the levels of training and education.

[43] After reading *Love My Rifle*, the most disquieting prospect is not what would happen if unprepared female cadets were to continue to be plunged into bonding operations hostile to them. If Williams’ account is typical, the more disquieting prospect is that women should stop joining the military at all, leaving its technologies unchanged.

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<sup>i</sup> While ‘bitch’ might be said to denote a kind of impenetrability, it is hardly to be counted as respect or inclusiveness. More likely, ‘bitch’ is a term used to represent those females serving in Iraq who managed to harden their demeanour sufficiently to disallow even spurious penetrable categorisation. *Love My Rifle*, op cit: 259.

<sup>ii</sup> Swofford describes an affinity: while the enemy soldiers *are* enemy soldiers (that is, until they surrender or are captured and rendered ‘safe’), he says, ‘I’d been able to imagine them

as men similar to me[...]’ Indeed, there is a sense where their very oppositionality *as similarly bonded men* makes them almost his comrades. Swofford, Anthony. *Jarhead*. New York: Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc., 2003: 323.

<sup>iii</sup> In 2004 in Australia, there were at least twenty alleged rape assailants across the professional football codes alone (probably more if the Rape Crisis Centre’s view that eighty percent of assaults go unreported is taken seriously). See Prent, Cassidy. ‘Sexual Assault and Footballers in the Media.’ *Football Fans Against Sexual Assault* Victorian Women’s Trust Internship Report, Appendix 1. n.d. Web. 28 Aug. 2006.

<<http://www.ffasa.org/hpages.asp?PageID=63>>. Furthermore, according to gender and women’s studies theorist Michael Flood, ‘sports players are over-represented among the men who commit acts of sexual assault and domestic violence.’ See ‘Being a sporting champion means you have to play by all the rules.’ Flood, Michael. 10 Mar. 2004. Web. *On Line Opinion: Australia’s e-journal of social and political debate*. 7 Oct. 2008.

<<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=2058>>. Incidentally, other research conducted by the National Rugby League committee in which media commentator and academic Catherine Lumby participated focused on ‘peers’ from other team-sports, not between team-sport players and non-sporting or non-team-based ‘males’ (or, furthermore, military cultures), finding that attitudes toward ‘women’ were ‘not out of step.’ See Masters, Roy. ‘Protocol on sex claims.’ *The Age*. 21 Dec. 2004. *Fairfax Digital*. 7 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/Sport/Protocol-on-sex-claims/2004/12/20/1103391699759.html>>.

<sup>iv</sup> *Jarhead*, op cit: 209. Troy, arguably closest to the narrator, says: “‘Every whore I ever fucked I loved her first and she loved me.’” The simplicity of this is followed by the even further reductionism of: “‘I know you’re a jarhead. That’s all I need to know.’” The connection between the whore/bitch/lady divide and identity for the male protagonists is constantly made and remade through the theme of cuckoldry.

<sup>v</sup> At one point in particular Swofford describes himself as one of the many ‘cuckolded jarheads.’ *Jarhead*, ibid: 131.

<sup>vi</sup> *Jarhead*, ibid: 130: ‘the guy next to him [...] began describing [a sexual encounter with] a woman who sounded a lot like the grunt’s wife [...] And then the tanker mentioned that the woman was married to some dumb grunt—and that’s a quote from her[...].’ *Jarhead*, ibid: 130.

<sup>vii</sup> ‘I hated being a marine because more than all of the things in the world I wanted to be[...], I was a marine.’ *Jarhead*, op cit: 43.

<sup>viii</sup> Anonymous. ‘Gay-friendly army.’ *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 Aug. 2005: 11.

<sup>ix</sup> As at August 2005, after an Australian Defence Force request, women were to be permitted in combat zones in Iraq; however not in combat roles. Note that the request arose (and was acquiesced to) out of a perceived skills shortage, not a change of ideology. See (anonymous) ‘Women headed for front line.’ *ABC News Online* 22 Aug. 2005, 8:08pm (AEST). Web. 18 Feb. 2006.

<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200508/s1443159.htm>>

<sup>x</sup> According to the BBC, speaking of the Israeli Defence Force: ‘While some women soldiers perform highly demanding roles like tank instructor, more than 60% of the young women doing national service are assigned to dreary desk jobs.’ See ‘Israel’s army struggles with its image.’ *BBC Special Report* 27 Apr. 1998, 07:20 GMT, 08:20 UK time. Web. 16 Sep. 2008.

<sup>xi</sup> ‘Spoils of war.’ *Ms*. March 1996; 6, 5: 15. *Academic Research Library. Proquest*. University of Wollongong. Web. 10 Apr. 2006. See also ‘Sex and the single warrior.’ Howell, Llewellyn D. *USA Today*, Jul. 2001; 130, 2674: 53. *Academic Research Library. Proquest*. University of Wollongong. Web. 10 Apr. 2006.

<sup>xii</sup> ‘Iraq abuse photos “taken for fun.”’ *BBC News* 4 Aug. 2004 05:27 GMT. UK version. Web. 8 Oct. 2008. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3529984.stm>>.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Butler found that, since there could be no identity without prior heterosexualisation, the category 'woman' that organised feminism merely replicated heterosexual norms. She found that any future political agency would need to come from disaggregated coalitions aiming at the ephemeral destabilisation and delegitimising of heterosexual intelligibility. For her denial of the possibility of 'full-scale transcendence' see *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 124. For her discussion of the way identity politics like feminism import the very normative practices they seek to deny, see *Gender Trouble*, ibid: 2. For her suggestions for a way forward for politics see *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 15. Speaking of homosexual activism, she says: '...in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence.' *Gender Trouble*, op cit: 124.

<sup>xiv</sup> Not to suggest that rape only affects women.

<sup>xv</sup> In 2004, there were at least twenty alleged assailants across the professional football codes alone. See Prent, Cassidy. 'Sexual Assault and Footballers in the Media.' *Football Fans Against Sexual Assault* Victorian Women's Trust Internship Report, Appendix 1. n.d. Web. 28 Aug. 2006. <<http://www.ffasa.org/hpages.asp?PageID=63>>.

<sup>xvi</sup> Nolan, Tanya. 'The World Today — NRL admits to League's attitude problem towards women'. *ABC. The World Today* 28 Apr. 2004, 12.34.00. Web. 7 Oct. 2008. <<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1096545.htm>>. Nolan says, 'Despite the fact that the Bulldogs have no criminal case to answer over the sexual assault allegations, the NRL believes there is still a problem in the code, in its attitude to women.'

<sup>xvii</sup> In Butler's words a reiterative system 'has to be *reiterated*, and, as reiterable, becomes open to variation and plasticity.' *Bodies That Matter*, op cit: 89.

<sup>xviii</sup> 'Iraq abuse photos "taken for fun."' BBC News 4 Aug. 2004 05:27 GMT. UK version. Web. 8 Oct. 2008. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3529984.stm>>.

<sup>xix</sup> The term 'heterosexism' is not used by Butler in earlier works, but in later work she explains that it was the 'heterosexism' of prior feminist writings that brought her to critique. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004: 207.

<sup>xx</sup> Butler says that 'the subject, the speaking "I," is formed by virtue of having gone through [...] a process of assuming a sex.' For her there can be no subjectivity outside heterosexual norms.

<sup>xxi</sup> In *Bodies That Matter* Butler took pains to re-examine embodiment from a discursive standpoint, only to find the object too elusive to be grasped. See 'Preface', *Bodies That Matter*, ibid: ix.

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