

6 | Women-of-color veterans on war, militarism and feminism

SETSU SHIGEMATSU WITH ANURADHA KRISTINA
BHAGWATI AND ELI PAINTEDCROW

Women currently constitute 15 percent of US military forces, numbering approximately 200,000 active-duty female personnel (US Department of Defense 2006). Across all branches of the military, women of color are over-represented. By 2004, women of color comprised 51 percent of the total number of enlisted service women and 31.7 percent of female military officers (Manning 2005: 14). Although there has been a growing body of literature that examines the militarization of women, there are few works that specifically examine how different women of color experience the US military (Moore 1995: 15–23). In response to this lacuna, this dialogue attempts to address the dearth of critical discourse on and by women of color in the US military through an engagement with the perspectives of women-of-color veterans.

The dialogue between Anuradha Bhagwati, a former marine officer, Eli PaintedCrow, a career enlisted soldier in the US army, and Setsu Shigematsu, a scholar-activist, developed from discussions that began at the 'Feminism and War' conference in Syracuse, New York, in 2006. It draws on a longer interview that was recorded on 16 June 2007, in Corona, California. The experiences of Bhagwati and PaintedCrow illuminate the differentiated experiences of this composite category, 'women of color,' and how various women decide to enter this male-dominated institution.

This chapter invites a dialogue between feminists and women-of-color veterans who possess intimate knowledge of the military as a means to complexify our understanding of how women of color are being incorporated as part of a hegemonic multicultural state agenda. The respective backgrounds of Bhagwati and PaintedCrow demonstrate how vastly different socio-economic conditions shape and structure the choices available to women of color who enter the military. In the dialogue that follows, PaintedCrow and Bhagwati share their views on the relationship between race, militarism, Abu Ghraib, US culture, feminism and peace.

Assimilation and (not) belonging

Setsu Shigematsu (SS): Eli, how did your background as a Native American woman relate to your participation in the military?

Eli PaintedCrow (EPC): As a Native person, there are certain things that come with joining the military. One is opportunity, because for us it is often the only opportunity available. For many of us school is often not an option, especially when you or your parents don't have money. Our work was about meeting everyday needs. By the time I was twenty, I was a single parent with two children. I lived in a one-bedroom cockroach-infested apartment with my two children and I didn't have any support. I was desperate to do something different with my life. In order to join, I had to be married, so I went out and found my ex-husband and got remarried. I was on welfare at the time and I really didn't like that. But I really didn't have any other skills because I didn't go to high school. I got my GE [general education] certificate when I was fourteen. I joined the US military and I gained some skills. I came back and felt a big load off my back, because I said to myself that I would never have to be on welfare again. So I spent twenty-two years serving in the military believing in this idea of patriotism.

As a Native person it was a great honor to be in the military because becoming a soldier is the closest thing to becoming a warrior and we come from a warrior society, but we don't have that any more. My brothers were in the military and I pushed my sons to be in the military. I became a drill sergeant. I was moving up the ladder as a woman of color. But in hindsight I realize that I was a token for the system. I was the only woman of color in the drill sergeant academy. I ended up leaving, because they gave me some authority until things started moving in a direction they didn't like. So what I quickly learned was that this authority they give you as an officer or as an NCO [non-commissioned officer] is also an illusion. Because they'll give it to you as long as they need you, and then they'll remove you. And if you're a female, it is easy, and if you are a woman of color, then you really don't matter.

Most Americans don't know their history, and if you don't know your history, then it gets defined for you by the government. When I was younger, I had that past missing from my life. I didn't even know about being Native. My parents had a lot of fear and assimilated as best as they could. They didn't talk about their heritage or history. My mother never talked about her Apache side of the family. My father never talked about our being Native, our being Yaqui. That fear was embedded in my parents and caused them to say, 'We are American.' And if you are from the rez [the reservation], that can bring a whole other kind of woundedness. Just

because you are Native, people expect you to be a certain way, but we sit on different places in the world and in our hearts about being Native so there are many ways that Native persons understand themselves.

SS: Eli, your reasons for enlisting point to how an ostensibly 'All Volunteer Force' is reproduced through systemic design, which involves a structured lack of opportunity alongside recruitment efforts that provide economic and ideological incentives. Your background contrasts significantly with that of Anuradha, who decided to join the marines after graduating from Yale University. As a daughter of two Columbia University professors, and having been raised in a highly educated and liberal environment, your joining the marines was surely an unexpected choice.

Anuradha Bhagwati (AB): At that point in time, I was enrolled in graduate school. I saw my life closely mirroring my parents. I felt constrained and controlled, which was in part a result of my Indian upbringing, and the pressures to conform to my parents' professional expectations. They basically tried to convince me that the more advanced degrees you have, the more valuable a person you are in the world. The marines were a slap in the face to my parents' privileged world and to the world of higher education in general, I thought. I learned more about human behavior and the various dimensions of American society from the marines than I did from years of schooling.

After five years in the marines and leaving as a captain, I came out with the conclusion that not all the women or people of color in the world could alter the vices within the organization, because the organization fundamentally transforms a person's essence into something terribly destructive and self-destructive, regardless of who that person once was. Marine boot camp is so infamous because it succeeds in making killers out of the most timid human beings, and not just killers, but killers who love just how tough and badass they've become. There's a huge difference in a fighting organization that learns to fight because it has no other choice, and one that trains people to love killing, regardless of the context, time, place, or cause. Loving, being obsessed with and turned on by violence, to the point that you are a borderline sociopath, does not make you a warrior, or an empowered person, or a good public servant. I really had no idea how much the institution would fundamentally alter my personality.

I met a lot of children of immigrants in the marines. I think, regardless of the primary reason we joined, we shared a common desire to prove ourselves to be just as American as the average white guy with a crew cut. The insecurity people of color have about not quite belonging to the

American way of life, however large or small it is, is really magnified in a white male institution like the marines. They have racial or identifying terms for many of us, some of which are institutionalized through language. Marines who are black are called 'dark green' [green refers to the old jungle-green camouflage uniform], while marines who are women are called 'WMs,' or women marines. This practice of differentiating 'real marines,' meaning white males, from the rest of us reinforces that no matter how much they tell you your service matters just as much as the next guy's, you are constantly reminded that you do not quite belong, or are not wanted.

The strange thing for me was witnessing the presence of young marines with roots in Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Korea, and also, after 2003, a handful from South Asia and the Middle East. There is an understandable sense among some immigrant children that they owe something to the country that they now call their own. But what about the total disconnect with US history and current events? The United States laid waste, even genocide, upon Southeast Asia, but still, children of survivors of those wars still feel they have something to prove about their American-ness. People will do surprising and sometimes awful things to feel worthy or respected in this country. Sometimes we'd rather erase every ounce of cruel history and pretend we've always belonged to white American culture, than painfully admit maybe our roots lie elsewhere.

Some of the 'finest marines' I knew were people of color and women of color. And therefore I don't think that you can assume that because a person is of a particular race or background that they are necessarily going to come out of the marines thinking a certain way. After 9/11, the issue of race became much more obvious to me. The term 'raghead' became common, like 'gook' was during Vietnam. The military has a real knack for nurturing racial epithets for the enemy, and for summoning the worst filth out of soldiers. Immediately after 9/11, I witnessed numerous conversations about people wanting to kill Arabs and Muslims. I remember an old Hispanic marine saying, 'Let's bomb them all to hell – all Afghan men, women and children.' It wasn't uncommon. Vengeance just fueled our natural inclination to be violent and perverse.

SS: In terms of how you experienced racial difference at work in the marines, you have underscored the ways in which being a person of color doesn't predetermine how a person is going to respond to, negotiate, deny or resist how racism is at work within the military. One's own racial and cultural difference can fuel the drive to do violence to other racialized subjects.

Abu Ghraib and US culture

SS: From your experience in the military, how do you think the US military torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib relates to the rest of American society?

AB: Abu Ghraib is the quintessential milestone in US history. You have acts of torture that are considered 'shocking' only to people who are unfamiliar with racism in the United States or the current US practices of local and federal law enforcement. Abu Ghraib was framed as shocking because that perpetuates the myth that, under normal circumstances, US culture, government, its police force, and beloved military are civilized, and righteous, and ethically superior to all the rest. Abu Ghraib became a very misleading media story because most people analyzed it as an aberration. You have key players in the government, military, and the law enforcement world denying responsibility for the making and indoctrination of those particular soldiers, saying, 'We don't do this, we don't do this, these soldiers do not represent us.' But that kind of pathological violence is not uncommon in the military or in US society.

The kind of twisted sadistic sexual violence that the Abu Ghraib photos depicted is an extremely familiar thing in the marines. I remember the week the photos came out, I was sitting with a bunch of marines, and it seemed like we were more shocked that those soldiers got publicly exposed rather than with what they actually did. The public has a very naive and patronizing view about American soldiers, as if they embark around the world to be boy scouts or diplomats. This kind of idealism is epitomized by this Iraq war generation's 'support the troops' activists, whether the support for the troops comes from the right or the left. Many activists are out of touch with the mind-altering that occurs when a young person is systemically indoctrinated in violence, and taught to wreak havoc upon other human beings who they are told are the bad guys. The overwhelming ideology that anything soft or effeminate is something that should be destroyed is so central to that indoctrination. Hardcore pornography, animal abuse, sexual humiliation, domestic abuse, and good old-fashioned misogyny – these things inform the culture of American soldiers. I wish mothers in this country would snap out of their naive soldier-boy obsessions. Marines love to pull triggers, see things go boom, scream at the top their lungs, make someone else hurt and pay for not being like 'us.'

When did Americans become so blind to how ugly this stuff really is? This stuff happens every day, behind prison gates, behind closed doors, and in every element of our children's entertainment supply. Savage violence is as much a part of the American way of life as shopping malls

and SUVs. Within our own borders, we are experts at torture and imprisonment. We are the most experienced prison guards on the planet. No other country in the world has as many prisons or incarcerated human beings as we do. It's a great tragedy, an embarrassment, and we don't talk enough about it. Why is it such a shock that the techniques employed by US prison guards would be employed by US soldiers? We are born and bred in the same country, inside the same system that preaches the notion of empowerment and respect through the use of violence.

EPC: Abu Ghraib provided this opportunity for people to say, 'Oh my God, we are so innocent.' As if we didn't know that the US was founded on shit like that. As if we don't remember. Our history is based on that stuff. So why are we so appalled? They tortured Native peoples. They scalped them alive. They raped them. What happened to us is not recognized as an atrocity. Are we not considered human? Can we really say that was the past and today it is different? I for one certainly can't. It looks the same to me.

AB: I really only processed after I left the marines the extent to which I had been programmed, the extent to which I was infatuated with violence. One summer during graduate school I ended up working in Palestine with a community-based NGO that specialized in non-violence training, much of it for teenagers that had grown up traumatized by the violence of military occupation. I looked Palestinian and much of the time Israeli soldiers assumed I was Arab. The experience of being at the other end of a live muzzle at military checkpoints was the most overwhelming experience I'd ever had. I couldn't do a goddam thing one way or the other. Like all the local people, I was just a target. I had spent years training American marines to do the same thing, and here I was at the other end of it, watching young Israeli kids, who were just like my own marines, in slow motion, day after day, hollering and waving muzzles at skulls, strutting around with such ego and contempt. It was surreal and horrifying. It completely changed me. Those soldiers were me, as clueless and desensitized and cruel and arrogant, with as giant a chip on their shoulders. It was the first time I really felt the shame of who I'd become – in fact, who I had chosen to become.

American kids are immersed in a ruthless culture of violence through entertainment and television, but unless they've grown up terrorized by gangs or poverty, they have no idea what war feels like, how it affects every aspect of your life and psyche. They have no idea what kind of harm this 'cowboy' culture perpetrates against human beings around the world, let alone in their own towns and cities. War is the natural extension of American popular culture and values. Look at the camouflage clothing

parents are drowning their children in. This military clothing is at once a symbol of sex appeal and naive, rebellion without context. And it's shamelessly flaunted while people are being slaughtered in the Middle East as a result of American aggression. We are objects of indoctrination and recruitment the moment we're born. It's the numbness throughout civilian US society that feeds and sustains our current level of warfare.

SS: Your experience in Palestine and being seen as the enemy points to how people of color have to, in a sense, work at denying how replaceable and disposable they are in the eyes of the military and how they too can become the enemy.

Feminism and militarism

SS: Eli, in March 2007 you had a public dialogue with Cynthia Enloe. In her latest books, *The Curious Feminist* (2004) and *Globalization and Militarism* (2007), she encourages a feminist curiosity to take seriously all the complex reasons women end up in the military. By ignoring the condition and perspectives of women in the military, we fail to see the many parallels and connections that exist between the military and the education system and how certain feminist discourses supplement the militarization of women. Through my conversations with you both, my understanding of these parallels has been illuminated. The compartmentalized approach taken by many feminists and civilians is that they believe themselves to be *outside* and *above* the military system; and therefore don't interrogate enough the complementary function of these institutions, and how the education system and the military work together.

Universities are an integral part of the military-industrial complex, funded to develop weapons and military technology; universities reproduce the workforce of engineers and designers who work for private military corporations. Both the academy and the military have been historically patriarchal and sexist, and demand adherence to the established standards of a Eurocentric male-defined rationality and productivity. Both institutions function as essential state apparatuses that maintain and reproduce social hierarchies.

Now we have a select category of women in the US who have risen into the ranks of powerful white men, whether that is in the military, government, corporations, or the academy. The way in which women in the US become 'empowered' often involves a process of assimilation, incorporation and domestication by the values and practices of established institutions.

AB: I'm tired of fighting just to prove a point and get to the top. I think we need to wrestle more with what empowerment should really mean. I

believe it's critical to have women in the institutions you just mentioned, as they serve as important reminders that all members of society should be represented in decision-making bodies. But just because you've entered an institution doesn't mean your presence alters its condition, or improves the well-being for others it professes to serve.

SS: The mainstreaming of liberal feminist discourse which promotes women's equality with white men has become part of US popular culture. It has also bled into the cultural production of the genre of superwomen. The transgressive allure of sexy women with guns is a staple across mainstream culture in films, TV and video games.

AB: A large part of me was drawn to these superwomen icons, and shaped my desire to fight the man within whatever institution I was in. If it weren't for Demi Moore playing the role of GI Jane, I might never have joined the military. One of the horrible results of the Hollywood version of the genre of the sexy woman killer is that the causes and effects of violence are rarely explored. Killing is basically a livelihood for these fantasy women. They rarely have to deal with the warping of their soul or psyche.

SS: These popular representations of women's empowerment through their ability to compete with and outdo men – through acts of physical prowess and militarized violence – have become one of the ways in which representations of token and fantasy women not only misrepresent women's experiences in the military, but operate to normativize the use of mass industrialized violence and obscure the gravity of our socio-economic crises that the cycle of warfare will only exacerbate.

You've both talked about the disconnect between academic feminist analysis and the experience of women in the US military. Part of this disconnect may be a result of the fact that many feminists don't think that the military is a reformable institution. Many feminists who identify themselves as anti-military and anti-war may not pay heed to how the militarization of women may in fact constitute a deep crisis for US feminism.

EPC: Anti-military feminists need to see how people chose their path as a means to get out of their oppressive conditions. If they are anti-militaristic, what are feminists doing to provide viable alternatives for people who enter the military? Are they going to the rez to help? To the barrio or South Central LA?

There is all this judgment without looking at the systematic robotic conditions which young minds are forced to adjust to and accept if they are to be looked upon as successful students and scholars. The education system is like the military in that it has its rank and positions of

authority. In both institutions, value is placed on your credentials and your ability to conform to the system.

US feminism has become too much about criticism, breaking down, analyzing, and in doing so, it has become disconnected from the bigger picture, from a broader understanding of ourselves, and this world, and how everything is interconnected. We have forgotten why this all started in the first place and how the idea came about that women should have rights, which was inspired by white women learning from Native communities. We need to remember the roots of the US and how it was settled.

The cycle of genocide

EPC: My tour in Iraq was a real eye-opener for me. When I was in Iraq, my biggest enemy was my own company. I would hear officers who gave briefings referring to enemy territory as Indian country. I found that shocking and I wondered what side I should be on if this is Indian country. I began to realize that perhaps I was on the wrong side.

I got to meet Iraqi people and what I came to understand is that they are very much like Native peoples. They have the drum, they have clans, they have ceremony, and they have an understanding of family in a very different way than Americans. They have their history that is now being erased, like ours was erased. My history isn't told to this day, as if I don't exist. And now I have participated to create genocide in another country against a people who are very much like me. I'm really struggling to look for my past that has been erased and I feel so guilty coming back because now I have been a participant of this genocide that everyone refuses to name. It is not a war, it is an invasion, we are committing a genocide over there, to children, to mothers, to brothers, and nobody wants to use the 'G' word, because if you do it means that you also have to look at what happened here at home in America.

Healing starts at home with the refugee camps here called reservations. It starts with healing our own hearts and admitting our own fears.

We don't need to be pointing fingers at the military or at George W. Bush. That is too easy. Let's stop pointing fingers and fighting for a power outside ourselves. Instead let's look inside ourselves and seek to understand how this US president mirrors this country and what we stand for as a nation. If we don't like it, then it's up to us to change it, that's all.

We are so busy going to work and paying our bills that we have no time to participate in the world to transform things. We say let our government take care of it. We are addicted to our possessions instead

of loving our lives and participating in the world to make it a better place for our children. We are too comfortable and too lazy to care about anything that does not affect us directly, that is not directly in our face. The majority of the people in the US who have the power to make change don't because they are afraid of change, and are afraid of facing the truth about us Americans. We are all responsible for the acts our nation has committed against another people for the sake of greed.

This country does not know peace. I've been invited to be part of many peace movements around the United States, but from what I've observed among these movements, I am always disturbed at how much fighting takes place within these peace movements. You can't fight a fight with a fight and call it peace. You can't be anti and call it peace. We cannot give away something we do not have for ourselves. You cannot get peace; you have to be it, nurture it and give it away so that others may be touched by acts of peace and perhaps want it in their own lives.

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7 | Decolonizing the racial grammar of international law

ELIZABETH PHILIPOSE

The appeal of international law to legal positivists and feminists alike, in providing compensation for violence endured, derives from the claim that international legal mechanisms are a counter to the otherwise ubiquitous power politics of sovereign states. There are, however, many ways in which international law fails to mitigate the damaging consequences of states' pursuit of power through the use of violence. From the lack of enforcement mechanisms to its simultaneous valorization and condemnation of the use of violence, international law has not been the moderating force to bring about more peaceful relations between states and peoples. In fact, there is a long-standing relationship between law and violence which justifies and legitimizes violence when it is in the service of power, and more specifically when it is in the service of imperial, racialized and masculinist power (Gregory 2007; Orford 2002).

At the same time, the appeal of law and legal legitimacy remains strong. Appeals to international law to stop the torture, rendition (detention) and indefinite incarceration of Muslims, or people perceived to be Muslims, in the 'global war against terror' (GWAT) resound today. In each set of appeals is a sense that international law is and ought to be universally binding and applicable, meaning that every person who is violated by international violence has the right of the protective cloak of international law.

There are synchronous impulses within international law and the use of torture, derived from Euro-colonial history, and iterated today in contemporary debates about the use of torture and the role of international law in mitigating 'terrorist' violence. International law, as it has come to be constituted, derives from European nation-building needs, in a time of Euro-colonial expansion. Though outlawed by European states in the 1800s, torture was retained as a useful and covert method of containing and suppressing non-citizen, 'enemy', or 'insurgent' populations. Whereas international law has been overtly employed to justify interventions, annexations and occupations of colonized territory and peoples, torture has been the accompanying stealth mechanism designed to facilitate intervention and occupation.