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# *Gender, Dissenting Subjectivity and the Contemporary Military Peace Movement in Body of War*

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## Abstract

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This article considers the gendered dynamics of the contemporary military peace movement in the United States, interrogating the way in which masculine privilege produces hierarchies within experiences, truth claims and dissenting subjecthoods. The analysis focuses on a text of the movement, the 2007 documentary film *Body of War*, which portrays the antiwar activism of paralyzed Iraq veteran Tomas Young, his mother Cathy and wife Brie. Conceptualizing the military peace movement as a potentially counter-performative reiteration of military masculinity, drawing on Butler's account of gender, subjectivity formation and contestation, and on Derrida's notion of spectrality (the disruptive productivity of the "present absence"), the article makes visible ways in which men and women who comprise the military peace movement perform their dissent as gendered subjects. Claims to dissenting subjecthood are unevenly accorded within the productive duality that constitutes the military peace movement, along gendered lines that can reproduce the privileges and subordinations that underpin militarism.

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## Keywords

dissent, performativity, *Body of War*, masculinity, injured veterans

Tomas Young has been described as "the new Ron Kovic"<sup>1</sup> (Powers 2008; Achter 2010, 47), a young American who joined the US Army two days after 9/11, roused, he says, by President George W. Bush's speech from among the rubble of the twin towers (*Body of War*; Donahue and Spiro

2007). Tomas never achieved his stated aim of hunting down Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, as he was shot and paralyzed five days into deployment in Iraq. His subsequent antiwar activism within the military peace movement (comprised of soldiers and their families affiliated with a number of formalized groups, such as Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), Military Families Speak Out (MFSO) and Gold Star Mothers for Peace (see Leitz 2011)) is represented in the documentary *Body of War*, which depicts two years in Tomas's life. The documentary's website describes how "[a]s the film progresses we witness Tomas's evolution into a powerful leader, finding fresh abilities out of his disability and expressing his new form of patriotism" (2013). Inseparable from Tomas for most of the film, and also engaged in antiwar activism, are his mother Cathy Smith and then-wife Brie Townsend.

Made by talk show host Phil Donahue and documentary filmmaker Ellen Spiro, *Body of War* is billed as "an intimate and transformational feature documentary about the true face of war today" (*Body of War* website 2014).<sup>2</sup> In an interview given after the film's release, Donahue described how he first met a then very ill Tomas at Walter Reed Medical Center. Donahue decided, he says, that "the American people should see this" (MyNorth.com 2008).

*Body of War* is a text of the military peace movement. It portrays men and women, soldiers and families, within the movement to convey an antiwar message centering on the purported "true face" (*Body of War* website 2014) of the Iraq War, made visible in the lives and experiences of military families. As a text it is significant as one moment and one articulation of the play of an ongoing array of social practices that produce, reproduce and constitute power relations, subjects and social formations. Accounts of how dissent can and should be undertaken, by whom and in what contexts are rehearsed and defined, and subjects are interpellated into particular subject positions that define their gendered, and dissenting, subjecthood.

The analytical reading of the film for the discussion in this article involved a process of negotiation between a range of texts (the film, associated media interviews and existing scholarship) in a discourse analysis guided by problematization (Howarth 2000, 140). This process of problematization involved a dialogue between existing interpretations, the *Body of War* texts, theoretical concepts and the "intuitions and hunches" (Howarth 2000, 140) of myself as a socially situated researcher. Out of this analytical dialogue, themes, relations and interventions were "read" within the film.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b) conceptualizations of gender, subjectivity formation and contestation, accounts of military masculinity (see, for example, Belkin 2012) and Derrida's notion of the disruptive productivity of the spectral "present absence" (Vatter 2005, 13), I argue that conceptualizing the military peace movement as a counter-performative reiteration of military masculinity reveals the productive duality in which military authority is simultaneously the target of and means to dissent. However, while this duality has the potential to be subversive, the dominant social order is perpetuated within the US military peace movement

(see Cockburn 2004, 2012). I argue that within *Body of War* and the military peace movement, women's dissenting subjecthood is produced out of relational invocations of military masculinity, within which particular haunting specters that populate and produce military dissent are invoked and exorcized to reinstate gendered relations of power.

This account is important in addressing a silence concerning the political authority on which the military peace movement in the United States is predicated. We know that, for example, "turning conscientious objectors . . . into heroes of the antimilitarism movement could unwittingly perpetuate exactly the sort of masculinized privilege that nurtures militarism" (Cockburn and Enloe 2012, 553). In this article I demonstrate how the authority derived through this masculinized privilege is not an unwitting addition to, but *constitutes* the military peace movement; the movement is existent and functional through the practice of this privilege even as it targets militarism. It is through an analytical focus on this productive duality that we can move beyond characterizations of the US military peace movement as an uncomplicated site of opposition (see Achter 2010, 47; Cortright 2010; Gutmann and Lutz 2010; Leitz 2011). We know that dissent is not straightforward, simple or consistent (Foucault [1976] 2005, 88), but by turning our attention to the specifics of productive tensions and inconsistencies within formations such as the military peace movement we can better understand the moments and sites in which contestation reinforces that which it seeks to disrupt.

Establishing a novel conceptualization of the military peace movement as a gendered premise in the first part of the article enables the second part, which discusses the relations in the movement between the dissenting subjecthood of women as wives and mothers and men as returning soldiers, both constituted as dissenting subjects by military masculinity (see, for example, Belkin 2012, 3). Previous scholarship on women in the military peace movement (Slattery and Garner 2007; Knudson 2009; Managhan 2011) highlights the significance of discourses of motherhood and maternal activism, however without a conceptualization of the military peace movement as itself an overarching gendered premise, this research can only go so far in aiding our understanding of how dissenting subjecthood founded on motherhood and care functions within the movement's immanent hierarchies. To address this lacuna I argue that women in *Body of War* are represented as enablers of a masculine military perspective simultaneously imperiled and amplified by injury, as they facilitate the communication of the authoritative military experience of the injured returning veteran. The dissenting capacity this accords is limited, achieved through a partial, associative and unstable claim to military masculinity. In their caring roles, women within the movement are represented as ultimately stymieing acceptable modes of masculinity and most significantly impeding the realization of a privileged, powerful hypermasculine dissenting veteran subjectivity, which is represented as more valuable to the movement and less unsettling to society as a whole.

In this section I argue for the conceptualization of the military peace movement as a gendered premise; a counter-performative (subversive) (Chambers and Carver 2008, 172–177; Jagger 2008, 3; Medina 2013, 236) reiteration of military masculinity, drawing on Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b) account of gender, subjectivity formation and contestation. The counter-performative potential of reiterations of military masculinity is grounded in the disruptive productivity of the “present absence” (Vatter 2005, 13), illuminated by Derrida's ([1993] 2006) notion of spectrality. I then discuss how claims to dissenting subjecthood are made through the function of particular reiterations in particular ways.

Performativity describes “the influential rituals” through which “subjects are called into social being,” “formed and reformulated” (Butler 1997a, 160) in a “reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer” (Butler 1993, 24). Performativity is therefore both crucial to the formation of the subject and its “ongoing political contestation and reformulation” (Butler 1997a, 160), since “[n]o social formation can endure without being reinstated” and this process of reinstatement reveals the contingency of the formation, putting it at risk (Butler 1997b, 14; see also Salih 2002, 11 and Mahmood 2004, 162). The authority of the US military peace movement rests upon a military masculine authenticity of experience expressed in the trope of the “boots on the ground” perspective (Christensen 2008; Anden-Popadopoulos 2009; Kennedy 2009) and the associated access to “ground truth” (Leitz 2011, 249), along with the mantra “support the troops – oppose the war” (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995; Coy, Woehrlé, and Maney 2008; Managhan 2011, 441). The phrase “ground truth” expresses “a belief that the first-hand knowledge of military individuals is the real truth” (Leitz 2011, 249). In military slang, “ground truth” describes the on-the-ground and in-the-field reality, which is contrasted with the intelligence-driven predictions of “senior leaders” who are “far removed” from the battlefield (Bishop 2009, xxiv; Linden 2010, n.p.). Within the military peace movement, ground truth is represented as having a public “educational value,” and appears “on numerous VFP [Veterans For Peace], IVAW, and MFSO documents” (Leitz 2011, 249).

This significance of ground truth within the movement illustrates how dissent is constituted by counter-performative reiterations of dominant military masculinity (the authority of the “boots on the ground” perspective of the combat veteran) that, when cited within other contexts (Salih 2002, 92), operate as the “tools” for subversion (Butler 1990, 145). For example, rather than telling a ground truth of heroism in battle (cf. Tommy Reiman;<sup>4</sup> see Achter 2010, 51; also Açıksöz 2012; Serlin 2003, 161) in *Body of War*, Tomas performs, through the context of bodily injury, a ground truth haunted by the “present absence” (Vatter 2005, 13) of a military masculinized body lost to a pointless war in which the injury was not acquired during

“derring-do” but while he sat in the back of a poorly armored truck. Through such spectrally reformulated citations, military masculinity is the resource of and the target for disruption (a similar point is made by Hockey 2002, 153). As a text of the military peace movement, *Body of War* relies on the authority and privilege of the ground truth, military perspective and hard-to-impugn patriotism of its subjects in its political project of revealing the “true face of war today” (PBS 2008; *Body of War* website 2014).

Throughout *Body of War*, Tomas and his family are represented as being in possession of various permutations of ground truth. These accounts operate as invocations of military masculinity; “a set of beliefs, practices and attributes that can enable individuals – men and women – to claim authority on the basis of affirmative relationships with the military or with military ideas” (Belkin 2012, 3; see also Enloe 1993; Higate 2003). This authority is then mobilized in dissent. Military masculinity underpins and produces the authority that legitimizes war (when invoked, for example, by wartime politicians (Belkin 2012, 2)) but it also produces the authority underpinning the military peace movement. Military masculinity is in that sense turned back on itself; it is simultaneously what is being contested – the privileging of the military and its practices – and the means to do so. The authority produced by this privilege enables those within the movement to dissent against military logics and practices. However, I will argue, there are contradictions and tensions within this productive duality; military masculinity produces dissent but also reproduces hierarchies of experience, truth claim and dissenting subjecthood along gendered lines.

As I have suggested above but will now explore in detail, the ground truths constituting the authority of the military peace movement are populated with specters; specters that produce the counter-performative potential within reiterations of military masculinity. Spectrality (Derrida [1993] 2006) concerns the effects of “present absence” (Vatter 2005, 13) in which the present presence is haunted and disrupted by that which is absent; that which has been excluded is missing or is apparently passed (see, for example, Kenway et al. 2006, 5).<sup>5</sup> In *Body of War*, Tomas’s ground truths are of the experience of arriving in Iraq and seeing only “women and children running away,” never firing a shot and then being paralyzed by a sniper’s bullet while riding in a poorly armored vehicle. These are truths defined by present absences: absent enemies, combat, protection and able-bodiedness. His daily experience after coming home, of being paralyzed, losing his dignity, autonomy and masculinity, shifts this ground truth to the domestic setting. His present is haunted by the specter of deployment.

Therefore, depicting Tomas’s firsthand experience of the war’s realities *after* deployment, *Body of War* widens the scope of soldiers’ “in the field reality” to include post-deployment and post-military lives (demonstrating that the legacy of deployment and military service for soldiers and their families and communities is long lasting and far reaching). These specters therefore disjoint logics of presence, absence, past and present to disrupt the self-sufficiency of

the present. Ghosts can be used to “create doubt where there is certainty” (Kenway et al. 2006, 5) by de-reifying existing “present” forms and structures (Vatter 2005, 13). Ontological logics of presence, existence and temporality are disrupted (Wolfreys 1998, 30); existence can no longer simply be understood as presence.

Specters, such as that of Tomas’s military masculinity, are simultaneously absent and present (indeed, made present through the form of their absence) such that “the ghost *is* but does not exist” (Kenway et al. 2006, 4). These ontological disruptions underlie the “de-realizing” effects of ghosts on the “present presence” (the “given forms of domination” (Vatter 2005, 13)) in hinting at the fragility of that present, including the dominant social order. This present is not, as James (1995, 76) puts it, “as self-sufficient as it claims to be.”

The war in Iraq is a haunting event (Redfield 2009) reiterated through haunted lives and bodies such as those represented in *Body of War*. Opposition to this war is populated by ghosts and produced out of the reiteration of these specters haunting “present” lives and subjectivities. Dissent is performed and negotiated through this haunting and these ghosts are gendered. Tomas, for example, “exists” as the present absence of a masculinity destroyed by battlefield injury. Cathy “exists” in permutations of motherly fear and grief, haunted by the simultaneous past, present and future of her sons’ fate (Slattery and Garner 2007; Managhan 2011, 442). *Body of War* invokes specters to break down the comfortable self-sufficiency of the present. Violence, it demonstrates, cannot be contained “over there” in faraway conflict theaters or in the past. Yet it also attempts to exorcise these same specters through realization (the specter of lost masculinity is “realized” in the figure of the hypermasculine dissenting “powerful leader” (*Body of War* website 2013) that Tomas becomes) and in so doing so nullifies their disruptive productive effect (Vatter 2005, 15).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it is in this process of realization – reinstating rather than rupturing from the prevailing order – that gendered hierarchies within the military peace movement become particularly visible, as I explore in the next two sections of this article.

In summation, the political contestation produced by the military peace movement arises out of counter-performative reiterations of military masculinity. The reformulation producing the disruptive shift in that reiteration is achieved through present absences such as the military masculinity of paralyzed Tomas in *Body of War*. The military peace movement is therefore constituted by a range of potentially disruptive reiterations, remade or restaged in ways that have the potential to reveal the frailty of targeted social formations. Claims to dissenting subjecthood are made through the function of particular reiterations in particular ways that unfold in the “fissures of a never-fully-constituted self” (Lovell 2003, 2) during the “on-going political contestation and reformulation” of the subject (Butler 1997a, 160). I will now turn attention to the way in which dissenting subjecthood is constituted out of these reiterations.

The military experience, and therefore military masculinity-invoking ground truths of present absence explored within *Body of War*, interpellate Tomas into dissenting subjectivity. Asked if he would have spoken out against the war had he not been injured, Tomas says, "I had friends who died, unnecessarily, in this war so I would still speak out although I probably wouldn't have as firm a leg to stand on – or chair to sit in." He also notes that his brother is currently deployed in Iraq. Tomas's dissenting subjecthood is grounded, therefore, in his experiences of losing comrades, the potential loss of his brother and losing his pre-deployment body. It is this loss, a present absence, which provides him with a right to speak in dissent, a leg to stand upon or, as he ruefully notes, a chair in which to sit. As an injured veteran, Tomas's patriotism and combat experience (military ideals and experiences) are seen as being starkly and visibly evidenced by his broken body (Serlin 2003, 161; Achter 2010, 47) and its corollary: the now only spectral echo of his former self.

For Tomas's family, the authenticity of "military" experience and associated authority-conferring military masculinity is founded in another form of reiteration-reformulating haunting: the ordeal of having a family member away serving overseas and the constant possibility of loss (explored in the film through the deployment of Tomas's younger brother Nathan, a present manifestation of the younger, idealistic, physically untarnished Tomas who also shipped to Iraq and never came home). With Tomas returned, the experience of the family intersects with that of "their" returned soldier. Where Tomas's domestic ground truth centers on being *cared for*, with its associated loss of autonomy and dignity, Cathy and Brie's ground truth becomes that of *caring for* a paralyzed son and husband. This care becomes a vivid rehearsal and exposure of what is absent – the Tomas who never returned. Cathy and Brie, in their act of care, perform a disruptive reiteration of military masculinity: their ground truth reproduces the association of authority with military identity and ideals (it constitutes them as subjects with an experience and perspective that is valued within the prevailing social order), but in caring for Tomas they highlight the present absence of his bodily strength, autonomy and dignity – an absence that poses, as Achter puts it, "a problem to the smooth narrative of war" (2010, 47).

In *Body of War*, representations of the lives of the family are juxtaposed with footage from the Senate debate and vote on the Iraq War. The "on the ground" reality of those involved in the waging of the war (whether that "on the ground" is the battlefield or the hospital bed) is contrasted with the disconnected and unrealistic pronouncements of "senior leaders" "far removed" from the battlefield (Linden 2010, n.p.) who are actively distanced from military experiences and ideals. In doing so, the documentary reproduces the authority of military masculinity to question their legitimacy. Cathy states, "[the leaders] are so insulated... they don't want to know about people like Tomas." In one example of the documentary's many juxtapositions, Brie discusses Tomas's fears about experiencing incontinence on their

forthcoming wedding day, a scene that is intercut with footage from the Senate debate. In another, Tomas lists his many medications like a litany and holds up each bottle of pills to the camera. This footage is intercut with the vote result from the Senate debate, with each medication followed by the name of a senator who voted “yes” to the invasion of Iraq.

In his discussion of photographs of disabled veterans of the American Civil War, Serlin (2003, 161) argues that “[b]y being no longer whole, those veterans whose bodies manifested physical damage . . . were men for whom disability suggested a certain level of incompetence.” Disability, as Serlin observes, is emasculating and lost masculinity can be “recuperated” through photography such as that from the Civil War, which demonstrated the military context of the injury by depicting disabled former soldiers in uniform and wearing medals and therefore distinguished their injuries from congenital deformity (Serlin 2003, 161–162). In *Body of War*, Tomas’s body as a physical manifestation of incompetence is not – in the scenes described above – “fixed” (cf. Achter’s (2010) discussion of the “domestication” of disabled veterans). Instead, the locus of incompetence is the civilian leadership who, insulated from the realities and truths known by military individuals, sent soldiers into misadventurous battle in insufficiently armored vehicles. The representation of Tomas’s disability, a partial rupture in the reiteration of military masculinity, remains partial by simultaneously reinstating a hierarchy that reinforces civilian incompetence and preserves the impunity of soldiers from responsibility, a permutation of the “support the troops – oppose the war” discourse within the military peace movement (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995).

#### “MY BABY:” CAREGIVING, CARE RECEIVING AND DISSENTING SUBJECTHOOD

Having theorized the military peace movement as grounded in counter-performative reiterations of military masculinity, this section explores the contradictions and tensions within this productive duality. Military masculinity produces dissent but it also reproduces hierarchies of experience, truth claim and dissenting subjecthood along gendered lines.

In *Body of War*, paralyzed Tomas is represented initially as haunted and still defined by a past – now diminished or obscured – masculinity (Serlin 2003, 161; Shuttleworth 2004, 167; Meeuf 2008, 98; Shuttleworth, Wedgwood, and Wilson 2012). His autonomy, physical wholeness and sexual function are the present absences that define him, disjuncting a straightforward reiteration of dominant modes of masculinity. Broken in body and in spirit, he is emasculated and infantilized; defined by what he has lost or ceased to be and by his care-receiving position as, in Cathy’s words, her “baby.” However, over the course of the documentary’s narrative arc Tomas becomes the “powerful leader” (*Body of War* website 2013), realizing that

which was absent (Vatter 2005, 15), banishing his ghosts and ascending to a remade masculinity as a patriotic dissenter. In the documentary, this individual “becoming” is achieved through a distancing from his wife and mother, a resulting burgeoning autonomy and an association with key masculine military dissent figures epitomized by Bobby Muller, represented in the film as a form of “supercrip:” “a person, affected by a disability or illness (often in the prime of life)” shown “‘overcoming’ to succeed as a meaningful member of society and to live a ‘normal’ life” (Hardin and Hardin 2004, n.p.; also Smart 2001; Meeuf 2008).

Key to the narrative of “becoming” is the figure of Bobby Muller, a prominent paralyzed antiwar Vietnam veteran, and an assortment of other antiwar veterans who perform the dissenting subjectivity of the patriotic masculine dissenting soldier. In the narrative arc of the film, Bobby Muller’s reiteration of the Ron Kovic “supercrip” trope of dissent (Burgoyne 1994; McKinney 1990; Shor 2000; Weber 2008; Achter 2010, 47) is a catalyst in Tomas’s realizatory “becoming.” Bobby is confident, muscled, and appears physically fit and robust despite disability. In the scene depicting their meeting, Bobby’s overt masculinity is juxtaposed with the withered masculinity of Tomas. Where Bobby sits upright, wears his military medals, is muscled, and displays a confidence that borders on arrogance, Tomas slumps; his body seems wasted and his manner hesitant. Bobby is the man Tomas could (and *should*) be: Bobby’s performative reiterations of supercrip hypermasculinity are a template for the dissenting subjectivity that is the object of Tomas’s transition. His subjectivity is a reiteration of the realized masculinity that is the present absence defining Tomas during most of the documentary.

Of the women represented in *Body of War*, Cathy and Brie (Tomas’s mother and wife) form the main focus. Cathy is the “good mother” (Slattery and Garner 2007, 430) to the infantilized Tomas and the soon-to-be deployed Nathan, and also the “grieving mom” (Managhan 2011, 442). Her dissenting subjecthood is grounded in the uncomfortable simultaneity of presence and absence. Cathy is grieving for a past, uninjured Tomas who never came home from Iraq and for an imagined loss both in terms of the tangibility of Tomas’s mortality and the imagined future possibility of Nathan’s death. She reiterates a model of dissent epitomized by antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan, whose soldier son Casey was killed in Iraq. As described by Knudson (2009) and Managhan (2011) this mode of opposition to war is predicated on the grieving good mother whose military masculine ground truth and dissent is performed relationally to the haunting figure of the dead or disabled soldier son. This Gold Star Mother claim to dissenting subjecthood (Gold Star families are those whose family member has been killed in combat or military operations)<sup>7</sup> is founded on lost sons, absent and yet powerfully present in that absence as signifiers of military masculinity and its associated authority. As the “good mother” (Slattery and Garner 2007, 430), Cathy talks of Tomas as her “baby,” pushes him in his wheelchair, and undertakes intimate personal care. In one scene, the disabled Tomas’s physical return to an infant

state and his mother's role is explicitly evoked. Cathy is shown catheterizing Tomas in the back of a car. The scene is presented as capturing a moment of dark humor (see PBS 2008) as Cathy wrestles with Tomas's penis and the catheter tube: "You know what? It's not the first time I've had your pee on my hand," she laughs.

Within the film, the boundaries of acceptable dissent for the figure of the grieving mother are reiterated. First, the figure of the grieving mother is a collectivity. Rather than the individual accounts of war experience invoked by soldier-dissenters (cf. Glantz and IAW 2008; Cortright 2010; Gutmann and Lutz 2010), mothers are characterized as part of a population of mothers with a collective experience. Second, dissent is practiced not through offering accounts of experiences of grief, but through invocations of a dead or imperiled soldier child who signifies the claim to associative military masculinity. As Cathy says of Cindy Sheehan, she is "our voice:" a voice for a nonindividualized plurality of mothers whose soldier children are in Iraq. By contrast, the perspective of the returning veteran is grounded in the individual experience of the soldier. Tomas is interviewed about his particular experience, and emphasis is placed within the military peace movement on veterans telling unique stories of ground truth for their public educational value (Glantz and IAW 2008; Leitz 2011, 249). Grieving mothers in the film, however, enact their dissenting subjecthood in groups; their experience of the loss of sons is a shared one.

In one scene in *Body of War*, women are shown at a rally in Washington, DC carrying a line of string from which hang photographs of all of the US soldiers<sup>8</sup> killed in Iraq. The women are a silent and backgrounded collectivity behind pictures of fresh-faced dead sons. They function as enabling mediums for their sons, making them visible even after they are dead by physically taking them – now only as images – to a place of high politics in which the sons' present absence is starkly invoked to accord them a political role not despite their death in war but *through* the particular political currency – and authority – that such a death produces. The dissenting subjectivity of the mothers is produced out of this rather literal "claim [to] authority on the basis of affirmative relationships with the military" (military masculinity) (Belkin 2012, 3). It is by holding up pictures of their dead soldier children that the women claim an authority in dissent.

Another scene shows Tomas encountering a group of bereaved mothers at a rally. The grief of this group is presented as a primal, animalistic and barely controlled force. The women – Cathy notes – unable to encounter their "babies [who] have not come home," cannot stop themselves from touching Tomas. They reach across the tops of banners to hug and kiss him and tell him they are glad he is alive. Tomas, the individual ground truth-speaking returning veteran (Leitz 2011, 249), is backgrounded; remade as a symbolic lost "baby." But while the individual figure of the dissenting returning veteran is diminished, his significance as a military masculine referent from which feminine dissenting subjecthood is derived is maintained. He, a signifier

of military masculinity and absent lost sons, becomes the meaningful embodiment of the women's existence as dissenting subjects, the reason for their dissenting life. Rather than the focus being on any particularity in each woman's experience, it is on Tomas.

Therefore, the practice of dissent for the grieving mother is founded not in telling their individual stories of grief but in invoking lost sons, either through a figure who stands in for them or in the form of photographs of the dead – or indeed the imperiled living. In *Body of War*, Cathy is depicted speaking at a rally. “This is my Tomas,” she says, holding up a picture of him before he went to Iraq. She also holds up a picture of Nathan and talks about his imminent deployment. Later in the film, Cathy discusses how every morning at work part of her routine is to look up US military deaths on [icasualty.com](http://icasualty.com) “to make sure my baby's not on there.” She is a bereaved mother-in-waiting, her daily practices represented as orienting around the literal and possible absence and imperilment of her deployed son. Her dissenting subjecthood is constituted out of the constant moment of unknowing concerning the fate of her son, who is therefore simultaneously meaningful as both alive and dead. This interpellates her into a dissenting subjectivity conferred by the authority of military masculinity through its association with military figures and experiences. Cathy is at once the good mother who must protect her son, but also the grieving mother who has failed to do so. Nathan is thus simultaneously a spectral echo of a possible dead future self and a present presence that serves to remind his mother of the preciousness of what could be, and already has been, lost. It is in this haunting that a reiterative rupture is possible through the “de-realizing” effects of ghosts on the “present presence” (the “given forms of domination” (Vatter 2005, 13)).

While Brie performs a similar role as carer for the infantilized Tomas, her dissenting subjecthood is also formed out of her experience of being the wife of a profoundly disabled veteran. Her sacrifice is of a “normal” married life: a missing, impossible life that haunts and defines that which is lived and ruptures the normative tropes of masculine and feminine relations. As someone who yearns for this impossible “normal” life, Brie operates within the text as a repeated reminder of Tomas's sexual impotence, emasculation and associated loss of power. In this sense she is herself a specter, embodying a present absence (Vatter 2005, 13). In the narrative arc of the documentary Tomas's sexual impotence has to be addressed (discussed below). The masculinity he performs must be reiterated without the disjuncture produced by the specter of his lost sexual ability before he can ascend to the subjectivity of masculine dissenting “powerful leader” (*Body of War* website 2013). The present absence must be realized (Vatter 2005, 15).

First seen in the film pushing Tomas in his wheelchair at Ground Zero (encountering the film's overarching haunting event), Brie is depicted as being the constant caring presence in Tomas's life. While Cathy may speak of Tomas as her “baby,” it is Brie who tirelessly pushes Tomas in his chair, checks he has taken the correct medication, changes the cooling

vest that regulates his temperature and washes out his “puke pan.” Brie’s dissenting subjectivity is defined by her position as Tomas’s enabler. Like the maternal activism (Knudson 2009) of Cathy, her dissenting subjecthood is constituted through an associative claim to military masculinity. In one scene, the couple attend a Sheehan antiwar event on their honeymoon. Tomas is seen speaking to IVAW members and giving interviews. While Tomas is vocal – he tells *his* story, shakes hands, wears an American flag bandana and an IVAW T-shirt – Brie looks on, silent. Brie is represented as crucial, in a very direct and logistical sense, to Tomas’s activism. He could not attend the event if he was not in receipt of her care. Yet, it is clear that Brie’s activism is very much an associative corollary to his. She does not have a story of her own; instead, her dissenting subjecthood is derived from allowing the veteran’s authoritative perspective to be voiced. She is there to enable Tomas to invoke his specters rather than acknowledge her own. Tomas is presented as the locus of military masculine authority that must be assisted, and through that assistance some dissenting subjecthood for Brie can be achieved.

The only highly visible women in *Body of War* are therefore predominantly caregiving permutations and reiterations of the good mother (Slattery and Garner 2007, 430) the grieving mother (Managhan 2011, 442) and the enabling wife. However, the existence of other modes of dissent for women is briefly revealed in a scene in which Cathy spots two women, dressed in IVAW T-shirts and fatigues, at a peace rally and introduces herself as “Tomas’s mom.” The other women respond by giving just their first names. “You guys have someone . . . ?” asks Cathy, by which she is asking what (by implication, male) family member the women have in the military. “We were in Iraq,” says one of the women, and the camera lingers on the suddenly forced smiles and social discomfort of the three. This is the only point in the documentary in which women in the military peace movement are represented as anything other than mothers and wives, practicing and deriving their dissenting subjectivity through caring roles and relationally to men.

On the one hand, this representation is important in acknowledging that women’s dissent can occur in ways other than through their gendered identities as mothers and wives; women can be soldiers too. However, the exchange between Cathy and the female IVAW members produces Cathy as sheltered from experiences and lives beyond her immediate family and her role as a mother; she is revealed as naïve and old-fashioned. The phrase “we were in Iraq” – a claim of military masculinity – serves to silence her. Her military masculinity-invoking claim of being “Tomas’s Mom” goes from being a statement that gives her a right to dissenting subjecthood to being a marker of her insulation from the more “real,” more “true” “boots on the ground” perspective of the returning veteran (male or female). In a hierarchy of military masculine dissenting subjecthood, those in fatigues trump those in a “Military Families Speak Out” T-shirt. This trope is reiterated across the documentary. While wives and mothers have some claim to dissenting subjecthood through

association with military experiences and ideals, it is a lesser claim and it is relational to a soldier figure.

## DICKS AND SLEDGEHAMMERS: HYPERMASCULINITY AND DISSENT

So far I have discussed the way in which dissenting subjectivity is produced along gendered lines within *Body of War*. Women are represented as practicing dissent as caregivers, referent to a care receiving “baby” whose masculinity is diminished by this care. In the final portion of the documentary, Tomas ascends to the hypermasculine patriotic dissenting subjecthood of the antiwar “super cripp,” through a process of “becoming” the “powerful leader” (*Body of War* website 2013). To do this he must leave his status as Cathy and Brie’s “baby” behind.

As described above, Tomas is shown meeting Bobby Muller, the paralyzed Vietnam War veteran and peace campaigner. The conversation between the two turns to Tomas’s erectile dysfunction and the operation he is considering having which will make it impossible for him to have an erection but alleviate other medical problems. Bobby is appalled that Tomas is considering this and describes how rather than being a barrier to sexual function, his disability provides an almost superhuman sexual prowess, and could do the same for Tomas. Bobby is interpellated into hypermasculine subjectivity not despite his disability but through it:

You’re going to wind up being an ace because no normal guy can hang in there the length of time that you’re going to be able to hang in there cos the only way they’re going to be able to knock your dick down is with a sledge hammer.

The masculinity that had hitherto seemed, for Tomas, imperiled, diminished or absent through his disability and the infantilizing and desexualizing ministrations of Cathy and Brie is possible via the archetype of the hypermasculine wheelchair-bound veteran dissenter: muscled, fatigued wearing, medal bearing and sexually superhuman.

Throughout the final stages of the film, representations of Brie and Cathy diminish. In the final scenes, Brie sits alone in her small apartment. Tomas has ended the relationship. He describes how “one of the big hurdles that kept me from asking for the separation sooner was because I was worried that I wasn’t going to be able to function as well on my own.” Brie and the absence of Tomas’s autonomy are synonymized: her caregiving rather than enabling had become restrictive and smothering. It had stood in the way of his journey of becoming. Now he has regained his autonomy by asking her to leave (a reassertion of that which was lost when, in a reversal of the male–active feminine–passive trope, she unilaterally declared she would marry him). Tomas discovers he can do much more for himself than he imagined. A barrier to “becoming” the “powerful leader” (*Body of War* website 2013) has been removed. Tomas is

shown taking down wedding photos in what had been the couple's shared house and boxing up and putting away medals and citations that had previously been on prominent display. Tomas says:

I don't really understand why they give you an award for being shot, but they do, and that's what that is. My wife liked to have these sort of things up on display, like this machine autographed certificate of appreciation from our president . . . I already know I got shot; I have an everyday reminder of it. I don't need to come out here to my living room and see a flag and a purple heart to tell me what situation I'm in.

This scene reproduces gendered hierarchies of experience and dissenting subjecthood. Direct military experience subordinates and marginalizes that of the female family member, who in her keenness to display medals and mass-produced letters from the President, an attempt to invoke the authority of military masculinity, is produced as naïve of the more authentic soldierly experience, and ultimately complicit in the lies of distanced politicians and military leadership.

The final sequences in the film represent Tomas's realization of "becoming" a powerful leader. He is shown in a montage wheeling himself around (rather than being pushed by Brie or Cathy), getting himself into his car and appearing in an election broadcast. He echoes the bodily tropes of Bobby Muller, looking fit, more muscular and sitting upright. He is depicted being carried up the steps of the Senate house, not by his female family members but by a group of burly, male IVAW members. The wheelchair that once evoked a child's pram, pushed by a "good mother," is now more akin to the litter of a powerful king. Inside the Senate, Tomas meets anti-Iraq War Senator Byrd and they proceed down a corridor, the elderly Byrd leaning on Tomas for support. Not only is Tomas now freed from being physically dependent, he can offer a firm, manly shoulder to lean on. The epilogue to the film states, "Tomas now lives with Riley Soden, an Iraq War buddy who sustained a bullet wound in his foot." Back in the company of military men, Tomas's ascent to powerful antiwar leader is complete.

## CONCLUSION

The authority associated with masculinized privilege constitutes the military peace movement. On the one hand this is a productive duality; the simultaneity of the target of and resource for contestation enables counter-performative ruptures that disrupt prevailing knowledges about war and violence and provide a discursive presence to those whose lives are made, remade and destroyed by the operation of prevailing formations of power.

However, the narrative arc of *Body of War*, in which the broken body of Tomas is recast within a narrative of specter-banishing personal growth and individual trial over adversity, relocates focus away from the political context

and origin of brokenness (see Achter 2010) and present absence. Injured former soldiers are seen to turn their disablements into assets that make them powerful leaders – not despite what has happened to them, but because of it. This narrative, within which men and women within the military peace movement are interpellated into particular military masculine dissenting subject positions, reproduces hierarchies of experience, truth claim and dissent. The “becoming” of personal growth, regained autonomy and trial over adversity of the injured soldier can only be realized through the marginalization of those such as Cathy and Brie, whose claim to military masculinity was constituted through caring for “their” soldier and enacting his loss of individual autonomy.

We might be tempted to conclude, therefore, that we have been considering a very partial rupture. Yet there is an epilogue to the story of Tomas Young. While *Body of War* ended with Tomas appearing physically strong(er), on the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq he released a “letter from a dying veteran” (Truthdig 2013) announcing that following years of failing health, he had decided to cease being fed with a tube (Goodman 2013).<sup>9</sup> The reiteration I described above is destabilized by this “final protest” (Goodman 2013). There is no neat definitive becoming in the “fissures of a never-fully-constituted self” (Lovell 2003, 2).

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## Notes

- 1 Ron Kovic is a paralyzed Vietnam war veteran and an icon of the Vietnam-era veterans' antiwar movement whose autobiography, *Born on the Fourth of July*, (Kovic [1976] 2005) was adapted for film by Oliver Stone.
- 2 The synopsis of the film on the documentary's official website has changed over the years since its release, possibly to reflect the changing fortunes of its subject.
- 3 Of course, there are many ways to approach such a reading, and so by utilizing alternative methodologies such as film analysis (for example, Stadler and McWilliam 2008) additional or differing analytical perspectives could be reached.
- 4 Tommy Reiman is an American Iraq “war hero” whose (invisible) injuries were represented by George W. Bush as evidence of a “willingness to sacrifice his body for his country” (Achter 2010, 51). He was later hired by and starred in the US Army's “video game and recruitment initiative, America's Army” (Achter 2010, 52).

- 5 In Derrida's *Specters of Marx* ([1994] 2006), this haunting was of the present presence of contemporary capitalism by the ghost of absent, excluded Marxism.
- 6 See Vatter (2005, 13): "The revolutionary spirit (*Geist*), if it is to have revolutionary effects, must remain a ghost (*Gespensst*), that is, must resist the temptation to realize itself and instead serve to de-realize (de-reify) the given forms of domination."
- 7 "The Gold Star Lapel Button, also referred to as the Gold Star pin, is distributed to members of the immediate family of a fallen servicemember by the Department of Defense" (Gold Star Family Registry 2013).
- 8 Overwhelmingly but not exclusively male.
- 9 Tomas subsequently decided to "hold on for as long as I can", to "spend as much time as possible with my wife, and no decent son wants his obituary to read that he was survived by his mother" (Wing, 2013). He died of complications relating to his injury on 10 November 2014.

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