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# The Gender Politics of 'Ground Truth' in the Military Dissent Movement: the power and limits of authenticity claims regarding war<sup>1</sup>

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This article analyses the politics of 'ground truth', a premise central to the contemporary military dissent movement in the United States. Ground truth refers to the 'truths' about war that soldiers who have experienced its realities can bring to bear on prevailing war narratives in order to disrupt them. The article identifies how the authority of ground truth is bound with accounts of gender and sexuality through which particular understandings of war (principally war as combat and violence) are reproduced. Examination of two prominent dissenting subject positions within the movement, the '(anti)war hero' and the 'peace mom', suggests that authority to oppose war is organised around the hegemonic military masculine figure of the warrior hero. Potentially more unruly war experiences, such as those of non-combat military personnel, remain obscured. I explore what perspectives and understandings of war might be revealed if we consider non-combat personnel as actively engaged in and experiencing war, and discuss implications for dissent. The article therefore addresses how gendered power structures the ways in which war is known, understood and also opposed through authenticity-based authority claims.

*We spoke with the legitimacy and the authority of those who were in the military, those who were in combat: those who saw what it was really like on the ground who knew the 'ground truth'...* (David Cortright, speaking at Winter Soldier 2008)

This article analyses the politics of 'ground truth' as it manifests in the contemporary military dissent movement in the United States. The expression, which originated in military slang to describe the reality on the ground or in the field (Linden 2010: n.p.n), centres on a claim to have been proximate to war and on the resulting 'belief that the first-hand knowledge of military individuals is the real truth' (Leitz 2011: 249). The analysis identifies how this repertoire of dissenting authority is grounded in accounts of gender and sexuality through which particular understandings of war (principally war as combat and violence) are reproduced. This addresses the wider gendered politics, power and limits of the authenticity-based authority claims in which such dissent is invested.

The military dissent movement is comprised of servicemen and women, and their families, who come to publicly oppose the wars they have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and war and militarism more broadly. I examine how authenticity and a resulting authority to oppose war is organised around the hegemonic military masculine figure of the warrior hero by examining two prominent dissenting subject positions within the movement: the '(anti)war hero' and the 'peace mom'. Ground truth reproduces the privileging of combat soldiers (referred to in military parlance as 'the tooth' – see, for example, McGrath 2007) who represent the template for military masculinity, and it also reproduces the account of war that is entailed in the perspective of combat

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soldiers. The potentially more unruly war experiences of those in non-combat military roles (known in military parlance as ‘the tail’ [McGrath 2007]) continue to be obscured. Within both academic literature (see as exceptions Sasson-Levy 2003, Lair, 2014)<sup>2</sup> and wider cultural configurations, we remain preoccupied with studying and understanding war through the ‘tooth’. Yet, most people in western militaries comprise ‘the tail’; they are not combat soldiers but are instead engaged with the administrative, logistical, headquarters and life support duties of war (McGrath 2007: 5).<sup>3</sup> I examine how the figure of Bradley/Chelsea Manning disrupted the gender-heteronormative neatness of established dissenting subject positions. I explore the implications of how Manning’s dissent has been framed, as the work of a ‘whistle blower’ and ‘truth advocate’ rather than ‘soldier’ or ‘veteran’. I ask, finally, what war experiences and what understanding of war might be revealed if we consider ‘the tail’, including soldiers such as Manning, as actively engaged in and authentically experiencing war. As a result we might be able to understand war as, for example, boredom and bureaucracy as much as, or inextricably bound to, war as combat and violence.

This analysis contributes to three main areas of enquiry. Firstly, previous research has noted the significance of ground truth within the military dissent movement (Leitz 2011) and has conceptualised the basis for the movement’s political authority as military masculinity (Tidy 2015: 458). Remaining unaddressed however is the manner in which this gendered basis for authority (which manifests in the premise of ground truth – Tidy 2015: 457), structures knowledge about what war fundamentally *is*. I discuss how, in privileging certain war experiences of ‘the tooth’ over those of ‘the tail’ (McGrath 2007) when communicating war as it ‘really is’, ground truth reproduces narratives of war that are amenable to logics of militarism.

Secondly, recent work has foregrounded war not as (solely) a state concern but as something experienced by – and more richly understood through – people (Sylvester 2012; 2013; McSorely 2012a, 2012b; Parashar 2013; Holmqvist 2013). Focusing on war as experience entails turning attention to those people who ‘fight/suffer/[and] live inside wars’ (Parashar 2013: 617). Through such an approach, ‘human bodies come into focus as units that have war agency and are also prime targets of war violence and war enthusiasms’ (Sylvester 2012: 484). I contribute an account of the way in which war experiences can be, on the one hand, a material out of which anti-war and anti-militarist interventions may be formed, but on the other, how gendered power relations structure the possible, to both include and exclude some people and their war experiences from even dissenting accounts of war such that their experiences may not be counted as

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<sup>2</sup> This point has a wider implication for us as scholars, as we remain bound within a preoccupation with combat soldiers as those understood to have the most authoritative access to war, thus neglecting potentially more unruly accounts including those originating with non-combat personnel. Parashar’s list, for example, of those ‘people involved in wars’ (2013: 628) whose experiences we should look to better understand war includes ‘warriors’ (621) but no other military role or subjectivity, effectively erasing the experiences of the majority of those military personnel whose roles do not match the warrior template.

<sup>3</sup> The ratio of ‘tooth’ to ‘tail’ personnel has been steadily falling: in the case of the US Army in Iraq the proportion of those classified as ‘tooth’ has been as low as 28% (McGrath 2007: 42-52).

war experiences at all. In this sense I offer a problematisation of the category 'war experience'.

To make these points the article analyses how ground truth operates at the intersection of 'war, knowledge and power', the complex Barkawi and Brighton (2011: 126; Brighton 2013) term 'War/Truth'. Thirdly, therefore, I provide an empirical discussion of how War/Truth operates. In particular the analysis explores how the generative 'uncertainty and contingency' of the battlefield can disrupt and remake the 'settled narratives' of war (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011: 127). I describe how the practice and experience of war can be the material through which military dissenters challenge such 'settled narratives' but show how the gendered ordering of established narratives about armed force and war delineate and circumscribe the terms of the possible for interventions.

Empirical material for the analysis in this article was derived from websites, press releases, statements, images and video in the public domain, released by or pertaining to the two most high profile groups in the U.S. composed of dissenting Iraq and Afghanistan veterans (Iraq Veterans Against the War – IVAW – and Veterans for peace – VFP), the two most high profile groups composed of dissenting military families (Military Families Speak Out – MFSO – and Gold Star Families for Peace – GSFP), and the Chelsea Manning Campaign/Support Network who coordinate campaigns related to Chelsea Manning. These groups were chosen due to their significance in terms of their membership size, media and campaign visibility, and because they have been identified as the key groups that comprise the military dissent movement elsewhere in the literature (such as in Leitz 2011: 238; see also Managhan 2011; Knudson 2009)<sup>4</sup>. When identifying claims to ground truth I included practices that invoked in some manner a proximity to war and an associated access to its truths and realities, particularly as these were seen as an authoritative basis to oppose war. The objective of this analysis was not to discern or infer intentionality on the part of 'the movement' or the individuals that comprise it (i.e. 'what they really think' or 'intend'), or to suggest that the movement – comprised as it is of thousands of individuals with a complex and diverse set of motivations, political allegiances, strategies and practices – can be fully encompassed by the observations I make here. Rather I am concerned with tracing shapes and patterns in the movement's repertoires of public political intervention in order to illuminate the wider gendered politics that determine the possible terms of intervention at the intersection of war, knowledge and power.<sup>5</sup>

Texts were subject to an initial thematic analysis based on Ryan and Bernard's approach (2003: 8-94; see also 1998). In concrete terms, such thematic analysis involved the identification of repetitions (such as repeated references to IVAW members' combat experience in membership statements on the group's website); 'local terms that may sound unfamiliar or are used in unfamiliar ways'

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<sup>4</sup> Leitz omits the Chelsea Manning Campaign, but it did not exist during her ethnographic fieldwork.

<sup>5</sup> My aim here is therefore not to critique the movement or those who comprise it, rather to illuminate how opposition to war and militarism operates within broader gendered power structures and to trace the consequences of this for how war is known, understood and opposed.

(such as the phrase 'ground truth'); metaphors and analogies (such as in the military dissent movement slogan 'Second time I've fought for my country: first time I've known my enemy' which links combat experience and an authority to dissent); similarities and differences (such as between dissenting practices of soldier-led and military family-led organisations IVAW and MFSO); and finally, missing data: 'what is not mentioned' (such as the absence of references to Chelsea Manning as a soldier within military dissent movement texts) (Ryan and Bernard 2003: 92). Within the conceptual framework these themes and the nuances of their constructions were then further considered, to answer the question 'what do these themes tell us?' in a negotiation between the empirical shapes identified and the insights and directions provided by the conceptual vocabulary.

### **Military masculinity, ground truth and war as combat**

Whilst its membership encompasses all branches of the military and both combat and non-combat elements, the movement has been the most high profile when publicising the experiences of those who, as David Cortright puts it, have been 'in combat' and who are assumed therefore to have seen authentically what war is 'really like on the ground'. The phrase ground truth is common across VFP, IVAW and MFSO documents (Leitz 2011: 249). On its website<sup>6</sup> (2015) the group IVAW states that 'members educate the public about the realities of the Iraq war by speaking in communities and to the media about their experiences' (IVAW website 2015). These realities and experiences are presented as a contrast to, and more authoritative than, the accounts of war articulated by politicians, military leaders and within a broader society structured around militarism.<sup>7</sup> Implicit in any claim to authenticity is the existence of a fake opposite (Johnson 2003: 3). Ground truth, itself part of a lexicon of war-fighting, becomes refigured as a mode of dissent which works by revealing the uneven relationship between war as it is known in established 'narratives concerning armed force and war' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 140) (often presented in the discourse of military dissent as false, the product of lies or otherwise detached from reality) and war as it is authentically experienced, known and lived by those tasked with fighting (Sylvester 2012; 2013; Parashar 2013).

Working with the premise that gender, and therefore masculinity, is socially constructed (Butler 1990; Connell, 1995) the concept of military masculinities reveals how militaries 'constitute a crucial arena for the construction of masculinity in the larger society' (Hale 2012: 700). The military 'serves as a standard-bearer of masculinity', reiterating and forming 'socially dominant ideas about gender' (Brown 2012: 184-5; also Enloe 1983: 13; McFarlane 2014: 4). Crucially for understanding the nexus of 'war, knowledge and power' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 126), the military construction of masculinity entails a particular account of war and violence through 'the dominant model of military masculinity', 'the warrior hero' (Woodward 2000: 643). Soldierhood is identified 'exclusively with masculinity' (Sasson-Levy, 2003: 441, 447) and the combat

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<sup>6</sup>In this article, all quotations and references to material derived from websites refer to these websites as of 20 March 2015.

<sup>7</sup> IVAW state that they 'understand militarism as a value system that prioritizes aggression, violence, and regimentation throughout many sectors of our society' (IVAW website 2015).

soldier has a hegemonic status, providing a template for masculine subjectivity more widely (Sasson-Levy 2003: 320). Whilst there is a 'multiplicity' of (military) masculinities (Kirby and Henry 2012: 445) and also femininities (Sjoberg 2007; Stachowitsch 2013: 161), and the interconnected institutions that comprise the thing we call 'the military' are far from monolithic in terms of how gender operates within them (Brown 2012: 4-5), the archetype of military, and broader, masculinity, is the 'infantryman trained for close-quarter combat on the battlefield' (Woodward 2000: 644). Male combat soldiers are those who are held to have the most authoritative claim to *be* the military (Enloe, 2000 quoted in Sasson-Levy, 2003: 442). It is this hegemonic form of military masculinity that is the most visible within society generally, within the academic literature and within the military dissent movement so that we continue to 'know' war primarily through the battlefield experiences of the combat soldier.

Whilst the valorisation of military service as an ideal of citizenship is typically associated with war waging power structures (as popular support is mobilised and opponents stigmatised as unpatriotic – Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 161-2) the military dissent movement is predicated on the reiteration and recasting of this valorisation, popularly associated with the 'compulsory utterance' 'support the troops' (Managhan 2011: 441). 'Military masculinity underpins and produces the authority that legitimizes war...but it also produces the authority underpinning the military peace movement' (Tidy 2015: 458). In asserting a right to convey a dissenting ground truth military dissenters emphasise their time in the military, their tours of duty, and any honours received whilst serving. As Coy, Woehrle and Maney (2008: 161) point out, 'military service has been valorised as the definitive demonstration of citizenship' making veterans, soldiers and their families 'authentic groups' (War Resisters League quoted in Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 181) that incumbent powers struggle to impugn, an authenticity tied to the figure of the combat soldier as a definitive good citizen (Sasson-Levy, 2003: 442). IVAW membership, for example, is open only to Active Duty, National Guard and Reservists who have served since 09/11/2001' (IVAW website 2015) and documentary proof of service is required.<sup>8</sup> Military dissenters who dissent publicly do so in ways that make them recognisable *as soldiers* – and a particular imagination of what soldiers 'are' and what war entails. They take part in drills and marches at anti-war rallies, carry flags, wear military uniform and their medals, and take part in guerrilla street theatre such as Operation First Casualty (a public performance during which IVAW members re-enacted combat experiences in Iraq on the streets of various American cities.) IVAW slogans such as 'Second Time I've Fought For My Country: First Time I've Known My Enemy' cast dissenting action as a continuation of soldierly duty, service<sup>9</sup> and modes of being that centre on the figure of the soldier in combat against an enemy.

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<sup>8</sup> In the form of a DD form 214, Military Photo Identification, Medal, award, or certificate of recognition, Paperwork from Veterans Administration, Unit Move Order indicating service dates and locations.

<sup>9</sup> For example, MFSO's 2014 Veterans Day statement called on readers to thank members of the group IVAW 'but make sure and thank them for their service *after* they served' (MFSO website 2014).

The military dissent movement has called upon citizens to 'support the troops: oppose the war', 'support the troops: bring them home now' (MFSO), or 'honor the warrior not the war' (VVAW and IVAW). Prominent military dissenters such as Camilo Mejia and Kimberley Rivera have been described as the war's 'true heroes'. Such formulations 'attempt to subvert traditional notions of heroism while redefining the meaning of a good soldier, one truly worthy of support' (Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 180; Moser 1996: 25). This recast good soldier is, as I will explore, archetypally a warrior hero (Woodward 2000: 643) who, having seen war's realities, turns his energies towards fighting the newly identified enemy (the lies of those in power, or war itself) in the pursuance of peace (see Leitz 2014).

Ground truth in the context of the military dissent movement is a claim to have accessed the reality of war by having 'boots on the ground' as a soldier, (see for example Christensen 2008: 155; Anden-Popadopoulos 2009; Kennedy 2009) particularly one engaged in combat. Claims to something akin to a ground truth of the home front is also mobilised by groups associated with military families, such as MFSO and GSFP. In their case ground truth typically relates to the realities of war as they manifest in, and imperil, American homes and family formations, typically through the experience of having a family member serving in a combat role, risking their lives, or dying (Tidy, 2015). Both are claims to an authoritative knowledge about war based on the lived experience either of being an iteration of the warrior hero of the military masculine template or being related to him (and therefore having an 'affirmative relationship' - Belkin 2012: 3). I now turn to a discussion of how military dissent orientates around the figure and specific experiences of the 'warrior hero' in both the combat and home-front forms of ground truth as mobilised within the '(anti)war hero' and 'peace mom' subject positions. Through these positions of authority veterans with particular war roles (and their families) occupy a privileged position of visibility within the movement.

### ***The (anti)war hero: 'Seeing' war through combat***

As noted at the outset, the military dissent movement encompasses all branches of military service and both combat and non-combat elements. Male combat soldiers are those who are held to have the most authoritative claim to *be* the military (Enloe, 2000 quoted in Sasson-Levy, 2003: 442); in the case of the military dissent movement it is such soldiers who are seen to have the most authoritative claim to have encountered war. Experiences of combat are emphasised as offering the most authentic, authoritative and direct way to 'see' war's realities. This is illustrated by analysis of repetitions across membership statements made by both combat and non-combat veterans who are members of the group IVAW. These statements are collated on the group's website and typically describe the connections between a member's background, military service and reasons for involvement in military dissent. Members commonly cite their combat experience as having given them direct access to the true nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, experiences which are seen as revealing what are often referred to as the 'lies' of politicians and military leaders, and demonstrating why previously held ideas about the wars or war in general were ill-founded. Authenticity and its corollary, the supposedly inauthentic prevailing

knowledge about the war, are therefore juxtaposed. Colin Utterback, for example, describes on the group's website how '[a]s a veteran, I experienced first hand in combat, the atrocities committed by the US and coalition forces against the Iraqi people... I joined the war effort and watched as my country lied to its people for the reason we entered the war'. Trevor Clumpnor's states 'I served a 6 year term with the military and had boots on ground. The things I saw made me hate the war'. Across the statements, references to having 'watched' 'seen' and 'witnessed' war (and consequently come to oppose it) are ubiquitous, exemplified by Nathan Toth who wrote 'I've seen what war does to people. I've seen its propaganda. I've seen its destruction. I've seen PTSD and depression and suicide among my friends. After seeing all of this, I became very anti-war.' Literal seeing, with one's own eyes, of the everyday of war becomes a means and a metaphor for the revealing of wider truths about war, truths that highlight the inauthentic nature of prevailing understandings. In these accounts the ocular authenticity of 'seeing' is something that those with 'boots on the ground' are primarily credited with possessing.

Those in the membership statements who were citing combat as the experience wherein they 'saw' war tended not to elaborate what their combat role entailed; the brief claim to 'boots on the ground' as in the example of Trevor Clumpnor is a shortcut to being an authority on war. In contrast, those describing their war experiences and dissent who had served in a non-combat role did tend to elaborate on, and justify, how their non-combat experiences took them close to war, principally close to the aftermaths or effects of combat on others. At times non-combat veterans explicitly acknowledge that any experience of war and authority to speak out against it that they have comes *despite* them not being involved in combat. Casey Mihalik, for example, describes how 'I have no combat deployments because ive been in a nondeplotable unit. Never the less, I am saddened, outraged and disgusted by the xenophobia, homahobia, sexism, racism and fasle pretenses for war [sic]'. Steve Remley describes being a 'commo nerd'. He notes that in his role '[t]here were alot of things I saw' but the experience that made the biggest impact on his view of the war was having to 'debrief a PFC who was ordered to gun down three teenage rock-throwers', an order Remley felt was illegal. Sara Schwartzburg describes her role in the Air National guard: '[a]s an Ammo troop I worked with all the munitions that were there and primarily I built bombs'. Having served in Iraq and Afghanistan believing that 'the US was a liberating force and that all the suffering and death was for a greater good' it was her second tour in Afghanistan that she says 'really opened my eyes'. Volunteering, as she had done throughout her tours, in the base hospital she encountered a badly burned 'insurgent' who the nurses were less willing to treat: 'I made sure to apply the burn cream as gently as possible and at that moment I decided I didn't want to build bombs anymore'.

Across these examples, combat – and therefore proximity to 'being' the warrior hero of the masculine template – is seen as the most direct, authentic and authoritative way to 'see' war. For those in combat roles, stating their combat experience is enough to demonstrate their position of irreproachable citizenship and authoritative knowledge about how war 'really is'. In what it inevitably a selective account of their war experience, combat veterans often emphasise



fighting and violence rather than – for example – the boredom, preparation and support activities that are also a part of a combat soldier's life (see Lair, 2014). For those not in combat roles, proximity to combat and violence remains a vital part of claiming authority and a valid war experience. As in the example of Steve Remley above, being a communications officer is not presented as a war experience in its own right and it is instead through Remley's role debriefing someone who was in combat that the reality of war becomes clarified. In their articulation of dissenting ground truths both combat and non-combat military personnel therefore focus on how combat and violence is something they have been involved in or has been made visible to them. Combat soldiers underplay their experiences of 'the tail' and non-combat soldiers emphasise their encounters with 'the tooth'.

These dissenting accounts challenge established understandings of armed force and war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 140) by revealing them as inauthentic. But they do so not by disrupting the established tropes of the warrior hero but by reaffirming them. In the accounts described above, combat soldiers gun down teenagers armed only with rocks and commit 'atrocities'. Enemies are burned with bombs rather than confronted by warriors in 'close-quarter combat on the battlefield' (Woodward 2000: 644). In Steve Remley's account, the soldier he is charged with debriefing has been 'ordered' to 'gun down' the 'teenage rock throwers'. The failure to perform the warrior hero of the masculine template lies not in the combat soldier himself, and neither does it trouble the possibility of the category of 'warrior hero'. Rather it is those who give the orders who are, in their pursuance of a misguided war, thwarting the realisation of a heroic masculinity. Across the membership statements IVAW members describe going to war to realise their goal of heroic service in combat. They describe wanting to serve their country, protect it, and bring democracy to others. Once they have 'boots on the ground' they are thwarted in this aim by the lies, incompetence and nefarious agendas of leaders (both military and civilian).<sup>10</sup>

The reiteration of hegemonic military masculinity through the figure of the warrior hero is therefore the means through which the military dissent movement is able to exist and intervene in War/Truth. This entails a particular account of what war is, one that is ultimately amenable to those established narratives of armed force and war it seeks to contest. War remains, in these accounts, combat, killing and peril, conducted by warrior heroes whose effective fulfilment of the masculine ideal is thwarted by those who give them orders in the course of a misguided and poorly conducted war. This is war that those tasked with building communications systems or bombs may occasionally see traces of but are not engaged in actively. This reinforces rather than complicates the prevailing notion that it is 'the tooth' that has access to 'real war' whilst 'the tail' does not, a distinction which perpetuates the privilege of the warrior hero as the locus of authority on war.

### ***The 'peace mom': ground truths of grief and the authority of military families***

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the slogan 'Second Time I've Fought For My Country: First Time I've Known My Enemy', dissent is presented as the means to realise the ideals of the warrior hero and finally confront an enemy in the service of the nation.

Cindy Sheehan, 'and other grieving mothers and widowed wives' have been at the forefront of the military dissent movement (Managhan 2011: 442; see also Franklin and Lyons 2008; Hamilton 2012); indeed, they have arguably been more visible than soldiers themselves (Managhan 2011: 442). Examination of this mode of dissent demonstrates that the emphasis on the combat soldier, the military masculine template, as the authoritative source of truths about war is not confined to the dissenting practices of soldiers. The dissent groups set up by military families welcome all of those with 'relatives or loved ones currently in the military, or who have served in the military since the fall of 2002' (MFSO website 2014) but most visible within those groups are those whose military family member has been killed in combat. The figure of the combat soldier as a military masculine referent within the heteronormatively-imagined American family provides a vocabulary of authority through which soldiers' family members dissent, organised through these groups which include MFSO and GSFP. A domestic 'ground truth of grief' draws its authority from the iteration of the warrior hero that a slain soldier represents. Proximity to the realities of war for family members (usually mothers) comes from the experience, or risk, of losing the warrior hero son to a misguided war (as in the case of Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey was killed in action) or caring for them if they return home injured as embodiments of the heroic masculinity that is imperilled by the war (Tidy 2015: 460). The making visible of the domestic consequences of war centres on the various ways in which misguided war disrupts and imperils heteronormative formations of 'family', hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality, for example through depicting the emasculation of injured soldiers who return from Iraq impotent due to their injuries and unable to have sex with their wives (see Tidy 2015: 464).

Within the military family movement 'peace moms' like Cindy Sheehan (Sheehan 2006; Managhan 2011; Knudson 2009, Hamilton 2012) have a political currency based on their refiguring of 'heartache' into 'activism' (Sheehan, 2006). This political currency is grounded in specific heteronormative accounts of gender and sexuality that comprise dominant understandings of 'the family', femininity (particularly motherhood) - 'femininity is perceived as antithetical to the military' (Sasson-Levy, 2003: 456) - and an affirmative association with the military (Belkin 2012: 3) embodied by the warrior son. Cindy Sheehan's identity 'as a mother of a soldier who was slain during active duty in Iraq' was the material from which to 'craft a maternal politics of peace' (Knudson 2009: 164). Mothers grief, for either dead or imperilled soldier children (Tidy 2015: 461; 463-4), is disconcerting to incumbent War/Truth because it reveals war's destructive reach into the middle American lives and comforting family formations, and their constitutive accounts of gender and sexuality, that prevailing narratives suggest war is necessary to protect. The ground truth of military families is therefore predicated on making the domestic consequences of war visible as in MFSO's 2010 True Costs of War campaign, which sought to highlight 'the human toll that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had on our loved ones and families'. In this sense the dissent of military family organisations functions as a mode of maternal activism, wherein motherhood is used to 'lobby for social and political change' (O' Reilly 2008: 11). Within the movement a maternal rationality of care (Managhan 2011: 451) is presented as an antithesis

of, and foil for, the excesses of militarism. For example, MFSO's tagline 'support our troops, bring them home now, and take care of them when they get here', emphasises the caring and nurturing role of the group (and by extension a whole nation of good citizen mothers).

Such maternal activism therefore reproduces particular accounts of femininity (characterised by caring, nurturing and peacefulness, and grief at a child's loss) that draw on normative accounts of women and families. As I explore elsewhere in relation to the anti-war documentary *Body of War*, (which follows the activism of a severely injured IVAW member and his family) where activism is predicated on maternal care the ground truth of war is 'that of caring for a paralyzed son and husband' (2015: 460), with such injury being a stark signifier of his exposure to the realities of war. Cindy Sheehan's activism (and attempts to question it by those politically opposed to her) centered on cultural constructions of the 'good mother', a 'figure who is...caring and nurturing but who is also charged with protecting her children from harm' (Slattery and Garner 2011: 88).

Because prevailing war knowledge can accommodate families' grief and trauma within narratives of noble sacrifice for a necessary cause, the most penetrating critique advanced by the ground truth of military families is that their family member is risking their life in combat, has been injured, or has died for an invalid reason, expressed in placard and tshirt slogans such as 'our son is a Marine. Don't send him to war for oil', 'President Bush: you killed my son', 'Bush Lied: My Son Died', or 'For what noble cause?' In this way, experiences of grief at (most commonly) the loss of a child<sup>11</sup> are contextualised as originating with the misguided or nefarious agendas and logics of 'senior leaders', who are 'far removed' from the battlefield (Linden 2010: n.p.n) rather than the enemies defined within prevailing narratives of war. These placard and Tshirt slogans rehearse the maternal impulse to protect a child from harm and protect the family unit and the grief of a failure to do so in the face of misjudgments and lies by military and civilian leaders.

Being a (military) mother is not enough, however, to be high profile within the military dissent movement. The most visible members of groups such as MFSO are those that have an associative connection to combat, through a son<sup>12</sup> who is either serving in a combat position or has been injured or killed in combat. This association is continually reiterated within military family dissent groups. At rallies family members often hold photographs of family members who been killed and place their relatives in the centre of actions predicated on simultaneously memorialising them and campaigning for peace (such as Cindy Sheehan's 'Camp Casey'). Family activism in the military dissent movement often involves making the American war dead visible, enabling them to have a political involvement despite their death, or indeed with their war death 'starkly invoked to accord them a political role not despite' it 'but through the particular political currency – and authority – that such a death produces' (Tidy 2015: 263). Family

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<sup>11</sup> The loss or imperilment of sons is the most visible, however there are other permutations. For example at a Memorial Day observance in 2008 MFSO member Elaine Brower spoke of her father's WW2 military service as well as her son's.

<sup>12</sup> It has usually been a son because of the restrictions on women in combat positions

members have also sometimes carried placards with messages ('letters from the front') from soldiers who were away on deployment such as 'baby, I'm just a foot soldier fighting an unjust, f\*\*\*\*d up war'. In this way military family members are produced not just as experiencing war's violence and enthusiasms (Sylvester 2012: 484) as it constitutes their own lives through loss, grief, family separation, and the consequent thwarted duty to care, and compromises the gendered formations of the ideal of 'family', but as being conduits for the authoritative experiences of war to which combat soldiers are privy.

The military family dissent movement is, therefore, contingent on the political authority of combat (and particularly death in combat), which is grounded in military masculinity and the reproduction and privileging of its archetype: the warrior hero. This is epitomised by the existential premise of GSFP (also at times known as Gold Star Mothers for Peace), which was co-founded by Cindy Sheehan and was closely associated with MFSO. Gold Star refers to '[t]he Gold Star Lapel Button, also referred to as the Gold Star pin' which 'is distributed to members of the immediate family of a fallen servicemember by the Department of Defense'. 'Gold Star Families... are individuals who have received the Gold Star Lapel Button from the Department of Defense for the sacrifice of their loved one' (Gold Star Family Registry website, 2015). In MFSO texts, those who have lost a child in combat are referred to as 'Gold Star mothers', whereas those who have not, but are the mothers of those serving in the armed forces, are referred to as a 'MFSO mothers' (for example, MFSO website 2015). The Gold Star mother has, as an aspect of the valorisation of combat soldiers, an 'unassailable position of moral authority' (Knudson 2009: 165), not through her position as a mother, or her experience of grief, but due to who she is a mother to and who she has grieved for (a son killed in combat). This produces a gendered hierarchy of grief, sacrifice and associated authority, in which those whose son has died fighting – the ultimate practice of military masculine citizenship – are awarded a 'Gold' status and elevated visibility within the movement. Grief for a son killed in combat is the most authentic grief in terms of the authority it confers to hold a political position on war. The 'gold' status is one that is accorded, initially, by the Department of Defense, and as such is an iteration of the established narratives of war, and their power relations, that the movement seeks to contest. Refigured within the movement, the Gold Star status produces, on the one hand, a position of authority in which to speak in dissent, but on the other it reproduces the logics underpinning war and militarism.

Combat soldiers who are imperilled overseas become the bases of meaningful authority for their families to dissent through their war death or its possibility. This emphasises a particular account of soldiers and war experience, which entails a specific understanding of what war is or can be. Because the most visible families within the movement are those whose relatives have died in combat, the notion of war as combat, killing and peril is reproduced, reiterating a narrative amenable to the terms of established accounts of war and armed force which cast soldiers as those who fight 'on the ground' (as opposed to, for example, those in the Air Force or Navy) and who risk their lives far away. Those that are killed on active service are more likely to be combat soldiers in the Army or Marines, and their heightened visibility reproduces the configurations

through which non-combat roles (such as those that were until 2012 only available to women in the United States military) and those in particular branches of the military, are deemed less proximate to 'true' war, thereby reiterating a partial account of war experience. Furthermore, no Gold Star is forthcoming for those family members whose soldier has been killed in, for example, a training accident or has committed suicide on returning home. These many war experiences which fall outside of the available repertoires of authority are necessarily excluded, both from the prevailing narratives of war and armed force and from attempts to destabilise them.

In conclusion the dissent of military families reiterates the privileging of the military masculine archetype: the combat soldier. An association with a combat soldier, particularly one that has died fighting, is the privileged form of political authority for military family dissenters, providing as it does access to the realities of war both as they play out in disruptions to home and family life and the maternal rationality of care (Managhan 2011: 451) and as documented in the 'letters from the front' they receive. Expressions of the elevated position of the combat soldier within established and official accounts of war and armed force, such as the 'Gold Star', are refigured into an authority to dissent, but they also reproduce the militarist notion that combat is the most authoritative way to 'do' war and to practice citizenship. As explored in this section, the military dissent movement is predicated on refiguring the authority of the combat veteran with their 'boots on the ground' perspective of war and the entailed accounts of what war is. Family members can 'know' war through 'their' combat soldier and through the grief, loss and disruptions to the heteronormative family formation that his death or injury produces. The accounts of war emanating from this 'ground truth of grief' centre on fighting, peril, killing and sacrifice and the closer one has come to these experiences the closer one is seen to have come to war as it 'really' is. Taken together these two most visible dissenting subject positions – the (anti)war hero and the 'peace mom' – draw on and reproduce a neat gendered and heteronormative ordering. In the next section I turn to the example of Bradley/Chelsea Manning, examining the problems she posed for these neat repertoires and considering the consequent possibilities for anti-militarist political interventions.

### **Chelsea Manning, (trans)gender and war as boredom and bureaucracy**

In July 2013 Private Chelsea (formerly known as Bradley) Manning was found guilty of leaking the largest volume of classified information to date into the public domain and sentenced to 35 years imprisonment for violations of the Espionage Act. Manning had accessed the information whilst serving as an intelligence analyst in Iraq in 2009 and passed it to the organisation WikiLeaks. The leak made visible the file-trail of modern western war; tens of thousands of classified military documents known as the Iraq War Logs and the Afghan War Logs (also known as the Afghan War Diary), footage of an airstrike in Baghdad which came to be known as the 'Collateral Murder' footage, along with diplomatic cables, and files relating to Guantanamo Bay. Manning told her pre-trial court martial hearing that she released the information to expose the 'on the ground reality of both the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan' and remove 'the fog of war' to reveal 'the true nature of twenty-first century asymmetric warfare'.

She said she intended the 'American public to know that not everyone in Iraq and Afghanistan are targets that needed to be neutralized, but rather people who were struggling to live in the pressure cooker environment of what we call asymmetric warfare' (quoted in *The Guardian*, 2013). In the web chat with hacker Adrian Lamo which would lead to her arrest, Manning had said she wanted 'people to see the truth' (see for example Zetter, 2011). This was a political intervention which drew on the vocabulary of ground truth: Manning's objective was to make visible the 'on the ground reality' of war, in so doing destabilising a false prevailing narrative that viewed people as 'targets' to be 'neutralized'.

As I have explored so far, the combat veteran and the desk veteran – both of whom may have an overseas service ribbon or a Global War on Terrorism Service or Expeditionary Medal – are not held to be authoritative in the same way. Not all 'ground truths' are equal because not all servicemen and women are understood to be able to access 'true' or 'real' war. This entails the terms of possibility defining what 'true' or 'real' war is or can be. The hegemonic masculine figure of the combat soldier as an authoritative model of masculinity, citizenship and experienter of war as it 'really' is, and the partial account of war that he entails, remains tenacious even within interventions oriented towards the disruption of established accounts of armed force and war and the militarism that underpins them. Therefore, although Manning's framing of her intervention drew on her access to the 'on the ground reality' about war her war experience and her gendered subjectivity did not fit the established repertoires of authority through which the most prominent military dissent is undertaken. During her service Manning 'was a paradox the military was scarcely able to digest' (Madar 2012: 25) and she was similarly confounding to the neat repertoires of authority through which military opposition to war has been the most visible. Manning spent her time in Iraq at Forward Operating Base Hammer, sat at a computer. She was not a masculine (anti)war hero: a combat soldier turning away from violence and towards peace who tells first-hand stories of how war 'really is' 'on the ground'; the violence she had encountered had been on a computer monitor. Manning was publically visible initially as a conspicuously diminutive gay man whose physical bearing was a far cry from the notional warrior hero of the military masculine imaginary. The photographs during Manning's trial that circulated the most widely in the press showed him being escorted by (and juxtaposed with) burly soldiers who were consistently at least a head taller than him and twice as broad.<sup>13</sup> Much was made of Manning's difficulties during training with the conclusion drawn that she was 'plainly not ... soldier material' (Madar 2012: 24). Later, when she went public as a trans woman she was an even more unsettling figure. An institution that 'serves as a standard-bearer of masculinity' (Brown 2012: 184-5) had become a space wherein the openness and contingency gender (and sexuality) categories themselves had been made visible. Manning did not fit the image of the (anti)war hero, but neither did she fit the accounts of femininity and the family produced within the military dissent movement. It had been a boyfriend rather than girlfriend or wife who Manning

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<sup>13</sup> I have referred to Manning as 'he' here because at that point she was publically understood to be and made publically intelligible as a man.

had left behind in America. Rather than having a close knit 'military family' headed by a matriarchal figure like Cindy Sheehan, she had uneasy relationship with her separated parents and stepmother (including, it has been suggested, because they objected to Manning's sexual orientation – Madar 2012: 20). Of course, the military and the military dissent movement is populated with individuals whose lives, subjectivities and experiences do not map neatly onto expectations and dominant narratives of (and opposition to) military masculinities, militarisms and war. Yet, as explored above, it is that which *does* fit that tend to be emphasised in order to achieve authority (soldiers emphasise, as discussed above, their combat experiences). It is in these reiterations of fitting that the terms of authority and their entailed power relations are reproduced. Manning did not appear to fit any of the available terms of military masculine authority.

How then, did the military dissent movement make political sense of Manning? Manning was a soldier, a Private in the US Army, serving in Iraq,<sup>14</sup> yet the military dissent movement has embraced Manning not as a soldier, but as a 'whistle-blower'. Throughout press releases, statements and reports issued by the organisations Courage to Resist, IVAW, and the Free Chelsea Manning campaign/Chelsea Manning Support Network, Manning is referred to most commonly as a whistle-blower (for example 'heroic US Army WikiLeaks whistle-blower' [Free Chelsea Manning Campaign website]), or variously as a 'prisoner of conscience', a 'patriot', 'democracy advocate' (Free Chelsea Manning Campaign website) and a 'heroic truth teller' (Courage to Resist website). Manning is not described as a 'soldier' or 'veteran'. Evidently in a context – explored in the first part of this article – in which 'being military' in some sense is the locus of dissenting authority this is a significant departure. The military identity which made Manning part of a hard to impugn authentic group (War Resisters League quoted in Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 181) was downplayed in favour of an account of individual moral courage. Whereas military dissenters are often presented as acting in accordance with their military principles (continuing to serve national and martial ideals seemingly threatened or disregarded by their leaders) Manning is presented as a lone, maverick enabler of truth. Her military identity therefore drops out of the vocabulary used to describe her authority, putting her in a different category– with more affinity to civilians (at the time of their political interventions) Daniel Ellsberg or Edward Snowden.<sup>15</sup> Rather than disrupting the gender normative category of 'warrior hero' by demonstrating that soldiers can be, as Manning was, trans, 5'2", and engaged in war at a computer terminal, understanding her as a whistle blower leaves the category intact and untroubled.

As a quasi-civilian presented as having more affinity with Ellsberg or Snowden, Manning functions within the military dissent movement not as someone with war experience in her own right, but as a conduit to the authentic and authoritative war of others. Manning, in this account, made visible a war waged by others but had no immediate access to 'real' war herself. She was neither the

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<sup>14</sup> Manning held a Global War on Terror Service Medal prior to her dishonourable discharge.

<sup>15</sup> Ellsberg was a Marine from 1954-57 and Snowden did not complete training in the reserves.

(anti)war hero, nor the military mother or wife. Entailed in Manning's visibility as a 'whistle-blower' rather than (or as well as) a soldier is a statement about what war *is*. Placing her in the same category as Snowden or Ellsberg erases her as a war-experiencing subject. This has the effect of maintaining a partial view of war: war as the combat, killing and peril depicted in the Collateral Murder footage that she leaked, as opposed to or, rather, inextricably enmeshed with the war as she experienced it in Iraq, which was a war of information, boredom and bureaucracy (see Hansen 2011). When the Collateral Murder footage made headlines around the world it was Private Ethan McCord, a soldier fleetingly seen on the Collateral Murder video who was the source of a 'boots on the ground' corroborating ground truth and became WikiLeaks' (anti)war hero.<sup>16</sup> An account of the incident he gave at a peace conference was placed on the WikiLeaks website, he was interviewed widely within both the mainstream and alternative/anti-war press, and his *Open Letter of Reconciliation and Responsibility to the Iraqi People* was disseminated widely by military dissent organisations. McCord was a much better fit with the gendered repertoires of authority in which military dissent is grounded. Visible in the footage carrying an injured Iraqi child from an Apache-destroyed truck and his frontline authority strikingly evidenced by images of him stained with what he said was the blood of the children he had rescued, his 'bravery on and off the battlefield' was noted by Cindy Sheehan (2010). Accounts of McCord emphasised his 'tough-tender' heroics (Managhan, 2011: 457), epitomised by the images of him running through the scene of devastation left behind by the Apache, carrying a wounded child in his arms (Zetter, 2010). McCord personified the redefined military masculine citizenship of the (anti)war hero: 'a good soldier, one truly worthy of support' (Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 180) who demonstrated his prowess, bravery and resolve on and off the battlefield' (Sheehan, 2010).

Whilst understanding Manning as a whistle-blower, as the military dissent movement has, directs attention very powerfully to the war made visible in the Collateral Murder footage and the Iraq and Afghan war logs, examination of Manning's own account of her time in Iraq tells us something much more potentially subversive of established narratives of war and armed force than the Collateral Murder footage ever could. As Manning said of her time working in FOB Hammer, "you had people working 14 hours a day... every single day... no weekends... no recreation...people stopped caring after 3 weeks" (Manning quoted in Hansen, 2011). Manning's war as boredom, war as data and war as bureaucracy is an uneasy match for the prevailing narratives of war waging powers which cast war as the rush of combat, killing and peril. But, it is an uneasy match also for the accounts of war produced out of the privileging of combat veterans in the military dissent movement, which reiterate such accounts of war albeit with the disruptive additions of trauma, loss and absence of moral cause. As such, whilst acknowledging Manning as a someone fully experiencing war would have disrupted foundational knowledges of war and military privilege, it would have also disrupted the basis on which the military dissent movement is able to craft a rival authoritative knowledge about war.

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<sup>16</sup> At the time of the release of the footage by WikiLeaks Manning was had not been named as the person responsible for the leak.



Manning was uncomfortable to both the prevailing accounts of war and armed force and the military peace movement because she and her role undermined the valorisation of the military on which both the wagers of war and its military opponents depend. The military hierarchies that pejoratively term those with desk-based jobs 'FOBbits' (those that stay in the safety of the Forward Operating Base and never cross the wire to risk their lives on the outside) extend into accounts that challenge military power, emphasising some and subordinating other war experiences and reproducing a particular view of what war is, one what is ultimately useful to militarist narratives.

### **Conclusion**

The political authority of the military dissent movement in the United States rests on the authentic war experience of veterans – particularly combat veterans. Opposing war and militarism 'from within' in this way can be politically transformative. The visibility of these experiences reveal the uneven relationship between war as it is known in established 'narratives concerning armed force and war' (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 140) and war as it is experienced and lived (Sylvester, 2012; 2013; Parashar 2013) by some of those who fight war and some of those who are bereft by it. In this article however, I have explored the consequences for what we know about war of grounding these claims to authenticity and dissenting authority in accounts of gender and sexuality that (re)produce the military masculine valorisation of the 'warrior hero'. Within the terms of the military dissent movement the warrior ideal is not questioned by but is best served *through* dissent, since military and national ideals are seen to be more authentically served through anti-war opposition, making dissenters the 'true heroes' (Coy, Woehrle and Maney 2008: 180). As a result, the war that the military dissent movement most often reveals is the fighting, violence and peril of combat (albeit fighting, violence and peril in a misguided war) that is also amenable to discourses of militarism. I discussed how Chelsea Manning did not fit and was troubling to these established and available gendered repertoires of authenticity and this view of war. This resulted in her being understood as a quasi-civilian whistle-blower rather than a soldier, eliding her experiences of war. However, by turning attention to Manning's war 'behind the wire' – boring, bureaucratic or mundane – and foregrounding rather than obscuring her war work as a soldier, established understandings of war could be productively challenged, including by revealing the connections between the practice and experience of her war and that of conventionally understood combat soldier.

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