

## ***American Wife and Hesitation Kills: Gender and War on the Home Front and in Iraq***

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### **1. Introduction**

As the title of this essay, “*American Wife and Hesitation Kills: Gender and War on the Home Front*” indicates, the analysis presented here centers on texts concerned with war. More precisely, it is concerned with the constructions of war and *gender* in two recent American autobiographies about the second Iraq War: Taya Kyle’s *American Wife: A Memoir of Love, War, Faith and Renewal* (2015) and Jane Blair’s *Hesitation Kills: A Female Marine Officer’s Combat Experience in Iraq* (2011). I will scrutinize the femininities constructed in these autobiographies and the ways in which they depict the home front and the battlefield as gendered spaces or “fields of gender” (Jeffords xi). Both of these texts are related to my larger research project in which I study autobiographies by female veterans of the United States’ second War in Iraq, focusing on the constructions of different kinds of femininities in these texts. As these autobiographies are situated in a male-dominated genre and describe the experiences of women in a patriarchal, masculine institution, I argue that they construct very specific kinds of femininities that utilize, but also stand in tension with and subvert traditional generic discourses.

The same cannot necessarily be said for Taya Kyle’s *American Wife*, the first of the two autobiographies that will be compared in this paper. Not a soldier herself, Kyle experienced the Iraq War as the wife of a Navy SEAL. Nonetheless, her autobiography is the first written by the *wife* of an Iraq War veteran, and her self-representations in *American Wife* thus feature constructions of femininity within the genre of autobiographies of war that allow for a productive comparison with Blair’s *Hesitation Kills*. In the following, I will provide a short overview of my project, the theoretical bases of my analysis, and introduce my central analytical category of “military femininities”. Then, I will analyze and compare the femininities constructed in *American Wife* and *Hesitation Kills*. Throughout, I will also consider the ways in which the home front and the battle-

field are presented as gendered spaces within these two autobiographies.<sup>112</sup>

## **2. Gender and War in Autobiographies by Female U.S. Veterans of the Iraq War**

### **2.1 Writing in a Male-Dominated Tradition**

My main research question is concerned with how female authors of Iraq War autobiographies write about themselves as women in the U.S. Military and how they grapple with the masculine culture of this institution on the one hand, and of the genre of autobiographies on the other. Additionally, I ask how their self-representations as female soldiers interact with, depend on, and perpetuate imperialistic, nationalistic, and patriarchal discourses about the “War on Terror”, and if, and to which degree, the realm of imaginative literature opens up spaces for alternative storytelling, within and against these dominant frameworks. I will analyze how their narratives construct what I call “military femininities” as a way to establish themselves as legitimate authors of autobiographies of war. At the same time, these particular femininities allow the introduction of experiences that are specific to female soldiers into the discourses of the genre. Besides these additions to the scope of the genre, it is also of interest to see which parts of the military’s culture these women emphasize in their accounts to solidify their claim to the label “soldier”, and how this impacts the way they write about the Iraq War.

To achieve this, my analysis combines several conceptual and theoretical approaches. Among these are analyses of American literature of war, feminist analyses of women’s autobiographies, and theories about the interaction and interdependence of militarism and gender. I approach my primary texts as autobiographies of war, and thus as texts within a genre that is coded as male in at least two ways. For one, autobiographies in general have long been dominated by male authors. As liter-

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<sup>112</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Christine Gerhardt for her astute comments and suggestions, which have helped me to complete the article in its present form. Further thanks go to the editors of the present collection for their work not only in editing this volume, but also in organizing the symposium that preceded it.

ary scholar Leigh Gilmore points out in *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994), “[a]utobiography names the repeated invocation of an ideological formation that comes to seem natural – that is [...] that autobiography is what men write” (2). The same is true for war literature. As has been argued before (Elshtain 212; Acton 87; Spsychala 322), male combat veterans are predominantly seen as legitimate narrators of war stories. This perception has not only to do with the organization of Western militaries and Western thinking about war (a point Jean Elshtain also makes), but also with the genres - autobiography and war literature - I am looking at here. Both of these genres, as the quote by Leigh Gilmore above indicates, have long been dominated by male authors.

I aim to move away from the focus on men's narratives that has so far dominated research into American war literature. This focus emerges, for example, in Samuel Hynes' *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (1997), but also in newer works such as Simone Schwär's *Storyfying War: Writing Lives and Combat in Contemporary American War Memoirs* (2014). Schwär, like Hynes, focuses only on “accounts by veterans: those who have been deployed to the frontlines and who witnessed and participated in combat” (30). Such an approach firmly excludes the experiences of the majority of soldiers - both male and female - from consideration, as Alex Vernon has also noted (2-3). This reduction of war to active participation in combat, combined with the fact that ground combat units in the United States Military were only opened to women in 2013 further helps to explain why women still struggle to be recognized as veterans and thus as legitimate authors of war narratives, especially those that depict women occupying roles that go beyond those of Army nurse or member of the civilian population (Spsychala 322).

And while Schwär's *Storyfying War* as well as Stacey Peebles' *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating the American Soldier's Experience in Iraq* (2011), both studies that focus on contemporary war memoirs, give space to the analysis of Kayla Williams' *Love my Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army* (2006), this is the only autobiography by a female veteran they include. Because they otherwise focus on texts by (and in Peebles' case movies about) male veterans, they miss the opportunity to compare narratives authored by different female veterans and analyze

the ways in which gender works in these texts, criticism that I have already raised elsewhere (Spsychala 323).

## 2.2 American Autobiographies of War as Gendered Narratives

Just as female veterans of the Iraq War who publish autobiographies about their deployments do not only write about their experiences as soldiers in America's most recent war, but about their gendered experiences, so do male authors. That fictional and non-fictional writing and other depictions of war are also always about gender is a fact that is increasingly being recognized in scholarship about war literature. Susan Jeffords, in her landmark study *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989), examines the "renegotiation of patriarchal relations . . . through 'remasculinization', a revival of the images, abilities, and evaluations of men and masculinity in dominant U.S. culture" (xii) effected through media representations of the Vietnam War. Jon Roberts Adams furthermore points out war's double signification in American culture: it is seen as both a threat to and a guarantee for the soldier's masculinity (1). In his study *Male Armor: The Soldier-Hero in Contemporary American Culture* (2008), Adams investigates "how contemporary representations of war in American culture persistently foreground disjunctions between soldierly experience of war and civilian attitudes toward it" (7). Jefford's and Adam's readings are useful for my own analysis because they point out and interrogate the assumed connection between war and masculinity that pervades the genre of American war literature. Because it highlights the struggles male veterans face with regard to their war experience and their masculinity, Adams work is useful for my analysis of the (self-)representations of women's gender identity within the U.S. Military. Since the male soldier is an established figure and the "standard", so to speak, against which female soldiers are measured and measure themselves, Adam's interrogation of the militarized masculinity that is present in American culture helps me to shed

light on the fact how the texts I analyze work to establish a militarized femininity.<sup>113</sup>

In order to delineate the different femininities that are established in narratives by female veterans, my corpus of primary texts includes autobiographies by women who served in four of the five branches - Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force - of the United States' Military.<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, the authors whose texts I have selected for my dissertation held different military ranks and come from a variety of regional and economic backgrounds. My primary texts include autobiographies by enlisted soldiers such as Jessica Goodell's *Shade it Black: Death and After in Iraq* (2011), and Shoshana Johnson's *I'm Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen - My Journey Home* (2010). When it comes to higher-ranking soldiers, I will analyze Janis Karpinski's *One Woman's Army: The Commanding General of Abu Ghraib Tells Her Story* (2005), and *Iraq and Back: Inside the War to Win the Peace* (2011) by Kim Olson. While Blair served as Non-Commissioned Officers during her time in Iraq, Karpinski was a Brigadier General, and Olson held the rank of Colonel. I have also included Kristin Beck's autobiography *Warrior Princess: A U.S. Navy SEAL's Journey to Coming Out Transgender* (2009) in my collection of primary texts. *Warrior Princess* is the first autobiography by a transgender veteran and of special interest to my topic as it depicts the war experiences of a transwoman and thus blurs the gender lines along which the U.S. Military is structured even more than the autobiographies by the cisgender women included in the project.<sup>115</sup> Another

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<sup>113</sup> Readers interested in further research into masculinities in Western militaries are referred to the collection *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (2006) edited by Paul R. Higate.

<sup>114</sup> The United States Coast Guard makes up the fifth branch of the U.S. Military. While it was also involved in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, I have so far not found any autobiographies by female members of the Coast Guard.

<sup>115</sup> Autobiographies by LGBTQIA veterans of the Iraq War are still rarely published. To the best of my knowledge, only two autobiographies by gay veterans of the Iraq War exist, namely Bronson Lemer's 2011 *The Last Deployment: How a Gay, Hammer-Swinging Twentysomething Survived a Year in Iraq* and Stephen Snyder-Hill's *Soldier of Change: From the Closet to the Forefront of the Gay Rights Movement* (2014). The scarcity of autobiographies by LGBTQIA veterans is in part due to the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy which was in effect from 1993 to 2011 (Encyclopedia Britannica n.pag.). While it "theoretically lifted a ban on homosexual service [...] in effect it continued a statutory ban" (n.pag.). Since this policy has only been repealed relatively recently, it remains to be seen whether more LGBTQIA soldiers will publish memoirs about their time in the U.S. Military.

source of diversity in my collection of primary texts is social class - Jane Blair for instance comes from an upper-middle class background (17-18), while Kayla Williams' mother struggled financially throughout Kayla's childhood (27-28). As these examples show, female veterans make up a relatively diverse group, which will allow for a description of the different femininities that are represented within women's autobiographies.

This diversity, however, does not extend to racial categories. The overwhelming majority of veterans publishing autobiographies about their time in Iraq - both male and female - are white. Shoshana Johnson's *I'm Still Standing* has so far been the only autobiography by a female veteran of color that I have been able to find. This goes to show that while women's war writing has a marginal status within American literature and, until recently, has not depicted their increasingly active participation in war and combat, the same is true for people of color, and to an even greater extent: Persons of color are mostly overrepresented in the U.S. Military when one compares census data (4) with the "2012 Demographics Profile of the Military Community" (11). However, veterans of color write and publish fewer autobiographies than veterans who identify as white.<sup>116</sup>

This disparity is highly problematic not only because it obscures the war experiences of persons of color, but also because military service and citizenship are bound together in the "citizen-soldier" tradition in American culture.<sup>117</sup> As R. Claire Snyder explains in her 2003 essay "The Citizen-Soldier Tradition and Gender Integration of the U.S. Military", the citizen-soldier "embodies the twin practices of civic republican citizenship: military service and civic participation" (187). In this context, the fact that Iraq War autobiographies are almost all written by people of Caucasian descent means that the Military, and in extension the citizen-

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<sup>116</sup> My above claims are based on a comparison of relatively recent demographic data. For a more in depth discussion of the make-up of the U.S. Military, I recommend Amy Lutz's study "Who Joins the Military? A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status" (2008).

<sup>117</sup> The tradition of the citizen-soldier has been described by several scholars working in different academic disciplines. Military historian Allan R. Millett, for example, has described it in his monograph *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (1984). At the beginning of the 21st century, several articles, for example by Eliot A. Cohen (2001) and Ronald R. Krebs (2009), debated whether the citizen soldier tradition was still effective.

ry, of the United States are represented as white within and through these texts. This is especially important when one keeps in mind how, from its very beginning, the discourses surrounding the Iraq War were racially charged, with female soldiers standing in for “the US’s civilized and emancipated culture, in contrast to a carefully constructed image of the Middle East as barbaric” (Kumar 299).<sup>118</sup> This ‘whitewashing’ of the U.S. Military is also problematic in light of the fact that military service has long been seen as a pathway to citizenship for minorities precisely because of the citizen-soldier tradition.<sup>119</sup> This intersection of race and gender is important to note because of the connections between gender, race and militarism that emerge in texts like Shoshana Johnson’s *I’m Still Standing*, and the ways in which gender and race have been deployed in cultural narratives in the post-9/11 United States.

### 2.3 Military Femininities

Before moving on to the analysis, an explanation of my category of military femininities is necessary and to do this, a first look at the autobiographies I analyze here and in my larger project. The theoretical basis outlined here has already been published in similar form in an article titled “Military Femininities and Soldierly Identity in the Iraq War Autobiographies by Female U.S. Veterans” (2016). Some of the autobiographers that are central for my dissertation state a desire to shed light on the underrepresented lives and experiences of female soldiers. Kayla Williams, for example, writes: “I wanted to write a book to let people know what it *feels* like to be a woman soldier in peace and in war” (Williams 15). Others, like Jane Blair, want to keep the memory of soldiers more generally alive through their writing (*Hesitation Kills* 275). Regardless of the stated motivations, these autobiographies carve out a space for women’s experiences within a male-dominated discourse of war. Gilmore’s insistence that institutional discourses create a person’s gen-

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<sup>118</sup> Readers interested in further analysis on this topic are referred to Nancy W. Jabbra’s article “Women, Words and War: Explaining 9/11 and Justifying U.S. Military Action in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2006).

<sup>119</sup> James Burk’s essay “Citizenship Status and Military Service: The Quest for Inclusion by Minorities and Conscientious Objectors” (1995) is a good starting point for explorations of the connections between citizenship and minority status.

der (*Autobiographies* 17) helps to explain the predominance of texts by male veterans. As I have argued before, “the discourses one encounters in established U.S. American literature of war perpetually (re-)authorize men as soldiers (and women as civilians), thus reproducing gender differences in a way that withholds from women the authority to write as female soldiers” (322-323). Here, I concur with Susan Jeffords’ claim that the battlefield is a gendered space in which the enemy is ascribed feminine attributes, while female relatives and girlfriends are referenced to condone fighting during war time (xi). These “fields of gender” (xi), as Jeffords calls them, are not only in effect in narratives about the Vietnam War, but also perpetuated in Iraq War autobiographies like David Bellavia’s *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War* (2009) or Chris Kyle’s *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History* (2012), both of which rely heavily on the established dichotomy of men as combatants and women as civilians that Elshtain has identified (4; 144). One aim of my larger project is to analyze how female soldiers, through their autobiographies, engage with these “fields of gender” and the discourses that shape them, and I argue that the construction of military femininities plays an important part in this engagement. In the following, I argue that the narratives by female soldiers and veterans work to establish an autobiographical subject that has the authority to talk about the Iraq War, and thus to enter Jeffords’ “fields of gender” (xi) by constructing alternative, “military femininities” (Spychala 324). This claim rests on Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of gender (2008; 2011) and on Leigh Gilmore’s assertions that the autobiographical subject is constructed through its representation (25). Furthermore, Gilmore’s claim that “the authority of the autobiographical *I* coincides with other forms of authority” (67) is important to keep in mind when analyzing women’s life writing about war. I argue that women’s autobiographies have to negotiate the fact that the autobiographical subject’s gender identity undercuts the authority, based in the narrating *I*’s status as (combat) soldier or veteran, to write about war. Thus, the limitations of the genre of military autobiographies, and the discourses it perpetuates, require the construction of an autobiographical subject that, as a soldier, is at once authorized to write about war, but that can also depict the previously excluded experiences of being a *female* soldier. Conse-



quently, these autobiographies challenge the boundaries of the genre they belong to and open it to a broader range of experiences (Spsychala 324). One could even argue that they do this more so than the autobiographies of other groups who have long been excluded from the literary canon.

Thus, while gender plays an important role in these texts, so do the traditions of the genre of war literature. I have argued before (Spsychala 324) that some of the conventions of the genre, like the description of combat, have to be seen as what Gilmore, building on Teresa de Lauretis' and Michel Foucault's work, calls "technologies of autobiography" (18), and that they come into play in the texts I analyze in this paper. The descriptions of combat that readers encounter in autobiographies like Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills* "solidify the construction of a female autobiographical subject with a soldierly identity, and thus legitimates their writing about war" (Spsychala 324). Combat experience then combines with the constructions of gender in such texts and leads to the production of what I call "military femininities" (324).<sup>120</sup>

The texts I analyze here and in my larger project come out of a tradition of women's (life) writing about war. A tradition they draw upon, but also change. While Carol Acton has traced the ways in which women wrote about their deployments during World War One and the Vietnam War (2001; 2004; 2007), I analyze how female Iraq War veterans, for example by describing combat and thus establishing "military femininities," challenge and change generic conventions (Spsychala 324).

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<sup>120</sup> The term military femininities has been used by other scholars, for example by Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter in *Sexing the Soldier: The Politics of Gender in the Contemporary British Army* (2007), but also in recent dissertations by Nina Rones in *The Struggle over Military Identity: a Multi-Sited Ethnography on Gender, Fitness and "the Right Attitudes" in the Military Profession/Field* (2015) and Alexandra Hyde in *Inhabiting No-Mans Land: The Military Mobilities of Army Wives* (2015). To the best of my knowledge, however, neither of them uses the term as an overarching category of analysis or in the sense in which I am using it in this article and in my larger work. Additionally, neither of these analyses engage specifically with autobiographies written by female Iraq War veterans.

### 3. Military Femininities in *American Wife* and *Hesitation Kills*

#### 3.1 Constructing a Secondary Military Femininity in *American Wife*

This part of the essay will contrast the autobiography of a female veteran with that of a soldier's wife to illustrate the claims made so far. To the best of my knowledge, *American Wife: Love, War, Faith, and Renewal* (2016) is the first autobiography by the wife of an Iraq War veteran published so far.<sup>121</sup> However, and this makes it interesting in the context of the larger project outlined above, the narrative is not only concerned with domestic issues such as childbirth, but also comments on her husband's experiences in Iraq (51-53; 72-73; 78-81) and even defends the sometimes questionable actions of American soldiers during deployment (36-38). As such, it troubles the boundaries of what is considered war literature in the American context because certain aspects of the Iraq War are narrated from a civilian's perspective. What interests me here is in how far the narrative constructs a *derivative* military femininity, and how this gendered identity differs from those femininities constructed in autobiographies written by women who participated directly in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, (that is, the military autobiographies that are central to my larger project). By contrasting *American Wife* with Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills: A Female Marine Officer's Combat Experience in Iraq* (2011), I will show that the narrative in the former text constructs a secondary military femininity. More precisely, this text does not trouble the gender binary that structures canonized autobiographies of war to the same extent as *Hesitation Kills* does. Rather, it could be seen as an intermediate text, situated between autobiographies by male soldiers and those by female soldiers.

In Taya Kyle's autobiography the construction of a specific kind of femininity begins with the title and the front cover. *American Wife* clearly echoes the title of Chris Kyle's autobiography *American Sniper* and in doing so, and by prominently featuring the word "wife," constructs her

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<sup>121</sup> While *American Wife* is the first autobiography by the wife of an Iraq War veteran, it is by no means the first autobiography by a veteran's wife. Earlier examples include Marian F. Novak's *Lonely Girls With Burning Eyes: A Wife Recalls Her Husband's Journey Home From Vietnam* (1991) and Jim and Sybil Stockdale's *In Love and War, Revised and Updated: r*

femininity, and indeed her military femininity, as contingent on her husband and his status as a soldier. This is in line with Cynthia Enloe's argument in *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (1983) that the wife of a soldier "is defined by society not only in relationship to a particular man, but by her membership in a powerful institution; she is seen not just as a particular soldier's wife, but as a military wife" (46). At the same time, the title implies that Taya Kyle is an *American* wife and thus holds her up as a model for how civilians should relate to soldiers and the Iraq War in general.

The cover also includes a golden banner that advertises *American Wife* as "The Unforgettable Memoir by the Widow of 'AMERICAN SNIPER' CHRIS KYLE" and features a picture of Taya and Chris surrounded by a golden frame and adorned with the SEAL trident, the insignia of the Navy SEALs. Both emphasize Taya Kyle's status as the (now widowed) wife of Chris Kyle, and thus construct a rather traditional femininity, while also legitimizing her narrative: This cover and the title create a military femininity based mostly on a secondary knowledge of war. In doing so, they blur the boundaries between the battlefield and the home front. The SEAL trident further militarizes the femininity constructed here. It also re-establishes the connection between *American Wife* and *American Sniper* as it echoes the trident included on the cover of first edition of Chris Kyle's autobiography. As such, the title, in combination with the cover, not only constructs a derivative military femininity for the autobiographical subject of *American Wife*, but it does so within a binary and heteronormative framework. While the title alone might also be used for an autobiography by the spouse of a female soldier, the cover picture anchors the title - and the subsequent narrative - within Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix" (*Gender Trouble* 7).

The narrative of *American Wife* continues this unconventional construction of a "traditional" femininity that is consistently militarized, and thus of an autobiographical subject that can legitimately describe war. Apart from grounding Kyle's identity in being the wife of an increasingly famous Navy SEAL (141), the narrative develops her femininity, and to some extent Chris Kyle's masculinity, within a narrow, "traditional" framework. A case in point here is the section describing her pregnancy with their first son. It includes a scene during which the narrator de-

scribes Chris' hesitancy about touching Taya's belly, leading to the following comment, "There's a reason women are the ones who have the babies" (43). Not only does this bathetic comment link femininity to the ability to be pregnant and become a mother, and thus to possessing a certain body, it also presents pregnancy within an exclusively heteronormative framework, constructing femininity and masculinity as two sides in a binary system.

At several points within the autobiography, however, the narrative seems to trouble such conventional constructions of femininity, for example, after the birth of the Kyles' first child. At first, the narrating I claims "[b]eing a mother and a wife was only part of who I was. I was a sales manager for a pharmaceutical company as well" (55). However, the narrative progresses quickly to Taya Kyle's decision to become a stay-at-home mother. The narrator explains: "I felt as if I was abandoning my son, especially since his dad was still away" (59). This reasserts the link between Kyle's gender identity and her identity as a wife and mother, a very conventional construction of femininity. Following the decision to quit working, the narrative continually reasserts this identity, for example after the publication of *American Sniper*: "I went to the book signing and the events and enjoyed being who I was - wife of an American hero. Chris Kyle's wife. That was my identity; I was wife and mother. I wanted to be the best possible wife and mother" (141). Here, the importance that being a mother and wife - and the wife of an increasingly famous veteran at that - has for the construction of the autobiographical subject of *American Wife* emerges very strongly.

The "traditional" femininity constructed in the scenes analyzed above is also militarized to some extent. The births of both of the Kyles' children, for example, are included in the part of the book titled "War." In this chapter descriptions of life with young children are mixed with descriptions of Chris Kyle's time in Iraq, as in the following quote which is also from the "War" chapter:

In November 2004, while Bubba and I were negotiating nutrition and breastfeeding, Chris was heading to Fallujah to help Marines retake the city. Fallujah at the time was a stronghold for mujahedeen and other Sunni terrorists who wanted to topple the Iraqi government and get rid of the Americans. (51)

I would argue that this mixture of domestic issues and the simplistic descriptions of the battle in the city of Fallujah dramatize the ways in which family members of deployed soldiers experience war. By structurally connecting Kyle's pregnancy and childbirth to her husband's deployments to Iraq, the narrative does not only construct a traditional femininity for her, but also, in my reading, a derivative *military* femininity. While the narrative thus reasserts the traditional gendering of the home front as a feminine and the battlefield as a masculine space, it *also* troubles what can be considered war experience and entrenched notions of the home front and the front line.

When compared to female veterans' autobiographies like Jane Blair's *Hesitation Kills*, it becomes obvious that *American Wife* does not push at the boundaries of the genre of war literature to the same extent. The conventional femininity constructed in Taya Kyle's autobiography, while militarized through the consistent reference to her status as the wife of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, is not as transgressive as the military femininities constructed in texts like *Hesitation Kills*, which combines descriptions of combat with the depiction of a traditionally feminine gender identity. And yet it participates, if ever so slightly and mostly indirectly, in the destabilization of the discourses that structures the genre of autobiographies of war.

### **3.2 *Hesitation Kills* – A Soldier and a Wife**

In contrast to the self-declared "military wife" Taya Kyle, Jane Blair served in the United States' Marine Corps as a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and took part in the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Her 2011 autobiography *Hesitation Kills: A Marine Officer's Combat Experience in Iraq* lends itself well to a comparison with Taya Kyle's autobiography because the military femininity it constructs rests not only on Blair's combat experience, but also on a relatively traditional femininity that, in some respects, is similar to the one constructed in *American Wife*. Thus, a comparison of the similarities and differences helps to identify the key features of both texts.

In most women's autobiographies about war, the construction of femininity, and more precisely of a military femininity begins with the title and front cover. *Hesitation Kills: A Female Marine Officers Combat Experience in Iraq* is no exception (Spychala 326-329). Already the first part of this title, *Hesitation Kills*, provocatively undermines conventional ideas, encapsulated by Jean B. Elshtain as "the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls" (4), about women as more passive, and also more gentle and peaceful beings than men. It achieves this by associating the protagonist with quick, decisive action *and* with killing. The subtitle then explicitly emphasizes Blair's combat experience, but also her gender. The latter fact is especially accentuated because the word "female" is printed in yellow on a black background, only one of two words on the book's cover set in this color. The second word set in yellow is "kills" in the first part of the title, which, as the reader learns during the narrative, goes back to advice Blair receives from one of her supervisors at the beginning of her deployment: "Hesitation kills in combat... You've got to be quick when you're out there, or else you could be dead" (39-40). This once again highlights Blair's combat experience and her ability and willingness to kill. In addition, the picture selected for the front cover shows a female soldier in combat gear, peering through the scope of a rifle, underscoring the combat experience alluded to in the title (Spychala 327-328). Thus, as with the cover design of *American Wife*, elements central to the construction of the autobiographical subject of *Hesitation Kills* - in this case having experienced battle and Blair's gender identity - are already presented here. Yet clearly, the emphasis on Blair's gender identity *and* on her combat experience on the cover of *Hesitation Kills* troubles the genre of autobiographies of war in ways that the cover of *American Wife*, with its presentation of a conventional femininity tied to her husband's status as a famous Navy SEAL does not.

The same is true of the narrative in *Hesitation Kills*. In a narrative move that is also used in many other autobiographies by female Iraq War veterans, the first-person narrator refers to Blair's combat experience, and thus to her status as a soldier, repeatedly. The autobiography starts out with descriptions of Blair's unit preparing for war (1-4) and thus sets the tone for the rest of the text. It also introduces Blair as the new second lieutenant of her unit (2-3), stressing her rank as a Non-Commissioned

Officer (NCO) with authority over both male and female soldiers. As I have argued elsewhere (Spsychala 331), this emphasis on Blair's rank, combined with the remark that Blair and the other female soldiers in her unit "would be some of the only women going into combat" (15) establish the autobiographical subject firmly as a soldier.

At the same time, however, this narrative also constructs a very specific femininity in which this emphasis on Blair's role as a soldier about to go into combat is combined with a traditional, heteronormative femininity, which makes a comparison between *Hesitation Kills* and *American Wife* particularly productive. As in Kyle's *American Wife*, Blair's husband, who is also a Marine, is an important part of her narrative (Spsychala 331-332). After her husband's deployment, the narrating I comments:

All anxieties of my husband going to war were compounded by the knowledge that I'd be leading my Marines in a combat mission as well. I knew I couldn't get distracted worrying about him because my Marines depended on me. (12)

Here, the narrative not only emphasizes Blair's worries about her husband, a trait that, in more traditional narratives of war, is usually a hallmark of civilian wives, or, to use Elshtain's formulation, of "the Beautiful Soul" (144), but also her role as a Non-Commissioned Officer about to go into combat.

Compared to *American Wife*, Jane Blair's autobiography thus crosses generic boundaries more determinedly than that of Taya Kyle. While both texts construct femininities that are in part still defined by traditional gender norms, *Hesitation Kills* strongly militarizes its femininity and does so more consistently than *American Wife*. That Blair's autobiography crosses the lines more persistently, then, can not only be explained by their different experiences - Blair as a soldier deployed to Iraq, Kyle as a wife who remains at home - but also, and more importantly, by the ways in which both autobiographies use these experiences to blur the lines between civilian and military spaces, experiences, and identities. Both combine conventional notions of femininity with aspects of a military femininity that broadens the possibilities for women to redefine themselves as active, decisive, and political participants in one of the major political upheavals of the twenty-first century and as

subjects in war autobiographies, but they do so in different ways. Taya Kyle's *American Wife* presents a fairly conventional war narrative that reproduces Susan Jeffords' "fields of gender" (*Remasculinization* xi) by presenting the home front as a space inhabited by women and children, while the front line is reserved for her husband and other (male) soldiers. Blair's *Hesitation Kills*, on the other hand, troubles these "fields" through the combination of a traditional femininity and its insistence on combat experience. Her husband Peter is essential for this combination, as the femininity presented in the autobiography - very similarly to Taya Kyle's - is based largely on Blair's relationship with her husband. The facts that both Blair and her husband are deployed to Iraq and that their Units work closely together emphasizes the autobiographical subject's military femininity even further. This emerges, for example, in the following scene from *Hesitation Kills*:

This was the first time during the war that we rejoined our brothers from 7<sup>th</sup> Marines and had artillery support from none other than 3/11, my husband's unit. I knew that any targets I now found, my husband would kill with artillery rounds.  
(161)

This scene introduces a detailed description of an attack on a Fedayeen camp that depends on Blair and the observational drone she pilots (161-163), and thus strengthens her claim to combat experience. At the same time, the focus on her husband reasserts the femininity the text has established so far. The erotic undertones in the last sentence I have just quoted, and the fact that it is her husband, and not Blair herself, who actually fires the weapon directed against their enemies further strengthen Blair's fairly traditional femininity, as well as his (military) masculinity. I argue that scenes like this one, which blends her identity as a soldier with combat experience with her identity as a wife, present powerful constructions of a military femininity and put pressure onto traditional gendered divisions that have structured the literature - and especially the autobiographies - of earlier wars.



#### 4. Conclusion

It has been recognized by several scholars that autobiographies about the second Iraq War present a productive field of research. However, while all book-length studies about these particular texts published so far focus mostly on narratives written by male veterans, my analysis centers on women's narratives about war and the way gender is constructed and negotiated within these texts. This focus allows insights into the ways in which notions and constructions of gender are intertwined with discourses of war in American literature and culture. What is more, texts by female veterans present a subgenre of American war literature that has so far received only marginal attention from literary scholars and thus provides a wealth of interesting and varied primary texts that trouble and subvert some generic traditions, but also use and perpetuate others. The analysis of *American Wife* and *Hesitation Kills* presented here offers a glimpse at one version of femininity constructed in women's Iraq War autobiographies, namely a femininity that on the one hand follows traditional conceptions of gender, but on the other disturbs notions about the roles men and women play in times of war. This is especially the case in Blair's *Hesitation Kills*.

However, there is a need of further analyses of women's writing about war, and the ways in which these authors engage with generic discourses and traditions. While this is true for all writing women have produced about their participation in American wars, it is particularly true for narratives about the Iraq War because it is the first war in which women served in varied roles throughout the Armed Forces.

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