

## Commemorating Compassion, Countering Containment: The Female Wars on Terror Witnesses of Helen Benedict's and Lynsey Addario's Transcultural Narratives

**Keywords:** Wars on Terror, journalism, transcultural feminism, Orientalism, affect

**Abstract:** This article analyzes representations of female Wars on Terror witnesses by Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario. In their narratives of U.S. soldiers and Arab refugee lives, both criticize effects of (counter-)terrorist warfare and argue for transcultural compassion. Benedict's documentary novel *Sand Queen* (2011) unsettles the categories of Oriental terrorist and U.S. hero, as a military sexual assault survivor and an Iraqi refugee interact. Journalistic photographs from Addario's series for *The New York Times* ("Women at War"; 2010) and *National Geographic* ("Veiled Rebellion"; 2010) document the suffering experienced by female soldiers and civilians. These counter dominant Wars on Terror discourses by complicating the gender stereotypes underwriting the U.S. defense melodrama and its anti-colonial resistance. Through field research, including interviews, Benedict and Addario strive toward "authentic" reports of war, but their documentary aesthetics anticipate receptions that sensationalize pain and commodify colonial power asymmetries. This article also asks if demanding that subaltern woman testify to oppression commemorates depoliticized compassion or further precludes the participation of "others" from political spheres.

This article analyzes how the documentary novel *Sand Queen* by Helen Benedict (2011) and photojournalistic frames by Lynsey Addario that appeared in the series "Women at War" (2010) and "Veiled Rebellion" (2010) in *The New York Times* and *National Geographic* during Operation Iraqi Freedom provide space for female Wars on Terror witnesses to integrate their memories into U.S.-American culture. The observations of Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario concerning the U.S.-American military presence in the Middle East articulate countercultural critiques through the eyes of women whose testimonies they construct as universally relatable and metonymic for

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their communities' suffering. Meanwhile, they must avoid cultural essentialism when they translate Third World women's memories of containment that might promote their subjects' negative reception as accomplices of Western supremacy in their local communities, as Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj warn (Amireh and Majaj 7). However, in the context of their stated intentions, Helen Benedict's novel and Lynsey Addario's photographs primarily aim to unsettle media clichés of terrorism-related violence as exclusively directed against an individualized "us" with liberal values by a vague "them" motivated by fundamentalism. In the book *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler points out how, in such an anti-Arab and Islamophobic worldview, the characteristics of "perpetrators" are derived from their ethnic and religious identities alone without reminding of the diverse ways in which Middle Eastern and/or Muslim individuals can also be victimized by terrorism and radicalism (Butler 38).

Significantly, both Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario consider themselves to be primarily journalists whose purpose is to "authentically" document their subjects' condition, rather than being advocates conveying a particular political message to the readers or viewers of their work. In this way, their metonymic subjects can additionally gain credibility by not being associated with any definitive political imperative derived from the memories of the women telling their stories. Thus, Helen Benedict's and Lynsey Addario's cultural products actively enforce the sense of a global social responsibility which outweighs categorizations of "victimized" and "perpetrating" communities to the point that terrorist attacks as well as war crimes can be remembered as threats to the interests of every individual in the world.

In this sense, Helen Benedict explains in her 2012 interview with Richard Wolinsky for *Guernica Magazine* that, contrary to certain audience perceptions of her journalistic and literary work as activism, her commitment is to raise awareness for facts, which go forgotten otherwise, because they compromise the cultural image of military institutions as protectors of national values (Benedict 2012). As a consequence, when she approaches the subject of women who experienced sexual abuse in the U.S.-American military in a drama (*The Lonely Soldier Monologues*, 2015) or a novel (*Sand Queen*, 2011), she relies on interviews with real-life survivors as a basis for the development of her characters, using her imagination to render palpable their subjectivity (Benedict 2012). Helen Benedict consequently desires for readers of her novel to gain both 1) factual knowledge of the desperate situation of female soldiers whose gender marginalizes them in their profession to the point that power hierarchies force them into speechlessness as well as 2) an affective understanding of the psychological impact of this oppression (Benedict 2012). Because she prioritizes *vraisemblance* in her

documentation of institutionalized sexual violence along with its repercussions for subjects politically subordinated to U.S.-American female soldiers in an obscure hierarchy of powers, the climate of military occupation predetermines her representation of women's relations across frontlines: "I wanted to be realistic. It would not have been realistic for Kate and Naema to become best buddies and see each other all the time. That doesn't happen in a war. It was realistic that they could meet, interact, and have an effect on each other's lives in a way that's very profound" (Benedict 2012).

Here, her underlying notion of realism contrasts the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Western literary movement that imagined underprivileged citizens overcoming social barriers to realize their ideals. She further inspires a negative commemoration of Operation Iraqi Freedom by organizing her audiences' expectations around the trope of abuse when she states that: "If you can't treat each other right, then you can see how that would spill over very quickly to not treating detainees right and not treating Iraqis right" (Benedict 2012). The female narrators of *Sand Queen* reflect this aim, but since one of them is a U.S.-American soldier and the other is an Iraqi refugee, both the counterterrorist rhetoric of national vulnerability mapped by Elizabeth R. Anker (2014) as well as the subaltern's foreclosure from discourse that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak diagnoses (1988), complicate the representability of their testimonies.

In contrast to how Helen Benedict's representations of female U.S.-American soldiers and Iraqi refugees stress the probability of affective divides between them because of the warzone context of their encounter, Lynsey Addario seeks to produce audience compassion that defies the automatic categorization of "others" as potential enemies. On the one hand, she also downplays her possible impact on contemporary cultural politics when she refuses to identify herself as a combat zone correspondent by referring to herself as a photojournalist who simply happens to work there on a regular basis (Addario, "War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy..."). On the other hand, she takes pride in the fact that her records of human survival amid despair for, for example, *The New York Times*, can eventually reach political élites (Addario, "War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy..."). Since her first report on Afghan women under Taliban rule (in the year 2000), Addario attributes this cultural power of her photographs to her refusal to pass any moral judgments on her subjects, so that she can observe their survival in demoralizing situations and testify to their subjectivity as transculturally relatable ("War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy..."). Addario has also explained her approach of rendering herself invisible

to allow the faces in her essays to bear witness to their painful memories and give the viewer a chance to recollect how the Wars on Terror came to affect populations as they currently do: “What started out as me being curious about how Afghan women coped under the Taliban was suddenly on the front page of *The New York Times* – so Bush and the policy makers could see the fruits of their decisions. Then it becomes responsibility: How can I not go? It would be irresponsible not to” (Addario, “War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy...”). When marketed by the press, aspects of Lynsey Addario’s life that demonstrate her commitment, such as her captivity at the hands of Libyan loyalists to Muammar Gaddafi in March 2011 or the fact that she continued an assignment in the Gaza Strip while highly pregnant, are narratively linked to her professional goal which she has described by appealing to the trope of sacrifice: “As a photographer who is constantly in violent, bloody situations where the instinct is to turn away, I am always trying to figure out how to make people not turn away. For me it’s about engaging” (Addario, “War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy...”). The tension between Addario’s intention to actively generate audience compassion with subjects that would otherwise illustrate cultural “otherness” and to still let their own portraits narrate their testimonies is exemplified by two frames of an Afghan refugee from terrorism and a U.S.-American Marine. Placed side by side with Susan Sontag’s critique of sensationalizing war reportages (2003), these images also work in connection with Lauren Berlant’s arguments against cultural products that advocate social responsibility based on empathy alone, but not as political subversion (2008).

So far, both Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario mobilize affect through their documentations of women’s lives under the Wars on Terror by foregrounding the personal memories of their suffering female subjects, rather than dominant cultural imaginaries, which would anticipate politicized receptions of their works. Thereby, however, these cultural producers’ own femininities fuel public perceptions of their works as particularly “authentic” in terms of relating to the struggles of women they commemorate through a compassionate lens. Addario especially credits her close contact with the real-life witnesses of her narratives with motivating her to provide space for victimized perspectives to articulate themselves publicly in the first place (Addario, “War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy...”). Of course, the trope of white Western women acting as advocates for Middle Eastern Muslim women from warzones carries Orientalist connotations just like the commodifying over-coverage of Third World women’s oppression by First World mass media. Yet, given their journalistic practices, Benedict’s and Addario’s dependence on first-hand witness accounts unsettles any simplistic reception that capitalizes exclusively on

highlighting neo-colonial cultural politics of representation. Given the importance accorded to affect in counterterrorist projects of conditioning citizens to expect endangerment at the hands of “others”, the memories these women circulate from the lives of female Wars on Terror witnesses can counter the paranoia against Arab Muslim individuals that pervades Western mainstream media reports on terrorism (Butler 38-39). When they seek to commemorate the subjectivity of a U.S.-American soldier or a Middle Eastern refugee in a documentary narrative (Helen Benedict) or a journalistic photograph (Lynsey Addario), they can also challenge cultural clichés associated with these identities by unveiling the affective cost of (counter-)terrorist violence. However, their works must navigate the blind spots inherent in the Western cultural memory of counterterrorist defense and combat zone survival, precisely because they want to extend the opportunity of testifying to Third World subjects, who risk being contained by essentialist narratives of their suffering.

### **Femininities Inciting Identification?: On Helen Benedict’s *Sand Queen* (2011)**

In the documentary novel *Sand Queen*, Helen Benedict primarily chronicles atrocities related to the U.S.-American military occupation of Iraq that women in that space typically faced in 2003, ranging from sexual abuse to existential deprivation, through the metonymic narrators Kate Brady and Naema Jassim. She also stylizes their femininities against the cultural backdrop of First World liberalism. Her construction of the 22-year-old Iraqi medical student Naema Jassim in defiance of Western clichés of Arab Muslim femininity as retrogressive and submissive commemorates the cultural diversity of the Middle East and thereby symbolically unsettles the self-legitimation of Operation Iraqi Freedom as liberating for women. In contrast to this independent and rational character, the 19-year-old U.S.-American Army Specialist Kate Brady rather represents traditional femininity according to Western cultural ideals with her voluptuous, petite figure, and Christian upbringing. Still, both women’s lives deteriorate due to U.S.-American military actions; their gradual loss of understanding for the situation of the other is symptomatic of the violence they face. Precisely this tragic combination of embattled virtue and external threats is what links *Sand Queen* to the popular melodramatic rhetoric of justifying U.S.-American preemptive approaches to terrorism that Anker traces in public calls to arms in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where concerns for democratic institutions preclude interrogations of Western imperialism:

“Melodrama depicts the United States as both the feminized, virginal victim and the aggressive, masculinized hero in the story of freedom, as the victim-hero of geopolitics” (Anker 2-3). Here, Anker convincingly argues that gendered tropes structure official speeches advocating counterterrorist warfare since President George W. Bush’s first press statement following 9/11, while recognizing that institutional shortcomings of the U.S.-American establishment further enable their affective efficiency (Anker 11).

Anker’s understanding of the Wars on Terror as channeling national desires for greater freedom into a defense of the republican status quo is embodied in Helen Benedict’s categorization of Kate Brady as a stereotypical “American sweetheart”: while she seeks to trade the *ennui* of her civilian life for adventure, she is faced with institutionalized discrimination in the military. Indeed, the narrator describes her life at home as comfortably dull, revolving around her family’s activities in their Christian community and her relationship with a former classmate, until she is recruited to follow in the footsteps of those peers of her suburban Upstate New Yorker neighborhood who are venerated for their courage (Benedict 2011, 40). On a semiotic note, Kate Brady is a passionate observer of natural phenomena such as trees and birds, which represent her love for both rootedness and mobility, two values she loses along with her faith and her mental health during her deployment in Iraq. A notable example for this transformation underwrites the scene where her Staff Sergeant attempts to rape her as punishment for disobeying him and a broken wing becomes a metaphor for her traumatized psyche: “All I can do is taste my own spit and blood. And then I’m not me anymore. I’m a wing. One ragged blue wing, zigzagging torn and crooked across the long black sky” (Benedict 2011, 80). As she experiences further oppression, because her report of her Staff Sergeant’s disciplinary use of rape leads to her relegation to dangerous convoy duties (Benedict 2011, 230-231), she renounces compassion and her transgressions terminate both her affair with a male comrade and her compassion with Naema Jassim, who initially defies Kate Brady’s prejudices: “Startled, I look around. An Iraqi girl about my own age separates herself from the mob, walks right up to me and stares into my face with no fear at all. ‘You really speak English?’, I ask, amazed” (Benedict 2011, 20). This moment of their first encounter is an epiphany for both, since Naema Jassim is also surprised that Kate Brady is a female soldier and not a preposterous male youth (Benedict 2011, 18-19). Her reaction anticipates the remaining novel’s documentation of her own disintegrating femininity as evocative of the affective harm of life in the combat zone.

At the same time, the fact that Naema Jassim assumes responsibility for her mother’s and grandmother’s survival while her father and brother are captured as terrorist suspects by

U.S.-American soldiers compromises her capacity to perform the femininely coded virtue of compassion toward Kate Brady who, as a prison guard, is overwhelmed by the outcries of the detainees and their families outside. As her narrative style changes during her account of occupation and the increasing deprivation of the rural community of Umm Qasr, it becomes clear that counterterrorist warfare particularly targets the women living in combat zones and that the conditions there lastingly affect their gender performances with negative results.

Thus, self-restraint characterizes the fragments narrating Naema Jassim's suffering in the same sophisticated language that impressed Kate Brady when they first met. Concerning this endearing representation of Arab Muslim femininity, I here apply Spivak's statement on the multifaceted confinement of Third World women to suggest that despite Helen Benedict's efforts to translate the suffering of an Iraqi Wars on Terror witness, her metonymic narrator cannot convey a holistic critique of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I argue this while considering Spivak's negative answer to her question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak famously argues that ethnically "othered" and politically underprivileged women are always objectified by both Western imperialist enterprises and indigenous rebellions who ignore the possibility that these subjects' femininities may evade totalitarian commodification, as demonstrated, for instance, by 19<sup>th</sup> century British legal bans of Hindu widow self-immolation as well as its local cultural commemoration: "In the case of widow self-immolation, ritual is not being redefined as superstition but as *crime*. The gravity of *sati* was that it was ideologically cathected as 'reward', just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as 'social mission'" (Spivak 97; italics in original).

Analogously, ideas of "liberating" women accompany militant counterterrorist discourses and fundamentalist propaganda, so that Middle Eastern Muslim women occupy a role in the cultural memory of the Wars on Terror that echoes that of Hindu widows under the British Empire, where they could not choose their "defender"/"possessor." Due to their poverty and exclusion from social spheres of decision-making, women struggling under occupation can only prevent their performances of femininity from becoming the ideological battleground of colonial and anti-colonial discourses through self-destruction, through which they prevent themselves from testifying (Spivak 90-104). In the case of *Sand Queen's* Naema Jassim, who possesses a narrating voice to accuse the U.S.-American military occupation, not

silence, but affective dissociation, reveals the extent to which her refugee condition cuts short her past life of choice and privilege in Baghdad with the exceptions of her father's incarcerations for opposing Saddam Hussein. Consequently, the stoic register in which she indicts her surroundings linguistically conveys the damage caused by Operation Iraqi Freedom to her personal life, since she recounts memories of family holidays or her fiancé in a melancholic tone, but presents her fears for the future as facts and in detail, as in the following prediction: "We are sliding backwards in my country. We are becoming narrower than we have been for decades. Soon we women will be forced to live the life Granny had to lead – married off as little girls, beaten by our husbands, shrouded, enslaved – our rights as human beings obliterated" (Benedict 2011, 169). This analytical outlook on the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom that she develops in her narrative casts her encounters with Kate Brady as missed opportunities for transcultural compassion to emerge with an affectively accessible Iraq metonymically embodied by Naema Jassim in the fragments preceding the death of her grandmother. At this point, she could still draw clear boundaries between a repressive past and a liberal pre-war climate for women. Indeed, the lethargy that befalls Naema Jassim following her grandmother's death in a distant, overcrowded, undersupplied British hospital marks her descent into trauma. Her personal journey from an ambitious student to a dispossessed refugee metonymically illustrates the loss of hope for her country, where religious fundamentalism and political radicalism abound, as in the Shia-led movement expanding in her region (Benedict 2011, 169-170). The difference is, however, that she does not physically manifest her new hatred of the U.S.A., but eventually expresses regret regarding her decision to approach Kate Brady in this initial scene: "I step forward to curse her, too, but then I stop. This behavior is futile. Better to wait for the chance to offer my English to this creature of destruction, for perhaps, God willing, in return she will tell us what she and her kind have done with our men" (Benedict 2011, 19). The interior monologue reproduced above leads to the deal that Kate Brady deliver messages from Naema Jassim's detained father and brother if she help pacify the other Iraqis waiting at the makeshift prison, using her native Arabic language. It contains a hope for transcultural collaboration that both women lose, as Kate Brady uncontrollably channels the rage she accumulates after her sexual humiliations into fatal aggression against the terrorist suspect Halim al-Jubur (Benedict 2011, 191-192), who happens to be the father of an unknowing Naema Jassim that is further victimized by her now futile determination to reunite her family.

## Femininities Registering Ruin in Lynsey Addario's Frames

Compared to *Sand Queen's* narrative translation of the suffering of U.S.-American and Iraqi women during the Wars on Terror in a documentary novel, Lynsey Addario's photojournalism follows a visual aesthetic, as she commemorates experiences of her subjects with the explicit goal of generating audience compassion. Yet, the degree to which her intention for her frames and their captions can be realized deserves further examination, given Sontag's critique of war photography from the U.S.-American Civil War (1861-1865) to September 11 in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), where she reflects on such images' limited possibilities of reception in iconocentric societies. She argues that photographers covering suffering tend to sensationalize their subject matter and thereby perpetuate depoliticized ideals of martyrdom rather than integrate the scenes they are witnessing into timely and urgent appeals for concern:

It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation – a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused. Something that makes one feel powerless.

Furthermore, Sontag expresses concern for her contemporaries who (as an effect of their exposure to the overwhelming circulation of violent images in mass media) lose their ability to feel affected by war reportages and fail to distinguish actual battlegrounds from Hollywood fantasies, as in the case of those witnesses of the collapsing Twin Towers who compared the attack to action films. However, such a reaction benefits from the spatial divide that war photographers typically capitalize on when they distinguish comparatively privileged First World audiences from direct victims of brutality, which hence presents itself in an anti-aesthetic of surrealism deriving symbolical power from religious imaginations of sacrifice (Sontag).

Echoing Sontag's argument that war photographs only bear witness within given cultural settings, Lynsey Addario mediates the suffering she observes in her documentation of Bibi Aisha's condition, whose portrait she took in 2009. In this picture from the series titled "Veiled Rebellion,"<sup>1</sup> her wounded subject is constructed as a carrier of audience compassion because of her removed nose and her social isolation

which visually testify to the cruelty of the Taliban fighters surrounding her husband who inflicted her injury. The caption reads:

Bibi Aisha was 19 when I met her in Kabul's Women for Afghan Women shelter in November 2009. Her husband beat her from the day she was married, at age 12. When he beat her so badly she thought she might die, she escaped to seek a neighbor's help. To punish her for leaving without permission, her husband, who is a Taliban fighter, took her to a remote spot in the mountains. Several men held her while he cut off her nose, ears, and hair. She screamed—to no avail. 'If I had the power, I would kill them all,' she told me. I wanted to be strong for Aisha to give her hope she would be fine again. But when she described that moment, I began to cry. Aisha arrived in the U.S. in August for extensive reconstructive surgery.

Although Bibi Aisha would also appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*, lending her face as “evidence” to the alarmist title “What Happens If We Leave Afghanistan” in 2010 (Stengel), Lynsey Addario’s photograph of her (as well as the caption) abstains from commenting on U.S.-American military strategies in her series. Rather, it commemorates the process that leads to her being able to embody a martyred femininity through a complex interplay of light and shadow, in which her partially revealed black curls and a portion of her face remain in the darkness of her empty room. Meanwhile, her face right of her nose emerges into the sunlight, foregrounded by her green veil as she casts her gaze down. Thus, the composition evokes liberal values such as enlightenment, hope, and a new chance at a better life in the future; these are especially consistent with the democratic ideals of compassionate Western consumers. Yet, these values coexist in juxtaposition to her injury and the circumstance that she is draping her traditional *hijab* closely around her shoulders to attest both to her survival and her vulnerability, as she leans on her Muslim faith. I argue that such a combination which at once relates and distinguishes Bibi Aisha from the Western audiences her picture targets performs the function of war photography by framing suffering as discursively silent but culturally expressive. Such underlying ambiguities also reflect the blind spots that Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol criticize in contemporary women’s human rights discourse, which claims global relevance by glossing over the particular local, religious, and gendered identities of Third World women that it constructs as requiring liberation from First World advocates (Hesford and Kozol 16-17). However, Addario does not explicitly frame Bibi Aisha’s suffering within a call to defend her human rights militarily, but focusses on the difficult process of her healing as a witness, as implied by her shrunken shadow on her far right side.

At this point, it might be useful to consider Berlant's work on the cultural significance of generating compassion for precarious subjects while avoiding to take explicit political sides. In *The Female Complaint* (2010), Berlant demonstrates that representations of women in precarious circumstances catering to relatively privileged female audiences create an affective bond between witnesses of opposed realities by linking their struggles for a standard First World lifestyle and romantic satisfaction despite lamenting the exclusivity of such liberal ideals (Berlant 12-27). Since so-called "intimate publics" generated by texts targeted at women with the interest of expanding their compassion for embattled females expose their subjects' suffering in isolation from their ethnic identities and socioeconomic contexts, they fail to qualify as political critiques. In this sense, Berlant states: "Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the *sense* in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility" (Berlant 11). She warns that sentimental accounts of women caring for other suffering women risk depicting political resistance as futile compared to interpersonal relationships, because it is not as emotionally fulfilling and amoral men overwhelmingly dominate spaces of government (Berlant 10-12). In line with the patterns of sentimental culture as analyzed by Berlant, the only external threat that Lynsey Addario's portrait of Bibi Aisha presents to her viewers is her isolation, symbolized by the emptiness of her room except from her shadow, so that, at a superficial glance, her injury implies primarily a challenge to the girl's social life.

Nevertheless, Addario has stated that she wants her images to influence world leaders precisely because they mobilize compassion and memory ("War photographer Lynsey Addario on tragedy, pregnancy..."). However, due to their exclusive focus on her subjects' personal testimonies, they can risk overshadowing larger social contexts. In contrast, traditional documentary war photography does not individualize its subjects and risks merely catering spectacles of bodies in pain to privileged audiences, who are unaware of the agency and resilience of the figures they are witnessing. Another frame allowing femininity to witness isolation shows the U.S.-American Marine Lance Corporal Stephanie Robertson from the series "Women at War" on September 15, 2010.<sup>2</sup> Comrades may surround her in the battlefield, but their vulnerability forecloses committed interpersonal connections. In the according caption, Lynsey Addario summarizes the image in this manner:

United States Marine, Lance Cpl. Stephanie Robertson, 20, a member of a Female Engagement Team attached to Second Battalion [sic!], 6th Marine Regiment, watches 'Finding Nemo' on her laptop at a forward operating base for Fox company in Southern Marja, Afghanistan, September 15, 2010. Though the overall mission of the FET teams is to engage Afghan women, the female marines are increasingly exposed to small arms fire and improvised explosive attacks while on their patrols to access villages.

When Lynsey Addario names the film the soldier is watching while tending to her hair to be *Finding Nemo* (2003) in the caption, the fact that this title is a cultural product for children underlines her affective precariousness and need for relief and privacy, given her daily condition in the combat zone, where she must function stoically. Symbolically, the back of her black comrade is turned to her and to the camera and they are not visibly engaging in conversation with Corporal Stephanie Robertson either. Despite the absence of physical wounds, this documentation of warzone suffering can inspire compassion for female soldiers based on the contrast it establishes between the bareness of the space designed for use by military personnel and the personal relics scattered around these, including a stuffed bear and a child's drawing upon the wall, a reminder of the scarcity of innocence in that particular space.

### **Affective Politics of Helen Benedict's and Lynsey Addario's Wars on Terror Testimonies**

Throughout this article, I have attempted to show how Benedict's and Addario's approaches to documenting the suffering of female Wars on Terror witnesses can inspire audience compassion but must also commemorate the resilience of their subjects in selected examples illustrating personal effects of (counter-)terrorist violence. The particular relevance of these works relates to their foregrounding of gender in cultural imaginaries affected by preemptive and insurgent violence, from the rhetoric of Operation Iraqi Freedom as redemption for emasculation that Anker uncovers (Anker 2-3) to the British colonizers' trope of "rescuing" Hindu women that Spivak criticizes (Spivak 92-95, 101). Of course, in both these historical instances of embattled femininities witnessing global military "defense" efforts, certain subjective perspectives go ignored. In the first case, there may be U.S.-Americans who refuse to feel threatened in their daily lives by al-Qaida or ISIS and in the second case, as argued by Lata Mani, the trope of indigenous tradition already forecloses women's resistance to colonial "women's rights" and anti-colonial fundamentalist discourses

alike (Mani 153-154). In order to counter this problematic situation which results from cultural imaginaries categorizing militarily, economically, and diplomatically powerful nations as “masculine” and embattled states under attack or occupation as “feminine”, Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario recollect the narrative agency and affective struggles of female U.S.-American soldiers and Middle Eastern refugees even when they are removed from the battlefield. Thus, they renounce the pre-9/11 Orientalist aesthetic of ethnographic objectifications of Middle Eastern identities that Ella Shohat recognizes to complement imperialist privileges, notably by staging occasions where Western white men can gaze at Arab women in their most intimate spaces as if they were appropriating the indigenous men’s *harems* and thus doubly possessing local female bodies (Shohat 217-220).

Lynsey Addario’s frames of women like Bibi Aisha engage specifically with this cultural repertoire, in addition to the Christian artistic tradition of commemorating martyred bodies that Sontag identifies as pervasive in war photography. Her photographs unsettle U.S.-American national self-perceptions as the single military force able to defend embattled women at home and abroad. However, her recollections of her own journeys prevent her written narratives from advertising entirely institutionally conforming or subversive agendas, as she complains about Marine officers who block her from witnessing scenes of combat in Korengal Valley, Afghanistan, while still sympathizing with them in her autobiography *It’s What I Do. A Photographer’s Life of Love and War* (2015). Instead, an image like the one of Corporal Lisa Gardner with Lakari civilians on May 3, 2010 commemorates transcultural collaboration in occupied Afghanistan as a source of communal survival.<sup>3</sup> The spirituality of the Afghan women reveals itself to the viewer in their religiously inspired coverings, but they can still win the “hearts and minds” of a Western audience given their concern for their children which evokes associations with Marian motherhood instead of cultural “otherness.” Lynsey Addario describes the scene as follows:

United States Marine with Female Engagement Teams attached to the 2-2, Corporal Lisa Gardner, takes the vitals of a group of Afghan women in Lakari village during a medical outreach in Helmand, Southern Afghanistan, May 3, 2010. Most Afghan women in Helmand are not able to leave their homes, and are not able to be treated by male doctors as per cultural restrictions, so Corporal Gardner assists by taking the vitals of the women, notes the symptoms, and passes everything to Dr. Lt. Morrell for a rough diagnosis, and then hands out medication for treatment.

However, this documentation, which neither fetishizes Middle Eastern female bodies for a Western male gaze nor reduces military subjects' testimonies to trauma to generate shock, can risk pushing participants into the background if Lynsey Addario's own celebrity dominates the reception and audiences focus primarily on the dangers she faced as a photojournalist in the combat zone. When she invites consumers of her essays to participate in personal memories of marginalized women through her photographs, her work initiates a community in defiance of antagonistic categories where regulations of femininities incite compassion because they differ from Western liberal women's ideals of comfort and romance (Berlant 2-7). Yet, commemorations of such transcultural compassion threaten to center on the obstacles to private happiness that arise for the ever-occupied U.S.-American journalist, who sacrifices her social life to her professional aspirations and rather performs feminine gender expectations through her work of inspiring audiences to care (Addario, "What Can a Pregnant Photojournalist Cover?").

In order to direct her audience's attention to her threatened subjects exclusively, Helen Benedict constructs both U.S.-American female soldiers and the Middle Eastern warzone refugee Naema Jassim from *Sand Queen* in contrast to Western clichés of military officials performing acts of heroism only to lose their moral integrity because of their traumatizing experiences with "other" combatants. Her writing additionally challenges the post-9/11 clichés that victims of terrorist attacks always embody liberal ideals and that religion and origin predominantly characterize Middle Eastern Muslims (Butler 38-39). Instead, *Sand Queen* documents the emotional downward spiral of Kate Brady as her experiences of sexualized humiliation and institutional oppression estrange her from her aspiration to become "tough" and independent as well as Naema Jassim's reflections on the implications of her country's occupation and devastation for her personal dreams of becoming a cosmopolitan academic (Benedict 2011, 90-92). While these narratives equally bear legacies of Western liberal ideals of women with authority over their lives, it is Kate Brady's disenchantment dominantly driving the plot once she renounces the femininely coded virtue of compassion by torturing Naema Jassim's detained father for relief. Helen Benedict also warns of the effects of sexual mistreatment upon the general psyche of female soldiers in her 2007 *Salon* article:

All soldiers with PTSD come home to some combination of sleeplessness, nightmares, bursts of temper, flashbacks, panic attacks, fear and an inability to cope with everyday life. They often turn to drugs or alcohol for escape. Some become depressed, others commit suicide. Many are too emotionally numb to relate to their families or children. But those who have been sexually assaulted

also lose their self-respect, feel they have lost control over their lives, and are particularly prone to self-destruction.

In her article, she does not refer to examples such as the convicted Colonel Jane Karpinski with the purpose of excusing the crimes of any Western soldiers against detained terrorist suspects as merely symptomatic of a military hierarchy using disciplinary violence (Benedict 2007). Instead, she raises awareness for the circumstance that female veterans, unlike their male comrades, are first deprived of enjoying comradeship and adventure and then of receiving public compassion for their emotional pain, which frequently stems from sexual abuses that their leaders never acknowledged (Benedict 2007).

Finally, even *Sand Queen*'s title, which refers to a military slang term directed against U.S.-American female military personnel claimed to "profit" from the sexual deprivation of their male comrades in Middle Eastern combat zones (Benedict 2011, 105), does not signify that the novel privileges Kate Brady's suffering over Naema Jassim's, but establishes a link. The social responsibility that Helen Benedict's novel calls for Western consumers to adopt is toward both their national identity as embodied by Kate Brady's post-traumatic gender performances as well as their potential transcultural allies, as implied by Naema Jassim's increasing distrust toward the U.S.-American occupation of her country. Since her rise to fame, Addario also stated her responsibility as a U.S.-American photojournalist to render memories of oppression visible to her audiences ("What Can a Pregnant Photojournalist Cover?"), whom subjects address by granting her access to their lives because her own manifestations of compassion encourage them to trust her, even when they disagree with her country's politics. Out of scenes of personal suffering at the hands of both counterterrorist and terrorist violence, the trope of compassionate femininities connecting across enemy lines thus emerges through her lens to remind Western audiences of the global cost of warfare which harms otherwise impartial individuals on various levels. Accordingly, the hope guides my article that such compassionate engagements can inspire Wars on Terror witnesses to reconcile in awareness of their shared memories despite political and cultural divides.

To conclude, this article has outlined the storytelling practices and tropes that Helen Benedict and Lynsey Addario deploy in their narratives to bear witness to the impact of the U.S.A.'s military invasions of Iraq (2003-2011) and Afghanistan (2001-today). I first showed how the documentary novel *Sand Queen* attempts to translate

women's counter-memories of occupation through transculturally legible narrative patterns and thereby unsettle the categories of U.S.-American heroism and Arab Muslim fanaticism. I then questioned if, by drawing from her personal experiences for her photographic reports of female solidarity among U.S.-American and Middle Eastern women in combat zones, Lynsey Addario can defy First World associations between existential deprivation and sacrifice outside of geopolitical contexts. In summary, I found that both journalists must elucidate the cultural blind spots of contemporary Wars on Terror discourses, which perpetuate Orientalist legacies, if they want to advocate global responsibility. The challenge they face thus lies in overcoming sensationalist stereotypes of "other" suffering which permeate their genres of documentation and, as argued in my readings above, risk precluding the voices of Third World women from testifying against (counter-)terrorist warfare when Western standards of relatability do not apply to divergent gender performances.

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<sup>1</sup> The image is available for free on the artist's website here:

<http://www.lynseyaddario.com/afghanistan-pakistan-and-iraq/veiled-rebellion/VeiledRebellion005/>.

<sup>2</sup> The image is available for free on the artist's website here: [http://www.lynseyaddario.com/women-at-war/15\\_LA\\_WomenatWar\\_2/](http://www.lynseyaddario.com/women-at-war/15_LA_WomenatWar_2/)

<sup>3</sup> The image is available for free on the artist's website here: [http://www.lynseyaddario.com/women-at-war/03\\_LA\\_WomenatWar\\_2/](http://www.lynseyaddario.com/women-at-war/03_LA_WomenatWar_2/)

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