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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Machine Wash, Pink:
The “Trans Military Ban,” Media, and Pinkwashing the U.S. War Machine

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

in

Sociology

by

Mathew D Byrne

March 2020

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family who have taught me so much, while providing endless *craic* along the way. You forged me in the fires and, most importantly, you taught me how to love and how to fight like hell.

Tá grá agam duit agus go raibh míle maith agaibh.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Machine Wash, Pink:
The “Trans Military Ban,” Media, and Pinkwashing the U.S. War Machine

by

Matthew D Byrne

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, March 2020
Dr. Ellen Reese and Dr. Jane Ward, Co-Chairpersons

This article analyzes the “trans military ban” through the lens of activist-director Fiona Dawson’s 2015 *New York Times* op-doc *Transgender, At War and In Love* and her 2018 feature film *TransMilitary*. Using the theories of “pinkwashing” and Derrick Bell’s “interest convergence,” the article argues that some LGBT rights advocates responded to the ban in a way that promoted an agenda of global militarism. In doing so, they also made pro-LGBT sentiment contingent on increased militarism. The article concludes by arguing that discourses of pinkwashing absolve the military-industrial complex of its role in creating the conditions that lead many in the LGBT community to enlist in the first place: poverty, organized abandonment, and anti-LGBT violence.

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Machine Wash, Pink:

The “Trans Military Ban,” Media, and Pinkwashing the U.S. War Machine

Matthew Byrne¹

When we see war time is an argument [. . .] we can see that it need not cause us to suspend our principles. Our times do not determine our actions, they do not absolve us from judgment. (Dudziak 2011, 136)

— Legal scholar Mary Dudziak

Yes, the graffiti in question [“Highjack this Fags”] is deplorable. But then there is the slight matter of the bomb itself. And what happens when it is armed, dropped from the air and exploded. [. . .] Given this sort of Gay Tunnel Vision, I wonder if [the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs] would put out a laudatory statement if the missions had gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender bombardier(s). (Duggan 2004, 46-47)

— Activist Bill Dobbs commenting on the infamous “fag bomb”: a warhead loaded onto the *USS Enterprise* upon which was emblazoned the dare: “Highjack this Fags”

In July 2017, Donald Trump announced a controversial military recruitment policy via Twitter barring transgender individuals from enlisting in the armed forces, now known as the “trans military ban.” In response, individuals across the political spectrum quickly criticized the “ban.” Critics even included conservative political actors like military officials and Republican politicians who are not typically associated with the fight for trans

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rights. In the language of transgender “rights,” critics highlighted the injustice of the “ban” and argued that transgender soldiers would not affect the “readiness, effectiveness or lethality” of the U.S. Armed Forces (Davis and Cooper 2017; Levin 2017; Noel *et al.* 2019). In other words, the U.S. war machine would be as lethal as ever, even if some of the troops identify as transgender.

Relatively bipartisan support for trans visibility in the U.S. Armed Forces begs the question: why transgender soldiers and why now? Support for trans soldiers parallels a noticeable shift in mainstream LGBT rights organizations towards conservative goals of access to and “inclusion” in institutions like marriage, markets, and the military (Chasin 2001; Duggan 2004; Spade 2015). Scholars and activists in critical queer and trans movements seeking to abolish prisons, the military, and other systems of violence, however, have long criticized the conservative thrust of mainstream gay politics, especially their campaigns for LGBT military service (Conrad 2014; Duggan 2004; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2006; Reddy 2011). Critical queer scholars Yasmin Nair (2013) and Dean Spade (2015) have uncovered the troubling connections between LGBT organizations and the drone developers, military contractors, and corporations that make up the “military-industrial complex” (MIC). These “intimate investments” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008) in the MIC highlight the troubling reality that “liberals have grown comfortable with seeing the military establishment” –despite its institutionalized sexual harassment and queerphobia– “as a venue in which to promote [social change], pointing the way for the rest of society on matters such as race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Bacevich 2013, 25).

All this points to how trans inclusion –and visibility– inevitably find political support when aligned with the ambitions of imperialism, militarism, and global capitalism. Mere inclusion comprises what numerous scholar-activists label “pinkwashing:” a strategy of coopting the concept of LGBT rights “to redeem the tarnished image of [an institution] such as the military, that [is] associated with violence, racism, and colonialism” (Spade 2015, 141-142). In the U.S. context, “rights” are narrowly defined by participation in white supremacist, patriarchal, and settler-colonial state institutions (Melamed 2011; Reddy 2011; Spade 2015). Consequently, trans visibility and representation do not necessarily create more equitable conditions (Conrad 2014; Gray 2013). Increased representation and inclusion of trans people have, however, proven quite profitable, especially for the corporations that make up the MIC (Chasin 2001; David 2017; Nair 2013).

These dynamics suggest that criticism of the “trans military ban” may have had more to do with political and economic forces and the general expendability of trans people than with a commitment to the trans community’s legal rights. In this article, I examine the Trump administration’s “trans military ban” through the lenses of cultural studies and sociology of culture. I use the theories of “pinkwashing” and “interest convergence” to argue that prominent media responses to the “ban” promoted an agenda of global militarism and U.S. hegemony by coopting pro-LGBT sentiment. I highlight the relatively bipartisan consensus of absorbing expendable LGBT bodies into projects of global militarism and capitalist accumulation through participation in the MIC. In short, the present study contributes analysis of how *and why* trans rights advocates and actors in the MIC deployed discourses of pinkwashing in response to the Trump administration’s “trans military ban.”

To make these arguments, I organize this article into four sections. The first contextualizes LGBT military service in the historical context of U.S. imperial decline to suggest that recruitment margins –not antitransphobia– motivated military officials to criticize the “ban.” The second explores the work of activist-director Fiona Dawson to demonstrate how she pinkwashed militarism. I argue she did so by centering the narratives of idyllic, patriotic trans soldiers and framing war as liberatory for trans people. The third section outlines how military recruitment of trans soldiers can serve projects of capital accumulation. In the fourth, I conclude by suggesting pinkwashing absolves the military-industrial complex of its role in creating the conditions that lead many in the LGBT community to enlist in the first place: poverty, organized abandonment, and anti-LGBT violence.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars of gender and sexuality have refined pinkwashing as an analytical concept in the context of marriage equality legislation, settler colonialism, and militarism (Puar 2017a; Puar 2017b; Spade 2015; Spade and Willse 2014). That said, analyses of pinkwashing often have theoretical blind spots because they are not placed in the proper sociohistorical context (Ritchie 2015). For example, while “the advancement of GLBTQ rights is necessarily and inextricably connected to the context of a republic at war” according to queer of color theorist Chandan Reddy (2011, 11), there are relatively few studies that contextualize pinkwashing in terms of U.S. imperial decline, increasing militarism, and global capitalism. Those that do often highlight the U.S. Armed Forces’

ambivalence towards gender and sexuality minorities (Belkin 2012; Lehring 2003), but generally do not question the significance of military service in LGBT rights advocacy in the first place (Montegary 2015).

Instead, I follow the suggestion of scholars in critical military studies to maintain a “skeptical curiosity” about the actions of the Armed Forces in order to “question conventional assumptions,” “cultivate new areas for investigation,” and “generate more reliable explanations and fuller accountings” of the U.S. Armed Forces’ actions (Enloe 2015, 5). I am indebted to sociologist Emmanuel David’s notion of “transgender archipelagos” (2018) to conceptualize the multiple, competing forces that shape transgender politics. Likewise, I have relied on the work of scholar Viviane Namaste (2005) to think about how transgender rights discourses are yoked to projects of global capitalism and imperialism.

With this in mind, I argue that pinkwashing assures a bipartisan audience of the indispensability of war. Trans soldiers act as, in the words of Zillah Eisenstein, “sexual decoys” to draw attention away from the brutalities and monumental failures of foreign war as a mechanism for queer and feminist liberation (Eisenstein 2004; Eisenstein 2008). Liberals relish the “progress” of LGBT rights (Spade and Willse 2014) while conservatives rest easy as law enforcement and the Armed Forces remain sacrosanct in the mind of the U.S. American public (Morin *et al.* 2017). By mimicking the work of war propagandists who argue “war restore[s] traditional values and promising those who [want] reform that war mean[s] opportunity for a better life” (Brewer 2011, 278), pinkwashing is key to securing “hegemony” or consensual domination to borrow from Marxist philosopher

Antonio Gramsci (1971). Consequently, I frame pinkwashing as not only promotional labor for U.S. empire but also as a bipartisan propaganda strategy to recuperate the tarnished image of state violence.

Discourse Analysis and Selection of Cultural Texts

In this article, I engage discourse analysis to analyze director Fiona Dawson's feature-length documentary *TransMilitary* (2018) and her 13-minute *New York Times* (NYT) op-doc *Transgender, At War and In Love* (2015). I also touch on four briefs from four of the largest LGBT advocacy organizations in the United States –the Palm Center, Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, and Lambda Legal– in response to the “ban.” That said, I focus the vast majority of my analysis on Dawson's films.

In the tradition of poststructuralist queer theory, I analyze Dawson's works and LGBT organizations' legal briefings as cultural texts through “discourse analysis.” This method allows me to consider “how language, both spoken and written, enacts social and cultural perspectives and identities” (Gee 2017, *x*). As a result, I can uncover the social and cultural assumptions that led activists like Dawson to uncritically support transgender military service.

Dawson's op-doc (2015) details “the challenges of a transgender military couple, who are banned from serving openly:” Logan Ireland, a Senior Airman in the U.S. Air Force, and Laila Villanueva, a U.S. Army Healthcare Management Administration Specialist. After opening with an informal face-to-face introduction to a muscular and mustachioed Ireland, Dawson's op-doc introduces a montage of Ireland lacing up his Army

Combat Uniform and audio of small talk with his fiancée, Villanueva, about wedding planning. Dawson's documentary *TransMilitary* builds on Ireland and Villanueva's narrative to include the stories of two other transgender soldiers –El Cook and Jennifer Peace – and their families. With other transgender veterans and active duty soldiers, the four soldiers, form a group called SPARTA (*Service Members, Partners, Allies for Respect and Tolerance for All*) to advocate for their civil right to serve openly in the military.

I analyze Dawson's works for a number of reasons. First, news media have an "agenda-setting" power to frame the consumption of current events (Hall *et al.* 2013, 64-65). Second, Dawson's op-doc is featured on the *New York Times* (NYT), which has the largest circulation of any U.S. newspaper. Its popularity, consequently, offers a wide platform of viewership. Third, the NYT shares its op-docs on its social media platforms with subscribers and non-subscribers alike, circulating its material to a pool of millions of viewers. Finally, Dawson's work is resolutely political, and she has spoken about her work and her activism for transgender military service on major news networks including MSNBC, DemocracyNow!, and Al Jazeera.

While the films and briefs are tightly curated texts that have undergone rounds of edits, their prominence in national debates over transgender service in the military makes them worthy of scholarly attention. An analysis of Dawson's works and the texts of LGBT rights organizations offer an intervention to understand how prominent figures in the mainstream LGBT movement framed –or rather, pinkwashed– the "trans military ban."

Imperial Decline and Transgender Recruits

To understand the relatively bipartisan criticism of the Trump administration's "trans military ban," I contextualize military recruitment of transgender individuals amid U.S. imperial decline. As the Golden Era of U.S. capitalism (1938-1970) came to an end, the United States' status as an economic superpower waned, while its exercise of military power abroad waxed. The global policeman increasingly relied on the cudgel of military force to generate the conditions for capitalist accumulation (Arrighi 2010; Johnson 2005; Robinson 2014). To the chagrin of officials, the 1973 draft repeal and concomitant decline in prestige of the citizen-soldier (Bacevich 2013) undermined a necessary prerequisite to exercising this military power: recruitment. The number of active duty personnel began a precipitous drop in the 1990s, plateauing from 2000 through the 2010s (Reynolds and Shendruk 2018). This drop signaled a crisis for hawks and officials, who still require a steady flow of docile bodies to operate sophisticated military gadgetry, drones, tanks, and so-called "smart bombs."

Moves were taken to retain enlistees, a trend particularly pronounced for members of the LGBT community. To make up for the recruitment slump, the second Bush administration loosened recruitment standards and increased use of "moral waivers" to allow individuals with racist tattoos, past criminal convictions, histories of involvement in White power movements and gangs, and poor physical health to enlist (Kennard 2015, 74-82). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the Pentagon issued a "stop loss order" to all branches of the Armed Forces, which "suspended discharges—including those of service members who disclose their homosexuality" (Lehring 2003, 110-112). The Obama

administration's 2010 *Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act* and its 2016 lifting the military's ban on transgender soldiers, too, were part of this "numbers game:" members of the LGBT community "would get their rights: but only because it was too costly to keep them out" (Kennard 2015, 187). Despite these moves, troop enlistment trends remained low through 2018 (Philipps 2018).

In a context of declining recruitment and active duty personnel, increased "inclusion" of gender and sexual minorities in the military is logical as is the backlash against the "trans military ban" from actors across the political spectrum. Indeed, Secretary of Defense Secretary of Defense Ash Carter –representing the Department of Defense– released a statement proclaiming as much:

The Defense Department and the Military need to avail ourselves of all talent possible in order to remain what we are now: the finest fighting force the world has ever known. Last July, I [Carter] directed the commencement of a study to identify the practical issues related to transgender Americans serving openly. [. . .] I'm announcing today that we're ending the ban on transgender Americans in the United States military (Dawson and Silverman 2018).

For the Defense Department, transgender individuals are merely a previously untapped reserve of potential soldiers and "talent." In that sense, transgender individuals are just like any other recruits: they form a small, but crucial number of bodies that the U.S. Armed Forces requires to project military power globally. Transgender troops, however, are much more expendable than their cisgender peers, given the discrimination, poverty, and violence they face.

With these recruitment dynamics in mind, the backlash against the "trans military ban" suggests the presence of unsurmised dynamics of "interest convergence" (Bell 1980).

For legal scholar Derrick Bell, “interest convergence” is a dynamic where the interests of a minority group will be met only if they converge with the interests of the majority. In the case of racial desegregation beginning in the 1950s, “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell 1980, 523). Similarly, transgender military service satisfies mainstream LGBT groups (“inclusion”), the U.S. Armed Forces (more exploitable bodies), and global capital (continuous growth at any cost) at the same time as it offers the mantle of progressive politics in “branding imperial, racist state violence as somehow progressive” (Spade and Willse 2014, 9). For instance, soon after Trump announced the “ban,” 56 retired military officials penned an open letter denouncing it (Levin 2017). This criticism, it must be noted, is not necessarily antitransphobic in nature. Given the structural homophobia and transphobia of the armed forces and weak public support for trans recruits (Belkin 2012; Flores *et al.* 2018; Lehring 2003; Spade 2015), recruitment and retention –not progressive pro-LGBT attitudes– likely motivated these officials.

Indeed, the costs of losing an estimated 15,500 transgender troops² could be catastrophic (James *et al.* 2016; Parrish 2017). The prospect of replacing these soldiers signals not only a fiscal disaster, but also a logistical nightmare for recruiting, training, retaining, and organizing replacements. Logistical concerns have historically been central

² I note there is a general lack of data on transgender U.S. military personnel. I use the generally accepted estimate of 15,500 here, though I acknowledge other estimates range from 1,320 to 6,630 (Schaefer *et al.* 2016) to about 8,800 (Gates and Herman 2014).

in driving institutional change in the U.S. Armed Forces as its history of desegregation demonstrates (Dudziak 2011).³

While mainstream LGBT organizations have treated the “ban” as a civil rights issue, active-duty military officials have not. In the words of General Mark A. Milley: “my job is readiness. It’s not about equal opportunity or equality. My job is readiness” (Dawson and Silverman 2018). In short, the laser-focus on “readiness” betrays the motivations of military officials who criticized the “trans ban:” it was a desire to maintain U.S. military supremacy that drove officials to critique the “trans military ban.” As an alternative to this brand of equality politics, which is easily susceptible to cooptation, scholars, advocates, and activists ought to adopt a needs-based “ethics of care,” not predicated on state-intervention or state surveillance (Fraser 1989; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2006; Spade 2015; Walia 2013). I explore this issue further in the conclusion.

Idyllic Trans Soldiers and Military Messianism

Like falling recruitment margins, a series of institutional changes to military policy in the early 1990s helped to rebrand the U.S. Armed Forces as a force for humanitarianism and social change. After the Soviet Union’s dissolution and victory in the Gulf War in 1991, the United States Armed Forces (USAF) had no enemy that justified continued militarism. In response, the USAF adopted more technologically sophisticated weaponry and hesitantly subscribed to the notion of “humanitarian interventionism:” deploying

³ As legal scholar Mary Dudziak (2011) points out, units desegregated at the behest of necessity, not antiracism. When coordinating segregated units proved too difficult during the Korean War, officials opted for the path of least logistical resistance: desegregation.

military might for purportedly “humanitarian” ends (Bacevich 2002; Bacevich 2013; Parenti 2007). Armed conflict gained a new “aesthetic respectability” that –along with changes in policy toward gender and sexuality minorities– rebranded the military as an engine for social change, while maintaining the MIC’s production at full tilt (Bacevich 2013, 22).⁴

Like mainstream LGBT advocacy groups (Spade 2015; Spade and Willse 2014), Dawson integrates this “aesthetic respectability” of war by (1) centering the narratives of idyllic, patriotic trans soldiers and (2) framing war as liberatory for trans people. Both *TransMilitary* (2018) and its op-doc predecessor paint a picture of Ireland and Villanueva as an interracial boy-and-girl-next-door couple, demonstrating the ways that Villanueva (Hawai’ian) and Ireland (White) obey the dictates of heteronormative gender embodiment and family structure. Such a portrait relies on pro-LGBT shibboleths of the “strength” and “equality” of gender and sexual minorities: the brave, strong transgender soldiers equal to their cisgender peers. With tears in her eyes, Villanueva says, “there shouldn’t be any problem for us to serve openly” because “we live our life” and “get married just like anybody else” (Dawson 2015). Both also fulfill the trope of “strong” soldiers in gender-inflected ways: Ireland’s burly physique complements Villanueva’s emotional fortitude away from her fiancé.

⁴ Clinton’s 1994 DADT policy marked a dramatic step away from overt exclusion and towards provisional inclusion of gender and sexuality minorities into projects of militarism. A number of policy changes after DADT reiterate this trend: the 1996 *U.S. v. Virginia* Supreme Court case allowing women to attend military academies, the 2010 *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act*, former secretary of Defense Leon Panetta’s 2013 decision to lift the ban on women serving in combat (Roulo 2013), and the 2016 end to the military’s ban on transgender soldiers, to name a few.

Indeed, Ireland and Villanueva's reception implies that ideal LGBT soldiers still must present as heteronormative and subscribe to neoliberal ideology. Alongside their heteronormative relationship, the couple emphasizes their status as proper citizens because, in Villanueva's words, "we do our jobs" (Dawson 2015). The couple largely avoids "gender trouble" at work (Schilt 2011) by striking a balance between openness and surreptitiousness. For instance, while Ireland and Villanueva open up to their superiors about their gender identities, the couple largely goes stealth as cisgender: friends of Villanueva do not know she is transgender and Ireland's gender identity is "very much need to know" (Dawson 2015). Additionally, the couple's conformity to hegemonic gender embodiment –both Ireland's musculature and mustache, and Villanueva's understated makeup– place them within the "charmed circle" of sexual minorities (Rubin 2007). 'Foreign' (transgender and interracial) but familiar (heteronormative), the couple's relationship is easily digestible by non-queer audiences.

Intimate and idyllic portraits of soldiers –like those of Ireland and Villanueva– have roots in wartime propaganda meant to garner support for U.S. militarism. Historian Susan Brewer traces initial uses of "human-interest stories" to late the 19th and early 20th century, a key moment in the U.S. imperial turn towards planetary domination. War propagandists diverted attention away from thorny discussions of expansionism and death by celebrating the figure of the patriotic citizen-soldier. Since the McKinley administration, propagandists have assured civilians and soldiers of a swift victory partly by lionizing the White heterosexual masculinity of soldiers (Brewer 2011, 10, 32-37). By proffering idealized images of soldiers, officials diverted attention away from the troubling realities of war as

well as the identities of male soldiers themselves: whether “tragic victims of post-traumatic stress” or “homophobic torturers” (Ward 2015, 158).

Indeed, as political scientist Aaron Belkin argues, “idealized minority testimonials of U.S. warriors” play “an important role in making military masculinity as well as empire seem unproblematic and contradiction free” (Belkin 2012, 69). The portrayal of Logan Ireland offers one such example. After Ireland discloses his transgender identity to his superiors, they assure Ireland “we have your back 150%” (Dawson 2015). They also advise him he can now abide by “male dress appearance standards.” Ireland happily recounts: “now I’m going by male dress appearance standards, too, so I don’t have to grow my hair out, and I can have a mustache.” By celebrating Ireland’s ability to sport a mustache, for instance, Dawson pinkwashes conservative efforts to assimilate *masculine* transgender bodies into the *masculine* USAF. Indeed, the changes in protocol purportedly signaling an increased tolerance of transgender recruits, however, are limited to Ireland’s embodiment as a man. Villanueva’s embodiment as a woman is not offered the same degree of tolerance.

To be sure, permitting Ireland to follow male dress standards does signal an improvement in his life. However, in comparison to the military’s treatment of Laila Villanueva and Jenn Peace, this moment of flexibility in typically strict military protocol suggests that the military tolerates and integrates gender minorities along the line of masculinity. Both Ireland and Villanueva argue that military spaces do not afford the same liberatory potential to women as they do to men. A transgender man, Ireland is an “outsider-within” (Collins 2004); he “negotiate[s] being treated as not just *different from* women but *better than* women” (Schilt 2011, 57, emphasis original). In one instance,

Ireland states that Villanueva's superiors "do not support her" because they refuse to acknowledge her gender or use her proper pronouns. Their dismissive attitude throws into sharp relief the (trans)misogyny that undergirds the military establishment. In the "manly environment" of the military (Dawson 2015), military officials have long worked to control women so as to maintain recruitment flows and fortify retention of *male* personnel (Enloe 1983). Whereas trans men like Ireland appear to be more readily integrated, trans women face misogyny, cissexism, and, in the case of Villanueva, racism. The gendered treatment of trans soldiers highlights how (trans)misogyny partially integrates trans men into the USAF without challenging structural gender inequality or unequal gender relations in the USAF overall (Schilt 2011, 131).

As the cases of Ireland and Villanueva suggest, ambivalence defines the "inclusion" of gender and sexuality minorities in the armed forces. While military officials regulated and monitored homosexuality as early as the 1910s (Canaday 2011), these same military officials also looked the other way during wartime as the cases of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War demonstrate (Kennard 2015; Lehring 2003). For transgender individuals, the outright ban on service was lifted in 2016, only to be reinstated in 2018. At the same time, historian Michael Bronski argues "many of the most important changes for LGBT people in the past five hundred years have been a result of war" (Bronski 2012, *xix*). These changes reach beyond the enticing career and economic benefits of military service. For instance, U.S. Cold War-era research brought about sea changes in gender ideology and medical practice that would enrich the lives of some LGBT individuals: i.e. gender-affirming surgeries (the first of which was performed on former

soldier, Christine Jorgensen), rudimentary silicone breast implants, penis implants, and synthetic testosterone and estrogen (Bronski 2012; Preciado 2013; Reddy 2011). In short, militarism and progress in LGBT rights are deeply entangled: “technologies of gender and technologies of war” are “the same business” (Preciado 2013, 224).

Ignoring this checkered history, Dawson’s op-doc also pinkwashes armed conflict by representing war zones as idyllic spaces for gender embodiment. In a particularly revealing segment, Ireland explains what he “like[s] about this deployment:”

I can be my authentic self. I’m just another guy, whereas back home I’m still seen as female, and I go by female regs [regulations] and standards. *Here, in Afghanistan, a war zone, it’s like a vacation to me because I can be myself in such an austere environment*” (Dawson 2015, emphasis added).

Ireland affirms conceptualizations of military spaces as queer (Lehring 2003; Ward 2015). He frames Afghanistan as a refuge from the transphobia he experiences “back home” where his peers do not acknowledge his gender identity. The Afghan war zone, in other words, distinguishes itself from civilian life because he imagines it to lack the coercive power of normative gender. His “vacation” in Afghanistan permits him to “be [his] authentic self,” living as “just another guy:” a sentiment typical among trans men in professional work environments (Schilt 2011). Trading in the Orientalist repertoire of exoticism (Said 1979), Ireland stages Afghanistan as an “austere environment:” a military term referring to an area marked by significant environmental hazards that may be dangerous for individuals if medical care is lacking. Afghanistan, for Ireland, becomes a *tabula rasa* upon which he inscribes an absence of transphobia. Gender embodiment, therefore, is only possible in the “imaginative geography” of the Afghan war zone (Gregory 1995; Said 1979). “Difference”

(an absence of transphobia) is folded into “distance” (“a war zone” far from Ireland’s “home”), as ff geographer Derek Gregory would say (1995).

To be sure, Dawson was far from alone in prioritizing (para)military institutions as the solution to social inequalities and anti-LGBT violence (Byrne 2019). City officials in Austin, Houston, Cincinnati, and Aurora offered an alternative path to employment for rejected transgender recruits as police officers in their cities: where trans soldiers would join soldiers who patrol U.S. cities as police officers (Astor 2018; Balko 2014; Wong 2017). The responses of these officials universalize enlistment in the military or service in law enforcement as the sole pathway to queer and trans liberation. Not incidentally, the pervasive harassment and violence of law enforcement and the USAF pose two of the greatest threats to the LGBT community (Ritchie 2017; Spade 2015). This military-as-savior and police-as-savior framing engages in pinkwashing discourses that paper over police violence against LGBT people as well as people of color, immigrants, and sex workers who make up a vital component of the variegated LGBT community.

The inclusion of LGBT soldiers reframes global militarism as a pro-LGBT victory, even as enlistment magnifies the violence faced by LGBT individuals caught in the crosshairs of the U.S. war machine. Military enlistment does little to change the fact that LGBT individuals still face obstacles of discrimination on a number of fronts in civilian society: the job market, housing, healthcare coverage, and government bureaucracy (Ritchie 2017; Spade 2015). While mainstream LGBT advocates argue for transgender people’s participation in the USAF, it remains unclear how military enlistment could ever

address the confluence of socioeconomic forces that shorten the lives of trans and queer people.

Trans Soldiers and Capitalist Accumulation in the Military-Industrial Complex

It is also important to note that none of the soldiers in either of Dawson's films address what drew them to the U.S. Armed Forces. For that matter, few responses to the ban *at all* addressed the reasons why transgender individuals enlist in the first place (Byrne 2019). Briefings from some of the largest LGBT organizations in the U.S. –GLAAD (2017), Human Rights Campaign (2017), Lambda Legal (2017), and the Palm Center (2017)– provide a case in point: none breached the subject. In doing so, they bypassed a discussion of the structural transphobia that disproportionately draws trans individuals into the USAF.

A number of dynamics help to explain why transgender individuals are, shockingly, twice as likely to serve in the military as their cisgender peers (Harrison-Quintana and Herman 2013; James *et al.* 2016). Trans people suffer high rates of unemployment, impoverishment, and homelessness brought on by a lack of legal protection, transphobia, capitalism's organized abandonment, and "administrative violence" (Robinson 2017; Spade 2015). For trans people of color, these issues are, of course, compounded by White supremacy. Such a precarious socioeconomic position often relegates trans individuals to low-paying jobs or illegalized sex work, aggravating their chances of entry into the criminal justice system (Manning 2015; Ritchie 2017; Robinson 2017; Spade 2015; Stanley and Smith 2015). At the behest of economic necessity and avoiding imprisonment,

far too many transgender individuals are coerced into enlisting in the U.S. Armed Forces: the largest employer of trans people in the United States (Dawson and Silverman 2018; Manning 2015).⁵

In the crosshairs of carceral regimes and the military-industrial complex, far too many transgender individuals are given a choice between probable imprisonment (through illegalized work and poverty) or military service (Manning 2015; Robinson 2017; Spade 2015; Stanley and Smith 2015). While problematic for the trans community, enlistment and imprisonment are a boon for capital because, like prisons, military conflicts are markets. Geographers Deborah Cowen and Amy Siciliano have detailed how “incredibly productive and profitable” it is to cycle “redundant men through security industries and institutions” (Cowen and Siciliano 2011, 1533). Enlisting trans men makes these “redundant” men “productive” to capital over the minimum four years of active duty, while painting the U.S. Armed Forces as somehow progressive.

Therefore, while increased tolerance of transgender male soldiers *under the rubric of pinkwashing* may be a small victory for some trans people, this development hides the ways the MIC culls, dispossesses, and exploits trans bodies to reproduce a relation of domination. The USAF recruits from criminalized populations and low-income communities, where steady employment, free healthcare, and job training are minimal (Cowen and Siciliano 2011; Kennard 2015). This inherently extractive process of culling

⁵ For instance, the twinned issues of economic deprivation and institutional hypermasculinity drove whistleblower Chelsea Manning to enlist (Manning 2015). On the one hand, Manning sought a college degree, but as a low-income gay man (as she identified at the time) confronting a desiccated job market, she had few options besides the army. On the other, Manning enlisted because she suspected “a career in the military would get rid of [her gender dysphoria]” by “placing [herself] in situations where [being transgender] would be impossible” (Reeve 2013).

bodies from communities into prisons and the Armed Forces comprises a fundamental tenet of neoliberal economics: “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2005). The dispossession of the trans community enables the accumulation of capital through enforced activity (military service) and enforced inactivity (incarceration) (Cowen and Siciliano 2011; Gilmore 2017). In this way, “transgender rights cannot be separated from the project[s] of global capitalism” and imperialism (Namaste 2005,113).

In criticizing the “ban,” advocates like Dawson often confined LGBT equality to the issue of military enlistment, bypassing thorny discussions of how the MIC affects LGBT individuals *outside* the USAF. Most critically, discourses of pinkwashing generally fail to address the fact that ballooning military budgets facilitate the dismantling of arguably the most critical civilian institution to the LGBT community’s survival: welfare services. After World War II, Pentagon- and Department of Defense-led advocacy spared the MIC welfare programs from the chopping block, while conservative politicians systematically dismantled *civilian-oriented* New Deal-style programs (Hooks 1991). This activism aimed to channel benefits only to soldiers; indeed, while numerous politicians initially intended the GI Bill to be offered to all civilians, their advocacy stalled in the face of the USAF’S lobbying efforts (Canaday 2011). In the meantime, the Pentagon adopted a New Deal-inspired “military Keynesianism” (Hooks 1991) that channeled New Deal-style benefits towards the Sun Belt (Schulman 1994). Rather than bringing prosperity, these infusions of capital pool geographically, benefitting well-educated in-migrants from the Atlantic seaboard, while impoverishing locals (Markusen *et al.* 1994; Schulman 1994).

In all, the response of Dawson –and other advocates of her ilk– to the “ban” brand the U.S. Armed Forces as uniquely antitransphobic. She collapses the complex issue of structural transphobia onto whether individuals support trans individuals’ *incorporation into the military* or not. For Dawson, one either supports the trans community by advocating enlistment or undermines the transgender community by blocking enlistment. In doing so, she implicitly normalizes war as a fact of life, confirming the postulate of philosopher Walter Benjamin that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (Benjamin 2012, 378). These responses to the Trump administration’s transphobia preempt a genuine discussion of endless wars, yawning defense budgets, and troubling patterns of violence perpetrated by soldiers.

Conclusion

While gender and “sexuality might not explain the “why” [. . .] of imperial power,” they “crucially explain the “how”” (Schueller 2007, 165). In this article, I examine the Trump administration’s “trans military ban” through the lens of Fiona Dawson’s films to demonstrate how prominent criticisms of the “ban” rendered transgender equality coterminous with increased militarism. Consequently, “inclusion” in the U.S. Armed Forces is reframed as an LGBT victory, even as military service renders trans individuals tools and targets of violence, injustice, and capitalist accumulation, each of which “[chips] away at trans existence” (Ahmed 2016, 22). At stake is the fate of the politically fragmented LGBT movement, which has been readily coopted to repaint violent militarism with a

friendlier, more “multicultural” and pro-LGBT face, as this article has sought to demonstrate.

These developments demonstrate the propagandistic value of pinkwashing for the U.S. Armed Forces. It paints the MIC as a progressive institution that provides some LGBT individuals a degree of upward mobility, economic stability, educational opportunities, and social services: precisely the resources they have been starved of by queerphobia and rising military spending in the midst of decades of neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state (Belkin 2012; Hooks 1991; Lehring 2003; Spade 2015). An illusory pro-LGBT façade absolves the MIC of its role in state violence because, as theorist Chandan Reddy correctly points out, “State violence is legitimate only when there is a true equality among the ‘national people’” (2011, 11).

Beyond meeting falling recruitment margins, trans “inclusion” in the military-industrial complex offers a solution to growing activist movements calling for transformative change. Pinkwashing discourses stall the momentum of progressive political activism by offering “inclusion” in the MIC as a conciliatory prize for “liberation.” In doing so, the progressive bent of LGBT activism is redirected toward the USAF and the productive cycles of capitalist accumulation. In the case of LGBT activism, the state tolerates certain sexual minorities so that oppressive systems can ingrain themselves deeper into social formations (Puar 2017a). “Inclusion” in the military channels rage over queerphobia and transphobia into productive processes for power before progressive activism and simmering political rage can create transformative social change. Indeed,

mere equality for trans people –as scholars point out– does not necessarily hail queer liberation (Conrad 2014; Ritchie 2017; Spade 2015).

In times of endless war and massacres of civilians sanitized as “collateral damage,” what can be said about mainstream LGBT rights advocates who prioritize military service in their advocacy? What are scholars, advocates, and activists to do when these groups are coopted into projects of global militarism unparalleled in the history of the world? To address these concerns, I turn to the late poet-scholar, Audre Lorde, who warned “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2007, 110). Lorde’s metaphor offers an apt summary of the pitfalls of attempting to retool militarization as a solution for social ills. For how can the “tools” that built the United States –genocidal military conquest, patriarchal control of sexuality and gender, racial repression, and unencumbered capitalist accumulation– be recycled for gender and queer liberation? In short, they can’t. “Inclusion” will never be sufficient for queer and trans liberation because it is founded on a “rights” framework, defined by participation in white supremacist, patriarchal, settler colonial state institutions (Fraser 1989; Melamed 2011; Reddy 2011; Spade 2015).

Scholars must critically deploy the analytic of pinkwashing so as to uncover the propagandistic value of LGBT identities and avoid resorting to repressive, brutal techniques of imperial violence. Rather than reading the “inclusion” of gender and sexuality minorities as a victory, scholars, activists, and advocates must look beyond military enlistment to find solutions to persistent social problems of yawning inequality, queerphobia, transphobia, and racism. Instead, scholars, activists, and allies must look to

“intersectional activism” (Spade 2013) that tackles queerphobia, transphobia, and misogyny as well as other relations of domination –including those based on class, race, and xenophobia– that oppress women and the LGBT community. “Intersectional activism” does away with identity-based rights frameworks altogether in favor of need-based models of mutual aid, self-determination, and community solidarity (Conrad 2014; Fraser 1989; INCITE Women of Color Against Violence 2006; Namaste 2005; Ritchie 2017; Spade 2013; Spade 2015). In this way, the transgender and queer community will not have to make a “bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988) with the cissexist, patriarchal USAF in order to thrive (Eisenstein 2004; Eisenstein 2008).

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