Demilitarization for Social Justice

Gwyn Kirk

A version of this essay was published in *Feminist Formations*, 30(30), Special issue on feminist teaching for social justice (Winter 2018): 33-44.

Given the current tumultuous political climate many thanks are due to the editor of this special collection for providing a space to share ideas on feminist teaching for social justice. The current administration's callous destruction of already inadequate "safety nets", reckless foreign policy moves, contempt for the natural environment, support for overtly racist and sexist attacks, and the daily circulation of distortions, half-truths, and outright lies all challenge us profoundly. This is not new, especially for indigenous people on this continent, for other communities of color, and those in subjugated nations, but it has become starker, more clear-cut, and increasingly affects many of us with relative privilege. What to think? Where to focus? How to respond to one crisis after another? How to support students trying to find their footing in this maelstrom?

This essay focuses on militarism—a system devoted to traumatizing, displacing, and killing people rather than helping us to thrive. Militarism's central distortion is that organized state violence is essential for providing security. On the contrary, feminists, environmental activists, and indigenous people working for sovereignty and self-determination have shown that militarism creates insecurity for subjugated peoples, for many within dominant nations, and for the planet. Militarism also renders those of us in dominant nations as unwilling participants or complicit in other people's vulnerability and oppression.

I argue that demilitarization is a crucial part of working for social justice. But because militarization is so normalized it is necessary to peel back its many layers before one can think about reversing this process. Conflicts, wars, and preparations for war all tear apart connections among people, and between people and the land that sustains us. Hence, demilitarization includes nurturing and re-making these ties, re-humanizing those who have been defined as enemies, and healing the devastation caused by war and preparations for war. We need many more powerful examples of how people do this, a repertoire of heroic stories that are not war stories.

Teaching Courses on Militarism, War, and Peace

I first taught an upper-level WGS course on gender and militarism at the University of Oregon in spring 2003. As I finalized the syllabus the United States launched an all-out attack against Iraq, triumphantly touted as "Shock and Awe". Public opinion was polarized. Only a month earlier some 35 million people around the globe had taken to the streets to oppose this war before it started. But once the decision to strike was put into force there was huge pressure in this country to support the troops, underscored by President George W. Bush's dictum: "You're either with us or with the terrorists." The students—mostly WGS majors and minors who were familiar with feminist thinking and structural analysis—were confused about where to stand and felt a gut-wrenching combination of anger, fear, responsibility, and powerlessness. As did I.

The course provided a space to analyze and critique militarism as a system much wider than any one war. This can seem overwhelming, but intersectional feminist thinking provides cogent insights that connect militarism, gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation. Although few WGS programs include regular courses on this topic there are many ways to bring it in. An intro course might look at the role of war toys, war movies, video games, military-chic fashions, and

"boot camp" fitness programs in the daily construction of gender. Cultural studies and media studies courses might explore the representation of militarism in popular culture or news reporting, and how these representations shape ideas of heroism, adventure, patriotism, and citizenship. Courses on social movements may include the discourses, strategies, and organizational forms developed by women's peace movements in this country and elsewhere, which often recognize that the "power-over" logic inherent in individual acts of gender-based violence also drives militarism at an international level (see e.g. Alonso 1993; Chedelin and Eliatamby 2011; Cockburn 2007, 2012; Cook and Kirk 1983; de Alwis 2001; Fisher 1999; Swerdlow 1993).

From 2014 to 2017, I taught an intensive January Term course, "Cultures of War and Peace," at St. Mary's College of California, a Catholic liberal arts school. I wanted students to see that the United States is a highly militarized society, bolstered by massive corporate investments in military contracts and political support for high military spending, and to think about what could be gained, in terms of social justice and everyday security, by changing this.

Students came into these classes with a wide range of knowledge and opinions. They had grown up on video games, war movies, mass shootings, and drone strikes. They had heard repeated assertions that war is "a necessary evil" or that "diplomacy doesn't work". Many believed that America (their term) is the "good guy" and strongly identified with the nation ("We went into Iraq..."). Two-thirds were young men, mostly first year students and mostly white. A few were veterans or enrolled in ROTC. Most had family members who had served in the military. Their affection and respect for these relatives made it difficult for many of them to question militarism as an institution.

I provided a lot of information, which I hoped would help students contextualize and evaluate what they already knew. I emphasized the scale of US military spending, for example. This was $611 billion in 2016, more than the next eight countries combined.[1] Over $700 billion is projected for 2019, over half the Federal discretionary budget.[2] Yet we are told money is not available for public schools, Head Start, elder care, Veterans benefits, and many other socially useful programs that have been cut without remorse or apology. In researching Federal budget trade-offs many students were shocked to discover what their cities and counties could have bought with the money they contribute to the military.[3]

Some students felt the course was too negative about this country and war in general. They thought of themselves as realists—mature, pragmatic, and willing to accept "necessary evils". They scorned moves toward demilitarization as idealistic. I asked what ideas and projects "realism" excludes, makes unsayable, or unimaginable? The course materials referenced the vast damage war and militarism cause.[4] What is *realistic* about this? What might be useful about idealism? I wanted students to be able to question government policy and the role of the United States internationally. What does it mean to be American? Is there only one place to stand? How to widen the limited public discourse on these issues? Could this country play a more constructive role internationally? If so, should it do this? I wanted students to see that it is absolutely legitimate to desire something better than the current militarized, unsustainable state of the world.

The college's stated principles of social justice, religious faith, and respect for all persons created the space for a course like this. Even so, it was a hard sell. I discarded many readings I thought these students might dismiss as rhetorical. I tiptoed around feminist concepts like "militarized masculinity" (Enloe 1993). I had to learn how to carry on this intensive

discussion as a white woman older than their grandmas with students I would probably not otherwise teach.

I focus on militarism here, but those who teach about the impacts of globalization or the role of the nation-state face similar challenges. Liberal perspectives do not question the fundamental assumptions and institutions of our society, which is essential for addressing the root causes of injustice. By contrast, seeking access to combat roles or Senate seats, difficult as that may be, is a very limited goal. Further, many students know little about the effects of US policies on people in other nations, or how the United States exercises power worldwide—culturally, economically, politically, and militarily. Some students' sense of patriotism made them highly resistant to thinking about such issues (Hase 2002). A few St. Mary's students dismissed virtually all the course materials as "ridiculous rubbish," "hippy nonsense," or laughably naïve. I asked, "If you find yourself feeling defensive about a reading or what someone says in class, what is being attacked?"

As a group, the students knew much more about war than they did about peace, a concept that seemed hazy and weak. We watched *Facing Fear,* featuring Tim Zaal, a former neo-Nazi skinhead, and Matthew Boger, the gay victim of Zaal's hate-crime attack. Remarkably, these men met again 25 years after that incident. They were challenged to grapple with their feelings and fears about each other, and against the odds, they became friends. I asked students about their own experiences of forgiveness and reconciliation and what it takes to change their hearts and their behavior. We watched *Regret to Inform* by Barbara Sonneborn, who visited Vietnam to learn about other widows' experiences twenty years after her husband was killed there. Vietnamese women were touched by this and thanked her for wanting to know how they'd coped

with the devastation of that war in their own land—a small moment of personal reconciliation between women who had been defined as enemies.

A guest speaker, formerly in the Navy and now a youth worker, explained why and how he became a conscientious objector. Students read about US Army veterans who knelt before indigenous elders at Standing Rock and apologized for US wars against their people. They read about community truth-telling efforts as part of healing from violence and conflict, and about dedicated behind-the-scenes work to hammer out agreements between groups or nations. Following Enloe (2000), I emphasized demilitarization as a process rather than peace as a static condition. Nations may become more, or less militarized, depending on many factors.

Creating Resources for Teaching and Learning

Thanks to Franklin Graham, our first editor, Margo Okazawa-Rey and I were able to include a chapter on women and the military in *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives.* This focuses on militarism as a central institution in this country. It considers how militarism deploys gender and race, and the impact of war and US bases on women overseas; and discusses feminist opposition to militarism and war. Although not all teachers who use the book assign this chapter, the increase in militarization, especially since 9-11, makes it a salient topic for an introductory course.

Another resource is *Living Along the Fenceline,* a low-budget documentary featuring grassroots women leaders from Okinawa (Japan) to Texas and Puerto Rico (Hoshino, Kirk and Lee 2012). Although not considered war zones, these strategic sites are part of a network of roughly 1,000 overseas bases that allow the United States to go to war anytime, anywhere. These women are not four-star generals or White House strategists. Their expertise comes from living

with the effects of militarism on a daily basis. Director Lina Hoshino focused on women's stories. She filmed barbed wire fences around the bases, DANGER-KEEP OUT signs, fighter jets zooming overhead, and the grassy spot in a park where a woman was raped by soldiers and tells us: this is where it happened. Despite different locations, the film shows recurring patterns: gender-based violence, environmental destruction, the impacts of colonization, and the importance of women's organizing and leadership. Our goal was to affirm each woman's work in responding to the US military presence in her backyard, and to show the possibility of a very different kind of security centered on respect for people and the land.

I have helped to organize anti-military fashion shows as a way to discuss militarism in accessible terms (Ahn and Kirk 2009). The Women of Color Resource Center staged the first one at a standing-room-only event in Oakland in 2005 featuring original designs as well as street "camo" and demo wear (Enloe 2007). As models walked the "runway" a narrator read a script describing each outfit.[5] Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe talked about the military origins of khaki. Spoken word artists and musicians added to the event's energy and political analysis. Since then, various groups have put on their own versions of this show. Local artists and designers, thrift-store bargain hunters, and people handy with a needle, glue gun, stapler, or duct tape have made remarkable outfits: Bomb Gown, Military Carbon Footprint, Bikini, Respirator Bra, Fence Dress, War is Not Sexy, People's Budget, Uncle Spam, and more. These shows can be theatrical events as in Oakland and at the University of Oregon, or pared down as part of a talk or workshop. Much of the excitement is in designing original outfits and scripts that encapsulate the stories people want to tell.

Another community project was an event at the Comfort Women memorial in San Francisco. This memorial, located in a public park, commemorates some 400,000 young women

forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army from 1931 to 1945 (McGrane 2017).[6] For International Women's Day 2018 members of local groups created altars representing other examples of systemic violence against women, in addition to the plight of WWII comfort women, and celebrating resistance to it:

- Missing and murdered indigenous women,
- Women victims of war and drone strikes,
- Migrant women crossing the US-Mexico border,
- Women impacted by US military bases in Asia,
- Violence against Palestinian women living under Israeli occupation, and
- Violence against trans women in this country.

Participants talked about the items they chose to place on their altars as a way to explain each issue and to recognize the work of organizations that oppose these blatant violations of women's human rights.[7] Sharing these harrowing stories was a moving way to connect struggles across lines of race, ethnicity, and national origin—an opportunity for learning, networking, and affirming shared beliefs about social justice and human integrity.

Contexts and Frameworks

In my experience, teaching for social justice requires focus and patience. It takes work to go against the grain. It may carry unacceptable personal and professional risks, especially for those responsible for children and other family members. As well as personal conviction, feminist scholars and teachers also need contexts that sustain us in this work. I am grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from department chairs, colleagues, and students over the years. Also, I have benefitted enormously from working with Women for Genuine Security, a

small but vibrant political community that is part of the International Women's Network Against Militarism (Cachola et al. 2010).[8]

As teachers concerned with social justice we are up against the teachings of the corporate media, Right-wing talk shows, the stereotypes circulating in news reports and popular culture, and the echo chamber of social media. An iconic figure like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been reduced to a "dreamer" by the news networks, while his hard-hitting speech linking "the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism" is far less well known (King 1967). We are up against endless distractions, shorter attention spans, the price of tuition and textbooks, and other economic pressures students face. We are up against everyday psychological explanations that see inequality and injustice in terms of low-self esteem, poor identity development, learned helplessness, or a few "bad apples" that spoil the barrel. We juggle these considerations as we construct our courses, create assignments, and help students to absorb class materials, including structural analyses that explain these systems of oppression.[9]

As well as identifying complexities and contradictions, intersectional feminist theorizing reminds us that academia was not set up to promote social justice, despite the development of fields like ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, and queer studies that embrace this goal. As NWSA members know, these programs were created as a result of strong social movements and student demands. Determined faculty members generated the intellectual rationale for them. They negotiated with university administrators, got curriculum committees to approve courses, made connections across academic departments, and so on. In turn, they have needed Deans willing to validate such programs and direct resources to them.

In the past twenty years the political climate for WGS on campuses and in the wider society has become more challenging as misogynist, racist viewpoints have gained ground

through official rhetoric, legislation, policy, and the narrowing of public discourse. Also, academic institutions have become increasingly beholden to corporate funding and values. Budget cuts, department mergers, and the fact that two-thirds of faculty are employed on part-time or temporary contracts these days all affect the organization and viability of interdisciplinary programs like women's and gender studies. Moreover, charges of "bias" and attacks on academic freedom have made many teachers' lives more difficult, in some cases seriously affecting their physical and mental health.

The Political Nature of Education

These turbulent times make the political nature of education explicit. Our work may be written off as ideological, unscholarly, or politically motivated. It is crucial that we organize collectively on campuses and in communities to support teaching for social justice, and that we are part of strong, vocal professional organizations that also do this. We must support academics in marginal positions and those whose work is threatened by conservative voices and organizations on and off campus. We should help support feminist activist writers who have contributed to scholarship, teaching, and course materials over the years without regular remuneration for this. We should urge other professional associations to do the same.

I believe our job as feminist scholars and teachers is to think big, to help provide spaces where students and community members can confront current challenges, and where they are affirmed as people who care about social justice, not based on guilt or pity, but as part of a "common context of struggle". [10] Ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, and queer studies programs have all contributed to such understandings and communities of praxis. A silver lining in this wild time is that even as some political spaces are being closed down, new social

movements are opening up others.

The strong tradition of organizing for social justice in this country needs to be much better known, as well as the many efforts currently underway. They provide lessons, models, and inspiration. We cannot afford despair or to nurture despair in others. We must continue to work for and hold out the possibility of progressive change even as past gains are being attacked and unraveled. In this regard the 2018 NWSA conference theme, *Just Imagine, Imagining Justice*, is well chosen. Also planned for October 2018, a Women's March on the Pentagon seeks to refocus national attention on the immense costs of militarism at home and abroad, and the vital importance of redefining security.[11]

Working for social justice means taking on the world as it is currently constructed. We need all our passion, creativity, skills, life experience, and the conviction that things can and must be organized differently, based on justice and love.

How does your work contribute to such a vision? Who and what inspire you to do it? Who are your allies and accomplices? How do you cope with the challenges you face? What new tools and understandings do we need to create, as feminist scholars and teachers, to help us move forward?

Notes

1. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute: www.sipri.org

2. See https://www.nationalpriorities.org/analysis/2018/trumps-fy2019-budget-request-has-massive-cuts-nearly-everything-military/

3. National Priorities Project tradeoffs: http://nationalpriorities.org/budget-basics/federal-budget-101/spending/

4. Watson Institute, Brown University. *The Costs of War*: http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/

5. Sample scripts and outfits are at

http://www.genuinesecurity.org/projects/fashionshow/fashionshow.html

6. Comfort Women Justice Coalition: http://remembercomfortwomen.org

7. International Women's Day event 2018, Comfort Women memorial, San Francisco:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Paxss7h8mnE&feature=youtu.be

8. See www.genuinesecurity.org; http://iwnam.org/

9. For a classroom exercise that helps students understand structural inequalities see Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, *Star Power: Experiencing a stratified society*.

http://www.sjsu.edu/people/carol.mukhopadhyay/race/Starpower-Activity-2014.pdf

10. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003).

11. See https://www.marchonpentagon.com/about-march

References

Ahn, Christine, and Gwyn Kirk. 2009. "Fashioning Resistance to Militarism," *Foreign Policy in Focus,* March 10. http://www.fpif.org/articles/fashioning_resistance_to_militarism

Alonso, Harriet Hyman. 1993. *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Cachola, Ellen Rae, Gwyn Kirk, Lisa Natividad and Maria Reinat-Pumarejo. 2010. "Women Working across Borders for Peace and Genuine Security", *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 22:2 (164-170).

Chedelin, Sandra I. and Maneshka Eliatamby (eds.) 2011. *Women Waging War and Peace:*

International perspectives of women's roles in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. New York: Continuum.

Cockburn, Cynthia. 2007. *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*. London: Zed Books.

Cockburn, Cynthia. 2012. *Anti-militarism: Political and Gender Dynamics of Peace Movements*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Cook, Alice, and Gwyn Kirk. 1983. *Greenham Women Everywhere: Dreams, Ideas and Actions from the Women's Peace Movement.* London: Pluto Press/ Boston: South End Press.

De Alwis, Malathi. 2001. "Ambivalent Maternalisms: Cursing as Public Protest in Sri Lanka." In *The Aftermath: Women in Post-war Reconstruction*, edited by Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredeth Turshen, London and New York: Zed Books.

Enloe, Cynthia. 1993. *The Morning After: Sexual politics at the end of the Cold War*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000. *Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women's lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2007. *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists make the link*. Rowman and Littlefield. ch. 7.

Fisher, Jo. 1999. *Mothers of the Disappeared*. Boston: South End Press.

Hase, Michiko. 2002. "Student Resistance and Nationalism in the Classroom." In *Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms: Pedagogies of identity and difference,* edited by Susan Sánchez-Casal and Amie MacDonald. New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Hoshino, Lina, Gwyn Kirk, and Deborah Lee. 2012. *Living Along the Fenceline***.**

DVD for classroom and community use available from Third World Newsreel: http://www.twn.org/catalog/pages/cpage.aspx?rec=1437&card=price

King, Martin Luther. 1967. *Beyond Vietnam: A time to break silence*. April 4 address at Riverside Church, New York. Text and audio available at: http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2564.htm

McGrane, Sally. 2017. "An Important Statue for Comfort Women in San Francisco," *The New Yorker*, October 12. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-important-statue-for-comfort-women-in-san-francisco

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Swerdlow, Amy. 1993. *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional motherhood and radical politics in the 1960s.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Films

1000 Women and a Dream (dir. Gabriela Neuhaus and Angelo Scudeletti, 2005) shows how the idea to nominate 1000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize developed into a global project and features some of the nominees. http://www.1000peacewomen.org/en/publications/books-and-movies-32.html

Beyond Recognition (dir. Michelle Grace Steinberg, 2015) features Native American women who have established the first women-led urban indigenous land trust in order to preserve land and culture in a society bent on erasing them. http://www.beyondrecognitionfilm.com

Facing Fear (dir. Jason Cohen, 2013) features a former neo-Nazi skinhead and the gay victim of his hate-crime attack who meet by chance 25 years after that incident. They are challenged to grapple with their beliefs and fears, eventually leading to their collaboration and friendship. http://www.facingfearmovie.com

Ground Operations: Battlefields to Farmfields (dir. Dulanie Ellis, 2013) features combat veterans who are rebuilding their lives as organic farmers and ranchers and revitalizing their communities with access to local, affordable, healthy food. http://groundoperations.net

Pray the Devil Back to Hell (Gini Reticker and Abigail Disney, 2008) features Liberian women's courageous and creative nonviolent actions—across lines of religion, ethnicity, and class—to bring an end to their nation's civil war. http://praythedevilbacktohell.com/

Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people (dir. Sut Jhally, 2006) features negative images of Arabs in film based on the work of media analyst Jack Shaheen. https://vimeo.com/56687715

Regret to Inform (dir. Barbara Sonneborn, 2000). Twenty years after the death of her husband in Vietnam in 1968, Barbara Sonneborn went in search of the experiences of Vietnamese and US war widows. http://www.pbs.org/pov/regrettoinform/#.URlc244gIfc

The Invisible War (dir. Kirby Dick, 2012) A documentary about sexual violence in the US military. http://invisiblewarmovie.com/

The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (dir. Connie Field, 1987). The overseas deployment of men during World War II opened up job opportunities in war-related industries for US women. In this documentary, five women talk about their experiences. Plus archival newsreels, posters, ads, and music from the period: www.clarityfilms.org/rosie/

Women, War, and Peace (PBS, 2011) A 5-part series featuring women in conflict zones from Bosnia to Afghanistan and Colombia to Liberia.

https://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/