

Article

MATERNAL SURVEILLANCE: DISRUPTING THE RHETORIC OF WAR

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Abstract

Entwining history with clinical process, this paper investigates the gendering of war, and of war resistance. Cultural rhetoric of war relies on constructing an eroticized fusion between heroic performance and civilian desire. This fusion occludes real perception of the war zone. War resistance must break up this erotic fusion, and restore absent images of combat. Gendered protests are necessary to achieve this. This process is traced through war reportage, protest activity, and a clinical study of a "war hero" who recounts an atrocity. Erotic fusion ignites in the analytic dyad, and is broken up by the appearance of an omniscient maternal specter.

Keywords

war; hero; atrocity; soldier; counter-transference

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Peter has an unquestioned identity as a war hero. Now, in his 60s, he stands naked before his mirror. He gazes at his battle scars. Wrinkles, grey hair, withered muscles disappear. Each morning, in the mirror, a golden warrior awakens to look upon himself. And then, a good officer moves out among men. A year after arriving in Vietnam, he ordered the firebombing of a village. His orders set mothers and children and infants on fire. While he watched. While he, himself, shot the elderly and the unarmed. There is some sadness about the burning of children. But his soldiering is



always told with a quiet, prideful gravitas. To a civilian who knows nothing. Who was protesting the war when he was fighting it. Conditions were chaos. He was fighting for American freedom. It was guerilla war; the enemy was everywhere. There was nothing for it, but a scorched earth.

In the months after the firebombing, his troop blew up tunnels; they were hit by snipers, they were killed by land mines. He risked his life to save the lives of his men. Until he, himself, was blown up. He was hospitalized for months, and received both medals and scars. He lost his right foot and part of his right leg. He had a prosthesis, phantom pain, and a crutch. Athletic discipline restored his ability to walk. For Peter, movement is will. Will is his heroic, now, as it was then. Since his return from Vietnam, he has been a guiltless man of modest desires. He pursued what he wanted, and what he wanted, he got: business success, home, wife, children, grandchildren. Now, he wants a retirement filled with love and health and ease and prosperity. “Golden” years that move easily back and forwards through time. But this wish is disrupted by the coldness of his wife. What he wants is to make her desire him again.

In Peter, there is no conflict over history, no registry of regret. And there is no real perception of self, or of other. As Peter exalts the heroic myth of combat, as he erases the bestiality of that combat, he can only glimpse the I–Thou (Buber, 1923) relation in an increasing state of rupture. Each morning, the mirror resuscitates a youthful Adonis, an officer who did not die, who will never die, and the gap widens between himself and his real, aging wife. Peter’s life story has no elasticity, no evolving new perspective; it admits no grief or moral or political complication. It does not respond to time or distance, to changing gender roles, or new historical/cultural epochs; nor to aging or fatherhood or to any other kind of intimate experience. His body, like his vision, is perfected. Soldiering is a hyper-masculine phantasm linked to hyperbolic splits. To “gooks” and men, and the purifying necessity of violence. He has never looked at his own grandchildren, and seen those other children. He has never seen the young boy within himself. There are no depths to his mirror. Looking is a condition of blindness.

Visual rhetoric, ocular directives

War rhetoric always conjures this blindness. It relies on a shuttered, and redundant field of vision. Ideologies regulate what can, and what cannot be seen. Through selective and absent images, politics occlude, and focus, the public eye. As Sontag (2003) notes, war photography has been used to ignite arousal and to suppress reflectivity. So that our gaze is directed away from the “pain of others”. But it is also directed away from the real pain of ourselves. Warfare has long known what psychoanalysts have theorized: that access to simultaneous and divergent images would enhance the capacity for linking (Bion, 1965), reflectivity and mentalization (Winnicott, 1963; Fonagy

and Target, 1998), and an awareness of our own destructive agency (Klein, 1948; Benjamin, 2006). When multiple perspectives appear, malignant dissociative contagion (Grand, 2000) breaks up. It becomes difficult to exhort a populace to war.

To exhort us towards war, the soldier's testimony must be silenced, and all complex markers of the tragic must be made to disappear. For political rhetoric to mobilize us, the disappearance of the tragic must be concretized in our pre-linguistic organization, in sensory modalities that are prior to, and outside of, mentalization. Ideologies must contrive a singularity of perspective. A single war wound perceived on "us", perpetrated by "them". Thus warfare must restrict our sensorium to an insulated field of totalizing knowledge, what Mahler (1968) described as an omnipotent autistic orbit. As Feldman suggests, this requires strict visual controls, which act as a closed "circuit of vision and violence (which) is itself circumscribed by zones of blindness and inattention" (2000, p 49).

To construct this closed circuit, polemics seem to anoint an invisible "director" for our ocular apparatus. And then, they construct a beatific union with that "director". In this pre-linguistic fusion with an all-seeing martial eye, we are unable to direct, or re-direct our vision. And we are unable to know we are not regulating our sight. We imagine that we see through our own eyes. But real agency is bewildered.¹ The "director" "transforms the whole society into a field of perception" (Foucault, 1979, p 214). Our sensorium seems to inform us, but we are not informed. As Feldman (2000) describes it, this is a condition in which we seem to know "who and what can be watched" (p 52), but we cannot seem to know *what* sees (Feldman, 2000, p 52). Unseen, the "director" produces a "blindness of the seeing eye" (Freud, 1893, p 117).² This holds the soldier hostage; it dictates civilian percepts of the soldier-as-war-hero. Civilian desire solicits heroic performance. Soldiers cannot subtract themselves from this desire. Entire nations can be emptied of remorse and ambivalence, and filled up with noble causes. Magic omnipotent denial (Klein, 1946) sustains us in dangerous states of arousal. We act as a collectivity of unthinking bodies, who cannot think about other bodies, wounded.

In the reportage of war, we can find the imprint of this ocular "director", as it forecloses both ourselves and the other. Since the American invasion of Iraq, the American media has been forbidden to photograph the flag-draped coffins of returning soldiers. And injured troops are similarly kept outside the camera's view: "flights carrying the wounded arrive in the United States only at night' ...both Walter Reed and the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda barred the press from 'seeing or photographing incoming patients'" (M. Benjamin, cited by Rich, 2007, p 14). In these selective and absent images, the war wound is replaced by imaginary whole bodies. At the "home front", looking becomes a condition of blindness. When this type of visual rhetoric prevails, there is little purchase for war resistance. Doubt has no evidence. Doubt is "unpatriotic", a

kind of weakness, a kind of betrayal. It shakes hands with the devil. When non-violence becomes unpatriotic, the rhetoric of combat has become almost seamless. But the director's ocular arrangement can never coincide "with itself in a moment of perfect, remainderless, grasp" (Norris, 1987, p 15). Doubt is never extinguished. Pain keeps howling through the war zone. It will not assent to its own obscurity.

Resisting ocular directives

When the vista of war is controlled by the "director", this pain cannot reveal itself through the soldier's testimony. It must find another figuration. Some source of visual authority which is equal to the authority of the "director". A truth source equivalent to the missing truths of combat. In war, this figuration is the exalted maternal body: the birth body of the hero, the birth body of lost innocents. Behind every soldier, there is always a sacrificial mother. Her loins have yielded the hero; she has relinquished "him" to destiny; she waits; she mourns "his" remains. Her gaze is always cast upon the war zone. As combat's perfected projective object, she has the all-seeing eye of loss and grief.

Once, her infant's body was entirely known to her, when that infant was still in a state of unknowing. Her eyes have always registered that which we could not see. What she sees cannot be disputed. During war, the hero's mother maintains this sacred claim to truth. Because she has been installed as the "Angel" and as the "omniscient mother" (J. Benjamin, 1995) by *war rhetoric itself*. Maternal grief and authority are always used to confirm the "just war". Her mourning is meant to witness *our* soldier's wound. But this personification eventually queries the just cause. Her grief keeps referring to other mothers, who have lost their own children. Together, they grieve for *all* children. Civilians and soldiers. Enemies and allies. Mourning becomes an exponential expanse, a universal restoration of war's absent images. If the director contrives the "blindness of the seeing eye", the primordial Mother can trump the arrangements of that blindness. When war resistance mobilizes the omniscient maternal eye, it creates a formidable counter-force with which to meet the "director".

And so her gaze found us, in the United States, in February 2007. The war in Iraq was entering its fourth year. We have never seen returning coffins, or the bodies of the wounded. Political debate rages: do we send more troops or pull out? Today, the *New York Times* headline reads: "Analysis of Iraq's Future is Bleak, but Both Sides in War Debate Find Support" (2007, p A6). The article is replete with data, political analysis, strategies, noble causes. But on the page, the text is visually displaced. It is a border that works itself around the edges of a large, black and white photo. The photo displays a street in Baghdad. There is a car in the background, shattered from a bombing. Debris litters the street. Behind that car, another car, mangled. In the recesses of the photo, men huddle,

their backs turned to us. In a posture which is suggestive of despair. In the foreground, a woman faces us. Draped in black, head covered by a hijab. Her face is exposed. Her hand is covering her mouth. She seems to have witnessed the unspeakable. On her hand, there is a simple gold band. Her face is round, she is not young; she gazes out at us in sadness. Next to her is a small child, perhaps 5 years old. White sweater, thick black hair, eyes round with fear and supplication. The woman seems to hold the child's hand. This child seems to refer to other children, no longer living. To orphans, whose mothers are not living. Woman and child are unidentified. To someone in Baghdad, they are, of course, particular.

To us, in the United States, this mother suggests a nameless series of mothers. Whose eyes have seen all, and know all, and address us with their grief. Below the photo, a caption reads, "A common scene in Baghdad: a car bomb in a Shiite commercial district. Violence against Shiites and among them is a theme in a new prognosis". (*New York Times*, February 3, 2007, p A6). The text traces reasoned political discourse. It traces violence between Sunnis and Shiites. No photos attest to the detritus of American bombings. The "director" only permits us to see the effect of *insurgent* bombings. But the maternal gaze points us toward every war wound. Looking out at us from the combat zone, she re-instates those absent images which the "director" is withholding from our eyes. Her grief reminds us that, "Every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism" (W. Benjamin, cited in Said, 2004, p 23). So that we must see into our own destructiveness, and relinquish our pretense to the "chivalrous passage of arms" (Freud, 1915, p 277).

In war, the omniscient maternal eye becomes a potent antidote to the "ocular director". When the chronicle of violence prevails, this gaze is conjured in art forms, in media; it is activated in women's protest movements. It is conjured, as well, in the psychoanalysis of a war hero such as Peter. Who never converted the war wound into narrative. Whose war vista is still controlled by the "director". When a soldier commissions atrocity without any guilt or remorse, when heroic mythology never converses with loss and grief: this is when the maternal phantasm arrives. This personification seems to know that, as Sartre put it (1964, p 251), "Through shame we confer on the Other an indubitable presence".

PETER: Heroic performances, civilian desires

In response to my inquiries, Peter was compliant, disinterested, unruffled. His aging, the atrocity, his limp, his war: these were unrelated to his problem. He wanted to talk about his wife. She blames him for his sons' problems. She thinks he is too "hard"; he thinks she is too "soft". His two sons are in their 30s. They are divorced, with children. Unsuccessful in marriage, adrift in their careers, financially unstable, they keep returning home. She gives them money, takes

them in. To Peter, she is too indulgent; she makes them passive; they've got to "stand on their own two feet". I thought that this metaphor spoke volumes. He wasn't interested in it. What he knew was that his wife wouldn't have sex with him. He didn't know why. Or what he should do. He attributes her erratic behavior to menopause. About his family, he seemed innocent, but cooperative and earnest. Concerned about his wife and sons, but blank about the conditions for their mistrust. For Peter, there was no reflectivity or interiority (see Slochower, 2006), or interpersonal comprehension. Ogden's (1986) "autobiographical subjectivity" did not exist. Time and memory skipped atrocity; they skipped decades; they rearranged themselves in the mirror. He lived on a dual track in a continuous present: he was 20 years old, an able bodied good officer; he was a mature solid citizen. The same man, in two different eras: muscular, self-disciplined, every limb still intact.

He had no thoughts about his childhood and could tell me little about it. He had a good life, a good marriage, a good family, until now. His wife said that he should go to therapy. He wasn't sure what she meant, but he would try, if it would fix his marriage. He would come in to his sessions, sit forward, and say, "So, ok, let's get going". I was quiet, and then he would say it was my "show"; he didn't know how this worked, but he wanted to "take care of this business". "Go ahead", he would say, "shoot". Shoot? An unnerving invitation from this veteran. I would hesitate, he would get restless: "I hear you really know your business. I'm paying a lot for this. So go ahead. Shoot." Not rude, really, but commanding, ready. This was not what I anticipate in an analytic conversation. Do your job. Fire your weapon. Earn your money, Doctor. As an opening gambit, it said everything, and yet, he would have claimed it meant nothing. If I waited, nothing more was forthcoming. And so, I would wonder aloud if he was lonely now that he was estranged from his wife.

Lonely? He would try to answer me, but he never knew what I was asking. I tried to listen, but I didn't know what I was listening for. Often, there seemed to be nothing to hear. I was silent about the firebombing, although it haunted my imagination. Every time he said "shoot", I saw the elderly and the unarmed. The more I saw them, the more they fell outside my excavations. I am a pacifist. But I didn't think I should impose my own political/moral values on his marital agenda. I didn't know how to sit with what he had done. I didn't know how to help him, or even, what "help" might mean. Or what ethical compromise it would take for me to assist him.

From the first, I held myself apart from, and above him. I knew nothing about his war. I didn't want to know anything about his war. But I was certain that I could never do what he had done. There was no shared humanity between us. There was not even a common body. Just as Peter needed an exit from maternal accusation, I needed an exit from any shared destructive capacity. For both of us, that escape had to be embodied. Hormonal. To Peter, his wife was just being menopausal. I saw the firebombing as testosterone gone wild. Estrogen was the

bedrock of my non-violence. I have never believed that biology is destiny or that sex equals gender. But our estrangement felt cellular, structural, sexed, biochemical. Sometimes I felt that we were not even of the same species. He sat quietly in his chair. But when I looked at him, I saw an animal poised for predation. His body would mutate; he was not even a “him”, but a beast, “red in tooth and claw”.

I didn't think I could tolerate seeing him even once a week. I could not identify Peter as a human subject. Or want him as a human object. Oddly enough, he wanted to come twice. He didn't know about this psychology business, but he wanted to solve his problem, and quick. I knew I could not proceed with him in such a state of repugnance. Somehow, I had to defer the atrocity, and contain the atrocity, while I found some empathic pathway to his interiority. I pursued the only intervention that seemed possible: a detailed inquiry into his relations with his wife and children. It was a dull, but reasonable conversation. Peter is bewildered: he was a good father and husband, and suddenly, he isn't. His wife and sons are now united in a cold front against him. When he comes into the room, they seem angry and fall silent. He says, “it's like I was some kind of beast”.

“As if I was some kind of beast”. Ordinarily, of course, I would ask him for his associations. But this is not an ordinary conversation. I don't pick up the referent to the beast. Instead, I engage in psycho-education about familial communication, roles and interactions. He is a serious, if concrete, student. He is not interested in his own psychodynamics, or in the patterns learned in his own childhood. He has a very narrow lexicon for his own affects; he has no dreams, no explicit transference material for me to attend to. But he practices new interpersonal strategies. I am resigned to a superficial psychotherapy. His family life will get patched up, and then he'll move on.

Then suddenly the frame goes into breakdown. I see Peter at my home office in New Jersey. While things were plodding and dull with him, another case had been heating up. A woman patient is about to separate from her husband. Paranoid, intermittently psychotic, addictive, raging and dependant, the husband has been in and out of treatment for many years. They have three children. Recently, he tried to get a gun permit under a false identity. She has decided to get out. She fears his incipient violence. The police have recommended that she get a restraining order. This man knows where I live; he has left me threatening messages. My local police recommend a security system; they advise me to carry an emergency alert in case I am accosted on the driveway. I lock the door to the waiting room, and a new security camera is installed.

A few days after this installation, I am waiting to see Peter. My last patient has left, and I have about 30 minutes before Peter is due to arrive. He is rarely early. I go out to get the newspaper. And there he is, my patient's husband, pacing on my driveway. He rushes over, loud, cursing, begging. I am trying to be

firm, to get him to leave. Peter picks today to come early. He walks right into this altercation, before I even realize he is there. He confronts the other man, and barks at him, once, to get out. My patient's husband hesitates, blusters, while Peter seems bigger, straighter, broader, more fluid and more powerful than he seems in my office. There, again, is the stern voice, telling him to get out – and not to come back. The husband shuffles away, muttering. Peter asks if I am okay. I ask him to meet me at the back door to the office. I go in the front door, and buzz him in through the new security system. I have a few minutes to collect myself. When Peter comes in, it's clear, he's got the story. The altercation, the new security system: it's a crazy patient or a crazy relative of a crazy patient. "You look pale", he says, "do you want time to yourself? Do you want to call anybody? Can I do anything?" He wants to know what I'm doing to secure my own safety. Have I spoken to the police? When is my husband coming home? He's protective, and pissed as all hell at the jerk on the driveway. I am touched by Peter for the first time. But I'm appalled at the disintegration of the frame. In five minutes on my driveway, his protected, private space has been eliminated. I feel unprofessional, out of control. How can I go back to my therapeutic position? Who is the patient here, in this moment? I was his doctor, now he's my bodyguard? I feel like Dr Melfi, who fantasized about Tony Soprano's protection.

I try to shift the conversation away from me, and ask him what he is feeling. As usual, he can't recognize his affects, especially his own vulnerability, but simply refers to danger and action: "The guy's a nut. He could've taken a swing at you." A pause. Then: "You might have been alright, but it's a good thing I was here". There is no language for his subjectivity. But as I am trying to re-coup my therapeutic position, I am aware of a new sensation. I have enjoyed his soldierly protection. I have seen him as he sees himself in his mirror. I am riveted by his assurance in danger. I want to imagine my heroic future as he remembers his heroic past: muscular, fearless, incontestable in danger. Once, he had evoked my revulsion. I had been unable to imagine him as an erotic object. Now, I want to *be* him, and to *have* him.

As a heterosexual woman of a certain age, I am inhibited in my aggression. After the altercation on the driveway, I despise that inhibition. Suddenly, that hate is mutating my desires. For 35 years, Peter has re-cycled himself as a war hero. He has an opportunity for this performance when he sees me accosted. Now the story of killing "gook" children can become the rescue of "our" women and children. So that his body can change in its erotic significance. I can want to BE him, and to HAVE him, without knowing that the HIM I want to BE and HAVE is the same HIM who commissioned an atrocity. For the first time in my memory, I can admire a military uniform. I see a "good soldier" and imagine that soldier unsoiled by war.

In the moment when I join Peter in his mirror, he sets me loose from my feminine constraints. Over the next few sessions, he refers back to the incident

on the driveway. I know he's worried about my soft female body. He figures, correctly, that my husband was off at work when the "jerk" accosted me. I am moved by Peter's concern and his kindness. But I feel imprisoned by this feminine impotence and dependence. Peter, my husband, the police: why do I need their protection? Why aren't my muscles good enough? Just then, he says, "You know, you were really pretty tough out there. I was watching from the street for a minute. You were doing okay". Really? He could not have given me a better gift. I do not subject it to analysis, because it might turn out to be a wish or a fantasy or a projection, an appeal to my narcissism, or a strategy of false reassurance. For himself, and for me. Maybe this is what soldiers tell each other after they have just shit themselves in combat. I don't know, and I don't want to know. Right now, I need my toughness to be real.

Together, we make that toughness real. I am becoming hard-bodied, because a hard-bodied old soldier sees, and admires, my prowess. In the same session, he praised my incisive "muscle" about familial communication. Increasingly, he uses military lingo: after our meetings, he says he implements his "marching orders". I stopped being an armchair, timid, bookish, know-nothing; I stopped being a vulnerable *girl* who needed a man to protect her. I was someone who could "cut through" interpersonal disorder. I got the job done. With my own precision weaponry, and a minimum of "collateral damage". Without arousing any latent shell shock in this decent old veteran. He made me feel like a good officer. And he got to be a grunt in *my* army. He told me war stories, and I, the pacifist, found myself laughing. My patient's husband hadn't been back. But he was still calling and screaming. It was a difficult few weeks of management. Peter was there with me, in the "war zone". He mixed black humor and concern with phallic solidarity and recognition. I knew he was still taking care of me by getting me laughing; I tried to ask him about it, but he just cracked another joke.

In the rest of life, I am anti-war. But in the moment on the driveway, Peter saw into me. I became Peter's because he knew, and confirmed, what I desired. I yielded the division between his body and mine. I was enraptured, and I was gone. Gone "for a soldier". Because, in his eyes, I found my own force. I found my own aggression, and I felt victorious. And in my gaze, he, too, would become enraptured. Gone "for a soldier". Because treatment would make him feel that he could be loved by a man, and love a man, without ever having his sexual identity unravel.

All of this was potentiated by the electronic eye at my door. Once, the waiting room had been open to all. Now, each time Peter arrived, an ocular apparatus functioned as a persecutory system: it discriminated between "bad men" and "good men", and then, it let the "good man" come in. Peter's destructiveness was extruded onto a real, alternate personification: my other patient's husband. Badness was outside, goodness was inside, and our aggressive bonding was legitimized. Sometimes, the absurdity of this security arrangement would strike me: the man I was admitting to my waiting room had killed countless victims.

The man I was keeping out was nasty and crazy, but he hadn't killed anyone. My patient's husband was a real danger. But he also seemed like the personification of a traumatized vet: paranoid, addictive, hyper-vigilant, armed, ill-adjusted to peace. My patient's husband had never been in combat. But he signified that other Peter who never came home from his war. Each session, the security system kept that Peter out. So that the one who came in was neither damaged nor damaging: he was sane, and potent, and alive, and intact.

Like me, this Peter was a heterosexual "of a certain age". In going to war, he had a fixed vision of a man. If I was inhibited in aggression, he was inhibited in love: he had to *be the man whom he could not want to have*. When male armies go into combat, love between men is deep, and physical, and tender. They can touch because they are killing; they can touch because they are dying. But that touch must be a-sexual, narrowly constituted by violence. About homosexuality, the US military is still stuck with "don't ask, don't tell". But now, in the analytic dyad, Peter anoints me as a male officer, *who is also a heterosexual woman desirous of a man*. He has me looped in a loop of erotic complication, so that he can desire a man, and be desired by a man, and imagine that the man is female. All of this emerged in unconscious derivatives. When he talks about wanting sex with his wife, I inquire exactly how he wants to have sex. When I asked this earlier in his treatment, he would say, "What do you mean? Like before". Before meant him arousing her, then the missionary position, him on top, her below. Now, when I ask this question again, he is embarrassed. He's been having dreams of someone sucking his penis. He's on his back. Silence. Then, "I'm not gay you know. Jesus. This therapy shit". I ask him what he is dreaming, and he tells me that sometimes it's a man, sometimes it's a woman sucking his penis. "Jesus. I'm not gay am I? How could I be gay"?

He is cringing with shame. So I say that I don't think this is about being straight or gay. I say that, "Maybe passivity has something exciting to it". He's straining to get this, "Oh you mean I'm not gay"! – I don't say anything – then he says, "Oh, I think I get it. If someone else is on top, it's gotta be a man"? "Yes", I say, "you want to lie back and it frightens you at the same time. It's lonely and tiring the way you are living. Wouldn't it be nice if someone else got to know you, took care of YOU? But in your mind, they would have to be sort of a man and sort of a woman. Tough enough so you could lie back". "Oh, yeah", he says, "I do sort of lie back sometimes in here. I get to talk and you listen". There is a silence, and he gets worried: do I think he wants me to suck his dick? "Jesus, you Freudians, everything is about sex". More cringing and then a light bulb goes off. For the first time, he grasps at a metaphor as if it is a life raft. Not a moment too soon: what a relief! "Oh, you mean maybe I want you to take care of me, sort of". His emergence from concrete thinking saves him from gender disorganization, and sexual humiliation. He is still heterosexual. And he's not soliciting fellatio from his therapist. He just wants some rest. To stop giving the orders, trying to save his unit. But he's afraid of

lying down – some jerk might fuck with him, or fuck him up. I say that the desire which would fulfill him is associated with violence.

After this, his associations become more fluid. I suggest that his erotic dreams refer, in part, to lying on my couch. After some anxious joking, he decides to lie down. Grief emerges about all of his lost men: his war buddies, his sons, his father. He is less shy about wanting male love. At home, he behaves better with his wife and sons. Like his leg, the analysis seems intact, even though the frame was blown up. Indeed I feel somewhat magical: I am a warrior *and* a pacifist, racing ahead of contradiction so that contradictions are seamless. I have tutored him in vulnerability and compassion. While our unconscious field continued to be captivated by war. My dreams were idealized transcripts of firepower, in which the firebombing did not exist. By day, I was protesting the war in Iraq. But at night, combat became exaltation without horror. I was a ready conscript to the heroic imaginary. I was a teenage boy signing up to “be a man”; I was a woman who always wanted to be a man, and I was a romantic girl captivated by uniforms. In the area of our shared seduction, Peter and I only saw our perfected bodies. Regardless of whether I was *being* him or *having* him, regardless of whether he was being me or having me, we were “systematically sanitized... everyone has his limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer” (Fussell, 1989, p 268). For each of us, desire had become more elastic; but it had an affinity with killing, with that “awe, fascination with power, and feelings of violence and boundlessness that transgression arouses” (Stein, 1998a, b, p 256).

PETER: Maternal surveillance and the return of the repressed

Two months passed since the altercation on the driveway. My patient’s husband was no longer menacing. In his treatment, Peter moved between martial excitement, an unconscious wish for dependence, and a narrow band of grief which recognizes “us” but not “them”. For both of us, real external threat was fading. The electronic eye began to shift its meaning. Previously, the “eye” had been confirmatory of our mutual phallic goodness, legitimizing our solidarity in a “just” war. But now, the “eye” seemed to grow breasts. And without a real external threat to absorb badness, badness started threatening to “come in”.

Peter was preoccupied with the security system, with its one-way field of vision. On the way I could look into, and at him, without him being able to see me seeing him. It was winter by now, and the days were getting shorter: what if dusk obscured his image in the “eye” and made me mistake Peter for HIM? What if I thought he was the “nut” and I wouldn’t let him in? What if I called the police? I said, “On the couch, and in the eye of the camera, I can see you without you seeing me see you. You can’t be sure what I am seeing, and I might somehow see YOU as the ‘beast’”. For the first time, I have uttered that word

which links us to the atrocity. He cannot formulate any kind of response. And then, he reports a series of dreams.

He is at home, in his bedroom. The room with the mirror. A woman is just *there*: gloved, demure, coifed. Eyes obscured by the black mesh veil of a pillbox hat. A 1960s, white, ladylike presence, reminiscent of Jackie Kennedy's elegance. At first he barely notices that she is in the room. But her presence is both fixating and obscure. She sits, and she is silent. He doesn't know her. He cannot see her eyes behind the veil. The dream re-occurs, and his dread seems to increase with every repetition. I ask him for his associations. He can only say that she reminds him of Jackie Kennedy, at JFK's funeral. Although he doesn't know what this means. The pacifist within me has been dormant, but now it is re-awakened by her entrance – Jackie, the aristocrat of *motherhood*, whose own children were half orphaned by violence. Whose husband was sanctified by his assassination. Inserted into history as another "profile in courage". In a condition of eternal youth. Like Peter, in his mirror. In 1960s America, Jackie's widowhood was grace; her dignity and fortitude were used to confirm the man's heroic honor. But now, in Peter's unconscious, that widowhood is becoming an admonishment. Grieving, she watches Peter. She is saying nothing, doing nothing, but she casts the "evil eye" on his badness. Peter's dread is shapeless and wordless and insistent. The perpetrator in him seems to become a child, a toddler, an infant. I ask him what "Jackie" sees. His body becomes fetal and turns towards the wall. Then, he says, "She knows what we did".

At this juncture, our phallic idealization fell apart. In Peter's material, I started to move between *being* the omniscient mother, and being *exposed* to the omniscient mother. Sometimes, he imagined that I had her x-ray vision. He made more confessions. Sometimes Jackie seemed like a transference referent to my feminine non-violence. I certainly wanted to claim her as myself. But it became clear that her moral authority was not my own. The woman in the veil appears and re-appears in a multiplicity of forms, ceasing to be Jackie, proliferating, morphing into almost any anonymous woman in a "veil". Muslim. Catholic. Jewish. Pious, demure, sexless. Draped, anonymous, nameless, concealed. What she derives from me is my body configuration, my position of seeing without being seen. But as she moves further from Jackie, from my own socio-cultural context, it is clear that while this phantasm borrows from me, she is also not me. She is something outside of, and beyond this treatment. She is the return of the repressed, a signifier for an unknown series of mothers and children; a personification of persecutory guilt, a precursor of Benjamin's (2006) "ethical third".

This figure borrows my eyes. But she also sees in me what she sees in Peter: righteousness inflated to evacuate terror. Intoxicated aggression. Us versus them. When Peter is not imagining that I have the omniscient eye, he is dreaming of me as another soldier. The phrase repeats, "she knows what we did". Our crimes seem broadcast from one veiled woman to another. This is a

transference representation which reflects perception, not projection. All through this treatment, I have been sacrificing her children. Insofar as I remembered the atrocity, I excluded Peter from the realm of the human. I never wanted to know the subjective reality of his war. Insofar as I was enticed by Peter's heroics, I forgot that innocents were burning. I forgot about traumatized boy soldiers. I was excited by combat. Once, I thought Peter was narcissistic, or schizoid, or suffering from a well-concealed version of PTSD. Now I saw him as a warrior-sacrifice, offered up at the altar of civilian desire. If I had been in his war, perhaps I would have shot the elderly, and the unarmed.

When atrocity conjures maternal admonishment

Peter and I were human, we were whole, and then, we had become someone's enemy. Demonized. Threatened. Me, on my driveway. Peter, in boot camp, and then, in Vietnam. There, we lost the moral compass of depressive intersubjectivity. Like Joseph Conrad's Marlow, we found ourselves traveling "in the night of the first ages, without a sign and no memories...in need of some deliberate belief" (Bhabha, 1985, p 146). A belief that acquired the mythic properties of the heroic. Human frailty was replaced by violence. There was no war wound. There was no resonance with vulnerability, in the self, in the other. Our manic defenses (see Altman, 2005; Peltz, 2005) locked us into a persecutory system. Together we were blind to the ordinary body. Until a "veiled" woman returned that body to our vision.

Particular and nameless, she was both real and a phantasm. She invoked both the inter-subjective and the fantastic registers (see Benjamin, 1995). She was the trace of shared cultural and historical referents. And she was the trace of primordial body memory. She was a mysterious subject, who acted upon as like the return of the repressed. Her veil denoted a gaze which had seen all, but which could not be seen. As no one, she was a universal signifier for the abject. But she was also the "mythical" or "transformational" object (Bollas, 1986), whom we nominated as sacred. A beacon of light, a figure of dark enchantment, an "Angel" and an "omniscient Mother" (Benjamin, 1995): we imbued her with "sympathetic or telepathic knowing" (Bollas, 1986, p 95). Her gaze was the font of life, from which we could be cast out.

In this figuration, an absent "I" enhanced the power of the omniscient maternal "eye". Her veil seemed to lift the veil from our eyes. Our shared response to this trope was an "...adoration (which) covers dread with awe and mystery" (Horney, cited in Benjamin, 1995, p 81). To be recognized, to come into view, our violent "not me" selves (Sullivan, 1953) required this dark version of the transformational object. She was an object whose vision would not be deferred to the "ocular director". Through gendered and erotic arrangements, "he" had been directing our sight when we didn't know "he" was directing it. But the omniscient Mother seemed immune to those "language rules and

denials” (Arendt, 1955), which prevail in “atrocious-producing” (Lifton, 2005) situations. Placing “the presentation of fragile human life above the instrumentalities of technocratic power”, her vista of war was “a rejection of amoral statecraft and an affirmation of the dignity of the human person” (Ruddick, 1989, p 81). She restored wounded children to our vision.

Protest theatre: When war meets maternal surveillance

For Peter, this was an intimate, relational transformation. But this transformation also occurs on the political stage, when women protest. War and state terror are wanton in their erasure of mothers and children. But resistance movements can turn grief into maternal omniscience. In protest theatre, woman bodies become both reality and phantasm. Inserted into our vision, in the public domain, they dispute the rhetoric of the ocular director. During these acts of resistance, the visual field is appropriated by a transformational mother who “propels a regenerative cycle” through “mourning play” (Bassin, 1994). Women achieve this by “de-privatizing their mourning” (see Elshtain, 1994, p 81) in public spectacles that conjure the woman in the “veil”. To transgress before the Mother’s immaculate authority; to have this moment engraved on the public transcript (Scott, 1992); to have that transcript dispute the authority of the “ocular director”: here, destruction can meet the threshold of its own impossibility.

It was in this way that Cindy Sheehan kept vigil at Bush’s Texas ranch. For weeks, we watched her watching the ultimate “director”. In a non-violent, public spectacle. And that “director” could not speak, or move against her. Or even have her removed. Because her son, Casey, was killed in the war in Iraq. Cindy Sheehan was no one: she was a nameless mother, and a nameless soldier’s mother³ and, then, in her vigil, she became every soldier’s Mother. As Ruggiero puts it:

Peace advocate, movement leader, passionate – Sheehan is all of these things. But after spending last Monday with her, I realize that above and beyond all else, Cindy is a Mother. Not *just* a Mother, but Mom Laureate, Subcomandante Momus, Nobel Peace Mom, Dr Mom, Jr. Mahatma Momdi, National Mom, World Mom, Milky Way Mom. Which is to say, Casey’s Mom. (2006, p ix)

In Ruggiero’s description, Sheehan’s protest becomes both real and a phantasm. It links the inter-subjective and the fantastic registers (Benjamin, 1995). She was an ordinary, particular, grieving mother, speaking on behalf of other, ordinary mothers. She named her son, and she named herself. But she also draped herself in the “veil” of maternal de-individuation. As a particular mother, and as every Mother, she gained mythic force. She had birthed the “hero”; she held sacred status in the chronicle. And she refused to confirm the “just war”.

As a particular and private mother, her loss had previously been enlisted by the “director”, in a ritual intended to confirm Bush’s compassion (Sheehan, 2006). But in her vigil as Mother, her authority exposed his lack of all compassion. Watching Bush, Sheehan restored our absent images of the war. While our president’s agency was confounded. Belligerent, wanton, freely trafficking in violence, he found himself paralyzed. His advisors couldn’t find anything to do *to* her, or *with* her. Because the “omniscient maternal eye” had found them. If they made a public gesture against her, they risked that “dread that through her he might die or be undone” (Horney, 1932, as cited in Benjamin, 1995, p 81). Cindy Sheehan was untouchable. She dignified doubt. She invited the testimony of soldiers,⁴ and war resistance took off.

Sheehan’s action drew on what Steiner refers to as our “antique imaginings” (1984) of a primordial Mother. Who knew her infant’s body, when her infant was in a state of unknowing. Who once contained the fetus within her own uterus. Whose umbilicus refers to our helpless dependance. Her gaze reduces us to children. It scolds us, evokes a dread of retribution. To mobilize these “antique imaginings”, women must conjure themselves as the umbilical body. They achieve this effect by donning markers of *de-individuation*. By mobilizing their *lack of subjectivity*. And then inscribing this lack on named particularity.

This performance is a frequent trope in war resistance, and in resistance to state terror (see Graziano, 1992; Eshtain, 1994; Hollander, 1997). Its potency is derived from the very structure of violence, with its gendered “social unconscious” (see Layton, 2005). Because war (and state terror) are characterized by splitting, they tend to “masculinize” the aggressive subject, while diminishing a weak, feminine object. But they also anoint a mysterious, unknown, and beatific primordial Mother. Who stays home, and awaits the returning hero. Who stays home, to birth the next hero. This figure is obscured and domesticated, lest it emerge to dominate the infantile self states which are expressing their dominance through violence (see also Benjamin, 1988). As a primitive narcissistic object, this primal figure can confer a halo on the aggressor. But she is also the judge, the original arbiter of good and evil.

PETER: Dread, maternal surveillance, and remorse

But this Mother does not just want to be a signifier for exposure and retribution. She is always a signifier for loss and grief. For a multiplicity of bodies in the war zone. “Her” children are the victims of the phallic warrior. “Her” child is the phallic warrior, “himself”. What she wants is the sanctity of her children. At first, she finds her force in our shame and dread. But when her audience is ready, her gaze invokes the tragic. Now, a space opens between excitement and destruction. And a real, human other finally steps in.

And so it would be in Peter’s analysis. Once I thought I could never do what Peter had done. But the woman in the veil started breaking into our mirrors.

And filling us with dread. He takes pills for insomnia and anxiety. I read histories, Vietnam diaries, watch documentaries, war movies. My eyes fill with wounded soldiers. His fill with innocents, dying. I realize that these soldiers could be me. He realizes that Vietnamese children are his. In his sessions, Peter's past and present are becoming inseparable in grief. She knows about him, he says, and she's been protecting the kids from him. I don't know if he is referring to his wife. Or to the phantasm in the veil. Or to real mothers who once cowered before him. "The burning children"? I ask. He sobs, nods, yes. Then, he says, "She always knew". "Your wife"? I ask, and, again, yes. Finally, I am made to understand why he arrives now in my office. There has been the war in Iraq, the atrocity at Haditha. Iraq re-ignited Vietnam; Haditha made his wife see him as "the beast". I ask if his sons know. He thinks so, he is sobbing, "How can they touch me"?

Still the veiled woman appears. She is no particular mother, and she is every ferocious mother. She is entirely unlike the mother with whom he grew up. Who mimicked Jackie, and was flirtatious and glib and elegant and social climbing, deferring his care to sequential housekeepers. While his father moved between his business and his bar and his newspaper in the den. Peter has never known a protective mother, or a tender father. If they had cared for him, and sheltered him, he wouldn't have been drunk in college. He wouldn't have flunked out. He would never have been drafted, lost his leg, lost his men, lost his mind and his morals. At last, he really tells me about Vietnam. The way he went mad before the firebombing. His dream series ended. Dread fell away. Together, we evolved a more tragic world view. With it, there was a sense of grief and departure. As if,

I saw him for the last time. He was kneeling by a tomb of white marble and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath and waited by his side. The unearthly quiet of his face had changed to an unearthly sorrow...the darkness closed round the pilgrim at the marble tomb – closed around the veiled woman from the grave – ... I saw and heard no more.
(Collins, 1985, 1859, p 281).

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Notes

1 According to Reis (2006), Klein views this as an unconscious process that involves, "a phantasized sequence of projection and introjection so complicated that its actual workings appear unfathomable" (p 183).

2 This condition has resonance with the psychotic processes described by Williams (1998).

3 Sheehan states that her war resistance was mobilized, in part, by Bush's ignorance of her son's name when he proffered his condolence for her loss (see Ensler, 2006).

4 See Zinn, in Sheehan (2006).

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