

EVENT TITLE: Removing the Camouflage: Queer and Trans Military Voices Speak Out

EVENT DESCRIPTION: Recent creative nonfiction storytellers speak out about being queer and/or trans in the military and how sharing their stories has helped shape public perspectives of LGBTQ+ people in the armed forces. Panelists discuss the challenges with sharing queer and trans stories, contributions of queer and trans voices to military literature, film, and storytelling, and strategies in creating social change through advocating for more diverse voices in the writing and documenting of military experiences.

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR:

Bronson Lemer is the author of *The Last Deployment: How a Gay, Hammer-Swinging Twentysomething Survived a Year in Iraq*. His work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Southeast Review*, & *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers*. He is a 2019 McKnight Writing Fellow and lives in St. Paul.

OPENING REMARKS:

Welcome to “Removing the Camouflage: Queer and Trans Military Voices Speak Out.” A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

We have included an incomplete list of books, articles, films, and other resources related to queer and trans members of the military. You can find that list at the end of the outline linked to our panel online.

During the 2022 AWP Conference, I attended one of—if not the only—panel on military writing at the conference. The panel was on how digital writing spaces have assisted veterans and other military writers in sharing their stories. I had just spent two years teaching first-year academic writing online and through Zoom, so I was thinking a lot about how virtual spaces provide particular benefits to writers struggling with their own mental health, writers processing traumatic experiences, and writers who have been marginalized. In particular, I was thinking about queer and trans writers and how virtual spaces have become safer spaces for sharing experiences, ideas, and stories that have traditionally been pushed to the margins.

When my memoir about serving under “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in Iraq was published in 2011, just as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was being repealed, I thought it would be one small ripple in a wave of stories from queer and trans writers sharing their experiences of serving in the military. I naively imagined the floodgates opening, where dozens of stories of people serving under the policy would finally find the light of day. But, over ten years after the repeal, these stories are still largely missing from literature and storytelling about the military experience. I wanted to bring together writers and storytellers who have shared their experience of serving in the military to discuss the challenges in writing about their experiences, the role queer and trans narratives about the military can and may play in the larger canon of military-related writing and storytelling, and how sharing these experiences can help advocate for a more diverse catalog of voices documenting the military experience.

I will introduce each of our panelists and then ask each of them to share their initial thoughts (3-7 minutes per panelist). I will then open up the discussion with a few prepared questions and ask each panelist to respond. We will end with a 10-to-15 minute audience Q&A.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:

Katherine Schifani is the author of *Cartography: Navigating a Year in Iraq* (2022, Potomac Press) and is currently serving as an aircraft maintenance officer in the US Air Force Reserve. Her work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *War, Literature, and the Arts*, *Consequence*, and *Epiphany*. She holds an MA in English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, an MFA in Writing from Seattle Pacific University, and an MBA in Operations Management from the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, and is a graduate of the US Air Force Academy. She lives and works in the mountains of Colorado.

Tonee Moll is a Queer poet, essayist and educator. They are the author of *Out of Step: A Memoir* and *You Cannot Save Here*. Their work has been honored with the Lambda Literary Award, the Non/Fiction Collection Prize, the Jean Feldman Poetry Prize, The Bill Knott Poetry Prize and the Adele V. Holden prize for creative excellence. Tonee holds an MFA in creative writing & publishing arts from University of Baltimore and a PhD in English from Morgan State University. They are an assistant professor of English at Harford Community College. They were enlisted in the U.S. Army from 2002-2010.

Máel Embser-Herbert is professor in the Department of Social Justice and Social Change at Hamline University, a veteran of the US Army (1978-1981) and Army Reserve (1981-2000), and co-editor of *With Honor and Integrity: Transgender Troops in Their Own Words* (2021, NYU Press). They also authored the books *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality, and Women in the Military* (1998, NYU Press) and *The U.S. Military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Policy: A Reference Handbook* (2007, Praeger). They hold an MA in Sociology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a PhD from the University of Arizona, and a JD from Mitchell Hamline School of Law.

Richard Brookshire is the Co-Founder of the Black Veterans Project, an organization that advances research, litigation and public education to address long-standing racial disparities faced by Black veterans in the United States. He previously served as Director of Communications for Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America and Deputy Director of Communications, Politics for the Human Rights Campaign. Richard is an alum of Columbia University and Morehouse College and is a former

infantry Combat Medic and U.S. Army veteran of the War in Afghanistan. His work has been highlighted by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Reuters*, the *Washington Post*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *theRoot* and others.

PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:

Katherine Schifani: The rhetoric of war is, by and large, about dehumanizing the enemy so they are easier to remove. There is always an us/them dynamic in conflict; and there must be if there is to be a winner and loser. One of the more complicating things about the US's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was the blurred nature of this us/them dynamic. These conflicts introduced a third, transitionally neutral person. I say transitionally neutral because the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, in arguably separate ways, were just this: they were neutral, collateral in some cases, until they weren't. Until they picked up a weapon. Until they buried a roadside bomb. Until they did something that put them on the kill list. Clearly defining the us/them was a central problem, representative of some of the larger issues with both of America's wars this century. A global war on terror doesn't have a clearly defined enemy, doesn't have a clearly defined us/them because the them became undefinable. The result, aside from messy, failed conflict, was the subtle undoing of a clearly defined us.

I find it no surprise that the repeal of DADT coincided with this undoing of a cohesive military "us." In particular, I believe the role women came to play in Iraq and Afghanistan—often taking on direct combat roles by necessity or accident, and in a few rare cases, with intention—helped reshape what the military found acceptable and functional within its ranks. As the "them" unraveled, forcing individual military members to make split-second perceptions of threat, the "us" dissolved away. A monolith melting in the summer heat of Baghdad. What was once a rigid definition of what made a good soldier, sailor, airman, or marine expanded outward, encompassing more ground and finding new contours. The DADT repeal was central to this dissolution, and a consequence of it.

In actuality, when the repeal happened little changed for me in the moment. We were forced to do some online training reminding people to treat "the homosexuals" with dignity and respect, reminding us we couldn't terminate our military obligations because gays and lesbians could now serve. But I was still with a mish-mashed team, doing a jumbled, ill-defined mission, living with 4,000 Iraqis. The Iraqis I worked

directly with remained concerned I was an unmarried woman and I wasn't about to tell them why.

The biggest change from DADT's repeal came later, and shows why stories matter. I was teaching English at the Air Force Academy and there are two memories I will never forget. First, I was coaching the women's rugby team and two of the women on the team were dating. Openly. At the same place I had developed several strategies—most of which involved getting pretty drunk and making out with some dudes—to at least confuse people not even a decade earlier. I was on a panel for the National Character and Leadership Symposium speaking with other women in combat, and an audience member asked about the effect of DADT. The other women on the panel all had nice, thoughtful things to say. None of them were gay. I recall looking into the audience and seeing the rugby team—the entire team—who was sitting in the second and third row waiting for me to say something. It was terrifying. And it was this moment when I realized my story mattered.

The second memory that struck me were students of mine in the senior level war literature class (a few of these students did not clearly understand the difference between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). A handful of them challenged me on my deployment to Iraq because they couldn't conceive of a woman doing the things I did. This baffled me more than their ignorance over the two wars. These cadets, who had never served a day on active duty in their lives, had a hard time believing I was involved in the ways I was, never mind the thousands of other women who served similarly. This was the second moment I realized my story mattered.

Stories like mine and the other panelists here matter because they give abstract concepts a face. They give the second and third rows of an audience someone to look at for validation. They give people a chance to destabilize their belief in abstractions. It is much harder (though it still happens with shocking frequency) for someone to look at me, for instance as their commander, and say women or gays don't belong. Once, I had a commander of mine come to my office one day, sit in a chair, and tearfully proclaim how I had singularly changed is perception on gays in the military. Before me, it was a concept he couldn't reconcile. Once he met me, it was a person, with a face, and a name, doing good, meaningful work.

If we, through storytelling, can break down the monolith of what it means to be part of America's war machine and expand the notions of soldiers, sailors, airmen,

guardians, and marines, the more connected we become to the population we defend. That connection is essential for a functioning society. War is a human invention. The more we give it a face that we recognize, the more human it becomes, and perhaps the less likely we are to pursue it.

Anthony Moll: (*Draft language—final remarks may differ slightly from what is included here. Run time: about 6:40.*) I'm going to start with a bold claim: military literature *is* gay and trans literature. Same-gender desire is not only a common part of military lit, it is an essential part. The same goes for gender outside of a static binary. This has been true throughout the history of the western canon. From our earliest examples, and extending through history, military literature has included such stories.

We must start with the *Iliad*, one of our oldest extant works of military literature. This is, from any angle, a love story, and one of the romances at the heart of this story is that between Achilles, the greatest warrior of the era, and his lover, Patroclus. This is the heart of that story. The history of military literature in the west starts with gay love. Yet it's not just same-gender desire that we see in these characters. In the story of "Achilles on Skyros," we see the warrior dressed up as a lady-in-waiting so as to blend in with the women of Skyros and avoid his fated death in the battle of Troy. In some versions of the story, when he is finally found out and leaves, the woman with whom he has had a child on Skyros reverses the narrative by dressing as a man in order to accompany Achilles to war.

Yet we're not just talking about one occasion that pops up at the start of the tradition. It continues throughout history. Queer and trans writers (and scholars) are finally gaining ground to reenter what amounts to a long history of LGBTQI+ military service, and by extension, a long history of this sort of literature. But in that work, two unavoidable questions arise: Who gets counted as Queer or trans? (It's a more difficult question that one might imagine.) And what gets counted as military literature?

On that first question, it's worth remembering that queer and trans are contemporary constructs of immortal ways of being—new names for old desires. The problem is that, in a homophobic and transphobic society, historians and literary scholars are quick to ignore, dismiss or erase same-gender desire and gender nonconformity. So many of us are initially introduced to *The Iliad* without the context of Patroclus and

Achilles being lovers. This is despite the fact that we have a major work of Classic literature (the *Symposium*) that looks closely at their relationship, that identifies it as a “greater love.” Such scholars (and if we’re being honest, educators) who engage in this erasure are imposing a contemporary view (homophobia) on historic texts. And when queer and trans scholars work to undo this historic flattening? We are the ones accused of imposing new ideas on old stories. Why? Heteronormativity & cissexism: the ideas that being straight and cis is normal, default & expected, and everything else must be proved. As Dr. Kit Heyam points out in their recent monograph, *Before We Were Trans*, we rarely hear “we can’t know this figure was straight; we can’t know she was cisgender.”

There is another problem here, one that Heyam points out in their book: what these identities mean for contemporary readers considering historic figures, good, bad and complicated. Good: what might it mean for young warriors in a homophobic culture to know that queerness is central to the ideal warrior in western war lit?

The bad: What do we do when we learn historic villains are queer or trans? What do we do with the homophobic & transphobic histories of institutions some folks are proud of, histories like DADT or the Allies’ failure to liberate queer victims of the holocaust?

The complicated: what does it mean to imagine someone like Dr. Mary Walker mattering to trans military history, when she is the only woman to ever receive the Congressional Medal of Honor?

And that second issue--the definition of military lit? There are a dozen questions hiding just behind it: Are homefront narratives during times of war military literature? Are stories of recovery hospitals? Transition out of the military? Is anti-war literature military lit? Anti-colonial? Is Chelsea Manning’s most recent memoir? Is Tommye Blounte’s “The Bug,” a poem about dating a veteran? Whitman is clearly war lit to me, so why is he so frequently missing from lists of military lit? Is Dickinson—writing and publishing poems of home in the 1860s—gay war literature?

Either way, the truth is that military literature has always been gay, has always been gender nonconforming. Dr. Jane Ward discusses in her book *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, that gay sex and homoeroticism are not an *incidental* part of homosocial institutions like the military, but **essential**. Not only has it always been there, but the continued success of these institutions relies on it.

Which is all to say, the history of gay and trans military literature is as long as the history of heterosexual and cisgender military literature, maybe longer. In poetry alone we have: Homer & Ovid, the story of The Sacred Band of Thebes, The love letters of poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. Civil War Nurse Walt Whitman writing of gay love on the battlefield and in bivouac.

We have more recent collections of gay military poetry, like Charlie Bondhus' *All The Heat We Could Carry*, or Rob Jacques' *War Poet*. Yet it is also worth considering how we see the homoerotic gaze in war literature that is *not* from self-identified queer or trans writers—like Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* or Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*. Why? Because, as Ward points out, these homosocial spaces rely on homoeroticism.

So it isn't that any of what we're discussing is new. So why does it remain in the margins? What Ward suggests is that these institutions maintain an unspoken sense of what counts as *serious*. As in: 'It's not gay if it's a joke. It's not trans if we're just playing.' What I arrive at is how much a similar sentiment is what drives the problem we're discussing today: that readers of military literature don't think that queer and trans narratives "count" as *real* military lit—that it's trivial, and thus, incidental, rather than a part of military literature's essential fabric.

I'll end with an uncomfortable question, the other side of the coin: why should queer & trans scholars, writers and readers *want* to queer or to trans military literature? We can't forget that we're talking about the literature of violence, the literature of colonialism. This too is connected to how the lines around these literatures get drawn, and I can't help but wonder about what is gained in doing so, measured against what might be lost in reconsidering war as a sexually diverse space.

Máel Embser-Herbert: Compared to my fellow panelists, I suspect that I'm coming to this event today from a slightly different place. First, I'm a sociologist. Second, the book that led to me being here is an edited volume composed primarily, though not entirely, of the work of others. This week/end I'll be ignoring the former and masquerading as a writer. To the second, let me provide a bit of background.

In the fall of 2017, I had the opportunity to attend a local film festival that included short films about trans military service. I had just written a book chapter about it and was interested in seeing what I might learn. A local trans guy, serving openly as a

Captain in the MN Army National Guard offered a few remarks. I was struck by the fact that only 16 months earlier, under the Obama administration, DoD had announced the move toward inclusive service. But, not quite three months before the film festival, Trump had tweeted a reversal, throwing everything into chaos. The question I found myself asking was, “How were trans military personnel navigating this terrain? Toothpaste:tube.” I decided to see if I could get a handful of trans service members to talk with me. I ended up conducting a dozen interviews and writing an article that was published in an academic journal. As time wore on - and things were all over the map in terms of legal challenges, injunctions, debates over policy - I decided that I wanted to do more to contribute to what people know about the military service - and experiences - of trans people.

As a tenured full professor who, basically, didn't really have to make anyone happy or conduct the “right” kind of social scientific research, etc., I had a lot of latitude with what I might do. I knew that I wanted to be a conduit for getting the stories of trans service members out, but I didn't want to do it by making them the subject of my “researcher's gaze,” etc. I recalled a book for which I had been interviewed around 2005. It was a mix of verbatim transcripts and prose. That gave me the inspiration to see if trans service members might be willing to craft their own personal essays about their experiences. I reached out to one of the people I had interviewed for what became the journal article, asking if they would be interested in working with me on a book. They responded with an enthusiastic “yes.”

I won't walk through the mundane details of putting the book together, though I'm happy to respond to questions anyone might have. I will say that I am so very pleased that we ended up with six essays from veterans, i.e., those who served before restrictions were lifted (the first time, in 2016) and 20 essays from trans people who have served since restrictions were lifted, even if they have since left military service. And, contributions represent all branches and a range of ranks and identities. Perhaps most importantly, the essays cover a range of experiences, mostly positive but also the negative, and the challenges even if not entirely “negative.”

Most of my scholarly writing has centered on gender and sexuality in the military. But, I should also add that I am a queer veteran of the US Army and Army Reserve who served under the policy that was in place prior to “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” as well as

after that policy was implemented as federal law in 1994. I was investigated. I had friends who were discharged under earlier policies. So, I come to the panel both as an academic, as a writer/editor, and as a queer veteran. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. What challenges do you think queer and/or trans storytellers face when sharing experiences related to military service? What challenges did *you* specifically face when telling your own story?
2. Are there particular facets of military culture that you think are apt to explore using a queer and/or trans lens or perspective?
3. What role do you think queer and/or trans military stories have to play in the military-literature canon? What are they contributing or have contributed that isn't reflected in the other literature?
4. Part of the excitement in sharing queer and/or trans stories during "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was the fringe or taboo nature of talking and/or writing about what we shouldn't be talking or writing about. Do you think the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" has taken away the risk and/or excitement in telling these stories?
5. What stories are missing? What would you love to read more about related to queer and/or trans military experiences?

READING AND VIEWING LIST:

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Bratton, E. (Director). (2022). *The Inspection* [Film]. A24.

Brookshire, R. (2020, June). Serving in the Army as a Queer Black Man Opened My Eyes to Racism in America. *The New York Times Magazine*.

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