

Covert Operation

Archiving the Experiences of Transgender Service Members in the US Military

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Abstract In this essay, the authors pose and respond to three questions about their process of generating and contributing to an archive of transgender military experiences: First, why create an archive of transgender military experiences? Second, what constitutes such an archive? And, third, what are the political stakes of doing this work? By tracing their experiences, the authors offer insights, chart challenges, and lay bare their hopes for an archive of transgender military experiences. Along the way, the authors reflect on the political, legal, and ethical dimensions of this project as a way to demonstrate its broader theoretical and practical implications for the field of transgender studies.

Keywords archive, transgender, military, research

In eighteen countries—including the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Canada—transgender people are able to serve openly in the military (Bendery 2014). Military policies in these countries either explicitly enable or implicitly allow transgender-identified individuals to take part in a range of military activities. In the United States, however, transgender people remain excluded from open military service. Though the September 2011 repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” made possible open service for gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women, current military policies still exclude transgender people from enlisting and/or disclosing their transgender identity while serving in the US armed forces. And yet, the Williams Institute estimated that nearly 150,000 transgender individuals either have served, or are currently serving, in some capacity in the US military (Gates and Herman 2014). Thus, although transgender people continue to serve their country in secrecy, policies in the US Department of Defense have been slow to change regarding the issue of open transgender service.

Because strict military policies forbid even alleged transgender identity during service (see Kerrigan 2012; Elders et al. 2014), very little is known about

transgender service members and veterans—particularly what their experiences have been while serving actively, or while serving in the National Guard or Reserve. While some transgender service members, such as Kristin Beck and Chelsea Manning, have received national media attention (e.g., Pengelly 2014; Schultz 2014), the lived experiences and attitudes of most transgender service members and veterans remain obscure.

Responding to this, we have been engaged in a multiyear data collection project. In this essay, we trace our ongoing efforts to contribute to a multimedia archive of transgender military experiences. Three questions animate our discussion: First, why create a transgender military archive? Second, what constitutes an archive of transgender military experience? And, third, what are the political stakes of developing this archive? To answer these questions, we draw on our own experiences as cultural and behavioral scholars who have been collecting qualitative and quantitative data about transgender military experiences. Along the way, we explore the political, legal, and ethical dimensions of our project as a way to demonstrate both the theoretical and practical implications of our endeavor.

Our collaboration began when, in the spring of 2013, the Palm Center released its first call for proposals through their Transgender Military Service Initiative (Palm Center 2013a). Specifically, the Palm Center requested proposals for studies in eleven key areas: (1) cost and complexity of care, (2) discrimination and readiness, (3) foreign militaries and transgender service, (4) institutional privacy accommodations, (5) organizational effectiveness and transgender inclusion, (6) physical standards and transgender service, (7) privacy in the US military, (8) transgender sports, (9) transgender medical accommodation, (10) uniform regulations, and (11) US military accommodation of serious medical conditions (Palm Center 2013b). The Palm Center's efforts were aimed at filling the gap in research on transgender military service in order to help lift the ban on open transgender service.

We submitted a proposal to the Palm Center aimed at gathering the experiences, challenges, and complexities of transgender veterans and active-duty service members, which was funded. Our study engaged mixed methods, including surveys and in-depth interviews, as well as archival and policy research. By the end of our first year of collaboration, we had collected nearly one hundred quantitative surveys from transgender veterans and active-duty service members; twelve in-depth interviews; a dense literature on military legal and medical policy; and six video-recorded interviews with transgender advocates, medical experts, and veterans.

As we further developed our project, we realized that we were creating a transgender military archive. Additionally, we became aware that given the US military's policies on transgender service, most of our participants had to take

part covertly in military service. Thus, we felt ourselves slowly transform into archivists working to make visible to broader public audiences the experiences of a group who has been rendered invisible. Our project became a covert operation, what the military describes as “an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor” (US Department of Defense 2015: 55). Covert operations are intended to create a political effect that can have implications in the military, intelligence, or law enforcement arenas (Berkin et al. 2014). Like all archives, the one we are helping to construct is “intentionally adapted to an audience for a particular persuasive purpose” (Rawson 2014: 25). Indeed, we have constructed our archive in order to share the stories of many service members who have served secretly under the ban and to disrupt or have a direct effect on such exclusionary military policies.

Why Create a Transgender Military Archive?

There is a dearth of knowledge about transgender military service. When we began developing our project, we could find only seven peer-reviewed publications on transgender military service, consisting primarily of secondary data about transgender veterans (see Elders et al. 2014). As we put together our grant proposal, it became clear how few researchers were gathering primary empirical data on this population, despite the high prevalence of transgender men and women with military status. Indeed, population-level data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey estimate that roughly 134,300 transgender individuals hold veteran or retired National Guard or Reserve status in the US military (Grant et al. 2011).

Yet, the construction of a transgender military archive is thwarted in at least three ways: First, because transgender people cannot openly identify and enlist or serve in the US military, those transgender individuals who are currently serving are less likely to talk to both internal and external researchers about their gender identity since they could be discharged from service (Harrison-Quintana and Herman 2013; Kerrigan 2012). Second, when research is conducted on the experiences of service members more generally (e.g., US Census), institutional exclusion often renders sexual and gender minorities invisible. For example, the Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers, one of the largest military studies, does not address the particular mental health of any sexual or gender minority, since it is based on data that were recorded before “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was repealed and under the current ban on transgender service (Hill and Barnett 2014). By ignoring the needs of transgender people in such important studies, the military reifies the misconception that there are no active transgender service members and that their needs are therefore irrelevant. Third, gaining access to transgender service members and veterans to conduct research is not an

easy task. How does one locate individuals who have been rendered institutionally invisible? Thus, even when researchers seek to address questions related to transgender military experiences, they are likely to run into myriad logistical challenges and institutional barriers.

Despite such challenges, we were determined to move forward with our project. Brandon Hill has been attending the “Southern Comfort Conference,” an annual gathering of transgender people as well as allies, health-care providers, vendors, and scholars, for several years. During his yearly visits to the conference, he has met numerous transgender veterans and heard stories about many others, and so “Southern Comfort 2013” seemed like an apt place to begin. The sense of safety produced by the conference, bolstered perhaps by our shared connection to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, increased the likelihood that people would drop by our booth and chat with us. Propped up on a stack of books, a small sign on our table asked passersby, “Are you a veteran or active duty servicemember?” That small sign, along with much casual conversation, drew people in, and we were quickly surprised at how many of the transgender attendees were military veterans.

After explaining our study and our purposes, we invited self-identified transgender veterans to complete a survey on one of several iPads. Once they finished the survey, we asked them if they had any questions, concerns, or suggestions about the questionnaire, and we told them about an opportunity to participate in an in-depth interview with Joshua Barnett. Before participants departed, we encouraged them to send our way other veterans and active-duty service members whom they knew at the conference. By the second day of the conference, nearly seventy-five people had taken our survey. As we met these transgender veterans, we heard over and over again something like this: “I’m so glad someone’s doing this. Our stories need to be told.”

Without a robust archive of transgender military experiences, researchers, medical experts, and advocates are ill equipped to combat prejudiced and misguided beliefs. For instance, Elaine Donnelly, who leads the right-wing Center for Military Readiness, routinely circulates misinformation about transgender individuals. In warning against the perils of transgender service, Donnelly claimed, “Now some people can see an incentive that would be created if young people who, for whatever reason, are confused about their sexuality—why, who knows, it baffles me—but if they decide, ‘well I know that my medical benefits are going to be covered,’ and so you join the military and if you know the military has to pay all of these medical benefits, then it becomes like a magnet” (qtd. in Tashman 2014). The Army’s *Standards of Medical Fitness*, the compendium of “medical conditions and physical defects which may render a Soldier unfit for further military service” (2011: 20), includes both “transsexual” and “gender identity

disorder” in a list of disorders that “render an individual administratively unfit rather than unfit because of physical illness or medical disability” (33). Like Donnelly, the military expresses a deep anxiety about the potential administrative challenges that they perceive open transgender service would pose.

The persuasive force of archives to provoke policy changes should not be understated. The repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2011 is a recent example of how discriminatory military policy yielded under the weight of new data. As Nathaniel Frank (2013) narrates in his history of the public information campaign that helped end the ban, in the beginning “there was little actual research allowing the national debate to trade in hard facts” (162). Without research (including statistical data as well as powerful narratives), advocates for the repeal were unable to convince policy makers that allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would not undermine the military’s efforts. In Frank’s telling of the story, research played a key role in repealing the policy: “When the world did finally turn to this issue because the political stars had aligned, a powerful record of research was available to the powerbrokers who would be pulling key levers” (165). That research archive served as a backdrop for political conversations, not only providing information but also shaping those discussions. A similarly robust transgender military archive could provide invaluable rhetorical resources as political debates about open transgender service in the US military continue to play out.

What Constitutes an Archive of Transgender Military Experience?

Given the exigencies to which we hoped to respond, we knew that our archive needed to be eclectic enough to offer both quantitative and qualitative accounts of transgender military experience, as well as visual imagery that humanized the individuals with whom we were engaged. Not only were we interested in transgender-identified service members’ and veterans’ knowledge and use of existing forms of medical care and accommodation offered by the Veterans Health Administration, but we also wanted to know more about their diverse experiences as transgender people who have served, or are currently serving, in the US military. We hoped to create an archive of transgender military experience that could contribute to both public understanding, and to policy makers’ understanding, of what it is like to participate in the US military as a transgender person.

We wanted to create archival records that would be useful for opponents of the US military ban’s specific purposes. “Hard data” would be needed, we thought, but so would compelling narratives, detailed stories about lived experiences, and visual images. The more complete a picture of transgender military experience we could provide, the more likely policy makers and public audiences would be to see these individuals as worthy of open military service. In a vote of confidence, both the Palm Center and Indiana University endorsed our methods

and materials with the understanding that all information would be collected confidentially and without any participant identifiers. Those who volunteered to be in videotaped interviews were asked to sign only a photo/video release agreement.

The impossibility of producing a complete archive is an inescapable fact that all archivists confront in practice. As Diana Taylor (2003) argues, important distinctions should be made between the archive and the repertoire, the latter consisting of “all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). The kinds of knowledge contained in the repertoire, such as “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, [and] singing” (20), were inaccessible to us since we were meeting people at a temporal and spatial remove from their lived experiences as transgender service members. Similarly, K. J. Rawson (2014) argues that “transgender phenomena prove quite challenging to the archive” (25) because of the extent to which they are experienced by and on the fleshly body. Indeed, much of what constitutes “transgender military experience” remains lodged in the bodies of service members in the form of visceral affects, emotions, and sensations that can be discussed after the fact but not necessarily archived in any conventional sense. Moreover, as Rawson points out, since transgender people may wish to forget some of their embodied memories, there are bound to be gaps between the kinds of knowledge transferred by the repertoire and the archive. The transfer of knowledge is an inescapably messy and incomplete practice.

We chose to create three kinds of archival records that might be persuasive to our different audiences. First, we created a questionnaire that asked about military history, motivations for enlistment, mental and physical health histories, and transgender “outness” and support. Survey data generated by the questionnaire have yielded several useful statistics that support advocacy for open transgender service. In particular, of the 106 transgender service members who participated in the survey (55 active duty, 51 veterans), transgender women made up the majority. Similar to current military demographics, the majority (51.5%) of transgender service members were serving or had served in the US Army, but all branches of service were represented in our sample. Additionally, transgender service members represented a wide range of military rank, ranging from entry-level enlistment to high-ranking officers, with an average of 8.4 years of military service (range 1–26 years).

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with transgender veterans and service members at the “Southern Comfort Conference.” Conducted by Barnett in a private suite at the conference hotel, the interviews were audio recorded, saved to a secure device, and later transcribed by a research assistant. While the survey enabled us to ask questions about current and past health, in-depth stories that

would better illuminate the richness of lived experience were solicited during the interviews. Drawing on narrative research methods, Barnett asked guiding questions but also encouraged participants to tell their own stories and to share narratives that they deemed important (see Barnett and Johnson 2013; Costa and Matzner 2007; Riessman 2008). Those with whom we talked shared stories about why they joined the military, how their gender identity positively and negatively impacted their experiences, how they navigated complex medical environments, the joys and struggles of transitioning during or after service, and much more. By inviting people to tell their stories, we followed Ann Cvetkovich's injunction to view archives as "repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (2003: 7). The in-depth interviews became the scene of highly charged emotional exchanges. Many feelings and emotions are thus captured in the audio recordings and, to a lesser extent, in the transcriptions of those encounters.

Third, we invited a still-smaller subset of those we interviewed to participate in a film project, independent of the qualitative and quantitative research, in which they could appear not merely as voices transcribed in an academic article but also as fleshly human beings with unique and important stories. Visualizing transgender service members' bodies does not resolve the complex challenges of archiving transgender phenomena (cf. Barnett 2015), but it does help to lend a human face to a population that has been rendered invisible by institutional discrimination.

After making clear our intentions to share these video interviews online and in future presentations, most participants declined to take part in the video interviews for privacy reasons. However, three self-identified transgender veterans did choose to sit for short video interviews. For these videos, veterans were asked to discuss one or two topics from their in-depth interview that they felt were particularly important or noteworthy. Additionally, a well-known transgender surgeon, Marci Bowers, and one of the United States' foremost transgender advocates, Mara Keisling, sat for filmed interviews in which they shared their professional opinions on transgender military service.

Our time at "Southern Comfort" in 2013 was a whirlwind of data collection, often necessitating eighteen-hour days overflowing with recruitment on the bustling convention floor, quiet and emotional interviews upstairs in our suite, attendance at relevant meetings and workshops, and the familiar social activities that dominate the evenings of most conferences. We were overwhelmed by the schedule, but also by the willingness of transgender service members to share their stories with us. Even as we disassembled our recruitment table on the convention

floor, people came by to talk to us, asking about our research and how they might get involved.

More than any of our other data collection activities, however, the video project pushed us up against the limits of our capacities as research archivists. Although we knew that videos might contribute to humanizing transgender service members, lending human faces and first-person narratives to the storehouse of resources available to policy makers and advocates, we learned quickly that even when people wanted to be in the video project they often could not for complex reasons. It was in moments like these, when people who were otherwise excited to tell their stories pulled away, that we felt the full force of the military's longstanding discrimination against transgender people.

What Are Some of the Political Stakes of

Creating an Archive of Transgender Military Experience?

An archive is not merely a repository of materials, a resting place for privileged historical documents. An archive is also, as Charles Morris notes, “a dynamic site of rhetorical power” (2006: 115). Archives make rhetoric—and thus politics—possible (see Biesecker 2006). Once collected, archival records can be given new life within diverse discourses. Though commonly understood as repositories of “the truth,” places where history goes to reside, archives are much messier and more malleable. “Far from a neutral or objective record of the past,” Rawson argues, “a transgender archive is . . . a rhetorical institution that is intentionally adapted to an audience for a particular persuasive purpose” (2014: 25). Just as advocates and policy makers drew on archives to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (see Frank 2013), so too will they rely on archives in their efforts to fully realize open transgender service in the US military.

Thus, the question is not *whether* our archive of transgender military experiences will be rhetorically mobilized, but *by whom, how, and for what* purposes. The question is, rather, what sort of politics will our archive enable? The forms that our archival records assume directly bear on issues related to transgender citizenship and on the lives and livelihoods of those transgender people who are currently serving secretly in the military, and the many others who hope to do so openly in the future.

While we could only speculate as to the full range of uses to which our archival records might be put, a number of concrete issues bear mentioning. The production of these records is itself a political act. As Alana Kumbier (2014) avers, archives can be scenes of community formation and thus of political force. For one, people can gather around archival records or in the places where they are stored. In the case of our research, people were also able to take part in creating the archive. Sharing details about their experiences, narrating stories about their lives,

and lending their images as rhetorical resources, transgender service members invested much in this project. Their investments reside not only in the archive as data to be considered by scholars, advocates, and policy makers but also as stories within the written record that will come out of this project. Those written records will articulate a shared community that most participants knew existed but had never heard much about. Thus, the act of production, and most especially of participation, is also an act of political resistance against forms of institutional discrimination and silencing.

Although we hoped from the beginning that our project would play a role in policy change, its potential political force was revealed to us in conversations with many of our participants. When we returned to the “Southern Comfort Conference” in 2014 to make a preliminary presentation about this work, we were excited to hear how enthused others were about our research findings. People who had completed our survey a year before were eager to hear what we learned, and even more enthusiastic to know how we planned to distribute the data and narratives to military officials, policy makers, and other transgender service members and veterans. Our research results suggest that the US military would not need to make radical transformations in its everyday operations. We were pleased that these findings resonated with audience members, many who took part in the research project. After hearing our report, transgender service members and veterans at conference events and receptions repeatedly encouraged us to share our findings with those who are in positions to effect policy changes, which we intend to do.

Further, our materials will ultimately reside in the care of the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, which has a rich history of housing some of the world’s most reputable archives in gender and sexuality studies, including a significant collection of transgender records. Lastly, we move forward knowing that our work does not stand alone but, rather, resonates with several other studies sponsored by the Palm Center and being undertaken by other researchers across the globe. In fact, twelve studies were commissioned by the Palm Center to investigate different aspects of transgender service. As these studies conclude and findings are put forth in the researchers’ respective disciplines, we expect to see much more documentation and archival records where a vast void once existed.

Of course, we hope that we are not the only researchers to mobilize these archival records as part of the ongoing effort to establish more inclusive forms of trans citizenship (cf. Cram 2012; West 2014). The three kinds of records we have generated lend rhetorical resources, in the form of data, stories, and visual images, to claims that transgender individuals have played and continue to play important roles in the US military. Moreover, our contributions make visible some of the experiences of transgender service members that have heretofore been

recorded mostly as ephemeral and anecdotal stories. A capacious definition of citizenship, one in which transgender individuals are both allowed and empowered to determine their own relationship to military service, depends in part on our collective capacity to recognize already existing performances of citizenship. This is, we hope, the kind of recognition our covert archival operation can help to accomplish.

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