

# Decent and indecent exposures: naked veterans and militarized (counter-)violences after war

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8 **Decent and Indecent Exposures:**  
9 **Naked Veterans and Militarized (Counter-)Violences after War**  
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12 ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the multiple and contradictory functions of barracks nostalgia for a veterans  
13 organization in the United States, Irreverent Warriors, and for its principal activity, the Silkies Hikes. Silkies Hikes are  
14 day-long events across the US in which military veterans, men and women, convene to hike in their underwear to  
15 prevent veteran suicide. The Hikes are more than exhibitionistic gatherings of nearly-naked veterans. They are  
16 elaborate rituals where veterans expose and deploy their bodies to navigate and survive return from war. Drawing on  
17 feminist and queer theoretical insights, I develop a reparative case study of the Hikes to explore three arguments. First,  
18 militarized nudity can be more than, and other than, violation. Second, nurturing militarized masculinity might be  
19 experienced as necessary for some veterans' post-war adjustment. Third, nostalgic re-enactments are not either/or re-  
20 /de-militarizing. Rather, Silkies Hikers are militarized subjects undergoing a de-militarization process which they  
21 experience as violent and traumatic so they in turn seek out, even demand, re-militarization, but re-militarization re-  
22 cast as a counter-violent manoeuvre. Consequently, the Silkies Hikes represent a critical opportunity to elaborate  
23 theories of militarized masculinity and foreground dilemmas involved in calling on endangered bodies to do the work  
24 of de-militarization.

25 KEYWORDS: military veterans, post-war adjustment, veteran suicide, militarized masculinity, nudity  
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28 *Who is to say what a stuckness is and what an arsenal is and when they are the same?*  
29 (Lauren Berlant, in Helms *et al.* 2010)  
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33 It's 13 May 2017 and a thick haze is evaporating off Mission Bay in San Diego, California.  
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35 It's chilly out at 8am, but that is not stopping approximately 650 men and women from taking  
36 their clothes off beside their parked cars. They strip down to their underwear, and not just any  
37 underwear: almost everyone is wearing green "silkies," the short and revealing boxer briefs that  
38 were once standard issue in the US Marine Corps, and for which active duty and veteran  
39 Marines harbor preternatural attachment. Most of the silkies wearers are Marines, but the  
40 other US military branches are represented, too. Of the 650 gathered, almost all are in their  
41 twenties and fit. About one-third of the Hikers are women and about one-third are black, Latinx  
42 or Asian. Now down to their silkies, they pull their khaki combat boots back on, then reach into  
43 their cars and place impossibly over-stuffed military packs onto their shoulders and backs, and  
44 walk to the park. They mill around tables offering coffee, donuts or pamphlets advertising  
45 various services. Some of them start to play volleyball. Others make jokes about a Twister board  
46 set up nearby. Several have brought props: lots of American flags, a blow-up sex doll, a sex toy  
47 mounted on a tricycle. A Silkies Hike is about to begin.  
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5 A veterans' group called Irreverent Warriors (IW), founded by Danny Maher and Ryan  
6 Loya and now incorporated as a non-profit charity in the US, staged the first Silkies Hike in San  
7 Diego on 25 July 2015. Since then, Silkies Hike coordinators have organized over 100 Hikes with  
8 12,000-plus participants across the US. On this day, the Silkies Hike was coming home to San  
9 Diego for a second time.  
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15 The outside observer, especially if a researcher, might be tempted to see a Silkies Hike  
16 as a quintessential parade of militarized masculinity. Indeed, the men continuously talk about,  
17 gesture towards and draw attention to their penises. Several Hikers, apparently unwilling to let  
18 their silkies do all the talking, use body paint to draw additional penises on their torsos and legs.  
19 A competitive spirit of physical one-upmanship prevails: if one Hiker breaks ranks to do pull-ups  
20 at a nearby playground, at least two dozen more follow suit. Asses are slapped. Whoops are  
21 hollered. The participants say the Silkies Hikes are a "celebration" and "just fun," an escape from  
22 the humdrum of civilian life and an opportunity to re-capture the "best parts" of military life.  
23 Steeped in nostalgia for the barracks life of basic training, the Hikes explicitly recreate and  
24 perform two of those so-called best parts: communal nudity and irreverent camaraderie.  
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33 But re-creating those parts, the Hikers say, fulfils "a deeper purpose" for their collective  
34 assembly. The tagline for the Hikes is "22 with 22 for the 22," meaning 22 km hiked with 22 kg  
35 on Hikers' backs to commemorate the twenty-two veterans who are said to commit suicide each  
36 day in the US.<sup>1</sup> Second, the Hikers claim that communal nudity and irreverent camaraderie  
37 actively work to *prevent* veteran suicide. Hiking in their underwear, they say, allows them to  
38 drop their guard to be able to give and receive social support otherwise unavailable to them in  
39 civilian life, including through orthodox therapies of rehabilitation and adjustment, which many  
40 of the Hikers distrust. The event invite for each Hike states,  
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48 These hikes support and spread our bottom line: "put the gun back on safe, put it back on the  
49 nightstand, and stick around a bit longer." The hike provides the therapy and treatment for veterans  
50 suffering from post-traumatic stress and other stressors to effectively prevent suicide by using  
51 humor and camaraderie to heal mental wounds.  
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53 I first emailed Danny Maher, one of Irreverent Warriors co-founders, in 2016 while  
54 researching veteran-led organizations in the US. Danny is gregarious and speaks in long  
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3 sentences without filler words. He joined the Marine Corps when he was 26, eventually  
4 becoming a captain. He would have stayed in the military but various physical injuries  
5 (dislocated shoulders, broken ankles) sustained during successive deployments led to his  
6 medical discharge in 2014. He is now in his 30s and runs a web-based comedy site called VetTV.  
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8 During our first interview, he explained,  
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12 So, hiking in our underwear prevents suicide because... it enables us to come together in a familiar  
13 environment... So, we're exposed, we're laughing, we're comfortable. Those three things facilitate  
14 social interaction. Social interaction leads to social connection, which leads to bonds between the  
15 participants. Those bonds lead to support [so] when the VA [Veterans Administration] isn't there  
16 and when their wife leaves them or when they flunk out of school, that support group that they  
17 met at this event is what can keep them alive and keep them successful, get them back in the game.  
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20 "We will be the most effective Veteran community in the United States," the website for the  
21 Hikes says. "The END RESULT is fewer veterans who kill themselves."<sup>2</sup> These big claims tell a  
22 different story about the Silkies Hikes, one where they are *more than* celebratory enactments of  
23 militarized masculinity.  
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27 This article asks: *what happens to veterans' bodies, and to theories about veterans'*  
28 *bodies, when subjects deploy the symbols and practices of militarized masculinity to*  
29 *simultaneously re-make and un-make it?* It contends that Silkies Hikers are militarized subjects  
30 undergoing a process of de-militarization which they experience as violent and traumatic so  
31 they in turn seek out, even demand, re-militarization but re-militarization re-cast as a counter-  
32 violent manoeuvre. Drawing on critical feminist and queer theoretical insights, the article  
33 locates silkies as a symbol-object and the Hikes as practice-spaces that, even while reinforcing  
34 aspects of militarization, "might also create spaces for a radical re-appropriation" of  
35 militarization "outside of war-making projects" (Crane-Seeber 2016: 51). It makes three main  
36 arguments. First, the Hikers' deployment of silkies and insistence on the therapeutic necessity of  
37 nude camaraderie suggests that militarized nudity can be other than, and more than, violation.  
38 Second, the Hikers paradoxically suggest nurturing militarized identity might be necessary for  
39 their post-war survival and civilian integration (i.e., *de-militarization*).  
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51 Third, the Hikers resurrect certain militarized practices – rucking (walking with loaded  
52 backpacks), the nudity/irreverence of barracks life and the wearing of military textiles with  
53 patriotic accessories – that function not to *re-militarize per se*, but to improvise violence  
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3 prevention. Successive Hikes, I suggest, iterate a discourse and practice of suicide prevention  
4 that simultaneously *re-/de*-militarize in order to help participants resist the pervasive violence of  
5 return-from-war. The Hikes *re*-militarize in several ways, including the creation of a veteran-only  
6 space, with many Hikers saying that periodic, purposive escape from the civilian world is  
7 necessary to survive it. They also aim to partially dismantle militarized masculine tropes of the  
8 stoic warrior suffering in silence and to de-stigmatize help-seeking through their own anti-  
9 institutional brand of alternative therapy. I say partially because the Hikes aspire to challenge  
10 only some aspects of the militarized inheritance.<sup>3</sup> All three arguments expound a related insight:  
11 repeated performance of militarized masculinity is never a carbon copy of a prior, originally  
12 instilled militarization that remains stable from basic training through to life after military  
13 service, but is instead always re-worked and transformed. Because the Silkies Hikes reproduce  
14 objects and practices of militarization that potentially also subvert aspects of it, they are a  
15 critical site for any study of militarized masculinity and an important case study for queer and  
16 feminist global politics.  
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28 To analyze these arguments, I develop a narrative and interpretive study of the Silkies  
29 Hikes, based on interviews with the Hikes' two creators, Danny and Ryan, and with twelve San  
30 Diego Hikers, and on participant observation of the 2017 San Diego Hike.<sup>4</sup> I draw from the  
31 interview transcripts with all twelve San Diego Hikers to identify and build a narrative of a  
32 common, shared experience. That commonality is important because it echoes and widens the  
33 intentionality of Danny and Ryan as the Hikes' founders. It also situates the significance of the  
34 Hikes to the thousands of military veterans who participate in them each year. I additionally  
35 make extended reference to the narrated experiences of Danny, Ryan and four of the San Diego  
36 Hikers – Josiah, Rosie, Maribel and Bill – to explore key themes about how and why they attach  
37 meaning, including therapeutic and counter-violent meaning, to the Hikes' deployment of  
38 communal nudity and irreverent camaraderie.<sup>5</sup>  
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48 To explore this complex terrain, I start with a conceptualization of militarized  
49 masculinity anchored to feminist and queer theoretical insights, and then move on to  
50 empirically analyze and theorize the Hikes' "decent" (nudity as therapeutic) and "indecent"  
51 (veteran-led suicide prevention as a counter-violent gesture to the bodily precarity of return-  
52 from-war) exposures. Both empirical sections address the experiences of both men and women  
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Hikers to show that although silkies literally foreground the penis, the Hikes do not inevitably reinscribe veterans' bodies as solely male. My aim throughout is to produce research that seeks not just to *incorporate* but to be *affected by* veteran-led narrations and performances, including through the transformation of research theories, methods and outputs (Bulmer and Jackson 2016: 26).

### THEORIZING MILITARIZED MASCULINITY

Enloe (2000: 291) defined *militarization* as “the step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria.” The theory asserts a mutually constitutive relationship between militarized violence and masculine gender identity (Morgan 1994). Accordingly, *militarized masculinity* reveals how training bodies for war and maintaining civilian support for a state's war-making projects both rely on the valorization of militarized and masculinist ideals (Richter-Montpetit and Weber 2016: 12). Militarized masculinity is also a useful frame for understanding *post-war* injury and violence, including how previously militarized bodies continue to rely on the military institution for post-war survival and identity (Enloe 2000: 3).

Alongside the many contributions of this scholarship (Henry 2017: 186-189) is critical feminist recognition that it often “ends up producing the effects that it names” through the rehearsal of a binary and “generalised story” (Welland 2013: 882-885) about militarized masculinity that gets concretized through iteration “even though much of the scholarship upon which the generic storyline rests is both nuanced and rigorous” (Stern and Zalewski 2009: 619). According to such a story, men and women *inevitably* internalize and act out the *pre-determined* and *pre-existing* logics of misogyny, heterosexism, racism and othering practices that they naturally and passively absorb through training and consequently perform on others in the field of deployment (such as through soldier-initiated and –orchestrated prisoner abuse, torture and killing) and with each other (when masculinized horseplay primes subjects to be perpetrators and victims of rape and sexual assault). The generalized story presumes the (pre-)existence of starkly positive and negative productions of both gender and militarization. In response, “doing gender” differently (Stern and Zalewski 2009: 622) is presumed capable of producing progressive de-militarizations.

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Howell (2018) advocates discarding the term “militarization” in favor of “martial politics,” in part from concern about generalized story-telling, where “concepts intended to be “critical” and subversive... often become taken-for-granted heuristics with implied rather than explained meanings” (MacKenzie *et al.* 2019: 1). “Militarization,” Howell (2018: 119) argues, projects a fantasy where bad militarized subjects (such as veterans) pollute otherwise good, non-militarized political spaces (as if a non-militarized past exists to which to retreat) and ignores martial and racist violence such as police brutality. A robust debate has followed, with Eichler (MacKenzie *et al.* 2019: 11) arguing, “Martial politics may be a useful tool in the feminist toolbox, but ... [it] misses important nuances in the lived experiences of those who are most obviously entangled in the politics of (de)militarization.” I agree with Eichler that veterans are more than “martial subjects”; therefore, theories of militarized masculinity should not be discarded or bracketed but elaborated, their multiple and contradictory performativity fleshed out.

Another risk is that the generalized story of militarized masculinity gets transcribed onto subjects’ actions without academic or policy inquiry into, or engagement with, subjects themselves (Bulmer and Jackson 2016). The motivations, memories, opinions and actions of veterans sometimes do not feature in empirical and theoretical work that invokes them.<sup>6</sup> This risk of exclusion does not imply that the literature on militarized masculinity has not sensitively engaged veteran participants in nuanced ways. Much feminist work has highlighted the critical importance of human-subject fieldwork with active-duty personnel and veterans (Baker *et al.* 2016). And, veteran-centered research has produced key insights about the diverse ways in which veterans deploy agency to re-work their relations to each other, to civilians and to the processes and institutions of militarization, re-militarization and de-militarization (Schrader 2019: 65). Crucially, as Welland did (2013: 884), I want to acknowledge that pointing out “how easily a generalised rendition of soldiering identities can be generated” risks constructing its own false binary between my own ostensibly critical approach and a presumed academic canon that conceptualizes militarized masculinity monolithically.

Nudity and irreverent camaraderie might be aspects of the militarized inheritance that are particularly susceptible to generalized story-telling. In part, that is because of important insights that have linked militarized hazing and bonding rituals, frequently structured around

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3 group nudity, to violent abuse of civilians, detainees and fellow military personnel (Welland  
4 2013: 890; Richter-Montpetit 2007: 45). Upholding how such rituals promote cohesion  
5 camouflages how they exclude bodies based on lines of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender  
6 conformity and class (Higate 2012).<sup>7</sup> Belkin's work (2012) on hazing rituals and male-male sexual  
7 abuse in the US military accentuates militarized masculinity's *perpetual* but also *contradictory*  
8 and *contingent* operability. The military does not only call on subjects to avow masculinity and  
9 disavow its un-masculine foils (the queer, the feminine); it forces them to enter more  
10 ambivalent relationships with these traits. It is through contradiction and simultaneity, not  
11 binary opposition and hierarchical order, that pervasive and confusing discursive practices that  
12 result in abuse are maintained.  
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22 Anchoring theorization of militarized masculinity to *multiplicity* and *contradiction*, as  
23 Belkin and others do, helps to problematize deterministic story-telling even if reification via  
24 academic production is unavoidable (Enloe 2016). Such theorization grounds recent work  
25 exploring diverse sites of veteran sense-making about war and concluding that such sites are  
26 complex, contradictory, not at all "straightforward" (Schrader 2019; Dyvik and Welland 2018;  
27 Bulmer and Jackson 2017; Basham 2015). These studies are alert to ways that militarized  
28 subjects challenge inherited assumptions and practices even while they seemingly (re)enact  
29 them.  
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37 Centered on contradiction and multiplicity, militarized masculinity comes into focus as a  
38 queer sort of subjectivity, where militarized masculine veterans are simultaneously "one thing  
39 and/or another" (Richter-Montpetit 2018: 230). Not coincidentally, veterans frequently  
40 experience the process of post-war adjustment as an abnormal and perverse one, removed  
41 from prior habitual experience. Still, myths of there being a normal, ideal return persist,  
42 predicated on veterans breaking with the past in order to belong to an imagined and idealized  
43 *post-war, non-combatant* time-space.  
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50 Yet, the discourses and practices of return-from-war, including its modalities and  
51 assistance components, are often saturated in separation and un-belonging and are frequently  
52 non-integrative and anti-integrative in effect. On the one hand, while the state, civilians and  
53 veterans are ostensibly co-involved in dismantling veteran identity so that veterans can re-  
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3 acquire civilian identity, all three tend to participate in a political, economic and social project  
4 that continues to set veterans apart. In America, they are prioritized. They board airplanes first,  
5 and the mere invocation of them as a group influences debates across a range of issues, from  
6 gun control to police brutality (*National Public Radio* 2018; Lucier *et al.* 2018). On the other  
7 hand, veterans are simultaneously “known” to be disproportionately numbered among mal-  
8 adapted, non-integrated groups: the homeless, the drug and alcohol dependent, the  
9 unemployed (US Department of Housing and Urban Development and US Department of  
10 Veterans Affairs 2010). They are perpetually more than, and less than, civilians. Moreover,  
11 portrayals of veterans in popular culture, media, and policymaking center how ill-equipped they  
12 are for civilian life, naturalizing an *impossible* integration, an inevitably *stunted* and *warped*  
13 adjustment because of a fixed, insuperable inheritance of militarized masculinity (Green *et al.*  
14 2010).

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25 It is not just that veteran and queer subjects have things in common, although queer  
26 theory certainly has a soft spot for misunderstood, insouciant subjects.<sup>8</sup> The Hikes are fertile  
27 ground for queer readings (*plural*) for multiple other reasons, including the event’s explicit,  
28 knowing homo-eroticism.<sup>9</sup> *So, what is queer about my particular reading of the Hikes?* First,  
29 reference to queer theory can reveal how some subjects can experience nearly-nude, homo-  
30 erotic camaraderie as life-affirming/life-saving *because* such camaraderie remains taboo within  
31 civilian culture. Second, male Hikers’ assertion about the therapeutic value of homo-eroticism  
32 *elevates* non-normative modes of male-male companionship (as opposed to *disparaging* them),  
33 thus challenging any presumption that militarized masculinity works linearly to reify hetero-  
34 normative modes of action and thought. For Hikers, the buttoned-up, heteronormative civilian  
35 world is where veteran suicide happens specifically because it fails to incorporate nude,  
36 irreverent male-male interactions, considering them abnormal. Re-creation of the homo-  
37 eroticism of barracks life is not performed to mock or regulate homo-erotic relationality but to  
38 flirt with it and derive benefits from it. Third, and an idea I return to in the empirical section on  
39 suicide prevention below, the Hikers queer understandings of the death drive in ways that  
40 complement the anti-social turn in queer theory. I am not arguing that any of these queer  
41 moves is stable or unified during or after the Hikes; just that they are present and productive.  
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3 Return-from-war regimes can be read as placing veterans in a double bind familiar to  
4 queer subjects: such regimes perpetuate myths about ideal/perverse behaviors of return whilst  
5 imprinting returned bodies with new stamps of *un*-belonging and *extra*-belonging. The process  
6 of return must therefore be read as a *continuation of the war-making process* rather than as a  
7 *post-war* event. Combined, these insights suggest the need for subject-centred case studies  
8 where veterans narrate and navigate return from war (Connell 2005: 258), and where the  
9 research objective is bi-directional in its articulation: *what do theories of militarized masculinity*  
10 *reveal about veterans banding together to prevent veteran suicide, but also what can veterans'*  
11 *post-war experiences reveal about theories of militarized masculinity?* Articulation of militarized  
12 masculinity *alongside* veterans' lived experience corrects for the tendency of post-war subjects  
13 to go missing in many theorized accounts.  
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### 23 **PARANOID VS. REPARATIVE INDECENCY**

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25 Before proceeding to the empirical sections of the article, some methodological  
26 explication and caveats are needed. My approach is structured around narrative  
27 contextualization and theorization. First, I collate the claims the Silkies Hikers make about  
28 communal nudity and irreverent camaraderie as therapeutic and enlivening – *life-affirming* and  
29 *life-saving*. I identify the operability and efficacy of the objects (silgies) and ritual practices (the  
30 Hikes) that the Hikers have improvised in order to foreground their claims, and to inquire into  
31 what gives those claims their bodily shape. Not to *prove* that Hikes effect net de-militarization  
32 through some prior test or calculation of my devising, but to inquire into how and why Hikers  
33 ascribe meaning to these events. Privileging Hikers' own claims enacts a critical form of feminist  
34 theorizing, attuned to problematizing the gap between complex lived experience and what gets  
35 hegemonically constructed as "normal" (Wibben 2010: 1-2), and therefore also to the narrative  
36 power of exploring subjects' accounts of non-normative action. Narrativity also reflects subjects'  
37 own accounts: Danny narrates the Hikes as exhibiting a complex affective logic that proceeds  
38 from discomfort to nudity to humor about nudity to comfort to vulnerable disclosure to mutual  
39 support to suicide prevention.  
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52 Narrativity is also a theoretical and political act (Wibben 2010: 2). As a *methodological*  
53 choice, narrativity is purposive, drawing attention to academic and policy "distrust ... of life story  
54 as a piece of legitimate, credible evidence, of narrative as a way of knowing" (Krystalli 2019:  
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3 173) that de-prioritizes veterans' own claims. As a *theoretical* intervention, narrativity  
4 foregrounds critical disjuncture: first, between hegemonic therapeutic modality and veteran-led  
5 activism; and second, between idealized constructions of return-from-war and Hikers' lived  
6 experiences of it, where veteran suicide is not passively sustained *on the homefront* but is  
7 experienced as something *caused by the homefront* and therefore *by de-militarization* (Zahava  
8 and Stein 2017).  
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15 To further explicate and rationalize my approach to veteran-led narration, I want to  
16 borrow from another queer theoretical insight: an assertion that both reparative and paranoid  
17 readings of the Hikes are possible. A paranoid reading is one that "places its faith in [ideological]  
18 exposure," "a hermeneutics of suspicion" (Sedgwick 2003: 138). In contrast, a reparative reading  
19 "think[s] with... rather than against" subjects and avoids "critiquing their refusals and  
20 backwardness" (Love 2007: 23). It "wants to confer plenitude on an object that will then have  
21 resources to offer to an inchoate self" precisely because dominant knowledge and hegemonic  
22 interventions are "inadequate or inimical to nurture" (Sedgwick 2003: 149). A paranoid reading  
23 of the Hikes might insist that to qualify as therapeutic or subversive, the Hikes must offer up  
24 consistent performances of calculable net de-militarization. It might conclude, "Sure, these  
25 Hikers sound sincere, but I saw a news segment about a Hike and saw only bravado and patriotic  
26 strutting."  
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36 A reparative reading responds, "I saw that, too, *and more*. Also, *the Hikers say* that what  
37 you and I see does not interest them much because veterans are killing themselves, so what  
38 they see and say matter more to them. What they see is celebration *and* mourning. And what  
39 they say is that they are not capable of or interested in up-ending a world's worth of war-  
40 making but are instead using the tools at their disposal to stay alive." Again, *the militarized*  
41 *subject can be both one thing and/or another*. In this and many other respects, the Hikes are  
42 particularly fruitful for reparative readings of veterans' subjectivity because of how veterans'  
43 activism might always be both re-/de-militarizing (Schrader 2019).  
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51 At the same time, narration is always mediated and incomplete (Ackerly and True 2008:  
52 694). And, even reparative ethnographic practice entails frequent paranoid glances over one's  
53 shoulder: how will my research partners, people I spent time with and who trusted me with  
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3 personal stories of loss and hope, greet my work? They are bound to see less of them in this  
4 work than they, or I, had hoped, and because of academic production practices (word limits,  
5 reviewers' suggestions) unrelated to their experiences and aspirations (Krystalli 2019: 184). My  
6 narrative account is troublingly partial, collected from a small subset of Hikers at one Hike and  
7 edited around my objectives, not theirs. Yet, the research process is not just inherently limiting  
8 but *affectively productive*: the residue of relational engagement is not just dissonance but the  
9 generation of moving insights between researcher-researched (Fujii 2018; Hemmings 2012:  
10 151). Related to this possibility, I understand narrative reflexivity as theorizing with and  
11 alongside subjects rather than at them after the fact. I operationalized such a commitment by  
12 interviewing subjects "on their own turf" (Sylvester 2013: 50) and formulating open-ended  
13 questions to maximize narrative opportunities (Fujii 2018: 45); e.g., "Tell me about what you're  
14 wearing," instead of "Why are you wearing silkies." During the writing-up phase, this  
15 commitment entailed using Hikers' own words to build theories of meaning and prioritizing  
16 narratives that challenged "the status of the expert" and emphasized "shared epistemic claims  
17 from below" (Hemmings 2012: 151).

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30 A related challenge inherent in narrating and analyzing the Silkies Hikes concerns  
31 audience: whose meaning should be narrated, and how? The Hikes are for veterans only.  
32 Because they occur in public, however, they attract a mostly civilian audience of casual  
33 bystanders generically supportive of any assembly of veterans but lacking full understanding  
34 about what Hikers' assembly means. The Hikes also generate media coverage, which also  
35 produces an uninformed audience: journalists usually arrive and leave early, emphasize the  
36 spectacle of underwear-clad men, excluding women, and gloss over the meaning that Hikers  
37 give to silkies and the Hikes.

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45 Although diverse audiences undoubtedly impact on meaning production, this article  
46 privileges Hikers' own narratives about the Hikes. First, the Hikes are not parades. They are  
47 advertised to attract veteran participants, not spectators. Any spectatorship is incidental. They  
48 are enclosed, even solipsistic, events, "just us with us" as one Hiker put it. Second, the Hikes  
49 proceed despite, and arguably because of, civilian confusion about them. Danny said the Hikes  
50 are veteran-only

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3 because it enables the veterans who show up to feel more comfortable being themselves. They already  
4 feel different because they're a veteran. But when you put them in a group of a bunch of other veterans,  
5 they don't feel different, they feel normal. If you had a bunch of civilians in there, they would still feel  
6 different.  
7

8 Of course, my own narration of the Hikes inevitably constructs an additional, scholarly audience  
9 (Ravecca and Dauphinée 2018). Scholarly encounter with the Hikes might reveal the possibilities  
10 *and/or* limits of thinking about re-/de-militarizing practices, or open up space to think about  
11 post-war return as necessitating re-enacting *and/or* shedding military identity.  
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16 Additional caveats are also needed. Suggesting that the Hikes *can* de-militarize tropes  
17 about masculine stoicism and feminized help-seeking does not mean that they always do. Also,  
18 in explicitly branding themselves “celebrations” of military service, the Hikes appear  
19 uninterested in engaging broader debates about the morality, efficacy and violent legacies of  
20 America's wars. Irreverence, then, is bounded; it does not extend as gleefully to military norms  
21 that discourage dissent deemed non-normative, unpatriotic or overly political. The Hikes'  
22 celebratory vibe might additionally gloss over the absence of injured others, including those  
23 whose serious physical and mental injuries prevent them from feeling comfortable being nearly  
24 naked amidst mostly able-bodied and attractive Hikers,<sup>10</sup> or the Iraqi and Afghan injured and  
25 war dead, further othered whenever focus shifts to concern for returned veterans. But, these  
26 tensions are very much the point: participants' performances should not be framed as either/or  
27 a moment of militarization.  
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38 Danny, Ryan and Hike organizers are used to having to win over sceptics who doubt the  
39 efficacy of the Hikes. I asked Danny, “What if someone said, ‘How does hiking in your underwear  
40 stop suicide?’” He scoffed and replied, “What if? I've heard that a hundred times!” Paranoid  
41 practices therefore do not only shape academic knowledge production; they affectively  
42 constitute fields of embodied experience and action. Normatively, silkies scepticism discounts  
43 veterans' narrations of their own pain and therapeutic preferences. Scepticism obscures  
44 recognition that it is also possible to bridge paranoid and reparative accounts.<sup>11</sup> It has long been  
45 recognized, for example, that social connectivity is critical to happy post-war transition (Schuetz  
46 1945) and provides *alternative*, not just *complementary*, benefits to mental health recovery  
47 (Beehler *et al.* 2014).  
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3 If the motifs of a reparative reading are multiplicity, contradiction and subject-centered  
4 narration, then methodologically, theorizing militarized masculinity alongside veterans' lived  
5 experiences entails articulating Hikers' self-understandings of the meaning, necessity and  
6 function of the Hikes and then analyzing the Hikes as performances that extend and (re)produce  
7 militarization but also tweak it. In the sections that follow, I turn to Hikers' performances of two  
8 such tweaks: nudity and suicide prevention.  
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### 13 14 **NAKED NOSTALGIA: A COMPLICATED INHERITANCE** 15

16 This section builds on Hikers' narratives about silkies and irreverent camaraderie to  
17 explore nudity during the Hikes as *inter-play* between elements of a multiple, contradictory  
18 inheritance of militarized masculinity. That inter-play, in turn, suggests that nudity can be  
19 therapeutic – more than, and other than, violation. In the interviews, the Hikers identified the  
20 importance of several Hike components. The Hikes are:  
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- 25 • Outdoor;
- 26 • Social;
- 27 • Nearly naked;
- 28 • Fun/celebratory;
- 29 • Humorous/irreverent;
- 30 • Day-long to facilitate meaningful social interaction;
- 31 • Veteran-only;<sup>12</sup> and
- 32 • Performed in memory of the 22 but not for them, because they are
- 33 • Emphatically for living participants only, not to “raise awareness” about suicide but  
34 to “prevent” it.  
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44 The Hikes are re-militarizing because they (over)display the material symbols of military  
45 service: boots, packs, flags, insignia, marching. Additionally, the Hikers' nostalgic recall of  
46 military service in what they wear and how they hike is essential to the events. Specifically, the  
47 Hikers say that overt re-creation of the communal nudity and irreverent camaraderie of barracks  
48 life is necessary for their survival in the civilian world. Ryan, IW's co-founder and a sergeant in  
49 the Marine Corps, served two deployments in Afghanistan and then became a drill instructor in  
50 San Diego. He left the military in 2017. Both Danny and Ryan lost close friends to suicide after  
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3 they returned from their respective deployments. Talking about veterans who struggle with  
4 loneliness, alienation and depression, he said,

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6 "Oh, I'm miserable. I don't know what's missing," until you re-introduce that setting [of nudity and irreverence]  
7 and put a bunch of veterans together again and it's, like, "Ok, *this* is what I was missing."  
8

9 With these words, he connects barracks nostalgia to coping and survival.  
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### 11 **Making Dicks Ridiculous**

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14 What kind of nudity do the Hikes produce? Can it be pinned down? The meaning of  
15 nudity for the Hikes does not involve either reifying or dispensing with the penis (getting around  
16 it) but approaching it *through silkies*. Long before Danny and Ryan conceived of the Hikes, silkies  
17 occupied a prominent position in US Marine Corps culture, due to how they frame and fit the  
18 male body. One writer explained, "The 2.25-inch inseam doesn't leave much to the  
19 imagination..." (*Marine Corps Times* 2014). Silkies are a key site of initiation. The individual's first  
20 remembered reaction to silkies is one of discomfort and awkwardness about having to wear  
21 something so revealing. Then, once that individual becomes acculturated to, and is accepted  
22 into, military life, discomfort and awkwardness morph into fond attachment and familiarity.  
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29 Ryan explained,  
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31 [Silkies are] famous or infamous. To this day, Marines still love their silkies. It's just a certain  
32 intangible. It's something that when you get to recruit training, you're like, "What the hell? Those  
33 are tiny. That's what we're supposed to run in?" ... And then after you get into the club, you're like,  
34 "Yeah, silkies!" It's kind of something everybody knows.  
35

36 The shift occurs not just through repeated wearing of silkies but through humor about them.

37 Danny said, "[Humor is] how we respond to that uncomfortable situation." Each of the 12 Hikers  
38 I interviewed drew from a seemingly endless repertoire to express their humorous affection for  
39 silkies, calling them "the comfiest thing ever," "the best thing the Marine Corps ever did," "the  
40 shorts of God," "God's gift to the Marines," "booty shorts of freedom" and "the greatest field  
41 panties in the world."  
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47 The ludic quality of Hikers' descriptions establishes silkies as fetish objects, if their  
48 accentuation of the penis had not already done so. Silkies occupy a liminal status between  
49 materiality and corporeality. They clothe but they de-nude. During the Hikes, they are what  
50 mark and unite the bodies assembled and they are also the reason for gathering: the Hikes call  
51 on bodies to gather *in silkies*. Through attachment and familiarity, they become an appendage  
52 of the body and of the military, just as uniforms and fetish gear often do (Crane-Seeber 2016).  
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5 Josiah, early 20s, white, tanned, toned, confident and smiling, said he had opted to  
6 leave his silkies liners in because “we’re in public and I don’t want to dangle too much right  
7 now.” At the San Diego Hike, he was just about to leave the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, saying he was  
8 grateful to have an event like the Silkies Hike to ease the transition. He went on to explain, “I  
9 think that the silkies are a very important part of the shenanigans aspect of the Marine Corps, if  
10 you know what I’m trying to say, of the fun side and the brotherhood side, you know?” Our  
11 interview continued:  
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16 *What brought you out today?*

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18 Um, I saw it on Facebook and I was like --, it was a cause I could relate with. I’m down to cause a ruckus  
19 with 500 other Marines wearing silkies in public so I’m not going to turn that down, you know?  
20

21 *What can you relate to about it?*

22  
23 I mean, I’ve lost friends to suicide and I’ve been there myself, too, to a certain extent at least [*here, his*  
24 *voice cracks*]. It’s something within the military that you’re never really going to escape and, like they’ve  
25 been saying, the awareness is there but the follow-through isn’t necessarily quite caught up with that  
26 yet. So, I think that things like this, where it’s getting that network, getting that brotherhood that’s kind  
27 of missing... it’s kind of trying to grow that again, which I think is great, you know.

28  
29 I’ll return to Josiah’s disclosure of his proximity to suicide. Here, I want to focus on how silkies  
30 function as an object of memory and desire for him. Silkies signal shenanigans. They are aligned  
31 with the fun side, the brotherhood side. Recalling the sociality of military life, silkies are a potent  
32 symbol of the aspects of military life for which many veterans are most nostalgic. Silkies  
33 foreground the desires and aspirations of Hikers: what they miss *about war after war*.  
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39 As symbols of life in the military, silkies conjure contradictory messages. On the one  
40 hand, fetish objects accentuate desire. Silkies take veterans back to desired memory-spaces, to  
41 the barracks and the showers, to irreverent humor, to *reliable* social interactions, part of the  
42 military everyday. On the other, in acknowledging the need for the fetish object to transport  
43 them back, the Hikers signal the other function of fetish objects: they project desire by signaling  
44 *lack*. Each Hiker reiterated the importance of camaraderie, irreverence and humor because they  
45 are felt as “kind of missing” in their post-war life, and that lack has made their bodies vulnerable  
46 to diverse forms of violence, including suicide. If there is a fun side and a brotherhood side,  
47 there is also a traumatic flip side that can be addressed and prevented only through the silkies’  
48 projection of the fun/brotherhood side. Like all nostalgias, silkies nostalgia is deeply partial -- it  
49 recalls certain elements of a past experience while obscuring others. Yes, silkies are a “silly  
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3 object” capable of counter-political punch (Berlant 1997: 12) *because* they juxtapose efficacy of  
4 “high” and “low” forms of therapeutic modality. *But silly objects are slippery*: they can redress  
5 trauma yet, in so doing, always also risk perpetuating that same trauma through re-articulation  
6 of bodily resilience. Success stories, be they the Invictus Games (Cree and Caddick 2019) or the  
7 US Army’s embrace of positive psychology, “prevent soldiers’ ‘pessimistic’ responses to war”  
8 (Howell 2015: 15) and place responsibility for war’s injuries back onto veterans’ shoulders.  
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15 IW’s use of silkies during the Hikes was accidental. The potential therapeutic value of  
16 spending time together in nature was the Hikes’ initial impetus. During an emotionally  
17 meaningful hike after Danny learned a close military friend had committed suicide, he realized,  
18

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20 If I brought some of my combat veteran friends who are all fucked up in the head out here, I was like, I  
21 know this would un-fuck lots of their mental issues, just to go through this... I could literally save some  
22 dudes’ lives by bringing them out here.

23  
24 Ryan responded, “Dude, let’s step it up. Let’s do it in silkies.” Ryan says he suggested wearing  
25 silkies because it would “be hilarious and draw a lot more attention.” But what initially seemed  
26 like a frivolous add-on, designed more to capture media attention and draw a bigger crowd,  
27 became integral to the event. Danny and Ryan both connect the concept of silkies as “a joke” to  
28 what they described as their “deeper meaning.” Danny said,  
29

30  
31 I knew they make guys smile... My initial thought was we’ll laugh and have fun. That’s it -- fun. I didn’t  
32 understand the deeper meaning behind, or the deeper importance of the silkies, until [after] a couple  
33 months of Hikes.  
34

35  
36 Different from other rituals of communal nudity that reify the penis, memories of silkies as “a  
37 joke” function instead to de-nude the penis while emphasizing it. They deconstruct the penis by  
38 making its *over*-exposure in silkies into a joke. Silkies make dicks of the men who wear them, but  
39 what kind of dicks get made? In other words, building on Weber’s (1998: 95) conclusion to her  
40 discussion of a 1996 ad for *Men’s Health* featuring the drag artist RuPaul, if something is a joke,  
41 “who is the joke on?” Like the *Men’s Health* ad, if silkies are a joke, they are a joke at the  
42 expense of “masculine men” and “men in drag as men.” Silkies are venerable because venerated  
43 as a joke, and their status as a joke makes dicks ridiculous. Since the joke is a familiar one, Danny  
44 argues, it fosters self-comfort and comfort with others.  
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52 Bill is mid-40s, white, and has a son in the military. He lost a close veteran friend to  
53 suicide and has attended several Hikes. He juxtaposed the self-comfort and comfort-with-others  
54 instilled during the Hikes with his experience of communion with the civilian world. He said,  
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3 If coming here and being a knucklehead for a day makes you forget about some things or at least makes  
4 you feel normal again --, I think sometimes, you know, this is the only place like I could run through here  
5 and slap everybody in the nuts and get away with it, you know what I mean? It's the only place you can  
6 be this kind of silly still. Or if you want to have a conversation about things you've seen and done where  
7 people don't look at you like your hair's on fire. You know what I mean? Or people don't ask stupid  
8 questions here, either, you know. Sometimes you go somewhere and they're like, 'You're a veteran.'  
9 And the first question they ask is, 'Have you killed anyone?' Or, you know, stupid shit like that. And  
10 nobody wants to hear that or deal with that. Here, it's just us with us and it's comfortable. And I didn't  
11 think that was super important to me for a long time but it turns out that it is.

12 Silly humor is sexual but consensual, comfortable but not frivolous, providing important if  
13 temporary respite from stupid questions and stupid shit.  
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17 Irreverent humor is also about not taking oneself, and one's own suffering, too  
18 seriously. The Hikes' sexualized, broad humor tends towards self-deprecation, homo-eroticism  
19 and hyperbole. One man said about his silkies, "These are *extra small* [in the inseam]. They're  
20 tailored to fit me." Another winked at me when I asked about his silkies, saying, "Why? You  
21 want to feel them?" Matt performed some Rockette-style kicks, saying that silkies made him  
22 feel like an "agile, naked ninja." The Irreverent Warriors website says,  
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26 Why HUMOR? ir-rev-er-ent – adj. – an inability to take serious things seriously. We have experienced  
27 pain, tragedy, and trauma – both overseas and at home – and we have used humor as a coping  
28 mechanism. Laughing in the midst of tragedy allows us to continue the mission without breaking down  
29 mentally every day. Irreverent Warriors are connected by three things. 1) Our shared experiences in the  
30 US military. 2) Our shared experiences as *people* who have dealt with pain, tragedy, and trauma. 3) Our  
31 tendency to use humor to get through pain, tragedy, and trauma.  
32

33  
34 Hikers' irreverent humor was not so much an "inability" as a *learned refusal* to take serious  
35 things seriously. The Hikers mercilessly heckled and interrupted Danny while he tried to narrate  
36 the history of the movement before the San Diego Hike began.  
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40 But, once the rucking started, *different* verbal and non-verbal gestures contributed to  
41 the overall atmosphere alongside irreverent humor. Strangers introduced themselves to each  
42 other. Friends applied sunscreen to each other's exposed skin. People talked, sang and chanted.  
43  
44 Sometimes, people choked up or got angry about how prevalent suicide is. At one point,  
45 someone asked the Hikers to raise their hands if they knew someone close to them who had  
46 died of suicide and almost every hand went up. I saw a lot of quiet, mournful gestures, too. One  
47 man carried a backpack with a sheet of paper pinned to the back of it, announcing, "GONE BUT  
48 NOT FORGOTTEN" and the names of four friends lost to suicide written underneath.  
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#### 54 55 **Silkies Fit & Expose Women, Too** 56 57 58 59 60

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4 Danny's language about silkies is gendered, based on his own experience wearing and  
5 thinking about them. Pairing the military's "fun side" with its "brotherhood side" risks erasing  
6 the presence of women Hikers (and a military "sisterhood side"). Indeed, "staging" male nudity  
7 "is often central to homosociality" (Higate 2012: 458), where male-only spaces and solidarity  
8 combine to reinforce patriarchy. Queer theory has complicated the relationship of  
9 homosociality to patriarchy, however, suggesting that homosocial practices (those that reinforce  
10 men's desire to be in the company of other men) structure "men's relations with other men" in  
11 multiple and paradoxical ways (Sedgwick 1985: 1-2). Halberstam (2011: 53-86) sees queer  
12 possibility in bromance precisely because growing up gets equated with *progressing* to  
13 heteronormative relationships (marriage) and leaving queer friendships behind.  
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23 Silkies produce different exposure effects for men and women. The men tended  
24 specifically to invoke their penises as a key referent of the humor and camaraderie of silkies.  
25 Disparate gender displays of nudity appear to confirm Bordo's (1999: 30, 34) claim that male  
26 exposure is frequently accompanied by aggressive, posturing display, "and so [men] rarely seem  
27 truly exposed," instead revealing a "masculinity that demands constant performance." Indeed,  
28 the Hikes cannot exist independent of a patriarchal culture and history of unequal masculine  
29 and feminine performance and consumption of nudity, yet they highlight that performance and  
30 consumption are not fixed but dynamic. Exposure is not one homogenized, sustained chest  
31 thump.<sup>13</sup> Rather, men's exposure during the Hikes fuses strutting with more vulnerable displays  
32 of body- and soul-baring. In the Hikers' telling, the one (belligerence of silkies, aggressive and  
33 irreverent display) is *needed*, for socially constructed reasons beyond their control, to facilitate  
34 the other, more vulnerable display (disclosure of proximity to suicide and other war-time and  
35 post-war injuries). Bodies are, after all, "contested entities" (Sylvester 2013: 73) that "never  
36 quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled" (Butler 1993: 2).  
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48 And what about the women? At most Hikes, women participate in large numbers,  
49 commensurate with the overall makeup of the American military. At the San Diego Hike,  
50 approximately one-third of the Hikers were women. Women Hikers are not aping male  
51 irreverence and display during the Hikes.<sup>14</sup> They are enacting their own exposure, sometimes  
52 individual, sometimes collective and relational. Like the men, women emphasized the bodily  
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3 comfort and humor of wearing silkies. Unlike the men, they were less likely to link the humor of  
4 silkies to their own bodies, but neither did they locate that humor as emanating *solely* from the  
5 bodies of the men. Importantly, they also emphasized the *unifying* effects of wearing silkies  
6 together in public. Rosie, late 20s, Latinx, a mother of two daughters and a former Corpsman in  
7 the Navy, was wearing a US flag bandana around her head, US-flag tinted sunglasses, dark blue  
8 silkies and a navy blue top. Asked about the importance of silkies to the Hikes, she said,  
9  
10 “[E]verybody --, you know, no matter what kind of silkies you’re wearing, either green, blue,  
11 black, which [each] represent a different [branch of] service, we’re all together. It’s just  
12 amazing.” The exposure experience of wearing silkies is gendered, but in Rosie’s telling, is  
13 affective and effective for men and women alike.  
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22 Even so, some of the women Hikers created space for feminine attachment to silkies.  
23 Rosie said that discussion with other women about how they had decided to accessorize silkies  
24 with other clothing and jewellery was an easy way to meet new people, to break the ice. Her  
25 comment emphasizes a collective experience of comparing silkies on the assembled bodies,  
26 rather than an individual exposure effect of silkies for any one type of body (bodies with  
27 penises). Other women made it clear that their post-war need for, and claim to, militarized  
28 camaraderie was indistinguishable to that of the men, as this excerpt with Maribel illustrates:  
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33 *So tell me why you came out today?*

34  
35 Um, just to be around all the Marines and all of the veterans. I miss it a lot, so, I don’t know, just to be  
36 around this culture.  
37

38 *So, being with other Marines, being with other veterans, you think is important to adjustment?*

39  
40 I’m a really friendly person. I’m usually really personable, especially around Marine Corps individuals.  
41 And when I got out it was really hard for me to meet people, or talk to people, like civilians. [With  
42 civilians,] I can’t just go up to someone and start talking to them right away. And, with any Marine, you  
43 can just go up to them and it’s automatic, an instant connection, so it’s awesome.  
44

45 Maribel is in her mid-20s, Latinx and she recently reenlisted in the Reserves because she missed  
46 military life and friendships. Like Josiah, Maribel stakes her claim to the affective inheritance of  
47 silkies through her own experiences of camaraderie in the military and to its absence in post-  
48 military life. The similarity of their claims expands the repertoire of nostalgic attachment beyond  
49 a singular homosocial narrative of men’s attachment to silkies only in the presence of other  
50 men. The Hike experience, where men and women are exposed *together*, opens up potential for  
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3 bi-social connection to transcend the homosociality of barracks nostalgia, since intimacies and  
4 nudities of the *original* barracks experience are usually segregated by sex.<sup>15</sup>  
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### 7 **Bare Strength: Exposure as Survival**

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10 Agamben (2011: 65-66) has argued that since nudity is “an event that never reaches its  
11 completed form” and “never stops occurring” (because the “gaze avidly continues to search for  
12 nudity”), it is ripe terrain for *perpetual story-telling*, as the Hikers’ own numerous riffs on silkies  
13 nudity demonstrate. Nudity has long assumed symbolic power to express a desire to re-inhabit  
14 longed for time-space (Agamben 2011: 72). But nostalgic desire does not just orient a gaze  
15 backward to the past; it emphasizes present need and future expectations, too (Boym 2001).  
16 Silkies Hikers want to strip off more than their civilian clothing; *they want to slip out of their*  
17 *civilian skin, too*, even if just for a day. Silkies are an artefact well-suited to convey the  
18 backward-forward simultaneity of nostalgic desire. They are familiarly re-exposing: *this* hanging  
19 out recalls *past* hanging out.  
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29 Communal nudity also has a long history in military cultures, especially western ones  
30 (Welland 2013: 890). That history, however, is also an exclusive and violent one. Group nudity  
31 among soldiers gets contradictory treatment within military institutions, routinized as banal but  
32 romanticized as special. Opponents of women’s and LGBTQ+ inclusion in states’ militaries  
33 frequently leverage this contradiction of group nudity being both banal/routine (*no big deal*) yet  
34 necessary/bonding (*such a big deal*) to argue that the inclusion of bodies different to  
35 heterosexual cisgender male bodies threatens not just the traditions of military group nudity but  
36 military readiness and effectiveness, too. Additionally, research on militarized masculinity has  
37 effectively challenged the innocuousness of group nudity as a *non-violent, after-hours* activity,  
38 (Richter-Montpetit 2007; Higate 2012). These readings of the multiple, exclusionary and violent  
39 productivity of group nudity are important. Practices believed to be *just fun* can be crucial to  
40 normalizing violence.  
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50 At the same time, just because nudity frequently enables violation does not mean that  
51 nudity is always reducible to violation. Nudity also has a long history of calling war-making  
52 practices and structural violence into question through nude protest (Abonga *et al.* 2019;  
53 Eileraas 2014). Use of nudity as protest has likewise provoked intense feminist debate, critiqued  
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3 as attention seeking or a racist transposition of western imperialist norms (Nagarajan 2013). It is  
4 not my intention to imply that the Hikes could or should resolve this debate but to emphasize  
5 the productivity signaled by the debate's persistence. The debate reveals that *bodies cannot*  
6 *always control or predict how others will interpret them* (Striff 1997). And, it underscores that  
7 the nude body does not just reproduce pre-determined meaning but disrupts it and creates new  
8 meaning, too. In contrast, the generalized story of militarized masculinity pathologizes not just  
9 nude display but the masculine body itself as bad, oriented towards violence if left to its own  
10 biology and homosocial orientation. Can feminist and critical space be made for the naked body  
11 as also a site of imagination, improvisation and subversion that produces *and* disrupts  
12 militarized violence?  
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22 After all, another long historical attachment of nudity is not to violation and violence but  
23 to innocence, with Agamben (2011: 73) relating "the paradigm of nudity without shame" to the  
24 "belief that the voices of young boys pre-puberty are more pure (*voce bianca*) than those  
25 'mutated' by puberty (*voces mutatae*)." The drive to strip down and hang out with one another  
26 does not just say something about life in the barracks but also says something about the  
27 disappointment and injuriousness of adjusting to a civilian life lacking in shenanigans, a civilian  
28 life much "mutated" from the barracks. In this way, Hikers' re-imagining of reintegration shares  
29 with queer culture a "refusal of adulthood" and an "antidevelopment" impulse, substituting the  
30 therapeutic potential of "sideways" relations of veteran sociality for the vertical therapeutic  
31 interventions of clinicians (Halberstam 2011: 73).  
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#### 40 **REVERENT IRREVERENCE: SUBVERSIVE RE-/DE-MILITARIZATIONS**

41 The previous section was about nudity. It argued that the Hikes' multiple exposures are  
42 slippery, not easily categorized as default indecency, where nudity elides into violence and  
43 violation. This section is about suicide and so foregrounds a different indecent exposure: the  
44 exposure of veterans' bodies to suicide. Veterans' own body practices emphasize how they  
45 experience post-war forms of violence to their bodies, like veteran suicide, *as a continuation of*  
46 *war at home instead of an adjustment away from war.*  
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53 The recognition of return-from-war as something newly violent, coupled with veterans'  
54 suspicion that state and society alike are not doing enough to address that violence, impels  
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groups like IW to re-mobilize militarized symbols and sociality to combat bodily precarity in the way they know how: by relying on each other and on past experience. In so doing, Hikers articulate three potentially subversive, re-/de-militarizing discourses:

- Suggestion that nude exposure smooths vulnerable disclosure, which nurtures support communities and dismantles stigmas attached to help-seeking;
- Suspicion of hierarchical therapeutic regimes, which Hikers express through a counter-practice of veteran-led therapy and a counter-discourse of, “Fuck therapy, this [the Hike] is my therapy;” and,
- Spirited rejection of civilian strategies to redress suicide that rely on “raising awareness” about it, which Hikers express through a counter-discourse of, “Fuck awareness, this [the Hike] is prevention.”

Notwithstanding the non-normative, even angry, nature of these discourses, the Hikers’ collective assembly cannot be unproblematically categorized as protest or resistance (the Hikers themselves disavow these labels).<sup>16</sup> Instead, this section draws on an additional cluster of feminist and queer insights to enhance the legibility of the Hikes as events that participants experience as suicide prevention and alternative therapy. Not to prove the Hikes’ efficacy or tabulate their net de-/re-militarization, but to inquire into how experiences of suicide prevention bring the bodily precarity of post-war return and re-/de-militarized responses into focus.

For example, with respect to the awareness raising/prevention discourse, a well-meaning civilian world routinely mobilizes to redress social suffering through “awareness raising.” As Danny explains, IW takes a different approach:

Everyone else is talking about awareness, awareness, awareness. How does awareness prevent someone from killing themselves. If you’re considering suicide, you’re aware of suicide. How does that stop you from committing suicide? That’s another reason why we have become different. There’s a million groups out there promoting suicide awareness. *What the fuck does that do to stop a suicide?* So, anyways, prevention is the key ... When it’s for awareness what you’re doing is you’re making yourself a show for the civilian community, but that’s not what we’re about. We are doing this for ourselves.

One of the Hikers, Kevin, said in his pre-Hike speech, “[A]wareness is already there. If for some reason you’ve been living under a rock,” and then he began to shout, “for ten fucking years, you cannot help our fucking cause so get out of my goddamn way.” These utterances establish that



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3 the Hikers are not indicating a mere preference for prevention over awareness raising. They  
4 forcefully resist the discourse of awareness raising, which is felt to be ineffective and irrelevant.  
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8 *Do the Hikes prevent suicide?* This question is inseparable from a history of academic  
9 and policymaking power, habituated to answering through tests presumed unbiased and more  
10 rigorous *because they exclude the experiences and preferences of subjects* (Hemmings 2012).  
11 Feminist and queer interventions, in contrast, prioritize experience through narrative to resist  
12 dismissal of alternative, non-normative representations from below. Reparative reading  
13 emphasizes the opportunities (vs. the drawbacks) of taking Hikers at their word about suicide  
14 prevention, especially when subjects narrate efficacy alongside acknowledgement of scepticism.  
15 Ashley, an African-American Hiker in her late 20s, lost her husband to suicide. She wore a Dallas  
16 Cowboys football patch on her silkies (her husband's favourite sports team) and attached a  
17 small photograph of him to her pack with a safety pin. She said, "It might not seem like [hiking in  
18 your underwear can prevent suicide], but yeah... It just, it seems like it's working. Small steps."  
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28 Corroborating evidence that the Hikes prevent suicide also exists, in the form of  
29 testimonials posted across several online platforms (Facebook, Instagram, the IW website) and  
30 emailed to Hike organizers. The emotional force of these testimonials bolsters Hikers' claims  
31 about efficacy. Two examples follow:  
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35 This vet hiked with us in Mobile on 10/24/2015. 8 days later he tried to kill himself. Myself and  
36 other vets from the hike noticed the warning signs and were able to intervene in time to get his  
37 stomach pumped. The Silkies Hike saved this veteran's life, [Danny].

38 Everybody has their demons that they fight off every single day, and this hike has helped me  
39 overcome many of them. They will never be truly gone, but I have the ammunition to suppress  
40 them.  
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42 Danny reports having received hundreds of testimonials like these.<sup>17</sup>  
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46 I asked Maribel what the significance of "22 with 22 for the 22" meant to her, and she  
47 replied:  
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49 Personally, I haven't had any Marines that I've known commit suicide, but for a lot of these Marines --, I  
50 had... all right... [her voice cracks, and she pauses] All right. No, it's good. I was married my first four years  
51 in the Marine Corps and my husband tried committing suicide. So, he was in the hospital for six weeks.  
52 And that kind of sucked. It pulled me off my deployment and he was very unstable and it made him get  
53 out of the military, and he still struggles with it a lot today, but he's --, Well, we got divorced. He's no  
54 longer my husband. But, I still have --, I still talk to him and, it's just, the field Marines --, you're a Marine,  
55 you're not supposed to be weak so if you start being a "little bitch" and talking about your feelings it's  
56 just frowned upon. You kind of feel like, I don't know... So, a lot of people, or some individuals, feel that  
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3 they have no other out so then they turn to a dark corner and kind of put themselves in that situation,  
4 but things like this, it helps people understand that they can actually talk and reach out to people and it's  
5 not the end of the world. They can talk about their problems.  
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7 The link between body-baring and soul-baring during the Hikes is not abstract. It is deeply  
8 personal. Maribel initially asserts personal distance from suicide but then pivots and discloses  
9 the proximity of her body to the suffering of others like her, and close to her. As when Josiah's  
10 voice cracked when he disclosed his own proximity to suicide, Maribel's disclosure has an  
11 emotional impact on her, and she attributes her own willingness to disclose that emotion to the  
12 atmosphere that the Hikes foster. At the same time, Maribel contrasts the Hikes with the usual  
13 assumption, which she describes as an institutionalized and militarized assumption, that to  
14 speak of suffering and seek help for suffering are signs of weakness and "frowned upon." Hikers  
15 like Maribel recognize how military culture feminizes vulnerability ("being a 'little bitch'"), and  
16 see the Hikes as palliative, fostering resistance to gendered stigmas attached to help-seeking  
17 and vulnerability.  
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27 Recent clinical literature on suicide (Garcia *et al.* 2011) dovetails with feminist  
28 theorization (Basham 2015; Whitworth 2008) about how social desirability of masculine stoicism  
29 gets reinforced through the military institution. But, in clinical literature connecting masculinity  
30 to suicide, the body gets seen only as the conduit of already operable and hegemonic  
31 conceptions of militarized masculinity, where being militarized and masculine necessitates  
32 casting out un-masculine traits. An assertion that veterans struggle because they are *too male*  
33 and therefore too stubborn and too ill-equipped to do anything about their suffering, is its own  
34 violent dismissal. Recent feminist literature has shown that even approaches to suicide  
35 prevention alert to how gender norms impact on both men and women end up telling  
36 generalized stories that reify simplistic, dualistic models (Jordan and Chandler 2019).  
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46 The Hikes aspire to use nude camaraderie and irreverent humor to disrupt rather than  
47 fortify the militarized, gendered stoic warrior/little bitch binary. They foreground the centrality  
48 of the body to non-hegemonic masculinity expression, albeit always in response to, and in the  
49 context of, broader social structures (Duriesmith and Ismail 2019: 5). *Under patriarchy, every*  
50 *arsenal reflects stuckness*. But, citational *performance* does not pre-determine *performativity*  
51 (Butler 1993: x-xii). Militarized masculine bodies, in other words, do not await de-programming  
52 or rescue, but can improvise, outside of militarized norms even if not completely independent of  
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3 them, ways of being soft, injured, feminine, queer, vulnerable and emotional, “and it’s not the  
4 end of the world.” The caution that subversion can only be partial because any re-/de-  
5 militarizing manoeuvres are rooted in hegemonically masculine structures, does not mean that  
6 partial attempts lack meaning unless patriarchy and militarism are toppled. It might instead  
7 signal (reparative) acknowledgment that “we have to search for change not outside but within  
8 the relations of power, in small, fragmented and slow changes” (Davids et al. 2014: 404).  
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15 Queer theorists have grappled with similar dilemmas about the possibility of subversive  
16 action within oppressive structures. The death drive is a prominent theme in queer theory’s  
17 anti-social turn, where suicide gets recast as a radical politics of refusal, an expression of  
18 “future-negating” subjectivity in confrontation with the “heterofuturity” focused on  
19 reproduction of the life force (Edelman 2004). Because some anti-social theorists see suicide as  
20 a queer act, a non-normative “performance of radical negativity, utopian in its negation of  
21 death” (Muños 2009: 167), then the Hikes’ enactment of suicide prevention could be distanced  
22 from queer theoretical insights. I disagree, instead seeing affinities between the Hikes and queer  
23 readings of the death drive. First, Hikers argue that their own negative societal status (i.e., that  
24 their humor is too dark for mainstream society) drives them to reject accommodationist  
25 conceptions of post-war adjustment in favor of cloistered, veteran-to-veteran sociality and to  
26 embrace the therapeutic value of *that which makes them societally abject*. That embrace is  
27 analogous to how some theorists call on queer subjects to mobilize shame as a productive, even  
28 counter-shaming, gesture (Muños 2009).  
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41 Additionally, any disclosure of proximity to suicide, because it draws attention to the  
42 fragility of the body returned from war, is already an abject gesture and therefore conducive to  
43 non-normative performance of human bios. Kristeva (1982: 9) notes that “abjection is above all  
44 ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what  
45 t[h]reatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”  
46 Interestingly, and arguably queerly, the Hikers draw attention to the abjection of return via dark  
47 ambivalence, simultaneously negating the death drive and signalling its continued presence.  
48 Josiah said that suicide is something “you’re never really going to escape.” Remember the Hikes’  
49 event invites: Put the gun *back* on the nightstand; stick around *a bit longer*. IW’s discourse does  
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3 not *solve* suicide; it prevents it *for now*, centering perpetual bodily exposure and underscoring  
4 the ambivalence of its preventive posture.  
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8 Finally, queer anti-sociality it not linked exclusively to the death drive but also to  
9 hopeful, ludic, anti-conformist performances of irony and *jouissance*. Macabre irreverence does  
10 not require suicide to be performatively productive. Halberstam (2011: 109) critiques a reading  
11 of anti-sociality rooted in the death drive as bound “to a narrow range of affective responses”.  
12 Instead, a “queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd,  
13 the silly, and the hopelessly goofy” (Halberstam 2011: 187). Re-/de-militarized mobilization, if  
14 focused on the silly, lets veterans “cleave to... inevitable fantastic failures” (Halberstam 2011:  
15 187)  
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### 23 **CALLING ALL PRECARIOUS BODIES: DOING DE-MILITARIZATION**

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25 As a process of subjectification, militarized masculinity is an inescapable aspect of  
26 identity for veteran subjects, and therefore “cannot be unmade in a straightforward way”  
27 (Bulmer and Eichler 2017: 169). The “military residue” (Higate 2001: 453) is simultaneously  
28 opportunity and vulnerability, resource and debility. A final potential danger needing discussion  
29 is consequently how a generalized story might project a fantasy of complete de-militarization by  
30 calling on some of the most vulnerable bodies – bodies bearing the physical and mental wounds  
31 of war – to “do the work” of de-militarization by disavowing military residue. And yet, the  
32 contradictory nature of that residue guarantees that veterans will fail to de-militarize, not  
33 dissimilar to how structures of oppression mean queer subjects will inevitably fail to pass. These  
34 two expectations (de-militarizing, passing) both perform a neat trick, investing veteran and  
35 queer subjects with the kind of agency that structures rarely permit. And yet, “extracting  
36 sustenance from the objects of a culture” is particularly reparative for subjects entangled in “a  
37 culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (Sedgwick 2002: 150-151).  
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49 This article suggested the reparative value of resistance to constructing veteran subjects  
50 as either/or re-/de-militarized. Narrating Hike experiences of subject participants as an overt  
51 methodological and theoretical strategy, I have identified how Silkies Hikers experience re-  
52 enactments of barracks nudity and irreverent camaraderie as crucial to prevention of violence to  
53 their own bodies. I also demonstrated how the Hikers’ re-appropriation of militarized symbols  
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3 and rituals are never a carbon copy of a prior, originally instilled militarization but something  
4 more, if not something else: embodied mobilization of alternative therapeutic possibility.  
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8 To treat body practices as creative opens up “possibilities of new social configurations  
9 that stem from the generative capacities of bodies” (Wilcox 2015: 45), regardless of whether  
10 that creativity partially or fully succeeds. Dismissing the assembly of Hikers’ bodies as just  
11 another militarized masculine performance bolsters the argument that nudity is merely a site of  
12 intervention, where passive bodies are imprinted and molded, rather than taking Hikers at their  
13 word that nudity during the Hikes is both a layered objection to bodily precarity and an  
14 expression of therapeutic potential. Irreverent humor is a creative body practice, too: it resists  
15 the tendency (in policy and clinical settings and much media reportage) to identify veterans as a  
16 community that matters only because it suffers. With the emphasis on celebratory camaraderie  
17 and irreverence, the Hikes reclaim and re-assert veterans’ own subjectivity as a group that  
18 matters also because it experiences and generates joy through collective assembly. It is *also*  
19 likely true that any counter-violent effort that leaves the war-making project not just  
20 unchallenged but celebrated, intact, is one to be mourned even if its stated counter-violent aims  
21 are achieved. But, it is because re-/de-militarizations simultaneously succeed and come up short  
22 that they can “be a style”, a “queer art” (Halberstam 2011: 3).  
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35 The Hikers experience the prevalence of veteran suicide, and their proximity to it, as a  
36 crisis transcending the reach of orthodox therapeutic and rehabilitative approaches. The  
37 dilemma of having inherited militarized masculine rituals is that veterans reach for their  
38 symbols, memories and practices in moments of crisis because those things are familiar, fondly  
39 recalled and accessible. The Hikers argue that combating suicide and its associated injuries  
40 necessitates that re-enactment because that is what veteran subjects *most miss, best know* and  
41 *most trust*.  
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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A US Department of Veterans Affairs (2016) study decreased that number to 20 per day but the number 22, based on a 2010 study, is still the one veterans usually cite.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.irreverentwarriors.com/about/>, accessed 15 March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Silkies Hikes do not reenact all militarized symbols and rituals; some are passively discarded (obedience to hierarchical authority) or formally proscribed. A Code of Conduct advises participants against misogynistic harassment and abuse, via three directives: "Be Fucking Nice!," "No Politics" and "Irreverence is not a cover for shitty behavior."

<sup>4</sup> I conducted two interviews with Danny Maher in San Diego, on 19 January 2016 and 31 May 2017. I interviewed Ryan Loya in New York City on 15 July 2016. Interviews and participant observation at the San Diego Hike occurred on 13 May 2017. Danny and Ryan gave written consent to use their full names. We discussed how anonymization discounts the contributions and ideas of mostly enlisted soldiers and junior officers, resulting in military officials and veterans of high rank being the few subjects allowed to own their ideas and experiences via attribution.

<sup>5</sup> I use Hikers first names only, with consent, as part of the approved ethical protocol.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Caso (2016) starts with the concept-theory of militarized masculinity to read homoerotic photographs of injured American veterans, analyzing the motivations and work of the photographer in complex and critical ways, but without a concomitant account of the veteran models.

<sup>7</sup> Henry (2017: 182) argues that scholarly interest in the multiple identity positions of militarized subjects should "be connected with the 'originary' black feminist project" of intersectionality. She suggests direct research engagement with poor black women in the military. Minority veterans are at higher risk for PTSD, and black women veterans face institutionalized racism in diagnosis and treatment of PTSD (McClendon *et al.* 2019). Notably, experience of intersecting oppression leads many black women to resist through alternative knowledge systems rooted in empathy and communities of trust (Collins 2000).

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<sup>8</sup> A broader debate in queer theory is about what happens when queerness is “despecified” from LGBTQ+ content so that it becomes simply a “generic badge of subversiveness” (Halperin 2003: 341). Still, several queer theorists highlight the importance of situating queer subjectivity beyond the homosexual/heterosexual binary (e.g., Berlant and Warner 1995). My selective interpretation is not a distillation of some mythically unified queer theory, but a selective analysis of how queer subjectivity could productively trouble understandings of militarized masculinity.

<sup>9</sup> Veteran subjects have long been uniquely adjacent to theorization about queer subjectivity. A partial accounting for this special relationship includes same-sex rape and violent same-sex sexual hazing in the military; how homophobic defence of “don’t ask, don’t tell” fixates on homo-erotic sites like same-sex showering; countless treatments in novels and films of closeted veterans whose closetedness reverberates pathology and violence; and, assumptions about sexuality and feminine lack among women recruits.

<sup>10</sup> Danny says the near absence of severely injured veterans (e.g., burn victims) troubles him, too. Paraplegics and quadriplegics frequently attend, however, and Hikers’ non-visible injuries caution against making participation judgments on looks alone.

<sup>11</sup> Sedgwick (2003: 128-129) did not want to create binary opposition between the two styles, and suggested that each might need the other.

<sup>12</sup> The Hikes also allow active duty personnel soon to be discharged to participate.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Bordo (1998; 1999: 29) acknowledges dynamic, subversive and altered male performance of exposure and warns against construction of “essential” subjects. Male displays can be *both* arrogant *and* vulnerable.

<sup>14</sup> Goldstein (2018) contributes a nuanced understanding of femininity in military roles beyond conceptualization of femininity as masculine foil.

<sup>15</sup> Nothing in this article should be interpreted as diminishing how gendered forms of violent *exclusion* operate and persist in militarized environments. These observations are about how women also experience and rely on bi-social *inclusion* within militarized structures and discourses of camaraderie.

<sup>16</sup> Space precludes further exploration about how/why the Hikes might be a social movement while disavowing protest. Rich antecedent work brings the paradox into view, focusing on the multiplicity of social movement practices (Sharp 1978), how discrepancies between collective

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assembly and protest for war veterans are productive (Manahan 2011) and how structures of precarity shape the discursive possibilities and legibility of collective assembly (Butler 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Email correspondence, 15 January 2016.

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