Aretē: “We As Black Women”

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Abstract

Studies of Black US women servicemembers too often depict their stories as replete with post-war trauma and transition difficulty. However, crisis is not their only, or most salient, story. As warriors, as women perceived as invaders on male military turf, and as Black women who have persistently fought against racist discrimination, they occupy perhaps the most complicated position in the US military. Grounded Theory analysis allows us to hear their authentic voices and explore their stories of origin: their aspirations, trials, and successes. Using this material as foundational, this analysis will show that Black US servicewomen possess a standpoint all their own, i.e., a perspective on their experience that affords them, and their audiences, deeper insight into their civilian and military contexts than typical and stereotypical inquiries allow. The evidence is clear—Black US servicewomen have developed strategies of perseverance and cohesion that distinguish them as the group most likely to survive and resolve the crises they endure.

Keywords: Black women servicemembers, Black women’s discourse, US military culture, aretē, Grounded Theory, feminist analysis

Proving Ground: Lila Holley

I had a kid at 15, I grew up in the hood, I was the oldest with a lot of responsibility placed on me at very young in my life. And so, for me, that was life. You pick up, you fight, and you keep going.

We as black women—you walk in a room with people already going to look at you with a perceived notion. Oh, we’ve got to walk on eggshells and it might be that time of the month and here comes the angry black woman. Then the statistics...society is going to place labels on us...They placed labels on me when I had a kid at 15. I read the statistics that my life was literally over at that point and time, and if I listened to that, and I received that as my destiny, I would have laid down and died right there. I would have been no good for my son or anybody.

But, you take back your power when you define what that label means....Like for me, when I was a teenage mother, I knew what the statistics said and what that meant for me, but me, I was like, ‘Shoot, yeah, I had a kid at 15, but you know what that means to me? That means I’m going to just work a little bit harder to make sure I graduate on time with my class.’ I had my son in August. I was back in school in September. I graduated on time with my class in 1988. You know what I mean?

So, you have to take back your own ownership. You identify what those labels mean. You can receive them or you cannot receive them. It’s just to me being a black woman in America. Hardship comes with the territory....A lot of the times, for black women, hardship is par for the course. It is what it is. You put your big girl drawers on and you fight and you keep on pushing. You know?

Lila Holley, Personal Interview

“I Have to Come in Proving Myself”

In Greek culture, whose contests and stories of valorous heroes have shaped our own discourse of battle, Aretē is the goddess who extracts a cost from warriors striving to win her favor. She will “bring many labours,” Aristotle writes (“Fragment”), a depiction the Roman world later develops in its image of a woman “worn out with toil” who nonetheless values nothing “not won by hard work” (Philostratus). Her appearance represents a life replete with struggle: her garments are not the sophisticated draping of Olympus goddesses, but rough, “the plainest of raiment” like a uniform...
designed only for practical purposes and fits so poorly that “no vanities” are possible. She is, they say, a “discipline” in which “you steel your will resolutely,” and “overcome lions…hydras…monsters…all other labours” (Philostratus). Romans call the discipline of aretē, “Virtus” (Carr), and it is this practical virtue of “fighting the good fight” against the kinds of “monsters” that serve as symbols for biases and constraints, as our own vernacular would have it, that characterizes the discourse of Black women in US military culture.

“I don’t take prior successes for granted,” Lila Holley, author of the Camouflaged Sisters anthologies, tells me. “I go in at ground zero with a clean slate knowing that I have to come in proving myself, so I can’t come in taking anything for granted. That comes with sacrificing, it comes with long hours, that these are the standards you placed on yourself, that (the US military) is the work you dedicated yourself to, this is the extra stuff I have to do to just be on the same playing field with my peers, my counterparts” (Personal Interview). Holley (see fig. 1) is one of five Black servicewomen who have volunteered to participate in my dissertation study, “American Athena: A Feminist Sophistic Analysis of the Discourses of Women Servicemembers,” a project sanctioned by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the University of Washington and the University of West Florida (UWF), where the research is situated, and supported by the Andrew Hilen Fellowship for research in the Social Sciences. The study is comprised of 75 narratives, both interviews and published accounts, in which women veterans describe their decision to enlist and their experience of military culture. “American Athena” was born out of the complex relationship between the women and their discourse as they intersect as well with the values of American culture (nomos), and their own desire for adventure, escape, leadership, opportunity.

I came to this research and these realizations from teaching women servicemembers, both veteran and active duty, in my Public Writing course at UWF in Pensacola. The stories of their experiences speak of endurance, certainly, and also a fierce determination to assert their identities as military women, i.e., “American Athena.” While the literature is replete with first-person accounts, most research and analysis have focused on sexual assault, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and homelessness. Those disturbing situations and statistics are true; however, my students’ presentations and writings have shown that trauma is not the only story.

It seemed crucial to me that these women be heard on their own terms, that we give their voices room to speak, and see their service through their eyes. Thus, I devised the “feminist sophistic” of this project’s title, the term derived from Susan Jarratt’s Rereading the Sophists, in which she proposes the invention of a critical method for work with women’s language. A “feminist sophistic” is, in brief, a rhetorical methodology that studies the discourses of women within specific situations “to


1 I chose Athena as the organizing principle of this study because of her storied prowess in battle inherited from her parents. Her father, Zeus, is the god of war, and her mother, Metis, is a Titan who represents intelligence and strategic patience. In classical mythology, Zeus swallows Metis because he is threatened by her potential as mother of a child who could unseat him. In stealth, she carries Athena to term and is the cause of Athena’s emergence, both adult and armed, from her father’s forehead. The argument of my dissertation is based on that story: I contend that women servicemembers enter a culture devised by and for the work of men (the Zeus factor), and thrive within that often harsh terrain, through the use of metistic strategy: intelligence, patience, pluck, and technical skill.
locate personal experience in historical and social contexts” and “advance them in a public space” (115–116): in this study, their lived experience within the traditionally white male culture of American military.

The method known as Grounded Theory (GTM) seemed most suited to my purposes and most appropriate for feminist sophistic inquiry because the analysis is entirely situated, i.e., “grounded,” in speakers’ narratives. “Grounded theory provides tools for developing theoretical analyses of (data) from intensive interviews, personal narratives, case studies, field observations,” the analyst Kathy Charmaz explains (167). Developed as the antithesis of quantitative analysis of human experience and perception, GTM consists of a sequential and simultaneous process of listening, coding, comparing, and interpreting narratives, which thus become the basis of emergent and original theory. This method was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a means of listening to stories without static from other sources, such as existing theoretical frames, and is designed to resist the imposition of bias. The basic question asked in GTM is always, “What is most significant in these data?” (Charmaz 170). As Charmaz emphasizes, “I aim to learn about research participants’ concerns from their perspectives rather than impose a preconceived structure on them” (172).

The use of GTM in discourse analysis beyond the fields of medicine, psychology, and sociology is nascent; however, I view this method as a deeply rhetorical and “sophistic” approach, i.e., situated, grounded, spatial, local, temporal, kairotic, and utterly responsive to and constitutive of the human moment, what Charmaz has called “the experienced self” (170). Participants in the Athena study were asked to address a series of questions about their military experience, either in person or by email, using the basic GTM strategy of inviting narrative with an open-minded “Tell me about it” (see Appendix: Interview Instrument).

From these interviews, as well as published accounts that address the same issues, I have constructed a theoretical frame, the Athena Model, based on two sequences and themes that emerge from the women’s discourse: the creation and performance of a distinctive female military identity that accords with “the experienced self” as described here by Charmaz: “fluid, multiple, and emergent in experience” (170).

It was through the process of conducting GTM research and coding these two sequences that this particular discourse, entitled “We As Black Women” from Holley’s interview, emerged as resonant. I could not forget these stories. The standpoint of these women as a group seemed to me unique—and, as I discovered, uniquely unreported—and one that required its own chapter of the Athena project. This excerpt, “Aretē: ‘We As Black Women,’” is that discrete section: a GTM analysis of the stories of military women who consider themselves unacknowledged and unheard as the singular cohort they are. Its members speak to dispel this silencing and achieve, “each in her own way,” as feminist criticism requires, recognition, standing, and voice as servicewomen.

The following table (next page) introduces the five women whose stories I examine in this piece:

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2 Examples of published works in the literature of women servicemembers, analyzed in the American Athena study include “Completing the Mission,” an interview with Tammy Duckworth; Shoot Like a Girl: One Woman’s Dramatic Fight in Afghanistan and on the Home Front by Mary Jennings Hegar; Love My Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the US Army. Both Hegar and Williams are interview participants in the Athena study.
Table 1
Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Title/Role</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Bullock-Prevot</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Cryptologist</td>
<td>Founder, HER Foundation Homeless Shelter for Women Veterans in Pensacola, Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Desnoyers-Colas</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Public Affairs Officer</td>
<td>Author, <em>Marching As to War: Personal Narratives of African American Women's Experiences in the Gulf Wars</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lila Holley</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>All-Source Intelligence Technician</td>
<td>Author, <em>Camouflaged Sisters</em> series; Veterans Transition Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaRayne Hurd</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Combat Photographer</td>
<td>Graduate Student, Social Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tabitha Nichols</td>
<td>Army National Guard</td>
<td>Base Commander’s Assistant and Driver</td>
<td>Performer and Script Writer, “Talking Service”; “The Telling Project”</td>
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All women in this particular cohort were contacted by me personally, and communicated directly with me in pursuance of this project. LaRayne Hurd is a former student in my Public Rhetoric and Writing class at UWF who responded in writing and face-to-face interview. Both Nancy Bullock-Prevot and Tabitha Nichols are my colleagues in a veterans’ reading group, “Talking Service,” supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and facilitated by Christopher “Scott” Satterwhite in Pensacola: Nancy completed a written interview in collaboration with her daughter, Kourtney Prevot, a former student in my Public and Professional class at UWF; Tabitha met with me for a formal interview on the UWF campus. The works of Elizabeth Desnoyers-Colas and Lila Holley comprise the current research in Black women’s military experience: I conducted telephone interviews with both authors. Unless otherwise noted, all statements and stories from this group are quoted from the personal interviews listed in the Works Cited.

This exploration of stories these women tell will present the ways they narrate their creation and performance of a female military identity despite the challenges they recognize and strive to overcome. To wit:

- In Part One I examine how these women employ strategic patience (*metis*) to confront and overcome the discrimination they encounter and experience as a “double minority”: “I Was a Girl. I was Black.”

- All women express their refusal to allow discrimination to mark them as “outsider” within a system they have considered their terrain to enter and to change since the moment they decided to enlist, a standpoint of commitment to self and community I discuss in Part Two, “The Insiders: ‘Take Back Your Power.’”

- I close by offering some implications of this focus on the narratives of this cohort, both for the women themselves and the military culture they increasingly sustain.

The stories as presented enact the qualitative strategies of breaking through conventional thinking and listening to what the speakers say and do (Corbin and Strauss 88). Often the stories, written sequentially, create a multivocal narrative in itself, and I present those statements without interruption by researcher commentary. Through GTM, we study how the data reflects “positions, conditions, and contingencies” (Charmaz 169) that lead to the creation and performance of a specific female military identity. It was through listening to the narratives of these women, and reading the
few published accounts of Black women’s experience in US military culture, that I realized the truth in their depiction as “our most invisible heroes” by the National Veterans Foundation. I realized, too, how closely their discourse aligns with the classical value of *aretē*, or valor. And it may be, I propose, that this cohort of “camouflaged sisters” creates and performs a military identity that most clearly possesses that notable and noble quality.

**Part I–Double Discrimination: “I Was a Girl. I Was Black”**

In her 2013 investigative report “Sexual Assault in the Military,” Jennifer Koons reports that women are deemed “less worthy” in this culture than their male cohort, and “as a distinct, less worthy minority,” are therefore more vulnerable. Elizabeth M. Trobaugh reinforces this assessment in January 2018: “Women still face stereotypes about who they are and how capably they perform their duties” (1).

A powerful discourse of discrimination establishes a firm context for discussion of bias toward Black women in military culture and their identity as a “double minority,” i.e., female and Black. They contend with this bias despite their status as the fastest-growing cohort in that profession, currently over 30 percent of all women servicemembers, and nearly equal in number to White women in the Army (Reynolds 8).

In terms of women servicemembers overall, Trobaugh distinguishes between “hostile” and “benign” sexism, a binary wherein the word “hostile” denotes overt bias, and “benign” refers to overly-solicitous attitudes. The same terminology may be applied to racist attitudes, as illustrated on the Council on Foreign Relations website, "Demographics of the U.S. Military," wherein the Black servicewoman is positioned, her face blurred, behind her white comrade whose face is clearly defined.

Relegation to a background figure when one’s demographic group is swelling the ranks of a profession, I suggest, is not a benign form of racism for Black servicewomen. Rather, it serves as an ideograph of microaggression beneath a seemingly unconscious discrimination. As the African-American photographer, Carrie Mae Weems, instructs in a recent *New York Times* profile, “A camera has become more than just a journalistic or artistic tool, but a kind of weapon itself— one that reveals the truth” (O’Grady 140). Although included in this photograph, the indistinct portrait of the Black servicewoman reinforces her “camouflaged sisters’” image as a marked, beleaguered group.\(^3\)

Certainly, a story within the story of this community is their ethos as the most vulnerable minority group (African American Policy Forum). In *Marching As to War: Personal Narratives of African American Women’s Experiences in the Gulf Wars*, a GTM analysis by Elizabeth Desnoyers-Colas, these women share their experiences, often for the first time, and express a “concern about the physical safety of women with men” (85). This precarious position may account in part for the repeated claim throughout myriad sources that Black servicewomen “suffer disproportionately” (African American Policy Forum) as they face the double discrimination of which they are acutely aware.

But their accounts contain the countervailing claim that the military is, of all American institutions, the most accommodating to Black women. Just as clearly revealed as the struggles they endure, is their creative use of metistic strategy: patience, resourcefulness, and the smart move at the right time. Black servicewomen meet their hardships with this metistic code of resilience and tenacity, not only to survive and endure, but also to achieve, an ambition here defined by LaRayne Hurd, as she describes the reasons she listens to a persistent recruiter, a Black woman whom Hurd identifies as the professional she aspires to be, and signs up:

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\(^3\) It should be noted that all women servicemembers pictures in Trobaugh’s article about bias are White.
The Army was a way out. I grew up poor, black, and in the South. The decision to enlist for me was a decision to take the lifeline in front of me and do something, anything with my life that would give it meaning. I wanted to be a leader. (Written Interview)

Nor was Hurd’s ambition misdirected. From the mid-1990’s, this profession is portrayed as “colorblind” and “gender blind,” a place where Black women perceive more opportunity than offered them in civilian professions such as business, education, law, media, technology (Donegan).

Shoshana Johnson, who records her harrowing 22 days as the first Black female prisoner of war in Iraq in I’m Still Standing: From Captive U.S. Soldier to Free Citizen, describes her family’s legacy of service and conviction of the military’s ethos of inclusion:

I had been raised with the understanding that a military career was one in which you could succeed based on your skills and abilities, a career where color, gender, and even nationality have little to do with your success or failure. I had watched my father move up through the ranks and my sister was an officer. Putting on a uniform was the logical thing to do. (10)

Despite the stereotyping that still exists in military quarters, Black women in fact, have filled most positions of leadership among female non-commissioned officers (NCOs), which “reflects their longer stay in the service” (National Association of Black Military Women).

Indeed, competing themes of accommodation and discrimination typify and complicate the discourse of Black servicewomen. The identity created and performed herein accords remarkably with depictions of aretē as a “discipline,” in which the warrior must “steel (her) will resolutely” (Philostratus); and, in fact, develop the strategic patience that is the core practice of metis. Not only do Black women in military service face and deal with challenges endemic to their chosen profession, but simultaneously strive against a general culture of male dominance and racial biases that mark them as physically “different” and therefore, often, a target.

Metiotic Opportunity

Nancy Bullock-Prevot, the first Black servicewoman I interviewed, introduces the concept of double discrimination into this study: in response to the question, “what would you like us to ask you?” she responds, “what is it like to be a “double minority” in the military?” As the interviews progressed, it was clear to me that by their physical presence alone, Black servicewomen serve as a focal point for rhetorically pre-scripted ideas about skin color or gender. They note that a profile has preceded their arrival, marking them as “strong Black woman” (Desnoyers-Colas Marching 66), or “angry Black woman” (Holley Personal Interview), and “angry, hostile, unapproachable” (Hurd Personal Interview). These epithets, long familiar to them, serve to shape their colleagues’ approaches to them. Hurd illustrates the difficulty of discerning the origin of the set of prejudices she learns to negotiate, all the while performing her military occupational specialty (MOS) as Combat Photographer in the battleground of Iraq:

I know for me, more than anything (the problem) was my gender. It was because I was a woman. If I had been a male then they would have focused on my race. But I do think that while deployed my gender was at the forefront. A handful of instances in the states I know it was my race because I would be in a group of women. (Personal Interview)

A parabolic version of this story is offered by Desnoyers-Colas as she relates the advice she received as a young recruit from her first squadron commander, an African American women:

She told me that I always need to remember I was going to be a raisin in the general’s tapioca pudding, and you know the position of the tapioca being primarily White, and then you put the raisins in. She said that you always have to remember that you’re always going to be visible, and you’re always going to be looked at. If the general doesn’t like raisins in his
Fox / Arete: We As Black Women

The need to be “very, very aware” is frequently compounded by a position as the only servicemember of African descent and the only female in their squad: each woman interviewed describes herself as “someone that was going to be visible” (Desnoyers-Colas Personal Interview). In a culture whose customs and values (nomos) are based on the principle of the team, whose members “look out for one another” (Allen 3), each Black servicewoman depicts herself as solitary, a notable feature of the identity she enacts in the story of her military experience.

Indeed, “the solitary” may be considered an integral part of this sophistic analysis,4 the sense of being marked as “different,” and apart from the cultural norm in their specific and valued community—be it the Air Force, Army, National Guard, and Navy (to name only those in this section). “I was a girl. I was Black,” Hurd reports. “When I went out on assignments (as Combat Photographer), there were a lot of times where I was the only female and I was the only Black person” (Personal Interview).

In similar straits, Holley constructs a picture of isolation and describes the military as “a lonely place” for her:

“Often times I was the only Black officer on the staff and the only Black female in the office. I often joked about being the only ‘little chocolate face’ in the room during a briefing to the general or in a staff meeting. While I was able to joke about it, the lack of Black female representation had an impact on me.” (Camouflaged 11)

Awareness of their solitary status does not compromise the strength of their commitment to this chosen profession, however, and their reflections are clear on that point. For example, Bullock-Prevot’s distinguishing characteristic, both in the course of her service and her work thereafter, is advocacy for women veterans “who have no voice” (Written Interview). Her response to discrimination, e.g., “I was always very vocal” (Written Interview), typifies the metistic ways these women confront an obstacle they consider untenable and discursively determine to overcome: “A lot of the times, black women, hardship is par for the course,” Holley reminds us. “It is what it is. You put your big girl drawers on and you fight and you keep on pushing. You know?” (Personal Interview)

Her “camouflaged sister” Tabitha Nichols, never signals ethnicity or gender as difficulties to surmount, and yet she puts in play a strategy that is unerringly metistic, replete with her resourceful spirit and perfect timing, when she reports to the camp commander for duty as his secretary. In this situation, when the commander mentions his lack of a driver, Nichols creates her opportunity and then fulfills it:

‘Can I go, Can I drive?’ He like choked on his tobacco, … and he was like, ‘Really? Well, you have to get trained.’ Sent me out in like five minutes, ‘All right, let’s do it, it makes sense, you’re gonna be doing all the paperwork, why not be with me, if you think you’re tough enough.’ I think he put me through a little test, flying colors, I can drive combat maneuvers, he let me do it. I did it after I got hurt, too. I was the only female too. (Personal Interview)

Nichols (see fig. 2) thus becomes indispensable to him as his trusted driver; she also, at the age of 19, moves into a position of power that gives her both stature, as the commander’s driver, and scope: no longer relegated to an office chair and computer, writing up the field reports, she charts the passages that informs them and, as she explains, “I shot. I drove,” which sustains her even after a grievous injury (Personal Interview).

This method of metistic responding to opportunities as they arise also informs the tenure of Bullock-Prevot, whose very career, as cryptologist in the Navy, develops as she realizes the opportunity that exists for her:

When I first joined the military, I did not have any expectations. It took a couple of years for it to truly sink in, that being in the military could be a career and that there were women doing great things for and in the military…(How I responded) depended on the situation, I had to adapt my attitude, demeanor to each situation, but [throughout my career] I was always firm and fair. (Written Interview)

Her Army colleague, Holley, informs us that she, too, never loses awareness of her singular identity as a Black servicewoman, along with a certain wariness, as she assesses her status in her work with military intelligence:

I made high ranks. I always explain to people that my process walking into say, the meeting room, if you will, I tell them, first, the first thing they see is a woman, right, so they have to get past that layer. The second thing they see is a Black woman, and they have to get past that layer. And then they will eventually see, ‘Oh, that’s Chief. Chief has entered the room.’ You know what I mean? There’s a couple of layers I have to go through to get to the table, but there’s definitely a seat at the table. So I took that consciousness with me as I progressed in the ranks, understanding that and always having that in the back of my mind. (Personal Interview)

Their status as “double minority” thus empowers them to see and understand, and always keep in the back of the mind, the ways they are perceived and positioned according to a pre-printed and imposed label of “different,” despite their own refusal to have their experience and future determined by that sobriquet. “I would walk into these male dominated environments and I was 5’4”, at the time about a buck 30, and I was a junior enlisted person,” reports Hurd (Personal Interview). They are, like Hurd (see fig. 3), fully aware of the changes they embody and portend.

However, the identity that they themselves create and perform as military women, while it may be limned as solitary, is nonetheless composed of equal parts awareness of the customs and realia of military culture, and determination to succeed on their own terms, defined by Lila Holley as taking back “your own ownership...(identifying) what those labels mean…receive them or not receive them” (Personal Interview). A response that enacts the rhetorical strategy metów, i.e., “I was very, very aware” (Desnoyers-Colas Personal Interview), enables them to confront and endure the stress they experience as essential non-conformists in a culture founded on conformity.
Personal appearance is the point on which Black women’s acceptance into military culture seems most aggressively contested, and their integrity, disputed: “Military culture uniquely harms Black women in myriad ways,” the African American Policy Forum reports. The topic of that particular report is the ban on certain hairstyles, “disproportionately favored by Black women” (African American Policy Forum). Black women’s hair is a site of conflict in the larger culture: suspicion and suppression on one side; identity and integrity on the other: “America has always had trouble with black hair,” notes Ayana Byrd and Lori L. Tharps in their article, “When Black Hair Is Against the Rules.” The policy caused Black women to feel “they were walking targets because the regulations were subject to interpretation” (Mele), after April 2014, when the Army, for one, “enacted policies that explicitly prohibited locs, twists, brands, and other protective hairstyles common in the African-American community,” which caused “outrage” in the community of Black servicewomen (Kenny).

“Black people around the globe have worn dreadlocks for centuries,” report Byrd and Tharps. “They can be easily and neatly worn under a helmet or in a bun. Two-strand twists, a popular option for black female soldiers that look similar to braids but are much easier to style, especially in the field, are versatile and require little maintenance. AR 670-1 does allow women to wear wigs and hair extensions, a suggestion that borders on the ridiculous when considering the time and cost required for upkeep in a salon—let alone in a desert army barracks” (Byrd and Tharps).

Although these regulations were eased in 2017, the attempt to treat all women as if they share the same physical traits, no matter their ethnicity, begins with those discriminatory regulations for hair. Shoshana Johnson remarks that women’s challenges in military service were all about “simply being a woman,” as she elaborates the process of dealing with her hair in preparation for deployment:

I was going to war. It was entirely possible that I might find myself in a place where there wouldn’t be anyone around who could help me with it. There are plenty of people in the world who are ignorant about what it takes to manage black hair. It’s not a matter of running a comb through it or tossing it into a cute little ponytail. I required a plan. I brought a curl relaxer with me, thinking that once we got settled, I could relax it and that would make the management of it easier, but until then, I had to get it braided. (134)

Contemplating that decision, Johnson comments wryly: “I didn’t realize I would be wearing those same braids for many weeks” (135), and indeed, the condition of her hair was a primary concern upon her release from a captivity that was particularly inhumane.

At the time of the enlistment of the women in the Athena study, hair restrictions were still in place, requiring them to efface themselves, “relax” their hair with chemical straighteners, as the cost of enlisting to serve their country, their penalty for sacrifice. Army Captain Danielle N. Roach states, she “got treatments that used harsh chemicals to keep her hair straight,’ and notes that she “went every four to eight weeks for the treatments, which cost up to $80” (Mele). Desnoyers-Colas notes, “there were things that we couldn’t get away with that our White counterparts could,” and hair was one such *topoi* where her “femininity was questioned”:

The texture of my hair...you know, some of my African American colleagues wore wigs, so they would get the right context and texture of their hair. I chose to be natural until there was a brief period of time where I wore a perm, but I never had my hair long....I was very, very conscious of the way I look. (Personal Interview)

Indeed, in a move to maintain her own sovereignty over her body and appearance, Naval recruit Bullock-Prevot, cuts her hair before enlisting to conform to this policy. Combat Photographer Hurd, in writing to our Public Rhetoric class at the University of West Florida, implores her peers to remember the sacrifices of those who served (ENC 1102 Class Wiki). Civilians, and perhaps the
mainstream media itself, may not realize that Black women have been asked to relinquish their claim to a dimension of their personal identity: their natural hair. “For me,” Army Staff Sgt. Chaunsey Logan notes, “it wasn’t just about hair. I am completely against blind conformity, and I’m rebellious by nature” (Mele).

Desnoyers-Colas offers a clear visual, rhetorical in its aim, intent, and targeting, that precisely signals the military’s female ideal, an image at variance with Black women’s bodies as well. As the only scholar who analyzes the current stories of Black women servicemembers in the context of military history, she is acutely aware of the image of women that pervades this culture. In her view, the culture’s acceptance and affirmation of military women are patterned after “the White girl, the consummate GI Jane, petite female military fighting machine, a cute but tough-as-nails commando, ultimate Army of One servicewoman” (Marching 5-6). The problem of literally fitting women into military life is clearly embodied by Black women in the standard-issue uniforms supplied to them.

Nancy Bullock-Prevot imparts the rhetorical message impressed on the body when the uniform does not work on the actual figure. In her view, the uniform takes away one’s physical identity as a woman: “The uniforms were ill-fitting, one size fits all, and I lost my sense of being a female,” she relates. “It was like they took away the fact you were a female, but would at the same time, remind you that you were a woman, and you would never be equal with a man” (Written Interview). In the constant discomfort it causes, the uniform serves as a reminder that the women cocooned in it are interlopers to a “White male-dominated career field” (Holley 8). Desnoyers-Colas describes her own body as “athletic” and “strong,” which defies the notion of the military ideal that she calls the diminutive “GI Jane,” a body type she shares discursively with women of her ethnicity:

I was very, very conscious of the way I look as well as my build. Black women, we tended to be...our weight was always something that was under contention. I grew up and was called ‘big boned,’ so to speak. So, I was always very athletic, but I was always close to my weight restriction simply because, I think, the weight restrictions were discriminatory against minorities, particularly minority women. A lot of female friends were put on the ‘fat girl’ program because of their weight, and they weren’t heavy, they just weren’t overly thin like our White female counterparts. (Personal Interview)

Uniforms produced by this distorted image thus appear to accept, but in fact, disparage and reject the bodies required to wear them. Black women emphasize these points as examples of the profiling and stereotyping they face that lead to feelings of difference and precariousness. The military norms ostensibly devised to achieve equality and inclusion through standardized appearances and clothing offer no relief: both hair styles and uniforms are modeled on White physicality and cause these women feelings of discomfort and, in the case of Bullock-Prevot, trouble her sense of who she is. Nevertheless, the discourse is unequivocal that in the spirit of aretē, they persist.

“My Sex / Gender”

Their ill-fitting garments, too close for the wearer’s comfort, can mark the Black woman as a target for sexual antagonism and aggression, which Hurd experiences in boot camp and on her active duty in Iraq: “I had spent so much of my life dealing with discrimination that came from my skin color, that it never occurred to me that my sex/gender would ever be a hindrance to anything,” she states (Written Interview). Indeed, Hurd’s female drill sergeant harassed her without respite because, Hurd explains, “I have always been curvy and not even the oversized physical training uniforms could hide my hips. She would accuse me of altering my shorts, and trying to sleep with the male drill sergeants just because I had a figure” (Written Interview). Her attention is, in Hurd’s retelling, unrelenting, insulting, and pernicious: “I used to constantly attract her ire” (Written Interview).
The sense of being sexualized pervades her narrative of service, which, it will be recalled, she has joined to find a meaningful career with opportunities for leadership. The effect of continuous suspicion that sexualized her is as deeply carved in her discourse as it seems to be in her consciousness. Prior to joining the service, she notes, the comments and innuendo involved innocent matters, such as who was dating whom in high school: here, even on mission, Hurd interprets the commander’s separating her from the troops at night, and requiring that she sleep in his quarters, as sexual surveillance:

When we slept in a building, I always slept where the commander slept. Even though I was just a Specialist, I slept wherever the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant slept. Which usually meant getting a nicer spot than everyone else, but I know it was because they wanted to be able to have full accountability of me. It would not do it if I was off in the burned out building next door (engaged in sexual activity) with half the platoon. (Written Interview)

The danger and potential aggression that lay at the heart of this kind of attention rears its head in her story of the Iraqi soldiers, compadres to her division on a mission:

I remember being out on a mission one day with the local Iraqi Army and a few of the Iraqi soldiers thought it would be funny to discuss a price for me, once they realized I was a woman they suddenly took an interest in me. One of the guys took it too far and grabbed my arm, and while it was not a totally hostile move it was more than was necessary. I carried a side arm and my free hand immediately dropped down to my holster. (Written Interview)

By grabbing her without her permission and discussing in her hearing how much she would be worth as a bought woman, her supposed colleagues ostracize her. In one sordid joke, they define her solely in terms of her female biology and her kinship with women who have been purchased historically, and in the Middle East, still are, for purposes of sanctioned rape.

A similar “grab,” not of her arm, but her breasts, causes extreme pain and shock to Johnson immediately after capture in Iraq. The soldier assaults her sexually despite her suffering bullet wounds that transited both legs and broke her ankle, wounds that receive rudimentary treatment and are still unhealed at the time of her rescue nearly a month later. She further describes her fear, based on comments from guards about her marriage potential, that she would be taken against her will as wife and disappear. She recounts an experience of being openly assessed, and the advice of a fellow captive, that she speak of herself as unavailable:

A man in uniform came to my door. He opened it and stood there, staring at me….I didn’t like the looks of the guy. He was pudgy, with a thin mustache, wearing a black military beret and a brown khaki uniform. His dark eyes raked over me.

‘Are you married?’ he asked me, an angry, almost accusatory tone to the question.

‘No.’

‘Children?’

‘Yes.’

He stood there for a long moment continuing to stare. Finally he shut the door and left and I wondered what that had been about. Then I heard Williams through the wall.

‘Shana, from now on, if anyone asks, you are married,’ he said. (Johnson, Shoshana 186)

There is, admittedly, a lack of reliable data for sexual assault in military culture, although these women are clear in their discomfort with Iraqi and Saudi soldiers, as Hurd and Johnson indicate. Desnoyers-Colas speaks of women who define American military culture as a “sexual abuse climate” (Marching 88), and women who have experienced rape but who consider reporting as painful as the assault. In one specific case, “no one believed” the woman who has been raped, and frequently the
“superior” to whom the report would be filed, is the woman’s rapist; more frequently, she is ordered to work with her attacker (Marching 88).

Most perniciously, then, the double discrimination they experience as a result of their “double minority” status, a position that Bullock-Prevot wishes they were asked about more frequently (Written Interview), redounds on them in instances of sexual harassment and, in some cases, assault. The seamline between the colorblocking of women, i.e., white and not-white, appears with greatest clarity when Black women discuss the double jeopardy their bodies represent: either they are unacknowledged as physical facts that do not fit the military’s female paradigm, or they are sexualized by men and women alike.

It should further be noted that a tenet of GTM, and of discourse analysis as well, is attention to the element of silence: “We don’t know what (our study participants) left unstated” (Charmaz 171). Speaking for her “camouflaged sisters,” and subtending the stories that tell of being “very, very aware,” is a comment by Hearther Overstreet in the Desnoyers-Colas study: the “White males” with whom she has served, “thought that being Black meant that I was ‘easy’” (85). Her insight is supported by Carolyn Morgan, same study, who reports, “If you made eye contact with them, this was considered an invitation,” and whose awareness of physical threat is dismissed by her commanding officer (85-86).

But, as noted previously, the traumas of assault, harassment, and insult that these women endure, sometimes relentlessly, are not the only stories. Not all Black women experience the kinds of direct offenses that are recounted here and in the Desnoyers-Colas study: for example, Tabitha Nichols responds to the question about the need to shield herself with astonishment: “Protect myself from what? I feel like, when did I have to do that?” (Personal Interview). It’s important, too, to emphasize the methods Black women devise to sustain themselves through such experiences. Holley delineates a strategy metistic in its sensitivity to circumstance and cunning disguise that offers her protection:

As I served longer and longer and over the years… I’ve got a big mouth, you know? I went toe to toe with people because I’m from New York, and I felt I’ve got a good sense of humor, too, so I take everything in stride. I knew as I got higher up in rank structure, I started to hold some things in. I felt like the military is not an environment where you can let them see you crack too much, you know what I mean? (Personal Interview, emphasis mine)

Part II–The Insiders: “Take Back Your Power”

The choice of a journey along this path—for such Desnoyers-Colas calls it, “the military life journey” (Marching iii)—accords with the reasons that non-Black women in the Athena study join the troops. They, too, seek “a way out,” escape, a “lifeline.” But these intentions should not be too easily classified, especially since this decision, for the mothers among them, demands considerable sacrifice in time away from their families (Bullock-Prevot Written Interview; Desnoyers-Colas and Holley, Personal Interviews). The demographic studies show that 47 percent of African American servicewomen have children, compared to their White (30 percent) and Hispanic (27 percent) counterparts (Johnson, Jason “Sister”).

When asked, “what do you want people to know?” Bullock-Prevot speaks immediately to this point: “It’s hard, doubly so,” she explains, “when you deploy and wonder if you’re going to make it back home, and if you’re doing right by your children” (Written Interview). Women interviewed by Desnoyers-Colas describe missing their children as “horrible” and bonding in “collective sadness” with other women (Marching 66-67). This “strong commitment to their maternal roles” (Marching 67) may, counterintuitively, have led many Black women to enlist in the first place. Black women have not been “extensively studied,” notes a Rand Corporation Study, but a high percentage of Black
women “fit the bill,” for the security of “job training, good benefits, and help with college tuition” (Dao).

The African American Policy Forum speculates that women respond to the “benefit of job training, funding for higher education, and access to a steady middle-class career with excellent benefits” (“Neglected at Home”). Certainly, women in the Desnoyers-Colas analysis, report that they “perceive an equal playing field in job training, in pay, and in the ability to advance professionally” (Marching 80). Although, in her written interview, Hurd speaks of a search for “meaning” in her decision to enlist, the word “meaning” does not necessarily translate into monetary rewards or security. Nor does the military offer the only means of supporting one’s children: Holley is emphatic on this point. Although she once described herself as “a 15-year-old pregnant Black girl from the hood,” who needed the military to provide for her family (Camouflaged 7), she notes now, that the qualities that led to her success in the male-dominated military world, also have stood her in good stead as a young mother in civilian life. The question that she wishes people would ask Black servicewomen is, “Why did you choose the life in service in the military?”

I think people make a lot of assumptions about us, that we were down and out, and this was our last recourse. And no, that’s not everybody’s story. I feel like if I did anything just because of my drive and motivation of being a young mother, I would have it in life regardless of the route that I took. But I feel like if they really take the time to stop and ask military women why, they would be really shocked and surprised to find out the answer, the rank if you will, of these women who serve their countries. (Personal Interview)

This more complex and nuanced explanation for Black women’s enlistment, not mentioned in the published accounts of their reasons for service, presents further proof of the limited research into these narratives. Desnoyers-Colas offers a tantalizing glimpse of motivations that remain unexplored in the existing scholarship or story analysis, i.e., the desire to serve “out of a sense of moral obligation to the country (and) to demonstrate their worthiness” (Marching 27).

I’d suggest that vigorous investigation, starting with Holley’s question, “Why did you choose the military?” would not only shake loose the stories beneath the facile suggestions—that Black women choose this profession for economic reasons only—but also reveal a deeper “meaning” (“anything to give my life meaning,” as Hurd explains, the tone of her sentence poignant and tough [Written Interview]) that all female recruits might seek.

As noted, studies of this demographic are replete with rhetorics of economic, medical, and social need, and offer a distorted view of these women and their experiences. A GTM analysis allows us to hear the authentic voices of these servicewomen and explore their stories of origin: their aspirations, trials, and successes. Using this material as foundational, this section of the Athena study shows that Black servicewomen possess a standpoint all their own, i.e., a perspective on their experience that offers them, and the audience who listens, deeper insight into their contexts, both military and civilian, than the typical and stereotypical inquiries allow. In fact, these women may occupy the most complicated and difficult standpoint in the US military, compounded as it is, by their perspective and hard work as warriors with a clearly defined mission; women who are perceived as invaders on male military turf; Black women who have fought against racist discrimination their entire lives, and face it here as well, in a culture that prides itself discursively, and necessarily in combat, on inclusion. However, the evidence is clear that these “camouflaged sisters” have developed strategies that not only define them as “invisible heroes” noted earlier, but also distinguish them as the group most likely to survive and resolve the traumas they endure.
The Question of Equality

The question of equality is not a stated concern in these stories: the concept and the word itself do not come up. As is true in the discourse of all women servicemembers, their parity and equal partnership with male comrades are not their quest because they never doubt their own capacities or right to be there: all stories in the Athena project attest to that fact. Black women are, nevertheless, realistic—“Yeah, first off, you don’t take anything for granted,” Holley avows (Personal Interview). These women have dealt their entire lives with the certain knowledge that they are marked by color in American culture where “hardship comes with the territory,” in Holley’s words, and “people are going to look at you with a perceived notion” (Personal Interview).

This preconception can create the unique perspective of the “outsider within,” developed to analyze the standpoint of Black women in slave culture. The “outsider within” possesses a privileged perception of the dominant community that bars her entry and membership: she sees the insiders more clearly than they see themselves; she sees how they define and position her:

Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation they experienced at seeing White power demystified—of knowing it was not the intellect, talent, or humanity of their employers that supported their superior status, but largely just the advantages of racism. But on another level, these same Black women knew they could never belong to their White ‘families.’ In spite of their involvement, they remained ‘outsiders.’ This ‘outsider within’ status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women. (Hill Collins 103)

To those enamored of, and accustomed to, White male hegemony in the armed forces—a mythos that exhibits remarkable staying power despite the fact that “women have been on the front line for years” (Bullock-Prevot Written Interview; Desnoyers-Colas and Williams Personal Interviews), Black women embody a cultural difference and challenge to the “good ole boys’ club” (Hurd Written Interview). They are, as examined earlier, the “double minority” who survives a hostile climate by strategic use of intelligence, patience, pluck, and “resolutely” steeling themselves to achieve their goals (Philostratus).

Indeed, in counterpoint to the outside within, arising from their discourse is an equally tenacious conviction that this career and culture are theirs. This conviction, I believe, empowers the distinctive military identity they create and perform. It is the reason why the stories of their experience should be studied as the discourse of a discrete cultural group. While no community, including this dynamic one, shares a single voice on all matters, the Black women in this Athena project speak as insiders from a standpoint they define themselves, a status imposed on them a priori and uniquely, i.e., the double discrimination that arises from that “double minority” position.

As women, they represent 16 percent of all servicemembers; they are, as noted previously, “joining the military at a greater rate than any other cohort” (“Eliminating the Gaps”), currently at least 30 percent of all women, which in fact “makes up the largest group of minorities employed by any branch of the federal government” (Johnson, Jason “Sister”). The pressure of compounded prejudice can be felt acutely, as Desnoyers-Colas says, “you’re always being watched” (Personal Interview); or it can be muted through a protective shield of “personal commitment” that blinds them to discrimination, as Hurd explains (Written Interview). Whether they confront these challenges directly during their tenure of service or later, in reflection or resolve, they describe their endurance in terms sophistic in their attention and response to circumstances. The discourse of their service is replete with both metistic patience (“It is what it is,” says Holley. “This is life” [Personal Interview]) and metistic strategy: “Take back your power” (Personal Interview). Holley teaches with this purpose—the credo and destination for her entire troop of “camouflaged sisters”:

Because as a Black woman in this White male dominated masculine career field, you can get rolled over, dismissed, overlooked, rejected, minimized, or ignored.
I was not about to let that happen. (*Camouflaged* 7-8)

How they attempt to align their double-stigma with military standards that mark them at first sight is their decision to beat them at their own game—by working double-time, and resolving to keep a firm grip on power that is also recognizably theirs.

"**Take the Hard Assignments**"

To a woman, and in almost the same words, this cohort articulates the one and only way a female, and specifically a Black woman can succeed in military culture: "We place these, I call them, astronomical standards on ourselves to be that much better than our male counterparts, just to progress through the career," Holley explains (Personal Interview). Bullock-Prevot addresses the need to make oneself "stand out" and "be the best":

I think I challenged sex and gender norms; my rating is extremely male dominated. There were challenges: to be the best, work harder, to get promoted, and to make myself stand out....Yes, I experienced gender discrimination. It made me work harder. I had to sacrifice some things for a promotion. I had to take the hard assignments to be promoted at the cost of my family. (Written Interview)

Even Tabitha Nichols, who considers herself “lucky” that she is spared the trials endured by other women despite her small stature, feels the need to prove herself:

I didn’t hear that (‘Oh, she’s just a girl’), (but) I felt like I had to keep up. I felt like I had to prove myself, to be on their level. Yeah, it was (hard)—I kinda feel like that, I was small, I was 110 pounds, I wasn’t some big tough female, ‘oh what is her little butt going to do.’ So I felt like I had to work twice as hard, beat them there, do everything before they do it, start early and leave late, just to prove myself. Probably I didn’t have to, maybe, but I just felt like I needed to. It wasn’t so much negativity to where I was, like, ‘All right guys, I’m going to prove myself.’ It was an internal thing. (Personal Interview)

What they strive in their stories to overcome, perhaps to overturn as well, is the connotations of binary thinking in which specific fixed traits are built into the female / male assignments, so that the production of *realia*, or material objects such as uniforms, accords with their makers’ biases rather than physical fact, and thus become rhetorical in purpose and effect: abstraction rather than human. Bullock-Prevot defines the problem succinctly: “I didn’t want to seem like a ‘typical female’ in the military that men looked at as being weak and incompetent“ (Written Interview).

"**Sisterhood Was Strong**"

One quality that distinguishes their military discourse, a characteristic that’s notably and often pointedly absent from the narrative of other female groups, is their emphasis on very specific community customs and values (*nomos*) that sustain them. This *nomos*, which constitutes the service of these women and is constituted by their performance of that service, derives from their devotion to their families, their religious faith, and their community. The care of others, and generosity toward others in that marked group, is the source of what Desnoyers-Colas calls their “resilience…which was going to have to be a reality if (they) were going to succeed” (Personal Interview). Their community spirit and concern also distinguish their narratives in this Athena project. Desnoyers-

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Kayla Williams, who served as Director of the Center for Women Veterans at the Veterans Administration at the time I interviewed her, told me that “resilience” is a problematic word for many women veterans, who resist its connotation of unequal and victimized status, and prefer to emphasize achievement and valor. Williams is currently the Director of the Military, Veterans, and Society Program at the Center for New American Security.
Colas emphasizes the support system Black women construct for one another as a hedge against their “double minority” status.

A lot of times we would just help each other out. Sometimes people did my hair for me. I would teach people how to say certain words, and teach them subject-verb agreement. Things like that. I would make sure we looked right. If we had to be...on the weight program, we would go walking, we would exercise together, because we knew that we were going to be ‘it,’ as far as female officers, we knew there were only a few of us. We knew we had to look a certain way, and talk a certain way, so we worked with each other, and we would reach out to our enlisted counterparts, and say, 'We see so-and-so working at Base Ops, she’s got some 3510 clothing issues with her uniform, so you might want to reach out to her and talk to her.' We were watching out for each other, and the sisterhood that I experienced was strong all the way throughout my service, and not so much a negative thing, but it was a survival type of thing. (Personal Interview)

This service to community, which activates and defines the quality of their service to country and informs their military identity, continues in their post-service commitment to their kin and kith. For example, Bullock-Prevot has dedicated her prodigious energy and focus to secure a future for veteran women in need of shelter and work. In addition to her scholarship in the military culture of African American women, Desnoyers-Colas was an activist for the election of Stacey Abrams as the first Black woman governor of Georgia: “I think after we get out, we gravitate towards some type of service, that helps to reignite the service that we have already given our nation when we were in the military,” she notes (Personal Interview).

Holley is a national figure who practices support: her message is “take back your power” to veterans in need of the leadership she achieved in service and did not leave behind (“Lila Holley: My Story”). After a painful transition to civilian life, which caused a change of personality that she blames the VA for not treating, Hurd is earning a degree in social work to assist those who suffer as she did. Nichols fearlessly performs and thus relives her most painful experiences in “The Telling Project,” a national performance in which veterans tell their stories, in first person, to their communities. Nichols speaks on behalf of women veterans who cannot, deeply aware of the dire need for a sister-in-arms to represent them: “I’ll be that woman” (Personal Interview).

The point is not the pain they experience or need to assuage. Despite, or perhaps because of, the proliferation of studies that track and decry the instances of PTSD, homelessness, and unemployment of Black women veterans, it is a mistake to over-interpret the story of this group as monolithic, tragic in its effects, and characterize their position in both military and civilian worlds as victimhood. This ostensibly benign rhetoric serves effectively to disqualify their service and sustain the double discrimination they battle throughout their military service. The public discourse is wrong in this respect and challenged by the evidence in these stories and others that appear in this myriad collection of veterans’ accounts. Desnoyers-Colas speaks of the strength that Black women embody: “We’re expected to be the matriarchs, and we’re expected to be strong, we’re expected to be the nurturers” (Personal Interview).

“A Strong Sense of Being Survivors”

What elicited this testimony from Desnoyers-Colas is a study of the US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) I stumbled upon while researching demographics for my dissertation, the Athena Project, and presented for her comment. This study, only briefly described in the official documents, demonstrates the discovery that Black women have the lowest rate of suicide of all identified veteran groups and, in the nation, overall. This signal of inner resources, i.e., “We’re needed in our community,” notes Desnoyers-Colas, “why would we go anywhere?” (Personal
Interview), is “not completely understood” by the Department of Defense, which hopes to “re-create elements of black (sic) female culture that may help stop military veterans from killing themselves” (Kemp). Each Black woman in the Athena study responds in the same way when asked about this finding: they stress that their resilience comes directly from, and not despite, the odds against which they strive throughout their lives, and serves as perhaps the clearest sign of arête in the discourses of this group specifically.

The VA report isolates the factors listed earlier here, i.e., family, faith, community. However, the women themselves were not asked how they account for these statistics. Nor does this report address the ways that the multiple discriminations that Black servicewomen face have served as a means to “take back their power,” in Holley’s words (Personal Interview). A study published after our interviews, “Resilience, Cultural Beliefs, and Practices That Mitigate Suicide Risk Among African American Women Veterans,” does indeed address this phenomenon with the women themselves, who reinforce the source of resilience that Athena women relate:

Women talked about the hardships they faced due to their race and how these played a role in their development into ‘strong Black women.’ Despite facing adversity, the words participants used to talk about themselves described feelings of empowerment and a strong sense of being survivors. They mentioned waking up every day and continuing to live, despite these challenges. Overwhelmingly, participants described taking actions to improve their lives, and described focusing on the positive aspects of their lives, despite adversity. (Holliman et al. 5)

The theme of courage in the face of hardship that all Black women in this study share redounds on the issue of suicide rates as well: while the results are reported by the VA, the reasons the department offers are merely speculative. They do not know. This enormous percentage of the female military population who “shoot” and “drive” (Nichols Personal Interview), who have fought in combat anyway, despite their being hired as support capacity (Desnoyers-Colas Marching 55), attest to this fact to an audience that still, in many ways, resists it. “I feel I have become an advocate for women veterans who have lost their voice along the way, due to no fault of their own,” Bullock-Prevot explains. “I feel that the service taught me that I could persevere through anything” (Written Interview).

Holley, who speaks, teaches, travels, and writes on the subject of empowerment and leadership, describes the effect of living a “story that must be told,” but is not:

If life wasn’t hard, I would think I’m being punched or something. This is life. This is what we as Black women…you walk in a room with people already going to look at you with a perceived notion. Oh, we’ve got to walk on eggshells and it might be that time of the month and here comes the angry Black woman. Then the statistics…I talk a lot about labels. I feel like society is going to place labels on us….It sucks. Absolutely, it does suck. (Personal Interview)

Indeed, this valorous group of women, encountered on their own terms, represents not only the most difficult aspects of the decision to serve one’s country, but also the best and most enduring, the arête revealed in their stories about the experience of service and, remarkably and virtually unreported, their tenacity at its end.

Implications

Desnoyers-Colas teaches that the importance of telling their stories and having them heard, is the clarion call in Black women’s tradition, at least as far back as Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 A Voice from the South (Marching 15). This gestational work in Black feminist thought by an activist, scholar, and teacher exhorts this community to “muster the creativity and ingenuity to develop their own collective and rhetorical voice” (Marching 15). The crucible that turns the cry into a powerful statement of stance is the act prescribed by scholar bell hooks:
It is important that we speak. What we speak about is more important. It is our responsibility collectively and individually to distinguish between mere speaking that is about self-aggrandizement, exploitation of the exotic ‘other,’ and that coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle. (18)

Each Black servicewoman profiled herein, offers resistance not only to patterns of misogyny and racism in a culture to which they have committed, but also to the ways they are portrayed in our national “text and talk,” or discourse, about Black female servicemembers. Against powerful odds, akin to the “lions…monsters…all other labours” (Philostratus) that the warrior must overcome for the sake of attaining aretē. Black women create and perform a military identity all their own— a distinctly valorous one.

Aretē is not entitlement or privilege, but the embodiment of prowess hard-won in the agon or battle. For the sake of aretē, Aristotle tells us, one must “endure cruel unresting toils”– and it is this quest, and not the winning, not the trophy necessarily, but the persistent attempt, “related repetitions of virtuous actions (that) constituted and/or produced virtuosity,” that allow one to achieve victory on this particular field (“Fragment”). Conclusively, I believe, Holley tells the story of aretē for all Black women whose “unresting toils” fortify this culture. She speaks on behalf of those who serve their chosen communities and those for whom each day is challenge enough, with elegant precision: “I entered a shy young girl but now I’m a beast” (Personal Interview).

Accordingly, this brief analysis of the discourse of Black servicewomen is a call, to them and to their allies in military scholarship, to develop these preliminary discoveries and expand this critical domain, lest “their histories and life experiences (be) deemed insignificant or rendered invisible” (Desnoyers-Colas Marching 15). As is clear throughout this section of the American Athena project, many tenors and tones compose the intricate stories of Black women who have served.

However, the one refrain they all share is awareness that their voices are unheard. Veteran Felicia Watson calls these narratives “under-represented and underappreciated” in her interview with Desnoyers-Colas: “It’s a story that must be told,” she avows (Marching 112). In Marching, the only inquiry to date that documents and explores the discourses of Black women in the American military, Desnoyers-Colas notes the absence of empirical research as well as a “disparity of (media) coverage” (12): a clear sense of public devaluation that connects, in one sense or another, all stories from this Athena group. Pointing out the paucity of attention to this area of military history and literature is not a mere research strategy of finding a gap to fill discursively with one’s original scholarly work. It is a cry from the heart, from women whose crying has never moved them an inch further along the path they forge as they walk it.

**Conclusion**

This paper is a call to pay attention, in practice, research, and scholarship, to the changes Black women’s customs and values portend for military nomos itself. Elizabeth Desnoyers-Colas offers here a glimpse of the transformation that these valiant women carry with them, the identity they create and perform, as they continue to help shape the future of military service, not only for their own cohort of “camouflaged sisters,” but all who choose to share membership in this community: “I think we bring compassion and empathy to the military,” she notes. “There’s a certain thing that changes when women are in the room. If women come in the military, we don’t come in as honorary men. Let’s bring the human factor in…the voice of reason. All women will bring that” (Personal Interview).
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