Razzle Dazzle?
Identity and Agency in the Creative Responses to (Post)Deployment by Women Veterans

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“Start a Hare”, a ‘nursery noir’ story-within-a-story, is an extract from a novel of the same title for young adults which forms one strand of a creative practice research project with women military veterans: “Razzle Dazzle? Identity and Agency in the Creative Responses to (Post)Deployment by Women Veterans”.

The project’s title refers to Razzle Dazzle camouflage used by the UK and US Navy during the First and, to a lesser extent, the Second World War (cf. Willis). Unlike other forms of camouflage, the intention of Dazzle painting is not to conceal the presence of a ship but to make it more difficult to estimate its range, speed, and heading. A ship painted in bright colours is more visible but the fractured design, and use of counter-shading makes it a more difficult target to hit because it is harder to estimate its speed and direction. Dazzle camouflage has emerged in this project as a visual metaphor to view the creative responses of some women military veterans to (post)deployment identities.

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Women veterans’ life stories during and post-service are collected and deployed by a variety of organisations to impact charitable giving and government policy in the UK and internationally (cf. Your Stories). Reflecting language found in the wider community support service environment, states of transition – in this case from civilian to soldier to veteran/civilian – are understood as metaphorical ‘journeys’ and the transformative self-knowledge, good mental health and individual and collective agency, that result, are the journey’s ‘destination’. For example, the first page of the Joint Services Support Organisation’s advisory publication states that, “It’s important to recognize that the mental journey back to civilian life will take longer than the physical journey” (“Adjusting to Civilian Life” 1). However, as my conversations with a widening range of women veterans grew more nuanced, it became apparent that some of the women veterans in the research network experienced unease about the way their stories are used. In particular, they were uncomfortable about the way they are required to tell, retell, (re)affirm and so ‘fix’ their stories so that they might be ‘explained’ by others.

The roots of this unease grew during a number of creative ‘hacks’ of children’s books at Seven Stories – National Centre for Children’s Books. Book ‘hacking’ refers to the process of close, critical group reading followed by annotating the texts. The subjects of the ‘hacks’ included a range of sticker books produced by publishers, Usborne (Kelly n.pag.). These activity books illuminated the absence of military women and professional women in ‘Action’ or ‘Hero’ roles. As a result of the publicity surrounding these hacks we changed the designs to more accurately portray the participation of women in emergency and peacekeeping roles. Reflecting on this experience and the gender struggles of an Arthurian field nurse in Philip Reeve’s Here Lies Arthur (2011), and of the compelling call of ‘duty’ in Michael Morpurgo’s Kensuke’s Kingdom (2001), the women in the hack group understood their stories as both ‘authored’ and ‘read’ by and through other cultural and artistic products, including children’s books. They saw their stories as emerging and evolving in a creative and cultural dialogue, not as ‘assets’, something fixed that they ‘carried’ with them.

Razzle Dazzle evokes imagery of the vulnerable ship at sea and as a metaphor alerts us to the significance of hijacking, piracy and the interrupted journey: the journey that ends when the cargo is taken before the ship reaches its destination and is left drifting, with a greatly reduced value.

My own creative response reflects the unease of the core group of artist-veteran collaborators. Writing the Start a Hare stories as prose fiction, ‘nursery
noir’, I re-purpose not the bright colours of Razzle Dazzle camouflage but the fractured design and counter shading for my own creative contributions to the research. “Start a Hare” is not a story written for young children. As with the other stories-within-stories, it is adapted from the childhood experience of a friend. I use some of the attributes of the genre of children’s literature as a form of camouflage but subvert this by introducing tonal dissonance. For example, I use some of the characteristics of ‘noir’ as a tonal register for these stories in both the text and through Anne Wilson’s black and white illustrations. As a creative and critical discourse, ‘noir’ reflects the ambiguity, violence, and the unsettling effect of strong, independent women that is a characteristic of the gendered context of military (veteran) research (cf. Woodword and Winter). I chose to include the illustrations in order to amplify the ambiguity of the stories and to emphasise the sense of unease for the reader.

In my novel, the stories-within-a-story, my central character, a girl, floats on driftwood. Her sailing boat has hit an old mine and when she wakes up she is alone. She is on a journey that is not of her choosing and she has no control of her speed or direction of travel. A hare clambers aboard. She remembers the Russian story about a flood and hunter, “Grandfather Mazia and the Hares”, and, until the hare speaks, she thinks she is imagining it. The mountain hare is a central character in the meta-narrative and the story-in-the-story portrays its origins though other animals play central roles in the other six stories. The hare dwells in grassy depressions or ‘forms’, makes dramatic leaps or swift directional changes to avoid capture, and box-fights. Female hares box-fight to ward off unwanted attentions of male hares. In “The Dog and The Hare” in Aesop’s *Fables*, the hare demands that the hound makes its intentions clear as friend or foe.

While the work is at an early stage, we (myself and four of the artist-veterans) have been invited to present, read and exhibit at the ERGOMAS international military conference in Athens in June 2017 and to contribute a chapter to an academic publication with the publisher, Springer.

WORKS CITED


Willis, Sam. “How Did an Artist Help Britain Fight the War at Sea?” *BBC*, bbc.co.uk/guides/zty8tfr.


Once upon a time I knew a girl who imagined for herself a companion rabbit. Her rabbit had silky fur and a bobsie tail. Her rabbit was invisible to other people but she was allowed to keep it in the house so long as it behaved itself. The girl loved the rabbit and the rabbit loved her.

One day the girl’s Aunty came to stay. Her Aunty had long thin fingers, a soft voice and a wonky smile. After breakfast, when there was nothing to do but look at the snow and forest glooming outside the window, the girl decided to show her Aunty the rabbit.

The girl’s Mother was in the kitchen, washing up so the girl went upstairs and brought the rabbit from its burrow under the bed. Her Aunty stroked the rabbit with her thin fingers and spoke to it gently in her soft voice. Then she asked if she could hold the rabbit for a minute.

The girl was happy that her Aunty seemed to love the rabbit as much as she did. Her Aunty held the rabbit up to her face. The girl thought that her Aunty might kiss the rabbit or rub noses and she warmed with pleasure at bringing them together.

Then her Aunty smiled her wonky smile and the girl saw that over and above the wonkiness there was something not right about the smile. The girl couldn’t see where the not right bit stopped and started so she put her worry out of her mind, for the time being.

The rabbit was twitching its nose and bobsing its tail, and her Mother was in the kitchen singing to the radio. Everything was alright. Her Aunty smiled a wider smile. A sharp spike of ice froze the girl’s tummy and her face got sweaty. Her Aunty spoke to her and this is what she said:

“Yes, your rabbit is very nice. In fact, your rabbit is so nice that I am going to... EAT IT!”

And then to her unforgettable and almost inexpressible horror, the girl saw her Aunty open her mouth very, very wide and drop the rabbit down her throat.
Her Aunty gulped and coughed and that was that. The rabbit was swallowed up. The girl’s Aunty had eaten her rabbit!

Illustration: Anne Wilson

The girl screamed and screamed and screamed. She screamed until the windows cracked and the curtains blew out into the dark and flapped away toward the frozen forest like startled crows.

The girl’s Aunty laughed. She laughed until fat tears of wickedness ran down her face and pooled into salty lakes on the polished wooden floor. The girl’s Mother ran into the room with her hands over her ears and soap suds flying from her elbows. She had stopped singing at the first scream.

“What is going on?!” she shouted. Her eyes were wild and her voice wobbled.

In a crack of time so tiny and so huge that it cannot be named no one said anything. The girl’s Aunty stopped laughing. She began to make a peculiar whumping noise almost as though someone had kicked her from the inside. She swallowed and then whumped and then she coughed, opening her mouth wide.
The tips of two silver blue ears peeked out from behind her teeth. She made the kicked-from-the-inside noise again and more of the ears began to emerge from the Aunty’s open jaws. The girl and her Mother exchanged a glance of knowing-what-to-do-ness, seized an ear each and began to pull. More of the ears emerged and then there was a nose and a head and two paws and a body and then with a final tug there were two long hind legs and one bobsie tail. It was out. It was out, covered in belly juice and sitting on the dining room table. It was out and it was angry and it was not a rabbit.

The girl, her Mother, and her Aunty looked at the silver blue mountain hare, for that was what it had become, and the hare looked at the girl and then at her Mother. All at the same time the hare looked into the past and into the future (because that’s what they can do). Then the hare whispered something and they both bent closer to catch its words. The Aunty bent closer still and when she was nose to nose with the angry hare, it reached up onto its strong hind legs and boxed her ears swiftly and firmly. Then it sprang from the table and leapt through the windows into the winter. The girl ran to follow (she rather liked the idea of an imaginary companion that boxed people’s ears) but the hare was out of sight, invisible in the still of the dusk. It left only an erratic track to break its scent in the snow.

Illustration: Anne Wilson