

BURKAS, BOOKS, AND BLOGS: SELLING A STORY OF MIDDLE EASTERN
DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.

by

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(Under the Direction of Vanessa B. Beasley)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an examination of American media discourses pertaining to democracy and feminism in Iraq and Afghanistan during the U.S.-led military conflicts. The major focus is the relationship between the representations of gender and democracy. The project scrutinizes the ways that gender norms have influenced perceptions of democracy and the ways that democracy has influenced what are believed to be acceptable gender behaviors. Through an analysis of texts from both news media and popular media, this dissertation asks how stories of Iraqi and Afghan women are presented and how gender, looked at through a performative lens, reveals something that is otherwise unspoken in our conceptions of democracy. I focus on three representations of rituals that are deemed democratic and investigate the way these representations portray democratic and gendered rituals during wartime.

I pursue a close textual analysis of three case studies—the photographs of the Iraqi election of 2005, the 2007 book *Kabul Beauty School*, and the blog *Baghdad Burning*—concluding that they offer three distinct instances of gendered, ritualized democracy. In the first case study chapter, which examines photographs after the 2005 elections in Iraq, the images are

very focused on markers of both democracy and femininity. The captions and uses of the photographs suggest that the two themes are seen as complimentary. The second case study, which is a memoir about the beauty industry in Afghanistan, is explicitly about female empowerment and less obviously about democracy promotion. By contrast, the third case study, which looks at a popular blog written by an Iraqi woman, contains recognizable discussions of democracy but an emphasis on gendered bodies is not readily apparent. Analysis of these texts allows for a better understanding of the interplay between these rituals and behaviors.

INDEX WORDS: Feminism; democracy; war; vernacular; media; critical rhetoric; Middle East

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DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES

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DEDICATION

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This project grew out of a fascination with the United States media coverage of Muslim women during the time of the military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was intrigued by the amount of books, movies, news stories, and photographs that bombarded American audiences. I began my analysis in Vanessa Beasley's seminar and under her tutelage as an advisor the project began to take shape. I can say with complete certainty that without her support, guidance, and suggestions this dissertation would never have come to fruition. In addition to being a great scholar, she is a fantastic person and it has been a complete joy to work with her for the past three years. I am honored to have been in her inaugural class of PhD advisees.

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CHAPTER 1

INTERROGATING FEMINISM AFTER 9/11

Introduction

On September 23, 2001, New York's Yankee Stadium housed thousands of people as part of an inter-faith service entitled "Prayer for America" for the victims of September 11, 2001.¹ With the pitcher's mound covered with a red, white, and blue flower bed and an enormous flag stretched over the bleachers, the stadium looked like a picture of patriotism. But the *National Review*'s Mark Steyn argued otherwise. According to Steyn, what went on in the stadium that day was more "passivism" than "patriotism." In an article titled "Fight Now, Love Later: The Awfulness of an Oprahesque Response," Steyn argued that the women who had impacted the United States' culture in the months and years leading up to 9/11 had induced a "terrible inertia filled with feel-good platitude that absolve us from action."² For Steyn, the prayer service, with Oprah Winfrey's call to "leave this place determined to now use every moment" and "love each other," was just another example of the cultural elite's feminized message. "Not right now, Oprah," Steyn argued. If the United States was going to "win the war on terror," the country needed to silence the grief counselors and stop all the "drooling about healing."³

Steyn was not alone in indicting women and, seemingly, the women's movement for feminizing U.S. culture. Indeed, in the months that followed September 11, multiple writers within the American mainstream media launched a full attack on feminist values. These writers

¹ Porter Anderson, "Prayer Service: 'We Shall Not Be Moved'," *Cnn.com*, 23 September 2001.

² Mark Steyn, "Fight Now, Love Later: The Awfulness of an Oprahesque Response," *National Review*, 15 October 2001.

³ *Ibid*, 45.

often claimed that in light of the national tragedy, “the feminist movement, already at low ebb, has slid further into irrelevancy.”⁴ *New York Times* columnist John Tierney pointed out that since September 11, the “American males’ fascination with guns doesn’t seem so misplaced now that they’re attacking Al Qaeda’s fortress” and hoped that the days of putting “boys in touch with their inner feelings” had ended.⁵ It was implied that feminists and their desired “femocracy” had made the United States weak.⁶

Yet many voices within these same media outlets were also harassing feminists for not doing enough to help their Middle Eastern sisters. “At the very moment feminists should be finishing the battle that they began, they are nowhere to be found,” the *New Republic* claimed.⁷ Nicholas Kristof echoed a similar claim in the *New York Times* indicting feminists for ignoring things that should be “near the top of any feminist agenda.”⁸ Oddly enough, the Bush Administration seemed quite willing to fill this alleged void. Indeed, President Bush and his administration seemed to be working overtime to help women and girls, particularly those of the Muslim faith, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Because of the administration’s military efforts, “hundreds of schools have been built for Muslim girls, millions of women have the right to vote, scores of female health care clinics have been opened, and hundreds of thousands of women now work, have their own bank accounts, use cell-phones — even serve in elected office,” according to *Fox News* in 2007.⁹ The White House held a “women’s only” conference with members of Congress to discuss the situation of Afghan women. Some feminist leaders were invited to brief

⁴ Cathy Young, "Feminism's Slide Since Sept. 11," *Boston Globe*, 16 September 2002.

⁵ John Tierney, "GI Stands Tall Again (12 Inches)," *New York Times*, 11 December 2001.

⁶ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 24.

⁷ Sarah Wildman, "Arms Length; Why Don't Feminists Support the War?" *New Republic*, 5 November 2001, 23. See also Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* who also mentions this example.

⁸ Nicholas Kristof, "Stopping the Traffickers," *New York Times*, 31 January 2004; and "Back to the Brothel," *New York Times*, 22 January 2005.

⁹ "U.S. Presence in Iraq Promotes Muslim Feminism," *Foxnews.com*, 10 May 2007.

Karen Hughes and Condoleeza Rice on their thoughts about female equality. Susan Faludi argues that the administration implied that women's rights were the "common ground" where "we can all come together."¹⁰ Members of the Bush Administration were not the only ones with this opinion. At the same time President Bush was giving speech after speech about Middle Eastern women, stories about women's equality in Iraq and Afghanistan took the entertainment media industry by storm with best-selling books and movies all edging one another out to become the most authentic story about these women's experience with democracy.

Paradoxically, then, just as some commentators deemed U.S. feminism corrupt and unnecessary in a post-9/11 world, other people were maintaining that one rationale for the American military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan was to liberate women. But why was so much of the post-9/11 attention focused on women at all? As a critic, I may never know the answer, but I posit that one reason may be that women's freedom is perceived as both a symbol of and a warrant for U.S. democracy. Indeed, as Eric Foner argues, U.S. democracy is not a fixed category. Instead, it is an "essentially contested concept" filled with competing meanings and interpretations which people reshape to their own purposes.¹¹ Since democracy does not embody a single idea but a complexity of ideas and values, the rationale for the spread of democracy through a U.S-led war is perhaps made through a gendered narrative. This project begins with the assumption that the twin narratives about women that occurred post-9/11, one an anti-feminist backlash and the other a pro-women's liberation call to arms, signify something deeper—that notions of war and its relationship to democracy are tied up with deep seated attitudes toward gender. It seems the crisis of 9/11 again brought to the surface a long-standing

¹⁰ Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 39.

¹¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998); Carl Lotus Becker, *Modern Democracy* (New Haven,: Yale University Press, 1941).

narrative that ties war to democracy and, in this case, it is expressed through a parallel narrative of gender that depends upon the dialectic of the masculine and the feminine.

As a feminist critic, I understand that feminism is also a contested, unstable term. However, as Bonnie J. Dow has demonstrated, U.S. feminism has been portrayed through a variety of mediated texts, from journalism to popular culture.¹² Therefore it is important to ask how the post-9/11 representations of women's alleged liberation in Iraq and Afghanistan implied particular meanings for and to democracy. An understanding of the connection between gender and democracy can be enriched by examining three popular discourses about Iraqi and Afghan women as they function as examples of the ways feminism and democracy are attached to certain representations and behaviors.

I have chosen three case studies that are implicitly and explicitly about both themes: feminism and democracy. In the first case study chapter, which examines photographs after the 2005 elections in Iraq, the images are very focused on markers of both democracy and femininity. The captions and uses of the photographs suggest that the two themes are seen as complimentary. The second case study, which is a memoir from 2007 about the beauty industry in Afghanistan, is explicitly about female empowerment and less obviously about democracy promotion. By contrast, the third case study, which looks at a popular blog written by an Iraqi woman, contains recognizable discussions of democracy but an emphasis on gendered bodies is not readily apparent. By looking at the three case studies as well as what was being said about gender and democracy in the U.S., I am able to examine and explore the idioms that keep appearing in media accounts of the military efforts post-9/11 about women in both regions.¹³ In

¹² Bonnie Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

¹³ When I say "patterns" I mean Janice Hocker Rushing's notion that "a pattern is generally noticed when many instances of symbolic conflict performing the same rhetorical function occur within the same time period." There

many instances, these representations are rooted in historical myths that have existed about democracy and gender—many of which are more prevalent during wartime eras. As such, I will delve into some historical elements of this connection throughout this introductory chapter.

In all three case studies, this project asks how these stories of Iraqi and Afghan women are presented. I will consider several dimensions of this question throughout the project: How does gender, looked at through a performative lens, reveal something that is otherwise unspoken in our conceptions of democracy? How does the public representation of “women’s rights” make possible the invisibility and normalcy of militarism? Likewise, what might these representations teach about feminism and democracy in the United States and abroad?

This introductory chapter is organized as follows. First, I state two methodological assumptions at work in my project and detail how I treat mass-mediated texts. Second, I situate my project in the ongoing interdisciplinary conversation that examines the link between gender, performance, and democracy. The section reviews scholarship regarding the staging of democratic rituals and the way rituals resubstantiate gender politics. Third, I give a brief review of the public arguments about feminism in the U.S. and areas of the Middle East after 9/11. These examples give me an opportunity to delve into the well-documented history of how traditional gender expectations have been articulated during wartime. I posit that the discourse in the wake of military efforts shows how deeply ingrained traditional beliefs about masculinity, femininity, and gendered citizenship have shaped the national identity of the United States. Finally, I preview the case studies included in this project. I argue that these case studies serve as site of critical inquiry for investigating the public discourse surrounding gender and democracy.

are, of course, isolated incidents that do not fit into the dominant pattern of the times. See: Janice Hocker Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth," *Communication Monographs* 50 (1983).

Methodological Assumptions

While reading this dissertation, readers may wonder why I have chosen to focus on mass-mediated texts and especially three that vary greatly from one another. In this section I explain why media texts are important and then discuss my treatment of the texts in this particular project.

The event and aftermath of 9/11 has been theorized a great deal by communication scholars. In fact, in recent years scholars have examined the speeches given by President Bush and his administration, others have examined the social commentary surrounding the event, and a limited number of scholars have talked about the way Muslim women have functioned as propaganda.¹⁴ This project joins the conversation of post-9/11 to assert that one way we understand democracy is through gendered scripts. While it is important to study institutionalized discourse, like speeches from members of the Bush Administration, mass-mediated texts are also important vehicles to emphasize particular values.¹⁵ Even if there are no universal values, I assume that mass media artifacts may compose a “collective consciousness” of a society by extending performances of historical, continued rituals.¹⁶ For the purpose of this project, I use “ritual” to mean the particular ways mediated representations of public behaviors represent and construct shared beliefs among a public.

To perhaps state the obvious, I assume that media texts play a crucial role in shaping and influencing society. As Pippa Norris has argued, trends in media are a commentary about

¹⁴ John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11th," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2003); Troy Murphy, "Romantic Democracy and the Rhetoric of Heroic Citizenship," *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2003); Greg Dickinson, "Selling Democracy: Consumer Culture and Citizenship in the Wake of September 11," *Southern Communication Journal* 70, no. 4 (2002); Jessica Winegar, "Of Chadors and Purple Fingers: US Visual Media Coverage of the 2005 Iraqi Elections," *Feminist Media Studies* 5, (2005).

¹⁵ Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth."

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

societal trends more generally.¹⁷ Thus, the discursive forms that are being circulated today are a particularly suitable space for exploring how they can maintain dominant order. In particular, this project continues the endeavor of other critics who argue that the story of American democracy is told through media texts.¹⁸ I also make the case that studying these mediated texts helps scholars and concerned citizens understand how they contribute to the normalization of gender and war. Instead of offering any definitive claims about how audiences received these two strands of tandem discourse, here I argue that understanding how gender and democracy are articulated in these examples gives way to a deeper understanding of long-standing attitudes toward the subjects of democracy and feminism.

While it is not my belief that everyone in the U.S. consumes and processes mass media texts in the same way, there is no denying the power and influence of the mass media in U.S. life. It seems nearly inescapable. Indeed, the case studies I have chosen for this analysis come from different types of media—newspapers, blogs, and popular literature—and highlight the widespread circulation of narratives about Iraqi and Afghan women. Although these case studies obviously do not include every possible form of public discourse, I offer them here as a starting point for our analysis because they help make clear the connection made in recent years between particular representations of femininity and democracy. Further, the case studies illustrate that only particular behaviors are marked as democratic. I argue that these narratives provide an ideal site for examining how gender and democracy get constructed rhetorically through social

¹⁷ Pippa Norris, *Politics and the Press: The News Media and Their Influences* (Boulder, Colo.: L. Rienner Publishers, 1997).

¹⁸ Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth."; Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, "The Rhetoric Of "Rocky": A Social Value Model of Criticism," *Western Journal of Communication* 42 (1978); Troy Murphy, "Romantic Democracy and the Rhetoric of Heroic Citizenship," *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2003); Janice Hocker Rushing, "Mythic Evolution of 'the New Frontier' in Mass Mediated Rhetoric," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986); Walter R. Fisher, "Reaffirmation and Subversion of the American Dream," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973); Kristjana Maddux, "Passionate Publics: Christian Media and the Construction of Citizenship," (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2007).

discourse, and how gender and democracy, in turn, affects cultural discourse about war.

Rhetorical representations of war provide an opportunity for gender norms to be regulated and disciplined.

In doing so, I echo the sentiments of Barry Brummett and others who argue that media texts enjoying currency in society provide a way to examine what that society's members are celebrating. For Brummett, who draws heavily on Kenneth Burke, there are themes present in media narratives which "sum up the essence of a culture's values, concerns, and interests."¹⁹ In this case, a culture's values, concerns, and interests are historically rooted in notions of gender. Brummett's take on Burke nicely coincides with a ritual view of communication, which I also adhere to in this project, because it emphasizes how media projects community ideals. Thus, reality is produced and also maintained through discourse.

Likewise, I am not trying to understand these texts in a singular way. Instead, I am recognizing in part what Leah Ceccarelli calls the "hermeneutical depth" of the texts.²⁰ That is, I am arguing that a variety of meanings are sustained by the texts I have studied here. In fact, I encourage, recognize and accept the complexities at work in the three case studies. So, even though there are similar patterns and topos, the case studies are diverse. Some of the texts seem to resist the dominant characterization of democracy promotion, some seem to support popular understanding, and some are more ambiguous. However, all focus on the performance of democratic rituals. To sustain this focus, I examine the historical roots of the rituals and performances present among all the narratives. I turn now to those historical roots through a description of ritual, performance, and gendered scripts.

¹⁹ Barry Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1 (1984); Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: G. Braziller, 1955).

²⁰ Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998).

Public Performance: Gender and Democracy

Because discussions of ritual and performance feature so prominently in this dissertation, I want to define those terms in this introductory chapter. As I will explain, the discourse analyzed in this dissertation features a variety of messages that offer a particularly narrow range of democratic and gender representations. To demonstrate this potential, I have chosen to analyze different characterizations of the democratic experiences of Iraqi and Afghan women, including voting, working, and even protesting. These texts offer a place to interrogate the potential that particular representations of gender performance suggests certain democratic behaviors. In other words, one of my main objectives is to draw attention to the performative aspects of democracy as these understandings get played out by gendered bodies.

Because so many scholars have written about gender and performance, I would like to briefly clarify my goals for the project. For example, my project will not focus on the “performative turn” taken by theorists interested in sex, gender, and sexuality who were inspired by Judith Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble*.²¹ This is, while I agree that gender is constituted by what individuals do rather than our predetermined biological essence, I do not spend much time theorizing about how gender binaries are produced and/or intentionally enacted. While the project may lead me to occasionally discuss gender presentation and, more likely, the regulation of gender binaries, my focus is on the public display of democratic acts and the gendered bodies performing them, or, put differently, the rhetorical representation of female citizenship as a tool for understanding democracy. In fact, the reason I turn to the performance literature at all is to analyze how media depictions of gender are tied up with notions of democracy. Therefore, this

²¹ See John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

project emphasizes the theatrical, ritualized nature of gender and democracy and how this relationship can be represented through mediated artifacts.

As such, there is an important overlap in my thinking and Butler's thinking in terms of performance. Butler claims that concepts such as gender are made intelligible through the process of iteration. That is, the process by which the body comes to appear is not constituted through a singular act but rather is a "ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint..."²² Thus gender is produced through a series of acts that work within a system to materialize and naturalize certain norms. While Butler is speaking specifically about gender performance, the notion of ritualized performance also aligns with a group of communication scholars who argue more generally that norms can be regulatory. Because gender identity is not the only focus of my project, I turn to these communication scholars who help analyze the ritualized, regulatory nature of democratic performance.

For example, James W. Carey's premier work *Communication as Culture* urges a ritual view of communication. Carey makes the case for a ritualistic lens of communication as a means for understanding the meaning of symbols that draw people together; in other words, he is concerned with communication's role in the larger social realm.²³ Carey's ritual model is helpful to consider the way an American audience interacts with the media. Under the ritual view, media portray a certain structured and ordered view of the world. And, importantly, the idea that media projects and confirms a particular view of reality is critical in understanding how the media represents particular view of gender and democracy. In other words, by using Carey's view, we do not have to assume that a mediated text is influential purely because of its widespread circulation, but instead because of the ways in which it portrays social phenomenon

²² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 157-8.

²³ James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18.

so that they become understood as representations of reality. For Carey, a ritual view of communication is preferred to a more instrumental view of communication. In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as “community,” “participation,” and “fellowship;” in contrast, in an instrumental view communication is linked to functions like “imparting,” “sending,” and “giving information to others.”²⁴ Thus the term “ritual” here does not necessarily have the same meaning as it would in the anthropological sense, but instead draws attention to the reproduction of shared meanings.

To illustrate the benefit of taking a ritual perspective, Carey analyzes the act of reading a newspaper which millions of people do each day. He argues that to study a newspaper under the transmission view, one sees the medium as a means for disseminating knowledge. A ritual perspective views reading a newspaper less as sending information and more like attending a mass or religious service—a situation where nothing new is learned but a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, for Carey, is a habitual action that invites reader participation insofar as they are cast within a social order they understand. Therefore, people read the news not to change their minds but to confirm what they and others already know. Since Carey is interested in dramatic actions like church services and prayer services we can assume that at the core of these ritual actions is performance.²⁵ Performance, in this sense, speaks to a series of events or social dramas as Victor Turner refers to them, filled with ritualistic behaviors that fill daily living.²⁶ Therefore, ritual is the connection between the social interaction and dramatic performance as many people perform the same acts again and again.²⁷

²⁴ Carey, 15.

²⁵ Victor Witter Turner and Richard Schechner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 1.

²⁶ Turner and Schechner, 74.

²⁷ Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970-1976*, 1st ed. (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977).

For Carey, the first step for communication scholars is to graph examples of shaped, ritualized behavior. A critic must read the acts in relation to the social structure at work. As Carey implies, actions like news reading, dances, and plays serve to structure the world as they create an “artificial world through nonetheless real symbolic order of things.”²⁸

If, as Erving Goffman and Shakespeare famously claimed, “all the world’s a stage,” democratic rituals can be viewed as a script.²⁹ Performance scholars have noted that critics should think of the street and other public spaces as a place to stage events for the camera. The staging of events can turn the public into a political theater.³⁰ Often large public spaces are transformed into theatres where collective democracy is performed. Parades, mass gatherings, petitioning, and voting are often exaggerated, repeated, and done for show. The actors are citizens and the audience includes the participants themselves, journalists, television reporters and their mass spectatorship, and high-level decision makers.³¹ Indeed, Richard Schechner writes at length about the theater that was Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989. The big open space filled with the recognizable acts of protest by the people was democratic political theatre. Before it turned violent, Schechner argues, the public act was a way for the protestors to, even when improvising, work from familiar “scripts” which emerged out of democratic traditions that were recognizable to many watching the events unfold. Official Chinese culture was upstaged and support radically shifted away from the People’s Liberation Army.³² Central to the notion of ritual is the idea of a careful adherence to a traditionally prescribed format or script. As Turner

²⁸ Carey, 4.

²⁹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959).

³⁰ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

³¹ Schechner, 83-87.

³² Schechner, 54

emphasizes, the relation between ritual and theater is woven together giving the potential for both social messages and entertainment to exist in ritualized behavior.³³

These studies, while important to the formation of my thinking, do not address the rhetorical representations of such moments. For this project, I am choosing case studies in which the public is getting information through someone else's interpretive choices. So while these examples of political theater imply a direct, immediate audience, my case studies are all about representations that are functioning as political theater in front of a general audience. However, the work of Turner and Schechner, which advances the notion that political rituals can be political theater, is important to the basic premise of this dissertation: that political rituals can be repeated again and again to reinforce dominant ideas about democracy and gender.

I mention Carey and performance scholars like Turner and Schechner in this introductory chapter to illustrate a particular paradigm of studying discourse. For me, like Carey, the media highlight particular ceremonious instances of political theater that creates and recreates meaning across time. In this next section of this chapter, I turn specifically to a discussion of gender. I will first explicate some more examples of how gender was talked about in the post-9/11 world. Given how I understand theories of ritual and performance, I presume an underlying congruity in the way the media messages during this time perform femininity. Due to the long-standing views of femininity and masculinity that have for so long characterized the U.S. view of democracy, it is possible that, in the face of 9/11, the representation of political rituals I examine in this dissertation are examples of behaviors which maintain those ideas—even in the case studies that do not appear to be overtly hegemonic or right-wing. Indeed, as I will articulate

³³ Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, (Chicago,: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

further in the chapter previews, each of the narratives draws upon the dialectic of the masculine and feminine to construct democracy.

Post-9/11: What in the [Gendered] World is Going On?

This section provides evidence of the perplexing happenings by examining the strands of related messages: first, the cultural politics of the women's movement left the United States vulnerable to attack, and, second, that U.S. military involvement contributed to the ongoing liberation and democratization of women in Iraq and Afghanistan. While it is this latter category of texts that I will analyze in the dissertation, I include the discussion of the larger context in this chapter to better set up the analysis that particular performances of democratic femininity had momentum in the United States after 9/11. This section will also suggest reasons why we might assume gender expectations are salient during wartime.

Women Should be Seen and Not Heard

Because within mainstream media accounts there was no discursive space for discussion, diverse points of view, or concerned citizen comments, John W. Jordan documents how the homefront was disciplined during the war in Iraq. I want to talk about how gender in particular was a subject of that discipline. The story begins with the disciplining of high profile American feminists. Not everyone was as obvious with their feminist bashing as Jerry Falwell who infamously quipped that 9/11 was allowed to happen because of the "feminists."³⁴ Instead, the media was more subtle, albeit only slightly. William Bennett echoed Falwell's concerns in his book *Why We Fight*. Bennett argues that feminists weakened the U.S. resolve when they taught "that male aggression is a wild and malignant force that needs to be repressed or medicated lest it

³⁴ Jerry Falwell, "Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians," *Cnn.com*, 14 September 2001.

burst out” into murderous behavior.³⁵ Media opinion leaders noted that with all the feminist “babble” about guns and patriarchy, a “surprise attack on U.S. soil is a good reminder how absurd it is to defang a man.”³⁶ It seemed the feminist agenda had unnecessarily turned America into a “nanny state” that left them with no will to fight.³⁷ However, as Peggy Noonan wrote in a much-circulated op-ed piece, “from the ashes of September 11 arise the manly virtues.”³⁸

Not surprisingly, manly virtues thrived in an environment devoid of another perspective. As such, feminist pundits and writers were silenced. When Susan Sontag contributed an essay to the *New Yorker* wondering if a “few shreds of historical awareness might help us to understand what has just happened and what may continue to happen,” she was called “deranged,” an “ally of evil,” and “stupefyingly dumb.”³⁹ Perhaps worse was when feminist commentator Katha Pollitt questioned the legitimacy of flying the flag as a symbol of national unity when it has been so long used as “jingoism and vengeance and war.”⁴⁰ In what followed, which Pollitt deemed the most hostile response she had ever received, she was told to “shut up” and “take her brain to the dry cleaners.”⁴¹ To even raise these types of questions was considered traitorous and nothing short of a terrorist act. Feminist writer Barbara Kingsolver argued that the public whipping of feminists quickly positioned them as “bad girls” and worthy of ridicule with words like “bitch, airhead and moron and silly.”⁴²

³⁵ William J. Bennett, *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 18.

³⁶ Ann Coulter, “Women We’d Like to See...In Burkas,” *Townhall.com*, 2001.

³⁷ Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 24.

³⁸ Peggy Noonan, “Welcome Back, Duke,” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2001.

³⁹ Andrew Sullivan, “America Drops the Little Issues to Face the Real World,” *Sunday Times*, 23 September 2001; and Steve Chapman, “Lunacy on the Left--and Some Sanity,” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 October 2001.

⁴⁰ Katha Pollitt, “Put up No Flags,” *Nation*, 2001.

⁴¹ Steve Dunleavy, “Crybabies Have ‘Left’ Common Sense Behind,” *New York Post*, October 3 2001; see also Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, which contains an interview with Pollitt about the situation.

⁴² Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 32.

At the very same time these feminists were being disciplined, a particular model of femininity was being praised in the United States. Conversations about women shifted to a description of the “ideal post-9/11 American woman.”⁴³ An example of this narrative was featured in the *New York Times Magazine* with a story about “Casey” who had personally not been interested in marriage, but when the towers fell, was “suddenly planning their wedding” because indecisiveness seemed “out of sync with the country’s renewed sense of purpose” and “somehow unpatriotic.”⁴⁴ The ideal American woman, it seemed, was a throwback to the women of the fifties: “homemakers in the suburbs held hostage by fear” who were willing to sacrifice for the good of the country.⁴⁵ These women, who realized that America was at war and reacted “appropriately,” were portrayed as the building blocks of the United States. The media in guided women away from the unpatriotic statements from Pollitt and Sontag to instead embrace what Faludi calls “the virtues of nesting:” that is, a return to old values of “homecoming and housecleaning.”⁴⁶

Strangely, for every story in the media urging American women to retreat to feminine dependence, it seemed there was one praising Middle Eastern women for doing the opposite coming from the Bush Administration and media outlets. Just two months after 9/11, Colin Powell announced that “the rights of the women of Afghanistan will not be negotiable” and Laura Bush gave a radio address to “kick off the world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network.”⁴⁷ In October 2001, Bush announced America's Fund for Afghan Children, which raised nearly \$12 million for schools in

⁴³ Ibid, 130.

⁴⁴ Virginia Heffernan, “The Way We Live Now,” *New York Times Magazine*, 14 October 2001, 30.

⁴⁵ Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 117; and Nancy Gibbs, “Life on the Homefront,” *Time*, 1 October 2001.

⁴⁷ Powell, Colin. “Afghan Women: Secretary Colin L. Powell Remarks.” U.S. State Department (November 19, 2001). www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6186.html; and Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush.” White House (December 12, 2001) www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/2001117.html.

Afghanistan.⁴⁸ America, vowed President Bush, would never abandon any nation that “wasn’t capable of defending *herself*.”⁴⁹ The President gave numerous speeches arguing that because of military efforts and the sacrifices of the American people, Middle Eastern women were now free to attend school and live without the fear of rape and abuse.⁵⁰ He argued that Middle Eastern countries have “held elections in which women were allowed to vote and hold office for the first time.”⁵¹ The ability to guarantee women’s rights, therefore, was primary evidence for U.S. military intervention.

At the same time, images and stories of burka-clad women also became a staple of television news, box office hits, and best-selling novels. The influx of media stories was perhaps not surprising considering the fact that conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were the first wars to emerge as a fully coordinated “media spectacle,” complete with interactive websites, 3D maps of the region, wartime video games, and embedded journalists.⁵² But perhaps what was surprising was that most of the media stories placed an emphasis on women; many of whom were Muslim. With an eager American audience at their fingertips, the media hoped to entertain them with the overlooked and underexposed stories of the burka. In 2001, documentaries like *Beneath the Veil* and feature films such as *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* served as the perfect counterpart to government officials’ many speeches and programs. Stories spilled to bookstore shelves with titles like *The Saffron Kitchen* in 2006 and the widely popular *The Thousand Splendid Suns* in

⁴⁸ Bush, George W. “President Press Conference.” White House (March 16, 2005), www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/03,

⁴⁹ George W. Bush, “President Press Conference,” (Washington D.C.), March 16, 2005, emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Bush, George W. “President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror,” White House (March, 2008), www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/03 2008; and “President Bush Discusses Importance of Freedom in the Middle East,” United Arab Emirates (2008), www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01

⁵¹ Bush, “President Bush Discusses Importance of Freedom in the Middle East.”

⁵² Kellner, “9/11 Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics.”; John Jordan, “Disciplining the Homefront: Mainstream News and the Web During the War in Iraq,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4 (2007);and Roger Stahl, “Have You Played the War on Terror?,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006).

2007.⁵³ In 2008, Internet sites such as *Second Life* gave users a chance to interact as a Muslim woman to develop an “inclusive perspective on religion and democratic coexistence.”⁵⁴ Even comic books revealed an intense interest in the stories of Middle Eastern women.⁵⁵ Given the public eagerness to learn about the experience of Muslim women, the *New York Times* claimed in 2008 that the veil had become over-exposed.⁵⁶ To be sure, the veil and the woman’s body that it covers have gone beyond the words of press releases and speeches and entered the pages of popular media.

Taken individually these strands of discourse about Muslim women and American feminists might seem like random, touching stories or extreme, singular examples. But taken together, they make up an undeniable narrative that elaborately constructs a myth that to be a patriotic woman is to support the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and to be democratic meant that one participated in public elections and not public debates. Indeed, the prevalence of these narratives shows that there are recurring ways of speaking about gender during a time of war. While these examples are mostly anecdotal, public discussions work in part, according to Lauren Berlant, as keys “about what ‘America’ stands for...how citizens should act.”⁵⁷ The idea that public discussions give clues about what America stands for is fundamental to this dissertation. That is, it is possible that the story of the military conflicts in the Middle East, which is being written in the mainstream media through the repudiation of U.S. feminists and through the support of women’s rights in Iraq and Afghanistan, is a telling barometer of how Americans are

⁵³ Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007); Yasmin Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, (New York: Viking, 2006).

⁵⁴ PR Press Release, "Findings from the Understanding of Islam through Virtual Worlds Projects," *PR Newswire*, 9 February 2009.

⁵⁵ Jo Tatchell, "Meet the Islamic Barbie," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2004; and Ed O'Loughlin, "Fulla Has the Mid-East Doll Market Covered," *International Herald Tribune*, 23 December 2005.

⁵⁶ Lorraine Adams, "Beyond the Burkah," *New York Times*, 6 January 2008.

⁵⁷ Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.

encouraged to feel about gender and democracy in general. Therefore, while these examples are about war, they are also examples of rhetoric about democracy. But the idea that stories about war may actually be rhetoric about democracy can only be recognized if we look at the media narratives as performances, which is the goal of this dissertation.

Before turning to my case studies, I now turn to an examination of historical perspectives of war and national identity to provide insight into the roots of this narrative. Scholars have studied the complexity of war from various ethnic, political, economic, and religious standpoints, but I agree with Susan Jefford's assertion that "an important way to read war, perhaps the most significant way when we think about war itself, is as a construction of gendered interests."⁵⁸ Therefore, the scholarly work that makes a connection between women's stories and war helps further my analysis that messages having to do with gender reveal something unspoken about U.S. conceptions of democracy.

Motherland Protected by her Soldier Son

When national crises, like 9/11, seem to destabilize and threaten masculinity, often there will be a circulation of images and stories to reinvigorate masculine identity. But before that can happen, there may be an influx of stories placing blame for the cause of the decline in masculinity. Immediately after 9/11, the media was filled with stories blaming the women's liberation movement. For example, some people accused the women's liberation movement of "feminizing" American men by making men and women "indistinguishable in the workplace," subjecting them to "mourning and therapy," and, perhaps the most grievous offense, damaging the U.S. military's "morale, discipline, recruiting, retention, and overall readiness" by insisting

⁵⁸ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Theories of Contemporary Culture (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi.

women have equal access to the military.⁵⁹ So, in the aftermath of 9/11, it was obvious to some that America was not strong; the men had allegedly lost their swagger. According to this logic, not only did this weakness invite the attack because Osama bin Laden viewed Americans as soft and weak but it appeared the United States had lost the will to fight. Therefore, to get back the strong, active, protective masculinity which for so long characterized the U.S. national identity, feminist influence had to be eliminated from the public sphere.

Once the feminist voice was minimized, masculinity and a strong U.S. identity could resurface. This interconnected relationship between maleness, masculinity, and national identity relies on the ubiquitous circulation of images in the mass media. In particular, during wartime American culture becomes saturated with pictures of strong, brave, and masculine characters. For example, Jeffords explains that in the post-Vietnam era, American culture experienced an increase of masculine icons such as “Rambo” and Miami Vice’s Sonny Crockett. These characters epitomized the “hard body” ideal.⁶⁰ Indeed, the visibility of strong male bodies often accompanies efforts to restore the public’s faith in their national identity.⁶¹ And after 9/11, when the U.S. was thought to be vulnerable, they had firefighters and police officers. There was, according to the *New York Times*, “Neanderthal TV” with characters like 24’s Jack Bauer and a police officer on *The Shield* who can kill with his bare hands.⁶² Who can forget the photographs from President Bush’s Crawford, Texas, ranch where he rode in his pickup truck and took his dog on hunting trips? And on the international stage, the United States had images of servicemen roaming the streets of Iraq and Afghanistan.

⁵⁹ Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, 26.

⁶⁰ Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, 168.

⁶¹ Sattareh Farman-Farmaian and Dona Munker, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown, 1992), 2.

⁶² Warren St. John, “What Men Want: Neanderthal TV,” *New York Times*, 11 December 2005.

Of course, the functionality and intelligibility of masculinity depends, in large part, on a feminine counterpart. The civilian woman makes the male soldier ideal possible. The narrative of feminine “motherland” is particularly salient when “she” is protected by the masculine soldier.⁶³ The gendered protector-male/protected-female relationship is essential to a militarized patriarchal narrative and practice. She needs him to fight for and save her and he needs her as a reason to fight and be the savior.⁶⁴ Shelia Jeffreys echoes this sentiment: “Without the concept of ‘women’ as social inferiors from whom the male soldiers must differentiate themselves by their actions, the male soldier might have no founding myth to hang onto, no rationale.”⁶⁵ Cynthia Enloe explains that the depictions of women in “enemy” countries as “vulnerable” constructs them as victims of international politics and justifies the invasion of “enemy” nations who permit the abuse of *their* women.⁶⁶ Thus, military conflict is often justified as a means for securing the civility of vulnerable women who are dependent upon the presence of a benevolent masculine guardian.⁶⁷ For these reasons, I examine photographs in Chapter Two because they show both military men and civilian women as part of the representation and performance of gender.

Some scholars have argued that even though women are visible during international conflicts, they are often just symbols of nationalism and shut out from the actual political discussions. Women are seen as positive and beneficial to the continuation the state, because

⁶³ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), xiii-xiv; and John W. Howard III and Laura C. Prividera, "The Fallen Woman Archetype: Media Representations of Lynndie England, Gender, and the (Ab)uses of U.S. Female Soldiers," *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 3 (2008), 289.

⁶⁴ Howard III and Prividera, 290.

⁶⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, "Double Jeopardy: Women, the US Military and the War in Iraq," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30 (2007), 14.

⁶⁶ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora, 1989).

⁶⁷ Shannon L. Holland, "Gender, National Identity, and Public Discourse: Making Sense of Operation Iraqi Freedom," (University of Georgia, 2006), 6.

they are assumed to be “peaceful,” and “collaborative.” As such, V. Spike Peterson argues that women are used as participants in political identity struggles. And, because women are often seen as the key to national identity, they are often under strict disciplining. As Peterson notes, “By enforcing legislation regarding marriage, child custody, and property and citizenship, the state controls” the women’s membership in the state.⁶⁸ The reality seems to be that often women’s roles revert to traditional ones, and nationalistic loyalties are more highly valued than is gender equality.⁶⁹

These enduring images of noble warriors and their mythic fight for democracy rely on essentialist notions of women and men. Because these assumptions are deeply rooted, scholars have noted that these myths are easy to replicate and are widely exported by the media.⁷⁰ These well-documented happenings provide a starting point for which to begin my analysis. I approach the narratives in this project, which are about women in Iraq and Afghanistan, in light of the three themes that I’ve highlighted in this literature review. First, democratic behaviors are often ritualized and performed with much theatrical flair. Second, during times of war and democracy promotion, media narratives follow a consistent pattern of emphasizing traditional gender roles. Third, in the aftermath of 9/11, there was at least a partial turn in the media to embrace a new characterization of femininity as long as it was a Muslim woman enacting the characterization. Aware that the case studies are constrained by both a need to present traditional gender roles and newfound democratic agency for Muslim women, I turn to an explanation of the rest of the dissertation.

⁶⁸ “Gendered Nationalism: Reproducing ‘Us’ versus ‘Them.’” In Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer E. Turpin, *The Women and War Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 41-9.

⁶⁹ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53-56.

⁷⁰ Anita Taylor and M.J. Hardman, “War, Language and Gender, What New Can Be Said? Framing the Issues,” *Women and Language*, 27, no. 2 (2004), 4.

Chapter Preview

Each chapter in this dissertation engaged in different ways the question of how the stories present femininity and democracy. Each chapter begins by situating the public behaviors within a historical democratic context. The chapters also describe in general terms how the narratives respond to the rhetorical exigencies explained in this introductory chapter. These chapters are arranged by democratic behaviors, so that the election photographs from 2005, the most obviously democratic narrative, come first followed by *Kabul Beauty School*, whose plot seems to deal less with democracy but more with claims of feminism. Following the memoir, I look at *Baghdad Burning*, a blog that seems to be a counter-narrative to the previous case studies but one that also illustrates a similar pattern of gendered performance. I look at both democracy and gender because my argument reveals that conceptions of gender reveal unspoken conceptions of democracy.

Before I give a fuller description of the case studies, I want to say a few words about the women discussed in this project. First, I understand that all experiences of Iraq and Afghan women are not the same. And, importantly, I understand that not all women in Iraq and Afghanistan are Muslim. However, these narratives primarily deal with stories about Iraqi and Afghan women who do identify as Muslim. Further, I argue throughout the dissertation that the popularity of the stories is due, in large part, to the religion of the women because a presence of “democracy” among Muslim communities is seen as more democratic than the presence in a secular, Christian community. Therefore, the narratives selected are about Muslim women. As evidenced by President Bush’s remarks highlighted in this chapter, Muslim women are often talked about in conversations about democracy promotion. However, my aim is not to treat the women as tokens in this analysis. Instead, I am interested in the media narratives that seem to

treat women as symbols of democracy rather than engage in a complex discussion about the material conditions of war and democracy promotion.

In Chapter Two, “Viewing Democracy,” I explore the representations of the ritual of voting. Specifically, I examine the photographs circulated in the U.S. mainstream media after the 2005 election in Iraq to see how the photographs portray a particular story of democracy, gender, and race. Perhaps more significantly, I also analyze the historical narratives about U.S. women’s suffrage that help an American audience make sense of the images from 2005. I turn to close reading of 20th century woman’s suffrage images to establish a vernacular from which the Iraqi images draw upon. While I do not argue that these images codes are presented consciously, the analysis suggests that certain motifs are used in both generations. First, in representations of democracy societies, women are shown to be rational, by highlighting behaviors like voting and education, and feminine, by highlighting traditional dress and behaviors such as mothering. Second, the visual representations connect topos such as “freedom,” “equality,” and “enlightenment” to female participation in democracy. In this chapter, I discuss the nature of this coherent visual understanding given that in one generation the use of this vernacular was revolutionary and the other is seemingly hegemonic.

In Chapter Three, “Writing Democracy in Afghanistan,” I examine one text about the beauty industry and its tie to democracy. To do this, I analyze a best-selling memoir that, on the surface, seems to have nothing to do with politics or the war. While the memoir genre has been a popular medium to tell the story of Middle Eastern women in recent years, the latest edition comes from an American hairdresser who desires to talk more about beauty than democracy. Deborah Rodriguez travels to Afghanistan, falls in love with the country, and sets up a beauty school while she is working with an American aid service. She tells her story in *Kabul Beauty*

School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil. Because this book is not explicitly about the war, the connection to this introductory chapter may not be clear. However, as I explain in the chapter, the media accounts of the book argue that Rodriguez has made lasting democratic change in Afghanistan because the beauty school brought financial freedom to women in Afghanistan. I look closely at the implications of a rhetorical coupling of democracy and capitalism in this instance.

Chapter Four, “Blogging Democracy in Iraq,” involves an Internet weblog. In 2003 an anonymous Iraqi woman, known only as Riverbend, began a personal weblog chronicling the Iraqi conflict. The blog, which ended in 2007 when the author and her family safely moved to Syria, has since been translated into two bound editions and won 3rd price in the Ulysses Award for the Art of Reporting. Clearly a widely circulated work, it serves as a slight deviation from the texts in the other chapters because it is written by an Iraqi woman; her narrative is largely resistant to the hegemonic narratives in the other two case study chapters. However, this chapter is fitting for analysis given the claim by many scholars and journalists that blogs are uniquely democratic and particularly useful for feminist politics. The chapter discusses some of the strategies that Riverbend uses to represent her gendered citizenship the analysis suggests that Riverbend receives notoriety because of the democratic medium and her pro-feminism message. However, she also illustrates a similar pattern of gendered performance, which leaves her vulnerable to disciplining. This case study, along with Chapter Three, does not have an obvious right-wing slant or ideological basis. If anything, this case seems to be counter-hegemonic. However, this chapter is worthy of analysis because the texts exhibits patterns of gender and democracy in its text and the reception.

By way of conclusion, Chapter Five, “Looking Ahead,” will tie up loose ends and draw conclusions based on the significance of these political rituals. I connect the idea of ritual to the literature on critical rhetoric and vernacular arguments. I argue that paying attention to the vernacular arguments, rather than the legal or official discourse, helps to gain a better understanding of the origins of these narratives. However, while most scholars argue that vernacular rhetoric is counter-hegemonic, I question if these narratives, which are steeped in democratic ideology, actually reinforce the ideals of the dominant power.

CHAPTER 2

VIEWING DEMOCRACY: PHOTOGRAPHS FROM IRAQ

Introduction

During his 2005 State of the Union address, George W. Bush claimed that the American-led efforts in Iraq were succeeding. As proof, he pointed to the elections held on January 30, 2005, when millions of Iraqis took to the polls and elected their first National Assembly. The vote, he claimed, was a “victory of freedom” which strengthened the “war on terror.”⁷¹ He reminded the audience that this “act of civic responsibility” was in line with the American “spirit of liberty.” And in what the *Associated Press* called an electrified moment in the speech, Bush pointed to the gallery where Iraqi woman Safia Taleb al-Suhail sat with First Lady Laura Bush. With all eyes on her, al-Suhail stood and flashed a victory sign to the cheering legislature below. One could not help but notice that her index finger was stained a bright purple. The President said her waving, purple-inked finger was a symbol for the millions of Iraqis who voted for the first time. As a way to support the symbolism, Representative Bobby Jindal provided purple ink for the House Chamber. Lawmakers marked their index fingers as a sign that Congress “will stand beside them and all peoples who embrace freedom.”⁷² Photographs of the event were chronicled on the White House webpage.⁷³

⁷¹ George W. Bush, *State of the Union*, Washington D.C. (February 2 2005), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>.

⁷² Bob Dart, "State of the Union: Purple-Finger Salute; Lawmakers Display Unity with Iraqi Voters," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 2 February 2005, 8A.

⁷³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/2005/photoessay3/03.html>.

Bush's address was met with mixed reviews. Some argued that there was no military plan articulated in the speech and that the event distracted from the real issues. Democratic Representative Lloyd Doggett quipped, "The real problem is that Bush's policies keep sticking our people in a barrel of red ink."⁷⁴ But the media latched onto the emotional, purple-filled moment and revered the speech. The *Washington Post* called the event "the moment that America embraced."⁷⁵ The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reported the purple-finger moment was "a sign of defiance to terrorists."⁷⁶ In actuality, the purple ink was simply used to cut down on voter fraud in Iraq. The indelible ink that takes days to wear off prevented people from voting more than once. The subject of this analysis, however, is to interrogate if the purple finger serves another function. How does Bush's focus on the purple finger echo a larger cultural narrative found in the U.S. media following the Iraq election?

Bush's choice of his special guest and the Chamber's focus on purple fingers do not seem to be an accident or mere coincidence. Instead, purple fingers and Iraqi women represent a very popular media occurrence. Countless media organizations have blog posts and articles devoted to photographs that tell the stories of the brand new democratic citizens.⁷⁷ *Time Magazine* has two separate photo galleries on their website which document the Iraq elections. The *New York Times* has a photo gallery that accompanies every article written about the election online and a few stock photographs that circulate in the newspaper. The *USA Today* has an interactive photo gallery on their website. The *AP Press Wire* released photographs of

⁷⁴ Dart, "State of the Union: Purple-Finger Salute; Lawmakers Display Unity with Iraqi Voters."

⁷⁵ Neely Tucker, "The Moment America Embraced," *Washington Post*, 4 February 2005.

⁷⁶ Dart, "State of the Union: Purple-Finger Salute; Lawmakers Display Unity with Iraqi Voters."

⁷⁷ For this paper I examined a variety of news media and blogs from different political affiliations and corporate ownerships. Including: *USA Today*, *The New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Reuters*, *Codepink4peace.org*, *The U.S. State Department's* photo gallery as well as the White House's interactive page.

citizens casting, examining and displaying election ballots, which have become stock photographs for many blog posts and political sites.

Indeed, the photographs became commonplace in the public sphere. What may have given viewers pause, however, is what the photographs had in common: an emphasis on women. The major newspapers featured online photo galleries to document the “Iraq election,” yet most, if not all, the photographs featured women in veils, holding up their purple-inked fingers. The United States media coverage was dominated by photographs of Iraqi *women* most of whom appeared to be Muslim at the polls. As rhetorical scholar Jessica Winegar noted in 2005 after the Iraq election, “images of women voting far exceeded those of men. Images of women in head-to-toe black chadors far outnumbered those in colorful headscarves or with no covering.”⁷⁸ Similar images could soon be found on the United States government’s sites. The United States’ State Department started a web page filled with images of the Iraqi people voting largely filled with women.⁷⁹ The White House developed an interactive page about democracy specifically devoted to voting rights, democracy, and participation in the Middle East featuring women voting, using computers, and holding voting literature. What results is a full color, pictorial tour of the Middle East with women’s bodies being the most popular souvenir.

To claim that these images are significant and widespread is not unique as scholars from many disciplines have made similar claims.⁸⁰ Instead, this chapter investigates how the images of voting have come to have meaning for U.S. audiences. In particular, what is the significance of the images of women voting? Drawing on Roland Barthes who claims that photographs attain

⁷⁸ Jessica Winegar, “Of Chadors and Purple Fingers: US Visual Media Coverage of the 2005 Iraqi Elections,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 5, (2005).

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Iraqi Elections,” January 2005, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/pix/b/nea/iraq/41368.htm>. See also www.whitehouse.org.

⁸⁰ Winegar, “Of Chadors and Purple Fingers: US Visual Media Coverage of the 2005 Iraqi Elections.”; Myra MacDonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representations,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 6, no. 1 (2006); and Naomi Klein, “Brand USA Is in Trouble,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 15 March 2005.

meaning from their historical foundation, I posit that the images of today are meaningful because of pre-existing narratives about female citizenship in the United States from the 20th century.⁸¹ Indeed, given the United States history with inclusive suffrage, the ritual of women voting has become almost synonymous with democracy. As such, the images circulated after 2005 Iraq elections are not surprising. However, the similarities between the sets of images are an interesting site for study for scholars interested in the historical evolution of images. After all, Cara Finnegan argues that to study photographs as generationally isolated and as “free-floating signifiers” is only to understand half the story. Photographic images have a past just as much as they have a present and a future.⁸² Meaning cannot exist without an understanding of the story and history of the images.⁸³ In this chapter, I locate part of the “meaning” of the Iraq election photographs in the long history of women’s suffrage and citizenship rights in the United States, which tends to be told visually. The photographs could help audiences visualize democracy through the act of women voting, which is an activity that already has a stable narrative in the United States’ memory.

To understand the complexity of the voting images, I investigate the ritual of women’s suffrage broadly and historically. I argue that the history of female suffrage in the United States provides the vocabulary for a particular version of democracy—a democracy which values political rituals such as voting at the expense of other democratic models. To explore how and why particular images are circulated again and again is to understand how images become inventional resources in the public sphere.⁸⁴ Thus, the historical analysis is necessary because it

⁸¹ Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 94.

⁸² Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), xvi.

⁸³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Penguin, 1972).

⁸⁴ Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*, 223. Finnegan makes this argument about a historical approach to FSA poverty photos.

shows there is a vernacular from which the Iraqi images draw. And, while the connection may be unconscious, making note of the vernacular points to the idea that particular notions of gender and democracy get used again and again by the mainstream media. This chapter, then, contributes to the goal of understanding patterns of meaning in regard to gender and democracy. It also provides examples of how feminism and democracy are attached to certain representations and behaviors. The study does not want to simply label the photographs as “propaganda” and “exploitation.” Rather my approach moves us to engage the various ways the media “pictures” women and democracy and gain a deeper understanding of why the photographs of women were circulated at all.

In order to understand the democratic ritual of voting, this chapter proceeds in three sections. In the first section, I examine a sampling of the images after the 2005 election in Iraq to see how democracy is being represented. A close reading of the images reveals three themes of democracy in Iraq. First, the images expand the typical assumptions about Muslim women as submissive and oppressed to include characterizations of citizenship. In turn, the images show Iraq to be enlightened because of the inclusive elections. Second, the photographs show democracy as something America gives to Iraqi women with the American soldiers literally delivering ballots and keeping guard at the polls. The photographs seem to suggest that [white] soldiers are responsible for democracy. Third, the photographs portray a very procedural notion of democracy. Specifically, the images portray liberal democracy with the individual act of voting at the center. The images show women traveling to and from the polls, casting ballots and studying issues rather than gathering in the streets for a protest or at a town hall with men to lobby for candidates. The photographs combine to provide an interesting story of what it means to be a Muslim woman, an American [soldier] man, and a participant in democracy.

Having established the three visual motifs of Iraqi democracy, I argue in the second section that the portrayal of Iraqi democracy may be both familiar and strange to a U.S. audience because of the dependence on universal suffrage. Here, I turn to a historical look at women's suffrage in the U.S. A close reading of 20th century images shows similar themes as the photographs today. The photographs contain two important themes. First, the photographs redefined woman as compatible with voting citizen. The second rhetorical strategy was to associate gender equality with justice. The two themes became part of the public conversation and are influential even today. When seen individually, the images of women's suffrage movements past and present have their own meanings. When taken together, they become a coherent, cumulative myth that overshadows more complex stories of wartime and democracy. In short, the visuals from the Iraqi women's suffrage efforts invite American viewers to participate in an existing narrative about universal suffrage and democracy that can then be used to make assumptions about Iraqi women and democracy promotion.

To conclude, I turn to a discussion of what cultural work the historical understanding does. Obviously, the photographs tap into visual understanding. However, the nature of this is complicated given that the use of this vernacular in the 1900s was considered revolutionary and, by my account, the same motifs today are hegemonic. And while I talk more in Chapter Five about how these photographs contribute to a present day cultural vernacular, in this chapter I argue there are two impacts of these culturally revered photographs. First, I argue the major problem with a visual portrayal of liberal democracy is that individual, procedural acts such as voting are substituted for complex discussions that may be of import to Muslim women. I argue that women's suffrage efforts portray the public performance of women but overlook their experiences in the private sphere. Second, the representations create a myth which usurps

dialogue and debate. The photographs, and the subsequent understanding of them, suggest that the military efforts are important in securing women's rights. The photographs are examples of cultural texts blurring the distinction between myth and reality. But, even more generally, the existence of the photographs at all signals that *viewing* democracy is important for a public.

The Visual Present: Photographing Democracy in Iraq

The photographs in 2005 were used to provide an intimate look at the elections in Iraq and draw attention to certain aspects of the democratic happening and divert attention from others. Pictures are attractive as “hardly any mental effort is required to look at” them and the attractiveness of them is only enhanced “if the pictures are themselves sensational, faintly salacious, or gruesome.”⁸⁵ Daniel Mich and Edwin Eberman argue that a good picture story should contain a sharply focused narrative, employ photographs with impact, focus on people as opposed to things, and recognize that universal interest transcends spot news.⁸⁶ Indeed, the photographs of the 2005 election are an interesting, some might say sensational, narrative that focuses on people engaged in recognizable activities. Yet the photographs of the Iraqi election seem curiously uninformative about the context of the event as there are rarely explicit references to specific events, people, or locations. The photographs do, however, tell an impactful story about Muslim women and the rituals of democracy. A careful analysis of the sample photographs reveals that the images uphold the necessary and recognizable democratic rituals. Therefore, the photographs complicate the viewer's gaze by working against previous images of Muslim women in a variety of ways but, at the same time, confirm some previous

⁸⁵ Ibid,168.

⁸⁶ Ibid,179; Daniel Danforth Mich and Edwin Eberman, *The Technique of the Picture Story* (New York, London,: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1945).

assumptions by working with the visual conventions that uphold gender and racial binaries. Therefore, the photographs are both strange and familiar to the viewer.

While it is not possible to review all of the images that circulated after the Iraqi election, the images shown in this chapter are a representative sample of three themes found in the images. First, the images marry traditional markers of Muslim women to markers of citizenship in order to show Iraq as an enlightened democracy. Second, the images show a procedural notion of democracy with the act of voting at the center. This theme lends credence to the claim by the Bush Administration and others that Muslim women are active, eager participants in the public sphere. Third, the photographs illustrate a division between Muslim woman and American [soldier] man. American men are shown as keepers and givers of democracy while Muslim women are participants in the American system. The three themes work together to frame a picture of war, gender, and performance that depends on gender and racial binaries and a procedural view of democracy.

Before I start with the images from 2005, I want to provide a written snapshot of traditional representations of Muslim women more generally as the images used in this chapter mark a shift from previous images of Muslim women. By making note of the shift, I hope to remind readers that the images from the 2005 election serve as a site of struggle over the image meaning of Muslim women. Scholars have made note of the shift in media characterization during recent years. Speaking of images prior to 2005, feminist media scholar Myra MacDonald argues that in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, “the Western media again used women’s bowed and veiled bodies to confirm the urgency of rescuing them from their fate....The burqa became a suddenly familiar trope of oppressed womanhood.”⁸⁷ Media critic Jack Shaheen concurs when he argues that Muslim women were long humiliated, demonized, and eroticized in the

⁸⁷ MacDonald, "Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representations."

mainstream media.⁸⁸ Yet in early 2005, the images of Muslim women were noticeably different. Brigitte Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna argue that images after the United States' invasion created new cultural depictions of Muslim women.⁸⁹ Consistent with the reading of Nacos and Torres-Reyna, I argue these depictions of Muslim women show female citizens engaged in democratic rituals. These new images have been popularized and made part of the larger cultural discussion. While I discuss the larger cultural context in Chapter Five, I will use this chapter as an opportunity to discuss how the images from 2005 define gender and democracy. As I discussed in Chapter One, notions of war and democracy are tied up with deep seated notions of gender. As I will discuss here, these notions are often dependent on women participating in democratic rituals like voting.

The definition of the democratic civic identity in Iraq starts with two key elements: Muslim women and women's suffrage. Many images draw a viewer's attention to the clearly marked Muslim females in the photographs and their participation in the public sphere. The photographs often show women dressed according to many Western expectations of Muslim traditions with burkas covering their bodies and hijabs cover their heads (Figure 1). Both garments signify Muslim femininity as most viewers understand that the Muslim faith promotes modesty in women's dress, sometimes including full coverage dressing gowns and veils.⁹⁰ Often the only flesh visible is their faces and their freshly inked fingers. The inked fingers show that the women have participated in the election, which implies the women support "freedom"

⁸⁸ *Reel Bad Arabs*, (Brooklyn: Interlink Publishing, 2001), 22-24.

⁸⁹ *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, And Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 39-42.

⁹⁰ A vast number of Muslim scholars and theorists have chronicled that Muslim women are required to be fully covered so as not to attract undue attention or reveal the shape of the body. See Michael A. Koszegi and J. Gordon Melton, *Islam in North America: A Sourcebook*, Religious Information Systems Series (New York: Garland Pub., 1992).

and “democracy.” The traditional dress and delicate hands mark them as female. Thus, the eye recognizes that they are democratic, female citizens.



FIGURE 1 New York Times 1/20/2005 “*Women With Their Index Fingers Stained Purple*”

As Figure 1 shows, the photographs invite an intimate connection between the viewer and the women in the photographs. The viewer of the photograph is invited to make eye contact with the women and given the close proximity it feels as though one is with them as they vote for the first time. The faces of the women invite a viewer’s gaze and eye contact. Their direct look into the camera indicates that they are aware of the photographer. The image shows two generations of women which allows a viewer to postulate aged differences to voting. The older woman’s gray hair peeks through the top of her headscarf. Her wrinkled mouth and sunken eyes show the hardship of her days under non-democratic rule. The younger woman is foregrounded in the picture as if to suggest that there is a fresh perspective on democracy and life in Iraq. She wears a white headscarf, has crisp features, and represents the bright future in store for Iraq. As such, the photograph symbolically shows that Iraq has moved beyond the old regime into a new, rehabilitated, bright state. The women could represent all women in Iraq. All women—young and old—are ready and able to vote. While their faces and freshly inked fingers are shown there is no further context to the photograph, no guess as to their surroundings, whereabouts, or

feelings. The lack of detailing allows the viewer of the image to imagine the important contextual information about the photograph: times are changing in Iraq, and the democratic future looks bright. Women do not have an individual identity. Instead they serve to represent a nation's transition to democracy.

The photograph emphasizes the stoic nature of the women. They both face the camera. Neither is smiling. Because the photograph is still, the women appear lifeless, unresisting, and vacant. Yet the brightness of their inked fingers suggests that the women have been actively participating in civic activities to reshape Iraq. The caption does not even say "voting," but the purple finger is worth a thousand words. Purple signals participation and suffrage. The glossy, luminous color of the photograph suggests hope and promise for a luminous future. The purple finger—the sign of the vote—works to add markers of citizenship to markers of Muslim women. Viewers no longer look at the women as only Muslim. Now they are Muslim citizens actively engaged in recognizable democratic theater.



FIGURE 2 www.freerepublic.com 12/13/05

Another way to provide an intimate portrayal of Iraqi democracy is to include representations of women and children. Many of the Iraqi suffrage images connect motherhood and citizenship. Women are often holding two vital objects: a child and a ballot. Thus, a viewer can look at the photo and see the relationship between her private and public experiences. One can conclude that just as she holds her child, the Iraqi woman holds the fate of a young democracy. The impact is clear: a women's right to vote impacts the family. A woman needs to participate civically to participate in familial situations. As in Figure 2, many photographs merge the traditional notion of female as mother with the idea that females can be citizens, too. The close cropping of the photograph and the absence of any text focus a viewer's attention on the face and finger of the mother and the body of the baby. The lack of caption forces the viewer

to consider the photograph apart from a larger context and instead focus on the only visible information: the markers of citizen and markers of mother. The woman holds a ballot; her finger is stained with ink; she holds her child. She is feminine and rational. The intimate portrayal of motherhood in Figure 2, made even more poignant by her participation in the election, provides a pleasing icon of womanhood. To make sense of the picture one may universalize the mother's plight and assume that her actions represent all women in Iraq.



FIGURE 3 US State Department *“Iraqi women walking to voting polls”*

Other images, such as Figure 3, are less detailed and cannot be understood without reading the caption. A cursory glance provides the necessary information that these are Muslim women but a viewer could assume that the women are on their way to mosque or hurrying home after visiting a family member. The military tents in the background and clear desert surroundings seem to indicate the photograph was taken during a time of conflict in the Middle East, however, the accompanying caption helps the viewer make sense of the tiny thumbnail: “Iraqi women walking to voting polls.” The most prominent images in the photograph are the females walking. The picture is striking because there are no faces looking at the camera and the figures do not seem as lifelike as those in other photographs. They are stripped of all human markers except their feminine dress. A wider or larger photograph could reveal more about their

surroundings and the material conditions of Iraq on a very dangerous election day. However, the image is small and without a lot of detail suggesting that the most important detail is the four female voters. The figures are abstract and distant but viewers of the photographs are watching the women, as the caption reminds us, going to the polls.

These types of photographs suggest that “Muslim woman” is interchangeable with “citizen.” They are wearing the appropriate Muslim dress and engaging in the appropriate democratic process: traveling to, arriving at the voting polls, and casting ballots. Significantly, these photographs are devoid of any adult male presence. A viewer does not see a male poll worker let alone a Muslim male voter. The pictures suggest, through an absence of men, that Iraqi women are now enjoying a newfound independence. The photographic images seem to symbolize that women are emerging as empowered participants in this new democratic society.

But there is a role for men; when American males are featured it is as protector and when Muslim men are photographed they are portrayed as an enemy of democracy. Communication scholars have argued that *nondiscursive* practices, such as visuals, can be used to maintain the power of the male/female binary.⁹¹ For example, Catherine H. Palczewski argues that visuals produced by United States suffragists marked and formed understandings of sexual difference in politics. She writes that the postcards and photographs circulated in the year 1900 were one reiteration of what it means to be a woman.⁹² Of course, identity is intersectional. One is never only a woman. We are composed of races, genders, sexualities, classes, and ethnicities. For this project, I cannot study sex/gender distinct from the other identities at work in these photographs. These images contain white men as soldiers, warriors, and protectors. The combined narrative of Muslim women as feminine and Muslim women as risking their lives to be competent citizens

⁹¹ Some draw on Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁹² Catherine Palczewski, "The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in the 1900 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 91, (2005), 385.

are, of course, heightened by the presence of white men as protectors. From the election images, one can understand what it means to be a Muslim woman and a white man. White men stand guard so Muslim women can vote.



Figure 4 Joe Raedle/ Getty Images

In a *Time Magazine* photo essay of Election Day, for instance, many images of Muslim women voters are featured along with others of [white] American soldiers.⁹³ For example, Figure 4 shows two soldiers surrounded by chaos and carrying large guns. The caption reads “U.S. Army soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment secure the scene around a burning humvee after it was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device a block from where voters enter the polling station in Ramadi, Iraq.” American soldiers are shown again and again guarding the safety of Election Day. The soldiers are shown literally delivering democracy to Muslim women. Of course, the model of democracy is dependent on voting. The soldiers drop off ballots at polling stations and hold large guns in the streets outside polling locations (Figure

⁹³ "Election Day in Iraq," *Time*, 31 January 2005., <http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/iraqvotes/2.html>.

6). Figuratively speaking, the soldiers are not shown as engaged in political discussions or making room at the table for women to discuss politics. They are not, literally, protecting women from violence or offering them room to protest. Instead, they deliver a particular type of democracy.

The [white] soldiers are not only in contrast with Muslim women but also Muslim men. For every attempt the [white] soldiers make to maintain democracy, Muslim men attempt to disrupt the efforts. In contrast with the photographs of Muslim women, who are in orderly lines, holding voting literature, and casting ballots, the photographs of Muslim men show them to be dangerous, irrational, and resistant to democracy.⁹⁴ The *Time Magazine* photo essay from Election Day contains only six photographs, and two are images of Muslim men being searched, detained, and restrained by American soldiers. As seen in Figure 5, American soldiers must detain Muslim men who are, as the caption reads, “suspected of stealing an ambulance in the Haifa Street neighborhood of Baghdad. Authorities believe the men could have used the ambulance as a bomb vehicle.”

⁹⁴ Ibid., <http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/iraqvotes/4.html>.



Figure 5 Darren McCollester/ Getty Images



Figure 6 Yuri Kozyrev for *Time*

For more examples, I turn to the February 14, 2005, *Time Magazine*, which contained a photo essay entitled “Investing in Iraq’s Future.”⁹⁵ The essay, which is still available on their website (<http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/iraqchildren/1.html>), contains five photographs documenting Iraq’s historic election. The photo gallery encapsulates the media coverage of the election as all photographs contain either Muslim women voting or American soldiers keeping the peace. The visual themes of the photographs are repeated again and again even when the circumstances vary. In fact, the visual themes often replace the actual theme of the headline and caption.

The feature opens with a photograph with the caption “In Baghdad's largely Sunni al-Mansour district, turnout was as high as in nearby Shiite neighborhoods.” With the claim of high turnout, a viewer might expect to see lines at the polls or a wide angle shot of many voters leaving polling booths. Instead, the photograph consists of three women on the street outside a voting booth surrounded by three children. The second image is captioned “U.S. soldiers keep a low profile as they provide perimeter security near a polling station in southeastern Baghdad. Many voters thanked the soldiers for their presence.” Again, a viewer’s expectation might be to see the many voters thanking the troops. But the photograph accompanying the headline shows three women walking away from what can be imagined as a polling booth. Another caption claims, “While voter turnout was higher than expected, some election workers failed to show.” Instead of showing frazzled election workers or lines of waiting voters, the photograph is a close up of a woman studying her ballot with a young child at her side.

The repetition of unnamed women in veils and seemingly unrelated captions develop a connection between women’s liberation and the necessity of military intervention. Rather than the election being about months of murder, destruction, negotiation, and the rise of religious

⁹⁵ “Investing in Iraq's Future,” *Time*, 14 February 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/iraqchildren/1.html>.

elites, the election seems to be about Iraqi women. The images became signifiers of American beneficence and the validity of military intervention.⁹⁶ The five images as they appear in the article, framed by their composition and in the disparity of their captions, aim to make the democratic rituals the focus. Recall from the beginning of this section, Mitch and Eberman argued that a picture story should possess four characteristics: a sharply focused narrative, an emphasis on people doing things, pictures with impact, and themes of universal interest. Indeed, the picture story in *Time Magazine*, then, is as much about gender and racial binaries as it is about the real-life situation of “Iraq’s Future.”

The *Time Magazine* story also makes clear that not all democratic behaviors are worthy of a photograph. The images articulate a narrative that largely upholds a procedural-based version of liberal democracy with voting at the very center and ignores other behaviors. I would be remiss in not mentioning that there is more than one model of democracy. Further, some theorists have argued that voting is not that important to democracy. For example, Robert Alan Dahl theorizes about systems of democracy in his *Preface to Democratic Theory*. Aligning with John Stuart Mill, he argues that universal suffrage is the sign of political equality and concludes that social training will form the societal norms that make political consensus possible. Of course, Mill has a myopic view of social training. For Mill, the electorate should be trained in voting. While Mill urged universal suffrage, he also argued that there was no use for voting if the individual had not been prepared to participate locally. In short, both men believe that societies must learn to govern themselves but that governance requires more than just voting.⁹⁷

These images of Iraqi suffrage seem to support Dahl and Mill’s idea of democracy: the images

⁹⁶ Winegar, "Of Chadors and Purple Fingers: US Visual Media Coverage of the 2005 Iraqi Elections."

⁹⁷ Robert Alan Dahl, *Preface to Democratic Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). For analysis of the similarities between the two men, see Chapter Two of Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

all show democracy as procedural rather than filled with activities such as attending school or participating in a public forum. And while participation is central to some thinkers, it is an afterthought for others. Carole Pateman, who wrote an entire book about participation and democracy, argues that the recent obsession with participation is rather “ironical” given that most widely accepted theories of democracy grant participation only a minimal role. Pateman argues that democracy should be viewed as a political method for arriving at legislative decisions because it requires bureaucracy and organization more than participation.⁹⁸ For political theorist, Joseph Schumpeter, a democratic system is characterized by a competitive struggle among nominated officials for people’s votes, a variety of civil liberties and the operation of a free market economy. Schumpeter did not regard universal suffrage as necessary in a functioning democracy.⁹⁹ Unlike this small sample of democratic theory, photographs do not show diverse views of the definition of democracy. The visuals are powerful precisely because they are a visual depiction of Muslim women voting. An American audience understands that democracy is occurring because women, who need the protection of American, male soldiers have the right to vote. In short, democracy is illustrated on and through women’s bodies.

These images of women suggest that Iraq is both liberated and enlightened; the purchase of this claim can be found in the active procedures of democracy which are visible in the photographs. The photographs do not value total inclusion. They do not suggest that democracy requires people of different sexes, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. The images show *Muslim women* in line, holding voting literature, and casting their ballots (Figure 7). They suggest that the women are engaged in collective, public democracy only with other women and share the experience only with women. The whole voting process is represented in these

⁹⁸ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁹⁹ *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Geo., Allen & Unwin, 1943), 242, 269-292.

photographs: being educated before the vote, waiting in line at the polls, voting at the polls, and traveling home. But the only participants are women. The visual depiction of the Iraqi democracy has female suffrage featured front and center.



FIGURE 7 Erik de Castro, Reuters, 2005/01/30 *"Iraqi women hold election information pamphlets while queuing to vote for the national polls in a polling precinct in Al Anbar province 23 kilometres west of Baghdad, Iraq January 30, 2005."*

The popularity of these images is a telling social barometer as often is the case with media texts and I am not the first person to take note of the importance of images in shaping public opinion.¹⁰⁰ But rather than examining the circulation and frequency of the images, I am interested in how and why the images produce meaning. Given the focus of my project, I argue these photographs narrate a particular version of democracy. Contemporary mainstream media certainly produces information, but, even more so the media provide a space where political arguments are struggled over. Kent A. Ono and John. M. Sloop argue that media images often

¹⁰⁰ Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*; Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, "Performing Civic Identity: The Iconic Photograph of the Flag Raising on Iwo Jima," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88, (2002).

populate an audience's understanding of political issues.¹⁰¹ Whether intentional or not, the selection of particular aspects of mediated stories will change history and re-shape present attitudes and opinions. Visual media in particular are powerful in times of great political turmoil. Speaking specifically of photographs, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue that the visual medium: reproduces ideology, communicates social knowledge, shapes collective memory, and models citizenship.¹⁰²

The reproduction of this liberal democratic ideology is powerful and the symbolic images have moved beyond the pages of newspapers and magazines into institutional forums. Remember that for Carey, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the actual world but invites participation based on the audience's assumption that they understand the social roles at work. Given that these ideologies about gender and democracy are repeatedly reinforced within society, it is easy to see how they create shared knowledge among the U.S. public. In this case, the image of the purple finger has become a customary part of everyday conversation—a way for United States' citizens to communicate about the complicated happenings in Iraq and even democracy in the U.S. In addition to the infamous State of the Union Address, the Republican Party of Iowa hosted a straw poll on August 11, 2008. Voters at the poll dipped their fingers in purple ink, the same brand used in the 2005 Iraqi election, to indicate they had cast their ballot. Republican Party officials called the voting “Iraqi-style.” Of course, with the threat of voter fraud low, the rhetoric became more about what the United States has given to the Iraqi people. As Chuck Laudner, Executive Director of the Republican Party, stated, “We recognize the great privilege of voting by tipping our hat to the Iraqi people who

¹⁰¹ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187*, Mapping Racisms (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

¹⁰² Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 9.

case their first votes in a free and democratic election. Iowans will be just as proud to display their inked thumb *as the newly liberated Iraqi people were.*"¹⁰³ *The Associated Press* did a feature on the straw poll entitled "Vignettes From the Iowa Straw Poll" where they interviewed voters (most of whom were women), like Linda Sawin who said that "you wouldn't have been able to vote twice" but that she liked how noticeable the purple ink was, and young Tiffany Olson who was too young to vote but remarked that the process was "really cool."¹⁰⁴

The prevalence of the photographs and the appropriation of them in institutional outlets suggest that the images of Iraqi women voting mean something. To understand why Americans are invited to view the images in a particular way, one must understand the historical, visual significance of female suffrage. To understand this American democratic aesthetic, I trace the visual tropes of women's suffrage images from the early 1900s.

Suffrage Past: Establishing the Ritual of Voting

In 1912 feminist Harriot Stanton Blatch wrote, "Men and women are moved by seeing marching groups of people and by hearing music far more than by listening to the most careful argument."¹⁰⁵ Shelley Stamp Lindsey argues more generally that much of the American women's suffrage debate was waged in visual terms: in posters, cartoons, pageants, marches, and ultimately on movie screens.¹⁰⁶ According to Margaret Finnegan, suffragists had "mastered the means of modern advertising, publicity, commercial entertainment, commercial design, retailing and publishing" in their effort to create the imprint of women's suffrage on the public

¹⁰³ Jon Cohen, "When a Poll Is Not Really a Poll," *Washington Post*, 8 August 2007; Mary Tiffany, "Voting at the Iowa Straw Poll: Fraud-Proof, Honest and Secure," *Iowapolitics.com* (2007), emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴ Amy Lorentzen, "Short Items from the Iowa Straw Poll in Ames," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, 11 August 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Harriot Stanton Blatch, "Why Suffragists Will Parade on Saturday," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 12 May 1912, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Eighty Million Women wants: Women's Suffrage, Female Viewers and the Body Politic," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 16, (1998), 1.

consciousness.¹⁰⁷ In this chapter, I contribute to the study of visual stories of female citizenship.¹⁰⁸ The rich history of these images makes them powerful rhetorical arguments. Because they are a large part of American social knowledge, they have the potential to influence American citizens even today. Americans may use this visual history to make sense of the Iraqi photos and, as a result, the Iraqi democracy. As seen above, the political model of democracy is greatly intertwined with cultural ideologies, gender roles, and the perpetuation of these ideas over time. I am interested in emphasizing how the ritual of women's suffrage specifically serves to create, promote, and reinforce these beliefs. Reviewing the images from the turn of the century and the scholarship that have analyzed them reveals similar themes as the images from 2005. First, we see the blending of traditional notions of women being morphed with notions of citizen. Second, the images construct democracy as more enlightened with the inclusion of women. The images may look slightly different because it is obviously a different context. But the themes are present. As was the case with the Iraqi images, my intent is not to provide an exhaustive review of all the images from the 1900s. Rather, I hope to show the same general themes through an examination of a representative sample. I do this reading to draw attention to the performative aspects of democracy as they have played out by gendered bodies across generations. Pointing out these historical roots suggests that these democratic performances are, indeed, rituals.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 11; Jennifer L. Borda, "The Woman Suffrage Parades of 1910-1913: Possibilities and Limitations of an Early Feminist Rhetorical Strategy," *Western Journal of Communication*, 66, (2002), 41.

¹⁰⁸ Palczewski, "The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in the 1900 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards."; Michele E. Ramsey, "Inventing Citizens During World War I: Suffrage Cartoons in the Woman Citizen," *Western Journal of Communication*, 64, no. 2 (2000).; "Driven from the Public Sphere: The Conflation of Women's Liberation and Driving in Advertising from 1910 to 1920," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 29, (2006); Dana L Cloud, "'To Veil the Threat of Terror': Afghan Women and the <Clash of Civilizations> in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (2004); Ian McDonald, *Vindication! A Postcard History of the Women's Movement* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989); and Jennifer L. Borda, "The Woman Suffrage Parades of 1910-1913: Possibilities and Limitations of an Early Feminist Rhetorical Strategy," *Western Journal of Communication*, 66, (2002).



Figure 8



Figure 9

The strategic goal of early 20th century suffragists was to take their efforts to the streets as they felt that to make women more visible in the public sphere was to make progress in the debate that women belonged in the public sphere. Throughout the women's suffrage campaign, then, activist Alice Paul felt that individual letters and press bulletins written for and by supporters were not enough to achieve the movement's lofty goals. Instead, she believed in the compelling power of a rhetorical scene.¹⁰⁹ Paul and other suffrage activists decided to create one such scene—a parade. Parading provides a symbolic announcement of unity, strength, and purpose among the supporters but it also suggests figuratively that ideas and messages should move forward. Importantly, the parades were also used as a “conscious transgression of the rules of social order” as women took to the streets.¹¹⁰ Paul promoted these transgressions with hopes that scandal would generate more press. Indeed, the parades provided photo opportunities, which helped the suffragists become even more visible because the photographs would then

¹⁰⁹ Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

¹¹⁰ Borda, "The Woman Suffrage Parades of 1910-1913: Possibilities and Limitations of an Early Feminist Rhetorical Strategy."

circulate widely. In the United States, the majority of the postcards supporting women's suffrage contained real-photo images from the parades.¹¹¹ While I do not feature these images in this chapter, Catherine Palczewski argues that postcards were the most vivid and persuasive arguments in the early 20th century, both for and against women's suffrage. Lisa Tickner and others argue that the pictorial postcard was the great vehicle for messages of the new urban proletariat.¹¹² The photographs added to the sense of involvement and heroism of the women. The shots often included women in action, portraits of the participants and a variety of visual elements that emphasized the excitement and significance of women being active in the public sphere.¹¹³ These postcards presented a vivid depiction of women participating in political rituals previously dominated by men.

¹¹¹ Linda J. Lumsden, "Beauty and the Beasts: Significance of Press Coverage of the 1913 National Suffrage Parade," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77, no. 3 (2000).

¹¹² Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51. See also John Fraser's work on the postcard.

¹¹³ Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, 70.



FIGURE 10 <http://www.vintagepostcards.com/>

Much like the parades, the antislavery petition efforts of 19th century female activist appropriate this public, visual strategy as well. As Susan Zaeske argues, female petitioners were assailed for leaving their “proper” sphere of the home to petition in the public arena. Yet central to the goals of petitioning was the idea that women were seen in the public sphere. The publicness allowed women to defy traditional limitations to women’s involvement in politics.¹¹⁴ To see other women in public, allowed women to consider themselves as confident activists.

Alice Paul argued that it was only a matter of time before all Americans could see that a woman

¹¹⁴ Susan Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women’s Anti-Slavery Petitions” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88, no. 2 (2002), 1-3.

could be an active and rational citizen.¹¹⁵ In fact, historian Carolyn Vacca argues that the visibility of citizenship acts moved women's rights from an individual concern to a group effort.¹¹⁶

While in public, the women sought to portray traditional markers of femininity and citizenship. Like the photographs from 2005, femininity had to be emphasized as well as the women's ability to participate in democracy. These themes were also illustrated by the women's suffrage efforts during the time of Reconstruction when women's arrivals at the polls often emphasized conventions of gender, including dress.¹¹⁷ Wearing long dresses and elaborate hats, they often brought their children to the polls and parades. The women both embraced traditional ideas of womanhood and stepped outside traditional expectations. The efforts expanded the meaning of "woman" to include "citizen" (Figure 10). The visibility of women, as E. Michele Ramsey argues, helped the suffragist cause by presenting women as "competent citizens" and redefining the meaning of "loyal citizen."¹¹⁸



FIGURE 11 "The Awakening"

http://www.nwhm.org/exhibits/gallery_07.html#

¹¹⁵ Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, 246.

¹¹⁶ Carolyn S. Vacca, *A Reform against Nature: Woman Suffrage and the Rethinking of American Citizenship, 1840-1920*, American University Studies. Series IX, History, (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 64.

¹¹⁷ Angela Ray, "The Rhetorical Ritual of Citizenship Women's Voting as Public Performance, 1868-1875," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93, (2007), 9.

¹¹⁸ Ramsey, "Inventing Citizens During World War I: Suffrage Cartoons in the Woman Citizen."

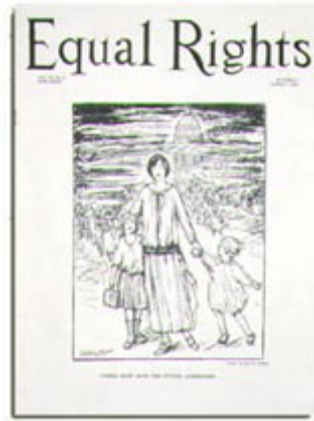


FIGURE 12 *National Women's Party voting rights poster*
http://www.nwhm.org/exhibits/gallery_13.html

The second, closely-related pathos was the portrayal of democracy as more enlightened, just, and complete when women were involved. Like the images from 2005, these images depicted traditional notions of womanhood and gender and often, for example, used motherhood as a reason for why women should be included. These images often implied that a woman's right to vote was good for her family (Figure 12). A majority of the images suggest a hopeful and promising future for the family and nation when women participated in democracy. As such, Ray argues that women's participation in the voting ritual challenged previous assumptions of who could be a citizen and how political power was enacted.¹¹⁹ Unquestionably, the images shown in this chapter suggest a public consciousness that defined women's participation as progressive, significant, and acceptable. Scholars have noted that political visibility of these themes became a vehicle for change.¹²⁰

The efforts of the suffragists were so widely circulated and visually evocative that the images were also used by opponents of the suffrage efforts to reiterate the disciplinary norms of ideology such as traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Postcard producers assisted

¹¹⁹ See Angela Ray, "The Rhetorical Ritual of Citizenship Women's Voting as Public Performance, 1868-1875," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93, (2007).

¹²⁰ Vacca, *A Reform against Nature: Woman Suffrage and the Rethinking of American Citizenship, 1840-1920*, 61.

anti-suffrage forces by using the images of the female form as topical and humorous. The anti-suffrage postcards lampooned, satirized and opposed women's involvement in the public sphere.¹²¹ Pertinent for this chapter, though, is the notion that the images of women became so popular and widespread that they were usurped by the established, ideological power. Because the visuals tapped into prevailing assumptions about women during that time period, anti-suffrage forces used the images to portray the suffragettes as ridiculous as well as reiterate the disciplinary norms of gender such as women not being rational enough to make political decisions.

This section illustrated that image codes from the 1900s contain similar motifs as the photographs from today. The visual narrative of female suffrage focused on femininity and a rationale female citizenry. Art historian Geoffrey Batchen says that photography should not be viewed so much as a specific technology as a “desire, conscious or not, to orchestrate a particular set of relationships between . . . things like nature, knowledge, representation, time, space, observing subject, and observed object.”¹²² To see how imagery was mobilized in suffrage debates, then, is to understand the historical treatment of female suffrage. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue that images that come to represent civic republicanism are often thought to be timeless.¹²³ Implicit in the idea of timelessness is the idea that images are also constrained by history. To be sure, I am not claiming that historical understanding of images results in all images having one fixed meaning. Rather I am suggesting that a historical understanding of certain images invite specific readings of images and narratives. If photographic icons, “operate as powerful resources within a public culture, not because of their

¹²¹ Palczewski, "The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in the 1900 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards", 366.

¹²² Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 213.

¹²³ Hariman and Lucaites, "Performing Civic Identity: The Iconic Photograph of the Flag Raising on Iwo Jima."

fixed meaning, but rather because they artistically coordinate available structures of identification within a performative space,” the images are indicative of a public identity, critics studying them need to understand the ideology of specific symbols.¹²⁴

Susan G. Davis uses the label “vernacular culture” to characterize the street parades and visual strategies of the women’s rights movement because the images of the women differed so much from the deeply-rooted notions that women belonged in the private sphere.¹²⁵ For Davis, then, the visuals were libratory for the women at the time. In Chapter Five, I will tackle the question of how libratory the images are today. But, in this chapter, it is important to note the similarities between the generations of images. And while the images of Iraqi suffrage may differ slightly in terms of some aesthetics such as color and dress, the connection is hard to deny as both sets focused on women as traditionally feminine and as mothers. After all, the familiarity of artifacts depends not on the degree to which they duplicate aesthetics exactly but the degree to which the overall message is appropriated to meet the needs of the user.¹²⁶ In 2005, the media reversed previous assumptions of Iraqi women; that they were oppressed, relegated to their homes, and shut out of political discussions and instead showed them as competent citizens participating in the new democracy. The news media has repackaged an American history and sold it as new. What the photographs of Iraqi women preserve from the past is not the struggle toward equality but the tactical performance of liberal democracy. As Ray asserts, “ritual performances invoke the past, mark the present, and affect the future. They not only re-cite prior forms in a specifically designated context but also produce social effects.”¹²⁷ Scholars, like Ray,

¹²⁴ Ibid, 387.

¹²⁵ Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 15.

¹²⁶ Ekaterina V. Haskins, ““Put Your Stamp on History”: The USPS Commemorative Program Celebrate the Century and Postmodern Collective Memory.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 89, (2003).

¹²⁷ Ray, 15.

persuasively suggest that the visual voting ritual built a new enthusiasm for suffrage. I will talk more about the contribution of the images to a current cultural vernacular in Chapter Five. But it is possible that in the 21st century the ritual of suffrage in Iraq could build enthusiasm for United States' military power in an age of democracy promotion and militarism. If this rhetorical ritual is accepted as universally good and progressive, conversations about the troubling context of the voting maybe silenced. Instead of contributing to a rich public sphere of conversation regarding the dangers and advantages of democracy promotion, the photographs could minimize the amount of disagreement. The photographs of today differ from those of the 20th century because the early suffrage photographs started the United States on a path of gender equality that is still being struggled through today. Whereas the photographs of the Iraqi election imply that the goals in Iraq have been achieved in the spirit of U.S. struggles with inclusive democracy.

The visuals of the Iraq elections, because, as I assess, they closely align with a U.S. past, may create a stable narrative about gender and democracy. By that, I mean that ritual communicative acts give life an overall form, order, and tone. Indeed, this tone is of democracy promotion and militarism and the photographs suggest that to protect democracy is to protect women's right to vote. As Hariman and Lucaites argue, "When the event shown is itself part of national life, the public seems to see itself, and to see itself in terms of a particular conception of civic identity."¹²⁸ This civic identity bonds a variety of social groups into a public. The authors go on to argue that:

One need not follow any of these norms to interact with, persuade, be persuaded by, and otherwise live amiably among those one knows...If photojournalistic images can maintain a vital relationship among strangers, they will provide an essential resource for constituting a mass media audience as a public...The photograph is a clear window on reality and is itself an example of the natural attitude of ideology...¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites , "Public Identity and Collective Memory U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image "Accidental Napalm"," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 20, no. 1 (2003),36

¹²⁹ Ibid, 36.

In the instance of Iraqi elections, the photographs privilege a very procedural notion of democracy. The public representation of “women’s rights” makes militarism invisible. And given the historical, continued ritual of female voting, the images are essentially displaying the American public to itself. Of course, the public is not a static, unchanging monolith. Instead, it is a complex group of citizens who believe different things about the war and “democracy promotion.” However, the medium of the photograph seemingly directs the public response in one way while drawing on the attitude people have toward inclusive, procedural, American democracy. These easily identified and recognized images replace complexity in the public sphere. This reduction becomes a tool of ideology because the tie to American democracy minimizes the representation of complexity of reactions from the United States public. The ideals of the photographs tap into an existing American unity that began in the aftermath of 9/11: American will bring freedom to the Middle East and the role of women is to support the efforts. Dana Cloud writes, “Today, it is impossible to watch television, go to a movie, drive down the street, or listen to politicians talk without being sucked into the imagined unity of American nationalism.”¹³⁰ Cloud was writing in 2002 or perhaps she would have added reading newspapers and magazines to her list.

Conclusion: Why Women’s Bodies?

The story of the Iraq elections depicted in the photographs represent a moment ripe for discussion and critique about female involvement in the new Iraqi government and the legitimacy of U.S. involvement in Iraq. And although these issues were raised by some scholars and media outlets, they were mere whispers compared to the overwhelming attention paid to the

¹³⁰ Gerard A. Hauser, and Amy Grim, *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement: Selected Papers from the 2002 Conference of the Rhetoric Society of America* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004). 76.

purple fingers of Muslim women. For anyone interested in the study of female citizenship, the moment after the 2005 election in Iraq is an interesting one. As this study and the existing women's suffrage literature make clear, discursive and nondiscursive practices produced by popular culture texts make and form understandings of sexual difference.¹³¹ As Ramsey notes in her call to scholars to study images of women appearing in popular culture texts, norms are reiterated even when not produced by official movements and institutions.¹³² Supplementing that argument, this chapter establishes the potential for the texts to reiterate particular information about democracy as well. The continuity among generations of images allows me to join the burgeoning scholarly discussion about the meaning of images and the power of the photograph to influence public opinion. I conclude this chapter by saying a bit more about visualizing the democratic process.

First, this essay points out the power of the performative voting act. This analysis advances the notion that voting is a rhetorical act that is performative in nature. The images of both generations tell a specific story about women and citizenship. Because they speak to the voting process, the images suggest that women are engaged in an action that has a specific script that performers are expected to follow. The act begins with traveling to and arriving at the polls. The script continues with carefully decorated performers who appear well informed and appropriately feminine waiting in line. Importantly, the two generations of suffrage images seem to comply with the same script. While they may differ in small ways, the overall impact is much the same and the audience is able to follow along, no matter what the century or country. In both centuries, the argument is framed visually. While some images have corresponding text, the

¹³¹Palczewski, "The Male Madonna and the Feminine Uncle Sam: Visual Argument, Icons, and Ideographs in the 1900 Anti-Woman Suffrage Postcards", 384.

¹³² Michele E. Ramsey, "Addressing Issues of Context in Historical Women's Public Address," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27, (2004). 353.

bulk of the information is transmitted through photographs and other images. This visual, rather than oral, narrative results in a static and overly simplistic view of gender, citizenship and, especially in the case of the Muslim photographs, race.

Second, the chapter reveals the danger of focusing solely on voting instead of democratic participation in general. To reduce all democratic theory to the single act of voting is not particularly helpful for those people interested in political and social change. In fact, political theorists have warned that behaviors like voting and participatory democracy often replace actual equality in the public sphere. Carole Pateman argues that the liberal principle of individual freedom and equality often provides a justification for participatory, not liberal, democracy. But it is the participatory acts in liberal democracy that are oft repeated. As Benjamin Barber has remarked, “the problem is that liberal democracy has been based on premises about human nature, knowledge and politics that are genuinely liberal but not intrinsically democratic. Its conception of the individual undermines the democratic practices upon which both individuals and their interests depend.”¹³³ With liberalist ideals being touted in these photographs, it seems the individual woman voter rather than the progressive social and economic policies that are the underpinnings of democracy becomes the focus. The photographs equate female suffrage with justice when there is so much more required to achieve a just society.

The visibility of women does very little to address some of the private sphere concerns. Pateman argues that by failing to take into account the feminist conception of “private” life and by ignoring the family, participatory democracy arguments have neglected a crucial dimension of democratic social transformation.¹³⁴ This seems to be what is taking place. In a survey

¹³³ Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

¹³⁴ Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 220. See also Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.

released in March of 2008, Middle Eastern women spoke openly about freedom.¹³⁵ One woman interviewed said “they gave us freedom and they took from us security ... but if I have to choose, I will choose safety and security.” Iraqi native Zainab Salbi wrote in the report:

unless there is a clear understanding of the obstacles and avenues to women's access to development resources and the political will to enact gender equitable policies, any blueprint for sustainable peace risks being placed perilously out of reach ... Peace means having three meals a day, a job, and a home to come back to. These are the prosaic triumphs of sustainable peace in stable societies, and they would not be possible without women. The front-line and back-line discussions must be held at the same negotiating table for real peace to materialize. It is time for women to be involved, not just in symbolic ways, but through full participation at every level, from the family dinner table, to community councils, to the United Nations. Strong women lead to strong nations.

Even Safia Taleb al-Suhail, the Iraqi woman who sat next to Laura Bush at the 2005 State of the Union Address, said later in 2005, “When we came back from exile, we thought we were going to improve rights and the position of women. But look what has happened: we have lost all the gains we made over the last 30 years.”¹³⁶ The tension in these photographs and possibly even in the actual view of liberal democracy is obvious. The photographs uphold liberalism more than democracy. If there is to be democratization of Iraq’s democracy, the media should pay attention to all spaces that women inhabit. State-created spaces may appear to promote inclusion, yet the continued subjugation of women in other areas makes women subject to even more “humiliation, discrimination and exclusion.”¹³⁷

Indeed, the manipulation of gender roles has long been a convenient strategy to advance imperialist projects.¹³⁸ The women are used as proof that “democracy” is working yet that proof is rooted in deeply held gender biases. Women must still be watched, guarded, and disciplined.

¹³⁵ “Iraq Report,” *Women for Women*, 3 March 2008.

¹³⁶ Robert Pachico, “The Neocon Agenda Failure,” *University Wire*, 29 September 2005.

¹³⁷ Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan P. Coelho, *Spaces for Change?: The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas* (New York: Zed Books, 2007); and Andrea and Anne Marie Goetz Cornwall, “Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives,” *Democratization*, 12, no. 5 (2005), 794.

¹³⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

Because, in order for the story of Middle East democracy to be successful, the women have to “learn democracy.” They have to be shown what to do and taught how to participate. In short, they are disciplined to participate. And in each instance depicted in the photographs, democracy is taught and given to the women by [white] males. In recent examples, the military gives democracy to Muslim women. Before the 2005 elections, the United States’ State Department announced that a \$10 million grant had been given to U.S. groups to train Iraqi women on the fundamentals of democracy. The primary recipient of the money is the Washington-based Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) founded and run by Lynne Cheney, the spouse of Vice President Dick Cheney, Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, and Donald Rumsfeld.¹³⁹ As Secretary of State in 2004 Colin Powell, stated, “I am pleased to announce that, as part of the Department of State’s Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative, we are awarding \$10 million in grants to several U.S.-based non-governmental organizations to train Iraqi women in the skills and practice of democratic public life”¹⁴⁰ Around the same time another organization was started, Women For a Free Iraq (WFFI), and was presided over by Paul Bremer, the U.S. Administrator of Iraq. That organization declared:

Iraqi women stand by your side to achieve a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Iraq. Your support and commitment to women’s rights is crucial to building democracy and freedom in Iraq and the Middle East.¹⁴¹

In the case of Muslim women, political obligation is not seen as a problem. It is now treated explicitly as a “constituent element of democratic ideology.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Jim Lobe, "Administration Chooses Anti-Feminist Group to Train Iraqi Women," *Commondreams.org*, (2004).

¹⁴⁰ Ann Lewis, "Anti-Feminists for Iraqi Women," *Alternet.com*, (2004), www.alternet.org/story/20189.

¹⁴¹ Nadeen El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls of a 'Democracy Promotion' Project for Women of Iraq," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27, (2008), 143.

¹⁴² Percy Herbert Patridge, *Consent and Consensus* (London: MacMillan, 1971), 23.

Last, the problems with myth-making and collective memory are obvious in this 21st century case study. The designation of universal suffrage as “American” is, of course, problematic. One must ask in what system are women participating in and for whose benefit? Viewers are invited to participate in a specific rhetorical act of remembering and memorializing which may distort the present situation in Iraq. In every visual rhetoric, some people, places, and events are deemed worthy of discussion and visibility while others are ignored. It may be tempting at first to see an increase of visibility as hopeful and liberatory for Muslim women. After all, feminist political theorists have long critiqued liberal democracy for its fraternal social contract. One of the primary critiques leveled against people who study democratic theory is that the pages of research are blind to the struggles of women. Too often, good citizenship is associated with men. Indeed, often men are the natural citizens and their behaviors are mimicked by women seeking the same rights. Carole Pateman writes that often womanhood and a woman’s body represent the private sphere and symbolize everything opposed to political order.¹⁴³ Indeed, reaching back to Rousseau and Freud, women were deemed to be unable to transcend their bodily natures to participate in public life. The female body, uncontrolled and passionate, deprived women of reason and moral character. Feminist scholars have claimed that the “fraternal social contract” divided public and private interests.¹⁴⁴ Many scholars in the aftermath of 9/11 asked “where are the Muslim women?” To see women on the front pages of newspapers, front and center in the public sphere may encourage one to mistake visibility as progress. Peggy Phelan suggests that, presumably, “increased visibility equals increased

¹⁴³ Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, 4

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 44. Pateman gives a history from Adam and Eve through 1983 to claim that women’s subjugation in the public sphere is historical and deeply rooted.

power.”¹⁴⁵ In this instance, it does seem that visibility could be a trap. Barbara Biesecker argues that memorialized images and ideas often are pressed into the service of ideological agendas.¹⁴⁶

Once women learn and consent to the rules of liberal democracy they are accepted for limited participation in the public sphere. It has been argued that voting protects the interests of all citizens, no matter how substantially unequal they are.¹⁴⁷ Yet if it is said that those who vote are consenting to the liberal-democratic rule, it must be asked “what are Muslim women consenting to?” Political theorists have shown that political participation, including voting, “helps those who are already better off.”¹⁴⁸ John Locke’s treatment of consent calls those who do so “perfect members” of society and indicates that they have a larger political obligation than those who do not consent.¹⁴⁹ Particularly damaging is the idea that all Muslim women consent or should consent. Journalist Susan Moeller puts it succinctly when she argues that newspaper articles in 2006 and 2007 favor images that portray Muslim women as “good Muslims” representing peace and freedom.¹⁵⁰ Much of the popular media has picked up on the notion that, as Salim Mansur writes in the *Toronto Sun*, “women are the secret weapon in freedom’s struggle across the Arab-Muslim world.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

¹⁴⁶ Barbara A. Biesecker, “Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88, (2002).

¹⁴⁷ Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*. 65 and John Locke and Peter Laslett, *Two Treatises of Government*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Locke infers that citizen participation is like a contract for protection in the liberal-democratic state.

¹⁴⁸ Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 338.

¹⁴⁹ Locke and Laslett, *Two Treatises of Government*.

¹⁵⁰ Susan Moeller, “Newspapers Portray Women in Pakistan as the ‘Good’ Muslims: An Analysis of News Reporting and Commentary in the Wake of 9/11 Reveals a Pattern in Which Women’s Circumstances and Lives Served as a Vehicle for a Desired Narrative,” *Nieman Reports* (2007).

¹⁵¹ “Democracy’s Best Weapon: In the Historic March Toward Freedom in the Mideast, Iraqi Women are Key,” *The Toronto Sun*, 4 September 2005, C4.

CHAPTER 3

WRITING DEMOCRACY IN AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

At the start of 2008, a trip into most American bookstores would bring readers face-to-face with shelves of books about Middle Eastern women. On one particular trip, I was greeted by an entire shelf of recommendations. If I liked *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I was encouraged to try *Infidel*. If I enjoyed *Kite Runner*, I should pick up *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. If I devoured *Kabul Beauty School*, I should discover *Lipstick Jihad*. In fact, no fewer than 15 books about Middle Eastern women were published in or around 2008 most of which centered around women in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁵² Obviously, female experience with this budding democracy was frequently used as a plot device in many novels and memoirs, and along with it came claims of feminism. Like my trip to the bookstore, Canadian scholar Catherine Burwell speaks of being bombarded by books about Middle Eastern women. On one particular trip around Mother's Day, she was urged to buy a "global story" for Mom. She notes that there are a high number of "memoirs and fictionalized accounts of life in the Middle East being actively promoted by publishers and bookstores."¹⁵³ Burwell argues that the marketing, discussion guides, and reviews of books like Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Marjane Sartarpi's *Percepolis*, and Yasmina

¹⁵² Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations-- One School at a Time* (New York: Viking, 2006); Yasmin Crowther, *The Saffron Kitchen*, 1st American ed. (New York: Viking, 2006); Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007); Dalia Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2007); Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007); Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2003); Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); and Deborah Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil* (New York: Random House, 2007).

¹⁵³ Catherine Burwell, "Reading Lolita in Times of War: Women's Book Clubs and the Politics of Reception," *Intercultural Education*, 18, (2007), 281.

Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul* are done in a way that aligns the books with mainstream feminist messages. Roksana Bahramitash concurs and argues that the genre of books that tell the story of women's rights in the Middle East have become best sellers in North America because they seem to align with a brand of feminism familiar to readers.¹⁵⁴

One of the most popular of these books is *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil* by Deborah Rodriguez, which was published by Random House in 2007. Rodriguez, a Michigan hairdresser, visited Afghanistan in 2001 as part of a disaster-relief tour arranged by a Christian humanitarian group. Her traveling companions were doctors, nurses, and therapists, and when she found very little to offer the medical team, she turned her attention to the social well-being of Afghan women. She determined that women needed a place to congregate, feel beautiful, and earn money. Because all beauty shops had been outlawed by the Taliban or destroyed during the fighting in 2001, Rodriguez joined forces with a few other women and rallied Vogue, Clairol, MAC Cosmetics, and Vidal Sassoon, collecting mascaras, lipsticks, dyes, and shampoos to donate to her cause. Eventually, their donations developed into a program called Beauty Without Borders.¹⁵⁵ Today she runs both a salon and a nonprofit school in Kabul. She narrates her journey in *Kabul Beauty School*. Since its release, the book has reached number ten on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Rodriguez has received a six-figure deal from *Colombia Pictures*. The book is a good text to understand what is reflected and deflected in the stories of Middle Eastern women that have become so popular with an American audience. It is also a good text to explore how mediated representations of public behaviors such

¹⁵⁴ Roksana Bahramitash, "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14, (2005), 221.

¹⁵⁵ Abbey Ellin, "Shades of Truth: An Account of a Kabul Beauty School Is Challenged," *New York Times*, 9 April 2007.

as working and owning a business represent and construct a belief that democracy is functioning in Afghanistan.

In general, these books are worthy of study because, as Burwell reminds us, reading this genre of memoirs and novels is not simply entertainment. Instead, as she suggests, First World readers' fascination with Third World women's stories is complicated by many factors, including "the Bush Administration's 'War on Terror,' the dominance of neo-liberal ideologies, and the rise of a mass book industry."¹⁵⁶ Specifically, *Kabul Beauty School* is worthy of attention in this study because of the notoriety Rodriguez received by providing an occupational trade to the women of Afghanistan. As such, the book provides another entry point into the public discussion about gender, performance, and democracy that would accompany such accolades.

More specifically, this book resides in the middle of the tension about feminism after 9/11. As I reviewed in Chapter One, pundits discouraged U.S. feminists from being vocal in the United States but simultaneously called for more feminist action on behalf of the women in the Middle East. In this chapter, I investigate what this well-received portrayal of sisterhood between an American woman and her Middle Eastern students looks like. I argue that the personal freedom that is embodied in a story about financial freedom becomes further evidence that democracy is functioning in Afghanistan. This case study takes a step away from the explicit focus on war and military occupation and instead focuses on an American citizen sharing her experience in the Middle East. Before I present my analysis, allow me to provide a bit more background regarding the book itself.

The book, although not a work of great literary merit, combines romance, danger, emotion, and beauty as it maps Rodriguez's experience with an abusive husband, Taliban

¹⁵⁶ Burwell, "Reading Lolita in Times of War: Women's Book Clubs and the Politics of Reception."; and Li Robbins, "The Scorn of the Solitary Reader," *CBC Online*, 2005, 4.

fighters, chicken farmers, and Vidal Sassoon. Considering its very short chapters and overall relative brevity (just over 250 pages), *Kabul Beauty School* is a natural page turner or, as one reviewer put it, “compulsively readable.”¹⁵⁷ The author herself is charismatic, strong-willed, and seems to speak with frank honesty about her struggle to secure funds for the school and to be respected in a culture where she was seen as an oddity. Rodriguez is hailed as a hero, and fans of the book often sing her praises. She has made her home in Kabul and is touted as one of the few relief volunteers who has “made a lasting contribution” in the Afghan capital.¹⁵⁸ The book, although tragic in some parts, is an uplifting story because the school gave the women of Kabul “their own space” where they could learn “life-sustaining skills and gain economic independence.”¹⁵⁹

While some questions have been raised about Rodriguez’s financial gain and even the truthfulness of her story, the reviews of the book have been overwhelmingly positive.¹⁶⁰ Given the personal vignettes contained within the pages of *Kabul Beauty School*, as well as the promise of lasting change for the women enrolled in the school, there is perhaps little wonder the book resonated with the media and public. At the heart of the positive reception are the purportedly feminist goals of Rodriguez and her school. To anyone who has read the memoir, the discussions of feminism are not surprising. The author, while never labeling herself a feminist, describes her project as “having women at the center.”¹⁶¹ Because she was struck by the exclusion and isolation of women in “Manistan,” she knew she needed to create a space of

¹⁵⁷ Frontstreetreviews, Amazon.com, April 10, 2007

¹⁵⁸ Heidi Benson, “Social Change--and a Haircut--Care of Kabul's Trendsetting Salon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 April 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid; William Grimes, “Kabul's Silent Revolution Begins at the Beauty Salon,” *New York Times*, 13 April 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Ellin, “Shades of Truth: An Account of a Kabul Beauty School Is Challenged” reports that the women featured in her book are in danger because they are no longer anonymous. The *NYT* believes that some of the women in her story may not be real but rather based on a dramatization of real events.

¹⁶¹ Readers Read, “Interview with Deborah Rodriguez,” Readersread.com, April 2007, <http://www.readersread.com/features/deborahrodriguez.htm>.

“belonging for women.” The salon became that space. She reports that in her salon women were safe to talk about taboo subjects and she “go through celebrations and hardships together.”¹⁶² The issues of sex, gender, birth control, marriage, and the balance of work and motherhood saturate the conversations in the salon and, therefore, the storylines.

Rodriguez herself is often touted as a feminist role-model by the mainstream media. The *Chicago Sun Times* reports that Rodriguez’s “brand of lipstick feminism is a win-win situation.”¹⁶³ Rodriguez has been called a “revolutionary” and a “radical” with multiple news reports making note of her “feminine power” and calling attention to her “no shrinking violet” personality.¹⁶⁴ Media reports speculate that Rodriguez probably had to “moderate her American feminism” to earn the trust of the Afghan women.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, Rodriguez herself claims she “doesn’t have a stay at home personality” and will always fight against victimization.¹⁶⁶ Given what we know about the portrayal of American feminists in the media during the aftermath of 9/11, Rodriguez’s popularity is surprising. As such, the success of the book in America suggests that the story is about the seemingly “liberated” Muslim woman rather than Rodriguez. Indeed, because Rodriguez is working in Afghanistan at the height of the U.S. military efforts, the story is as much about democracy as it is about feminism. The women in *Kabul Beauty School* orient themselves to the public sphere, and, through the beauty industry, they mobilize as a public that provides a check against the oppressive state in Afghanistan.

¹⁶² Readers Read.

¹⁶³ Rummana Hussain, "Hair Brained: What's a Michigan Hairdresser to Do? How About Opening a Beauty School in Kabul," *Chicago Sun Times*, 6 May 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Marjorie Kehe, "Shear Insanity in 'Kabul Beauty School' a Hairdresser from Michigan Uses Her Profession to Improve the Lot of Afghan Women in This True-Life Account," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 24 April 2007; Grimes, "Kabul's Silent Revolution Begins at the Beauty Salon."

¹⁶⁵ Joanna Pitman, "Kabul Beauty School: The Art of Friendship and Freedom," *Times Online*, 29 April 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Kehe, "Shear Insanity in 'Kabul Beauty School' a Hairdresser from Michigan Uses Her Profession to Improve the Lot of Afghan Women in This True-Life Account."

As a way to assist these women in their alleged transformation into fuller democratic society, Rodriguez helps women “develop better business skills” and enjoy the “ordinariness” of coming together in a salon.¹⁶⁷ To be sure, the storyline of *Kabul Beauty School* is marked by recognizable, “ordinary” behaviors of women beautifying themselves and gossiping within the confines of a salon. And while those behaviors might be common place in the beauty-driven American society, they are not activities one automatically associates with democracy. As we saw in Chapter Two, women are not often seen as “normal” actors in democracy. However, in this case, the presence of a beauty industry that was profitable to Afghan women suggests an absence of oppression. A reader is encouraged to identify “democracy” as a place where women make money and are at liberty to experiment with their bodies. Thus, this story of female empowerment becomes another way to perform democracy. Indeed, as I will argue, the right of Afghan women to choose to enroll in beauty school and use their earnings to begin a new life overlaps with an American definition of democracy.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. Because, in this case, democracy is performed through capitalist femininity, I begin this chapter with a look at the link between female economic empowerment and democracy. Specifically, I discuss the beauty industry and explicate the link between beauty and democracy. Scholars have noted that beauty and beauty salons are democratic for two primary reasons: the economic freedom the profession allows women and the empowerment found through experimenting with one’s body. Next, I turn to an analysis of Rodriguez’s reports about the beauty school and examine how those two reasons are illustrated in the book. Indeed, Deborah Rodriguez argues that her school is empowering to women because they are able to form a community and, as a result, make enough money to change their material lives. Finally, I draw conclusions about Rodriguez and some potential

¹⁶⁷ “Behind the Veil: Starting a Beauty School in Kabul,” *Forbes.com*, 12 July 2007.

impacts of her story. I argue that the beauty industry allows Rodriguez to reinforce essentialist notions of femininity while also supporting an American ideal of democracy. Therefore, Rodriguez's particular brand of feminism is couched in anti-feminist traditions as well.

Constituting Democracy: The Beauty Industry

It is interesting that *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil* (KBS) is seen as a "feminist" project by the mainstream media when in reality beauty is a complicated subject for feminist scholars. The last three decades of feminist research has paid much attention to the beauty culture with little agreement. Fundamental disagreements exist within the feminist community regarding the extent to which Western beauty practices represent women's subordinate status or can be seen as the expression of women's choice and agency.¹⁶⁸ Bonnie J. Dow suggests feminists have long been troubled by questions of agency. Perhaps nowhere is that more obvious than in questions involving beauty.¹⁶⁹

However, while the link between Rodriguez and feminism is complicated, the link between the beauty industry and democracy has been well documented. In the United States, women's empowerment is often understood through feminine capitalism, which I stipulate as capitalism that depends upon essentialist notions of femininity. In this section, I will explain this idea further by reviewing the scholarship about women's economic freedom and linking that value to democracy. In particular, much scholarship exists linking the financial opportunities in the beauty industry and women's liberation. Beauty salons are touted as a site for ritual and political participation by some scholars. Because they are often female-only places, salons have

¹⁶⁸ Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*, Women and Psychology (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁶⁹ Bonnie J. Dow, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 6, (2003); Mari Boor Tonn, "Miss America Contesters and Contestants: Media Discourse About Social 'Also-Rans'," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 6, (2003).

the potential to challenge oppressive regimes and serve as spaces in which pleasure and resistance occur.¹⁷⁰ In this section, I trace the feminist scholarship surrounding the beauty industry in order to ask why a story about a beauty school is being touted as a story about democracy. I explicate the two primary reasons scholars claim the beauty industry is seen as democratic: the economic prosperity women achieve through entrepreneurship and the ability to resist patriarchy through control over their bodies. To begin, however, I give a brief history of female entrepreneurship more generally to establish the idea that discourse about female entrepreneurship is often linked to democracy.

The history of beauty parlors in the United States is rich and is well-documented by scholars across disciplines. Much of the scholarship documents the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when women who worked on other women's hair transformed their own kitchens, bathrooms, and porches into beauty parlors and in doing so "turned domestic workers and farm girls into successful entrepreneurs."¹⁷¹ By the end of World War I, hairdressing had become a middle-class, respectable occupation for black and white women across the United States, and the prestige and economic viability of the profession continues to grow throughout the century.¹⁷² Between the 1920s and the 1950s, during the female-owned beauty salon's "golden age," American beauticians were considered highly skilled professionals.¹⁷³ And, it

¹⁷⁰ Jennifer Scanlon, "If My Husband Calls I'm Not Here: The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space," *Feminist Studies*, 33, no. 2 (2007), 309.

¹⁷¹ Julie A. Willett, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁷² Philip Scranton, *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 169-194. See also Scanlon, "If My Husband Calls I'm Not Here: The Beauty Parlor as Real and Representational Female Space."; Susannah Walker, "Independent Livings or No Bed of Roses? How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920's to the 1960's," *Journal of Women's History*, 20, no. 3 (2008); Sylvia Hoffert, "Female Self-Making in Mid-Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Women's History*, 20, no. 3 (2008); Willett, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop*; Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

¹⁷³ Walker, "Independent Livings or No Bed of Roses? How Race and Class Shaped Beauty Culture as an Occupation for African American Women from the 1920's to the 1960's," 61.

was argued, society was better for their opportunity as women's economic independence is essential to the well-being of the democratic state.¹⁷⁴ Historian Eric Foner notes a possible reason why. He argues that personal freedom, such as a person's opportunity to develop to the fullest his or her innate talents, is a persistent theme in American life. He argues that the "ability to choose" has become the dominant understanding of freedom.¹⁷⁵ Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lewis A. Mennerick, who study democracy in transitioning nations, assert that free market economy leads to greater individual freedoms and argue further that economic independence is the key ideology of democracy.¹⁷⁶ Communication scholar James Arnt Aune argues instead that it is simply the rhetoric of the free-market that suggests the presence of democracy. For Aune, "free-marketeers" assert arguments that confuse and conflate capital with democracy.¹⁷⁷ Aune may be correct that the connection is largely perception based; however, as evidenced by this dissertation, perceptions of democracy are powerful. As such, the rest of this section will turn to past research that provides evidence that the beauty industry and female entrepreneurship, in general, are things that have been talked about as democratic.

Salon services continued efforts started by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women's rights advocates that urged women to become "self-made" women and work toward female entrepreneurship. From the beginning, "self-making" was culturally defined as a white, male activity. But, according to Stanton, the ideology of self-making was highly adaptable, and it was necessary for "young maidens" to "strike out some new path to wealth and distinction besides

¹⁷⁴ Hoffert, "Female Self-Making in Mid-Nineteenth Century America"; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26.

¹⁷⁵ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), xviii.

¹⁷⁶ Mehrangiz Najafizadeh and Lewis A. Mennerick, "Gender and Social Entrepreneurship in Societies in Transition: The Case of Azerbaijan," *Journal of Third World Studies*, XX, no. 2 (2003), 40.

¹⁷⁷ James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*, Revisioning Rhetoric (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 168-169.

the needle and marriage.”¹⁷⁸ Stanton encouraged women to exploit the skills they had developed as housewives and become silk merchants or other business owners for which they had experience. Indeed, much of women’s efforts at capital accumulation were shaped and channeled by gender stereotypes because women’s ability to secure loans and opportunities were bound by images of womanhood and femininity. So the latter half of the nineteenth century is filled with examples of women’s efforts to engage the market with services with which they were familiar, such as dressmaking and small dry goods.¹⁷⁹ Typically, then, when women gain access to the workforce, jobs tend to be segregated by gender. But the access to the public sphere still has the potential to be empowering. After all, as Sandra Stanley Holton asserts, “women cannot achieve much independence without economic independence.”¹⁸⁰ And economic independence garnered through women’s entry into the workforce has led to increased independence because they are no longer at the mercy of men to provide for them.

These working women illustrated self-mastery, energy, industry, and perseverance which improved their material condition and, by default, moved from “dependents and economic caretakers” to being essential participants in the economic viability of the family.¹⁸¹ A trade, then, was a step toward equality. This point is particularly salient when examining the occupational opportunities for African-American women within the beauty industry.¹⁸² Indeed, the power of the beauty industry to help working class women and women of color is often highlighted as evidence of the radical potential of the beauty industry. The beauty culture is noted as something that contributed to the racial uplift and social betterment for African

¹⁷⁸ Hoffert, "Female Self-Making in Mid-Nineteenth Century America", 34.

¹⁷⁹ Susan M. Yohn, "Crippled Capitalists: The Inscription of Economic Dependence and the Challenge of Female Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century America," *Feminist Economist*, 12, no. 1 (2006), 92.

¹⁸⁰ Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918*, 24.

¹⁸¹ Hoffert, "Female Self-Making in Mid-Nineteenth Century America", 36.

¹⁸² Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

American women through the possibility of salon ownership and consistent employment.

African American beauticians across class lines valued doing work that was creative and allowed them to serve other black women in their own communities. Robert L. Boyd argues that the beauty culture and hairdressing provided Black women with an opportunity to economically advance. In fact, according to Boyd, the most successful, visible Black women in the early 20th century were in the beauty industry, such as hairdressers like Madame C.J. Walker and Annie M. Turnbo-Malone.¹⁸³

For women, integration into the workforce provided access to other public arenas. By entering the work force, women could engage in other activities outside the home, such as immersing themselves in politics and reform activities.¹⁸⁴ The sense of community found in beauty salons often gave way to collective politics. And scholars have noted that salons were places where “lots more got taken care of than hair.” Many scholars found that beauty shops provided a space for mulling over “our mutual discontent” and have “been a hell-of-a-place to ferment a revolution.”¹⁸⁵ As such, the beauty parlor is not just about beauty and womanhood but it is also an important ritual in democracy given the tie to collective action. In salons, women can form a collective, organize, and resist oppressive structures.

In more recent decades, the scholarship on beauty has focused more on the individual impact on women rather than the collective politics. Writers argue that beauty practices can be a powerful tool for women to cultivate and optimize the power and of their bodies.¹⁸⁶ Although these feminist thinkers attend to different aspects of beauty—plastic surgery, make up, and

¹⁸³ Robert L. Boyd, "Race, Labor Market Disadvantage, and Survivalist Entrepreneurship: Black Women in the Urban North During the Great Depression," *Sociological Forum*, 15, (2000), 654.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table--Women of Color Press, 1983), 213.

¹⁸⁶ Nancy L. Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

experimentation with dress, for instance—they all assert that the beauty industry helps to privilege the experience of women and value activities that are pleasurable to women. In the 1980's and 1990's, some feminists began to argue that there was nothing wrong with women making themselves look “good” with the products and practices of the beauty culture.¹⁸⁷ These scholars claim that feminism opened the doors for women to choose to participate in the beauty culture. Feminists began to think about how beauty practices could provide joy for and empower women. In contrast, some feminist thinkers beginning in the 1970's had begun to denounce the beauty culture and standards as oppressive to women and rejected societal pressures to diet, depilate, and wear makeup.¹⁸⁸ In more recent years, feminist writers, such as Andrew Dworkin and Naomi Wolf, argued that women were forced to meet standards of beauty that took an emotional and physical toll on women.¹⁸⁹

But in the late 1990s, new language entered the scholarship about the beauty industry that included words and ideas like: agency, choice, empowerment, and fun. Angela McRobbie's work is one such example. She argues that women are not “cultural dopes” but negotiate between the patriarchal meaning and the productive potential. She argues that women and girls are not just internalizing the patriarchal scripts but using them creatively to create new “pleasure-seeking identities.”¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the beauty industry has the potential to repair centuries of patriarchy and male domination through the celebration of women. Natasha Walter speaks of cultural icons like Madonna who has contributed to a new sexualized feminism and female role-

¹⁸⁷ Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1998); Karen Lehrman, *The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

¹⁸⁸ Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*.

¹⁸⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Women Hating* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990); Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination. Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁹⁰ Angela McRobbie, *In the Culture Society: Art, Fashion, and Popular Music* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999). See also ———, *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1997).

model.¹⁹¹ Other scholarship argues that plastic surgery and other beauty procedures allow women to “open up the possibility to renegotiate her relation to her body and construct a different sense of self.”¹⁹² “Doing looks” is a source of pleasure for women and can “appropriate a discursive space in which to contradict the silencing discourses of vanity, abnormality, superficiality, and unsisterliness.”¹⁹³ The access to the beauty industry gives women a space to pursue creative and pleasurable activities, some of which are resistant and some are simply for fun.

In general, then, it seems an American public could understand women’s empowerment through feminine capitalism. That is to say, industries like beauty and cosmetics allow women entry into the public sphere and allow them some control over their bodies. The beauty industry is seen as democratic by many, therefore, it is no surprise that after 9/11, a book about beauty and democracy would receive accolades. I turn now to that story to examine the interplay between KBS and democracy.

Selling the Skills of Domestic Femininity

At first glance, Deborah Rodriguez may seem like an unlikely hero. As a hairdresser from a small town in Michigan, Rodriguez was on her second marriage, a college drop-out, and, by her own account, did not know where Afghanistan was until 2001.¹⁹⁴ However, she quickly became the darling of much of the media; her accessible brand of feminism was a marketer’s dream. As evidenced by the popular press accounts I have reviewed already in this chapter, KBS was promoted as a book with feminist and democratic implications. For its explicit efforts to

¹⁹¹ Walter, *The New Feminism*.

¹⁹² Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 27.

¹⁹³ Liz Frost, *Young Women and the Body: A Feminist Sociology* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 134.

¹⁹⁴ Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, 63.

reclaim the stories of Afghan women, some of which I explicate below, KBS has surely earned its reputation among reviewers as a feminist text. However, in this chapter, I focus my attention on the details contained within those stories to explore how Rodriguez defines democracy—a definition steeped in capitalism and femininity. Rodriguez, because she avoids discussions about war and military efforts, implies that the way to help women transition into democracy during wartime is to provide them with economic independence.

In the next section of this chapter, the depiction of beauty found in the book will be connected with the real and historical accounts of the beauty parlor. But in this section, I examine how Muslim women’s experience with the beauty industry is described in the book. I examine the feminized workplace and the democratic potential of beauty. This section is separated into two parts. First, I examine the feminized space of the salon. Second, I explore how Rodriguez defines the democratic potential of that space.

Feminized Workplace

In the case of KBS, because it is a feminized workplace, certain skills and behaviors are necessary and expected. The skills are not recognized as learned, but rather are assumed to be innate to women. One of the central skills on which KBS depends is sociability. The salon space requires a certain degree of friendship. Indeed, a salon thrives when it becomes an environment where women create bonds with one another. As such, Rodriguez seems to highlight stories where all women, despite nationality, connect. Rodriguez stresses that the salon is a place for sisterhood.

The story begins with Rodriguez’s own friendships with Afghan women who were the impetus behind the school. *Time* reports that what “propels the story is her relationship with

Afghan women.”¹⁹⁵ She writes again and again of her sisters in her adopted country who provided salvation and refuge from her life in the United States. She writes:

If someone had told me only a few years ago that I’d be living in Afghanistan and running a beauty school, I would have laughed. But as soon as I set my foot on this soil, I knew I’d somehow managed to come home. I’ve been renewed by the spirit of this place and roused by its challenges. I’ve been blessed with family, and I’m rich—especially rich—in sisters. I sometimes wonder if I’ve done as much for them as they’ve done for me. They helped me heal my broken heart and believe in myself again, and I keep trying to repay them for the love they’ve been so eager to share.¹⁹⁶

As a home for female sociability, the salon is a space where women can share stories and commonalities. The story sharing is part of what creates the bond between women. For Rodriguez, who left an abusive husband to work in Afghanistan, the salon is a place to bond with women who have also suffered abuse. She provides a hint of how strong the friends are when she remembers a moment when a young student stood up during a party and cried, “My sisters, I salute you...Tonight I stand here proud to call you my sisters because through your hard work and perseverance, we can create a brighter, more beautiful future for Afghanistan.”¹⁹⁷ Rodriguez describes being overwhelmed by the “sweetness of friendship” and refers to the women as “treasures.”¹⁹⁸ The media reviews of the book also tell of the “warm bond of sisterhood” radiating from the pages.¹⁹⁹

Indeed, Rodriguez describes herself as more like her Afghan students than the other American aid workers. When she arrived on the war scene, she quickly earned the reputation of being both friendly and adventurous. However, because she was one of the few without medical training, she was relegated to tasks she felt were mundane. Rodriguez was often asked to take patients’ blood pressure and do the laundry in the clinic. She was on the “welcome committee,”

¹⁹⁵ Donald Morrison, “Bad Hair Days,” *Time Magazine*, 10 May 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, 269.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 121.

¹⁹⁸ Readers Read.

¹⁹⁹ Laura King, “The Beauty in Freedom,” *Columbia Missourian*, 28 April 2007.

where she greeted the new relief teams and provided hospitality to the workers. She writes that she started to feel frustrated and restless wondering if she would “ever have much of an opportunity to do something meaningful.”²⁰⁰ In short, Rodriguez was dissatisfied with her gender-specific assigned tasks, like laundry and hospitality, because she did not feel they helped the Afghan people. Rodriguez, therefore, put herself in more dangerous situations to explore the country and get to know the culture and the people. Because she had not connected with her fellow Americans, she made “fast friends with the Afghans.”²⁰¹ And the salon was the natural place to continue to bond with Afghan women. Later, in the salon, other aid workers also bonded with students.

In order to foster this connection, Rodriguez incorporated social idioms in the training of the students. At the beginning of the story, Afghan women were shocked by American customs and behaviors. Rodriguez then bombarded them with American customers. Because Afghan women “love beauty,” they were quick to bond with the customers. Rodriguez writes of the reaction of the Afghanistan women when Westerners came into the salon. She states that it seemed every westerner did something to shock them. One woman wanted a bikini wax. Another Western woman told of having a baby out of wedlock. A third woman revealed her legs in a short skirt. Rodriguez speaks of her relief that her students were willing and able to accept “the Western ways.” She writes that it was a “good thing, because if they learned to cater to the foreign crowd, they’d really be able to make good money.”²⁰² From the book, it seems all of her students were eager and able to join the school, overcome cultural differences, and befriend the customers. Therefore, these students are successful. Rodriguez boasts of her 100% graduation rate. The graduates either worked for the school or opened their own salons.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 55.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 44.

²⁰² Rodriguez, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind the Veil*, 29-30.

Of course, the success was helped by the fact that all of the Afghan students seemed to be beautiful and skilled at beauty techniques. Rodriguez continuously describes her students as having “big smiles,” “delicate features,” and standing out “like butterflies” among their bleak surroundings.²⁰³ And the women were eager to become even more beautiful by using Western beauty techniques. The students were willing to forget that the scissors looked like they had been made to “shear sheep.” They put product in their “frizzy hair” and abandoned the overdone make-up complete with “bacteria-laden kohl” that made women look as if they wore a “Mardi Gras mask.”²⁰⁴ The students even got over their fear of American technology. Rodriguez tells of the first time she showed an Afghan woman a blow dryer. She writes that when she pulled out a blow dryer the students “gasped as if I had pulled a gun on” them. However, after the students screamed and jumped out of their chairs, they realized how essential the tool was to their salon services.²⁰⁵ A similar thing happened with perm techniques. At first, the students laughed, but as soon as they saw the “colorful pictures and shining arrays of products,” the women’s voices “turned to music,” and they began memorizing their color wheels. And, for Rodriguez, that happiness is “just part of a salon and beauty school...like stepping into a hot bath or opening the door of an oven where cookies are baking...women just feel good.”²⁰⁶ For women who had not been reared to join the workforce, a beauty salon provided an initial step into the labor force. Indeed, the transition seems easy and almost natural.

²⁰³ Ibid, 146, 212, 4.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 53-54.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 96.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 95-96.

Democratic Potential

This space to bond together turns out to be very profitable for the students. Rodriguez's stories, then, do not stop at accounts of female friendship. They extend to serious matters of financial independence. Not surprisingly, given what we know about the history of the beauty industry, Rodriguez's stories are about the freedom—both personal and democratic—that is assumed to come from this capitalist venture. Rodriguez argues that Afghan women entered the beauty school because they saw the occupation as ladder of upward socioeconomic mobility.

As one might expect, Rodriguez selects only the most in-need students for admittance into to the school. Page after page tells the emotional stories of women helped by the beauty school. The testimony of her friend Nahida, who was married to an abusive Taliban officer, is one such example. Rodriguez speaks at length of the tricks she used to convince Nahida's husband to allow her to attend the beauty school. She writes, "somehow the Talib decided to trust us...the Talib told me that he had decided to let Nahida come back in three months and go to the beauty school. She was bright with happiness."²⁰⁷ Rodriguez also tells the story of Mina, who had a young son and was beaten by both her husband and her father. Because her husband was out of work and she needed to make money immediately, she was forced to take a housekeeping job at the school rather than enroll in classes. However, once Rodriguez heard Mina's story, she decided to admit her into the school. When Mina said she could not afford to stop working, Rodriguez reassured her that she could still work as a housekeeper for a few hours and make her full salary. But Rodriguez admits to readers that she only did that so Mina would not feel like a "charity case." The incentive of economic security allowed Mina to "really focus

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 58.

on school,” and she was one of the top students in her class, earning her a full time job in Rodriguez’s shop.²⁰⁸

There was also the story of Bahar, who Rodriguez claims was helped by the beauty school. Bahar was married to a man with “a brain injury that caused him to have uncontrollable rage.”²⁰⁹ Once Bahar started earning money, Rodriguez noticed that she began “speaking sharply to her husband on the phone” and “standing up to him.” Eventually, when she could afford a surgery in Pakistan, Bahar helped her husband and was revered by the family for providing such a miracle.²¹⁰ Another student, Robina, was able to purchase an apartment for herself and her sister after graduating from the beauty school. Robina was unmarried and refused to enter into an arranged marriage as such her community treated her poorly and refused to hire her. Rodriguez’s school provided Robina with the financial independence to continue to avoid marriage.²¹¹ In fact, it seems that many if not all of the 183 students Rodriguez tutored had disastrous home lives that were made better by their schooling. This point is not lost in the media reviews of the book. Her school is touted as the one place the women of Afghanistan are safe.²¹² Indeed, they are safe from tyranny and free to enjoy democracy. And while Rodriguez never speaks of a student using the school to gain political mobility, the economic prosperity was evidence of “success.” In fact, Rodriguez never even talks about political equality. However, with these stories of financial independence, democracy is purportedly happening in the Middle East after all.

These stories celebrate women’s freedom to choose to make changes in their lives. KBS celebrates marriage, singlehood, and the idea that women can change their minds about either.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 218.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 236

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid, 236.

²¹² Hamida Ghafour, "Afghan Secrets," *The New Statesman*, 28 May 2007.

Rodriguez, however, reiterates again and again that women must be financially independent in order to have the freedom to make these choices. But the only way for women to have choices was to be admitted into the school. She writes, “Only I, out of all the talented and dedicated Westerners I’d met here, could do it. I knew that I could help the Afghan women run better salons and make more money.”²¹³ In other words, the beauty industry begets financial independence, which then begets the possibility of freedom from oppression.

Conclusion: Why Women’s Bodies?

For the past five years, between the height of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and today, books like *KBS* have been read, enjoyed, and critiqued by millions of Americans. Stories, both fictional and not, about Muslim women saturate the market. So much so that *New York Times* writer Lorraine Adams claims “the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman has become overexposed. American book clubs consume her memoirs. Novels about her, as long as they are bleak, appear in the windows of our bookstores, intellectuals argue over how she should be described and who can save her.”²¹⁴ I seek not to “describe” nor offer up solutions for “who should save” Muslim women. Rather, in this chapter I analyzed how femininity and democracy were represented in the book. I turn now to a discussion about the price of a story about sisterhood and beauty. I begin with a critique of the idea that “feminist” solidarity exists between Rodriguez and her Afghan students. I then offer an analysis of how this form of feminism maintains gender distinctions as it is based on stereotypes and essentialized notions of femininity. Thus, I end the chapter arguing that there is very little that is feminist about Rodriguez’s work and yet her book preserves a particular story about liberal democracy. So, the

²¹³ Ibid, 53-54

²¹⁴ Lorraine Adams, “Beyond the Burkah,” *New York Times*, 6 January 2008, 12.

story and its reception seems to tell readers less about Muslim women and more about what the mainstream media thinks of feminism. Indeed, in this instance, feminism is represented as a colonial endeavor that reinforces both essentialized notions of femininity and hegemonic views of democracy.

In this colonial story, the beauty industry seems to be the great equalizer between American and Afghan women. She says in interviews that “beauty salons and beauty schools are sanctuaries for women everywhere in the world.” KBS is no different, she claims. As such, the stories of KBS are depicted here as universal. She says, “When you think about it, don’t we all do the very same thing?” When a woman gets ready for wedding parties, engagement celebrations, and weddings, we all “want to be beautiful on that day.” A bond created in the Afghan salon is the same as in U.S. salons. It is a “sanctuary” where women can bring up subjects such as “birth control, sex and husbands.” The salon humanizes Afghan women by making them the same as their Western customers:

We might have three customers receiving services at the same time: one could be earning \$30,000 a month, another \$2,000, and the third is volunteering and making little to nothing. There are no differences here in Kabul. We suffer the same things. None of us has electricity, we can’t walk on the streets without being called names or stared at as if we have three heads, and it’s difficult for us to move from location to location...but once inside the salon, we shake off the day’s dust, sit back to read an outdated magazine, drink some tea, and gossip...the salon is truly an oasis.²¹⁵

For Rodriguez, the equity created in the walls of the beauty shop is the ideal situation to help women. While she never says it explicitly, it seems the salon is the perfect way to spread democracy. She writes that on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, she felt a “burst of determination” and wrote an e-mail message to her friends. She wanted to make sure that her friends realized that even though September 11 was the day that “triggered America’s invasion to drive out the Taliban,” women in Afghanistan still needed help. She writes that the beauty

²¹⁵ Readers Read

school provided a “new chance to the women of Afghanistan.” Soon help began pouring in from her female friends because women “just understood.”²¹⁶ Indeed, though Rodriguez and her friends are from vastly different backgrounds, they are suggested to embody their identity in similar ways as the Afghan students. The assumption that it is natural for women to want to find solace in a beauty shop makes Rodriguez’s project seem noble. Women like Sontag and Pollitt, however, are seen as brazen, crude, and inappropriate while Rodriguez is a hero.

Rodriguez’s message is particularly powerful because it does not come from a military or government official. Because Rodriguez is writing as a civilian, her story does not depend on war to promote democratic change, but, rather, it depends on women’s economic freedom. As the story is set within the larger context of democracy promotion, though, this rhetoric also resonates because Rodriguez promises the ultimate victory over oppression: the actualization of democracy. Bahramitash claims that “the most effective propagandists” for the Bush Administration’s military policies “are not government officials or employees but rather ‘independent,’ self-proclaimed feminists whose personal experiences with the Muslim world” continue to portray Muslim women as primitive misogynists and religious extremists.²¹⁷ In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the memoir genre has gathered momentum often because of its success stories in an area of the world filled with bleak reporting. As such, this memoir, in particular, is powerful because the success story involved an American woman, a purported feminist, presenting a Western view of beauty and democracy. As argued in Chapter One, the assumption in America is that women should support the war efforts because they help women in the Middle East. Further the assumption is that American women, when faced with terrorism, will want to revert back to domesticity. In this story, the explicit connection between femininity

²¹⁶ Ibid, 97-98.

²¹⁷ Bahramitash, “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers”, 228.

and employment provides the best of both worlds. Women are able to enter the work force, but they work in an industry “natural” to their femininity.

The story also focuses on the need to “save” Afghan women from the uncivilized culture in which they reside—a culture devoid of democracy and, thus, female empowerment. And even though it is frequently asserted that Rodriguez developed a sisterly bond with Afghan women, the similarities that she mentions seem to fall victim to what Homi Bhabha claims is a colonialist rhetoric’s way of saying we are “just alike but different.”²¹⁸ Many post-colonial theorists reject the notion of a universal understanding of oppression and patriarchy given that it leads to making all people’s situations “European” or “American.”²¹⁹ That is to say that to ignore the differences between women of color and varying backgrounds and heritages is to reproduce the same structures of invisibility that existed in early women’s movements.²²⁰ Failing to delve into the differences between herself and the women of Afghanistan does little to recognize the unique and tragic pain they have suffered at the hands of colonization. And it is because Rodriguez strives to show the similarities among women that she is able to simultaneously construct them as the same and Other. She manages to be “like” the Afghan women yet maintain a distance. In her memoir and interviews, Rodriguez claims difference and similarity with the Afghan people. In personal interviews when Rodriguez claims that she has “made her home in Kabul,” made life-long friends, and immersed herself in the culture, she still argues that she had to “create her own world” to survive.²²¹ This created world is one she expects Afghan women to join; it is not their own.

²¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

²¹⁹ Angeli R. Diaz, “Postcolonial Theory and the Third Wave Agenda,” *Women and Language*, XXVI, no. 1 (2003), 4.

²²⁰ Kayann Short, “Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of This Bridge Called My Back,” *Genders* 20 (1994), 29; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991)..

²²¹ Benson, “Social Change--and a Haircut--Care of Kabul's Trendsetting Salon.”

Unarguably, a citizen's economic independence is an important component of a democratic ideology. However, to potentially state the obvious, these narratives about the students flourish because the narrator, Rodriguez, is in a position of power as the "civilized" White woman. Throughout the book, Rodriguez continuously juxtaposes herself and the Muslim students, positioning herself in a place of power. Rodriguez is a hero and keeper of knowledge, and her Muslim students depend on her for their livelihood. Often the colonialist discourse is presented in a funny and witty package so it potentially goes unnoticed. Rodriguez's stories simultaneously depict her students as grossly uneducated while also providing constant reminders of beauty's potential to help Afghan women. In the book and in interviews she gave while promoting the book, Rodriguez argues the women of Afghanistan wanted the opportunities found in her school. She stated in an interview in 2008, "you can argue about the superficiality, but you can't argue with facts. Maybe the women just wanted something that made them feel *civilized*."²²² The very statement, of course, implies that the Aghans lack civilization as their more traditional Afghan ways are crude and that civilization lies with blow dryers and western makeup techniques. Thus, democracy begins with war and is bolstered by blow dryers and beauty salons.

In order for a "mission" to be truly colonialist, it must seek to save an "Other" who is in need of rescue. And this Other, by Bhabha's account, is typically described stereotypically in order to justify the rescue. Thus, a colonialist rhetoric resonates with audience members because it depicts the Others as an oppressed minority. Describing her mission in interviews, Rodriguez says, "I say when 'my girls' have a voice and the world will listen to them, or their husbands will listen to them, or the police will listen to them, then I can leave. But right now, they still rely on me to be their voice." Rodriguez claims that she went on an extensive book tour because "her

²²² Debra Bass, "Chatty American Hairdresser Empowers Afghan Women," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1 March 2008.

girls” told her that she is their “only hope” and their “last chance.”²²³ While subtle and often humorous, Rodriguez takes many opportunities to point out the major differences between herself and the Afghan women. From their “backward” beauty techniques to the shock they showed at meeting Rodriguez’s western friends, the stories highlighted in the book paint pictures of Afghan women as meek. These seemingly harmless jabs prime the readers for a more serious theme in the book—that it was up to Rodriguez to “save the women” from their cultural and religious practices.

Rodriguez’s book presumes that the freedom and democracy found in American beauty practices are absent in Afghanistan. And she suggests that American beauty practices and their link to freedom and democracy presumes the absence of such qualities in Afghanistan. KBS, then, seems to easily open itself up to Bahba’s criticism. Even the title of the memoir sets up a binary opposition between America and Afghanistan. The title, *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes Behind The Veil*, implies a sensational drama full of adventure and tourism. An American woman, independent, experienced, and educated, goes deep into a world that is uncivilized and backwards. The cover art, of a presumably Afghan woman looking down and sad while covered in a head scarf, reminds readers that Muslim women are sad and alone. The title and the image contribute to the way marketing caters to the expectations of many Western readers. Rodriguez herself, her relationship with her Afghan sisters, and her link to a service which provides financial gain to the women make this story a marketer’s dream.²²⁴

Because Rodriguez’s presence in Afghanistan has saved the women and brought them independence and democracy, this story seems to justify military action even though the book is not explicitly about the military efforts. In fact, besides the stories about the NGO alerts,

²²³ Hussain, "Hair Brained: What's a Michigan Hairdresser to Do? How About Opening a Beauty School in Kabul."

²²⁴ Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, "Why Americans Love Azir Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33, no. 3 (2008).

Rodriguez never mentions the experience with military or war. Instead, her narrative is a particular script of democracy, and her readers are encouraged to read it in a particular way that reinforces the East/West binary.

The book simultaneously glorifies the colonial efforts of Rodriguez and disparages the larger feminist movement. The success of KBS was brought about by the fusion of economic independence with a non-threatening performance of feminism that relies on essentialist gender roles. The book, then, is perhaps reflective of the current tension surrounding feminism: it is okay to be feminist as long as a stereotypical femininity is present. And, perhaps most evident in the media although never expressed outright, Rodriguez normalizes an American obsession with beauty by arguing that the impulses to beautify are natural, universal, and even democratic. Closely related to this is the idea that Rodriguez is “fixing” Muslim women. She is lifting the veil, so to speak, off the oppressive, backwards culture and minimizing the discomfort a Western reader may have with Afghanistan. But for the media to label a beauty school as “radical feminism” is to keep the real problems in Afghanistan hidden.

CHAPTER 4

BLOGGING DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ

Introduction

At the start of 2003, 24-year-old Iraqi blogger, Riverbend, was virtually unknown. She was a computer programmer, a self-titled “geek” who was college educated, and an avid traveler. Her story was nothing out of the ordinary. But when she lost her job after the American military efforts began, she started a blog titled *Baghdad Burning*. On August 17, 2003, a little more than 4 months after Baghdad was occupied by American troops, she arrived on the virtual scene with a simple introduction: “I’m female, Iraqi, and 24. I survived the war. That’s all you need to know.” Readers learned a lot more about her over the years, however, and were captivated by stories of her daily life. Indeed, Riverbend’s blog is a collage of stories, created out of her experience as an Iraqi citizen, which help readers understand the more human aspect of war. Riverbend has been described as a “gifted writer” as well as a “natural storyteller” who developed a consummate appreciation of the “absurdities of war” from firsthand experience.²²⁵

Riverbend’s experiences lead her to a total, unequivocal hatred of the occupation efforts, and she used her blog to vent her anger at Bush, Ahmed Chalabi, Islamic extremists, the Western media, U.S. soldiers, Halliburton, and, of course, the war.²²⁶ “I wish,” she writes, “every person who emails me supporting the war, safe behind their computer, secure in their narrow mind and

²²⁵ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 1st Feminist Press ed. (New York: Feminist Press, 2006), xi-xiii.

²²⁶ Jai Singh, “Blog Power: Fresh Female Voices Rise from the Web,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 May 2005, B3.

fixed views, could actually come and experience the war live.”²²⁷ To experience war, she feels, is to be against war as “nothing is going to be achieved anyway.”²²⁸ She often asks if “Americans realize that ‘abroad’ is a country full of people—men, women and children who are dying hourly” and reminds readers that “abroad” is home for millions of people.²²⁹ And while these words echo the sentiment of Western feminists like Susan Sontag and Katha Pollitt, Riverbend received a much different response than those authors did after 9/11. While it is true that public criticism about the war had increased in 2003, the level of her popularity is still surprising. At the height of her popularity, Riverbend’s blog worked to over 5,000 hits a day and her entries were published in two volumes by *Feminist Press* in 2007. The collection received the Ulysses Award for literary reporting, was on the shortlist for the Freedom of Expression Award, made the longlist for the Samuel Johnson non-fiction award, and was brought to life on stage in New York City. It even became a BBC radio dramatization as part of a series presented during Woman’s Hour.²³⁰ Riverbend has been called “artful” and journalists claim that she had “touched Americans” with her “historical documentation.”²³¹ With her subtitle “Girl Blog From Iraq” and focus on the lives of women, it seems her words resonate with readers precisely because of her feminist perspective. She has been hailed for her expertise in understanding what it means to be young, female, and Iraqi during a time of war. She receives high praise from feminists concerned with militarization and the occupation’s impact on women. Cynthia Enloe

²²⁷ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 1st Feminist Press ed. (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), vii.

²²⁸ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, xix.

²²⁹ Ibid, 103.

²³⁰ Mark Blankenship, "Iraq on the Fringe," *Variety*, 6 August 2006; Jonthan Curiel, "Baghdad Blogging; Bloggers in the War Zone Write Both About the Devastating Effects of the Conflict and About the Events, Relationships and Frustrations That Occur in Their Everyday Lives," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 January 2007; Wayne Hunt, "Baghdad Burning: The Blogosphere, Literature and the Art of War," *Arab Media & Society*, (2008), http://arabmediasociety.sqgd.co.uk/topics/index.php?t_article=191.

²³¹ William Fisher, "Media: Mid East: Artful Bloggers Challenge the Big Guys," *IPS- Inter Press Service*, 16 March 2005; Tom Engelhardt, "Words from the Heart of Baghdad," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 November 2006; and Singh, "Blog Power: Fresh Female Voices Rise from the Web."

reviews the book and urges all Americans to “Buy this book. Read it. Share it. Assign it. Quote it. Act on it. This savvy Iraqi author...has given us an amazing gift full of political immediacy, personal candor, and feminist insight.”²³²

Of course, her popularity might not be surprising at all considering that, while her writing has been called “fresh” and new, the medium she is using is considered the pinnacle of contemporary democracy. Indeed, the *San Francisco Chronicle* argues that the presence of blogs in the Middle East suggests that democracy is making progress. Because, as they claim, with the diversity of opinions circulating, the “media in the Middle East is acting like a free press.”²³³ As Eric Foner argues, “freedom of speech and press” are the “cornerstones of the popular understanding of American freedom.”²³⁴ And if liberal political culture requires “independent voices,” The *Boston Globe* writes, “US policy makers should recognize blogging as the perfect tool” to demonstrate democracy.²³⁵ Further, in an article titled “What Does Democracy Look Like,” Steven A. Cook argues that the fact that women enjoy the freedom of the Middle Eastern blogosphere is a sign that the “status quo is crumbling.”²³⁶ To be sure, *Baghdad Burning* is a place where Riverbend vents her fears and frustrations. But, in this case, dissent, as long as it is on a blog, becomes a recognizable symbol of democracy. In short, the message here is that women in the Middle East are so free they have begun to blog. Just like voting, blogging becomes an example of a democratic ritual. However, according to James Carey, “it is not the *transmission* of the information that binds communities in cyberspace,” such as evidenced by Riverbend’s message of dissent. Rather, “it is the ritual sharing of

²³² Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*.

²³³ Amr Emam, “Media in Middle East Acting Like a Free Press,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 June 2007, A11.

²³⁴ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 26.

²³⁵ Hampton Stephens, “Uncle Sam’s Blog,” *Boston Globe*, 14 March 2005, A11.

²³⁶ Steven A. Cook, “What Does Democracy Look Like?” *Slate.com* (2005).

information.”²³⁷ Therefore, *Baghdad Burning* is a good case study for furthering a discussion about gender, performance, and democracy.

To that end, this chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I discuss the link that has been made between blogging and democracy. Here, I synthesize the literature that seems to argue that the medium of blogging is more democratic than other media. Relatedly, I argue that the alleged democratic potential of blogs is enhanced due to the large number of female bloggers in the United States and Middle East. Second, I turn to an investigation of what is said in Riverbend’s blog entries. Specifically I look at the gendered and political agency expressed through her site. This leads me to, finally, draw conclusions about the tension with Riverbend’s anti-American dissent being treated as evidence of pro-American democracy efforts in the Middle East by the media.

Constituting Democracy: The Politics of Blogging

Blogs, a shortened term for “weblog,” are typically self-produced, low budget, noncommercial, alternative media that provide commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.²³⁸ A typical blog is more interactive than conventional media because of their personally designed look, links for readers to click, and space for comments on each post.²³⁹ As of December 2007, blog search engine *Technorati* was tracking more than 112 million blogs. Considering there were only 23 known blogs in 1999, the increase of blogging is

²³⁷ James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 5. Emphasis in original.

²³⁸ I use Chris Atton’s definition of alternative media which is “a text that gives voice to Others.” See Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2002). And Bob Ostertag’s definition that says “alternative media seeks to promote ideas, not profits.” See Bob Ostertag, *People’s Movements, People’s Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2006).

²³⁹ This definition is fitting of personal weblogs, like *Baghdad Burning*, that does not have advertising and/or corporate sponsors. In 2009 this is becoming rare but at the time of *Baghdad Burning*, this definition was applicable.

staggering.²⁴⁰ In part, scholars credit the increase to dissatisfaction with mainstream reporting because blogs are often a space free from capitalist interests where citizens can challenge existing discourse. Often blog writers imagine their publications as shielded from the more mainstream societal views because they write on their own terms, in their own voice, and express opposition against the power structure without the threat of censure or sanction. While not all blogs aim to be or are alternative to mainstream media, many blog writers occupy dissident or oppositional stances. Accordingly, this section will explicate the literature that links blogs and democracy. In particular, I pay close attention to the analyses that find blogs to be democratic because of their inclusive nature and the high number of bloggers who are female.

In their relatively short lives, with the first web diary being named a blog in December of 1997, blogs have earned a reputation for their contribution to democratic deliberation as they attract people typically not included in the political process.²⁴¹ They represent an Internet media subculture of people who have “a great desire to question authority” and in recent years millions of young people, and women in particular, have begun using blogs and virtual social networking to fight the political oppression they see occurring.²⁴² Women use blogs to share their experiences and document other stories. One blogger writes, “the members of my generation want what we want—and we want it now. We want the factual evidence that mainstream media gives us, but we also want to question and debate what is happening. Blogs combine hard facts with personal narrative, and we soak it up like sunshine.”²⁴³

Given the inclusive nature of blogs, it is not surprising that they are often described as uniquely democratic. Scholars have described blogs as “the great equalizer” and as a medium

²⁴⁰ Rebecca Blood, “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” *Rebeccablood.net* (2000).

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Samantha Shapiro, “Can Social Networking Turn Disaffected Young Egyptians into a Force for Democratic Change,” *New York Times*, 25 January 2009.

²⁴³ Katie Stone, “More Twenty-Somethings Turn to Blogs to Stay Informed,” *The Denver Post*, 31 May 2006.

that “strengthens democracy.”²⁴⁴ Lynda Lee Kaid and Monica Postelnicu argue that the World Wide Web is an important channel for political communication and has the potential to enhance citizen participation.²⁴⁵ Scholars have noted, too, that blogs are often places where marginalized peoples will turn when they feel shut out of other mediums of public discourse. Harry Weger and Mark Aakhus suggest that the media now available to ordinary citizens allows for them to become involved in public communication.²⁴⁶ Communication scholar Ananda Mitra argues that blogging websites are places where marginalized groups can find voice in the public sphere, and he claims that groups begin “to gain a sense of discursive power because they can now find a speaking space on the Internet.”²⁴⁷ This is because, even though technology is supposedly neutral, technological innovations like blogs alter the structure and content of messages. This creates new communities and, therefore, transforms power structures. Thus, blogs sustain voices that otherwise would be silenced or muted.²⁴⁸ In short, citizens who were previously rendered voiceless by typical public deliberation find empowerment through electronic means. Even the media have made note of the democratic power of blogs with the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* deeming them “the new political phenomenon” and calling bloggers “the new face of politics.”²⁴⁹ It seems, then, that blogs are viewed as the ultimate expression of contemporary, cutting-edge democracy.

²⁴⁴Stephen Coleman and Scott Wright, "Political Blogs and Representative Democracy," *The International Journal of Government & Democracy in the Information Age*, 13, no. 1/2 (2008); and Maria Touri, "News Blogs: Strengthening Democracy through Conflict Prevention," *Aslib Proceedings*, 61, no. 2 (2009).

²⁴⁵ Mark Tremayne, ed., *Credibility of Political Messages on the Internet: A Comparison of Blog Sources*, Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of the Media (New York: Routledge, 2006), 149-164.

²⁴⁶ Jan Fernbeck, *The Individual within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective Principles*, ed. Steven G. Jones, Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997).

²⁴⁷ Ananda Mitra, "Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet: Examples from a Website for Women in South Asia," *Journal of Communication*, 54, (2004).

²⁴⁸ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 36-38.

²⁴⁹ Noam Scheiber, "The Lieberman Lesson," *New York Times*, 9 August 2006, A17; see also Michael Grynbaum, "Liberal Bloggers Come to the Fore," *Boston Globe*, 8 August 2006.

The democratic celebrity of blogs only grew during wartime due to the reported failure of conventional media. The list of scholars and activists who have indicted wartime reporting is too numerous to count.²⁵⁰ Most of the research of late critiques the practice of embedded journalism, which began after the military was criticized during the 1991 invasion of Iraq and the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Because of the low level of access granted to reporters and the minimal amount of information circulated for public consumption during those conflicts, changes were made during the most recent war in Iraq. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, more than 700 journalists were embedded with combat units to receive immediate information.

As one might imagine, embedded journalism has been met with controversy for a variety of reasons. Instead of resulting in more information, embedded journalism seems to prevent access to information. Reporters signed contracts with the military that limited what they were allowed to report because, as Lt. Col. Rick Long of the U.S. Marine Corps stated in 2005, "our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment."²⁵¹ Thus, the war reveals the conventional press's interests in not only reporting but also as being the proper agents for delivering the military's news. Some critics argue that those journalists without military experience often missed the mark when it came to explaining the hows and whys of military operations and culture.²⁵² But most critics,

²⁵⁰ John Jordan, "Disciplining the Homefront: Mainstream News and the Web During the War in Iraq," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4, (2007); Douglas Kellner, "9/11 Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics," *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2004); Jim A. Kuypers, *Bush's War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age*, Communication, Media, and Politics (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); and Norman Solomon, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (Hoboken, N.J.: J. Wiley, 2005).

²⁵¹ Paul McLeary, "Blogging the Long War," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2008); and Jeffrey Kahn, "Postmortem: Iraq War Media Coverage Dazzled but It Also Obscured," *UC Berkeley News*, 18 March 2004.

²⁵² McLeary, "Blogging the Long War."

often on their personal blogs, argue that embedded journalism fails because the human aspect of military conflict is missing from the reporting.

The public's concern with mainstream media reporting led to a unique opportunity for media technology and war-time reporting to converge.²⁵³ This discontent coupled with the technological advancement of recent years contributes to the rise of alternative media outlets. As I mentioned in Chapter One, the 2003 conflict in Iraq was the first war to emerge in the electronic informational space as a fully coordinated "media spectacle," complete with interactive websites, 3D maps of the region, and embedded journalists.²⁵⁴ To be sure, the coverage of the war illuminates the remarkable breadth and depth of the contemporary mediascape and could be a dissertation project on its own. Of particular relevance to this project, though, is the status of blogs. Scholars have begun to note that one technological medium with a large presence in the war-time media phenomenon is the Internet.²⁵⁵ As one online journalist noted, "This latest war has elevated the Internet to a status that early online news pioneers only dreamed about."²⁵⁶ In an age of embedded reporters and homogenized news reports, the Internet dispenses instant experts. Quirky new media sources, such as blogs, seem to have a freshness and immediacy to them that standard-issue news reporting lacks. These new media sources have turned cyberspace into a zone of "information wars." Blogs have become perhaps the most popular form of virtual expression with hundreds starting every year due to their human interest reporting, immediacy of access, and diversity of viewpoints.²⁵⁷

²⁵³ Jordan, "Disciplining the Homefront: Mainstream News and the Web During the War in Iraq", 277.

²⁵⁴ Kellner, "9/11 Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics."; and Jordan, "Disciplining the Homefront: Mainstream News and the Web During the War in Iraq."

²⁵⁵ Jordan, "Disciplining the Homefront: Mainstream News and the Web During the War in Iraq."

²⁵⁶ Steve Outing, "War: A Defining Moment for Net News," *Editorandpublisher.com* (2003).

²⁵⁷ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, xii.

Blogs are celebrated not just for the diversity of opinion but also because of who is doing the blogging, including citizens in the Middle East and a growing number of “war bloggers” that include U.S. soldiers, independent journalists, and Iraqi citizens.²⁵⁸ In the face of troubling visual and linguistic representations of Middle Eastern culture and the war efforts, many Iraqi citizens have sought a space to express their own views about the war, the Muslim faith, and what it means to be a citizen in the Middle East.²⁵⁹ For many, the Internet is this space. Blog usage, in particular, has surged among civilians in the Middle East during the years of U.S.-led military efforts. Over the past four years, “the amount of Internet users in Iran has increased by an astounding 1,620 percent. In Saudi Arabia during that same period, the growth has been 650 percent, while Syria has seen an increase of 630 percent. And the numbers in Iraq present the most radical one-year increase in Internet use ever experienced by one country.”²⁶⁰ People have used the Internet as a place to organize, share their opposition to the war efforts, and “test the power of each other.”²⁶¹ In short, the Internet has become a site for disaffected populations to advocate for political change. Because blogs are newspaper/diary hybrids, they are the perfect medium to couple news stories with personal narratives about daily life. And the entries, then, diverge from more conventional coverage of war-related narratives.

Blogs have been a particularly empowering tool for women. With a conservative estimate of feminist blogs being upward of 240,000, feminist and female-issue blogs make up a large part of the Internet community.²⁶² According to a 2009 Social Media Study by BlogHer,

²⁵⁸ McLeary, "Blogging the Long War."; Hal Bernton, "War Blog Rings True for Many," *Seattle Times*, 14 November 2005.

²⁵⁹ While at time I use “Middle East” in a generic way, I understand there are differences among Middle Eastern countries in culture especially when it comes to access to technology.

²⁶⁰ Nir Boms and Erick Stakelbeck, "Democracy Web," *The Washington Times*, 2004.

²⁶¹ Shapiro, "Can Social Networking Turn Disaffected Young Egyptians into a Force for Democratic Change."

²⁶² Kira Cochrane, "The Third Wave- at a Computer near You," *The Guardian*, 31 March 2006.

iVillage and Compass Partners, 64% of women are nearly twice as likely to use blogs as men.²⁶³

In January 2009, the website *Iraq Blog Count* listed as many as 285 blogs written by Iraqis and many of the blogs, including the most popular like *Baghdad Burning* and *First Words, First Walk*, are written by women.²⁶⁴ Though few blogs have reached the popularity of Riverbend's, blogs have become an increasingly important outlet for Middle Eastern women who, in general, are frustrated with the war. For educated young women, cyberspace is a liberating territory—a place to resist an imposed identity. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone, who studies blogging in Muslim cultures, argues, “The virtual nature of the Internet—the structure of interconnection in cyberspace that draws participants into ongoing discourses on issues of feminism, patriarchy, and gender politics, and the textual process of self-expression without the prohibition or limitation of physical space—offers new possibilities for women’s agency and empowerment.”²⁶⁵ Women are able to claim cyberspace for their expressions of individuality and desire for freedom. On the Internet, a young, independent woman can carve out a space that is free from the politically manipulated world she may inhabit. Or she may perform an act of independence even when she is not.

The Internet is a safe public space for a narrator to share her frustration, fear, and hopes because she is anonymous and feels she is safe from punishment. While some may argue that the Internet is “identity-less” due to the anonymity it offers, the Internet can cultivate a liberating social identity that allows women to form communities with other like-minded women.²⁶⁶ Free from the physical body and safe in the security of anonymity, “electronic technology” becomes a

²⁶³ Joel Loechner, “Blogs Trusted Source for Women,” *Mediapost.com*, 2009, <http://www.mediapost.com/>

²⁶⁴ Firas Al-Atraqchi, “Iraqi Blogger Documents History,” *Al-Jazeera*, 6 April 2006.

<http://iraqblogcount.blogspot.com/>. One Iraqi blogger, An Average Iraqi, has also attempted to compile a list of Iraqi blogging found at <http://aviraqi.blogspot.com/> although the blog has not been updated since 2006.

²⁶⁵ Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone, *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), 61.

²⁶⁶ Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments*, Religion, Culture, and Society (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 12.

tool “for the design of freely chosen identities.”²⁶⁷ The Internet identity, uncensored, safe, and public, can tell everyday stories which impact the public sphere. Barbara Page writes:

The conscious feminism of the writer animates her determination not simply to write but to intervene in the structure of discourse, to interrupt reiterations of what has been written, to redirect the streams of narrative, and to clear space for the construction of new textual forms congenial to women’s subjectivity.²⁶⁸

The Internet, then, is a site where some Muslim women can articulate their identities and political experiences. In the next section, I will examine how Riverbend constituted herself as a female citizen of a new, struggling democracy.

The Rhetoric of Riverbend

When a reader opens Riverbend’s blog, she is greeted by a header that reads “let’s talk about war, politics and occupation.” The header rests above a list of links that Riverbend supports, including *Al-Jazeera in English*, *Alternet*, *Iraq Occupation*, and *Iraq Body Count*. Below these links are links to other blogs for readers who are interested in news, Iraqi music, or recipes. The design of the blog contains many aspects that have been labeled as democratic: the freedom to express an oppositional stance, inclusive of many voices through the comment section, a collective and interactive community, and a female author who feels left out of the legitimized political process. By choosing to link to sites that are overtly anti-occupation and in support of Iraqi independence, the community Riverbend creates is explicitly oppositional. Riverbend maximizes the hypertextual, intertextual, and interactive potential of the medium to create a community of marginalized individuals. As she writes, “Bush was wrong when he said, ‘You are either with us or against us.’ The world isn’t black and white—there are plenty of

²⁶⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 22.

²⁶⁸ In Ryan (ed.), *Cyberspace Textuality*, 130. Emphasis in the original.

people who were against his war, but also against Saddam. They aren't being given a chance. Their voices aren't heard."²⁶⁹ Riverbend was indeed heard, as evidenced by the popularity of her blog and the media attention she received. But before I explicate how the media constructs her, I want to explain how Riverbend constructs herself. Her anti-American dissent is interesting considering she is using a medium that has been touted as especially democratic and her message has been well received by an American audience.

Collective Democracy

Innovative new media, such as blogs, have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities that dissolve prior barriers of space and distance, which then opens new ground for interaction and mutual recognition.²⁷⁰ As such, a blog's audience is a complicated concept. While normally a blogger has a specific readership in mind, the Internet often brings diverse readers. Unlike magazines or newspapers which have to be purchased, readers can happen upon a blog from another site or from a simple Google search. Because of this, the readership can vary in terms of opinion, knowledge level, and support of the author. In fact, today millions of people now use the Internet as the primary source of information about Muslim people.²⁷¹ Riverbend, both because of her notoriety and the popular topic of her blog, receives hits from readers all over the Internet.²⁷² Therefore, she tries to be welcoming to these readers by using inclusive and welcoming language. Riverbend demonstrates cultural pride through detailed explanations of Iraqi customs with a peppering of Arabic sayings. However, critics note that she has a "slight American inflection: and an awareness of cultural happenings which are evidenced

²⁶⁹ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 33.

²⁷⁰ Eickelman and Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 3.

²⁷¹ Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments*.

²⁷² For example, when her blog was active, an Internet user simply had to type "Iraq war, blog" and *Baghdad Burning* would appear on the first page of results. Still in 2009, her Amazon book listing comes on the first page.

by her many entries aimed at American readers.²⁷³ In one post at the beginning of her blog, she thanks an angry email writer for “taking time off watching *Fox News* to check my blog.” In one telling entry, she warns her readers that her entry is going to look like something “straight out of the *Onion*.” She writes of the possibility of using donkeys to move around carts and missile launchers. Of course the donkeys would look “guilty and morose” and may be “taken into custody,” but at least the United States would “find the WMD they were looking for.”²⁷⁴ The purpose of statements like this is two-fold. First, they make a reader intrigued by Riverbend’s likeability. Second, they establish her purpose, which is to report what she sees as the “real” happenings in Iraq. And while she recognizes the geographic diversity among her readers, she is focused on inviting conversation with a clear anti-occupation bias. Once she establishes her audience, Riverbend’s entries typically follow a rhetorical pattern of drawing attention to the inadequacies of mainstream media, raising doubts about war efforts, and then inviting comments, links, and stories to highlight the integrity of Iraqi citizens and bloggers. We can see this pattern demonstrated in the way she discusses Iraqi and Muslim culture, to which I turn next

In large part, Riverbend feels the media coverage oversimplifies Iraqi culture. She often uses the example of the veil to prove the inadequacy. She states that a writer for the *New York Times* “took hundreds of years of wearing the veil for religious reasons and relegated it all to the oppression of females by their male cousins.” She questions if human nature is really that simple.²⁷⁵ Her discontent spills over into the ignorance of Middle Eastern geography and culture. She gives another example of an article in which the *New York Times* “knows very little about geography” in the Middle East. The vulnerability in coverage provides Riverbend with an opportunity to argue that bloggers are a better source of information. She writes:

²⁷⁴ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 147.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

The article is dumb, but apparently the author thinks that the readers are even dumber. Of the 5 prominent “Arabs” the author gives as examples in the article (supporters of Bush), two are Iranian and the third is a Pakistani! Now this is highly amusing to an Arab because Pakistanis aren’t Arabs and while Iran is our neighbor, Iranians, are, generally speaking, not Arabs and I’m sure you can confirm that with Iranian bloggers.²⁷⁶

Riverbend is not just concerned about what is covered but also what is omitted from mainstream coverage. She often starts blog posts by asking about a variety of things “How can no one be covering this?” She also will compare U.S. coverage of an incident with *Al-Jazeera* coverage. In one particular incident, when U.S. sources were claiming that the bodies of two young girls were found by U.S. troops, she questions how “nobody bothers to cover” the true story which was that they were killed by U.S. troops while they were gathering wood to heat their home. The following day she links to multiple stories found on *Al-Jazeera*, the *AFP* (France Press), and other bloggers to prove the claim.²⁷⁷

In addition to describing Iraqi culture, Riverbend uses her blog to expose what she feels are unjust war efforts. She privileges blog readers and writers, who have experienced the war first-hand as experts because they understand the culture and also the impact of war. For example, Riverbend links to the blog *Secrets in Baghdad* and the author’s story of a bomb falling on Mustansiriyah University. Riverbend provides the link to the blog and quotes the author’s fearful entry which gives way to Riverbend’s own experience with bombings. She writes about the sound “of an earsplitting blast” and the “rain of glass, shrapnel, and other sharp things” with the “wail of people trying to sort out their dead and dying from the debris.”²⁷⁸ Riverbend expresses hope that her Iraqi readers “feel the unity stolen from us in 2003” and her American readers who do not want to be “synonymous with ‘empire’ and ‘warfare’” can find a space to

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 213.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 153.

²⁷⁸ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 86.

resist.²⁷⁹ Riverbend calls to her readers to create a community with flexible boundaries, she hails preferred readers and ideas, and she ridicules non-ideal readers who may not agree with her.

The medium of the blog allows for Riverbend to link to a variety of blogs. When she was writing, she was constantly updating her blog roll on the side of her blog. Here readers can find sources, humorous writers, and Iraqi cultural links. They can also find writers like Riverbend who blog about the war. She often reminds readers to “check her links on the right” when she adds new sites, such as mediachannel.org which “tackles some fantastic media issues—especially related to the war and occupation.”²⁸⁰ She writes particularly about other female bloggers that she admires and quotes their stories. In some entries, she thanks her female friends for sending her links, recipes, and “suggestions for keeping the dust out of the house.”²⁸¹ The blog, then, while authored by Riverbend, is a collective project designed to raise awareness about the poor reporting from the mainstream media and, as I will illustrate below, form a collective of like-minded individuals.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Riverbend talks at length about “democracy” in Iraq, and she gives a very different account of the elections of 2005 than the mainstream American media depictions, which are dominated by images of women eagerly participating. Riverbend does not show great excitement about the elections and instead refers to them as “interesting” political situations²⁸² and as part of “Operation Iron Hammer.”²⁸³ Riverbend is critical of the elections for two primary reasons. First, she argues that Iraq cannot be truly “democratic” while under foreign occupation. Second, she is skeptical of the link between the elections, feminism, and female advancement. Again, we see the same pattern in the entries with her calling attention to

²⁷⁹ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 13.

²⁸⁰ ———, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 111.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 77, 93.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 140.

the inadequacies of the mainstream media, raising doubts about the war efforts, and inviting participation from her readers.

Riverbend's opinions about the elections are tied to her desire to see Iraq represented in a positive light both in the global media and in Iraq's own memory. She writes, "Can you just imagine what our history books are going to look like 20 years from now? The first democratic elections were held in Iraq on January 29, 2005 under the ever-watchful collective eye of the occupation forces, headed by the United States of America. Troops in tanks watched as swarms of warm, fuzzy Iraqis headed for the ballot boxes to select one of the American-approved candidates."²⁸⁴ She admits to being somewhat "conflicted" about the elections because she does want to do the "democratic thing" but does not support the elections.²⁸⁵ She tells the *New York Times* that, "elections cannot be democratic under foreign occupation—especially when the election lists were composed largely of the same people who supported the invasion and occupation of Iraq."²⁸⁶ She goes on to remind readers that "if Democracy was equivalent with elections in general, Iran would be considered a democracy, wouldn't it?" In short, Riverbend argues that the U.S. mainstream media has misled the public in regard to democracy.

Instead of celebrating these democratic rituals, she focuses her writing on the "only aspect of the election that is interesting from a gender perspective" and that is the voting cards. She informs readers that the gender of the voter on the card, regardless of sex, is labeled "male." She continues:

Now, call me insane, but I found this slightly disturbing. Why was this done? Was it some sort of mistake? Why is the sex on the card anyway? What difference does it make? There are some theories about this. Some are saying that many of the more religiously inclined families won't want their womenfolk voting so it might be permissible for the head of the family to take the women's ID and her ballot and do the

²⁸⁴ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 40.

²⁸⁵ ———, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 193.

²⁸⁶ ———, "Elections, Yes; Democracy, No," *New York Times*, 18 December 2005, 12.

voting for her. Another theory is that this “mistake” will make things easier for people making fake ID’s to vote in place of females.²⁸⁷

Because Riverbend sees the ritual of voting as just another way to reinscribe the assumption that citizenship and even personhood is male, she argues that the elections are a “sinister cloak” and one in which she has chosen not to participate. As such, a reader gets a feel for the complexity of election happenings. They also get a feel that the election of 2005 were sham elections. Riverbend’s writing provides a look at variety of takes on the election of 2005—unlike photographs.

Gendered Citizenship

The same pattern of writing is continued in entries where she talks about her gendered life. From the beginning, Riverbend is committed to letting readers know that her life has changed, and not for the better, since the US-led occupation began in 2003. She speaks about herself and other females who can “no longer leave their homes alone” because the occupation has set the country back more than 50 years.²⁸⁸ Riverbend uses what has come to be called a feminine style of communicating by referring to her personal experience in Iraq and by identifying others experiences.²⁸⁹ She juxtaposes her experience with those reported in media accounts that claim that the war efforts are liberating Iraqi women. By identifying women’s

²⁸⁷ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 41.

²⁸⁸ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 16.

²⁸⁹ I’m speaking here of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s suggestion that women’s experiences have led to a tendency to display certain characteristics when speaking such as personal tone and using personal experience as evidence. It is important to note that Campbell and other scholars who have used her research have argued that this mode of engagement is not determined by biology. See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric Vol. 1* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); Bonnie Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, “‘Feminine Style’ and Political Judgement in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 79, (1993); and Phaedra Pezzullo, “Resisting “National Breast Cancer Awareness Month”: The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and Their Cultural Performances,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 89, no. 4 (2003).

political struggles, U.S. economic gains from the war efforts, and the poverty Iraq suffers, she reinforces a feminist belief that the personal is inherently connected to the political.²⁹⁰

Riverbend explains that because the occupation has led to more fundamentalism in Iraq, many women have seen their rights continually decrease after 2003. She writes that before the war nearly 50% of the college students were females and over 50% of the Iraqi workforce was female. A lengthy example illustrates the passion and despair Riverbend feels:

For example, before the war, I would estimate (roughly) that about 55% of females in Baghdad wore a hijab—or headscarf. Hijabs do not signify fundamentalism. That is far from the case—although I, myself don’t wear one, I have family and friends who do. The point is that, before, it didn’t really matter. It was **my** business whether I wore one or not—not the business of some fundamentalist on the street. For those who don’t know (and I have discovered they are many more than I thought), a hijab only covers the hair and neck. The whole face shows and some women even wear it Grace Kelly style with a few locks of their hair coming out of the front. A “burqa” on the other hand, like the ones worn in Afghanistan, covers the whole head—hair, face, and all. I am female and Muslim. Before the occupation, I more or less dressed the way I wanted to. I lived in jeans and cotton pants and comfortable shirts. Now, I don’t dare leave the house in pants...A girl wearing jeans risks being attacked, abducted, or insulted by fundamentalists who have been...liberated! Fathers and mothers are keeping their daughters stashed safe at home. That’s why you see so few females in the streets.”²⁹¹

This example is a complicated one, however, as it does dispute the mainstream media accounts. In addition, it also sets up an idea that I will expand upon later that Riverbend constructs herself as an independent and civilized woman. However, what is important is that this entry serves to counter the mainstream accounts and invites and alludes to other women’s stories with the occupation. Riverbend also talks about the legal developments that have transpired since the occupation. One development particularly devastating to Iraqi women is the shift from Iraqi family law, which was secular prior to the conflict, to Islamic Shari’a law. She writes that “By Iraqi civil law, parents are required to send their children to complete at least primary school.”

²⁹⁰ Pezzullo, "Resisting “National Breast Cancer Awareness Month”: The Rhetoric of Counterpublics and Their Cultural Performances.", 358.

²⁹¹ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 17.

However, according to “Shari’a, a father can make his son or daughter quit school and either work or remain at home.”²⁹² While she “brooded” over the government’s decision to change family law to Shari’a, she keeps with the same pattern of inviting participation from the Internet and links to other bloggers who are also distraught over the developments. She directs her readers to a post over at *Back to Iraq 3.0*, and she links to a story that contains pictures of Iraq’s only female minister, Nisreen Barwari, demonstrating with women’s rights parties.²⁹³ These posts, which are emotional and visual, serve as a critique of the discourse promoted by the Bush Administration and the mainstream media as a strategy in selling the war. She writes that things like “women’s conferences” are a sham as all female attendees are selected by the “feminist extraordinaire L. Paul Bremer.”²⁹⁴

For Riverbend, the women of Iraq are not oppressed or in need of liberation. Put simply, she writes, “no matter *what* anyone heard, females in Iraq were a lot better off than females in other parts of the Arab world (and some parts of the Western world—we had equal salaries!).” Instead, through stories about hijabs, unemployment, and lack of freedom in the public sphere, she educates readers on her experience in Iraq. Therefore, Riverbend uses the Internet to reconstruct her gender identity. And, in comparison to the other chapters in this dissertation, she is free to construct that identity in many ways given that the medium of blogging is, at least for the time being, relatively free of gender baggage. That is, her blogging persona is constructed and managed through her own writing.

This refutation of the assumptions about women is the first step in creating a new understanding of the female identity. Instead of the “sham” accounts of L. Paul Bremer, Riverbend provides many entries about her daily life as a citizen. She does not focus on political

²⁹² Ibid, 189.

²⁹³ Ibid, 191.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 68.

rituals and participation but chronicles events from her everyday life. She often claims she has “nothing to report” but wants to write anyway. Often these entries turn into a description of the subtle ways women resist throughout Iraq. This strategy involves treating the home and kitchen as a site of resistance. By privileging the everyday, she emphasizes that, for her, female citizenship is about community and peace. The blog is filled with respect for the rich Iraqi culture. While her country is being destroyed around her, Riverbend is committed to using her website as a space to preserve as much as she can about daily life in Iraq and strategies for peace.

Some feminist scholars often point out how females, during a time of war, tend to engage in a variety of resistant yet peaceful strategies. Many scholars have questioned how the home is a cultural space and a site of resistance. Often the interrogation is within the larger context of women in opposition to violence and military power. Through familial spaces like the home, women combat violence and war. Indeed, these spaces are often where mothering and feminist peace politics take place.²⁹⁵ Feminist critic bell hooks has called the home a “site of resistance” in the struggle against racism and poverty, and Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of “other-mothering” argues that women’s role in the community places them in a position of helping others combat poverty, discrimination, and violence.²⁹⁶ Isaac West expands on these ideas and argues that the everyday activities of domestic life are a vehicle for war resistance. In particular, West argues that cooking, recipes, and food creation is politically enabling. Particularly for women, cooking and collecting recipes provide a space to gather and often spurs political activity. West, who performs a close reading of the cookbooks from the pacifist group La WISP, argues that gathering recipes from its members assembled not only a cookbook but also a collective energy

²⁹⁵ See Julie Peteet, “Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 23, no. 1 (1997).

²⁹⁶ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture” in Robert Staples, *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1994).

toward political action, such as writing letters, hosting peace movement events, and attending protests.²⁹⁷ Olga Davis, in general terms, speaks of how the kitchen cultivates a culture of resistance wherein the private space of the home redefines the public sphere of women by making them more active.²⁹⁸

Food in the Middle East, Carol Bardenstein argues, has come to mean more to communities when people feel excommunicated and exiled from their culture and their homes.²⁹⁹ For people in the Middle East, many of whom feel powerless, food brings back memories and a feeling of collective identification.³⁰⁰ For Riverbend, who claims she “like millions of Iraqis,” feels completely detached from these current state of Iraq” chronicling the daily tasks instills a sense of normalcy into her routine and the daily lives of her readers.³⁰¹

Inherent in taking the kitchen as a serious site of study is the idea that everyday material lives are significant in political activism within a democracy. This elevating of the everyday is an important feminist strategy. As Lisa Flores writes, memories of the seemingly mundane, such as memories of mothers’ cooking or manual labor, serve many functions such as translating acts that are often unnoticed or undervalued into positive, empowered portrayals.³⁰² This reformation is important both at a group and individual level. As Hank Bromley emphasizes:

Material conditions give rise to one’s personal history (or identity) which, when interpreted through some culturally specific mode of discourse, leads to a particular form of (self) consciousness. The consciousness, in turn, enables an individual understanding of the role material conditions have had in forming one’s identity.³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Isaac West, "Performing Resistance in/from the Kitchen: The Practice of Maternal Pacifist Politics and La Wisp's Cookbooks," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30, no. 3 (2007), 360.

²⁹⁸ Olga Idriss Davis, "In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance," *Western Journal of Communication*, 63, (1999), 365.

²⁹⁹ Carol Bardenstein, "Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, (2002).

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 354-355.

³⁰¹ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 63.

³⁰² Lisa Flores, "Creating Discursive Space through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 82, (1996), 148.

³⁰³ Hank Bromley, "Identity Politics and Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Theory*, 39, (1989), 211.

This translation of everyday experiences is not just helpful for individual empowerment. This establishment of identity also has potential at a larger level. Indeed, rhetorical depictions of the everyday material conditions can open up opportunities for stretching and extending gendered roles.³⁰⁴ Through an emphasis on everyday activities, women can also translate and rework negative features into positive ones. It involves appropriating the definitions created by others and reworking the meaning into an affirmation of their existence. On *Baghdad Burning*, women are neither oppressed nor are they the faces of a liberated Iraq. Instead, they are a variety of things, including household experts, keepers of the secrets, and experts in getting by.

Throughout the first year of her blog, Riverbend speaks of being bombarded with requests for the recipes she speaks of in entries. She will often take a break in her political coverage to share a recipe or cleaning tip with her readers. She will often premise her entries about cooking and the home as “completely unrelated,” but it is clear that the home and Riverbend’s experiences in it are completely related to her politics given how meaningful the kitchen and holiday celebrations are to Riverbend and her family.³⁰⁵ Eventually the requests for recipes became so great she created an entire blog devoted to Iraqi recipes. She writes, “I’m going to start posting recipes on this page: Is Something Burning?!

(<http://iraqrecipes.blogspot.com/>). I’m still trying it out and I think I’ll change the links to link to recipe pages. We’ll see how it goes, I’d love to hear some feedback if anyone tries the recipes.”³⁰⁶ As the blog became more developed, Riverbend links to other women’s blogs that contained large collections of recipes. She also posts links to Middle Eastern grocers where readers could purchase supplies abroad. Unlike a traditional cookbook which has to be

³⁰⁴ Diane Marie Blair, ““I Want You to Write Me”: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Use of Personal Letters as a Rhetorical Resource,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 72, no. 4 (2008), 416.

³⁰⁵ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 162.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 131.

purchased, remains unchanged once it is published, and has a single reader at once, Riverbend's cooking blog is interactive with links, comments, and changes to reflect readers' desires. It is also a space for readers to share their stories, recipes, and tips.

The recipes, then, could mean a lot to Iraqi readers as well. Because their daily life during wartime is surrounded by sadness and confusion, the holiday and celebration recipes provide a nostalgia for a happier time. Riverbend herself uses her blog to celebrate the closeness of her family during wartime. She writes that if there is one advantage to war, "then it's the fact that families somehow find themselves closer together."³⁰⁷ During these gatherings, the family can discuss and reflect on the circumstances of war. She writes on New Year's Eve that the family saved up two hours of power from the generator to be able to gather around the televisions and "watch the rest of the world celebrate their way into the New Year." Riverbend and her family, however, sat, the last few hours before midnight, "thinking about the last few months and making conjectures about the future."³⁰⁸ To further reiterate the impact of war on her family, after the celebration she writes, "this year, New Year's Eve was a virtual family reunion. We decided to gather at my aunt's house but it couldn't be too big a gathering otherwise we'd be mistaken for a 'terrorist cell'—women, children, dishes of food and all."³⁰⁹ Riverbend acknowledges the changes that her family is undergoing because of the occupation but privileges the communal aspect of their lives that remains unchanged.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the recipes featured are often from Riverbend's own family celebrations. In the face of chaos, violence, destruction, and war, Riverbend and her family celebrate religious and political holidays. They seem to find joy and comfort in the celebrations and their home. Riverbend goes into great detail about the food and traditions of

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 179.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 181.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 179.

these celebrations. In one entry, she speaks of Ramadhan, the holiest month of the Islamic year in great detail:

We begin by preparing for the “futtoor,” or the meal with which we break our fast, over an hour before its time. Traditionally, most people break their fast on a date, and then proceed to whatever is on the menu. Often, people begin the meal with some sort of soup because it warms the stomach without shocking it after all those hours without food. The most popular Ramadhan soup is lentil soup, or “address.” It is a pale, yellow soup that is both light and flavorful. There are dozens of different ways to make it, but I enjoy it with a squeeze of lime and “khubz.”³¹⁰

Throughout the blog, she details all the food the family serves throughout the year. But the description of the celebration does not stop with the food. She speaks of the communal experience. She writes that the “neighbors are often a big part of the month. If they’re not dropping by to sample futtoor, then they’re sending over a plate of something for you to sample.” She continues that “Ramadhan is the time of year when we put aside neighborhood differences (like the fact that Abu K.’s dog howls at anyone who goes down the street) and combine culinary skills with the general feeling of empathy.” Even in the year of 2003, the family broke the fast with an uncle’s family and some neighbors (who happened to be Christian) to support one another.³¹¹ Riverbend mentions again and again the feeling of support she receives from family gatherings. Often they are planned weeks in advance and are made in the face of great danger. She writes that her family insists that they gather for holidays, like Eid, the three day holiday after Ramadhan. She says if her aunt has been slaving over the stove all day, then people had better “have a good excuse” not to come. She and her family are willing to pack themselves into a small house sometimes lit only by candlelight or accompanied by the hum of a generator. Yet the family, she says, “sat enjoying the food and light and feeling that it really was Eid. After all,

³¹⁰ Ibid, 126.

³¹¹ Ibid, 126.

we were family and gathered together...what could be more Eid-like than that?”³¹² Through a variety of vignettes, she shows a happy, harmonious relationship among her community and family. These types of examples are in direct refutation to emails she receives from readers that ask Riverbend why “won’t Iraqis stop killing each other.” Riverbend recognizes the potential of writing about these gatherings devoted to food and cultural celebrations as a way to humanize Iraqi culture to her reader.

But during the occupation these traditional gatherings also turn into new political rituals. A reader can understand that new norms have to be established to help Iraqi citizens cope with new circumstances. As such, the celebrations with the neighbors and family members give way to discussions about politics and war, which she summarizes on the blog. Riverbend argues that “politics in Iraq isn’t discussed like in any other place.” Iraqis do not “sit around with lit cigars and cups of tea debating.” Instead, the younger and older generations come together in front of the television or table.³¹³ And discussions about domestic things such as recipes often give way to political and social knowledge, which she also shares. One day when their neighbor brought over a dessert for the holiday of Eid, the conversation shifted to blackouts and water flow. Eid is spent visiting family and friends and eating, but it is also the time that all households “clean their house spotless.” The neighbor, who Riverbend deems the “Martha Stewart of Baghdad,” drops off a dessert and, when realizing they had not been able to clean, helps the family to “cunningly arrange [the garden hose] it to give a maximum trickle of water” and recommends ways to thaw out the freezer given the intermittent electricity.”³¹⁴

Given her privileging of the everyday and the communal notion of living, Riverbend is separating herself from what she sees as a masculinist order of the military conflicts. An

³¹² Ibid, 203. Ellipsis in the original.

³¹³ Ibid, 202.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 149.

interdisciplinary effort has been made by scholars to talk about the connection between motherhood, peace, sacrifice, and nurturing.³¹⁵ Scholars interested in exploring the relationship between women and peace, often point to the socialization process of women. Because women are often taught to be more nurturing and patient, their social skills often lead to a more pacifist politics. In her influential book *Maternal Thinking*, Sara Ruddick explains that while all women may not be mothers, many women practice maternal thinking. This thinking is a product of participating in the tasks that define motherhood—preservation, growth, and acceptability. Out of maternal practices, Ruddick argues, arise different ways of conceptualizing, ordering, and valuing.³¹⁶

A reader can tell that Riverbend understands and monitors the conflict in Iraq differently than a traditional journalist might. She is connected to the land and community. Riverbend tracks the location of heavy fighting and bombing by monitoring the trends in produce quality. She writes about a visit to her local grocer:

I feel like I have my finger on the throbbing pulse of the Iraqi political situation every time I visit Abu Ammar. You can often tell just how things are going in the country from the produce available at his stand. For example, when he doesn't have any good tomatoes we know that the roads to Basra are either closed or really bad and the tomatoes aren't getting through to Baghdad. When citrus fruit isn't available during the winter months, we know that the roads to Diyala are probably risky and the oranges and lemons couldn't be delivered.³¹⁷

She also speaks of the impact the war has on the land. She writes that palm trees have long represented the rugged, stoic beauty of Iraq and its people. They are a reminder that no matter

³¹⁵ See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).; hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*; Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard, *Gender, Politics, and Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Karen Warren and Duane L. Cady, *Bringing Peace Home: Feminism, Violence, and Nature*, A Hypatia Book (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Alison Bailey, "Mothering, Diversity, and Peace: Comments on Sara Ruddick's Feminist Maternal Peace Politics," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 20, (1995).

³¹⁶ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*.

³¹⁷ Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 56.

how bad the circumstances, there is hope for life and productivity. Palm trees always stand “lofty and resolute.” However, she writes:

Soon after the occupation, many of the palms on these streets were hacked down by troops for “security reasons.” We watched horrified, as they were chopped down and dragged away to be laid side by side in mass graves overflowing with brown and wilting green...The trees are bulldozed and trampled beneath heavy machinery.³¹⁸

This understanding of the land and the community’s well-being is in direct opposition with Riverbend’s view of the Western media’s handling of the same situation. Riverbend links to a *Washington Post* article that speaks of the bulldozing of trees and crops. The article states that the land is a “hiding place for Shiite Muslim political opponents,” but, in Riverbend’s words, the article fails to mention that the trees that are being bulldozed are prominent in the regions of Shi’a tribes. In Riverbend’s words, the article could have summarized the situation by writing, “US soldiers driving bulldozers, with jazz blaring from loudspeakers, have uprooted ancient groves of date palms as well as orange and lemon trees in central Iraq as part of a new policy of collective punishment of farmers who do not give information about guerillas attacking US troops.”³¹⁹

Through collaboration and privileging the everyday, Riverbend urges readers to re-think their ideas of strength. She writes, “some people associate the decision to go to war as a sign of ‘strength.’ How strong do you need to be to commit thousands of your countrymen and women to death on foreign soil?” She continues, “how strong do you need to be to give orders to bomb cities to rubble and use the most advanced military technology available against a country with a weak army and crumbling infrastructure? You don’t need to be strong—you need to be bad.”³²⁰

³¹⁸ Ibid, 105.

³¹⁹ ———, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, 106.

³²⁰ ———, *Baghdad Burning II: More Girl Blog from Iraq*, 13.

Cynthia Enloe writes that masculinity has always been an essential tool wielded in the process of empire building, which she argues is what the Bush Administration is doing in Iraq and Afghanistan. Paying attention to women's experiences, actions, and ideas is the only way to challenge the masculinist ideologies.³²¹ While the difference between Riverbend and mainstream accounts of war are obvious, I'd like to turn now to a discussion of how much Riverbend and blogs in general are able to challenge the dominant masculine perspective of war.

Conclusion: Why Women's Bodies?

This chapter has argued that the act of blogging is seen as uniquely democratic given its inclusive, participatory nature. In particular, Riverbend and other women use blogs to exert their political agency. I would like to now turn to a discussion about why Riverbend, even without a visible body, falls in line with the other case studies in this dissertation. Here I argue that her message of dissent on this medium becomes a way to assimilate and Americanize her thus contributing to the larger narrative that the United States has liberated Iraqi women. IN short, Riverbend sneaks into the conversation about war and democracy promotion because of her medium—the democratic blog. Yet she is also disciplined by the mainstream media.

Because they deal with creativity, expression, and resistance, Riverbend and blogs in general are in line with the counterpublic literature. This is to say that blogs are located within mainstream culture they are uniquely position to oppose that dominant, mainstream order. Yet according to much of the counterpublic scholarship, blogs are missing one key element: the absence of the body from the discourse. Many scholars have affirmed Michael Warner's suggestions that counterpublics rely on an "embodied socialibility" that is important to the

³²¹ Cynthia H. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 304.

political project of counterpublics. For Warner, emphasizing the “salience of flesh and body in the production” of the rhetoric is precisely how counterpublics develop their ideology.³²² While this project attends to her embodied femininity, the body of Riverbend is absent. Melissa Deem contends that the body has radical potential to disrupt the normative discursive logics of publics.³²³ Yet unlike the other two chapters in this dissertation, which feature bodies front and center, Riverbend’s body is not highlighted. Certainly her blog elicits images of a woman’s body working, cooking, cleaning, and communing but there is never a photograph of her on the blog, alongside her interviews, or even in press releases about the book. Even the cover art on the book series is generic and devoid of any information about Riverbend. While the lack of a body frees her from stereotyped markers, it also frees the mainstream media to make her into an *American* icon. Indeed, the “civilized” act of blogging makes Riverbend into a “civilized” woman. In a *Washington Post* article titled *Young and the Restless in Baghdad*, the reporter claims that Riverbend’s entries about cleaning her house could be a “scene from *Desperate Housewives*.”³²⁴ And a separate article that tells of the “roar of women bloggers” and writes that the anonymous “girl blog from Iraq” is another “web diva” like Dooce and Wonkette. While Riverbend may enjoy a similar virtual popularity with other female bloggers, the content of the blogs could not be more different. Dooce, who describes her blog as a bunch of “wacky, witty mommy-dearest rants,” chronicles her life in Utah and Wonkette prides herself on letting the scandalous sex secrets of Washington fly.³²⁵

³²² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 123-124.

³²³ Melissa Deem, "Stranger Sociability, Public Hope and the Limits of Political Transformation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 88,, no. 4 (2002), 448.

³²⁴ Theola Labbe, "Young and Restless in Baghdad," *The Washington Post*, 7 August 2005, T06.

³²⁵ Stephanie Schorow, "I Am Woman, Hear Me Blog," *Boston Herald*, 18 March 2005, E32. See also www.dooce.com and www.wonkette.com.

Even Riverbend's message of dissent becomes another example of a working democracy in the Middle East. The contradiction is explained by the *Washington Post*. If "democracy is about differences," then "opening new spaces" on the Internet means the oppressive status quo is "in for major trouble."³²⁶ *Al-Jazeera* claims that the dissention on blogs is the "life-blood of the pro-democracy movement."³²⁷ Therefore, Riverbend is able to add her voice to the virtual fray precisely because she is "liberated." This idea is exemplified in reports that link blogging in the Middle East to U.S. values. The *USA Today* argues that "democracy and the hunger for free speech are creeping across repressive societies," and the revolutionaries leading this charge are bloggers who "are finding that their views from politics to religion to pop culture share a unifying battle cry: a desire to speak freely."³²⁸ Indeed, "freedom of expression" is the foundation of free and peaceful societies writes Jim Hake, founder and chief executive of Spirit of America, a blogging software program released in the Middle East. The Arabic blogging tool will make "it possible for more people in the Middle East to freely share their ideas than ever before."³²⁹ For many, "liberty now has a World Wide Web" on which anyone can voice his or her opinion, and celebrate a "person's fundamental right of free speech."³³⁰

For her part, Riverbend's message of peace, collaboration, and community is ostensibly possible because she is free to blog and speak in a country with U.S.-led military efforts. Blogs, then, have the potential to be just another instance of civilization by the benevolent Americans,

³²⁶ Robin Wright, "Why I Have New Hope for the Middle East," *The Washington Post*, 2 March 2008, B01.

³²⁷ Mark LeVine, "'Business as Usual' in Middle East," *AlJazeera.net*, 2009.

³²⁸ Bridget Johnson, "When Bloggers Are Silenced, the World Must Speak for Them," *USA Today*, 2 May 2007.

³²⁹ "I-upload and Spirit of America Bring "Viral Freedom" through Blogs to Arab World ", *Business Wire*, 9 December 2004.

³³⁰ ———, "Bloggers Key in Battle for Free Speech Rights," *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, 9 May 2007.

and Riverbend was susceptible, as all women are, to the institution of representation and manipulation.³³¹

³³¹ Lana Rakow, "'Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful': Feminist Resistance to Advertising's Irresistible Meanings," *The Southern Communication Journal* 57 (1992), 140.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS: LOOKING AHEAD

Introduction

In October of 2007, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Meghan Daum wondered if September 11th had “killed feminism.” Citing the connection between the terrorist attacks and a return to traditional gender roles, she wondered why everyone seemed scared of the “f” word—feminism.³³² The analysis in this dissertation suggests that certainly not everyone was afraid to use the word. Indeed, I found claims of feminist ideals in three case studies. I have examined three very different case studies and argued that in each instance, there were certain “feminist” tenants that were considered acceptable as long as they accompanied a particular performance of democracy outside of U.S. borders. Indeed, as long as Iraqi and Afghan women were participating in traditional freedoms such as political, personal, and economic freedoms the narratives were hailed by the U.S. mainstream media for their feminist contribution. In Chapter Two, we saw the political voting rights of women being held up as evidence of their liberation. In Chapter Three, the freedom of expression that Riverbend enjoyed on her blog was evidence that democracy had taken hold in Iraq. In Chapter Four, the economic independence of the Muslim students at Kabul Beauty School earned Deborah Rodriguez feminist accolades.

The purpose of this dissertation was to parse out the different themes and ideologies at work in these three cultural texts about Iraqi and Afghan women during the U.S.-led military efforts. The analysis has focused on gender performance and disciplining during an age of democracy promotion. Although these case studies are unique in their own right, each example

³³² Meghan Daum, “Did 9/11 Kill Feminism?,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 2007.

could be read as part of a larger narrative regarding mass media and government's tendency to advance normative expectations about race, gender, and ethnicity during times of war. By highlighting particular stories about Middle Eastern women, the narratives reify their dependence on American citizens and military to provide democratic freedom. As such, these case studies contribute to discussions about gender performativity but also to discussion about *democratic* performance and its implications for gender disciplining. Barbara Poggio argues that citizenship is a practice performed through a variety of symbols on the political theatrical stage.³³³ In these instances, traditional ideas of democracy are joined with new participants and widely circulated in the media. Each instance reveals very little about Middle Eastern women's experience with democracy promotion and instead seems to be more reflective of the American audience who consumes the stories. This is evidenced by the way each narrative is painted as similar to an American story of democracy. We saw that the photographs of Muslim woman match the photographs of American women's suffrage. Deborah Rodriguez provides Afghan women with an opportunity for business ownership. This opportunity overlaps with an American definition of freedom that has economic independence at the center. Last, Riverbend's resistant message, which is seen as democratic, allows the media to compare her to popular U.S. bloggers and fictional characters.

The proliferation of stories about Middle Eastern women, in particular those who are practicing Muslims, suggests that the media will not stop trying to "provide an intimate portrait of Muslim communities."³³⁴ Yet as the humanizing stories increase and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan grind on, a growing proportion of non-Muslim Americans are still expressing unfavorable views of Muslims. According to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll in 2006, nearly

³³³ Barbara Poggio, "Casting The "Other" Gender Citizenship in Politicians' Narratives," *Journal of Language and Politics*, 3, (2004), 323.

³³⁴ Shireen Khan, "What It Means to Be American--and Muslim," *Time Magazine*, 4 April 2008.

half of Americans have negative views toward Muslims.³³⁵ And a March 2008 Gallup survey finds that only 17 percent of Americans have a positive perception of Muslims.³³⁶ The statistics give credence to *Boston Globe* columnist Derrick Z. Jackson's claim that non-Muslim Americans are still "holding Muslims at arm's length."³³⁷ The simultaneous interest in and disdain of the Muslim population brings up an interesting quandary as I conclude this project. How can these narratives be so popular with a supposedly unfriendly audience? To understand the tension and tie up loose ends, it is appropriate to revisit the concepts that help to tie these discourses together.

As such, this chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I return to the historical context of these case studies. I argue that these case studies align with previous conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, given the American anxieties about their own cultural superiority, the "liberating" of Middle Eastern women was the perfect story to assuage their anxieties and reinforce the need to return to traditional gender roles. This discussion leads to a critical discussion of how these strands of discourse contribute to a cultural vernacular that could be troubling for feminists. Finally, I conclude this chapter by reflecting on the questions these findings raise for critics interested in gender, performance, and war. Additionally, I suggest some possibilities for future research.

³³⁵ Claudia Deane and Darryl Fears, "Negative Perception of Islam Increasing," *Washington Post*, 9 March 2006.

³³⁶ Abdus Sattar Ghazali, "American Muslims Seven Years after 9/11," *OpEdnews.com*, 2008.

³³⁷ Derrek Z. Jackson, "Holding Muslims at Arm's Length," *Boston Globe*, 28 June 2008.

Gender and Democratic Performance in a Time of War

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, dominant representations of the United States were constructed through particular discourses in ways that resonated with the prior masculinization of U.S. identity.³³⁸ The United States, “the greatest force for good in world history,” suggested that they were strong enough in political and military might to protect “freedom and opportunity”.³³⁹ As the military and political conflicts waged on, democratic values and the U.S. commitment to them was used as further evidence of U.S. might. The United States, after all, was willing to “defend the freedoms of people everywhere.”³⁴⁰ While the representations of U.S. superiority were consistent with previous findings of scholars, my study shows some change in other representations. The representations of Muslim women, for example, went from being solely “pregnant, fleeing, starving, and widowed” to Muslim women as voters, workers, and bloggers.³⁴¹ The feminized passivity of a “victimized” Muslim woman is an obvious complement to the masculinized subjectivity of American military.

However, the updated representation of Muslim women as independent agents of political change is a nice complement as well. Middle Eastern women become recognizable within this discourse as variations of American women. Thus, the old and new discourses work together. The benevolent United States is still tied to freedom and women. Only now, the women are able to “realize their destiny and raise [sic] up societies based on freedom and justice and personal dignity.”³⁴² The women, according to former President Bush, will “encourage women to

³³⁸ Laura J. Shepherd, “Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post 9/11,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8, no. 1 (2006); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Theories of Contemporary Culture (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³³⁹ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation,” Washington D.C. (2001).

³⁴⁰ George W. Bush, “Address to the American People.” White House (2001).

³⁴¹ Cynthia Peters, “What Does Feminism Have to Say? In Susan Hawthorne and Bronwyn Winter, eds., *September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives* (Melbourne: Australia: Spinifex Press, 2002), 120-126.

³⁴² George W. Bush, “Bush Makes Historical Case for Resolve in Iraq,” *White House Bulletin* (2007).

contribute to the development” of the Middle East and help “build a prosperous society.”³⁴³ And while the President and other governmental officials are useful in delivering policy talking points, so, too, are popular culture texts. As Cynthia Enloe reminds us, “to make sense of putative American empire-building, we have to become much more curious...Reports now labeled ‘human interest stories’ have to be considered as serious commentaries on foreign policy.”³⁴⁴ For Enloe, stories which may show up only on interview shows or in op-ed pages and feature women as tea-pickers and factory workers or as activists and mothers are just as essential to “greasing or clogging the wheels of an imperial empire.”³⁴⁵ She writes that ideas “don’t just float out there in the ether.” Rather, ideas gain “legitimacy in social settings.”³⁴⁶ These inspirational stories rally the troops; the masses of citizens who see the stories as representative of a U.S. culture, therefore, see representatives of themselves.

The stories of Muslim women that are popularized in the mainstream media could be seen as “Western” because they are counter to the typical expectations of Middle Eastern women. While the portrayals could be seen as a challenge to Muslim female passivity or a criticism of U.S. imperialism, such resistive readings are unlikely given the rich history associated with gender and Middle Eastern culture. Despite the independence depicted, these narratives about Middle Eastern women, because they are associated with beauty, home, and other private sphere locations, pose little threat to the longstanding, stable narrative which cast women in the role of “Other.” Feminist scholars have noted that political activity is often a male preserve.³⁴⁷ My analysis here suggests that democratic political activity is also an American

³⁴³ ———, “President Bush Discusses Importance of Freedom in the Middle East,” United Arab Emirates (2008), www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01.

³⁴⁴ Cynthia H. Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 170.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 171.

³⁴⁶ ———, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 162.

³⁴⁷ Poggio, “Casting The “Other” Gender Citizenship in Politicians’ Narratives.”

preserve. Thus, a U.S. national identity would be threatened if these narratives were read in a resistive manner. Reading women's performative acts in disruptive ways is discouraged as it is easier to homogenize and subsume narratives into a U.S.-centric framework rather than disrupt the gender and ethnic stability of the longstanding narrative.

Similarly, the idea that the U.S. military is responsible for the safety of the Iraqi civilian population—especially Iraqi women—helps maintain the notion that the military must help Iraqi women exercise the rights that they may not fully understand. The idea that women must be regulated and disciplined to help them achieve “women's rights” prevents an actualization of equality. My work in this dissertation suggests that the larger context in which these discourses are situated governs audience readings of gender behaviors and ethnic identities. After all, given the Muslim world's reputation as oppressive, backward, and extremist, it has come to be assumed that to be a proponent of women's rights is to be pro-Western.³⁴⁸ The agency of Middle Eastern women, many of whom are Muslim, is articulated within a context that reinforces the American public's faith in its own cultural supremacy.

The restoration of the American polis is a potential impact from these narratives. The discourse about Muslim women comes at a time of citizenship renewal in the United States. The scholarship lamenting the maligned state of American democracy is widespread. In fact, political researchers Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti claim that “the last decade of the twentieth century will be remembered by scholars as a time when research and social commentary converged to call into question the condition of American democracy.”³⁴⁹ Perhaps most influential is Robert Putnam's work that cites declines in voting, volunteering, letter writing, attendance at rallies and club memberships as evidence that “Americans have been

³⁴⁸ Rina Amiri, “Muslim Women as Symbols--and Pawns,” *New York Times*, 27 November 2001.

³⁴⁹ Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti, *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.

dropping out in droves” from political and community life.³⁵⁰ Putnam’s argument is not new among scholars. Rather, it just continued a long trend of scholars documenting the perceived inadequacies of American citizenship, and calls for a more active and ideal citizenry have come from many different scholars. Whether American democracy is in “crisis,” “at risk,”³⁵¹ or filled with groups of “discontents,”³⁵² many scholars cite a need to return to an ideal character of previous democratic ages.

Further, after 9/11, scholars began noting that in the face of great national tragedy, American citizens had an intense need to be and to look up to heroes. An American citizen hero was founded through characteristics of strength, bravery, selflessness made explicit by Bush in the aftermath of 9/11.³⁵³ This rhetorical form constructs a “hero” of democracy that is “addressed to and serves as a model for all American citizens.”³⁵⁴ A good, heroic citizen carries out the responsibilities of citizenship including loyalty, partisanship, and attention to rights.³⁵⁵ The work underway in Iraq and Afghanistan is in line with these ideas. Humanitarian efforts are directly tied to democracy promotion. The case studies illustrated in this project provide the perfect complement for governmental messages about women’s rights. The images of women voting work in tandem with the stories of women working and blogging. All these stories converge to suggest that Muslim women are dedicated to democracy promotion and standing by

³⁵⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

³⁵¹ Michael Salvador, Patricia M. Sias, and Eisenhower Leadership Group, *The Public Voice in a Democracy at Risk* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998).

³⁵² Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

³⁵³ Shepherd, "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post 9/11.", 21.

³⁵⁴ Troy Murphy, "Romantic Democracy and the Rhetoric of Heroic Citizenship," *Communication Quarterly*, 51, (2003), 193.

³⁵⁵ Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Martin Kessler Books, 1998).

the side of the United States.³⁵⁶ This image of Muslim women eager to participate and assist with democracy promotion is so pervasive that Vanessa Pupavac says that women who resist the democracy promotion agenda are seen as “dysfunctional deviants” who need to be excluded from the rebuilding of a nation.³⁵⁷ Even Riverbend with her anti-American message seems eager to participate in democracy according to media accounts about her blog. So, not only are Americans like Deborah Rodriguez heroes in their efforts but so, too, are Muslim women, such as Rodriguez’s students, who actively participate in democracy.

This idea of a citizen hero divorces citizenship from the collective, communal social change it is proposing to make. According to Kathryn Ecclestone, the preoccupation with democratic citizenship denies individuals the chance to locate themselves in a broader social and political context.³⁵⁸ In short, including female *bodies* into the public sphere does very little to insert women’s interests into political institutions.³⁵⁹ My work here suggests this is true. While the bodies of women voting or working are highly visible, the collective activism of women like Riverbend is limited. The narratives make us forget about casualties of war and see the women as heroes as long as they participate in democratic rituals. As Dana Cloud writes, “tokens, as the word implies, are a medium of exchange, through which group identity, politics, and resistance are traded for economic and cultural capital within popular cultural spaces.”³⁶⁰ Instead of agents with freedom and choice, my analysis suggests that the women are, in fact, tokens.

³⁵⁶ Nadeen El-Kassem, "The Pitfalls of a 'Democracy Promotion' Project for Women of Iraq," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27, no. 2 (2008) argues that the description of Iraqi women engaged in political organizing is serving this purpose. El-Kassem, however, calls the moves patronizing and inaccurate.

³⁵⁷ Vanessa Pupavac, "Therapeutic Governance: Psycho-Social Intervention and Trauma Risk Management," *Disasters*, 25, no. 4 (2001), 364.

³⁵⁸ Kathryn Ecclestone, "Learning or Therapy? The Demoralisation of Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52, no. 2 (2004), 121.

³⁵⁹ Andrea and Anne Marie Goetz Cornwall, "Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives," *Democratization*, 12, no. 5 (2005), 783.

³⁶⁰ Dana L Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography.," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 13, no. 2 (1996), 122.

In this dissertation, I have explored seemingly unrelated discourses to see how they have contributed to shoring up notions of American strength and benevolence. As such, they become part of a cultural vernacular. In the next section, I touch briefly on the “demystifying function” of critical rhetoric and then make the link to cultural vernaculars.

Critical Rhetoric and Cultural Vernaculars

Raymie McKerrow reflects that the role of critical rhetoric serves a “demystifying function.” As he puts it, critical rhetoric can expose the “dense web” by “demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge.”³⁶¹ It is my hope that this project contributes to the effort of revealing the web of discourse that connects seemingly unconnected texts that help tie the military efforts of the U.S. government to women’s liberation and democracy promotion.³⁶²

In the twenty-first century, the mainstream media have an inexhaustible opportunity to construct realities and help audiences make sense of the world. Throughout this project, I have noted how media has become central to spreading information about the war. And while I think this project points to consistent themes found in the texts, the scope of the project does not allow for me to know for certain the impact on the public. As other critics have noted, audiences may take these messages and the world they create and accept, reject, modify, or ignore them.³⁶³ I contend that understanding what is at work in the texts is an important first step as it opens critics’ eyes to see what audiences may do with the texts. While I have speculated on some of

³⁶¹ Raymie McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs*, 56, (1989), 92.

³⁶² See Marita Gronnvoll, "Gender under Torture: How Gender Shapes and Is Shaped by Torture," (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2008) who argues that there is a interconnected web of discourse that makes torture socially acceptable.

³⁶³ Kristjana Maddux, "Passionate Publics: Christian Media and the Construction of Citizenship," (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2007); Gronnvoll, "Gender under Torture: How Gender Shapes and Is Shaped by Torture."

the impact of these messages, more work needs to be done to understand the impact of this consistent narrative. While I may not know if all Americans share in the assumptions present in the narratives, this project has at least made those assumptions and connections visible. As John M. Sloop argues, critical rhetoric “gathers discourses from the public involving gender and sexual norms and the popularity” associated with those norms.³⁶⁴ By interrogating the connection between gender, race, and democracy, I expose the very existence of these relationships. McKerrow notes, “demonstrating the manner in which our social relations constrain us, often in ways that are virtually invisible, which occur as such a deep and remote level in our past as to be anonymous, the possibility of revolt is opened.”³⁶⁵ With this in mind, I hope my project opens up discussion about how Western conceptions of liberal democracy constrain an ability to hypothesize about new forms of democratic freedom.

The discourses are related by worldviews that seem to operate at a deep structural level. . For example, in Chapter Four we saw the view of female bodies as docile participants in democracy while we saw male bodies portrayed as the keepers of democracy in Chapter Two. Additionally, the idea that democracy is only a blend of personal, political, and economic freedoms was present throughout all the case studies. One need not consciously ascribe to such worldviews to be influenced by them. That these discourses have been repeated and continued through generations speaks to their ability to influence and direct ways of thinking. Indeed, Americans clearly participate in these formations. My goal, then, in undertaking this project has been to expose some of the assumptions that make possible the use of military force to “liberate” woman. Indeed, the convergences of these discourses in this cultural moment have contributed

³⁶⁴ John M. Sloop, *Disciplining Gender: Rhetorics of Sex Identity in Contemporary U.S. Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 144.

³⁶⁵ McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis."

to the perception of the United States as authorized to force democracy in service of the greater [female] good.

By paying attention to the vernacular arguments, rather than the legal or official discourse, circulating within the public sphere, a critic gains a better understanding of the origins of the narrative.³⁶⁶ Vernacular often refers to a set of common or localized expressions used during particular historical periods and connotes the everyday, the common, and the colloquial.³⁶⁷ So, in attending to vernacular arguments, we have an opportunity to take a critical look at speech that resonates within local communities that is specific to those communities. However, in this case “local” means the United States. After all, the arguments in these case studies would not exist or resonate with much of the United States’ public, without a specific history in the United States. As such, the rhetorics in the case studies are enthymematic because they are grounded in the U.S. culture’s implicit social knowledge. The public discussions in these case studies were all based on similar beliefs, anxieties, and fears.

Indeed, photographs of Iraqi women voting would not have the same impact without a Western audience’s experience with inclusive suffrage. Cara Finnegan uses the phrase “image vernacular” to describe analyzing rhetoric that mobilizes beliefs expressed in photography in deliberations on social or political issues.³⁶⁸ Importantly, Finnegan reminds critics that vision and visual practices are historically situated.³⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, who uses the word “connotation” to describe the production of photographs, claims the layout and framing of the picture is not natural or artificial but historical. He writes in *Image-Music-Text*, “Its signs are

³⁶⁶ Marouf Hasain Jr., “Vernacular Legal Discourse: Revisiting the Public Acceptance of the ‘Right to Privacy’ in the 1960’s,” *Political Communication*, 18, (2001).

³⁶⁷ Cara Finnegan, “Image Vernaculars and Progressive Era Child Labor Rhetoric,” in *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetoric and Invention* (2008).

³⁶⁸ ———, “Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 8, (2005).

³⁶⁹ Finnegan, “Image Vernaculars and Progressive Era Child Labor Rhetoric.”

gestures, attitudes, expressions, colors, or effects, endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practice of a certain society: the link between signifier and signified remains...entirely historical.”³⁷⁰ The past is a symbolic resource to make sense of the present.³⁷¹ Indeed, Barthes argues that a picture is not so much a solid representation of what is as what was.³⁷² But this idea is present in all case studies. KBS, for example, would not resonate with readers without an idea that democratic freedom is linked to female economic independence. And Riverbend would not be supported without positive feelings about freedom of expression and the perceived democratic potential of blogging. This speaks to the idea that mediated representations of public behaviors represent and construct shared beliefs among a public.

Because of the localized and unofficial nature of vernacular rhetoric, many scholars have argued that vernacular discourse is counter-hegemonic.³⁷³ And, to be sure, vernacular discourse can combine elements of popular culture in a way to create a form of discourse that implicitly and explicitly challenges mainstream discourse.³⁷⁴ But the vernacular is not always counter-hegemonic. The lack of counter-hegemonic potential is evident in this case, as it “absorbs ‘classical’ elements of American life.”³⁷⁵ In fact, as Gerard A. Hauser has argued, the vernacular of human rights discourse is not normally about human rights but instead about their implied virtues. He argues that vernacular rhetoric often “publicizes the plight of the oppressed by

³⁷⁰ Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 206.

³⁷¹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10; Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977); and Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

³⁷² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

³⁷³ Todd Boyd, "The Meaning of the Blues," *Wide Angle* 13 (1991); McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis."; Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Gerard A. Hauser, "The Moral Vernacular of Human Rights," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 41, no. 4 (2008), 443.

³⁷⁴ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs*, 62, (1995), 23.

³⁷⁵ Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, 12.

translating it into other cultural frames.”³⁷⁶ Indeed, the narratives featured in this dissertation do not illustrate how representations of Middle Eastern women are liberatory but how women are passive subjects used to articulate stories about America. The Middle Eastern woman is essential to the story of war because her malleable character and body are necessary to urge actions on her behalf.³⁷⁷ Additionally, the stories emphasize the ideal Middle Eastern woman as a contradictory representation. Middle Eastern women are both obedient and resistant. In the stories, certain tasks require certain genders. Women go to the polls, beautify themselves, and care for their families. Blogging is the only resistant act in which a woman can take part, but even on the web her femininity is heightened.

My study indicates that these texts about Muslim women were decidedly not counter-hegemonic for U.S. audiences. Instead of being liberatory, these narratives contribute to what Naomi Klein calls the “Brand USA script.” Klein writes that the Bush Administration uses advertising campaigns in line with McDonald’s and other corporations to sell the “war-on-terror.” Central to their marketing techniques was the notion of women’s rights. “Whenever Bremer needed a good-news hit,” she writes, “he had his picture taken at a newly opened women’s center, handily equating feminism with the hated occupation.”³⁷⁸ In the context of this project, we must ask what role popular culture plays in encoding and reproducing these types of stories. The hijacking of feminist ideals by the Bush Administration is troubling, yet the co-opting of these messages by non-governmental agents is just as disturbing and overlooked.

³⁷⁶ Hauser, “The Moral Vernacular of Human Rights.”, 456.

³⁷⁷ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop noted a similar trend in vernacular discourse about Japanese American women during World War II.

³⁷⁸ Naomi Klein, “Brand USA Is in Trouble,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 15 March 2005.

Looking Ahead: Directions for Future Research

As I write, in the middle of 2009, the conflict in Afghanistan wages into its eighth year. The occupation of Iraq is in its sixth. Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives, and it seems both countries slip further into disarray each day. With so few benefits from war and so few resources actually assisting women, it seems discourse regarding gendered causes for war should be rare. Instead, a scrutiny of media discourses suggests there is an increase in recent years. It is with these things in mind, that I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of future directions of the project that will contribute to a more thorough understanding of the gendered nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular and the complexity of women, war, and national identity in general. There are three areas of the analysis that need to be expanded and strengthened.

First, the time table of the study should be expanded. Although I feel this project gives an accurate snapshot of portrayals of Middle Eastern women from the years of 2005 through 2008, when I extend the analysis I will investigate how the images and narratives of Middle Eastern women, in particular, Muslim women evolve over time. Because of the close proximity to the actual events, it is hard to determine if the burka or the purple finger are iconic images, and it is even harder to assess the impact on the U.S. audience. Hariman and Lucaites stress this idea when they argue that full implication of representations cannot be realized until the social codes shift to accommodate the variety of signs at work.³⁷⁹ Through an ongoing examination of patterns and connections, I hope to not only identify recurring themes related to gender and ethnicity but more importantly to examine how those themes impact the messages circulated in the public regarding military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Certainly, I cannot predict the

³⁷⁹ Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites "Public Identity and Collective Memory U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image "Accidental Napalm"," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 20, (2003), 37.

gravity of public dissent or support in the months and years to come nor the specific way in which Iraqi and Afghan women will be discussed in the mainstream media; however, I'm sure developments will prompt a rich body of discourse in need of examination.

Second, my future projects will explore the changing role of women in the Middle East. As conditions continue to deteriorate in the Middle East, more and more women are turning to violence out of frustration, sadness, and, in some cases, coercion. Over 50 women have carried out suicide attacks since 2003.³⁸⁰ While that number may seem small compared to the amount of lives lost in combat or in comparison to male suicide bombers, the discourse surrounding the women is significant as it struggles through ideas of agency, violence, and femininity. The ongoing political struggle in the reconstruction efforts of Iraq and Afghanistan and determining what is best for Muslim women has prompted intense debate both nationally and internationally. What happens to the perfect citizen narrative when women, who have little voice, make their sadness known by engaging in violence?

Third, I also hope to continue to understand these discourses within the ongoing struggle over various cultural definitions of "women's rights" by exploring Iraqi feminists' opposition to U.S. imperialism, including the war itself and the new democratizing initiatives proposed by U.S. political leaders and by Western feminists. In the spirit of my analysis of Riverbend, I hope to assess how oppositional discourses (e.g. discursive strategies used by Iraqi feminist organizations) both exceed normative Western expectations regarding Middle Eastern women and/or are contained within dominant narratives that are circulated by U.S. mainstream media.

As conflicts in the name of democracy wage on and new wars begin, critics must be aware of the way gender is used and constrained within conflicts. This project situates gender within larger discussions of war, democracy, and imperialism. My work suggests a potentially

³⁸⁰ Alissa J. Rubin, "Despair Drives Suicide Attacks by Iraqi Women," *New York Times*, 5 July 2008.

fluid nature of ethnicity and gender as images and stories of Middle Eastern women have changed over the years. Yet it recognizes the rigidly binding nature of U.S. culture in an age of military might as well as the idea that this rigidity continues to have impact on representations of gender. In sum, rhetoric matters. Particularly when ideological and gender assumptions are at work, critics must be ever vigilant to expose the workings.

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