

Teaching Resources

In the last year, several new and noteworthy films documenting women's experiences have been released. Consider using these films in your classes, and send us a teaching note to let us know how they worked.

Women in the Combat Zone

Some feminist approaches understand war and conflict as gendered phenomena, specifically as the global political manifestation of hegemonic masculinity. Too often, analyses of war focus exclusively on men's experiences. *Women in the Combat Zone* chronicles the experiences of women in Iraq. Women comprise 10 percent of the U.S. forces in Iraq. These women work as intelligence officers, helicopter pilots, and military police. Some have been held as prisoners of war. Many others are returning home wounded. Some have not lived through the fighting. Many are single mothers. Some are not even twenty-one years old at the time of their deployment.

Although ground combat is still off limits to women, Ted Koppel, who intro-

duces the film, claims that "a certain level of gender equality has arrived." Women are increasingly a part of war, and that includes the worst wartime activities. As the pictures of Lynndie England smiling for pictures with naked Iraqi prisoners indicate, women, too, participated in the sexualized abuse of prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib. In "a twisted tribute to gender integration," the infamous prison was directed by the highest-ranking woman in the military at the time of the scandal.

Because the nature of the Iraq war has blurred the lines about what constitutes a conflict zone, women are increasingly immersed in violence. Women working as military police are often on the front lines. *Women in the Combat Zone* provides images and background information to discuss the implications of this dubious indicator of gender equality. Ultimately, women interviewed for the film agree that going to war is a sacrifice of sorts, and framing women's work in war, in this way, does not sound altogether different from the work women have long completed in times of war.

Women in the Combat Zone is distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences. The film is available for purchase at <http://www.films.com> for \$89.95.

Beautiful Daughters

No other feminist performance piece has captured campuses like Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Colleges and universities throughout the world have joined in the V-Day campaign, staging productions of *The Vagina Monologues* to raise money and awareness toward stopping violence against women and girls. Proceeds are donated directly to local service organizations. The documentary *Beautiful Daughters* captures the February 21, 2004, staging of the first transgender production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

According to Andrea James, co-producer of the production:

One of our main goals was to give a voice to those who do not normally get a voice in our community: the successful, assimilated women living quiet productive lives, and those who are on the front lines, working to help our youngest and most vulnerable who face the highest rates of interpersonal violence. We wanted activists onstage and involved behind the scenes. Our community is typically portrayed in the media as prostitutes, punch lines, and psychopaths, as victims or criminals, and we wanted to remedy that with an inclusive event that celebrated the diversity of our community. We also felt it was important to show our community raising money for good causes, so that our ongoing monetary and cultural contributions could both be acknowledged. We chose The Task Force and the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women

as our V-Day beneficiaries, rather than trans-specific organizations, because we wanted to build bridges to other communities of activists and show that queer issues and women's issues are our issues, as they have so often done for us . . .

In many ways, the entire event was a microcosm of issues facing our community as it struggles to find its nascent political voice . . .

We proudly stand alongside all women, ready to add our voices to the rousing chorus of vibrant and beautiful voices brought together by V-Day. (http://www.deepstealth.com/film/beautiful_daughters/)

Interspersed with footage of the production are interviews with participants. Several describe the process of transitioning and their experiences as male to female transsexuals. Calpurnia Adams describes events from her life, captured in the Showtime film *Soldier's Girl*. In 1999, Adams's soldier boyfriend was murdered by fellow soldiers when they discovered his relationship with Adams. Leslie Townsend describes becoming a real estate developer after spending years working as an escort. Others use the opportunity to "come out" as transsexual women. In light of these stories, familiar monologues about what it means to be a woman and how women reclaim their bodies take on new meanings. In addition, the documentary captures the world debut of a monologue Ensler composed in collaboration with the cast. The new monologue describes the violence and degradation that often accompany being a transgendered woman.

Beautiful Daughters airs on Logo, the cable network targeting LGBT viewers, and

is available for download from iTunes and www.amazon.com. Go to <http://www.deepstealth.com> for more information.

NO!

NO!, a documentary produced and directed by Aishah Shahidah Simmons, explores “the international reality of rape, other forms of sexual assault and healing through the first person testimonies, scholarship, spirituality, activism, and cultural work of African-Americans” (<http://www.notherapedocumentary.org>). The film features interviews with women and men involved in anti-rape work, including *Feminist Teacher* collective member Aaronette M. White (social psychologist and anti-rape activist), Ulester Douglas (director of training for *Men Stopping Violence*), Elaine Brown (former chairperson of the Black Panther Party), Charlotte Pierce Baker (author of *Surviving the Silence: Black Women’s Stories of Rape*), Janelle White (director of the University of New Orleans Women’s Center), and Beverly Guy Sheftall (history professor at Spelman College). In addition to interviews with leading intellectuals and activists, *NO!* features performances by the late renowned performance poet Essex Hemphill and archival footage of the National Baptist Convention and Minister Louis Farrakhan. In all, the film captures the social climate in which responses to rape emerge and the possibilities for anti-rape activism.

The film is available for purchase on the website <http://www.notherapedocumentary.org>. Special rates are available for high schools, public libraries, nonprofit organizations with operating budgets less

than \$250,000, and historically black colleges and universities.

Thin

Women’s studies, sociology, cultural studies, art, history, and psychology have all made attempts to understand women’s fraught relationships with our bodies. In particular, eating disorders capture feminist imaginations because unlike other common forms of bodily harm experienced by women, eating disorders are directed at the self. Feminist theory understands eating disorders not simply as self-destructive behavior. Rather, the cultural context, including representations of women’s bodies in popular culture, is implicated in the emergence of eating disorders.

Thin takes the message of other films, such as the three-volume *Killing Us Softly*, one step further. Rather than focusing on the cultural representations of women and how familiar images of women’s bodies translate into eating disorders, *Thin* chronicles the lives of women in the midst of eating disorders. The documentary follows a group of women as they seek recovery at The Renfrew Center, the nation’s first freestanding facility dedicated exclusively to the treatment of eating disorders. Women describe the everyday rituals that characterize life with an eating disorder. Several indicate that they initially learned restrictive eating behaviors from their mothers.

It is a pessimistic portrayal of recovery. Very few of the in-patients maintain their recovery after their release, but *Thin* is adept at conveying why recovery is so difficult. These women’s identities are forged through their eating disorders. Recovery

depends on radically re-visioning their sense of self. Recovery is also impeded by the insurance industry. Viewers watch patients struggle to pay for their treatment. In this way, *Thin* makes a complex argument about why eating disorders

persist—both our cultural obsession with thinness and a health care system dominated by for-profit insurance companies undermine long-term recovery. *Thin* is available for purchase at <http://www.laurengreenfield.com/?p=Y6QZZ990>.