

**Titre du projet :** *“Performative Transgressions in Armed Conflict: Military Trophy Selfies, from the Philippine-American War to the War in Iraq (1899-2011)”*

**Durée du projet :** September 2019 – December 2021

**Coordinateur(s) du projet et centre(s) de recherche impliqué(s):**

**Elissa Mailänder**, Associate Professor, Sciences Po, Center for History (CHSP), Paris. In addition to her book, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), I have published several articles on perpetrator history and the structures, mechanisms, and dynamics of violence in Nazi concentration and extermination camps. In my recently completed project (HDR/habilitation), *Love, Marriage, Sex: An Intimate History of Nazi Germany, 1930-1950*, I examined friendship, intimacy and heterosexual relationships in Nazi Germany, highlighting the importance of mass participation and practices of everyday conformity to dictatorship. With this new project, I aim to broaden her focus and methodological schemes by writing a critical military history of soldierly performative transgressions in the long twentieth-century that foregrounds gender, sexuality, and cultural self-assertion in photographic snapshots.

**Description du projet :**

**Performative Transgressions in Armed Conflict: Military Trophy Selfies, from the Philippine-American War to the War in Iraq (1899-2011)**

We currently live in a digital era where self-display and self-performance are an integral part of our everyday life and social identity. Since the appearance of digital photo cameras at the end of the twentieth-century and the creation of mobile phones equipped with a camera at the beginning of the new millennium, people affiliated with terrorist movements have filmed and displayed their violent executions online; likewise, the instant photographs taken by US servicemen and women in the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 documented torture and human humiliation of Iraqi prisoners. These transgressive performances, however, have a history closely linked to Western hegemony, imperialism, and war, since it was precisely military conquest that originally promoted photography as a technology, as well as its “private” use in the Western hemisphere.

Since the invention of the photographic camera and more precisely since the late nineteenth century, combatants have captured “their” experiences of war and violence in images (Sontag 2003; Osborne 2000), making soldiers’ photography a real social phenomenon and mass medium. Whereas the act of human violation often becomes obsolete once executed, these shock-pictures of violence, cruelty, and death grant us crucial knowledge about the torturers and what we might call a culture of cruelty. Often perpetrators cannot recall or describe what they did or felt during the act of violence and killing, and why they did it. But the

photographs they shot on the spot document what psychologists rightly frames as the voyeuristic desire to bond with each other through self-exhibitionism and desecration. Hence “trophy selfies,” as I call them, allow us glimpses of intimate practices of excessive violence and peer group dynamics within a specific historical, geographical, and political context (Mailänder 2017; Niedermeyer 2017).

Research on humanitarianism has started to highlight the importance of photography as a major trigger and facilitator of an international awareness of humanitarian issues in the twentieth-century (Fehrenbach, Rodogno 2015). In particular, the emergence of photographic evidence of trench warfare in WWI or the Armenian Genocide has profoundly shaped the ways in which a more and more international audience grasped the concepts of atrocity, war, and mass violence at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Images of extermination camps and mass shootings in WWII, in both Europe and the Pacific Theater, heavily contributed to creating a public awareness of genocide. In the late 1960s pictures of human violation by the American Army published in the press created a moral outrage against the Vietnam War, and at the beginning of the twenty-first-century, social media played an important role in more recent conflicts such as the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

Yet, until today there is no transnational global military history that grants importance to soldierly photographs as a valuable source for understanding social and cultural practices, nor does the flourishing field of Humanitarian Studies overcome its focus on reception and circulation of photographic imagery that humanitarian organizations used to raise both funds and public awareness to alleviate human suffering. **With this project I aim to explore a new terrain and develop an innovative methodology to study the “long” twentieth century through the lens of soldiers’ photographs, beginning with the American-Philippine war (1899) and ending with the war in Iraq (2004). Hereby, I will contribute to a transnational and interdisciplinary discussion, bringing together the field of Critical Military Studies, Performance Studies, Visual Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies with more “traditional” fields of Genocide Studies, Military History, International Relations.**

Having a very specialized profile on Nazism and the Second World War, which I approached in my previous work with a “micro” political history of the perpetrators, this new project on soldiers’ private war photography across the “long” twentieth century allows me to expand my methodological skills and broaden my expertise. My sabbatical leave, starting from fall 2019 until summer 2020, will give me the opportunity to do archival research on different armed conflicts on other continents (see section below), while also allowing me to pursue a methodological inquiry on photography as an object, medium, and source.

**Writing a critical military history of soldierly performative transgressions, which foregrounds gender, sexuality, and cultural self-assertion in photographic snapshots, can hardly be the work of one researcher alone. A project of such an epistemological breadth calls for a resolutely collaborative research setting and an interdisciplinary discussion. Hence this project aims to bring together selected scholars in two workshops (see section below) in order to explore together and in an interdisciplinary framework the methodological approaches and different meanings of transgressive trophy photographs, of their aesthetics, as well as their impact on the observers (past and present).** With this collaborative project I see a unique opportunity to launch an engaged discussion that takes into consideration space, bodies, and minds of the historical actors and that explores, in a self-reflective exercise, our own positionality as researchers.